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BANANAS IN THE MIST: DIRECTING AMAZING ADVENTURES OF THE
MARVELOUS MONKEY KING

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

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By Diego Villada, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2008

Major Director: Dr. Noreen C. Barnes
Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Theatre

This thesis details -in personal narrative form- the process by which the author directed a production of Elizabeth Wong's Amazing Adventures of the Marvelous Monkey King at Dr. Michael M. Krop Senior High School in Miami, Florida. The following text explains elements of pre-production, presents relevant research associated with the play, describes the production process in detail, and states conclusions drawn by the author about the experience. The work challenged both the ensemble and the director to seek new avenues of expression and theatricality different from those traditionally explored in their respective educational settings.

Preface

The genesis of this production was a phone conversation that took place, between Andrea R. Kidd (Andi) and I, early in the summer of 2007. Andi is the director of the theatre arts department at Dr. Michael M. Krop Senior High School (MKHS) in Miami, FL. During that conversation, she brought up the topic of possible shows for her upcoming season and asked for my opinion in this regard. After voicing my perspective on the shows mentioned and adding a few to the list, Andi jokingly said, “I wish you were in town [Miami] this fall, so I could just let you direct one of my shows. That would give me some time to recharge and you could make it your thesis or something.” After a moment’s pause, we both laughed and enjoyed the levity of the moment. It was obviously a joke, because my graduate work thus far had me based in/near Richmond, VA and spending a semester away seemed crazy. That being said, the possibility seemed interesting, and so I unconsciously recorded it in the back of my mind. I did this without knowing that at the same moment events were transpiring that would make the possibility of directing a show at MKHS not a crazy option at all.

During the first weeks of August, all the intricately laid plans for my last year of graduate school came undone. It was my intention to participate in a professional internship and write about the experience as my thesis topic. My original thesis idea, assisting with the fight direction of a production in Washington D.C., fell through due to issues with contractual negotiations. In a flash I was left with no internship and consequently no thesis project. With ruined plans and low morale, I sought out the advice

of my advisor Dr. Noreen C. Barnes. She was as surprised at my sudden logistical bad luck as I was. She explained that my two options were to register for a traditional semester at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) or seek out another internship opportunity within the two week time span before the fall semester began.

I immediately started my search of potential internship sites throughout the United States. Unfortunately, because of the lateness of my queries, most theatres I contacted had already filled their positions. The only theatre that returned my calls and had an available spot open on their staff happened to be in Miami, FL. Due to the fact that Miami is my hometown (as well as a lack of options), I immediately accepted their solicitation for an onsite interview and subsequently accepted their offer for a semester-long internship. With my graduate credits once again assured, my thoughts turned to my thesis project. My inclination was toward an experiential thesis focused on production work. Unfortunately the internship I had accepted was inclined more towards the administrative and educational.

This disconnect between my new internship and my thesis inclination lead me to think about other possibilities for a creative outlet. As if by providence, it dawned on me that by being in Miami my proximity to MKHS was now such that I could direct a show there. I contacted Andi and we discussed the possibility. She was ecstatic about the idea and accepted before I could even finish my pitch as a potential guest director. When prompted as to the play I wanted to direct, I responded with a show that has been at the top

of my list for some time now: Fuenteovejuna¹. Andi applauded my choice and volunteered her most advanced students for the project. We set up a meeting to discuss all the particulars after my arrival in South Florida, and with that all the pieces were then in place for smooth sailing in regards to directing my thesis production. I should have known that these calm seas were not to last.

At our meeting in early September, Andi informed me that I would direct the second show of the season. We drafted a schedule of rehearsals and performances which spanned six weeks in October and November. It was then that she noticed that her seniors, the students she had designated for my production, would not be able audition due to scheduling conflicts. She explained that by that point in the school year they would be involved in two projects simultaneously, a one-act competition and college auditions. It would not be in anyone's best interest to involve them in a third project and risk spreading them too thin. After several attempts to reconcile the scheduling conflicts, it was apparent that nothing could be done. I was aghast and she was apologetic. Because of the heightened text in Fuenteovejuna, I was painfully aware that without the seniors it would be impossible to produce, or at least to produce well. To add insult to injury, Andi also informed me that the multi-million-dollar, state-of-the-art auditorium (which I had planned to use) was also unavailable due to budget cuts. In recent years it had been sectioned off with dividers and used as additional classroom space. I was heartbroken. My smooth sailing turned into rough seas after just one meeting.

¹ Fuenteovejuna (The Sheep Well) was written by Lope de Vega during the Spanish Golden Age.

Not being one to allow circumstances beyond my control to ruin a perfectly good thesis opportunity, I returned to the drawing board. Andi suggested that her bright eyed and bushy tailed neophyte students would have the best schedule to coordinate with my own, and so we resolved that they would be the ones to participate in my production. Once the students' level was chosen, it was then appropriate to choose a show. I needed a show that would challenge me creatively, push the beginners beyond their comfort zone, and yet still stay within the realm of the possible considering their lack of skill. My answer to this riddle was Amazing Adventures of the Marvelous Monkey King by Elizabeth Wong. It was a show that seemed simple on the surface but was full of hidden gems in respect to the imagery and staging ideas it brought to my mind. My sensibilities for movement would be an excellent complement to this script rich in archetypal characters. Now that the show, the schedule, and the students were all set, I finally began to get excited by the prospect of directing a show at MKHS, my alma mater.

MKHS is a public high school in the north east fringe of Miami-Dade County (Florida). It has over three thousand students and houses a magnet program for the visual and performing arts. Students Training in the Arts Repertory (STAR) Magnet Program invites students from the greater Miami area with exceptional potential in sculpture, painting, photography, instrumental music, choral music, theatre performance, technical theatre, television production, classical dance, or modern dance to develop their skills while attending a public high school. The students that audition and are accepted, take two magnet classes every year and must maintain a "B" average in order to remain in the

program. Many graduates continue to pursue the study of their chosen art form in a post secondary setting.

Research

In order to better understand the play, I needed to know more about its author. By researching Elizabeth Wong -her life and literature- I gleaned where this production fit chronologically into the canon of her works, the predominant themes associated with her dramas, and the production history of Amazing Adventures of the Marvelous Monkey King.

Elizabeth Wong² was born in South Gate, California in 1958, to parents that were working-class immigrants from China. At a very young age, she noticed that many depictions of Asian culture in the media were demeaning and stereotypical. This caused her to view her Chinese ancestry with contempt and disdain. Wong did not want to be associated with people that spoke in a “strange way” or with whom she felt no connection. This state of ethnic denial lasted through her adolescence and into early adulthood.

Wong earned her undergraduate degree in journalism from the University of Southern California in 1980, but it wasn’t until she earned her MFA from New York University (NYU) in 1991, that she began to see her Chinese roots for what they were, an asset. In the interim period between her degrees, she worked as a reporter for both television news stations and newspapers. It was during this time in her life that she happened upon Asian American Theatre. Wong was introduced to the work of playwrights

² Please see Appendix A: Headshot

such as David Henry Hwang and Wakako Yamauchi. This was a life changing experience for her because plays by the aforementioned artists treated Asian American culture with respect, which in turn caused her to realize the self-worth she had denied herself until that point. Wong understood that theatre was a medium through which the Asian American experience could be explored, with the dignity and reverence it required.

She quickly left the field of journalism, because she found it too restricting as far as her ability to comment on the events she was reporting on. Having never written anything for the theatre, Wong applied for admission into NYU's graduate playwriting program and (due to her natural talent and fervor) was accepted. While a student at Tisch School of the Arts (NYU), Wong wrote some of her most notable plays which include Letters to a Student Revolutionary and Kimchee and Chitlins;

Letters to a Student Revolutionary (1989), the first American play to dramatize events surrounding the Tiananmen Square massacre, is Wong's most popular produced work...[the plot consists of] two women who have little more in common than their racial identity [that] experience emotional and spiritual transformation through their decade-long exchange of letters...In *Kimchee and Chitlins* (1990), however Wong places overt antagonism between an Asian American population and a non-Caucasian community of color at the center of its dramatic action... Wong investigates a complex cluster of issues engendered by hatred rooted in cultural, ethnic, class, and sexual differences (Kaplan 352).

Elizabeth Wong is a socially conscious playwright that speaks to the issues affecting people, of both color and non-color, in all facets of American society. Predominant themes within her work include the self- reflection, self-actualization, confrontation of prejudice, promotion of cultural sensitivity, and tolerance in all forms. For her extraordinary work, she has received various fellowships, awards, and mentions. Wong is also known for her plays for young audiences. One such play is Amazing Adventures of the Marvelous Monkey King.

Amazing Adventures of the Marvelous Monkey King was first produced³ by The Denver Center for the Performing Arts in 2001. On the website for Playscripts, Inc, a New York based publishing company for dramatic works, the synopsis of the play is described as:

The mischievous Chinese superhero The Monkey King comes to life in this energetic and charming play where Chinese Opera and hip-hop collide. Between finding and losing a home, getting kicked out of school, and battling with a one-horned ogre, the naughty Monkey King somersaults into the future on his adventures, where he hears hip-hop music and gets jiggy with it. After much dancing, battles and heroics, the impish Monkey King triumphs over his adversaries -- and learns about leadership, responsibility, and forgiveness in the process!

