

**LOVE AND INFORMATION: DIRECTOR AS CO-CREATOR**

by

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## **Abstract**

This thesis forms the written portion of my MFA degree, and looks at the unique challenges and process of directing Caryl Churchill's 2012 late career opus *Love and Information*, an English language play which was performed at the Frederic Wood Theatre at The University of British Columbia from January 19-February 4, 2017.

The first section contains the original script analysis done in advance of directing the play.

The middle section is a record of activity undertaken in pre-production and during production rehearsals. This reveals my thoughts and questions as they occurred in real time, and shows the processes of directing a play that does not have a naturalistic story structure.

The final section is an evaluation of the final production and a reflection on the process. The open, poetic nature of the text means that the playwright summons the director to be co-creator in production, and I explore what this means on a practical level in this thesis.

## **Preface**

This dissertation is an original, unpublished and independent work by the author, Lauren McCulloch Taylor. The research program undertaken concerns the preparation, rehearsal process, and production of Caryl Churchill's play *Love and Information*, directed by Lauren Taylor, and performed at the Frederic Wood Theatre during the UBC Department of Theatre and Film's 2016-2017 season, including an evaluation of the process and outcome.

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- Stage Management: Amanda Parafina, Sony Tsai, Melicia Zaini
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## **Dedication**

To all my teachers who have helped shape my thinking and changed my world.

And to Annie and Kevin, who never said no.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Caryl Churchill (born 1938) is a storied, multi-award winning British playwright whose plays have been produced in multiple languages in the span of her influential six-decade career.

*Love and Information* had its stage premier at the Royal Court Theatre, London, UK on September 6, 2012, and has subsequently been remounted countless times around the world. It is especially popular in university settings due to the contemporary themes, multiple undetermined characters and the open, poetic nature of the text. There is over 100 non-recurring characters, with no given names, gender or background information (apart from one named Jennifer, in the scene titled 'Piano'). The play is made up of over 50 short vignette-type scenes that bear thematic connections but no narrative relationship to each other. Each scene has a title, and is organized seven scenes each in seven sections. The sections are numbered one to seven. The playwright determines each section be played in numerical order, but the seven scenes *within* each section can be ordered any way the director wants. Furthermore, at the end of the play is a section called 'Random', containing a series of optional short scenes that can be included anywhere. However, one Random scene titled 'Depression' is called 'an essential part of the play' (74), and must be included. To further complicate things, 'Depression' is a series of separate, one-line scenes, where the single spoken line in the scene is addressed to a depressed person who does not respond.

With this background to the specific production requirements, this paper identifies one approach to staging this play (on a university campus with student actors and designers), and investigates how such an open text might translate into meaningful performance using design, staging, and performance technologies.

The performance occurred from January 19-February 4, 2017, at the Frederic Wood Theatre on the Vancouver campus of the University of British Columbia as part of the Department of Theatre and Film's 2016-2017 Season.

The production cast was: Natalie Backerman, Daria Banu, Riley Bugaresti, Daniel Curalli, Seamus Fera, Tai Amy Grauman, Bronwyn Henderson, Sarah Jane, Olivia Lang, Louis Lin, Stefanie Michaud, Sachi Nisbet, Taylor Scott, Shona Struthers, Heidi Upham, Sabrina Vellani, Jed Weiss, Aidan Wright.

The stage manager was Amanda Parafina, Assistant Stage Managers were Sony Tsai and Melicia Zaini, and Marijke Asbeek Brusse provided stage management guidance.

Set Design was by Sophie Yufei Tang, and Lighting Design was by Stefan Zubovic, with projection design by both Stefan and Sophie under the guidance of Robert Gardiner. Ryan Yee and Vanka Salim provided assistance with set and lighting. Gwendolyn Loi decorated the lobby. Alaia Hamer designed costumes, with assistance from Diane Park and Heather Young, and Nicolette Szabo and Patricia Jiang.

Sound design was by Ed Dawson, with assistance from Sammie Hatch and Winnif Ngai, under guidance from Carey Dodge.

Lynn Burton sourced props, Technical Direction was provided by Jim Fergusson, and Marketing and Publicity curated by Andrea Rabinovitch.

Jay Henrickson was Production Manager, administrative support provided by Cam Cronin, and signing services for the signed show provided by ASL Interpreting Inc. All production photography is by Javier Sotres.

## **1.1 Play Analysis Prior to Rehearsals**

### **1.1.1 Unique Challenges of the Text**

*Love and Information* is unlike any other play I've read, seen or directed. There is no longer story or narrative thread. Each scene is isolated, surrounded by - what? The play doesn't say. The sections are ordered 1-7, however the scenes within can be ordered any way you like. Twitter theatre, it felt like, on first read. Fragmented, like the many screens we look at daily - we get bits of information all the time. How on earth do you stage it? Anything a director chooses becomes a statement. Everything is read. How to make the play reveal itself? I cannot say I have the answers yet.

### **1.1.2 Initial Response To The Play**

There is no great mysterious structure, or underlying thematic reveal. There are 49 +1 scenes plus 29 optional random scenes, (8-10 of which are not optional, are one line scenes called 'Depression'). The scenes are in 7 sections. The 7 sections form a structure, and within the scenes is a circular effect of recurring themes, but the narrative drive is denied at every turn, with every new character and sudden stop and start.

The scenes are truncated; occur 'in media res' (in the middle of things). Something has happened to trigger each scene, and the scene ends before a resolution is found. Often scenes end abruptly, or on a question.

This gives the impression of being a fly on the wall to intimate, important, or emotional exchanges, between characters we do not know, and do not get a chance to know.

What we know is that something is important to them. Love, information, or both.

On first read, I was struck by the immediacy of the text - it felt contemporary and full of action.

The constant changing characters and short scenarios gave a dizzy feeling by the end; there was

so much immediacy and change. Churchill always seems to write the zeitgeist.

I was struck by the humanity of the scenes. They flipped from dialogues between tired torturers wanting comfort to old lovers who couldn't remember all the places they'd made love. Flashes of brilliance, such as the concerned friend trying to convince his buddy that the love he feels for his virtual girlfriend is illusory, because she isn't real. The play felt like it could only be written here and now: the playwrights concerns with DNA, technological advancement butting up against human nature and human need, emotional arguments versus rational ones, how we remember, how we interpret, how we decide and choose, and how we crave, endure, remember and need love.

I felt that the questions the play seems to ask are important, relevant ones, for us, living in the information age. How are we different to machines? How far does our information craving go? How much information can we consume? What does it mean to be human?

'As the Industrial Age is drawing to a close, we are witnessing the dawn of an era of biological design. Humankind is about to enter a new phase of evolution.'<sup>1</sup> The quote is from the first man to sequence the human genome, and who has now created a synthetic genome, a very basic form of a living organism. Are we entering a future where we will need reminding of the structures and limitations of humanity, as the synthetic 'self' takes shape?

Theatre makers such as Vsevolod Meyerhold working in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century encountered the theories of Frederick Winslow Taylor as they applied to the human body<sup>2</sup> Timing, efficiency, and a focus on isolation of body parts proliferated as the machine led economy compartmentalized tasks and the division of labour, and ushered in different ways we

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<sup>1</sup> Ventner, J. Craig. *Life at the Speed of Light* 33

<sup>2</sup> Braun 183



interact with time, how we use our bodies, and consequently, how our physicality shapes our being in the world, our ability to see outside ourselves. In the same way Taylorism examined the body during the Industrial Revolution (how to ensure the body can learn repetitive machine tasks without breaking down), questions may now arise surrounding the limits of our interactions with technology, data, surveillance, categorization, itemization, and the always on, 24/7 hyper speed world of the internet, e-commerce, social media. What languages do we have to interpret its impact on the body and soul? Where is privacy? What will we be expected to do for work? How will we behave towards each other?

Are there more important values than efficiency, accuracy, measurability, and speed? Will we need to fight for these alternative values? Will we need to fight for the human space? Do we need to remind ourselves what it is to be human?

What are the limits of humanity? What do our social, economic and work structures need to take into consideration? How are we different to a (sophisticated) machine?

We all need sleep. We get mentally and physically ill. We need love and appreciation.

We are curious, and bend towards progress & accumulation in Western capitalist societies, especially in North America.

What is considered a 'natural', innate human trait? Love, Fear, Cruelty, Being diverse/different, Interpretation, Consciousness - awareness of self (and others, and spirit)

My impulse in staging is to reveal the structure, to try to recreate for the audience the sensation of reading the play - the excitement of the immediacy, the pause/take a moment feeling as you reach the end of a section and the beginning of a new section. The bookend structure of reading the title first, then the scene is revealed.

The interplay between the poetic title, and the connection it has to the action played.

For me, revealing the structure also helps locate the audience in the play. This is not a recognizable 3-act or 5-act structure. It's entirely new and unusual. So if we know that there is a format that is repeatable, that will meet us and be there for us, I'm hoping that will create a sense of security so that the audience can feel free to ride the scenes, and experience all the multiple things and people, without feeling lost; rather, looked after, in order to stay open to possibilities (i.e., knowing the play won't give them what they want or expect, but being open to what it does do - which is show a series of vignettes about the world, consciousness, memory, belief, morality, faith, and motivation)

What occurs in between the scenes is a series of specifically curated sound effects, and at times images, that provide a distraction for the audience during the scene changes, but also keep the performance tissue un-rent. Sustain a rhythm. Sustain one longer experience.

### **1.1.3 Title of the Play**

The title sounds like a lecture or report. Binary opposites. Love and information both guide and drive us. Love comes first because it's the key human driver. It forms us. It keeps us together.

Love is the force that keeps humans procreating, peacefully coexisting, co-habiting, and creating friendships and communities. It is a central human force and need, which drives us to superhuman acts, instigates change, and frequently trumps reason.

Information: We crave it, another strong human urge. Helps us to make rational decisions  
Overwhelms us, confuses us. Engenders change in a rational universe. We are made up of information - DNA, genes, cells give information to the body (codes).

We are living through an era unprecedented since pre-enlightenment for misinformation.

Especially evident in the current U.S election, the proliferation of misinformation has led to

pressure on Facebook and Twitter to regulate ‘fake’ news stories.<sup>3</sup> Gossip, innuendo, rumour and lies are passed off as truth. Verified human fact checkers are redundant in the pursuit of unimpeded access to information. Kill the gatekeepers. Then discover the temple has been raided. What is left? If the 20th century taught us anything, it’s that even after almost complete annihilation, nature revives itself, slowly, imperceptibly, adaptively, enduringly. The penultimate scene in Churchill’s order, ‘Small Thing’, has a snail as the third character.

These are Churchillian themes for theatre. There is hope. But recognize the lie.

#### **1.1.4 Recurring Actions in the Scenes**

What do these people do? These nameless characters.

**Reveal** information to each other, reveal secrets:

To provoke a response

To get closer to each other

To reveal the truth (a moral obligation, wanting to do right thing)

To unburden themselves, assuage guilt, get sympathy or love

**Remember** things, or remind other people or themselves of things:

To experience the joy of a fond memory

For the joy of an activity, shared with another

To make meaning

For pleasure

For practical reasons, to sustain friendships, to be loyal

To retain information, for job, for family, for moving forward in life

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<sup>3</sup> <http://fortune.com/2016/11/14/facebook-zuckerberg-media/> accessed March 28, 2017. Web

**Adjust** to a new situation - we watch people in the process of adjusting, change.

Deal with the consequences of giving or receiving information.

Give and receive information that *destabilizes* things - we watch the destabilization occur.

They **comfort** and reassure each other (love).

They **warn** each other.

They **explain**, describe, illuminate, convince.

They offer, suggest, guide, and **provoke**.

They pursue, harangue, **manipulate**, threaten, seduce.

They get annoyed with each other; they **compete**.

They want to know: do you love me?

They want to know: how, why, for what?

Are we exhausted from information? Has it ceased to have meaning for us? Yes. By the time we arrive at the final scene, we're done with the truth. The final scene is enshrined in the play structure; it is called 'Last Scene: Facts', and characters compete with each other with made up answers to made up facts. It doesn't matter if the information is true or not, it's who wins in the end (has Churchill predicted Trump & the post-factual era?).

### **1.1.5 The Third Character**

Many scenes have an unseen 'third character'. Referred to but present in the mind of the character's who speak, the unseen character directly impacts the emotional content of the scene:

The Government in 'Census'.

The Loved One in 'Fan'.

The Tortured Person in 'Torture', who is somehow holding out, making it hard for the torturer to do his job.

The chickens in 'Lab': Her concern for their welfare, their fate, and his attitude towards the chickens he experiments with affects how she feels about him.

The spoken-about friend in 'Affair', whose behaviour drives the second friend to reveal her secret to the first friend.

Mother, in 'Mother', who is a source of anxiety and fear.

'Fired': The personal assistant as gatekeeper who hasn't done her job.

'Message': The terrorists blowing themselves up, or the government that locks people up - presented as both sides of the same coin.

'Grass': The grassed person, who induces sheer panic in the wife.

'Schizophrenic': The voice of the schizophrenic person is like an unseen third person telling them to kill the other.

'Spies': 'They' who knew the rationale for war was wrong, the spies.

'Dream': The cuckolded 'him', the partner of the woman in the scene

'Recluse': There is an actual third person who speaks but we don't have to see, outside the door, who poses the threat of exposure. There are lots of 'outside' characters: The ex-wife, the Queen, the 'thousands of admirers', and the world. The exposure this character feels at the entire world brings to mind the idea of being Internet famous, where there is nowhere you can hide. Everyone becomes a celebrity, everyone is exposed, and becomes a target.

'God's Voice': The voice of God, ever-present.

'The Child Who Didn't Know Fear': The child who is the subject of the story. He/she is an example, in this mini morality play, of what can happen if you are not scared of something. You get eaten. It's the way of the animal kingdom. 'The Child Who' is used 3 times in scene titles, which hints at the importance of the parable.

‘Star’: The people in the future who might not see the dead stars.

‘Wedding Video’: The people from the past who can’t be memorialized on video.

‘Memory House’: The father, and her four-year-old self.

‘Maths’: The couple they have just had dinner with.

‘God’: God, who does not have higher consciousness.

‘Rash’: The baby with the rash, sending a message through the rash.

‘Children’: The ex-wife and the Spaniard, and the baby.

‘The Child Who Didn’t Know Sorry’: The child who has been hurt.

‘Climate’: The children she is frightened for, how their futures will be affected as a result of climate change.

‘Censor’: The Ministry of Defense, who has the power.

‘Wife’: The ‘real’ wife, from the perspective of the husband.

‘Grief’: He who has passed away.

‘Stone’: The person who has the special stone, who they take it away from.

‘Virtual’: The virtual girlfriend.

‘Small Thing’: The snail.

### **1.1.6 Punctuation, Rhythm**

Churchill uses punctuation deliberately in *Love and Information* to shape the rhythm of each scene and reveal character’s intentions. Punctuation shows core shifts in the debate at the heart of the scene.

#### **1.1.6.1 Capitals and Lower Case**

Where there is a capital letter that is not a pronoun or the first line of the scene, it seems to indicate a decisiveness, a specific energy connected to a declarative statement for that line. A

capital letter is used following lines that end on a period. Capital letters also indicate where a person may be acting cautiously, really thinking about what they are saying. The thing they are saying has weight, what they are discussing might alter another person's life, so be careful with it. Capitalization can be an indication of gravitas, or a sharpness to a person's perspective; an attitude shift to indignation. Reveals conviction, or a step up to argumentativeness, to defend their position. It can also mean that the discussion is formal, rational. It shifts to subjective and emotional when the caps are lowered.

