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THE INFLUENCE OF PERSONAL NARRATIVE
ON COLLABORATED DESIGN
A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THEATER ARTS

by

Nina McMurtrie

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THE INFLUENCE OF PERSONAL NARRATIVE ON COLLABORATED DESIGN  BY: NINA MCMURTRIE

ABSTRACT:

Theater can display an underrepresented identity unlike any other art form. A live body onstage depicting uncomfortable truths of diminished identities can have an extreme impact on audience members. Theater productions that have the intention of prioritizing needed representation should focus the productions design process on how to most respectfully and accurately display the identities. In considering the previous points, my production of Stay by Lucy Thurber in Fall 2016 at the University of California Santa Cruz aimed to expand the audience’s awareness of childhood traumas, abusive relationships, queer women, and childless career-motivated young adults.

This production focused on trying to display the characters in Stay with the most compassion and accuracy possible. This concentration lead to three essential collaborated design choices; (1) invisible set walls and doors signified the vulnerable nature of Stay’s atmosphere for the main character Rachel Lawrence, (2) fluid transitions allowed the production to have constant movement onstage that mimicked Rachel’s stressful life, and (3) Rachel changed costumed onstage as a part of the fluid transitions and to further the realistic recreation of Rachel’s life.
MA in Theater Arts Capstone Project: *Stay* by Lucy Thurber

Rachel’s life unraveling in Lucy Thurber’s *Stay* showed the effects of childhood trauma. Rachel and Billy, her brother, were viciously abused growing up. The intensity of their experienced cruelties conjured otherworldly creatures. The character of Floating Girl first appeared to Rachel when she was eight on the night Billy was almost beaten to death by their father. It wasn’t clear if Floating Girl was truly supernatural or Rachel’s imagination. Floating Girl’s origins and intentions were ambiguous and her behavior towards Rachel often shifted; she comforted Rachel during distressing times, repeatedly manipulated her, showed her how to harness supernatural powers and purposefully increased Rachel’s anxieties.

Motivated to escape rural Massachusetts, Rachel excelled in school and worked at developing her mystic skills. The powers enabled Rachel to experience others’ memories in first person. Rachel utilized her supernatural gift to begin and excel a writing career. The stories Rachel authored were inspired by others experiences she perceived with her powers. Rachel hoped that representing private personal struggles would allow someone who had similar traumatic experiences feel less isolated.

Rachel was driven to help other people, but not herself, and the plot of *Stay* showed the repercussions of Rachel’s repressed emotions. Billy visited in Act 1 Scene 1 and catalyzed a destructive behavior pattern by triggering Rachel’s fear of never being able to overcome her past traumas. Billy arrived at Rachel’s faculty housing unannounced and in a frenzied state to tell Rachel that he got fired from his law firm for striking a coworker. Billy’s behavior signified to Rachel that even
though she had left the home where their trauma had happened, that didn’t mean she had escaped the psychological damage. This realization took a deep hold on Rachel's emotions and affected her behavior.

Rachel's career was affected by her behavioral shifts. Rachel allowed an inappropriate relationship to begin with a student named Julia. Julia shared powers similar to Rachel’s and clung to Rachel because of this similarity. There were differences, however, in their utilization of their powers. Rachel aimed to use her powers to help others. Julia used her powers for her own personal gain through manipulation; her boyfriend Tommy was subjected to this treatment. The engrossed affection Tommy had for Julia was caused by both Julia’s powers and Tommy’s desire to protect Julia from herself (Julia had struggled with suicide).

Characters seeking personal redemption through the affirmation of other characters drives Stay’s plot. None of the characters looked inward to alleviate their own issues but instead projected all of their problems into their relationships with one another. These struggles highlighted the need for characters to start from within when seeking relief from past personal traumas. The production team hoped that the audience would take that message with them as well.
**Invisible doors, Invisible walls**

The production teams’ focus on representing Rachel’s identity with respect and accuracy drove each designer to pull inspiration from the script. The set design for *Stay* emphasized Rachel’s feeling of vulnerability through the lack of concealment. The Experimental Theater at UCSC is an expansive space ideal for hosting a script about exposure. The room is 58’ by 59’; set designer (Cody Lee) wanted the audience to surround the set, so they put two sets of bleachers, facing each other, on the 59’ sides. The set was between the two center facing bleachers (see Figure 1).