The story is an adaptation of an ancient Chinese myth entitled Journey to the West.

³ Please see Appendix H: Production History

Journey to the West was written by Wu Chen-en during the Ming Dynasty (1500-1582). It details the story of Sunwukong, the Monkey King, and is considered one of the four great classics written during this period of Chinese history.

Production

The following is my account of what occurred this past semester in my direction of Elizabeth Wong's Amazing Adventures of the Marvelous Monkey King⁴. It is written as a description of what occurred. The goal being to document the process as accurately as possible and give emphasis to each element that made up the production. It is not done chronologically. It identifies subheadings that will speak to individual compartmentalized portions related to specific elements.

Approach

Directing

The text is a children's story, written for a cast of four (with the potential for expansion of up to twelve actors). It is a 45-minute short play listed under the genre: children's theatre. The set is described a bare stage with one simple four legged table. I took out the table and had the set, time, place, and characters be created using physical storytelling. It is written for a multicultural cast. The intention I gathered is that the playwright wanted to make her play accessible to people of all cultures and ethnicities. I attempted to embody this from the start by employing colorful⁵ casting, not considering ethnicity or gender as far as any of the acting roles in the production. I expanded the ensemble to 11 actors⁶ in order to incorporate as many people as there were characters in the production. Most of the main characters were played by one actor. Some of the minor

⁴ Please see Appendix B & C: The Program

⁵ Colorful casting is sometimes referred to colorblind or blind casting.

⁶ The cast was comprised of twelve at the start. One student quit after the first rehearsal.

roles were doubled up to give the particular actor playing them some significant time on stage (so they might gain more from the experience).

One of the things that distinguished my approach to the staging was the presentational format I used. I attempted to explore the physicality of the animalistic qualities as they were described by the character names in the script. Due to the genre and the fact that many of these mythical personae were the Chinese equivalent of Greek gods and goddesses, each character lent itself to be made into a caricature very easily. Interesting theatre does not come from making the easiest choices though, so I wanted to stay away from caricatures at all costs. I was most interested in using their connection to elemental forces (i.e. earth and wind) and animalistic allusions in order to create character. Animal characters with animal qualities and elemental characters with elemental qualities was the goal, all the while having a commitment level to the movement that might have the actor's portrayal of this character seem "real". Not in the way we would describe realism⁷, but in the way of having a level of commitment that would cause the audience to suspend their disbelief and go on this journey with us. The *real* referring the real in the *world* of the play.

I also wanted to explore having this age group (high school freshman and sophomores) do the type of physical research necessary to bring about completely abstract physicalized characters and also have believability. It was an experiment to see how far we can take a very physically "easy" (on the surface) script and give it physical depth. The

⁷ Characterizes a style concerned with depicting the world as it actually is.

playwright (in the dialogue) gives us enough information and enough depth that it could be played without physical truth. Since its children's theatre, I am sure some choose to play the story without the level of commitment or research as I envisioned for my own production. I found though, that it was of most interest to me to work on this from a standpoint as if there were no words. If there was no text, the actors could tell the story just as well, with bodies that were alive and available to them to show the audience a clear picture of both intentions and emotions using only the physical human form and not text on a page. Physicality that was rich in emotional content coupled with the words could then make a more powerful story. Once the movement was on par with the richness and depth of the text, the audience would be transported into the world of the play and the experience of being present at this production. It would take the story telling to the next level, adding something to it that perhaps had not been added before.

That was my approach and what I thought I could bring to it. An emotional honesty coupled with a physical truth, both inhabiting the world of this play, but presented in a highly presentational format was the approach that I had. I worked individually with each character to reach the level of physical specificity required for the particular aesthetic I wanted. To be clear, I was attempting specificity that corresponded (and connected) the ensemble. By making each character so unique and defined, I sought to give them all a depth that would hold the audience's attention and facilitate the transference of the story.

Rehearsals

As a whole the rehearsal process⁸ took seven weeks to complete. Each of the weeks was dedicated to a specific goal. That is, the first and second week the focus was on team building. We had to develop a physical language entirely from scratch, meaning that the world of the play where the characters in habit was not our own (not reality). It was based on a Chinese myth. So this mythical world of the play was subject to different laws, natural laws that exist in every staged universe and will consist of conventions. Conventions that will in turn govern the specific personalities of the animalistic characters. This is not in the script and so it had to be created from scratch, from *carte blanche*.

In order to accomplish this feat, we had to take the first two weeks to team build and to develop the language, the common terms with which we would communicate throughout the process. Because of the cast's experience level, and the fact that my approach would require a significant amount of research on their part, I had to accept that the cast and I did not share common vocabulary with which to communicate. So I had to take the time to develop this vocabulary, both physically and intellectually. I had to come up with the terms I was going to use in rehearsal to signify the different physical qualities I wanted each actor to emphasize.

The weeks that followed included four weeks of plain-old rehearsal and one week of tech. I divided the four weeks into sketching and cleaning. I took the first couple to sketch. Sketching is establishing the entrances and exits, the transitions and how they would occur, and blocking within each scene (where the students/actors would move). For

the second two weeks of plain-old rehearsal we did some cleaning and polishing. We simply redid/reworked what had been sketched and added nuance. Once the students had a chance to incorporate the blocking I gave, they were then able to play. Play being the work that an actor does in rehearsal to flesh out the character they are attempting to portray. This can only happen once the blocking has been established and we have deduced all intentions, then they could find discoveries that are what give good performances an element of surprise and spontaneity. During tech week, we added the technical elements to the show. We added lights, sound, and costume, as well as music. The performances occurred November 19 & 20, 2008. The physical research dictated coming up with a codified system of movement for each character: giving them a specific quality that I wanted to inhabit all of their movement in order to give the audience a clear differentiation physically from one character to another.

Team Building

The first two weeks of rehearsal were for making the cast into an ensemble. Group unity is essential in an ensemble driven show, so we worked this first. Nothing helps out group unity more than stressful situations. My approach to achieve this goal was to give them a physical regiment, in order to strengthen their bodies. This included Grotowski⁹ work, specifically *plateau* work. This *plateau* work helped us develop a common language for the qualities of movement such as balancing the space, minimization, expansion, levels,

⁸ Please see Appendix G: Original Schedule

tempo, and stamina. This really helped to develop the ensemble, because it was a stressful common experience. One of the strongest elements of the show was the fact that these actors were not only in the same play but were an ensemble of players. Actors that train together and sweat together are the closest kind.

We also used exercises like *three step*¹⁰, an extension of *plateau* work, by having to add all the previous elements mentioned while keeping a rhythm. It forced them to communicate physically with each other and forced them to start using their bodies to communicate what they wanted to convey as well as to begin to control their bodies. The control of their physicality, lead them to view fatigue not as a crutch but as a vehicle for truth in their character work. A tired body is incapable of doing more action than is necessary to accomplish a goal and a character only needs the necessary. This is called economy of gesture. There was at the beginning, some resistance to this. Some of the actors, especially those students not in the theatre department (whose training did not approximate this level of difficulty) expressed some negative feelings. So I immediately dispelled any notions that commentary (on their part) was welcome. I let them know that their discomfort was irrelevant to their character research, so they should “get over it”¹¹.

Another exercise I use for team building was *circle work*¹². This is a call and response exercise. I had them respond in the following format: if I tell them to go faster =

⁹ “The *exercices corporels* [physical exercises] serve to relieve us of our cultural of sitting and standing, and in doing so they grant the lower halves of our bodies the freedom to move, to sense, to feel, and to express a much greater range of emotional life” (Wangh, 60).

¹⁰ *Three Step* is an exercise I adapted from the training practices of the DAH Teatar of Belgrade, Serbia.

¹¹ “Getting over it” refers only to the commentary of the cast during the physically strenuous exercises. Actors cannot fully be present if they are always commenting on what they do as they do it.

¹² *Circle work* is an exercise I adapted from the training repertoire of Janet Rodgers of TheatreVCU and the instructors at Miami Lakes Krav-Maga in Florida.

“ooaahhh”; if I tell them to slow down = “ooooouuuu”; and if I tell them to change direction = “aaaaauuuu”. This work was for two reasons: group unity and also to have the ensemble learn to respond to my voice. This was a distinct use of behavioral modification on my part. I did this so that throughout the rest of the rehearsal process when I spoke, the students would respond immediately. This is necessary because of the nature of the work. The physical approach demands this discipline. Having the students respond physically to my direction, would become an invaluable asset when the work turned to blocking later in the process.

Characters

Monkey King

The character of the Monkey King is a jokester, the archetype of the trickster. Even in Wong’s description on page 4 of the script it says “Monkey King, 20’s, male, playful, mischievous with a dash of earnest sincerity. Acrobatic, gymnastic, and athletic. Able to perform somersaults, head stands, black flips, and one handed somersaults would be a plus.” This of course is an indication to the director as to casting. But the Monkey King that I chose, the person whom I chose to play the Monkey King was someone whom I felt had the raw energy as opposed to someone that was just a gymnast. I wanted the Monkey King to have a very likeable energy that was youthful and powerful. The actress whom I cast was actually the second youngest in the ensemble, and also a very talented young lady. I chose her in an effort to cast the person whom best fit the role out the pool of those whom auditioned. Knowing that the Monkey King was the title role, this actor’s character work

was the most challenging, because this is the person we follow throughout. The job of this actress was to find the essence of this character and transport that essence into the different situations that the play puts the character in. The way that this was accomplished was that I gave her some physical qualities I wanted her to embody.

