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PLAYING GOD ON A BUDGET
The Importance of Poor Theatre in Education

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

MASTER OF ARTS
in
THEATER ARTS
by
Kieran Beccia

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ABSTRACT:

Playing God on a Budget:

The Importance of Poor Theatre in Education

By

Kieran Beccia

In this thesis, I will make a case for the importance of poor theatre models within educational institutions. I will clarify the educational advantages that working within the limits of minimal resources plays in the artistic development of students. I will draw out the important lessons that can be learned about creating cohesive worlds onstage and support it with examples from my experiences as Artistic Director of U.C. Santa Cruz’s student-run, poor theatre company, Barnstorm. I will use three case studies as further evidence: Barnstorm’s The Tempest, which I produced and directed; Barnstorm’s Ghosts, for which I acted as producer; and Pains of Youth, which I independently produced and directed using the skills I had learned from my work on the first two. Through this examination, I will make clear the necessity of learning the skills to work within limitations for the developing theatre artist.
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my thanks for the tremendous amount of support I have received this year from the wonderful people in my life. You know who you are.
Introduction

Polish director and teacher Jerzy Grotowski viewed poor theatre as an ideal, calling for the removal of "superfluous" elements and the exclusion of the "cross hybrid spectacles" (Towards a Poor Theatre 19).¹ Augusto Boal's ideal was even more extreme, exploring theatre by the poor for the poor, blurring the lines between audience and actor until theatrical event becomes community ritual in which "the spectator experiences the fiction and incorporates it elements," (113).² English director and producer, Peter Brook views the poor theatre as the acceptance of "rough" and jarring conglomerate elements to create a cohesive whole (The Empty Space 65).³ The poor theatre described here encompasses all three of these postulations. It is the theatre in which materiality and aesthetic uniformity are allowed to take a backseat due to both economic limitation and artistic ideal. Through the balance of these restrictions, an act of genesis can be created. This is something that is severely lacking in the commercial theatre, where worlds can be presented but are not always experienced. It is the poor theatre, the theatre of limits, the theatre that justifies its creation not by the

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¹ Grotowski (August 11, 1933-January 14, 1999), responsible for coining the term “poor theatre,” was an incredibly prominent avant-garde director. His work focused on examining the relationship between the actor and the audience by close collaborative contact.
² Boal (March 16, 1931-May 2, 2009) was a Brazilian theatre director focusing on theatre's engagement with the politics of culture, civilization, and community.
³ Brook (born March 21, 1925) is known for reinventing the way in which classic works can be interpreted for production. He advocated the consensus of concept and execution, while concentrating on human interactions as the center of his productions.
acquisition of profit, but by the hunger for emotional and intellectual connection, that is able to best represent the human experience. The poor theatre is a place of learning, of growth, of change and in a university environment, if students are to be taught how to create art rather than how to present it, is a necessity.
On the First Day...

For any theatrical production to be successful there must be a unity of concept and execution; that is, the directorial interpretation of a play must coalesce with the way in which it is performed, both by the actors and by the elements of design (lighting, sound, scenery, etc.). However, concept is often constrained by the realities of execution, meaning what can be achieved onstage with the available resources may fall short of initial expectations. When the allocated resources are insufficient to exhaustively, physically transform a theater space into the realm of the play, performance concept must be adjusted to space rather than the other way around. This means that the interpretation of a play for production must consider the space in which it will be performed and the interpretation must be adjusted to accommodate the inherent architectural limitations and restrictions. Artaud writes, “[...] the stage is a concrete physical space which asks to be filled [...]” (37). In the poor theatre, when this cannot be filled with elaborate design elements, it can and must be filled, by the collaborative impulse of the actor and the audience. Only when these two forces have reached a mutual understanding of the world in which the play occurs, can the physical space be filled by the imagination, creating a world that can be felt and experienced but not seen or touched. If this agreement is not reached, the

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4 Antonin Artaud (September 4, 1896-March 4, 1948) was a French surrealist, author, and actor. His theoretical writings on the “theatre of cruelty” focused on creating a more primitive, less aristocratic form of theatre.
space will remain nothing but a blank stage; only through this union can worlds be created.