#### **1.1.6.2 Period**

A period indicates finality, an end to the argument. It indicates a rhythmic shift in the scene. Suggests the other character is in thought about what has just been said. Tactics need to change. Often indicates the slowdown before the very quick speed up to the end of the scene.

#### **1.1.6.3 No period**

Where a period is absent and lower case letters start the next line, it indicates the characters are cutting each other off, speaking as we do in real life when we are enthusiastic, such as:

Overlapping each other.

Hearing/speaking at once.

Sometimes taking in what the other person has said only a few lines later, after we've already responded.

Picking up on what may have been said earlier and responding to it differently in another place.

Allowing the emotional response to occur in a different place to the line spoken.

We are not always rational or logical in our responses, especially to people we are close.

Churchill writes these moments, which is why many scenes feel intimate, and we recognize the patterns of emotional behaviour and irrationality through the punctuation.

This is the most challenging form as you have to have your intentionality, responsiveness, and objectives all happening at the same time, clear, while the pace is rolling ever forward.

### **1.1.7 Churchill's previous plays and themes**

My theory is that *Love and Information* is an epic swansong, written when Churchill was in her seventies, and is an aggregate of gestures found in almost all of her former plays, including her early radio plays written in the 1960's.

I've noted in brackets the scenes from *Love and Information* with which I see connections.

*Not Not Not Enough Oxygen*: A domestic drama set in a housing tower, in a dystopian future where oxygen is sparse and must be sprayed in a room from a can (parent/child and sibling dynamics, climate change/environmental destruction and its impact on humans) ('Climate')

*The After-Dinner Joke*: Uses episodic structure of short scenes, multiple characters (over 30), cross sections of contemporary society, to tell a story about the corporatization of charities. The whole play - structure, form and concepts feels like a precursor to *Love and Information*.

*Schreber's Nervous Illness*: Looks at mental illness and recovery, creativity and the psyche, and integration into society after breakdown ('Manic', 'Schizophrenic', 'Small Thing'). Also shows the theory of mental illness being another form of language in a corrupted society.

*Top Girls*: Famously revisionist feminist history, also looks at themes of domestic dysfunction, family secrets, children who 'aren't going to make it' - reduced intellect, brutality of children, siblings ('Mother', 'Savant')

*A Number*: Human cloning and ethics; interpersonal dynamics between father and clones; the feelings of those who are cast aside as a result of the selfishness of parents. Ends on a strangely positive note, like *Love and Information* ends with hope. Fathers and sons. Therapy. Grief.

Seclusion, science, and the bonds of familial love and how they transcend biology. ('Remote',



‘Lab’, ‘Fate’, ‘Virtual’)

*Far Away*: Turning a blind eye to conflicts in other places, while we contribute to the economics of war. The perceptiveness of children. Aunts and nieces. Bold theatrical imagery, the hat making workplace symbolic of consumption and fetishisation; the chain-linked prisoners walking across the stage wearing the hats symbolic of the price paid for cheap goods. Final monologue where the world falls apart, animals dying reminds me of the ending of Ionesco’s *The Bald Prima Donna*, where language eats itself, the centre cannot hold. (‘Facts’, ‘Child Who...’, ‘Memory House’, ‘Maths’, ‘Linguist’)

*Light Shining In Buckinghamshire*: Episodic storytelling with actors playing multiple roles, then switching (no consistent character casting, actors would change scene by scene), themes of *Paradise Lost*, the utopia of the Republic, and faith in the second coming. Political ideas of no man having dominion over another man, freedom of the individual, distrust of institutions, and the corruptibility of power. (‘Census’, ‘Spies’, ‘Censor’)

*Drunk Enough To Say I Love You*: A dialogue between two men (U.S. and U.K.) discussing reasons for going to war, and loving each other. Dark satire that investigates fetishisation and sexualisation of war, violence, and power (‘Spies’, ‘Facts’)

*Blue Kettle & Hearts Desire*: Both domestic dramas, one about a family homecoming and the other an orphan looking for family who ends up scamming elderly women out of their money. Both plays use the disintegration of language as a central device. As language fails, so too does the universe of these characters. Language destabilization and punctuation detail, the beginning of losing the ends of sentences. (‘Memory House’, ‘Linguist’, ‘Chinese Poetry’, ‘Piano’)

*Cloud Nine*: Sexual politics, colonialism, changing identities, morphing as theatrical conceit.

*The Skriker*: Mania, cruelty and hatred towards women and children. Venting of the forces of

inequality, cruelty, a re-examination of pagan Anglo-traditional figures of faeries, goblins, and changelings. If you push down nature, the innate wildling forces rise up and pollute in other ways, and turn things upside down. ('Climate', 'Stone', 'Mother')

*Serious Money*: The pursuit of finance against all costs, the corruption that occurs in the worlds of high finance, not just social, political and economic, but personal. A picture of the salivating party of the 1980's economic boom. ('Spies', 'Fired')

### **1.1.8 Rehearsal Planning**

#### **1.1.8.1 What I Learned From Watching the Student Actor's Auditioning**

Things to consider when going into rehearsal:

All scenes involve a process of change

Each line is in response to something else that happens

What is my target?

What am I responding to?

How can I make sense of my response?

What is the story being told?

What are the tactics I use to get what I want and when do I change them?

The characters are not always good, and the outcome is not always noble. They are not always likeable people.

#### **1.1.8.2 Where It Does Not Work**

If the story is unclear.

If the response is unclear, or if there isn't a response.

If the target is unclear.

### **1.1.8.3 Reminders for Rehearsal**

It's ok to start off not knowing, and try things until you find out.

It's ok to change things as you make discoveries.

It's ok to say it's not working and chuck it out.

Stay open and prepared to be surprised by what you find - a scene may change from what you thought it was. The words are just the surface. What is spoken. The relationship is underneath.

Scenes are icebergs.

It's all about relationships. Each person in every scene has an interdependence with their scene partner. Even in what appears a superficial or clinical relationship. Always find the human response, i.e. the torturer and the tortured, the writer with the censor, the bully with the co-bully, the best friend who is compromised by knowing a secret, and the friend who tried to keep it from her. All are using information to protect people, withholding out of love.

### **1.1.8.4 Brainstorm for Actors**

What is considered a 'natural' human trait? Something innate, that we all have.

Why would or wouldn't you build in some of the more 'negative' or 'useless'

human traits or motivators into AI? What is information? What forms does it take? (i.e. gossip, killing, traffic lights, dreams) What about the future excites you? What are you most scared of?

### **1.1.8.5 Rehearsal Tips**

Every line is a response to something. Look for what you are responding to. It's a reaction to something, or an offer towards something you want.

Pay attention to tenses - past, future, present. It reveals something about the character's desires, motivations, state of mind, and intent. Pay attention to punctuation, capitalization, and lower caps - all of the rhythm, pace and pauses are there.

This will be a true ensemble. You will all be crew as well as actors, and will help each other with costumes as well. No one is to be overloaded with backstage tasks, focus on acting.

Wear sneakers and movement gear to rehearsal. Do physical & vocal warm up 15 minutes before start of rehearsal. Like marathon training; we will need stamina, and the ability to switch quickly, so need immediate focus and response. Need ability to speak intimately at full volume.

#### **1.1.8.6 Technical Reminders for myself as director**

Lighting has to be specific, and rhythm of the fades are crucial to starts and ends of scenes.

No general wash looks. Can have large sections of coverage, but not huge fuzzy edges.

Projection is great but what does it say? What do the images do to the audience?

Specificity of image, connected to the themes and audience experience.

Acting has to be tight, active, vocally present, sharp attack, know what you want on every line.

Loose naturalism and languid energy doesn't work. Must be immediate, from start to finish.

As soon as light comes up, actors are fully in state of being. No sliding. Go.

The content of the scenes matters, is the most important thing in that moment.

We need to hear clearly the questions raised in each scene.

We need to see change occur in each scene, for the characters. Where they start is not where they end.

Sound needs to envelop us, not be quiet and only come from the stage. Projectors are noisy during intimate scenes - how can they be masked? Need a bed of sound that is not theatre silence and projector fan. Favour anything that makes us care about these characters.

## Chapter 2: Journal Pre and During Production

### 2.1 My Preparation: Push for Understanding

*May 2016*

What I've discovered about Churchill: influence of Taoism, non-ownership, and non-outcome.<sup>4</sup>

I have an awareness of the jagged rhythm and the need to focus on something to connect and make satisfying the story, as well as show the virtues of fragmentation. What we cling on to is the set, the lights, and the music. Because the characters we don't see again. And the story does not connect how we want.

*July/August 2016*

Why is the structure like it is? Why is Depression important?

Play tests the limits of the form of traditional theatre: Pacing, scene structure, and narrative.

Reflects in its form the structures we encounter in our technology driven society.

All of the scenes are in different location and no characters appear more than once.

There are no character names or allocated lines; the lines are written unassigned like poetry. It is the director's job to assign them. The play is structured like the basic DNA of a play,<sup>5</sup> and the director adds the flesh, life, and human element. Each scene is connected loosely by theme. The audience experiences the accumulated effect of the scenes, one by one, stacked on top of each other (like layers). What do the layers form?

Information and Love are two powerful driving forces. The play examines, through over 50 unique self-contained scenes, where and how these two forces connect.

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<sup>4</sup> Thacker Brown, M (1989) 'Constantly Coming Back': Eastern Thought and the Plays of Caryl Churchill in *Caryl Churchill: A Casebook*. (Randall) 25-45.

<sup>5</sup> Gobert (2014) *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill*. 189.

Churchill famously said very early in her career:

'Playwrights don't give answers, they ask questions...We need to find new questions, which may help us answer the old ones or make them unimportant, and this means new subjects and new form.'

'The imagination needn't have the same limitations as factual knowledge; we may make cautious philosophic and scientific statements, but we do not have to feel and imagine cautiously.'

'What is said and how it's said are hardly separable in the theatre; setting, language and form are all part of looking at a play.'<sup>6</sup>

To me, the play feels like a love letter to her grandchildren, a sweeping epic, and a time capsule, a snapshot of where we are right here and now, a mirror. Like a play for the Twitter era, performed in real time, with lots of strangely intimate short scenes. Each scene offers a question, or has a question contained within it, inviting you to consider something in life, in relation to technology or how it impacts us, or in relation to our sense of humanity and human urges (the need to know a secret; the need to process information in a way that we can make sense of it emotionally as well as intellectually; the need to love and be loved; the need for empathy).

Challenges:

1. Reconciling short narratives with real time practicalities of staging in theatre and humans moving furniture
2. An archaic form (live theatre in digital era) telling the story of the fast paced rate at which we receive information and what it does to us. This is a lovely contradiction in and of itself, which I kind of just love.

A reminder: Theatre is the last place we can go where strangers will sit in a dark room for two hours without cell phones on or looking at a screen once.

Themes:

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<sup>6</sup> Churchill (1960) 'Not Ordinary, Not Safe', from *The Twentieth Century* November 1960. 443-451

Dehumanization and lack of feeling as a byproduct of contemporary life.

Randomness - in science: particle physics, in philosophy: Buddhism, in reproduction: human genome.

Structures of things that provide information: technology, the body, the environment, and biology.

Children as vulnerable, truth tellers, and teachable.

Decisions to be made about what to do with the information.

Mental illness/grief/coping with loss (emotional states of being).

Friendships as important support structures.

Secrets and ethical choices to reveal and conceal.

Moral questions and choices.

Truth, subjectivity, and how we interpret information.

Justifications for amoral behaviours.

Do you want or are you ready for the information? Seems to come up as a recurring question.

#### 1. Given Circumstances

Contemporary English speaking worlds, urban dwellers

50+ sets of different given circumstances for each scene (write them all out)

#### 2. Dialogue

Short usually, between people who seem (mostly) to know each other intimately

#### 3. Dramatic Action

A lot of small arcs of dramatic action

There is no long narrative that connects all the scenes, other than themes

#### 4. Characters

Lots - it's crowded with different characters

Busy world, constantly changing

Urban, a range of ages, class, race, genders

## 5. Idea

Nature has put into place certain things that are at the core of being human that facilitate humanity such as fear and empathy. What happens when we eradicate fear and empathy?

In the absence of long narrative, what are the connectors?

- themes

- family

- moral choices

- the humans on stage, going through recognizable human scenarios from life

- the questions that are asked & what is asked of them, what they give up or sacrifice

- what moral choice they make

- wanting the other to be happy and what they want for each other

## 6. Design thoughts

Mirrors, above, to the side, could these help with sight lines?

Recreate the human into an image, the real and not real, the avatar of ourselves.

I want the set to support the play and the sound. Flexible, but dynamic

What if it's a floor and ceiling? It's so domestic, so interior, it needs walls.

The black void isn't enough. Too much like an exercise

Treat each scene like it's a precious jewel.

An important entity unto itself, not something that takes you to something else.

These aren't stepping-stones. They are as unique and individual as people are.



Once again the form is telling us something about the content. How it plays tells us about the playwright's intention.

*September 10*

Depression scenes action:

Offering food

Offering art

Offering companionship

Offering exercise

Offering ideas/possibility/intellectual stimulation

Is love and information the **antidote for** or **cause of** depression?

*September 21*

The struggle that I'm having with this play is:

I'm unable to find what the common action or statement is that the play is saying.

I'm nervous about all the scenes one after the other is the audience going to get bored? Audience not British, will it read ok? So far, what I keep coming back to is, what next. Stephen Malloy says this should be the overarching audience experience - what next? Nothing should get in the way of this. So many scenes seem to end with us feeling or asking (or the characters ask): So what next? Or the characters are left with this as a dilemma, i.e. Secret, the very first scene, ends with 'Now what? Now what? Now what?' So is the play just about choice? How we make decisions in an information saturated world.

Information and The Body: Circular Themes

Memory House - which then turns into seeing a buried childhood memory unexpectedly - which relates to Flashback - bad memory stuck in the body due to PTSD.

Fan - won't be able to sleep without the information - relates to Sleep - can't sleep because of too much information in my head - relates to Flashback - memories stuck in the body that I can't erase - relates to Shrink - memories that can be 'transformed' into something else, something that has meaning - relates back to Memory House - memories one remembers in the body.

*Top Girls* provides questions, no answers. But the resuscitation of famous (infamous) women from the dead, these women from history and giving them life at a drunken ladies dinner party and giving them voices to speak with is almost the shamanic 'play' like messaging of the play - the reminder of the struggle, the aspiration to greatness, and the secrets they've had to keep and keep squashed down and hidden.

This doubling of historical characters placed up against contemporary lives is like a mirror within the play, but structured in a way that the mirror effect creeps up on you and is implicit in the experience. A character does not describe it. The audience experiences it instead.

Not neat - but something occurs in the playing.

Trust the mess - trust the 'chaos' – not-knowing feeling. She's done the thinking, don't get in the way. Chart the accumulation of - what we know - what we feel - what we witness. How does it change?

*September 27*

Had coffee and 2-hour chat with Bronwyn Malloy, PhD candidate in English Literature, initially to discuss *Paradise Lost* theme in play. She said if the text resists a single thematic statement or interpretation, say that. She also asked, what drew me to it?

I read it and was instantly fascinated by how each scene seemed to jump out at me. But also what the scenes were about: contemporary scenarios that ranged from the mundanely domestic (I forgot what time dinner was) to parables about missing senses ('The Child Who Didn't Know

Fear’) to extreme scenarios about paranoia, being hounded, abuse, and surveillance (‘Recluse, Censor, Census, Torture, Schizophrenic, Grass’). Something about this collection of scenes that hurtle through and make up this play spoke to me about our immediate present, and reach well into the future. The questions the play seems to ask are:

How do I make a decision? (Facts vs. Feelings)

How do I know what I believe to be true?