Because she was the Monkey King, she had to have monkey qualities. I wanted her to have the movement qualities of a primate, an animal that transported themselves in the medium of trees and tall grass, in a hunched over position. That had moments of fluid and fast movement, but also had moments of instinctive pause and was very observant. In order to accomplish this I started the Monkey King on a physical regiment that was slightly different than that of the rest of the cast. I knew from the beginning that the Monkey King would need a level of fitness that would carry her energy consistently throughout the show. The way we accomplished this was to complete specific homework I gave, a regiment of pushups, sit-ups, and jump squats, the major muscle groups involved with the creation of the physical embodiment of this character. Aside from being a monkey though, this character had to be different from the monkeys whom she would be the “king” of. This character had to employ a very humanoid counter mask, counterpoint, to monkey element of her movement.

This character had to be both an animal and a human being. Not as we understand a human being to be, but to have those qualities that bring human beings to upright positions and with language available that was more intellectual or advanced than her monkey friends. Elizabeth Wong helps with this of course, because she wrote the language, but I had to connect those moments of humanoid posture with those humanly sentient moments.

It gave the audience a clear perspective into this character's personae. The fact that she was both playful animalistic pleasure seeking being, but she was also the leader of the group. The Monkey King was someone that had ideas was very much like them [the audience]. This identification was important to me. The Monkey King is one of the only animal-like character's that has humanoid moments. This really gave a good juxtaposition to her animal moments.

Another element was keeping in mind the actual myth: the story journey into the west. I wanted to definitely include the elements of naiveté, because Wong's play is in many ways the prequel to what occurs in the rest of Journey to the West. So I wanted to give it that element of discovery that would later have this character becoming the regal experienced character that I read about in the story and Chinese myth. Thus, when she is born out of the rock, I imagined her having the personality traits of pride and naiveté.

Kwan Yin

I wanted Kwan Yin, the goddess of air and water to have a quality akin to that of earth goddess. I wanted her to have an omnipotent feel, and in her physicality display a control over the elements that was alluded to in the script. The way I accomplished this was start off with a base of movement that spoke to what she was a goddess of. In the stories that I read, it seemed that she inhabited a palace in the sky and had wind be her major element. Thus I had her arms and their movement, as well as the swing in her body, to signify an element of wind, an elemental source of her power. While her upper body, (arms and torso) represented the wind, the lower half represented the water. This was done

using her perpetual motion, which gave me the quality that I wished for of her being “real” but inhabiting a different plain of existence as well. Thus having her visiting this world and originating from another (godly) world; as was portrayed physically with the two distinct notions of light, air-ness in her hands, all the while keeping a quality of imbalance of flowing water in the lower half of her body.

Working with this character was somewhat difficult. The student had never worked from this demanding place as an actress. It took a lot of work on both our parts in order to develop her codified form of movement. It was made most difficult by the fact that I needed her to be rooted in it; that is, to be believable. This actress was very much stuck in the words she was saying. I had to draw her out of that and begin to focus on telling the story with her body. It took us several weeks to get the base movement down. Once we had it though, we were able to add nuance and give it specificity.

Another element of Kwan Yin is that she also the narrator in many ways. I had to have her embody the aforementioned physical work but also project a sort of performative nature in order to connect directly with the audience. Completely in the play, submerged with the realm of the play but speaking through it, as a part of three distinctly different worlds. This was done to draw the audience in, on my part. She had to have a transient quality, able to move within different realms. She was part of the world the play, all the while knowing she came from the other-worldly godly pace, and also in the world that the audience was inhabiting in that moment as participants in the experience.

Dragon King

For the Dragon King I decide to deviate from the myth, in terms of his performance, because I wanted to set up an archetypal rivalry (with physicality) between him and the Monkey King. Since the Monkey King had a mischievous, trickster quality, I need the Dragon King to have a very grave, intense, quality about him. The Dragon King had to be someone to be feared and respected. I wanted to show this using his very quick fast movements only when he fought but lethargic and restrained most of the time (as if he could snap at any moment). But reined it in and kept it at bay. I wanted him to have the qualities of salamanders and other reptilian animals and creatures so that we could really get the essence of that. We researched snakes, and geckos, and Komodo dragons so we could get the specific quality I wanted him to have. Of course it also had to have a very mafia¹³ feel. I wanted him to be at the top of a plainly hierarchal organization. I wanted his second in command (General Fish Belly) and his vassals to be visibly intimidated by him and this had to inform his physical work.

The Immortal Guru

The Immortal Guru's text immediately brought images to my mind of what I wanted from this character. The image was that of the Kung Fu instructor, similar to the one shown in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill: Volume 2*¹⁴. The older, Chinese, martial arts master with a long grey beard descending from the chin, was a powerful image that had to be the base. It was only the base though and we had to flesh out who the immortal guru was for this play. I wanted the immortal guru to have poise, a distinct poise that would

¹³ Mafia refers to organized crime syndicates also known by the name La Cosa Nostra or Familia.

distinguish this individual in things martial and also in things philosophical, myth, and exude knowledge; the archetype of the teacher and someone who had compassion but was very rigid and tough on the students. The character had to be timeless for the audience. This is a person of older years but not establishing how many was important. The fact that they had the word “immortal” in their name gave me clue into this. I also wanted this character to be asexual. The quintessential teacher was what I cared for, not really what the sex (or gender) was. The guru could have been male or female, and I did not want to give attention to either or. The actress playing the immortal guru had an added difficulty, because I wanted this character to have an affected dialect. The reasoning and impetus for this is just point of reference for the audience. Using the context of martial arts movies, knowing the audience’s background in watching popular media, by having the actress put on that affected dialect, I could immediately clue into that archetype that is perpetuated by the media: person from Asia that is a master in martial arts. It was a specific choice on my part, and was deliberately put there to tell the audience whom this person was and what they were about from the moment they opened their mouth. I felt that the physical work is what informed that vocal work. The actress worked very hard on this and was one of the most diligent cast members.

One-Horned Ogre

The one-horned ogre was actually played by three people in the show. It was written as one character, and so I had one actor playing him and two actresses on either

¹⁴ Motion picture released by Miramax Films in 2004.

side playing his hands. The description of this character in the beginning of the text is “one horned ogre, that is grunting and inarticulate.” It is also mentioned that he has huge hands and likes to eat monkeys. The quality I wanted for the ogre was of the oaf, which was in the script. In some of the production photo’s I came across, I saw that the ogre was given large gloves or props to make their hands larger. So immediately, I thought that from a physical standpoint and with no set, I could just add people.

By making his hands actual people, I was able to give this character an interesting twist. The physical research for this character included not using his actual hands for anything other than controlling the hands played by the two actresses. He would send them out away from him and they would return on command. His hands were essentially detachable at the wrist. I was proud of this element, because of uniqueness and also the amount of work put in by the students to achieve a high level aesthetic proficiency with this movement.

The ogre was said to have been large in the script (unlike the three actors playing him). All three were short and the male student was short and stocky. I had to work these actors to understand double direction¹⁵ as they moved to show themselves going both up and forward. Also to give themselves a weight as they landed, moving around on each foot that would signify moving around a larger weight than the actors actually had. The person playing the ogre (in the middle) was not a theatre student he was a voice student that was interested in theatre. This brought a good mix to the cast because many times I had to clue

this person into some of the rituals which we as theatre students do all the time and never really explain or talk about it, such as wearing all black to rehearsal.

Hip Hop Kid

The hip hop kid was the youngest member of the cast and was a difficult element to work with. Because this actor was playing a human being, I had the difficult choice to make whether they were going to be an actual human being or rather a representation of a human being in this world. I chose the latter; this is why the actor wore a base of white face and used touches of human qualities in movement to distinguish them from the animal characters. This was done in order to maintain continuity in the telling of the story and the performativity of it. I didn't want it to be too realistic so that it would fit in this fantasy world.

The young lady that portrayed the hip hop kid was the youngest member of the cast and as such she had some attention span issues. I would give notes and homework repetitively, because this young lady simply was not used to doing the amount of work required for a production like this one with character's that are honest but also technically well done. She did have to employ elements of hip hop, which this young lady was able to bring to the production. I had her come up with a one minute routine of 10-12 of the most interesting dance moves she knew from a hip hop repertoire, and then chose the best 3 or 4 to include in the movement work. So, in that way, her movement work was detailed. We

¹⁵ Movement concept by which an actor creates more dynamic stage pictures using musculature/energy that

had to take her moves, choose the best ones, and have them be rooted in telling of the story (for the purpose of teaching rhythm to the monkey king).