While the communication of this immaterial world requires a unity of all elements of performance, the brunt of this work falls to the actor\(^5\). Peter Brook writes, “The theatre is perhaps one of the most difficult arts, for three connections must be accomplished simultaneously and in perfect harmony: links between the audience and his inner life, his partners and the audience,” (The Open Door 37). He continues, “an actor possesses an extraordinary potential for creating a link between his own imagination and the imagination of the audience [...]” (The Open Door 54). By making choices about the world they are experiencing, the actor can invite the audience to participate in this act of genesis, creating a fluid, visceral, and accessible world rather than a fixed, distanced, and presentational one. An actor talking about a mountain will never create a mountain; an actor seeing and physically reacting to a mountain is what allows the audience to see the mountain as well. The necessity of this discourse pushes the actor to use their body and mind to actively create rather than simply recite. “A word does not start as a word - it is an end product which begins as an impulse, stimulated by attitude and behavior which dictate the need for expression” (Brook, The Empty Space 12). Worlds cannot be created onstage

\(^5\) In this essay, the distinction will often be drawn between the physical world and the world of a production. The physical world is composed of everything humans can experience with their senses while the world of a production is immaterial one consisting of everything that humans can experience with their imaginations.
using words alone. A text being read is an engagement between the writer and the reader; the writer tells the reader what to see and the reader fills in the details. This creates a world that can be envisioned, but never experienced. When performed, the text must be secondary to the world at which it hints. The actor is the lens through which intangible existences become visible, and it is the job of the actor to embody a world in which the words of the text are allowed to exist.

The creation of these worlds, however, is not a free or unconstrained process. The incorporeal world is still subject to the limitations of the physical space in which it is being created. To resist the physical elements of a space is to engage in a futile and predetermined combat with the most immalleable collaborator of a production. This is especially prevalent in the poor theatre where resources further limit the ability to transform a space visually. This inability to mask the concrete features of a space forces the artists working within it to adjust their approach in the creation of the performed world to what the space will allow. The poor theatre must then use only the necessary visual elements that augment and employ the corporal location, relying on the discourse between actor and audience to fill the space metaphysically.

Peter Brook writes, of the audience’s participation in a performance:

It consists of becoming an accomplice to the action [...]. The imagination will happily play this kind of game on the condition that the actor be ‘nowhere’. If behind him there is one single element of scenery to illustrate [location], a cinematographic plausibility immediately
intervenes and one is locked into the logical confines of the set. (*The Open Door* 32)

A minimalism of concrete visual design elements, a necessity in the poor theatre for both resource-driven and artistic reasons, allows for an abstract freedom from centralized, overpowering locality.

Theatre exists in the space in between realities. It comes into being at the intersection where the world inside the imaginations of the actor and the audience collides with the world in which they physically reside. The poor theatre, and the theatre at large, should embrace this collision, making no attempt to trick the audience into believing that the world or events onstage are real, but rather inviting the audience to immerse themselves in the performed world, allowing themselves to enter a state of liminal reality, grasping the proffered hand of the actor and stepping with them into this created world. “We can thus define the theatre as ‘what takes place between spectator and actor’” (Grotowski 32). Live performance is conceived in this exchange of communication, but an awareness of the communication is equally necessary. Theatre should not claim to emulate life, only to represent it. To enter this space between realities, the awareness must exist that this is a ephemeral space, not rooted in either of the bordering worlds, but influenced by them, drawing from both the concrete and the imagined worlds in order to exist. The stripped-back style of the poor theatre is especially suited to this creation of liminal space as there is no hope of deceiving the audience into absolutely believing the onstage
world, but the honesty and genuine qualities of the poor theatre allow the audience to engage with a production in an analysis of the lifelike qualities presented in performance.

While the actor is responsible for this communication with the audience, it is the director’s role to set the non-physical parameters in which this shared world can be generated. For example, in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, all of the action takes place on an island; the director selects where and when this island exists (setting a time period and location) as well as asserting whether this is a literal or metaphorical location⁶. It is the director’s decisions that dictate what world is entered and why. “Making choices necessarily focuses a play’s interpretive possibilities, but it should also provide a rationale for assembling a group of artists to present a particular play at a specific time” (Bloom 71).⁷ The director in the poor theatre is responsible for making a production smaller in scale but not smaller in concept; the sacrifice of concrete object must be made without sacrificing relevance or resonant meaning. Often these ideas go hand-in-hand as the level of honesty required in the poor theatre surpasses the disingenuity of budgeted, spectacle production.