How do I know what is right, what something means?

How do I know what I know?

We spent some time discussing reality-based perception, and Bronwyn spoke of the devaluing of information. We have too much. It used to be that he who held the information held the power.

But now we can access more information than ever before. Spoke of flattening - no canon, no authority, no central leader telling us what to do. Our bite from the fruit of the tree of knowledge has lost us the privilege to simply follow. There are no leaders. We all have access. But we crave a leader. A renegade. A messiah.

Love is innate.

We live in a post-factual democracy. The facts don't matter as much as how we feel about things.

I think of lines from Churchill’s 1960 essay, 'Not Ordinary, Not Safe':

'Drama that is anything more than historical naturalism presents a hypothesis about life in the imagery of its action.' (447)

Everything you need to know about the play is in this essay.

*October 4, 2016*

Meeting Robert Gardiner again today at 2 p.m. We spent from 3:30 – 6 p.m. last Thursday in the Frederic Wood Theatre, talking through all the possible design ideas and hashing it out. Pros and

cons. Still not sure.

Then yesterday I just went to the theatre and sat in the audience for ages. I wanted to get to know the theatre better. I just thought, what does this space want?

I want all the actors in a plexiglass box with mikes. I can't.

I can't build a white box without imposing huge limitations on myself and others.

I don't yet know enough about the show to know finalities. So I'm trying to create a flexible space that can be contained, and yet allows for fluid possibilities for scene changes, projections, lighting and use of space.

So I drew a series of 3D frames, starting big and getting smaller. It looks like an old camera, Stephen Malloy says. Yes and evokes Pandora's box. A tunnel. A secret doorway. Frames that capture us in a structure.

*October 15*

Wrote email to Stefan where I talked about 'Lab' and the concept of 'seeing' information.

Wanted to use idea of using perception (What is real? How do we know?) as a concept for lighting design. Idea of a rainbow as simply light refracted - yet we see it, and know it to be true as a rainbow. So what other tricks of the light are there? What things don't we see? Microwaves, radio waves, ectoplasm.

LX Main States:

Nighttime outside

Interior - institution (cold)

Interior - workplace

Interior - family home, domestic setting (warm)

Interior - shop/bar/mall (fluro?)

Depression Worlds

Title worlds (black, projector)

Transitions

*October 25*

First design production meeting tomorrow.

I've had two meetings already with the designers, including last Friday's mammoth all day session with Ed and Alaia, which went from 10-5. Sophie joined us at noon, and we went to the Frederic Wood to measure out the set idea on the stage with spike tape. Stefan joined us at 2:30 and we discussed the play until 5. I wanted all of the designers to articulate their individual responses to and thoughts around the play, especially for the first meeting. I also introduced the idea of me trying to pursue us all thinking as 'one brain', which means we need to take the time to get on the same page at the very beginning. Also, if I can get their thoughts up front now, it teaches me a little about how they think, what their priorities are, and I can let those ideas percolate in my brain and generate ideas. Hearing also makes working with them down the track much easier, I can get to know how they communicate. By the end of the day I felt we were more aligned in what the play might possibly be and what the challenges are. We talked about who the audience were. What were the scenes for. We will discuss the design tomorrow in the larger meeting, and propose our rough ideas. The play is huge. I can't keep it all in my head at once. I've now finished writing a 15-page Google doc outlining the scene contents, and gone through the given circumstances per section. It took a really, really long time. There are still some scenes I don't know where they are, or what they are doing, or who they are. I don't know how the transitions work, or what they mean, what their temporal reality is.

But Alaia has enough to get started with costume design.

So far, what we have is:

A confirmed set concept consisting of a scaled series of black frames, unicolour to reveal projections better. Ideally scenes occur using the full depth of stage within each frame. Hopefully baffling from the soft masking wings help us hear upstage scenes.

Some of the more complex transitions will be hopefully mitigated by bringing in the wings which allows for less distance for stage crew to travel to bring on props – will help pace.

Not sure yet how sound works but its important to have all the way through

I have more work to do. Things are taking more time than I thought. That includes my understanding.

Design Analysis (based on Stephen Heatley's directorial analysis):

### Style

The style of this piece is hypernaturalism within post-structuralist form.<sup>7</sup> Short, self-contained pockets of hypernaturalism within a distinctly non-naturalistic experience. It's possible to choose another style for the piece, but I am choosing this combination of styles to reveal the play.

### Light

The world outside the scenes is:

Edged in black

Shadowy

Contemplative

Allows us to reflect on what we've just watched

Lets us build anticipation for what's to come

Gets us excited

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<sup>7</sup> Knowles (2014) *How Theatre Means*. 121

Lets us digest

Lets us weep

Lets us bond

Transports us

Is a necessary part of the show

Is experienced by the audience, not just 'viewed'

### Sound

What does it sound like?

Synesthesia

Data

Music

Code

Beeping

Tone - flat line

Other kinds of tones

Color - the sound of pure color

The sound of black

The sound of pixels

The sound of space

The sound of stars

The sound of family

The sound of love

Repetition

Repetition then change

Recurring theme that develops and expands

Sound states to build from: harmony, anticipation, tension & discord

### Projections

Show titles: give us something to look at while the scene change occurs.

### Transitions

What are they? What 'temporal' world are they in?

Do they change slightly with each section?

I.e. is there a sense of accumulation? Do they get more complex as we go on?

### Actions

Wanting/Not wanting the message

Getting the message

Interpreting the message

Remembering the message

What do I do with the message?

### Structure

The structure does highlight anonymity, personalization, and de-personalization of our digital and non-digital worlds. The tension in these micro worlds between the drive for knowledge as well as the drive for acceptance.

### Spine

What everyone wants = Love and Information (at what cost?)

### Dominant Idea

In an information soaked age, squeezed for time and under pressure, how do I make choices and



take action? An examination of the dual motivators of love and information in contemporary society shown in 50+ scenes. In the end, it's up to us. Love is all we have left. Make a choice: if not love, then what?

### Whose play is it? (Dominant Character)

All of them (no hierarchy)

The loved one

The audience

The depressed one

### What Actions Should Be Given The Most Storytelling Emphasis?

Information gathering - questions, interpretation, and explanation.

Choices - making a choice. Often the scene ends before they choose, which throws a rhetorical question to the audience.

Warnings.

People making a choice between love and....something else.

### Use of Space/Blocking

Split the stage into thirds. Proximity to scene and use of stage depth will be part of storytelling.

### The Sections and How to Show Them

The section number is projected really really big, onto a screen.

We create a really clearly defined, inescapable structure.

We direct attention to how the playwright has divided the play. The numbers 1 to 7.

People infer meaning from the number of sections, seven as loaded number.

We give them a deliberate structural pause. We pay attention to what the play is, as written.

### Actions in Each Section

What do we know or what has the end of each section introduced us to?

### Section 1

Craving a secret, craving information.

Too much information; information we don't want.

Information that seems trivial or useless, what's the point?

Relationships that mean something to people; people who want the other to care about them.

Ways of extracting information: Begging, pleading, manipulation, torture, analysis and study.

Refusal of information; characters who don't want information or access to it.

What people will do for love, driven by love, i.e. move/travel to a remote location, find out things they don't like.

People who are mistrustful of giving out information ('Census', 'Remote', unseen prisoner in 'Torture,' character in 'Secret').

The impact of too much information on the body (i.e. can't sleep in 'Sleep', prisoner in 'Torture', reactions in 'Lab').

The idea of 'seeing' information, i.e. the scientific experiment in 'Lab'.

Mistrust, warnings, cravings.

### Section 2

What revealing a secret does to people.

How people feel about certain information and how it is conveyed.

The burden of keeping a secret, and the effect of telling it.

Empathy. Introduced to concepts of empathy in workplace scenarios ('Fired', 'Terminal')

How is it used or not used? The professional mask vs. the human response.

Reasons for terrorism.

Reasons for falling apart?

Interrupting, breaking, or challenging the status quo

### Section 3

By now we know how this works and have become familiar with the structure so we're going a bit deeper, getting a bit darker.

Introduced the idea of Artificial Intelligence? Or at least the idea of something other than humans in the future.

A parable, a story, told as a warning.

Mental health and the interpretation of signs, language.

Crime, brutality, rationale, interpretation, consequences.

Surveillance, privacy and the action of hounding a recluse.

Revealing information that jeopardizes love.

Curiosity and justifications and rationale for finding out information.

Motivations.

### Section 4

Memory and remembering, more older people in this section, more children in previous section.

What if we were all the same? Medical conditions appear in this section.

Different kinds of memory: Sad, happy, traumatic, pleasurable,

Absence of memory, memory loss. Information that changes us physically. Memory that alters our perception of reality.

How important bonds of friendship are, as well as family bonds. The support of close friends, a sense of 'I'm here for you'.

Did I remember this correctly? What's the proof? Techniques for remembering, and forgetting.

Memory that opens up something inside us.

### Section 5

In the bog of it now. Laughed and cried by now. Watch for repetition and audience fatigue - keep things fresh. Know you can play with fatigue deliberately now. Reversals are big in this section. Scenes end with a reversal. We don't know who's/which version to believe. The body used as vehicle for information. Shorter scenes, quicker rhythm. More 'plinky'. Feels 'bitsy', uneven. Big topics: Sex, God, Evolution, Faith, Children and Reproduction: The weighty matter at the heart of it. We've moved away from gossip, fandom, and trivial things, and moved on to inexplicable things that mean stuff to people, such as irrationality, multiple languages, maths as a system, sex, believing in God, rashes, infertility, trauma and pain, painful experiences, and things we have a problem with understanding.

### Section 6

Information that doesn't get through. How can I convince you this is real?

Empathy, pain, ethical/moral dilemmas

Turning away from, rejecting the information or emotion.

I can't absorb the information. Just because it's real for you doesn't mean it's real for me.

I don't understand.

### Section 7

What do things mean?

How do I know what is real?

We're all just information.

The fragility of the psyche, and self.

The desire for information at all costs, competition, winning, lying, making things up.

We are more comfortable with made up facts than expressing love.

### Random Scenes

Many scenes are all forms of alternate languages and systems.

Depression as the critical spine of piece. Overwhelming feelings the result of what? Where neither love nor information can get through.

Anything to get you to engaged, speak, respond.

Myths, stories, made up things, made up systems (times tables - like 'Maths').

DNA sequence, building blocks of life translated as information.

Commands, training, and illness.

*October 27*

Before we start rehearsals, here is what I think this play is:

A prophesy. A warning. A reminder. A celebration. Disguised as scenes from the recognizable world.

How can we replicate human life, human brains, when the permutations and combinations that go into making up a person are dizzying? How can AI ever represent all of humanity, when each person in the world is unique? And what do we do with emotion? How do we program/deal with things like irrationality, decisions that are made that may seem illogical, inefficient? And what about mental illness? Conscience? Crime? God? Interpretation? Faith? Belief?

Why don't we heed warnings? Why, despite the evidence that we've been slowly destroying the planet through pollution since the industrial revolution, aren't we acting more immediately and radically to reverse it? The scene 'Climate' suggests the information is overwhelming. So inability to process is weightier and preferable to facing facts. We're overwhelmed. There's not enough love/capacity to process the information.

Do we know too much now? Too much to process. We get overwhelmed. We can't act. We're paralyzed. Incapable of action. There are people who can absorb and remember huge amounts of information ('Savant') but does it come at a cost?

Churchill seems interested in emotional cost and sacrifice. I think of *A Number*: themes of familial love and competition, searching for identity, emotional cost of narcissism versus need to recreate humanity. The play seems to question: 'who are you to me? Who am I to you? Do you still love me, despite the circumstances that have prompted your actions?'

We live in the Information Age. Churchill has written a play that asks us - what do we do with that information? How does it affect us? How does it change us? And where is it taking us?

Information, along with its other key human driver, love, is the fulcrum of human motivation.

We've evolved to want want want information insatiably, without thinking. We mistake information for love. We equate information with love. We are information. Yet with the information that is there, we don't read the signs or take action.

Note to self:

Keep the hyper cube idea, and strive for a test - see what it looks like. Let's try it.

Use it to indicate emotional shut down - when it goes front to back.

And a waking up - an elation - when it goes back to front.

Breathing - like a laptop when asleep. What a small, elemental, profound decision. To have a laptop 'breathe'.

*October 30*

I used the callbacks as an opportunity to hear the whole play read, and cast a 21-actor version.

Invited the designers to come to hear the play being read.

Put them in a corner to not make any actors nervous about having an audience.

It was surprisingly moving.

Natalie, Daniel and Sachi made me cry with Piano. Natalie sang *Edelweiss*. Blown away with their treatment of the scene. I could not have directed anything as good as what they put together.

Reassured by how powerful it is.

*November 2*

Design hours so far....approx 35. To talk through with Malloy today:

Proposed scene order and placement of 'Depression/s'

Design deadlines - ok for costume, LX, set, not ok for sound as Ed is away until 9th

Determine sight lines and amount of side seats to cut – I propose 96.

Things should speed up a bit in Section 7 - arrhythmic, wonky, out of sync rhythm so that when we switch to 'Small Thing', it can switch to slow time.

*November 5*

Yesterday's lighting meeting took from 3:30 - 8pm to go through every scene in Sophie's ground plan. Stefan and I started to fade around Section 5 and had to push through to the end, which was exactly what happened to Sophie and I when we made the ground plan. However, we need to do this work now. As much as possible needs to be figured out in advance.

We identified the sections of the stage that needs to be lit based on my notes scribbled on Sophie's first and second PDF. In the second cue list we created, I told Stefan to identify the scrim raises etc, so the cue list can also start to be a master document for everything. I haven't even begun to think about the projections yet. Oh my.

As tired as I am, as brain dead as I am, I am learning so much. With each long meeting and dive into detail, I am getting to know the shape of the play even more. It's time to read it again, from start to finish, without making notes or interrupting, to let the whole wash over me again.

I am learning how much prep goes into a full-length main stage show in the context of standard time constraints of Canadian professional theatre. I am learning that as a director you can score the entire thing and know detail, as you would know the details of your own room, and it doesn't kill discovery and collaboration, as long as you stay open to how it might evolve. And even if you don't know, choose something and know it can change. Prep time is dreaming time. I'm excited for it. I think it will be exquisite. I can't wait to build it.

*November 7*

It's the day before the US election.

I'm a little tired - still haven't caught up from days of feverish 5 hours a night sleep.

I just saw a show in the Frederic Wood Theatre, which used the cyclorama (cyc) beautifully - it totally masked the scene changes below, and I thought, wow that's exactly what we need. We keep talking about the need to have invisible ninjas and seamless set changes. And this did it.

The beautiful cyc distracted us with color. That's the kind of saturated color I want for the section breaks - full saturation.

So I asked Robert about the cyc, could we use it somehow? Could we raise the curtain above the portals so you can see the cyc behind? No. Can we do anything? Not really. Sophie: Don't change the set now! Then, temporarily, the conversation went back to a white set. With a white set, won't you see everything? I'd have to rethink how all that works on a white stage.

What about keeping the surprise of the next scene, the whole point of beginning 'in media res' - lights up! Go! How much pre-setting can we see on a white set? Glowing is ok, but full exposure - not sure. What I pictured was the black and white world that I saw in Gerald's production.

Seamless. Elegant. Theatrical. Magical. Disciplined. Clean.