General Fish Belly

General fish belly was a subordinate to the Dragon King. Keeping in mind the animalistic presence I wanted him to have, I wanted him to move like an actual fish. I needed the actor to display a gait that spoke to being in water and whose body was lead by a tendency to follow the movements of his head. His body followed shortly behind him and that is how he swam along. I also wanted him to have a quality of being battle tested. I wanted him to show that was an experienced fighter and someone to be respected. This character also became a point of comic relief in the show at times. Due to the intensity of the Dragon King, I wanted to give this character a certain intensity but also moments of levity. I could take this liberty because he was not in the position that Dragon King was. He would share his levity with the audience, and by doing so contrast his master well. The actor playing this role was also very dedicated, and it made everyone work harder.

Monkeys

I wanted each of the monkeys to have their own individual personality, aside from being just monkeys. They had to have that animalistic quality of monkeys (primates) but also individual personalities that would differentiate them for the audience. Monkey “one” was curious, inquisitive, excited, and sprite-like; while monkey “two” was lethargic,

extends in opposing directions.

somewhat dense and slow. This physical research was some of the hardest because of all the nuance necessary. These actors had to accomplish this individualization, while not stealing focus from the Monkey King, whom spoke in most of their scenes together.

The Fairies

I wanted the fairies to have a quality of movement similar to that of what we consider to be most prevalent in adolescent gossiping girls. I wanted them to have this adolescent movement especially when they interacted with the Monkey King. This was displayed by the fairies not including the monkey and ostracizing him. I also saw the fairies as having individual characters, but I wanted them to be less loveable than the monkeys. I did not need the audience to like the fairies, so I took their likes and dislikes to an extreme. I took fairy “one” and had her smile at everything, the type that pretended to like everything and everyone. She was very bitter, but through a smile. I had the fairy “two” do the exact opposite. I had her be an overtly embittered, frowning fairy.

Supplementals

Lights

Because we didn’t have any lights, I toyed with the idea of using the fluorescents. After some thought, I realized that was going to be an impossibility. There is no way to have any element of “magic” when you have fluorescent lights on stage. It takes away the transformation of the space and makes the performative style seem non-engaging. Thus, we had to find some lights where ever we could find them. I had to get resourceful. I

sought out the magnet lead teacher¹⁶ and he was able to facilitate some mismatched lighting equipment that I then transformed into an impromptu light plot. I employed a couple of parkans, a mirror ball, two spotlights, and two industrial free standing lights to make the show seem like a show.

Weapons

In some of the production photo's I found online, the weapons were too abstract. This was yet another way I wished to distinguish this production from the usual style in which this show is performed. I needed the weapons to have a look of danger to them. I wanted to them to resemble actual weapons¹⁷ from the martial arts of China. I accomplished this by purchasing weapons on eBay¹⁸ that resembled those seen in Kung-Fu. They were made of wood because of both stylistic and monetary purposes. Given what the script demanded as far as weaponry, I made choices that supported it while perpetuating my agenda of adding danger to the scenes with weaponry in them.

¹⁶ Larry Davidson, the magnet lead teacher at MKHS, was also instrumental in getting the program printed on professional grade paper and designing the tickets (Please see Appendix I: Ticket).

¹⁷ "Choose a sword that fits, your budget, your needs, your hand, and the historical context of the play" (Suddeth, 186).

¹⁸ eBay <www.ebay.com> is an online marketplace.

Insights Gained

This production certainly had its share of constituent triumphs and setbacks. As with any worthwhile experiences, conclusions¹⁹ can be drawn about both elements. Everything from the format in which rehearsals were scheduled to the uncontrollable restriction of secondary school theatre production yielded significant insights for me as an artist/educator. The successes and hindrances (both foreseeable and not) coupled with their corresponding insights are as follows:

What Worked

Music

Giving music to specific moments worked brilliantly. Musicality –movement or gesture that is wedded to music or sound- is able to heighten the desired emotion without disrupting the audience’s connection to the play. I also discovered that the order is inconsequential as far as the audience’s perception of staging elements. Only emotion or the emotional life of the actor/character rather, is affected by having music come before gesture or vice versa. By layering the work with both though, I was able to find a nice balance.

The combination of live and non-live music, within the small space, really caught the audience’s attention and made some moments very magical. The audience accepted

¹⁹ Some of the insights gained will be touched upon more than once. Due to the overlapping nature of the theatrical art form, many parts of the process overlap. I chose to address each portion individually (so as to be thorough), but in doing so I was forced to repeat myself in several instances.

this, even though in the back of their minds they knew they were in a theatre. The proximity to the performers and the effect of the live musical sounds, which were the gong, chimes, wood claps, and keyboard, gave it an element of “liveness” and excitement. The keyboard especially, setting the background and mood palpably changed the nature of the space. This effect was not lost on the audience at all. Each of the audience members could feel a human being close to them creating these sounds, which went perfectly with what the human beings were presenting for them on stage. Paradoxically, the live music combined with some CD sound effects really gave it that performative quality and that I wanted the audience to participate in. So it was a mixture. By having the music actually happening (being created in the moment) and music cues from pre-recorded sources combining, it was multi layered (and thus interesting).

Audience Participation

The unconventional participation²⁰ of the audience, with their “aahh ooou” responses, gave the performance a distinct element of *communitas*. *Communitas* is defined as a feeling of group solidarity (Schechner, *Performance* 62). In this instance it transformed intense moments in the show, such as when the Monkey King was learning to change shape or scenes of staged violence, into inclusionary instances where the audience (as one unit) and performers shared the experience of the play together. It was a powerful

²⁰ “Audience participation expands the field of what performance is, because *audience participation takes place precisely at the point where the performance breaks down and becomes a social event*” (Schechner, *Environmental* 40)

and palpable interaction that added greatly to the atmosphere of the theatre that evening. The transformative effect on both audience and players was undeniable.

Leadership Style

My regimented style of leadership worked well with this age group. The exactness I demanded and high standard I held the ensemble responsible for yielded very positive results. It wasn't until closing night that I realized the tremendous impact I had made on the group. By not accepting mediocrity and expecting results beyond the false range the students imposed on their own work, I had done something novel in their eyes: believed in them. The aspect of my personality that is (mildly) neurotic, anal-retentive, and obsessive-compulsive served me well because it brought out the best in these young people. One of my rehearsal personas, the army drill sergeant, mixed with a touch of genuine caring was responsible for the visible favorable change in the self-esteem of those in the cast/crew.

Choice of Material

Amazing Adventures of the Marvelous Monkey King turned out to be a great choice. It challenged both the ensemble and I to seek new avenues of expression and theatricality different from those traditionally explored in our respective educational settings. As secondary level theatre students in the United States, the ensemble was rarely exposed to a repertoire that was inspired by Asian mythology or ever had to focus on creating a physical language from scratch. As a graduate level theatre pedagogy student, I had never applied my particularly physical directorial approach to theatre for young

audiences. The experience was inherently filled with limitless potential for growth on everyone's part.

Spatial Intimacy

The intimacy of the space -the close proximity of the audience to the performers- was definitely an asset. The fact that the action of the play was happening so close, gave the audience a perspective of being involved. Much like when they participated by saying "aahh ouu" the proximity added to that sense of being involved and being "in" the story as opposed to being outside of the story and staring in. In essence, one could say that the fourth wall was actually beyond or behind the audience²¹. The spectators were included in the action of the play and they were a part of the performance. Another feature associated with intimacy was the fact that we successfully used the whole space and it gave the theatre (as a whole) somewhat of a cramped feel. One that was less expansive within the audience, therefore adding to experience of being involved in the play. In addition, the fact that the show was so stylized in regards to movement, combined with proximity factor, gave the audience a very close up perspective of that detailed (stylized) work. This added to it, because they were able to appreciate the difficulty involved in the project's creation. Seeing it from far away perhaps would have lessened that effect. They could actually see the movement work, the little minute details that would perhaps be missed on a larger stage/space.

²¹ One of the Asian influences of the show was the omission of the fourth wall: "Above all, the Chinese artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall beside the three surrounding him. He expresses his awareness of being watched" (Willet, 91).

Audience Configuration

The fact that the audience was on three sides, in a thrust, was also indicative of this participatory phenomenon (because the audience could see each other). Not only were performers close to the audience, but also the audience could see itself, once again adding to that extension of the fourth wall beyond them. The fourth wall being the liminal space traditionally thought of as dividing the performance space and the spectator space. This added for the actors an instance where they could perform in a format different than in a proscenium. Given that they were in a three sided audience and they were pretty close, I gave them a unique educational experience (especially as future professionals).

Visible Technicians

Having the audience see the technicians, gave the show a distinctly performative feel. Similar to having the audience call out “aahh ooou” as well as seeing the other patrons, by having them see the technicians it gave the show a presentational quality that acknowledged the audience’s presence, not necessarily to alienate them but to give them enough of a difference to a traditional (western) theatrical setting that they might accept more readily the conventions I had setup. In order to accomplish this goal, from the start I set some of the initial scenes with visible technicians clad in black, the audience got to see the people at the spot lights, working at the booth, and playing musical instruments (all out

in the open), which gave it all a very theatrical feel. I was not trying to hide the fact that we were in a theatre. It was just an accepted convention²².