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⁶ A metaphorical location would be any setting representative of what the locational setting could be interpreted to mean. For example, an island could represent any place of isolation or exclusion from the rest of the world as it did in Barnstorm’s production of *The Tempest*.

⁷ Michael Bloom is an American director and former artistic director of Cleveland Playhouse.
While technically difficult to execute, spectacle is the easy artistic choice allowing a distraction of the audience to avoid honest engagement. In the poor theatre, artists must learn to thrive in the absence of spectacle. Without adequate resources for elaborate design elements to entertain and distract the audience, the poor theatre must abandon illusion and revel in honesty. Artaud wrote:

If people are out of the habit of going to the theater, if we have all come to think of theater as an inferior art, a means of popular distraction, and to use it as an outlet for our worst instincts, it is because we have learned too well what the theater has been, namely, falsehood and illusion (76).

If the inner mechanisms of the theatrical event cannot be successfully hidden, they should be revealed readily and voluntarily. Poor theatre, by its very definition, is unable to accommodate, and therefore does not tolerate, spectacle. Thus, lacking the ability to lie well, the poor theatre must rely on honesty. An illusory production distracts the audience: amusing and entertaining but not connecting or engaging. An honest approach extends a hand to the audience, inviting them to embark upon a journey. Asking the audience to meet the production halfway allows them to be involved in the theatrical event as active participants rather than as external spectators: full of opinion but devoid of investment. It is the director who is responsible for fostering the creation of a world that resonates with modern, present context and audience; the director finds which worlds must be created and shared with audiences, which worlds
will carry meaning that will question the current values of society, engage the audience as collaborator, and evoke thought about the nature of humanity. Without the spectacle of design these immaterial worlds exist in the fragility of human communication. The fragile balance of these worlds rests in the intersection of artistic limitation and physically determined stricture, where the artistic concept is subjugated to and stimulated by the realities of execution within the concrete plane of the performance space.
Poor Theatre and Barnstorm

The poor theatre provides a superior educational environment for the developing artist. The limitations and the necessity of minimalism force theatre makers to adapt to what can, realistically, be created with what is available. In an educational environment, this is extremely important. Learning to adapt to the circumstances is incredibly valuable for young theatre artists. Students working in a poor theatre environment are compelled to confront the limits of their resources, both economic and substantive, and adapt to find minimalistic ways to unify concept and execution. This fosters an understanding of what can be communicated through theatre rather than what can be shown.

The model of Barnstorm as a both a company and a class furthers the theatrical education of its students.\(^8\) The class requirements dictate that students must perform support calls alongside their main jobs, fulfilling the myriad of tasks needed for the theatre to run effectively; support calls could be any aspect of theatrical production from ushering to costume design to publicity. The requirement that students partake in multiple aspects of company life and theatre production provides them with a better understanding of what goes into

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\(^8\) Barnstorm is the student-run theatre company at U.C. Santa Cruz. Since its founding in 2001, it has been a place for students to experiment and gain experience in theatre as an art form and a business. The company is managed by graduate students during their one-year tenure in the Masters of Arts in Theater Arts program and produces 2-3 full productions plus a series of one-nighters (improvisational comedy, musical cabaret, sketch comedy, staged readings, etc.) in the Fall and Winter quarters. Spring quarter is devoted to Chautauqua, a festival of student-written plays.
the creation of a theatrical event than usually occurs in the typical university production where students are only responsible for a single aspect. This logistical knowledge learned in Barnstorm allows students to develop as theatre makers, with an understanding of how theatrical art is coordinated, rather than theatre practitioners, with the understanding of how theatrical art is performed. Engaging in multiple aspects of theatrical management and production provides students with a variety of knowledge and opportunities that they would not receive working on department-produced shows and fosters an awareness and appreciation for the enormity of collaboration that is required within a company. Familiarity with multiple aspects of production better equips students to be able to create theatre rather than just present it, both inside and outside of a university setting.