Rachel’s life was completely surrounded and exposed. *Stay*’s minimalistic scenic designed mimicked a schematic (a diagram that uses abstract symbols instead of realistic images) to amplify Rachel’s defenselessness. *Stays* set design had symbolic representations of real components. The set walls were only materially signified by wires that went from the four corners of the two play spaces to the lighting grid above (an architectural structure that allows technicians to hang lighting instruments above the scenic environments) and the only physical representations of doors were painted thresholds on the stage's floor. There were four painted thresholds signifying the four doors on set (see Figure 1): two exterior doors (Rachel’s apartment’s front door and Rachel’s door into her office) and two interior doors (Rachel’s bedroom and Billy’s bedroom).

Throughout rehearsals, I emphasized to the actors that their interactions with the walls and doors were major indicators of their existence to the audience. “In the theater, paradoxically, real human beings – the actors – can convincingly interact with
highly stylized or abstract representations of their environment. They can open schematic or even non-existent doors and freely move between several such schematically suggested environments within a very narrow stage space.” (Esslin 74)

To reinforce invisible structures, there needed to be focus and accuracy. The actors and I discussed walls locations, the doors’ appearance, and the gestures needed when using the doors. In spite of the many discussions and door opening/closing drills we rehearsed, the doors’ interactions didn’t develop the way I had originally envisioned. Every actor’s interactions with the doors varied and it made it seem like a different door was being used each time. The sporadic interactions with the doors created a controversial aspect of the show. However, the audience members who discussed it with me picked up on the artistic intent of the invisible set. They understood that the unseen doors and walls were to symbolize Rachel’s lack of privacy and absence of volition in the play.

Floating Girl also reinforced Rachel’s defenselessness. With no set walls or doorframes, Floating Girl glided throughout the set with ease, and never allowed Rachel’s signified boundaries to inhibit her. For Floating Girl, relationship to another reality signified that she did not have to uphold the same symbolic boundaries. She also didn’t uphold the same physical limitations as the other characters and was seen floating the entire show. Roller skates provided Floating Girl (played by Carolyn Ho) a consistent gliding motion around the stage that generated an ethereal effect.
“The Open Stage requires a totally different approach. The cast cannot be directed to act only toward the front, because the audience is on the sides as well. And, in a sense, they must act dimensionally within scenic scheme, rather than in front of it” (Mielziner 79). Surrounding the set with audience members re-oriented the directorial procedures, especially for Floating Girl. The process of blocking (directorial instructions of where to enter, exit, stand, and move given to actors) was different for Floating Girl in comparison to other characters. Floating Girl’s unique footwear and bold character traits needed less direct blocking and more fluid directorial options. Floating Girl (Carolyn Ho) and I discussed patterns in which she could skate, and general locations to be reached during scenes instead of direct paths and specific locations.

Directorial choices were adjusted to best utilize the barren set design. The blocking and open set fostered an atmosphere that encouraged viewers to feel as if they were experiencing Rachel’s life and emotions first handily. The emotional atmosphere mimicked Rachel’s powers; the audience peering into Rachel’s life resembled her supernatural gift of experiencing others past emotions as her own. Rachel’s privacy was entirely compromised by the sets arrangement. Nothing about Rachel was hidden from the audience; there were no boundaries between her interior state and the state displayed on stage. Rachel’s lack of privacy caused her agitation; that distress was decidedly heighten by mimicking her ineffective personal boundaries into ineffective invisible set boundaries.
Fluid Transitions

When compared to other shows that have been in UCSC’s Experimental Theater, Stay was a relatively short production. Typically, productions at that location would have fifteen-minute intermissions halfway through the show that would allow audience members a break. Stay’s short run time made an intermission unnecessary and created the challenge of having to engage and sustain an audience’s attentions for a continuous hour and quarter run time. One tactic the production team used to entrance the audience was to have motivated fluid scene changes that didn’t disrupt the audiences’ perspectives into the play. When scene transitions occurred, there were always engaging elements for the audience to remain attached to: sounds, lights, onstage costume changes, and a translucent play space. All of these elements cohesively allowed our production to have fluid movement from one scene to another that encouraged our audience to stay focused on the narrative we displayed.