What Did Not Work

Lights

The lights in the space²³ (the integrated lighting system) did not work. It took time away from me focusing on other things by having to fix that issue. But from obstacles came creativity. I sought out the magnet lead teacher and I found two spot lights to replace front lighting. Then for lighting from above, I went into the auditorium and took out four instruments and four bulbs. I also put a mirror ball in the space, which was jerry-rigged so it would work when it was plugged in manually. I even “two-fered” the four instruments into two paired groups which then could be plugged into either side manually by a technician or cast/crew members. It was a very rudimentary system, but I was quite proud of it given the fact that I had to find the materials on my own, find the magnet lead teacher and suggest it, plot the light in a manner that best fit the space, and shoot the most light without imposing too much in the audience’s space. Even so, it was hardly ideal because the spot lights were in front of the mirrors during some of the scenes and some of the reflected light did bother some of the audience members.

Instead of having extreme seats (sight-line issues), the most prevalent issues were with some of the seats having too much glare. This of course could not be helped, since

²² This comes directly from Kabuki, a performance style of Japan: “Stage assistants in black (koken or kurogo) moved properties and scenery in audience view or lighted a star’s face with candle...” (Brandon, 584).

they were our only other source of front lighting other than the warehouse utility lights that I also used for front lighting. But even they were very rudimentary harsh white light that I could not even get gels on. Speaking of gels, I was able to put amber colored gels in the four parkans lights above the actors on the grid, and that gave it a nice feel, as well as the fact the lights on the spotlights did have some color options, which did give me some distinct choices that you see in the video (but no where near the sort of choice I would have had if I would have had the real lighting capability for that space).

Sound

As far as sound, the live sound was pretty “brilliant”, and it added much to the evening of theatre. That being said, Nick Rosen (the pianist) had an unexpected scheduling conflict during the second performance so he could not make it, he was only able to make it to the first night. Luckily, the first evening, the opening night, a member of the audience happened to be former teacher of mine (during my time MKHS), Beth Chasin, and she was able to step in last minute. In order to catch her up to speed, we watched the video (discussing cues) two hours before the second performance, I was able to instruct her on the feel/mood I wanted for the sound, and the intensions I wanted. Because of her professionalism and poise, she was able to pick up 90% of it. That being said, it was something that she just jumped into, we didn’t even have the keyboard from the night before, we had to use an upright (piano), and so this was definitely a setback. Given more time, I definitely needed to have musicians participate from the beginning of the

²³ The show was performed at the MKHS “The Little Theatre” or Black Box on November 19 & 20, 2008.

experience. This show was unconventional in that regard, because I was only able to bring Nick in at the last moment, as well as Beth just happened to be there to save the day.

Makeup (and Costumes)

Make up also had a last minute cancellation, Sammi (the make up artist) had a work issue the following day after opening night. So the students as well as myself, had to pay very close attention as to what her specific choices were, and tried to follow the plot for her make up as best we could. These setbacks really served to show me how important the collaborative nature of theatre is. It really does take a full team to put something on stage of the caliber that I enjoy working at (or seeing as an audience member). It does take an entire team of people to create theatre. Doing it mostly all myself, I gained a good appreciation as to the individual portions of the show (on the production side) that I do not usually correspond with. Costumes afforded similar insights, as they were something that I had to piece together from the “costume shop” (the storage space upstairs) above the classroom. I just took stuff from other shows and pieced it all together. Being that it was not my expertise and being that it was done somewhat last minute, I felt that we did an excellent job and rolled with the punches. However, someone who is a professional designer could have brought that element of the work to the next level.

Cast Maturity

Working with this age group demanded a lot of patience on my part. The maturity level and professionalism level was such that I had to teach them how to work as more

mature artists than their short years implied. I had to teach them how to be more disciplined. Many times our work was road-blocked by simple immaturity (appropriate of this age level though) and allowing outside influences to inhibit the work. While I think that we worked through it, that everyone had an excellent experience, and learned a great deal about making theatre; I gained many insights as far as the ins and outs of working with this particular age group.

Attendance

Attendance was also a point of contention. Doctor's appointments got to be quite rampant at one point, so much so that I had to put a stop to it pretty quickly. Even with the fact that I had parents sign an affirmation page²⁴ and let them know exactly what the commitment level was, and what was expected. Even still, people had emergencies and also non-emergencies come up and use them as excuses for not coming to rehearsal.

Politics

The politics of the school also put forth a setback. Many times I was willing to stay after rehearsal and work with some of the more willing/generous students (as far as their time) and was not able to. Andi actually took me aside and let me know that it was against school policy; because once rehearsal ends they [the students] should leave and we should not be working in the space. She let me know that this had to do with liability issues and with the school's responsibility to each student. Then it was also brought to my attention

that I wouldn't necessarily be in the best judgment, liability wise, to be spending time with students outside of rehearsal. Specific examples include not giving kids rides home, waiting for their parents to pick them up, and not having rehearsal late into the evening.

The fact that as a director I had to think about these things was new to me. These are all things that I really did not understand until that point. Even when I wanted to work on the issue of the lights and the costumes and the kids volunteered, I really was not able to allow them to help me because of liability issues. Andi brought it to my attention that at any moment a student could falsely accuse me of being inappropriate and I should safeguard myself against that by not spending time alone in any secluded space with any of them, since that would be unwise.

Behavior Issues

Not only was the cast sometimes rowdy in rehearsal, they also had issues with misbehaving in school. At one point I even had to bring in understudies in, from the senior class, so as to give them an incentive to go to school. It is a policy at MKHS that any student that skips school cannot come to rehearsal. Any student that has a grade point average below a certain level is not allowed to perform. As well as any student that misbehaves during school hours to the point where they get suspended or where they get in-door suspensions cannot participate in any extra-curricular activities. This became an issue with the main character, the young lady cast as the Monkey King. It was something that I did not foresee, I didn't even think about that. Andi was very adamant about the fact

²⁴ Please see Appendix D & E: Letters to Parents.

that I had to plan in case that person was to be unavailable due to these situations of misbehavior.

Inexperience

I also would say that my inexperience caused me to not schedule the entire rehearsal process correctly. Because I only scheduled to work two hours every day, I found that right when we were delving into it, right when we were about to have a breakthrough or reach a point in the work that was a level above what we had done before, many times the rehearsal period would end and I would need to do a cool down activity. In retrospect, I should have allowed for perhaps less rehearsals, but more time in each one. This of course creates a paradox because I also found that even within the short time span of two hours or two hours and thirty minutes per rehearsal, I found that some students (specifically my younger ensemble members) had issues with attention span. So at the end of two hours doing this very tedious and strenuous physical work, some of them would lose their focus entirely. Once that happened it would render the work worthless, until the next day when they were fresh. A nice balance needed to be found where I could have had more time in rehearsal but not so many rehearsals so as to have them burn out on me at the end of each day.

In addition, I put too much attention to the beginning of the show and neglecting the end of the show. This I can note as being an amateur mistake. Because the skills I was teaching had to be put into practice in order to be synthesized, I would teach or we would research a specific physical language and then we would put it into practice. But we ended

up always using the beginning of the show for this purpose. So the first 20 minutes of the show got worked on more and longer during the rehearsal process. I think it really showed. The end of the show could have been stronger. The end of the show was not as clean. I put that responsibility solely on myself. At the end, the fights were great, the intentions were fine, the physical language (even though the stamina of the students languished and lost a bit of characterization at the end) was just not as polished. It was a little sloppy. This was a beginner mistake as far as directing goes on my part. It is something that from now on, I won't go as far as directing shows backwards, but I will split the time a bit more evenly.

Respect

I also have a new found respect for high school teachers. They have to not only give direction, but also to teach at the same time; much more so than is regularly done at the university level. That is why I have new found respect for secondary level instructors, especially in theatre, because you want the students to have an autonomy that instills in them the idea that you trust them and respect their artistry. Yet many times they will give you a blank look and not know, literally not know what it is you're talking about. My solution was to explain exactly what I wanted, teaching the particular skill, allowing them to try it, then eventually give them notes about it. So that it literally takes two to three steps longer at this level to create theatre. Whether it is for performers or crew members, having to do everything for them and having to explain every little thing, gave the work a very slow procedural pace. This was also due to the fact that many of the students just have not been exposed to that much theatre, given their young age. One example would be having to

ask my stage manager for rehearsal reports and then have to teach her what a rehearsal report was, and eventually coach her through the first couple of them. The lack of knowledge of the students was a welcome setback though, because it gave me a chance to reinforce my understanding and my knowledge of the basics of theatre (since I had to explain all of it). I had to explain about being at rehearsal on time, professionalism, going home and doing homework, individual research, and the small things that become second nature to a theatre artist past the secondary level. I had to also coax, and in some cases challenge, in order to get the level of work that I wanted from these younger artists.