As a student-run institution, Barnstorm provides a safe environment for students to collaborate and explore their theatrical interests and preferences alongside their peers. It is considered by many students in the Theater Arts department as a starting point for those who wish to try a new aspect of theatre or just wish to gain more experience in their field of focus. In this protected environment, risks can be taken more easily with the knowledge that everyone involved, including most of the audience, is in the a similar position of attempting to learn more about this artform. This security fosters a freedom to experiment, allowing young theatre makers to explore the kind of art they want

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9 Barnstorm’s audience bas is almost exclusively students.
to create in a low stakes environment. Each quarter, the season is selected from student submissions, allowing a place for students to create the theatre they are interested in making. Perhaps the most indicative example of this is Chautauqua, the student-written play festival that Barnstorm produces each Spring Quarter. Chautauqua tends to yield the most off-beat, experimental works that Barnstorm produces, as it allows young playwrights the license to play with the form of their writing and continue developing their scripts in concurrence with the rehearsal process. The artistic liberation allowed by the existence of an institution like Barnstorm encourages students to explore theatrical forms in a hands-on but low-pressure environment.

Barnstorm’s poor theatre model pushes the students to think outside-the-box to create as much as possible within the budgetary limits. With limited economic flexibility, students are disposed to find ways to create the greatest effect with the least material resources. Almost no set pieces can be constructed; props are mostly borrowed or pulled from the existing, but meager, stock; costumes are largely taken from the actors’ own wardrobes. Designers for these elements are tested to use the currently available materials to produce the needed effect. Even the intangible design elements are quite limited in The Barn: the majority of the sound and light equipment has been donated to Barnstorm whenever the Theater Arts department has upgraded their performance spaces.

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10 Barnstorm had an overall production budget of $4250 for the 2015-2016 school year. The typical budget for a Barnstorm production over the last few years has been $300-$400.
with newer equipment. Of the forty-eight dimmers, only forty-four of them work, pushing lighting designers to utilize each dimmer for the greatest possible effect. Furthermore, the donated lighting instruments are in uneven states of wear, making the creation of even washes a bit of a chore. The design element least affected by the budgetary restrictions, is sound. This is credited mostly to the fact that the majority of the actual sound-design for Barnstorm productions happens on the designers’ personal computers, however the four speakers in the Barn Theater cause their share problems as they are getting on in years and have developed a habit of taking a day or two off unexpectedly. With the modesty of Barnstorm’s budget, updating to newer hardware does not seem a feasible possibility so designers continue to be pushed to learn creative ways of utilize the dated equipment to its full potential.

The physical space of The Barn Theater provides several unique challenges with which students are forced to grapple. The foremost of these are the vertical structural-support beams, one of which resides in the middle of the stage, wreaking havoc with audience sightlines and assuring that no seat is really a good seat.\textsuperscript{11} Additionally, more support beams stretch horizontally above the stage inhibiting the freedom and versatility of the lighting plot. The seating configuration itself poses an interesting obstacle: roughly half of the seats sit directly downstage of the raised playing area, giving the space the feel of a proscenium theater; however the seats continue much farther stage-right than

\textsuperscript{11} See Figure 1.
the stage itself, necessitating an odd diagonal angling of the blocking to be inclusive of the audience members on that side.\textsuperscript{12} The strangest feature of the seating is what the students have affectionately dubbed “the jury box:” 36 seats at stage level (and sloping upwards) that are situated stage-left, beginning about 3 feet behind the front of the stage. This gives the space a strange two-quarter thrust arrangement, making staging that is inclusive of all audience members quite a challenge.\textsuperscript{13} Overall, the rustic, worn, and unusual space of the Barn Theater is an overpowering presence in every production. Because of the dominant nature of the structure, and the minimal resources delegated to Barnstorm, hiding the Barn’s features is all but an impossibility; it is futile for a production to attempt to convince the audience that they are anywhere other than a barn. The concrete features of space are irrepressible and thus must be viewed as a collaborator rather than an opponent. Therefore, the space must be included in the formation of any theatrical production concept. Attempting to coerce a space into conforming to concept will always be ineffective because the concrete elements of space will stand in resistance indefinitely. As Artistic Director of Barnstorm, it became my job to guide the students to the conclusion that developing concepts in congruity with the unique and eccentric space of the Barn Theater is the only way to create the artistic/spatial harmony necessary for a successful Barnstorm production.