The transitions were a combination of characters walking from one exterior door to another (see Figure 1) and Rachel’s onstage costume changes; both always accompanied by sound and light designs. Due to our set walls only being signified by corner wires the, actors’ entrances and exits were fully displayed. The production team embraced these evident transitions as an opportunity to more realistically simulate Rachel’s life. These transitions gave us an opportunity to keep constant movement onstage and to give atmosphere to Rachel’s chaotic life. We watched Rachel go to her office, come home, make dinner, try to write, go to bed, wake up, get dressed, and go back to her office to start the loop again. Rachel never received a break from her hectic life and therefore neither did the audience.
As the director, I didn’t want the audience to experience impulses to disengage. Moments of scenic transitions, blackouts, or empty stillness are typically instances when audience members believe they don’t need to be engaging with what’s happening onstage. This production used transitions to continually encourage the audience to envelope themselves into Stay’s reality. During transitions, the layered designs helped to oblige the audience to remain attentive. Sound and lights were two main factors in every fluid transition. Sound design helped immensely in representing the frenzied state of Rachel’s turmoil throughout the show by contributing anxiety-inducing noise. As Jon Whitmore explains aural elements, or sound, in Directing Postmodern Theater, “The new directing approach in which visual and aural elements (sound) often take center stage (while linguistics elements are either non-existent or diminished in importance) creates a vibrant and sonorous environment in which more complex meanings are communicated” (Whitemore 2). To increase the depth of the atmosphere in Stay, there was a need for sound to assist many of the pre-directed silent montages onstage; in response to this Jamie was swift with many designs. Sounds of heartbeat, erratic pitches, and unmelodic noise were present in transitions. The sound effect helped guide the production forward and engulfed the audience in Rachel’s stress. When sound was added into sequences with zero dialogue (costume changes and traveling sequences) it strengthened the emotionality of these moments.

One transition in particular where sound created “a vibrant and sonorous environment” was during Rachel’s last cross from her office to her home during the transitions between Act 2 Scene 3 and Scene 4. During this transition, Rachel
completed silent movements on stage while accompanied by an eerie non-rhythmic soundscape (layered noise that aims to create an atmosphere). Rachel traveled around the space in a new direction and entered her apartment. She poured herself a drink of whisky, finished the drink, poured another, crossed into her bedroom space, changed into a black tank top and men’s boxer briefs, returned to the kitchen, and drank from the bottle. The transition sequence ended with her sitting on the couch horribly drunk and talking to Floating Girl. The sound design over this transition helped to build tension that lead up to the last moments of the show. Lighting design was vital in increasing tension during these final moments. The sequence described above was accompanied by lighting that increased in saturation of color when there was an increase of emotions. Throughout this scene and throughout the overall show the lighting designer (Spencer Doughtie) continued to increase the level of colorful lights, patterned lights, and use of lighting fixtures underneath Rachel’s office. These lighting design elements accompanied transitions, supernatural powers and intense emotions.

Lighting helped to keep all transitions sharp, and concise. One example occurred in Act 1 Scene 4 in Rachel’s office when Tommy and Rachel discussed Tommy’s paper. At the end of their discussion, Julia entered Rachel’s apartment. Only actors and lights executed this transition. Lights faded on the office and when Julia entered the apartment; the lights came up when she swung open the invisible door. This transition was instantaneous. The lights in this moment not only guided the change in scenic space but also reinforced the invisible doors. Lighting also reinforced the magical elements of this production by accentuating mystic moments.
with purple, blue and red lights. Red lighting was also used to accentuate moments of intense anger or fear onstage.