Kindness

Another mistake on my part was that of being far too nice²⁵. Although, I have a somewhat regimented style, and am demanding in my demeanor, many times students exploited my kindness. So when they asked me to take a break for a couple of minutes, I would acquiesce and they would take a break for more than a couple of minutes. Students would also ask me if they could attend a short event before rehearsal and be five minutes late. I, of course, not having the experience of having students choosing anything but rehearsal (as far as priorities) fell into that trap. Students would choose to be 5 minutes late to rehearsal, and when asked what happened they would respond by saying that I, “said it was ok.” Thinking back on it, I did tell them it was ok, they just didn’t understand that I meant they could go but be back for rehearsal at the scheduled time. Being too nice is something that at this level is not a possibility. Expecting them to do the right thing and

make the “right” choice, about where to be, is not something that is actually going to happen unless you explain it to them, unless you are very clear in explaining the choices and the format in which they should be doing things. Given the chance again, I would probably say “no” more than I did during this experience. I would probably say “no” twice as much, because I found that I was too nice in many instances.

Cast Reading

I definitely should have had the group read the play twice at the beginning of the process (as a group). I am not used to reading the play more than once as a group, but I am also not used to people coming to an ensemble reading, not having read it at least once before. This was something I found to be prevalent throughout my work with these students. They didn’t read the play enough. It wasn’t until I explained to them that they should know the play inside and out that they took that to heart. It wasn’t until I prompted them to answer questions they did not know the answer to, that they realized their deficiencies (because they didn’t have the knowledge of the play that was required). By reading the play twice, I could have fixed 25%-50% of the questions thrown at me initially; simply by taking another day of rehearsal to read the play again. Logically, the issue of time would be hindered by taking another day, but in retrospect, with everything else in mind, It would have been worth it just to get everyone on the same page.

²⁵ Too nice in this instance refers to being too lenient.

Thrust Seating

Doing the show in the thrust aided as far as the intimacy of the space, but it was very much a challenge. It was difficult, having to explain and show many times the *ins and outs* of thrust performing. This was a setback that I anticipated and welcomed, but non-the-less it was a hindrance. I would have had a much easier time explaining a more proscenium performance format and acting style. But I feel that the hardship of explaining to them more “natural” movement and acting in spirals (for all three sides of the audience), added to the experience and understanding for all involved.

The three-quarter seating arrangement is the hardest, most difficult staging format, which is why I chose it. As a director I wanted to challenge myself. I can admit that I did not foresee the setback of doing it in the thrust and not raising the audience. Because I had three, and in some cases four, rows of audience members on all three sides, I should have raised the audience. I should have put in some risers and raised the audience so that they did not have to stand up (in some cases) because they could not see some of the work that was happening on the floor. The very specific movements that I had involving monkeys brought my actors to the floor often, as well as much of the fight choreography brought the actors to the floor. This was just part of the stylized movement that I had, but in retrospect it was only “brilliant” for the first two rows, because they could see perfectly. For the third and fourth rows it was not that great, because could not see that well and had to at some points stand up (because of my miscalculation). I definitely (in the future) will think of that with more anticipation and will take that into account with my setting up of the audience.

Casting

Choosing a ninth grader for the lead was not the best choice. Even though I thought, as far as talent, no members of the cast matched that young lady's particular energy, it was a setback. Aside from the difficulties of working with this particular youth, in general, having the lead be less experienced and less mature than some of the other cast members did not yield the effect that I was looking for. Though aesthetically she was the one that fit the role and I do not regret casting her in the least, I do understand and realize the huge risk that it was having the second youngest member of the cast play the lead role. She had the talent needed and performed well. Yet, it was evident that she, aside from her own personal issues, was a beginning student even amongst beginners. Her lack of experience brought additional hardships to this endeavor.

Technicians

I should have assigned more crew people to the project. I thought that merely giving myself one week of tech and assigning a few crew members that it would be enough. But even though they did a great job, I think they needed help. I took on more work, and gave them more work than was really necessary given that with two or three more people on the crew, some of it could have been delegated. Having more crew members and also having them there for the entire process would have been beneficial to everyone.

Not only should I have added more technicians, but I should have had them come to rehearsal from the beginning. I thought that they were going to be able to just jump in; I

did not foresee having to teach them every element of tech (that I had expected them to know). This was a naiveté that was not helpful during tech. The technical process took much longer because I had to teach them how to use a spotlight, I had to teach them how to correctly time the plugging in of a plug into a wall. I had to teach them how to walk across a stage and be noticeable but not distract or upstage. I also had to teach them the etiquette required of technicians: coming in earlier than everyone else, leaving later than everyone, cleaning up, and making sure the show goes smoothly. I should have had them there from the beginning.

Spotlights

The spotlights came in very handy and created some of the nicer lighting moments throughout the show, but also detracted, especially given the fact that they shone on some of the audience at some points during the performance. The spot lights hitting some of the audience in the aisle ways, I am sure had to be uncomfortable. As a director, I at no point want to make the audience physically uncomfortable, but I feel that some of them were, because of this very necessary element. It was also a factor of noise. They were not very noisy as far as spotlights go, but it did have the effect of giving it a performative quality by having you see the technical elements and also hear them. Still, it also was somewhat distractionary.

Litigiousness

The particulars of high school litigation and being savvy for the potential for things to go wrong is huge insight gained. Thankfully it was not a problem, but my naiveté about those things was a challenge because I would plan things the way I would have for a university performance. Then Andi or the magnet lead teacher would cut me off and explain that there is no way that it could happen in that fashion. One particular instance was where I could not bring in the makeup designer or the fight director on a day that we were taking the school day to rehearse. Because they were not official volunteers²⁶, they were not signed up as a certain level of volunteers with the Miami-Dade school district, they could not be at the school during the day. They could not come in even as guests to assist me. Due to the fact that they were designated as guest artists, and thus had not had a background check and had not been finger printed (as I had), they could not help me during school hours, only after school. But that isn't something I usually think about when working at the university level.

Rehearsal Space

Another issue of the process was not having the actual space during the whole rehearsal process. This of course was unavoidable, but deserves note, because I did gain the insight that it is possible to stage a show when you don't have the space the whole time (but it's harder). Many a time I found myself having rehearsal in storage rooms, closets,

²⁶ In order to be a Level 2 Volunteer in Miami-Dade County, you must pass a criminal background check and have your fingerprints on file with the school board (Please see Appendix F: Identification Card).

the P.E. field, the courtyard, and different grassy areas. It really gave me the opportunity to explore the rehearsal process in a number of different venues. They were somewhat unconventional given that at some point we were even in small closet and we simply had discussions about what we would be doing if we had the space. This forced me get really creative as far as sharing the time. I was sharing it with Andi, whom was staging pieces for a thespian competition, as well as with seventh period. At MKHS there is an additional period that took place during the hours I had rehearsal. This only happened on certain days though, not all. In reality this gave me an audience while I was working, which was helpful during the latter portions of the process, but at the beginning was distractionary.

Another problem was not getting to use the auditorium, even for rehearsal. The fact that the school has a brilliant performance space, with the option of full Marley dancing floor, was a setback. I had full intention of using it before the process began, and then not being able to, caused me to have to rethink and explore my flexibility.

Visual Documentation

Not being able to procure the filming of the production by a professional videographer was regrettable. The documentation of the performance, though good, was something that I should have paid more attention to. It was something that I had planned to spend a significant amount of time on, but in retrospect I didn't. I know that I didn't waste my time while I was preparing the performance, but should have definitely procured the person to film before beginning the process. That being said, I didn't really have the

money to actually pay that person, so understandably I wasn't able to get anyone. But it was still a lack of planning on my part.

The fact that all the still photography that I have is only from the rehearsals is a testament to my lack of planning. I should have, on the days of the performances, planned to take production photos. I should have asked the students to stay a little extra in order to capture a few production images. This is one of the few things I do regret, the fact that I do not have production photos from the fully clothed fully made up actors. The photos that I do have are more candid shots and not really the type that I would consider properly staged, well lit production photos that are specifically taken for posterity and for documentation. That was something that next time I will make it a point to do. Not that I didn't have enough to think about during the days the show opened and closed, but that was something that could have been stronger.

Money

Having to invest my own money in the project was unpleasant. The school had no budget whatsoever to invest in the production. I had to invest from my own pocket²⁷ to purchase the weapons, the couple of costume and prop items I wasn't able to procure from the upstairs storage, and the performance rights. The insight I gained from this was just being the most creative given the limited resources available to me. But in another way it also gave me a very tangible (monetary) connection to the production. Not only was I not getting paid to direct the piece, but I was literally paying the school to do so. Aside from it

being my thesis work and being proud to work with these students, the investiture of my own funds, gave me an added impetus to do a good job (so I didn't feel like I wasted my investment).

Actor Liberties

Another element of avoidable fallback was the liberties, as far as notes, that I gave these students. This was a point of contention for me, because I wanted them to have freedom to discover and I to treat them as professionally as possible. But I should have demanded that they write everything down and double-checked that they in fact did. Many times I found myself repeating notes two or three times, simply because the students would forget the notes immediately as I said them. While I would give the suggestion, and model the behavior I wanted to see, by writing my own notes and carrying a notebook, only a few of the students actually took my advice to heart and actually wrote things down. I should have preempted this, knowing from my own personal experience of having acted this way when I was this age that they were going to ignore my suggestion. This is prevalent even at the college level, so I should have forced them to write everything down.