\textsuperscript{12} See Figure 2.
\textsuperscript{13} See Figure 3.
This unity is all the more important in low-budget theatre as it becomes impossible to rely on spectacle to keep audiences invested. Allowing students to work in a poor theatre environment allows them to explore the process by which communication with an audience can be achieved without an abundance of resources. Brook writes, “The greater the work, the greater the dreariness if the execution and interpretation is not of the same level” (The Open Door 15). In the poor theatre, audience interest cannot be piqued by spectacle but must be gained by genuine human connection. Without the possibility of reliance on flashy design to keep the audience focused and engaged in the story, their attention must be attained by communion with the actors, the story, and the world. Due to this necessity, students in Barnstorm learn communication rather than presentation, becoming aware of how to connect to an audience, reaching out as a collaborator, rather than dictate to a crowd. This prepares students to create work that will engage and affect audiences, generating art instead of merely entertainment.
Case Studies

1. *The Tempest*

Barnstorm’s Fall 2015 production of William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, for which I was director and set designer, is a useful example of embracing minimalism, adapting concept to space, and engaging the audience in the creation of a shared world. This production was subject to two challenges: space and budget. *The Tempest* focuses on Prospero, a exiled duke who, through magic, summons his betrayers to his island to enact his revenge. Aside from the first scene, which occurs on a ship, the entirety of the action takes place on the island. It quickly became clear that my initial concept of a nature-focused production would not be achievable in the dominantly enclosed and interior space of The Barn Theater. This necessitated a new approach to discovering what Prospero’s island is and the search for a concept that would allow the island to be created in the available space. Combing through the text, Prospero’s repeated references to his magic as his “art,” and his ultimate decision to forsake his magic when he leaves the island to return to Milan, became a focal point of interpretation. With this in mind, the island began to emerge as a place inside Prospero from which “art” could be created. Looking at the situation by which Prospero came to be on the island, imprisonment and isolation from the outside world seemed to be the elements that were most at harmony with the space of The Barn. Coupling these two ideas, the island conceptually became an inescapable place within the artist where they are compelled to make art - an internal location within Prospero’s
mind rather than a literal location. From this unity of concept and space, the next challenge became execution of this interpretation within the limits of the available resources.

From the beginning, being familiar with the resources delegated to Barnstorm productions, my approach to *The Tempest* was intended to be minimalistic. Furthermore, as this was the third full production added to a normal season of two, it was allocated a meager budget of $70, so economic necessity forbade any elaborate delusions. The foremost problem encountered was how to show the different locations around the island without the need for complex scene changes. The initial idea for the creation of this flexible world was to use white curtains, which could be detached and formed into whatever set dressing was necessary, in an extreme attempt at object versatility. An adjustment had to be made to this design due to both scarcity of resources and the concrete structure of the Barn; the idealized sweeping curtains became three separate bed sheets suspended on pulleys that could be raised or lowered to the ground and detached to be used for a variety of purposes, each configuration conveying a different part of the island.\(^{14}\) This flexibility helped to create the shifting, malleable world of the production, while making no attempt to mask or conceal the realities of The Barn Theater. Without the need for elaborate scene changes, the transitions between scenes could flow smoothly in front of the audience, enhancing the sense that the action was taking place in a psychological

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\(^{14}\) Figures 4 and 5.
locale, with different thoughts and characters flowing in and out of focus. Furthermore, leaving the stage empty except for white sheets invited the audience to project their own interpretations onto the undefined, abstract setting - providing blank canvases for the audience to paint. This idea became the point towards which the overall concept of the production evolved, creating opportunities for the audience to engage as interpreters rather than spectators. Additionally, a non- (if not anti-) realistic realm permitted an inharmonious mixture of costumes from different periods and styles to exist onstage together without conflict. By crafting the world to fit the space and available resources, a coherence of concept and execution was achieved.

With a minimal and abstract set, creating the world both in the internal life and physical expression of the actors’ bodies became imperative. The actors’ bodies could not simply exist onstage, they had to communicate the tone of their environment to the audience, allowing the audience to fill in the details. A body in space does not tell a story; how a body affects and is affected by space tells a story. This forces the actor to step into a more collaborative-directorial role in performance: in the same way that a director sets the parameters in which the actors can create the world of a production, the actors set the parameters in which the audience can engage with, interpret, and immerse themselves in this world. The actors in *The Tempest* had to guide the imaginations of the audience to see the world that they were inhabiting. The abstract tone of this production meant that rather than trying to lead the audience by the hand to see a rooted
physical location, the actors were responsible for fostering an event that allowed the audience to project their own interpretations of the space and the action using the space to show theatre’s Artaudian ability “not to define thoughts, but to cause thinking” (Artaud 69). The variable and impermanent uses of the sheets furthered this notion, never committing objects to a single use or concrete meaning and allowing the audience to engage with the work by reaching their own conclusions about location and form.15 “Emptiness in the theatre allows the imagination to the fill the gaps. Paradoxically, the less one gives the imagination, the happier it is, because it is a muscle that enjoys playing games” (Brook The Open Door 32).