I don't know this theatre space well enough, I can't picture things well enough. I'm reliant on the



minds of people who know more than me, so I'm trying to find out. I hope I don't seem pushy or annoying, I'm trying to be respectful. But it's my job to find out, and know more, when I'm struggling with multiple ideas and have to make a choice, a decision.

*November 11*

Projection design meeting with Sophie and Stefan from 3-5 at JJ Bean at SFU. Conceptual ideas mostly, and looked at which visuals we like, what can be animated. Projections are the one thing I have the least clue about. Sophie is incredible, she's so efficient. But I don't know what any of this is going to look like until I see it. I'm invested, but I have no frame of reference.

*November 14*

This is going to get messy before it gets neat. Jump in.

The text will tell you everything. Follow it. Follow the punctuation.

Keep everything sharp. Emotions sharp. Look and sounds clean.

Paranoia is a recurring theme. Characters caught between conflicting actions.

*November 28*

Analysis is handed in. Saturday is the first read thru.

My notes for the program are due next week.

In the next few days I want to refine my rehearsal plan. I've done so much and yet I still don't feel ready, don't know enough. Sometimes I just need to make a decision and move on it.

More rehearsal thoughts....questions...analysis.....

Big ethical questions around motivation and behaviour. Churchill theme: How we treat the vulnerable. Do we change and evolve to suit the information?

Cut back to the smallest, most essential exchanges - no need for a long story (but still a long story made up of little stories, an accumulation of perspectives and dilemmas)

Be wary of structures that take away meaning from our lives.

Nostalgia is destroyed by revisionist history. So too, our memories that soften the harder edges of life's experiences with time. But what if these memories are permanently captured?

Inerasable? Are we fated to keep re-living trauma over and over again without the option to forget it, re-write it, or reimagine it? Are 'problematic' memories necessary for our survival?

Does digital archiving mess with this system? Or simply reflect need for accuracy?

What's at stake?

### Section 1

Secret - Friendship

Remote - Love

Census - Privacy

Fan - Love, Worship, Security

Torture - Emotional health

Lab - Potential relationship (based on ethics - if this is how we treat animals, how will we treat each other?)

Sleep - Love, Relationship, human functionality

### Section 2

Irrational - Security

Affair - Friendship

Mother - Love

Fired - Dignity, Self-Esteem, Decency

Message - Humanity?

Grass - Safety, Security

Terminal - ability to cope with the information (prospect of death)

### Section 3

Schizophrenic - Safety, Sanity (grip on reality)

Spies - Trust (in government), structures, also friendship - 'you're an idiot', a boor

Dream - Love, Fidelity, Security, (empathy?), hurting

Recluse - Love, Privacy, Security

God's Voice - Truth, Reality based perception

The Child Who Didn't Know Fear - Safety of the kid?

Star - Security. The Future. Ability to move happily into the future.

### Section 4

Flashback - Mental and Emotional Health

Wedding Video - Love - remembering those we love - meaningful existence

Savant - Exhaustion??

Ex - Meaning, that what I remember (or think I remember) doesn't match reality. What I think is real isn't. My precious memory. (Nostalgia - leave it alone)

Memory House - self-concept - sense of self. Who am I? Security - in the world. Friendship.

Relationship to parents and past.

Dinner - Memory. Relationship.

Piano - Relationship. Memory.

### Section 5

Linguist - My view of the world. Certainty. Ability to define and be defined. (??)

Maths - How I see the world. Friendship. Love

Sex - Love

God - my belief system. My patience. Who I think I am (self concept) vs. who I really am.

Rash - my health, my child's health, my relationship. Grip on reality.

Children - potential relationship (same as LAB), dignity, sense of self as whole

Shrink - Sense of self (RD Laing - *The Undivided Self*), relationship to family, self esteem

## Section 6

The Child Who Didn't Know Sorry - decency, empathy, humanity

Climate - children's lives, relationship, grip on reality, future of human race

Censor - the facts, the truth

Wife - Love, the marriage

Decision - the friendship, the future

The Child Who Didn't Know Pain - being 'normal', friendship

Earthquake - friendship, sense of shared humanity, ability to cope

## Section 7

Chinese Poetry - ?

Manic - Reality, Friendship

Grief - Sense of self, dignity

Fate - my understanding of reality?

Stone - kindness, friendship, belonging

Virtual - grip on reality

Small Thing - grip on reality

Facts - truth, equality, revealing oneself, winning

## **2.2 Rehearsals Begin: December 2017**

*Week 1. December 3-10*

*Saturday December 3, 1- 6pm.*

Read through play twice, no discussion, just read play. Hear it, and note what comes up.

Design presentation (minus LX and Set Designer) Ed mentions pace and the actors look scared. I fumble through showing the set and concepts. Keep it simple. Alaia talks about costuming: 'you are all individual 'somebodies', not anonymous 'nobodies'. Good point.

Discussion afterwards; almost everyone has something they feel strongly about or relate to.

Good.

Stephen Malloy introduced me to the idea of doing two read-throughs on the first day during my first 520 project, and not really talking much, just listening to the play. I find being given 'permission' to do this so helpful. It enables me to have some quiet time to reflect on what I'm listening to, allow responses and ideas that come up and takes me outside the need to perform as director/leader on the first day. I feel pressure to provide information on the first day and 'perform' leadership - get buy-in from actors by seeming knowledgeable about the play, confident about the design, and all knowing about the process we are undertaking. This adds pressure on a director, and I tend to feel the opposite on the first day: panic, not knowing anything, and usually a sense of how the heck is it all going to come together. So to have a set up that takes the pressure off everyone, including myself, on day 1, is very helpful. We can get to the work easier, quicker.

Also, we are utterly bamboozled with scheduling, coordinating the availability of 18 actors and 4 designers.

*Monday and Tuesday, December 5 & 6*

Table work, around the world's hugest rehearsal table (18 actors, Stage Manager, 2 ASM's, + Director). I emailed Amanda Sunday morning to let her know about the schedule change; she was fine with it. We simply moved the plan for the rest of the week forward by two days, which means my plan to do a run on Saturday is out the window.

This week we are in Binnings 128, and next week we move to the theatre to rehearse (which is so so so fantastic). My fear is that if we don't do the table work, we'll need to do it at a later stage, and we'll lose time. Better to invest the time in understanding now than later.

I hate table work. I almost never do it. But I can't avoid it with this play. I've sent out the given circumstances to everyone, based on what I gave to Alaia for costumes. But given the conversations after the first read through, it's evident we still need to talk through the scenes. I think everyone needs to be there, in order to hear what is happening in other scenes that might apply to them.

Over the 2 days we read every scene in the play and discuss:

given circumstances

themes

shifts/beats

action

content

turning points

punctuation

Caryl Churchill's work, history, politics, previous works, styles

We got through almost all of the scenes of the play, except Virtual and Facts.

*Wednesday December 7 - Tuesday Dec 13*

First pass through each scene of the play, based on actor availability. Blocking and basic staging.

An ambitious undertaking - all pleasantly surprised we got through the schedule as planned.

Monday we moved into the Frederic Wood Theatre. It seemed to make a huge difference to do it

on the stage, however, odd for the first pass because the theatre is so huge and cold and

impersonal compared to the rehearsal room, and this is what I am afraid of, is that these intimate

scenes are difficult to do on such a big stage, but I am so grateful we have the opportunity to

rehearse on stage so we can improve this.

Managed to get through all scenes by Tuesday morning of Week 2, in order to get to a stumble

through by 1pm Tuesday, which both Brad and Stephen Malloy attended. Their notes for the first

stumble through: actors were playing shape of scene, not the scene.

I thought everyone did really well given this was the first time we'd done any of it in order. I still

have no idea how to treat the separate sections differently - it's the end of the first week and a

half and we haven't been able to run even a single section in order until now.

Also the first time we used furniture - included all of the furniture moves we had rehearsed from

Monday. Mel and Sony took care of the rest, exhausted and sweaty by the end. Amazing. The

best ASM's in the world. So impressed. The furniture ground plan PDF that Sophie created is

their bible - thank goodness we have that. Gave it to them to study it during this first week,

before the props arrived. I told Lynn that it would be ok to have the props when we get into the

theatre in week 2, rather than carting them all the way to the rehearsal room in Binnings just for

the first week (there are so many), so suddenly they all arrived at once before the run through.

All managed well for a first run through with moving pieces. The actors are great about stepping

in. When we need someone to move something, we call out, 'can we have a friend for this? and

someone will jump up and volunteer. My spiel about no divas, and all of us being equal at the start of the process I hope is working - I keep reiterating we are all equal and in this together. I've asked Mel and Sony to keep track of which actor is moving what when, because when costumes come on board, some people might need to quickly change. However it makes sense for actors to practice prop moving now, even if they have to hand over to crew later on, it will be much smoother in tech I think. So the actors are being very generous. Especially given they are playing up to 6 different characters, and have to make those switches. I've noted that volume needs to fill the space more. This will be an ongoing issue I suspect.

General notes:

What do I want? What do I know? What am I doing?

Who is the active person? Struggle to be the active person.

Responding to being cut off by other characters.

No talking backstage. Keep laser sharp focus - be clear, authentic, take action.

*Week 2. December 12-17*

After Tuesday's first stumble through, we began the second pass through the scenes starting Wednesday Dec 14. At this point, we are calling all of the actors for all of the rehearsals all of the time. I asked Malloy if that would be ok and he said yes, they have more than enough to do, it's not a waste of their time. Amanda and I are finding it difficult to predict exactly how much time each scene is going to need, even though we managed to get through all of the intended scenes in the time allocated last week. With everyone in the theatre, it's much easier to work staging, furniture moving and blocking. When the actors are not working scenes with us on stage, the expectation is that they will work in one of the rooms downstairs on their other scenes. Finally we are able to go through the play in section order, starting at Section 1. We have



planned to get through a section per day, with a run of the day's scenes at 5pm, thereby putting it all together. The on Thursday, aim for two run-throughs plus notes, before we break for the holidays. And that's it for December!

This plan means we may not get a chance to do a third pass on some of the scenes in January, as we only have rehearsals Jan 2-4 before crew view on the 5th. We aimed for the show to be ready by January 4th - that's the magic date I've been working towards.

General notes for actors:

Play the scene. What is happening in the scene. Given circumstances and moment before are designed to help get you to the scene; discard or change anything that doesn't help that is not in the text. Only you can locate yourself - I've given as much as I can.

Think of it as your job to know how you start and how you end. Don't focus so much on how you feel or feelings. Instead, use your senses & keep them open. Keep your brain alert. Tell story over playing emotion, always. Remember you have to want something, or have a reason to speak, or you'd stay silent. Work on repeatability. If you've got repeatability down, work on staying present in the moment. How can I be responsive in every moment? Use rehearsals to keep discovering your responses to what you hear. Take time. Be specific. Who just said what to me.

*Week 3. December 19-22*

Lost Monday Dec 19th - rehearsal cancelled due to snow day.

This entire month has been dire with the weather, and several snowstorms have threatened rehearsals, but this week it finally happened - a canceled day. Robert Gardiner was unable to come to our first projection test, and the second follow up test never happened due to the snow. The freedom to take as long as each scene needs is a bonus this week - we need to work outside

of time and scheduling pressures to find these scenes, and give the actors a chance to find them. Having the time to improvise around the scenes is helpful for the actors in making discoveries, especially with such truncated material so full of history and action. I call it Chekhov squished. We squeaked in two runs on Thursday, one at 5pm and one at 7pm. Brad and Stephen had the same notes as the first run through - they're still playing the shape of the scene rather than the scene. I have no idea how to fix this.

#### *December 24*

The marathon of rehearsals that was December finished on Thursday.

Then Friday a seven-hour lighting meeting, in the theatre, figuring out all the cues.

Stefan got Ryan to video the first run from Thursday, and we were able to look at the starts and ends of each scene, figure out timing of cues as well as placement. I found that so incredibly helpful. We now have 183 lighting cues and an updated cue list, ready 100% for tech.

We've tracked the movement of the scrim & all the furniture moves more precisely.

I took lots of notes to remind myself of what sound cues still need to be built, and how many, what they need to cover. Ed was in Bermuda on Dec 21 so not able to see the runs.

So another reason I really wanted yesterdays meeting, as I need to be able to tell Ed what is outstanding. We listened to everything he has so far in a 3 hour meeting last Friday before rehearsal - I really needed to hear what he currently has. So that was fruitful.

I think we have about 60% of the show sounds figured out. A few key cues still to build - namely, the section breaks, and whatever sound will play under Depression scenes. The section break sound needs to sound different to the Depression sound.

Rehearsals were bananas. There was never a moment where I was not working, non-stop. Non-stop. It's been exhausting. I'm ready for a break.

*Holiday Break: December 23 - January 1*

*Week 4. January 2-8*

Recap on Jan 2, with a slow run through the play. I thought it would take a day, but took three, right up until Wednesday night, so that our first run-through in real time was the crew view.

What was really helpful was Stephen Malloy coming into Monday's rehearsal, where we looked at scenes where I was either struggling with meaning, (what does the scene mean?) or struggling with acting (I can't get the actor to lock into what the scene needs), in which case Stephen as acting teacher/back up coach was very helpful. Also by the time of the third pass, my head is full and it's starting to get really difficult to see what I've made and what to do with things that may not be working just yet.

*Paper tech Friday January 6, 5-9.30pm*

We got through it all, with the help of pizza and burpy drinks, and candy and gum. Amanda is a superstar.

*Saturday January 7*

Managed two final run-throughs today before we start tech next week.

This is the last pass at the play with actors. It was worth working slowly through scenes earlier in the week, because real time runs at this point are very much needed. Finalized all blocking.

I'm so conscious of the fact that the next time we can run the show is a week away, and I tell the actors this - with tech taking all week, don't lose momentum, prepare yourselves for the fact that we won't run the show or the scenes properly again for a week!

*Tech Week*

*Tuesday January 10*

We start our cue-to-cue tonight. We have five sessions between now and Saturday, then a tech

run Saturday afternoon. Last night was levels. We got through all of the sound cues (not all of them are right, not all of them are done, lots of gaps), and we got through all the LX looks apart from Sections 5 & 6. It was a lot of pressure on Stefan, as a lot of the lighting looks had to be adjusted, but I know he'll be ok. He's been doing long hours, with all the video mapping, etc. I'm sick again. A little cold. Everyone has it in the cast.

I keep dreaming of meaning - what does it mean? Lines that stand out are: 'The words came to me'. What are the limits of our perception? Are we standing in a moment in time where perception is on the cusp of shifting, as we are able to process more information? An intense curiosity about how we will evolve. How do we hold onto reality? How do we know what's true?

*Sunday January 15*

Finished tech Saturday morning with 'Facts', 'Depressions' and 'Genes'. Then costumes brought in 2:30-3:30. Tech run at 3:30. Robert gave Stefan lots of lighting notes. Went surprisingly well, especially since costumes were added for the first time. The skeleton held together. Some actors not in lights. Both Robert and Stephen commented on the sequences that worked well, and encouraged us to tighten up the ones that were gappy. Encouraged us to light up more of the portals.

Thematic reminder to give to actors this week:

(highlighting playable action, main gestures or key recurring gestures in the sections)

Section 1: How Am I Going To Get The Information? (Need)

*I want to know, in spite of myself*

I need the information. I need the love

get information (in order to)

get love (need)

I want to know

Section 2: Is It Better To Know Things Or Not Know Things? (Choice)

*Information I don't want to know, but.....*

a construct

what's real?

it might be real...

or become real...