Communication

I rarely note my style of communication as holding the process back. I feel that the way I infuse my director, professor, and rehearsal persona with colloquialisms and references to popular culture, gives me a camaraderie/connection with younger performers

²⁷ It should be noted that the school did reimburse me using a portion from the tickets sales.

and artists, both at the collegiate and secondary level. Though in this instance, I do feel that at certain points it got in the way. The particular elements of humor that I used to convey my points were not as direct or clear as they could have been. This of course was a simple matter of needing to strike a balance, but it should be noted that it was not a significant setback, I can acknowledge that at some points the colloquialism that came out during my note giving (even though they were funny) got in the way of communicating my ideas as thoughtfully or easily as they possibly could come out.

Energy

The schedule with the internship I was doing simultaneously took its toll on my energy and came out sometimes. I do not feel that it was that noticeable. I do not feel that any of the performers had worked with me enough to notice or that I was displaying examples of my fatigue in an overt way, but I noticed them. I noticed that I came to rehearsal low on energy on more than one occasion. My professionalism dictated that I pick it up, and so I did. But, I also recognized a distinct difference in the days that I was up and ready to go and those that were down. Regardless of how consistent in my direction I was, on the days when I was up/ready the group worked harder for me than on those days when I was low and was just covering it up. I would say that my energy was a setback, because it was not on that high level that it should have been all the time. This, I am sure is something every director/professor deals with. I just need to prepare more for rehearsal by energizing myself before I walk in, as opposed to coming in low and energizing

simultaneously with the students, because that had the energy low at the start and not “ready” from the beginning of the rehearsal.

Pulling Teeth

Other hindrances fall under a category I affectionately called “pulling teeth”. Many times the rehearsal process became slow or restricted because of the simple resistance that I was encountering from the cast due to the strenuous activity involved in having such a physically demanding show. The resistance came mostly as a result of having choreography that was physically demanding. Many days they were “tired” or “sore” and it was on those days that working alongside them was akin to pulling teeth (in trying to get them to work harder). After having conversations with Andi, it is apparent that this laziness is prevalent in the secondary level students, just because there is an expectation that good performance work will just appear. They think that good performances on their part will just happen without putting in the time, the effort, and the sweat in the rehearsal process. This was something I did away with. This malady in thought process was something I addressed whenever I encountered it. But I encountered it on many days. It was sometimes like pulling teeth to get them to “dig deep” and work hard. Laziness was the setback most associated with this pulling teeth phenomenon. Laziness was something that these students were habitually accustomed to and a habit that I had to break from the top, by expecting to them do their best each and every day with complete disregard for the more trite excuses. This was something that had to happen throughout the process, because there was an inherent laziness among these actors who thought just because they were

talented that the performance would just come out. I dispelled them from that ridiculous notion from the get go and throughout the process. It was trying though because I had to keep bringing it up and it took up time; that is why I am citing it.

Specific Moments

Particular scenes can also be included in the list of problematic issues. The transition scene right before the entrance of the Dragon King is one of them. I am citing it because it was not added until tech, two rehearsals before opening to be exact. I added this transition scene, with two sentries entering the space, reacting to General Fish Belly, then subsequently to the Dragon King and finally being dismissed in order to show his position of power. But I didn't get the idea until the very end when I saw the element missing in the scene that follows it. The scene was clear and the two older students which I had understudying various roles performed their sentry parts very well considering the short amount of time I used to block it (about 10 minutes), that they did an excellent job. But it was very clearly not researched physically to the level of the rest of the show. I would have liked to have come up with the idea sooner. I wanted to distinctly show the position of power held by the Dragon King, and the fear he instilled, and give a reason why the Monkey King should be scared. This in turn added a tension for the audience when the Monkey King was not scared, and actually challenged to him.

Another scene where I encountered a challenge was the kata²⁸ that was supposed to take place between the hip hop kid and the monkey king. Due to time, I was not able to include that kata, which is the monkey king teaching the hip hop kid martial arts. This was just a simple matter of running out of time in the rehearsal process, and busying myself cleaning up and polishing other scenes. The cutting of the kata also came about as a function of cleaning that scene between the monkey king and the hip hop kid. There arose an issue that was the hip hop kid being able to get the blocking or lines to work the scene. So by the time tech came around, and that scene was the weakest, I simply cut it down to its most essential elements of her teaching the other character rhythm so that the story could keep going. Also, I crossed my fingers that the young lady playing the hip hop kid would not freeze up on me. In rehearsal, I do not think we had one successful time of her getting all the way through the scene, before it was shown in front of an audience. During the performances I was scared that she wasn't going to be able to complete the scene, because she could not remember the lines, choreography, or story. That being said, as a testament to the young lady, both nights of the performance, it came out and the scene was done exceptionally well. I think maybe she could be the exception to the rule that you have to be good in rehearsal in order to be good in performance.

Full Run-Throughs

Another inexperience example was the amount of time I allowed the show to run fully without breaking up the action to give notes. I know that it wasn't until the very last

²⁸ Kata is a series of martial movements put together in a particular order and performed with intense focus.

day, opening night, when the students were able to run the show from beginning to end without having me jump in. And those runs were actually our IDRs (invited dress rehearsals). We had students come in and watch these final dress rehearsals twice that day as part of an in-school field trip during two of the class periods taught on that day. Luckily it was a packed house both times. It gave the students sensitivity for the audience, in that they were getting used to running the show while feeling where to hold for laughs. But I am not glad that it was only those two times that they got to run it all the way through with me stopping them to give notes. I recognize that it simply had to do with my inexperience as a director. I wanted to keep giving notes, and it really hindered the synthesis of those notes in the performers. The sheer frequency with my giving of notes could have been lessened. I sometimes gave too many notes and inundated the performers with information. I could have definitely given fewer notes by synthesizing them myself before speaking.

Understudies

Due to lack of maturity, I also had to bring in understudies in the middle of the process, in order to challenge the cast into doing their work. I got older students from the senior class to join the ensemble and learn the parts of some of the main characters. I threatened to remove people and give away their parts if they did not “step up”. This was something that was a distraction tactic on my part and a complete bluff. Because there is no way, even given the fact that they were seniors, that these understudies could do the amount of physical research that had been done in six weeks over a period of six days, it was just an impossibility. I do not feel that this is something that could work at every level,

but definitely at the secondary level it was an effective tactic. Seeing the competition in rehearsal with them, in some cases not even allowing them to be on stage for an entire rehearsal really gave them a tangible fear of being replaced. That was another tactic on my part to get the very best from these sometimes lazy students. I recognize that this could have gone terribly wrong and caused one of my students to give up, but luckily none did.

Conclusion

It is overwhelmingly clear in this last section that the problematic constituents were plentiful as compared to the things that worked outright. I was distraught about this at first, but in retrospect it was for the best. The educational value increased exponentially each time a new obstacle appeared in our journey. Each obstacle meant that a new way had to be found to overcome it. In the theatre, like in all realms of inquiry, we learn the most from our failures. Tough times teach us the most about ourselves and our surroundings. This production forced everyone involved to be creative and work within the given circumstances. By making the most of what we had, we represented ourselves well and told the story in fashion that represented our respect for our art. Growth came from having to find unique ways to solve the issues at hand. If my work with these young artists can be measured at all, let it be measured in growth- both personal and professional- and by this measure I deem the production very successful.

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Works Consulted

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APPENDIX A

Headshot of Elizabeth Wong as seen on her official website.

APPENDIX B

Dr. Michael M. Krop Senior High School

STAR Academy for the Visual and Performing Arts
Mathew J. Welker, Ed.D., Principal

presents



Amazing Adventures of the Marvelous Monkey King

by
Elizabeth Wong

Directed by Diego Villada

Produced in special arrangement with Playscripts, Inc.
(www.playscripts.com)

This play was originally produced and commissioned by Denver Center Theatre for the Performing Arts and DCPA education director Daniel Renner under Artistic Director Donovan Marley.

Front of the program.

APPENDIX C

Amazing Adventures of the Marvelous Monkey King

by
Elizabeth Wong

Ensemble

.....	Monkey King
.....	Kuan Yin
.....	Dragon King
.....	Immortal Guru
.....	One-Horned Ogre
.....	Hip Hop Kid
.....	General Fish Belly
.....	Monkey # 1
.....	Monkey # 2
.....	Fairy #1, Jade Emperor
.....	Fairy # 2

Production Staff

.....	Stage Manager
.....	Asst. Stage Manager
.....	Sound Consultant/Crew
.....	Dramaturgy Consultant/Crew
.....	Makeup Designer
.....	Makeup Assistants
.....	Keyboards
.....	Fight Choreographer
.....	Ticket Office Manager
.....	Tickets/Costume Assistant
.....	Usher
.....	Crew

Mr. Diego Villada, the director, is a returning alumnus of MKHS (Class of 2002) and former president of Thespian Troupe 5927. He studied Theatre Performance at the University of Evansville and is currently finishing his graduate degree in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. Aside from directing, he specializes in fight choreography and movement coaching.

Diego feels truly privileged to have had the opportunity to work alongside the talented student artists involved with this production. He also humbly thanks Ms. Andrea Kidd, his mentor and friend, for facilitating the process of creating this piece.