Act 2, Scene 4 was the climax of Stay, and showed lighting designs’ reinforcement of plot and emotions. Julia again went to Rachel’s apartment uninvited. Prior to Julia’s arrival, the audience watched Rachel drink heavily and fight with Floating Girl. It was clear that Rachel was in an agitated state when Julia arrived. The scene escalated rapidly. When Julia asked to hear Floating Girl, Rachel lashed out aggressively and said “‘You wanna hear her? Pay for it. I had to” (Thurber 47). Rachel became more enraged when Julia began to cry “I didn't get to cry. STOP CRYING! Goddam it Julia, you are so fucken weak! You want to see how weak you are? (Rachel turns to Julia and slaps her across the face. Billy enters from the bedroom in time to see the slap. Rachel moves away from Julia) (Thurber 47). As Rachel’s fury escalated the stage become increasingly flooded with colors, predominantly red, and the moment Rachel’s hand struck Julia the lights instantaneously shifted and the colors vanished. This lighting shift was to emphasis Rachel immediate regret. The moment Rachel hit Julia, Rachel realized what she had done; rage and red lights vanished while regret and reality surrounded her (see Figure 8 and Figure 9).

Lighting and sound design accurately displayed Rachel’s emotional journey throughout the show. These design choices helped reinforce supernatural powers, emphasized heightened emotional moments and helped pace the production in a consistent forward motion. The constant motions and transitions were one of the biggest signifiers of Rachel’s relentless inner turmoil. Transitions wouldn’t have
happened in this manner if these designers weren’t attentive to the portrayal of Rachel.
Directing Costumes

“Discussions with a number of designers revealed that there is no singular protocol to guide the director and the designer. How a director informs a designer and how they work together after that varies from individual to individual.” (Rea 1988)

The design team was attentive to Rachel’s life and aimed to authentically display her multifaceted existence. The production continued to increase Rachel’s defenselessness through onstage costume changes. This artistic choice served also as a logistical one. Having Rachel (played by actor Melissa Gómez) repetitively exit the expansive Experimental Theater to change costumes would have generated too much dead time during the production and would have encouraged the audience to disengage. Cohesion of all design elements made the onstage costume changes further the production team’s goal of a realistic portrayal of Rachel’s life in Stay.

Collaboration with my designers on the open set, fluid transitions, and onstage costume changes helped me develop my director to designer protocol. Costume designing and directing generated an intrapersonal communication system. I encouraged all designers to find inspiration within the script, and I, as the costume designer, encouraged myself to focus on how to reinforce the plot and Rachel’s anguish through my design. The first costume design I made was inspired by dialogue in the script and by UCSC’s Costume Shop stock.

JULIA: You should really keep your front door locked, Miss Lawrence.
RACHEL. Julia? (Floating Girls head appears. She watches Julia and Rachel with interest.)

JULIA. Do you think I look nice?

RACHEL. What?

JULIA. Do you like my outfit?

RACHEL. Why are you here? JULIA. I wore it for you. Say something nice, I'm sensitive, because I'm young. (Floating Girl laughs. Julia lights a cigarette and sits down.)

“I wore it for you. Say something nice, I am sensitive because I’m young” (Thurber12). Julia had an unhealthy attachment to Rachel. The dialogue above was exchanged when Julia showed up at Rachel’s apartment uninvited. To emphasize Julia’s obsession with Rachel, I designed a matching outfit for Julia to wear that was eerily similar to Rachel’s. When I completed my first costume pull (a step to costume design were a designer will look for costume pieces in an already accumulated costume shops stock), I found two mint green costume pieces; Rachel’s blouse and Julia’s dress. From the color and sleek modern aesthetic of these costume pieces, I arranged most of the other costume designs.

Finding initial inspiration for the costume designs in that scene encouraged me to look for other textual information that helped guide additional designs. Costume choices inspired solely by the script were boots/roller skates, Floating Girl costumes, and men’s boxer briefs. Boots are footwear that someone living in the chilly East Coast, in fall, would wear. Boots also fit well with Rachel’s personality;
grounded, tough, ready for work. Rachel’s boots even had jagged bottoms that looked like teeth, suggesting how menacing Rachel could be. Every character wore boots at some point. Billy had large black boots; Julia had tan reimagined construction boots, and Tommy's were a fancy pair of brown boots (brand new to show Tommy’s wealth). The goals of the boots were to generate continuity across the costume design and to show the strong opinions each character had about they wanted to be perceived. All five characters showed that they had all believed they had a strong understanding of themselves, and conflict arose when their opinions of themselves weren’t being matched by outsiders’ perception.