I don't want to know (both sections signal choice)

Section 3: How Do We Know It's True? Or Real? Or Exists? (Motivation)

*Tell me how you know, and tell me clearly*

how do you know the information is true?

is it true?

is it false?

how do you know?

so how do you choose? (in my body, not in words)

Subjectivity, perception, assessing, how we know what we think we know

Section 4: How Do I Remember Information? Find out what to do next. Memory, Remembering.

*Things I need to remember/Things I need to forget*

there was something I forgot...

You can't help me/I can't help you, as much as I try

(changing a memory)

(the birth of a memory)

What Does It Mean?

Section 5: How Do I Know What Is Real? What is the information telling me?

(Interpretation/Signs)

*You don't know me, so don't presume*

prove that you love me

I want you to understand me/I don't understand you

getting things wrong about each other - making an assumption that backfires

misunderstanding the signs/message

uses and misuses of power

Section 6: Facts Vs Feelings. Taking Action. Empathy.

*Yes But No*

I don't feel it/How can you not feel it?

wanting to find unity but can't (and is that ok?)

(telling the story to illuminate the theme)

Section 7: How Do You Know What It Means? (Meaning)

*I just want to be loved (I wish I could tell you I love you)*

how do I interpret this?

How can I interpret this?

I've lost something/I'm losing something

Facts over feelings

I can't interpret this/I'm overwhelmed (too much...of something)

Note to self, look for:

Emotional States. Irrational stage. Anomalies.

Push the gesture or state - if they are irrational, make them really irrational.

Humans doing their best to try to understand each other.

What are they all doing? Receiving, Pursuing, Assessing, Categorizing, Escaping.

Anomalies - states of being that computers would not engage with, blips outside of the code.

Multifaceted - like a Rubik's Cube.

*Tuesday January 17. Two days before opening*

Last night's dress rehearsal we made all the mistakes.

I want to change one of the 'Depression' sounds - either the razor sounding one or static one.

Over lunch with Stefan we broached Malloy's idea of having the cast revealed behind the curtain. Open the curtain and then light the scrim with the red 1. Stefan thinks we can make the change. Section Breaks: I really want them to do what I want them to do. But they're not quite there. Still off kilter somehow. 1. timing of visuals with sound - get smoother. 2. fade up of section break colour on scrim - need longer in dark/semi colour, then more saturated intense colour, hold on number a little longer, and add 1-2 seconds to fades. Amanda and Stefan - talk through Isadora fade glitches - has to be fully out before next cue called. Hypercube in new place - tell Amanda. Look at all of Section 7 transitions. Also 'Manic' sound and projection transition moved to after 'Sex'. Too long getting into curtain call.

Thematic Reminder - Give to actors before preview as point of focus. The actors are doing an amazing job. I want to support them as we move to being in front of an audience.

*Wednesday January 18. Preview*

First time in front of an audience.

Too quick to get in - audience not ready for start of show. Tell Amanda count 3 seconds after Siri phone speech is done before calling curtain open cue. Also wait 3-4 seconds before moving off stage. Also the ending snuck up on them. Need to program a more pronounced lx fade that starts

before the curtains close. So many off sound cues tonight. Ed tells me later on that the left speakers weren't on. Importance of pre-show checks!!! All the levels were totally thrown off. It was terrible. Angry meeting afterwards, where I threw up my hands. Felt so responsible for a disaster. All those hours of work. So much time from so many people. 'What do we have to do to get this right?' I ask everyone. I get home and sob. I've made a disaster. I don't know what to do about it. We've worked so hard.

*Thursday January 19. Opening*

I wake up at 7am (well 5 but get up at 7) to write an email list of stuff to do today. The final push. Determined we will use our last 45 minutes of tech time, as we have for the past 3 days, to tweak and tighten everything we can.

The sound fixes. I sat in the theatre with Ed at 11:30 a.m and listened to levels again. Went to class at 2p.m, came back at 4.30. Spent from 4:30-5:30 with Ed re-doing the 'Genes' sound cue, making us crazy. It's still too throbbing, loud, but not loud enough in the first half. We ended up dividing it into 3 parts, and set a different level for each part - high at the start, then lower in the middle, then lower still when the beat goes crazy. It's not ideal...but nothing else seems to work to eliminate the ear assault and still get the bass in the heart and guts feeling we want. We just could not EQ it to work. The whole thing is coming from the sub-woofer. Bringing it into the house speaker makes the sound pop and sound crummy. Taking the volume down too much means we hear the actor's footsteps...argh. And we're 3 seconds away from opening. Ed was so fantastic to keep working on it with me, right up until that point. At 5:30 when actors arrive, we tightened up the closing scene into curtain call, deciding finally not to move the 'Facts' boxes. Fine. Then did both hypercube turn on and shut down with actors so operators could practice. Then looked at the rhythm of 'Chinese Poetry' from Section 7.



Later after opening night...

A phenomenal response. After the disaster of preview, it was good to see one show finally at the right rhythm with no mistakes (apart from one sound cue at the top of 'Fate' which we did not need). It flowed! And to experience an audience experience it – breathing, laughing, engaged.

*Saturday January 21*

Friday night's show had a projector down, so today a flurry of frantic emails went out, with Stefan going in to check on things, and Robert sending out instructions for how to power down and power up the projectors in the correct way, in the correct order. Another email flurry over the Georgia Straight review, I advised everyone to save reading until after the show closes.

Distractions.

## **Chapter 3: Reflection Post Production**

### **3.1 Overall Reflection**

#### **3.1.1 Key Learnings**

**Time** - how much time is applied to what you want to do. How much can be achieved in a certain time frame (more than I thought, as long as you are prepared). Importance of goals and deadlines as helpful structure.

**Understanding/Learning** - applying methodology for narrative work to a play with a non-narrative structure - my approach was a combination of research, theory, and instinct. However with this play I felt I was working outside of many of the structural approaches I had been taught in the MFA program, and this was sometimes tricky for me.

**Preparation** - an extraordinary amount of preparation went into this. The process of directing it was as educational as preparing to direct it. The outcome taught me to trust my understanding of a script, despite feeling like there was always more work to do - a nagging sensation there was something I'd missed or not understood.

**Team Building** - I learned the value of bringing together a team early on; getting the team enthused for the project. Taking the time to work individually to bring out best work. How much preparation I need to stay ahead of the design process in order to get the outcome I want.

**Turning challenges into opportunities** (where limitations became strengths) - how I managed to turn around what seemed like a road block at the time into something achievable, or work with a creative limitation that eventually led to something new and different. Basically, working with a road map, then having done enough prep to be able to change the road map when required.

### **3.1.2 The biggest challenges: Time/Understanding/Directing ‘theme’ + action in an open play**

The time and energy spent on creating the production - determining given circumstances, establishing meaning of scenes and conveying that information to designers and actors, coaching designers through process to get to the point where we become collaborators, rehearsing so many short scenes with separate given circumstances, and a long tech, meant that pre-production and production time became very compressed. There was a necessary discipline to the production approach that I was constantly balancing with trying to provide space for ideas to flourish.

I was conscious of wanting to make a piece where my directorial interpretation did not trample on the things the play was saying. I also wanted to make a piece that reflected the thrill I got when I first read the play, my sense of the immediacy, aliveness, compassion, heart, humour, sharp political voice, intelligence, and the presentation of complex ideas in a seductively simple yet so complex form. Every scene seemed like the distillation of a play. And if the volume of material showing my working process is large, it's because for me the process of unpacking each densely packed scene was large.

The open, poetic nature of the text, with unassigned characters or locations meant that determining what is happening in the scenes became crucial to moving forward in production and rehearsal planning. It is a lengthy undertaking, that under ideal conditions would be decided together by the collaborative team, including actors. However the given circumstances of production (university environment, student collaborators, specific time frame for production and rehearsals, main stage performance on Frederic Wood Theatre stage) meant it became clear I had to determine specific information in advance.

Early on I had the notion that once I had figured out themes and specific circumstances, and

could see/hear the play in either a reading or a run through, the structure and meaning of the piece would appear clearly, in a kind of kinesthetic reveal. If I did enough work, suddenly all these spiraling through-lines would jump out at me like invisible ink in special light and somehow reveal the hidden meaning of the play. As I reflect on the journal, I am reminded of how many attempts I made at articulating recurring action and themes. I did this several times, with the thought that there would be a point where all my preparation would meet a particular run through, and suddenly everything would become clear. Rather, as we went on, my understanding came in layers, and evolved and deepened. However, no greater structural or thematic reveal ever occurred, which surprised me. Even at milestone moments: each run through, tech, dress, and eventually opening. I even took notes at the penultimate performance, still pushing myself towards a declarative statement of meaning. But I never felt any certainty about declaring one central definitive ‘thing’ that the play was about, or a central action other than people wanting information, understanding or love from each other, and that drive prompting action that changes the relationship, or how they feel about themselves. This has caused me some anxiety as a director. Was I doing something ‘wrong’? It’s not lost on me that uncertainty as a key theme in the play also haunted me during production.

However I did make choices regardless, based on what I could glean. And whatever I wasn’t able to articulate in words, I held in my head, and when we made choices in sound meetings, or projector meetings, or in tech, I drew upon my research and understanding to create a piece based on what I thought seemed to hold meaning, or follow Elin Diamond’s ‘thematic drift’ (465), always with a view to 1) push the play forward 2) keep the audience engaged 3) create meaning/ful moments that favoured intimacy and immediacy.

I could make statements such as ‘the play is a call to the vitality of empathy’, ‘the play examines

what it is to be human in the age of AI', 'the play introduces themes that may be initially benign but recur later on in a causal spiral only more twisted and urgent', or, 'the scenes are connected thematically through a web-like structure, where themes travel through temporal reality based on what order the director decides they will play'. In deciding the scene order, I mostly stuck with Churchill's version, and moved a few scenes for rhythmic purposes and added the Depression scenes where I saw fit rhythmically, either to undercut a particular mood or, to enhance light and shade, which Churchill already writes into the scenes. In production choices I focused on uniqueness and individuality, and used sound/visuals that helped me move scenes forward. I wanted the pace of the show to reflect how fast Churchill's script seems to move, but I wanted to allow enough time for people to absorb moments. I did not ever want anything unclear or muddy, so that spectators could piece together their own responses to the material, and allow the cumulative nature of the play to be experienced: in the absence of long form story, the narrative is created within them.

But I could never say, 'this section is about memory, and it occurs right in the middle of the play, and so it is going to be treated differently to the rest.' How differently? In what way? My strongest feeling was that all scenes should be given equal weight, or the play's structure and themes would be tinkered with - that somehow a vital integrity would be lost. This instinct was backed up in conversations with my supervisor. 'Memory House' as the apex of the play is the longest scene, 'Sex' one of the shortest, contains the title, and is another apex point. What do I do with that? Do I treat them differently? I thought not. Leave them be. It seemed overkill to draw an arrow to the themes, as the playwright has already written them.

Instead, in the end, I decided that if the scenes are clear, and if I've done my homework, then the themes should jump out from the collage of scenes. I did not want to stickhandle meaning for the

audience – I did not want to present a directorial thesis in production which might (further?) alienate the audience, and somehow interrupt the spectator’s individual response to the material. Although I do recognize that all the choices I made in staging and design are unique directorial choices, and that every director will make different choices. This text is easy to place any kind of thematically linked directorial interpretation onto production, and I was mindful of this, and kept trying to ‘listen’ for the play.

### **3.1.3 Thematic Ideas post performance**

All through the process, my understanding changed, evolved, and deepened. There were moments where I felt convinced that one theme or question in particular stood out - where I discovered something that made me think, ‘yes, that’s it!’. But then it would change, or not sustain itself.

Initially, I thought the play was all about how humans are different to AI’s. Why we need to highlight those differences at this intersection in time/human history, knowing Churchill writes zeitgeist plays. There were enough hints about language, technology, scientific research, and human need, and the vast differences in human response to stimuli (physical, environmental, phenomenal, emotional), with an emphasis on empathy. And then just recently I read an article about the influence of Artificial Intelligence on voter choices for the 2017 US Election and the 2016 Brexit vote, and how data, freely given and freely obtained from social media was used to shape the message, and feed it back to voters. That emotions were able to be tracked, throughout the campaigns, and people’s responses predicted. That U.S President Donald Trumps bizarre 70-minute press conference in February 2017 was (amongst other things) an exercise in tracking the real time response of people who were watching and posting their thoughts and feelings on social

media. That AI was now considered the future of election campaigning.<sup>8</sup> I immediately found myself thinking of *Love and Information*, and that maybe the possibilities of what the play was articulating was beyond my imagination. The themes the article was raising seemed to link directly to the themes of the play. But I'd experienced this before; a sense of coming across something in my research that seemed to connect strongly to the themes of *Love and Information*, and yet eventually wasn't the only thing that the play was about. The play was like a mirror; it seemed to reflect back at you your current thematic pre-occupation and at the same time resist a definitive interpretation at every turn.

Then I found a note from February 4, written after seeing one of the performances:

All through play: The Message

What is the Message?

How do I know it's true?

How do I know to pay attention to the Message?

How is the Message transmitted?

What if I ignore the Message?

When should I act on the Message? How?

Who controls the message?

(Find out what to do next)

And I thought back to early discussions I'd had with my supervisor Stephen Malloy about the themes of *Paradise Lost*, and the corruptibility of the message, and the perils of the desire for information. One character (in the scene titled 'Message') says, of suicide bombing, when asked

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/feb/26/robert-mercier-breitbart-war-on-media-steve-bannon-donald-trump-nigel-farage> accessed April 4, 2017. Web.

if he'd do it himself: 'I don't think that message is what I want to say' (20).

We think of one side interpreting the message - 'terrorists just want to kill us because they're evil'. The other side perpetrating the violence - 'I'm fighting for my freedom because I'm oppressed by you'. Then a grey area in between where violence begets violence until it's so entrenched, I don't even know how peace is approached. And what of state sanctioned criminality, psychopathy, and the moral edges of societies that have broken down? Which causes actually promote civility, tolerance, and a social agreement amongst people based on shared values? What are those values? Does it need to be taught or is it innate? Where does the teaching start? Churchill's attention placed on children, storytelling, and instructional actions seems to suggest we pay attention to teaching empathy, which is especially critical when young.

If we humans are information, who takes our information and uses it? For what? Can we be predicted, based on our genes, emotions and experiences?

'Fate' examines this, and says 'yes': One character raises the idea of being predicted, while the other person in the scene becomes distressed at the prospect, then considers it, then becomes predictable and responds just as the first person says they would. Because the idea of removing personal responsibility for the consequences of things that might be out of your control (such as ageing complications or illness) is liberating - there is nothing you can do to stop it, so you may as well enjoy what you can. Churchill weaves several ideas into a scene thick with concepts, meaning and interpretation, as well as intention and responses. 'Fate' was one of the most opaque scenes in the play for me, and ended up being one of my most intriguing. One of the biggest challenges directing student actors with such thick material is investigating the depth and gravitas required within the actor to play these conversations that matter. How to perform all that back story, all that life lived in a tiny microcosm of the universe.