This production will serve as Diego's MFA thesis project at TheatreVCU, and as such he wishes to formally thank his thesis committee for taking the time to evaluate his work.

VCU Thesis Committee

Noreen C. Barnes, Ph.D. - Tawnya Pettiford-Wates, Ph.D. - John K. Deboer, MFA

APPENDIX D

September 20, 2007

Dear Parent(s) and Guardian(s),

I hope the 2007-2008 school year finds you well and has gotten off to a great start for you and your student. My name is Diego Villada and I am a proud alumnus of Dr. Michael M. Krop Senior High School. I graduated from the theatre magnet program in 2002 and went on to study Theatre at both the undergraduate and graduate levels at two excellent universities. I am writing to inform you about an upcoming opportunity for your child to be a cast/crew member of a show I will be directing. The specific information concerning the piece is included at the bottom of the page. Auditions will be held Tuesday, September 25, 2007 at 2:45pm (w/ call backs taking place at the same time the next day). The specific performance dates will be announced at a later date, but will most likely take place during the third week of November. I encourage every beginning and intermediate student to audition. This being said, only those students that can guarantee an availability from 2:45 – 4:30pm, Monday through Thursday (until the performance) will be chosen as performers or technicians.

Respectfully yours,


Diego Villada, MFA (candidate)
Guest Director

Show Information

Title: *Amazing Adventures of the Marvelous Monkey King*
Playwright: Elizabeth Wong

Synopsis from

The mischievous Chinese superhero The Monkey King comes to life in this energetic and charming play where Chinese Opera and hip-hop collide. Between finding and losing a home, getting kicked out of school, and battling with a one-horned ogre, the naughty Monkey King somersaults into the future on his adventures, where he hears hip-hop music and gets jiggy with it. After much dancing, battles and heroics, the impish Monkey King triumphs over his adversaries -- and learns about leadership, responsibility, and forgiveness in the process!

Letter to parents # 1, announcing auditions.

APPENDIX E

September 28, 2007

Dear Parent(s) and Guardian(s),

Congratulations on your child being chosen as cast/crew for the upcoming production of the Amazing Adventures of the Marvelous Monkey King. Because of the type of show we are creating, it is important that your child be present at every rehearsal. He/She will need to be available from 2:40pm – 5:00pm (Monday-Thursday) beginning October 1st until November 15th. In addition, they must be available for the two performances which will take place on November 19th and 20th in the evening.

By signing below you are affirming that you have been made aware of the time commitment required to be a part of the production and will aid your son/daughter in meeting that commitment.

Respectfully yours,

Diego Villada, MFA (Candidate)
Guest Director
STAR Academy Drama Department
Michael M. Krop Senior High School

Please detach and return the bottom portion once signed.

Affirmations:

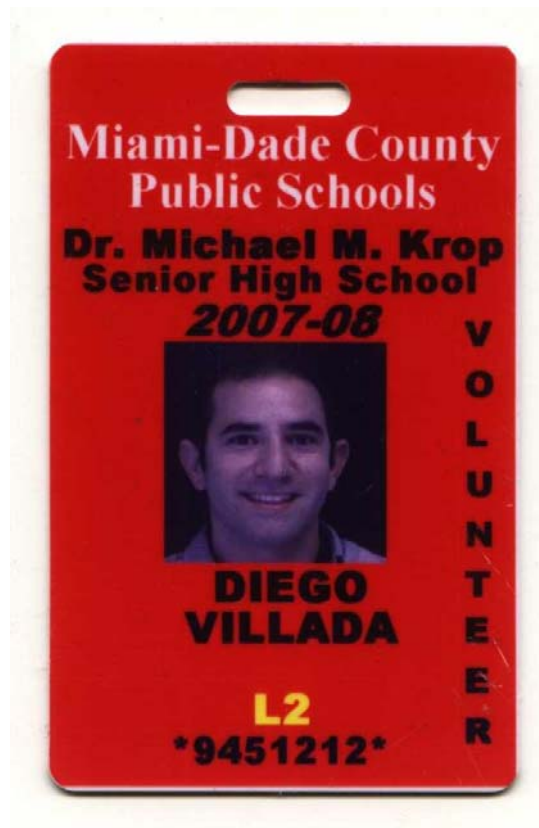
I _____ have asked my parent(s) or guardian(s) permission
(student name)
to participate in the production directed by Mr. Diego.

(student signature) (date)

I _____ have given my son/daughter permission to participate
(parent/guardian name)
and understand the time commitment he/she will need to adhere to.

(parent/guardian signature) (date)

Letter to parents # 2, affirmation that they understood schedule.

APPENDIX F

Identification card.

APPENDIX G

Amazing Adventures of the Marvelous Monkey King
Directed by Diego Villada
Fall 2007

Rehearsal Schedule

October 1	2:40 – 4:00 pm
October 2	2:40 – 4:00 pm
October 3	2:40 – 4:00 pm
October 4	2:40 – 4:00 pm
October 8	2:40 – 4:00 pm
October 9	2:40 – 4:00 pm
October 10	2:40 – 4:00 pm
October 11	2:40 – 4:00 pm
October 15	2:40 – 5:00 pm
October 16	2:40 – 5:00 pm
October 17	2:40 – 5:00 pm
October 18	2:40 – 5:00 pm
October 22	2:40 – 5:00 pm
October 23	2:40 – 5:00 pm
October 24	2:40 – 5:00 pm
October 25	2:40 – 5:00 pm
October 29	2:40 – 5:00 pm
October 30	2:40 – 5:00 pm
October 31	2:40 – 5:00 pm
November 1	2:40 – 5:00 pm
November 5	2:40 – 5:00 pm
November 6	2:40 – 5:00 pm
November 7	2:40 – 5:00 pm
November 8	2:40 – 5:00 pm
November 13	2:40 – 5:00 pm
November 14	2:40 – 5:00 pm
November 15	12:40 – 5:00 pm
November 16	2:40 – 5:00 pm (Friday)
November 19	Performance (curtain time TBA)
November 20	Performance (curtain time TBA)

Please note that there will also be some Saturday rehearsals. They will be scheduled according to the availability of the individual students called to be present.

Subject to change

The schedule that accompanied letter # 2.

APPENDIX H

Production History

Amazing Adventures of the Marvelous Monkey King by Elizabeth Wong

All | [Upcoming only](#) | [Professional only](#)

[Back to Play Profile](#)

Production Group	Location	Performance dates
Denver Center Theatre for the Performing Arts	Denver, CO United States	Feb 01, 2001- Feb 28, 2001
Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park	Cincinnati, OH United States	Sep 01, 2002- Sep 30, 2002
Honolulu Theatre For Youth	Honolulu, HI United States	Oct 01, 2002- Oct 31, 2002
Edinburgh Fringe Festival	Edinburgh, Scotland	May 31, 2003- Aug 31, 2003
Grand Prairie High School	Grand Prairie, TX United States	Sep 01, 2004- Sep 30, 2004
Po Chi Lam Martial Arts Training Center	FL United States	Apr 01, 2005- Apr 30, 2005
Hancock High School Theatre	Kiln, MS United States	Dec 01, 2006- Dec 02, 2006
Glencoe Silver Lake Schools	Glencoe, MN United States	Jan 20, 2007- Feb 03, 2007
Kimbrough Middle School	Mesquite, TX United States	Apr 24, 2007- Apr 24, 2007
MVHS Drama Club	Miramichi, NB Canada	Apr 26, 2007- May 04, 2007
Theatre Serendipity	North Port, FL United States	Jun 29, 2007- Jun 29, 2007
Douglas Anderson School Of The Arts	Jacksonville, FL United States	Oct 03, 2007- Oct 04, 2007
Dr. Michael M. Krop Sr. High	Miami, FL United States	Nov 19, 2007- Nov 20, 2007
Blue Springs High School	Blue Springs, MO United States	Dec 01, 2007- Dec 31, 2007
Citrus Springs Middle School	Citrus Springs, FL United States	Mar 25, 2008- Mar 25, 2008
University Of Wisconsin-La Crosse Department Of Theatre Arts	La Crosse, WI United States	Apr 02, 2008- Apr 05, 2008

Production history available at the website of Playscripts, Inc.

APPENDIX I



Ticket for the performance.

VITA

Diego Villada was born on May 23, 1984 in Jackson Heights, New York. He spent his most formative years in Miami, Florida and still has deep ties to his ancestral home of Colombia in South America. He earned his Bachelor of Science *cum laude* in Theatre Performance, with a double major in Psychology from the University of Evansville in Indiana. As an undergraduate, he received scholarships from the Bernie Kosar Foundation and the Hispanic Scholarship Fund.

Diego is an actor, director, fight choreographer, and educator. As an acting teacher, he approaches his work -both in class and in rehearsal- from a movement standpoint. He derives his pedagogical style from experiences that include teaching in: university settings, international workshops, summer camps (for adolescents), and martial arts studios (to students of all ages). He is a member of the Association of Theatre Movement Educators and the Society of American Fight Directors.

Diego earned his Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy from Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. During his time there he taught movement to third year actors and assisted in teaching courses of voice, movement, history, and stage combat to students at both undergraduate and graduate level.