This minimalism was successful as an evocative tool because, in this production, concrete fact and detail were secondary to the characters’ relationships to each other and to their world. As the connections of the characters moved to the foreground of the production’s focus, presenting a visual, material, or even linear world to the audience became less important than allowing them to viscerally experience the human interactions. “One is not bound by a unity of place, a unity of time, when the emphasis is on human relationships” (Brook The Open Door 35). Relocating The Tempest to the fluid, abstract, and interior space of the psychological realm, the production told the story of Prospero battling her inner demons in a desperate and futile struggle to

15 The sheets were used as a multitude of objects: as sails of the ship (see Figure 6), as the storm (see Figure 7), as Caliban’s hiding place (see figure 8), as Ariel’s harpy illusion (see Figure 9), and many others.
escape the compulsion to create her art. Finding this concept, that fit into the space of the Barn and could be reflected without complicated scenic design allowed the actors to explore this world through their characters’ relationships. By allowing the relationships to evoke and create the world in which the characters’ live, the audience was presented a very specific world without a pressing need for visual assistance.
2. Ghosts

Barnstorm’s Fall 2015 production of Henrik Ibsen’s *Ghosts* used similar principles but in different ways. With a budget of $400, the production of *Ghosts* was able to achieve a higher level of visual presentation in its design than *The Tempest*, but remained subject to spatial and budgetary limitations. Approaching a period piece, the creative team felt that visual aesthetic was more important for communicating the world of the play to the audience. With this production’s naturalistic approach, a larger amount of aesthetic uniformity was needed than was necessary for the abstract world of *The Tempest*.\(^\text{16}\) However, due to Barnstorm’s scarcity of appropriate or accurate period costumes or scenery, these elements had to be scrounged together from what could be found in an attempt to convey a visual effect evocative of what this world should look like. With the lack of resources, completely transforming the space of the Barn proved impossible so it became necessary to find minimal ways to invite the audience into an 1881 living room in Norway.\(^\text{17}\) The most effective element was also the most striking feature of the set design: a low, two-foot-high, molded, decorative wall across the back wall of the stage. This white “wall” made no attempt to conceal the course, brown, worn wall of The Barn, but rather made a suggestion to the audience what the walls would look like were the resources

\(^{16}\) Naturalism describes a theatrical style that focused on achieving the appearance of reality, aiming to emulate life as closely as possible.  
\(^{17}\) *Ghosts* explores the exposure of the repressed secrets of a Victorian-Era, Norwegian, upper-class family from the living room of their manor house.
available. This hinting design provided a sample of the world that was being entered and was able to engage the audience as an “accomplice” in the act of creating the world of the play, providing a starting point from which their imaginations could fill the rest of the room. (Brook The Open Door 32).

Furthermore, the costumes were pulled together from what could be borrowed, creating an eclectic amalgamation of period elements that only reached cohesion when the actors and audience agreed to accept the lack of strict visual uniformity.

The furniture was kept to the minimum amount necessary to convey the period and personality of the room in which the action takes place, the most elaborate feature being a large number of books strewn about the stage. To further create the image of a Victorian-era living room, curtains were placed in front of the jury box, the thirty-six seats at stage level on stage right and the platform on stage left under which the piano lives, transforming the theatre into a more traditional proscenium stage and seating arrangement and allowing a more naturalistic, fourth-wall approach to the production. Due to the internalized focus of naturalism, it is more difficult to find ways to connect or commune directly with the audience through the imaginary wall. Due to this, a more visual approach, such as the one used in Ghosts, is necessary in