**Figure 3.1. Wedding Video. (featured: Louis Lin, Heidi Upham, Tai Amy Grauman, Natalie Backerman, Daniel Curalli. Costume Design: Alaia Hamer. Set Design: Sophie Tang. Lighting Design: Stefan Zubovic. Photo credit: Javier Sotres)**

The seeds of information gathering, surveillance, governmental influence and intention, corruptibility, human needs such as love, companionship, belonging, and togetherness, as well as physical needs such as rest, sleep and physical comfort are all planted in Section 1 of *Love and Information*. We see several ‘old’ ways of gathering information - filling out a census, using torture (one of the oldest ways of information extraction), telling each other a secret, and my choice of searching through a magazine in Fan (the text seemed to indicate to me that they were not using a search engine: ‘You can’t find it’). The outlier is ‘Lab’, which refers to sophisticated lab testing to uncover what appears to be information of questionable usage, not old school tech, but which uses the oldest messaging system in the world, killing. By the end of the play, the states of being have become larger - paranoia has turned into mania, suspicion around

information gathering has turned into a person in love with an artificial intelligence ‘she’ (‘Virtual’), concern about moral choices has turned into panic about natural disasters, and debate called ‘Facts’ has turned into competition to answer made up questions with made up answers, a competition or game that favours its continuity over an interruption that asks for an expression of love. A line later the request for love is given a response, after which the still lingering ‘game’ question is answered. Who wins? Information, or love? And is it a zero sum game?

### 3.2 Hits and Misses



Figure 3.2 Sex (pictured: Bronwyn Henderson, Jed Weiss. Photo credit: Javier Sotres)

#### 3.2.1 Successes

Making a show that integrated multiple design elements into theatrical form that conveyed a meaningful audience experience. The design was integrated into the production as a whole.

Keeping the text alive for the actors, and directing the student actors to elicit meaningful

performances and telling each individual story clearly. Integrating design with acting and text in a way that kept the audience engaged for 90 minutes without intermission.

Engaging designers with the ideas and themes of play to enable strong work from each designer, and working within the given circumstances of production to produce work that sustained itself.

Staging a complex, post dramatic text that does not have a clear narrative in a way that sustained itself and created meaning for audiences. Deciding (mostly) sustainable pre-ordained given circumstances for each scene. Creating a production had a focus on theatricality and used theatrical technologies that appeared complex but were actually very simple.

### **3.2.2 Improvements**

Refine the visual journey. I would open up a discussion with the designers about how the sound and visuals connect thematically, where we can take the ideas we touched on, and deepen them to become critical to the life of the play. This process was somewhat truncated by weather and given circumstances of production, and the nature of the script. If I had the time to revisit tech, I'd have liked to sharpen some of the existing light, sound and projection cues to make the transition rhythms seamless – some of them were uneven or came out too early, but the sheer volume of cues and Isadora challenges meant this was the best we could achieve. (We did continue to change and tweak right up to opening) Once the video cues were programmed in sequence, we discovered it became very hard to make changes. Change the sound for Section Break 7 and transition into Wife, to something with a different feel; the sound was too slow for that point in the play. I'd look at alternate music for Section Breaks and how do they build. I'd also look at ways to re-stage Depression: play with putting the second person in the scenes on stage

Churchill invites the director to make critical decisions regarding meaning, interpretation and

staging of *Love and Information*. The script is so opaque; a distinct clarity of vision is needed to get the scenes up and running and have meaning. (I did not feel I achieved this with ‘Savant’ – besides the huge psychological effort for Seamus’ character to remember the movie *Godzilla* ‘shot by shot’ (36) in response to Sachi’s questions, it nagged at me that there was potential dramatic tension in this scene I wasn’t fully understanding, and I take responsibility for this, however I still always loved the scene)



**Figure 3.3 Savant (pictured: Seamus Fera, Sachi Nisbet. Costume design: Alaia Hamer. Lighting Design: Stefan Zubovic. Photo credit: Javier Sotres)**

As a director in this process, one experiences the themes of the play come to life in the process of directing - I was critically aware of how every choice I made would be read, assessed, analyzed, received, but I also experienced a sense of feeling rushed, densely packed with information, frequently stymied by the amount of choice, experiencing a sense of helplessness in the face of

random events, and keeping all the juggling balls in the air at the same time.

Often I was made hyper aware of the limits of my own humanity through things like needing sleep, needing food, needing caffeine, needing love and support. I was conscious of the fact that I was one individual among a larger group who were designing and co-coordinating the look, feel and transmission of this experience for other people. Churchill's thematic concerns seem to infect the groups who interact with her work.



**Figure 3.4 Piano (pictured: Sachi Nisbet, Daniel Curalli, Natalie Backerman. Photo credit: Javier Sotres)**

### **3.2.3 How did the audience respond?**

A wide range of audience responses. I have included some quotes that I overheard in the lobby or responses that were told to me.

There was an overall deep appreciation of the theatrical experience, especially visuals and sound. Intrigue as to what the play was about, and themes raised; the form of many short scenes, and

absence of narrative or story to guide them through the experience: ‘Once I figured out after the first few scenes that oh well, that was what it was, I sat back and quite enjoyed myself’.

A feeling of overwhelm; so much information/scenarios thrown at them: ‘I felt like it was my Friday night now and watching that just felt like the rest of the whole week, checking Facebook and dealing with stuff constantly, it was not relaxing’. Some people had an affective response, especially to scenes such as ‘Piano’ and ‘Depression’. Some people told me they cried, or felt the play had articulated something that they had experienced personally that they’d never seen in the theatre. Most audiences seemed to come out enthused or confused, and sometimes both: ‘I think that was about different generations of people’. Some could not locate themselves in the play, or had a hard time following what was happening. There was a range of strong responses to the recurring ‘Depression’ scenes, such as strong dislike or discomfort, and audible responses in the theatre when they would recur. Most people told me (whether they liked the play or not) that the event sustained their attention for 90 minutes, and did not feel that long. Some people said that it was their favourite thing they’d seen.

#### **3.2.4 Why did people respond the way they did?**

The ‘Depression’ scenes had a repeated format - an actor sitting in a chair stage left while their face was projected large on the scrim behind them. The scenes were short, and offered no solution. The depressed person was shown unresponsive to the offer made to them by the other person, who was not seen. I chose to hide the person speaking, in order to show visually just the depressed person on stage, and for us to hear the voice speaking. I wanted to separate the senses. There was no dramatic ‘advancement’; none of the Depression scenes involved a ‘forward’ in the action of the play. Could they ever be? I’m not sure. So they were a recurring moment of stasis, shown 8 times in the piece.





**Figure 3.5. Depression. (pictured: Olivia Lang. Projection Design: Stefan Zubovic. Set Design: Sophie Tang. Photo credit: Javier Sotres)**

I wanted to highlight the stasis of Depression. I wanted to show that it halts action. My interpretation of why Churchill says they are an ‘essential’ part of the play is because we are frequently overrun by action and stimuli, and frightened by stasis and aberrant behaviours. That excess fuels the depressed state.

One friend told me he really enjoyed the ‘Depression’ moments, because they were a break from the never-ending pace of the other scenes. He could catch up and breathe. He felt reassured by the familiar structure of the ‘Depression’ scenes, and used them to gather his thoughts and check in with himself, after everything else he’d just seen. Another person told me the ‘Depression’ scenes popping up randomly in amongst the activity of the constantly changing scenes made them think of how depression strikes in life sometimes, just when you least expect it. One

reviewer said they could have been longer, and were a wasted opportunity because they were so fast. Surprising to me, because I was concerned that they would be too long, too depressing, and would bore people. I added a tiny change to the final scene, where Bronwyn Henderson has a response to Sarah Jane's offer of 'a fountain of antimatter in the Milky Way that nobody knew'(74). At the very end, just before the lights faded on her, Bronwyn looked up towards the sky. I wanted this tiny moment of change to offer the possibility that the depressed person could at some point move out of depression, and at the same time present an idea about the vast amount of discoveries yet to be made, not just in space but also within the fields around understanding mental illness and our expectations of acceptable public behaviour.

### **3.2.5 Response to visuals/sound**

There was always something happening and changing on stage, which was carefully curated based on wanting to create a sustained piece made up of many short scenes. I never wanted to lose the audience's attention due to a lack of longer narrative, and therefore a lot of work went into the sound and projections. I never wanted either sound or projections to be merely decorative. I wanted both to be structural, have meaning, and reach for an affective response. I wanted to create things that seemed elemental, deliberate, not arbitrary. The human experience at the heart of each scene is emotional and not neat; several of the characters are emotional, irrational, ill, or embody other such 'messy' states of being, or grapple with 'messy' ideas - and yet the way the text is presented on the page is very clean, clinical, poetic, completely lean. There is no fat. So I wanted a production that had this sense of lean discipline within it.

### **3.2.6 Section Breaks**

For me, the section break visuals never fully matched what I hoped to achieve in my mind's eye. I had hoped that the section breaks would be our moments of reflective pauses, where we absorb



the experiences we've just been exposed to in the rapidly changing scenes. So the sections breaks were part of a vital balance in experiencing the text. What I wanted was an immersive experience based on the psychology of colour. I wanted to create the effect of standing in front of a Rothko painting, the way you can feel colour 'hum'. I remember sitting in a room of Rothko paintings in the Tate Modern Gallery in London, and just being awash with colour, saturated with humming colour. The gallery lights were dimmed, and the colour seemed to make noise. The colour seemed to fill your body. So I wanted each section break to be a moment where we're looking at a black screen, sitting in the dark, and then we experience the screen slowly change, and bloom, and eventually become saturated with rich monochrome colour.



**Figure 3.6. Section Break 4. (Projection Design: Stefan Zubovic. Photo credit: Javier Sotres)**

Each section corresponded with the seven colours of the rainbow. We then as audience members would experience the screen becoming awash with that colour (and its corresponding sound cue)

and in turn become saturated in visual and aural information. It's a formal offer based on the idea that white light is simply all the rainbow colours seen through a refracted prism, which was originally suggested by Stefan. As we are breaking down human motivation and responses in the play, and dealing thematically with constructs, illusions and interpretations (languages), so too if we break down light into its separate parts, the colours of the rainbow appear. We draw attention to the illusion of light, and how our brains interpret this information. I feel like I didn't fully realize these moments for these reasons:

1. The colour saturation on the scrim, even with two projectors, was never strong enough to match fully what I had envisioned (never achieved the Rothko hum).
2. We never got to build sound cues that somehow sounded like pure colour. We did listen to different coloured tones, but none of these sounds seemed appropriate for the section breaks. We discovered that the task of composing section break music (based on Ed's concept of a *Cloud Atlas*-inspired composition with an evolving theme) was simply too much, in amongst sourcing and making all of the other sound cues. Realizing there wasn't time, I decided on a royalty free piece that Ed and Sammie had found, from which we chose sections of approximately 30 seconds for five of the section breaks. The first section break was a different sound, more in line with what I originally wanted for all the section break sounds - it was a rumbly, chunky sound that drew us in. But it was simply not possible in the time we had to create all the other section breaks to be a variation of the first one

### **3.3 How We Approached Rehearsals**

#### **3.3.1 Casting**

It is difficult to describe the extraordinary amount of hours it takes to simply cast the play. I am

indebted to James MacDonald's casting grid for 16 actors from the original 2012 Royal Court<sup>9</sup> production for clues into characters, ages, and relationships, which gave me insights into the playwright's intentions, knowing that Caryl Churchill was involved with rehearsals and casting. To cast 18 student actors, I created 6 different versions of the casting grid, and made up templates for each Section that involved 3-4 actors for each role. Then I selected who I wanted to play certain roles first, and created specific couplings, and worked backwards from there, ending up with a casting grid for 18 actors, who each had at least 6 roles to play, with no repeated relationships or scene partners (successful bar one – Aidan and Olivia appeared opposite each other twice, in 'Star' and 'Maths'), that allowed for minimal quick costume changes. Casting over a hundred characters is fairly overwhelming and so I did not fully see how the casting choices played out until we were in production, when I saw how the casting met the characters and certain repetitions became evident.

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<sup>9</sup> Gobert 192-193



**Figure 3.7. Children. (featured: Daniel Curalli, Taylor Scott, Louis Lin. Set Design: Sophie Tang. Lighting Design: Stefan Zubovic. Costume Design: Alaia Hamer. Photo credit: Javier Sotres)**

### **3.3.2 Preparation: Scenes**

The process to meticulously mine the given circumstances for each scene took approximately 1 day per section, working twelve-hour days. I have all my notes written in my rehearsal book copy, and they are too exhaustive to include here and was too exhaustive to include in the initial analysis. It literally took me over a hundred hours.

I wanted to come up with scenarios and relationships that anchored the scene, supported the dramatic action, and let the audience ‘meet’ the play.

So why was it so important that I determine the scenarios and characters in advance?

1. Costuming.
2. Working with Student Actors.

### 3. Time allocated for rehearsal (given circumstance of production)

For Alaia to source and prepare over 400 costume pieces to make unique over 100 characters, she needed to know who they were, what their occupation was (if relevant, and sometimes it was), and have a sense of where in society I thought these people belonged, as social conditions matter when staging Churchill's characters.

For student actors to prepare for playing multiple roles in a short space of time, I decided that some of the scenarios were too elusive and the rehearsal time was too short to be able to determine all of the scenarios during rehearsal. I would have preferred to work with the actors in advance to determine given circumstances and come up with it together but this was not practical. Hence, all of the situations these characters were in had to be locked down in advance of rehearsals starting. I sent out a document to the actors once they were cast that outlined who and where they were in each scene. This was a very basic outline; which left us still with much to explore and discover in rehearsals.



**Figure 3.8. Fan. (Natalie Backerman, Sachi Nisbet. Costume Design: Alaia Hamer. Lighting Design: Stefan Zubovic. Photo credit: Javier Sotres)**

### **3.3.3 Discomfort and Decisions**

In determining specific circumstances ahead of rehearsals, I pushed myself to make bold choices based on my best interpretation of the play, and live with them. I favoured choices that were grounded in the information in the text, seemed appropriate, relatable, advanced the drama, and was not deliberately obtuse. For the most part, I was happy with the choices, and for the most part, they seemed to work. As articulated before, there is absolutely no way I could have gone into a three week rehearsal with student actors with this play and not have decided or figured out in advance a solid sense of the given circumstances of each scene. We simply did not have the time to decide this as a group all together.

As a director, deciding so many things in advance is not my preferred way of working. I prefer to

work collaboratively with actors, and would have preferred to keep the text open, and determine the ‘who what where and why’ in the rehearsal room. But the given circumstances of production did not allow for this. So the experience of having to decide so much upfront was a huge learning curve.

The success of the end result gave me some more confidence in my choices, in amongst the nagging uncertainty of whether I’d made the right choice. Most professional theatre companies in Canada are structured so that directors have to make most of their decisions in advance to ensure that the set can get designed, and costumes made. It’s an economic model that does not allow for much change and discovery beyond design deadlines. My preferred way of working is possible in fringe and independent theatre, but virtually impossible in larger equity companies. So learning to make decisions in advance is a necessary process in professional directing, at least as it currently stands in English-speaking Canada.

Prior to rehearsals was not the first time I would do a thorough analysis of each of the scenes. Overall, I had four passes at this, in an effort to develop a clearer and deeper understanding of the play: 1. The initial reading of the play in December 2015, where I noted themes, action and setting/character ideas, and anything that stood out for me. 2. All my notes within my script journal to do with extracting all given circumstances in each scene (an exhaustive and exhausting process that took a day per section). 3. The analysis that I gave to Stephen Malloy in November 2016, before commencing rehearsals (which forms Chapter One of this thesis). 4. Further scene action analysis written at the end of the 2.5-week rehearsal period in December, after getting the play to the point where we were able to watch two runs on the final day before we broke for the holidays. This document was over 25 pages! I also used the journal process to constantly revisit themes, action, and the section break distinctions, out of a constant desire to find more and



deepen my level of understanding and clarity.



**Figure 3.9. Schizophrenic. (featured: Shona Struthers, Sarah Jane. Costume Design: Alaia Hamer. Set Design: Sophie Tang. Lighting Design: Stefan Zubovic. Photo credit: Javier Sotres)**

### **3.3.4 The Rehearsal Process: Getting through it, getting to a run-through.**

Why were run-through's so important?