Rachel and Floating Girls relationship represented this occurrence of strong oppositional opinions. Floating Girl was constantly upsetting Rachel by showing Rachel truths about herself that she wasn’t ready to face. Floating Girl stimulated and represented Rachel’s emotional journey throughout this plot; therefore, Floating Girl’s costumes needed to emphasize that connection. Floating Girl had a total of three outfits. Her first outfit was a blue full-length romper, gold earrings, and a gold necklace. Her second outfit was a green dress with a high slit up both sides. Floating Girl’s third and final costume was a dusty, light-pink lacey dress. There was a decline in maturity from outfit to outfit: the blue romper looked sophisticated and womanly; the green dress had high slits and looked more like a dress a teen would wear, and the light-pink dress looked similar to what a young girl would wear. These outfits deteriorated in maturity to signify Rachel’s demise of sensibility. Rachel’s identity declined from being a young successful author and professor, to being an abusive teacher.
“You look just like your Father” (Thurber 46) Floating Girl informed Rachel at the top Act 2 Scene 4. “The images of fashion and art that had been forming ideas of femininity were created through the filter of a patriarchal society that had vested interest in presenting women as soft and submissive” (Arnold 107). Rachel wearing male boxers was to allude to the abuse she suffered as a child from her father.

Due to her father’s targeted aggression, Rachel’s female identity caused peril in her childhood. Rachel’s act of putting on men’s boxers intended to signify a rebellious act toward her horrific childhood, and instead, she furthered degraded the female identity by becoming an abuser and abusing another female. Rachel’s identity was, again, compromised due to her past traumas. Rachel’s biggest struggle throughout the show is to find liberation from her identity.
Conclusion

“The production of meaning on stage is too rich and fluid to be accounted for in terms of discrete objects and their representational roles. An adequate account must be able to identify the range of sign repertories making up what might be termed the theatrical system of systems” (Elam 2002).

Even though theater’s communication abilities are limitless, mine are not. Especially when writing about theater, it’s uniquely challenging because theater is not supposed to be compressed into words on paper; theater is meant to be experienced. The experience for Stay was meant to be an emotional journey filled with mostly anguish and some triumphs. This production team wanted to create an environment that allowed the audience to feel attached to Rachel’s emotional journey. This desire for the audience to have an interconnection with Rachel inspired focused collaborated designs choices that aided in the representation of Rachel’s narrative.

Even though aspects of Stay’s script felt somewhat unfinished (the ending left the audience with more questions than answers) the representation presented in this text outweighed its ambiguity. Furthermore, this production decided to highlight the ambiguous nature with an understanding that, in reality, life and situations of abuse can be ambiguous. Regardless of whether this ambiguity was the scripts original intention or our productions team’s reactions to a fragmentary script, it aided in the representation of these identities in a major way.
Theater is unlike any other form of entertainment; it also can influence people unlike any other type of entertainment. When creating theater that is representing an identity that is underrepresented, it’s essential that theater productions stay focused on the accuracy of representation. When we give space for authentic representation we allow these identities a place to flourish. Displaying narratives through theater will provide opportunities for more exposure and for more understanding.
Appendix

Figure 1 Diagram of Stay's set by Cody Lee (set designer)

Figure 2 Cody Lee's Model Box, Rachel's Office

Figure 3 Cody Lee's Model Box, Rachel's Apartment
Figure 4: Act 1 Scene 1, Rachel and Julia's matching outfits, photo by Nina McMurtrie

Figure 5 Act 2 Scene 2, Rachel's red lacy blouse, Billy's flannel shirt with red accent, photo by Nina McMurtrie
Figure 1 Rachel's red lacy blouse, Floating Girls rose pink lacy dress, Photo by Steve DiBartolomeo

Figure 2 Lighting underneath office area, displays lighting used to represent Floating Girl. Displays wires signifying set walls, photo by Nina McMurtrie
Figure 8 Rachel Striking Julia Act 2 Scene 4, photo by Nina McMurtrie

Figure 9 Rachel reacts to striking Julia Act 2 Scene 4, photo by Nina McMurtrie
Bibliography