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18 See Figures 10-12.
19 The fourth-wall refers to the imaginary wall through which the audience sees in a traditional proscenium staging, where the other three walls of the room are physical constructs.
communicating the creation of a production's world. Brook postulates of naturalistic stage setting, "If one finds oneself in a realistic set, [...] then the cinema can do it better! [...] The filmmaker has an advantage which the theatre director will only acquire if he leaves the realistic set and turns to the open stage," (The Open Door 35). Naturalism allows the audience to observe a familiar world. When the world conveyed onstage is understood to operate by the same rules as our shared familiar one, the audience is pushed back into a more passive spectator role rather than that of an active participant in creating and understanding the laws that govern the performed reality. The poor theatre must learn to show just enough that the effects can be communicated without allowing the audience to disengage and simply watch rather than believe. If this occurs, the collaborative unity will not be achieved and the audience's attention will be drawn to the missing pieces as shortcomings rather than opportunities.
3. *Pains of Youth*

The lessons learned in an academic poor theatre environment are incredibly useful, and are easily applied, to work student artists will do outside of established, academic institutions. My observations and experiences from these explorations of bare-bones symbolism (*The Tempest*) and minimal naturalism (*Ghosts*), proved invaluable when I independently produced and directed Ferdinand Bruckner’s *Pains of Youth*, for which I also designed both the set and props. Both the use of minimal concrete scenery and adaptable space were applicable to this production. The first necessary concept adjustment was to transplant Bruckner’s period drama to the modern day, adapting the trauma that the generation of young adults in the 1920’s experienced at the hands of World War I into the shellshock that the current generation of young adults experiences from growing up during the media boom. Luckily, the language of Martin Crimp’s 2009 translation of Bruckner’s play endowed the script with a contemporary feel, easing this transition and allowing the play a cohesive modern context without sacrificing the circumstances in which it was written.

Fitting this concept into the black-box space of The Dark Lab in the Digital Arts Research Center at U.C. Santa Cruz, presented its own set of challenges. The 40’x40’ black-box space was far too large to foster the intimacy required for

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20 *Pains of Youth* examines the instability of a generation caused by growing up during the WWI, focusing on seven young students in Vienna in 1923.
naturalistic bedroom setting. With no budget for production, the skills learned in Barnstorm about working with extreme limits proved invaluable. Faced with transforming the open expanse of The Dark Lab into a small bedroom without adequate physical constructs, a new approach was needed to create the playing space: utilizing the audience to create the necessary spatial constraints. To this end, the audience was used as the “walls” of the room. Sitting in a 16’x16’ square surrounding the playing space, facing inward, the audience set the boundaries of Marie’s bedroom. To help the audience adjust to their role as part of the architecture of both the space and the world, the two doors of the room were placed on the same plane as the audience, at opposite corners of the room, facing each other, with the rest of the furniture in the middle of this square.

While the initial directorial concept was less realistic and more inclusive of abstract symbolism, the seating arrangement allowed the naturalism of this production to flourish, adjusting the way in which the material was approached. With the audience on all sides, the actors were able to exist more realistically in space, able to face each other head-on without needing to angle themselves for optimal viewing. Additionally, the intense proximity between actor and audience highlighted and enhanced the conceptual ideal that the audience should feel uncomfortable with how deeply they identify with Bruckner’s

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21 Black-box refers to a theatre that is an open empty box in which the arrangement of audience and playing space can be placed as needed.
22 See figures 13 and 14.
23 See Figures 15.
24 See Figure 16.
characters and be unable to disengage or observe from a safe distance. Furthermore, each seat was told the same story from an entirely different perspective, some sections not being included in certain moments of staging, causing further discomfort to modern audiences who are used to having stories tailored to their perspective by film and proscenium staging. This idea was pushed even further by overlapping certain moments of dialogue so that two conversations would be happening simultaneously on different sides of the stage. The audience would thus be included in certain parts of the script but excluded from others depending on where they were sitting. This element furthered the production’s desire to represent, but not emulate, life by presenting the play in an extremely realistic perspective where no person receives the entirety of the story.

Presentationally, many of the tactics used in creating the naturalistic world of *Ghosts*, were employed for *Pains of Youth*. The similarly, if not even more extremely, enclosed proximity allowed the actors and audience to commune uninhibitedly regarding the creation of the onstage world, as no physical barriers, and minute physical distance, existed between them. The audience and door placement created the shape of the room, restricting the space by constructing the physical walls only by hinting at them. The intimacy