Getting to the first run though was vital to me in order to understand what this play was. What was this accumulation of scenes? What was this event that it created? How would I incorporate sound, light and projections? What do the accumulated transitions look like, and do to us? I was nervous about the structure of the play and all the transitions becoming wearying for the audience. I was conscious that I had made the decision to stage the play with centralized single scenes on a relatively open stage, with all the furniture and props needing to be brought on and off for each scene.



After the first read on a Saturday, we started with two days of table work, (Monday/Tuesday), followed by a six day period to roughly block each scene. Six days was how long it took to get through all the scenes in the play for a first pass, and this was still working quickly. We got to the first run-thru at end of day on the Tuesday of the second week of rehearsal, with eight full days of rehearsal and two half days left before crew view. The first run-thru was vital for determining flow of all the scene changes. I was aware that crew would need rehearsal time as well as actors, and given that the actors were also functioning as backstage crew, this first run of the entire play was critical to getting it ready. We were extremely fortunate to be able to do it in the theatre. Most productions are only given access to the theatre in tech week, which means actors have to make a rapid spatial adjustment from the rehearsal room to the stage space with set.

This first pass of the play was done out of section order due to actor's availability and exam schedules. As a result, during the first week, we were unable to see or focus on each section as a whole unit. So I could not learn how each section flowed or accumulated during this first week. Working towards an ambitious schedule, we did manage to stick to it, but only because I reminded myself to work in layers, and move on from something when we might have been bogged down. This resulted in some scenes being more ready than others, depending on the understanding of the actor (and director!), the clarity of the action, and the sophistication of the themes – some were trickier than others.

After the first run through, we decided to call full cast for the entire rehearsal period. We worked one day per section, and ran each section at the end of the day. It was extraordinary to see the amount of hours of work that went into each day of rehearsal, only to result in 10-12 minutes of combined work at the end of the day in the run. In this fashion we worked on a section per day

from Wed Dec14 – Thurs Dec 22. We lost Monday Dec 19 due to a snow day where the university was closed. Still, after the second pass of the play, we managed to do two runs on Dec 22, one at 5pm and one at 7pm, to enable the actors to get the rhythm and feel of the overall experience twice before going into the holiday break. I had discussed with Stephen Malloy and Jay Henrickson that we would have the show ready (albeit unpolished) by this time, and I worked extremely hard inside and outside of rehearsal every single day to make this happen. Amanda's patient stage management guidance and help at this time was invaluable. I was heavily reliant on her considerable skills to help me manage what was a very tricky schedule.

### **3.4 How We Approached Design**

#### **3.4.1 Initial Design Approach**

In September all designers and I had an all-day discussion about what we thought were the themes and scenarios, what we related to and what we didn't understand. I articulated my biases as director. We discussed themes extensively: human behaviour, motivations, fallibility, and needs, information/stimuli and overwhelm, mental illness, depression, perceptions of reality, judgment, irrationality. Our ability and inability to be predicted, algorithms and Artificial Intelligence. Initially I thought the entire play was about what makes humans different from AI's. I expected the designers to look at me as if I was mad but they all nodded. For them, it made sense. It was the first of many times in this process that I was humbled, inspired by and thrilled at the level of engagement from my much younger collaborators.

Much of the design process was made rich by each individual designer's willingness to commit time and energy to the project. The production would not have been as successful without the ideas, effort, and vision of the individual designers. The first meeting seemed to get them all on board. It took some back and forth to come up with the initial concept, and when we did, I still

felt somewhat under confident, partly because the script was so open to interpretation. Some directions I gave initially were statements such as: ‘think about sound as an immersive experience’, or ‘projections that are structural not decorative’, or ‘hypernaturalistic costuming that reveals who these people are’. After the initial meetings, I used Google Docs as a way to keep up communication up between all designers as we progressed, and as my understanding developed and evolved. I had begun the process with some conceptual framework, but not a series of fixed and final ideas, so the Google doc became our ‘working blueprint’. Initially it was especially helpful for costumes as it contained all the given circumstances of the scenes plus character information, which had to be pre-determined in advance for costumes to be sourced and made, as well as helping Ed to source in scene sound. The Google doc also provided vital information early on for props, lighting, set, and projections, and became the precursor to the mammoth furniture ground plan PDF’s that Sophie and I would later come up with when the set design was approved.

### **3.4.2 Costumes**

As we spend such little time with these characters in the scenes, costumes served as information about who these people are. They helped us as audience to meet the characters. Alaia’s input and costume ideas, that they were all ‘somebodies’, not a seething mass of nobodies, were foundational to my early thinking about the play, and the collaboration became incredibly valuable. Personalization was going to be important. We determined they were mostly contemporary (here and now), Vancouver, multi-seasonal depending on the scenes (i.e. ‘Flashback’ set on Halloween, so Halloween costumes had raincoats over top, because all it does in Vancouver during late October/November is rain), and mostly ‘realistic’ looking costuming. Most costumes were sourced from contemporary stock. Section 7 featured more elaborate

costuming, as states of being became heightened, but also because we were moving towards the strange by the end of the play and the show took on a more theatrical bent. The two scenes that had specifically built costumes were ‘Manic’ and ‘Facts’.



**Figure 3.10 Manic (pictured: Sabrina Vellani, Olivia Lang. Costume Design: Alaia Hamer. Photo credit: Javier Sotres)**

Our version of ‘Manic’ references a world of high fashion and art collectors. The silent indulgence of the friend who barely speaks in ‘Manic’ made me think of how people in this world may access mental illness in different ways, but are no less immune. ‘Facts’ was directly inspired by the hat parade in *Far Away*, where the shackled line of prisoners wear the impossibly large and extravagant hats that the characters make throughout the play. The scene is grotesque, shocking, and in one highly theatrical image manages to articulate so many horrors around complacency, distance, colonial fallout, and the daily realities of failed states and conflict zones.



**Figure 3.11 Facts (pictured: Bronwyn Henderson, Daniel Curalli, Taylor Scott. Set Design: Sophie Tang. Costume Design: Alaia Hamer. Photo credit: Javier Sotres)**

### **3.4.3 Sound**

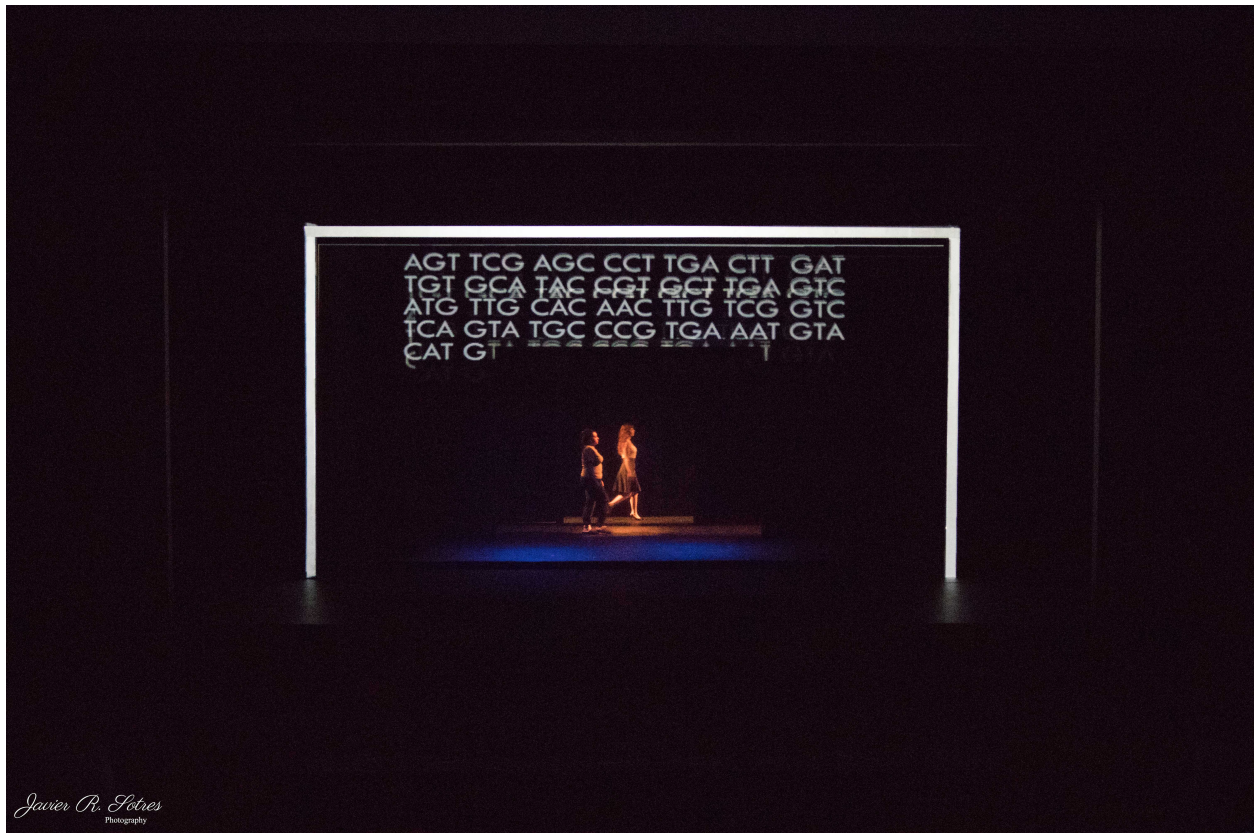
Sound took a long time to come together. We originally talked conceptually about the idea of 3 main sound areas: 1. transitional sound, that moves us forward and re-sets us in between scenes. 2. In-scene sound, that locates us in the given circumstances of each scene, and helps identify each scene as a unique location. 3. Section break sound - initially described as something that would fuel us along, keep the momentum moving forward, but which morphed as we progressed. I worked intuitively with sound cues that seemed to connect to the emotional content of scenes, as well as structuring it so that Section 4 was the mid point of the play. I felt that Churchill had written interspersed comic/tragic/reflective scenes, and I wanted to sharpen the edges of the comic and tragic, and used sound to support that. I wanted to create an immersive, ‘rollercoaster’

experience for the audience.

Interestingly, in the course of production the section break sounds changed from sound that moves you forward, to sound that became moments of pause and reflection, before moving on to the next section. The scene transitions ended up faster than we thought, and as each section did not seem to be overly slowed down by scene transitions, the section breaks ended up providing us with breathing space in the overall rhythms of the play. Without section break sound as moments of contemplation, I think it would have been harder to absorb all of the information/experiences that the play seems to hurl at you. I was pleased with what we did achieve, a huge volume of cues that I felt were effective, theatrical, and supported the play. After tech week Ed and I were in lock step with our understanding of sound in the play, and I would prefer that simpatico understanding happen with collaborators late rather than not at all.

‘Genes’ was the only specific Random scene that I used besides ‘Depression’, and I chose the music and movement to convey the person within the DNA code by using bodies on stage. I wanted a sense of mystery and daily life activity at the same time. Ed dampened a lot of the sound in the track to make it seem like you had your hands over your ears listening to loud music. When I first heard it I thought it sounded perfect for this show, but I did not know where it belonged. When we saw the projections for ‘Genes’ (the only text is the sequence of human DNA, with one mistake in it), it seemed like the perfect sound to accompany the scene.





**Figure 3.12 Genes (pictured: Tai Amy Grauman, Taylor Scott. Set Design: Sophie Tang. Projection Design: Stefan Zubovic and Sophie Tang. Lighting Design: Stefan Zubovic. Photo credit: Javier Sotres)**

### **3.4.4 Set Concept**

The set concept evolved through 3 different ideas. Initially in May 2016, I wanted a box type structure, of 6 boxes; 3 beneath, 3 above, each with a micro set inside them, and either removable walls, or sliding screens, to enable all the locations within the boxes to change at the section break times. But it proved impossible for sightlines, as Robert showed me. And Stephen felt that it would always favour a relationship to each box depending on where you sat in the house, and that took away from each scene needing to be centralized, having the same value as the others. Also, it couldn't be built for \$2000.

The second iteration was a white set with a ceiling and floor, which gave us the 'lab' like sense we wanted to apply to all the scenes, but it would have meant full exposure of all the mechanics

of the stage business. I'd already exposed the theatre with my THTR 520 project, *Face to the Wall*, and I didn't feel it was the right impulse with this play. Normally I love seeing the exposed mechanics of the theatre; my attitude is, why hide it? We know it's there. And it's beautiful.

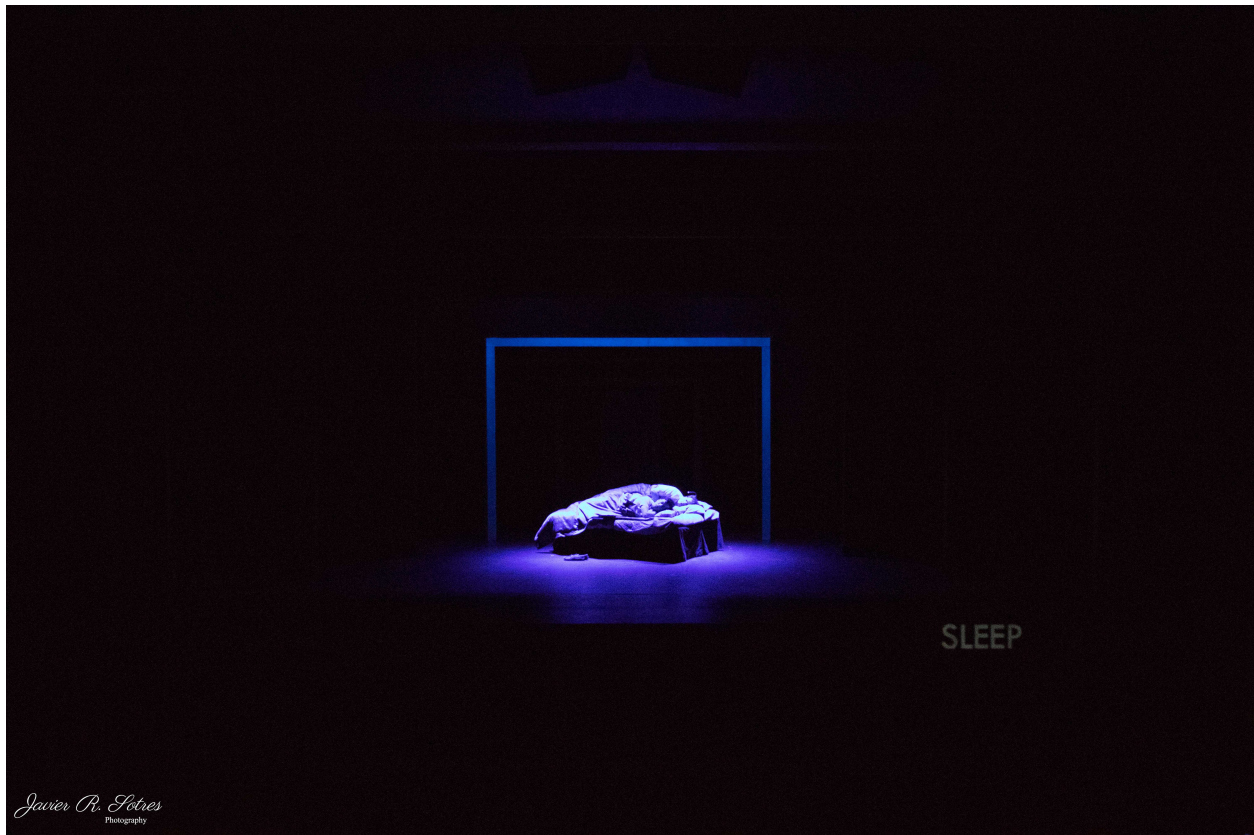
Makes me feel I'm in a human space, when I see all the human activity exposed.

But there was something about the clean isolation of each scene in this play that I felt I needed to favour, and bring forth. Cleanness.

Initially it can be hard for me to articulate what I want to hear or see other than what I have flashes of sensation around. Often these directions were based on my instinctive senses of what reading the play inspired in me, and those responses mixed with the reading & research I had done on Caryl Churchill and her previous plays. Often it was a feeling, a flash, an instinct.

One idea of a 3-D cube made of light seemed structurally beautiful and powerful, especially if capturing a human body within it. Referencing the structures we find ourselves in, the framework made of light suggested digitization and impermanence – the untouchable solidity of the digital world. A light cube seemed the perfect playing space to embody the themes of this play. I was lucky to have both Sophie and Stefan working together in concert to enable a set that worked for projections, and their vision was critical to the strong visual language in the show.





**Figure 3.13 Sleep (pictured: Seamus Fera, Louis Lin. Set Design: Sophie Tang. Lighting Design: Stefan Zubovic. Projection Design: Stefan Zubovic and Sophie Tang. Photo credit: Javier Sotres)**

### **3.4.5 Rhythm, Structure, Pace: How to build a set to house it all.**

My rationale behind the final set design took into account the following parameters:

The speed and pace of the play & needing to manage it (slow down, speed up, and sustain).

Creating multiple locations on the width and height of Frederic Wood Theatre stage.

The vocal energy of the student actors and the intimacy of the scenes (it can be technically difficult to act an intimate scene with an energized voice so the set brings masking in to create a funnel shape and baffle sound/voices).

To speed up quick changes, bring wings closer in so less distance to travel for set and prop pieces on wide stage.

Wanting an elegant space that could house these scenes, using a sense of theatricality, not

realism. Minimal props but just enough to locate us in an area, time. Costume that spoke of who these people are.

I spent hours alone sitting in the Frederic Wood theatre before I got an idea for how a set concept could work. I was wholly unfamiliar with the demands, feel, sense and acoustics of the theatre. I needed to get to know the space more intimately. I've always been a fan of Gaston Bachelard's seminal architectural work, *The Poetics of Space*, and the idea that the human work that goes on in spaces informs the personality of space, and vice versa. But I still could not come up with a concept, an idea. After days, I stood on the stage, looked up, and said 'What do you want?' And then the idea came, to bring in the wings, to follow the existing shape that was in the theatre already, rather than resist it or try to turn it into something else. Work with the flow of the lines, shape and pulse of the space. Bringing in the masking to create a forced perspective set was a do-able, practical, inexpensive option for the set. It allowed for multiple playing spaces (one in each wing area potentially), it allowed for depth, wide space, confined space, and quick set changes if need be. Black space allowed for the ninjas to move set pieces off and on. Sophie created the hard-edged frames and calculated a ratio that allowed the largest furniture pieces on and off without difficulty while keeping backstage out of sightlines. She talked about the set as a skeleton that housed the humans within. We could animate it with projected light. I am indebted to Sophie's vision for how the set would work in the context of this play, and for creating a set that worked so beautifully for projections.

I wanted to make the play behave in space as it read on the page. The immediacy. Hard edges. Unstructured rhythms, randomness. But still contained, clean. Each scene fired up as soon as the lights come up right through to them going off. Snaps. Clean edges.

### **3.4.6 Roadblock**

The initial set concept was not approved.

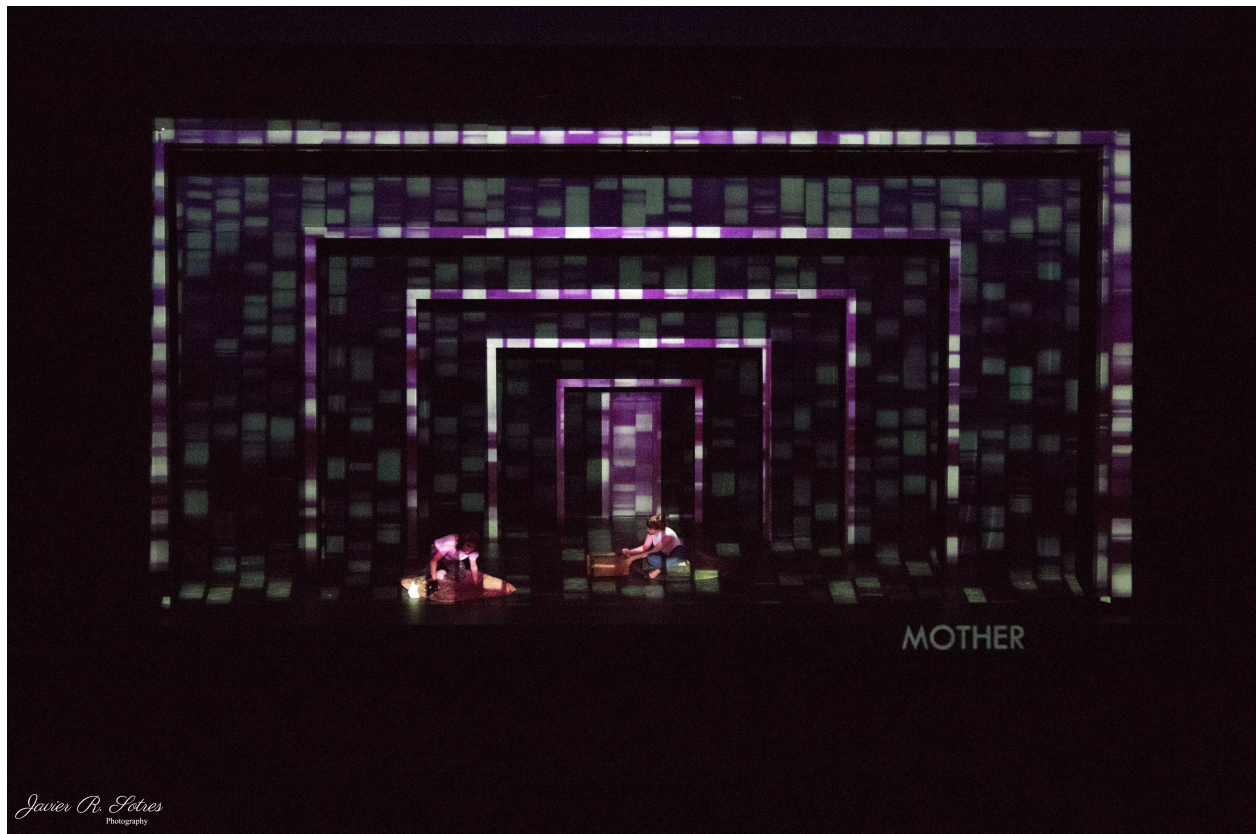
The hesitation from production design faculty centered around the fear that the ambitious scope of the set would extend a 90-minute play to 2.5 hours. To convince faculty and staff, we arranged a mock up session on the Frederic Wood Theatre stage, and timed some of the longer set changes in real time in the theatre. The longest set change was approximately 30 seconds, and the shortest took ten seconds. I am grateful to all the staff and students that participated in this mock up. With this information, the set concept was approved. We also received permission to reduce the wider edges of seating and cut 100 seats to create a more centralized, intimate audience block.

### **3.4.7 Projections**

Although initially planned early on, projections were only really finalized in the week before tech, and during tech. We had between 20-40 projections we had already tested and liked, and we had determined placement for only a handful of them by the end of rehearsals, but not through lack of trying. We aimed to fully map projections and visuals much earlier, but it was a fraught journey. There were two conceptual projection meetings, then we planned a projection test with sound in early December. Here we could identify looks and sounds that seemed to work strongly together. I wanted projections to work kinesthetically with sound, I did not want visual window dressing. I wanted to understand the language of the projections.

The biggest conceptual idea that mercifully worked was the projection mapping for the ‘portals’ or set frames. The first time we saw this it was amazing - the projections added three-dimensionality to the set, and could change colours, and rhythms. During the first test we saw a little bit of this. We also were able to see that certain full projections looked stunning on the all black set, such as ‘Maths’ or ‘Chinese Poetry’. After the first projection test, there was second

one planned, but it was cancelled due to snow. The weather interrupted mobility and the second projector was in the music school, unable to be moved until after the holidays. I think given a second test, we might have been able to work with the visual language in more depth. Instead it all seemed to come together in tech, dress and previews.



**Figure 3.14 Mother (pictured: Heidi Upham, Sarah Jane. Projection Design: Stefan Zubovic. Set Design: Sophie Tang. Photo credit: Javier Sotres)**

Projections continued to evolve during tech. Robert Gardiner's advice during tech was to dimly light each transition state rather than do scene changes in black. I did not want to 'overuse' the projections, or portal looks, but Stephen Malloy convinced me that we should include them in every scene transition - and when we did, we suddenly found the visual continuity we were searching for.





**Figure 3.15 Terminal (Projection Design: Stefan Zubovic, Set Design: Sophie Tang. Photo credit: Javier Sotres)**

Unfortunately, due to the difficulties of programming the projection software, we couldn't alter the duration of scene titles. I had envisioned titles happening between scenes, but when we got further into tech, I wanted to bring the titles in earlier, stay up longer, and vary the rhythm, so I didn't want to automate the timing, but we found once programmed, they were hard to change. In all however, I am indebted to Stefan's design, vision and persistence, in creating some breathtaking looks for this show, and continually championing ideas and concepts.

### **3.4.8 Rapid Understanding During Tech**

Tech was a huge time of understanding for me.

Lots of very quick, crucial decisions were made during tech week and beyond, right up until opening night. I was glad I had prepped as much as possible, as tech week was where it all came

together, and all of my buried knowledge about the play came forth in a series of rapid decisions (what sound goes where, where what we had planned has to change because suddenly in the space it doesn't feel right anymore, etc)

All through tech, dress and preview, I tried to stay in what Crystal Pite called a 'state of hyperawareness'<sup>10</sup>. I knew this was the time where all my understanding would come together in creating what this play was. But that it wouldn't necessarily be based on a prescribed blueprint, that in between the cracks of the planned items to execute would occur moments of rhythm and poetry that I would miss if I wasn't paying attention and highly attuned to what was happening when sound and visuals and the acting all came together. Having a longer tech (five days instead of three) enabled me to process the visual language over a longer space of time, so I could integrate it with the acting more clearly. I could process it better. Longer tech was very positive for this show. I took advantage of the extra time by being very prepared.

I often come to understanding late in the process, where the pieces all start to fit together. I've immersed myself in information for so long, the raw materials and collaborator's work are inside me, only formless. But I'm ok with that, as I find that time changes during tech. If I've done the work beforehand, the three dimensional shape is created, and happens quickly. But rather than tech simply being a process of animating the monster, for me, tech is the critical understanding time when something else gets put into play. Something I can't put into words, but the third thing, the meaning that occurs when the production becomes an entity. For me, I was trying to create this entity *and* understand it at the same time. What Gobert calls 'the evanescent realm in which performance resides' (105).

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Crystal Pite, November 13, 2016



**Figure 3.16. Transition from Small Thing into Facts (Projection Design: Stefan Zubovic, Set Design: Sophie Tang. Photo credit: Javier Sotres)**

I always want a theatre that goes beyond corporeal time somehow. I don't always achieve this, but during tech I try to listen in the dark for moments of surprise or sublimation that I could not predict or pre-ordain, because I think this gets me closer to what I want to achieve. I also believe that the sum of the group effort, despite taking more time and personal effort, makes something bigger and more polyphonic than a sole vision, and is one of the reasons why I love the theatre.

### **3.4.9 Conflict**

Several projection states were still being built by the time we got to levels and when some of the lighting looks in levels got behind, frustration was palpable in the theatre. I did not understand initially what was happening at a time when I needed to see the lighting looks in order to understand what changes could be made and what we could live with. Over the tech time, the

lighting evolved and improved, with tweaks and refocusing happening every day to finesse and refine some of the more problematic moments. Marijka's guidance at critical moments and everyone's commitment to keeping the tech on track ensured the working relationships survived this brief time of extreme pressure on everyone.

### **3.4.10 Preparation**

An extraordinary amount of prep was required for the ambitious vision for the show to come together. I've tried to show just a sample of the prep I did in this document: what I haven't included is all of my script notes, actor notes, and more notes I wrote for myself that helped me to understand along the way. Despite the fact that we had two extra days to tech the show, I knew we would still be running a tight operation simply because of the amount of scenes to cover. So I was militant about covering as much as possible in advance - I did not want to be surprised or not have everyone be on the same page in tech, I wanted to articulate exactly how each look would happen in advance. This involved:

In the second week of rehearsals, individual 3-hour sessions with each designer before rehearsals, resulting in 15 hour days, an all-day session with Stefan on Friday Dec 23 to finalize cues, a six-hour paper tech session on Friday January 6 that exhaustively went through each cue plus timings in order to facilitate a smooth running cue to cue and tech week. This is not counting ongoing shorter meetings we had throughout pre-production and production.

Because I knew I wanted have time at the end of cue to cue to understand what we had assembled (knowing each dress rehearsal and preview was an opportunity to refine and make adjustments, which we did), I knew we had to have figured out as much as possible in advance, and for me and the designers to continue to all function as 'one brain', in order to make the show work.



### **3.5 Conclusion: Director as Co-Creator**

As a director it is a rich and exhausting process taking on this play, as you become a co-creator; your choices are all over everything. So your interpretation of the work becomes fundamentally a part of the work. You determine who is speaking, how many are in each scene, where they are, and what relationship they have to the other voices in the scene.

However, despite the extraordinary amount of prep I did, I still question my satisfaction with the overall thematic transmission within the mechanics of the show we created. Should I be? I knew I was reaching for something – and there were moments within the sound, text, light and projection that seemed to hint at flashes of transgressive meaning. But it always seemed to end abruptly, what could I have done differently to bring us to the end of the play? How could I have staged ‘Depression’ differently? What additional choices could be refined and what deeper theatre can be found? My dissatisfaction is not a reflection of being unhappy with the show we created; more a restlessness at the finality of process, where I continue to learn and reflect for months and years after a production.

I believe the show did sustain itself theatrically, and the combination of gushing enthusiasm and split responses from the audience reflect to a wider extent how audiences and critics have responded to many of Caryl Churchill's plays over time, (Fitzsimmons 40-55). My instinct to create a theatrical frame to house the scenes and then let the scenes speak for themselves allowed for a range of audience responses.

The absence of directorial heavy handedness in the form of an overarching thematic statement allowed people to infer, participate in and retain their own unique experience of the play. I believe now this is central to the play’s theme. I am thrilled that the designers were able to showcase work they were proud of, and I am pleased that the actors were sufficiently challenged

and given an educational experience in preparation, interpreting language and meaning, and playing immediacy.

Having directed it once, I feel I am now ready to direct it again, still mystified by some elements of the play, but ready to tackle it again from a place of wider understanding. The structure of the play serves to prick our consciousness, and as Peta Tait suggests, the path to collective action requires an investigation of both thoughts and feelings: In a world awash with sentiment, seek out rationality; in an unfeeling world, uncover emotional responses. A singular response seems to eliminate the possibility of progress, or harmony. I've discovered that, even after directing a production, *Love and Information* is a play that resists a definitive interpretation, and maybe the discomfort I still experience (could it have been clearer? what other choices could I have made?) is the discomfort of feeling that rightful resistance.

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