25 In the round, if two actors sit facing each other across the table, the audience behind Actor A can see Actor B’s face and Actor A’s back and vice versa, but the audience sitting parallel to the actors can see both faces (see Figure 17).
26 See Figures 18-21.
allowed audience members to see each other across the playing space, reminding the audience that they are entering a liminal space between worlds and allowing the honesty of the theatrical event to remain present. The ease of communication regarding the creation of the world, coupled with the constant reminder that the world was being constructed by this communication, created the sense of existential unease inherent in Bruckner’s play. Furthermore, the seating arrangement rendered masking the space on the sides of the doors impossible, allowing the audience to see the actors walking from backstage to the doors for their entrances and forcing the actors initiate this communication before they even entered the playing space. The effectiveness of this world was tied to the lack of attempt to present the theatrical event as anything else than just that. Without trying to convince the audience that naturalism and life are synonymous, the communion between actor and audience was found in both emotional and analytical engagement.
Conclusion

When creating this dual level of engagement, perhaps the idealization of poverty is necessary. Without the need to fill in certain details for themselves, perhaps audiences are not as engaged with theatrical events; performances in which every detail is presented and polished require a lower level of investment, similar to the distanced observership of film. Had *Pains of Youth* been able to play within an elaborately constructed set, showing every detail of Marie’s bedroom to perfection and allowing the audience to see every nuance of every moment on every actors’ face, it would not have had the same effect or communicated the existential dread of the text nearly as provocatively. It is the poverty, the beggar-like supplication to the will of the audience, that allows the necessary communication to occur. To ask an audience to engage with a piece of art despite the transience and impermanence of poor theatre production creates the collaborative environment in which worlds can be created. This is a crucial lesson the education of young artists. Working in the poor theatre strips away the façade of physical presentation and fosters the creation of honest human connection as the center of the theatre art.
Appendix

*The Tempest* production photos taken by Kayla Morrow.

*Ghosts* production photos taken by the author.

*Pains of Youth* production photos taken by Kristopher Bumanglag.
Figure 1 - A view of The Barn Theater’s stage from the center of the audience. Photo credit: Kayla Morrow.

Figure 2 - A view of the Barn Theater’s stage from the house left side of the audience. Found on the UC Santa Cruz Theater Arts department website, photographer unknown.
Figure 3 - Ground plan of the Barn Theater as drafted by Eric Mack (labels added by author).
Space was left between the sheets for two reasons: firstly, because the beams above them would not allow them to hang together, and, secondly, in an attempt to not hide the space of The Barn, but rather augment it.

The sheets could be lowered and detached. Different arrangements of the sheets were used to show different locations.
Figure 6 - Production photo from *The Tempest*. The sheets become the sails of the ship.

Figure 7 - Production photo from *The Tempest*. The sheets become the storm.
Figure 8 - Production photo from *The Tempest* Caliban and Trinculo use a sheet as their hiding place.
Figure 9 - Production photo from *The Tempest*. Silhouettes are used on the sheets to create Ariel’s harpy illusion.

Figure 10 - Production photo from *Ghosts*. The living room setting draws the audience into the world without completely transforming the space.
Figure 11 - Production photo from *Ghosts*. The partial wall conveys what the room would look like if it could have been completely built.

Figure 12 - Production photo from *Ghosts*. Wrapping the poles in the partial wall showed an embrace of the eccentricites of The Barn's stage and helped the world to settle into the space.
Figure 13 - Production photo from *Pains of Youth*. The audience seating was placed around the playing space in a tight square. The seats that formed the western wall are shown here.

Figure 14 - Production photo from *Pains of Youth*. The seats that formed the northern wall are shown in the background.
Figure 15 - Production photo from *Pains of Youth*. A door sits in the corner where the northern and western walls meet.

Figure 16 - Production photo from *Pains of Youth*. With the audience on all sides, the actors could face whichever way they wanted without having to adjust to open themselves to any certain side.
Figure 17 - The audience sitting behind either one of the actors would only be able to see one of the face of the one across from them at this moment.
Figure 18 - Production photo from *Pains of Youth*. A moment viewed from the south side of the playing area.
Figure 19 - Production photo from *Pains of Youth*. The same moment as above (Figure 18) viewed from the north side of the playing area. The audiences sitting on opposite sides were given different perspectives of the same moment.
Figure 20 - Production photo from *Pains of Youth*. Two conversations happen simultaneously. Each audience member has to choose which one to focus on.

Figure 21 - Production photo from *Pains of Youth*. Two conversations happen simultaneously. Each audience member has to choose which one to focus on.
Bibliography


