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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Directing *X*: We Have Been Here Before

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

in

Theatre and Dance (Directing)

by

Rosie Glen-Lambert

Committee in charge:

Professor Vanessa Stalling, Chair
Professor Stephen Buescher
Professor Bobby McElver
Professor Lamar Perry
Professor Lora Powell
Professor Elizabeth Twamley

2024

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University of California San Diego

2024

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And lastly, thank you to the entire team that worked with me to stage *X*, a play that is not to be tackled by the faint of heart. You are all my heroes.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Directing *X*: We Have Been Here Before

by

Rosie Glen-Lambert

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Directing)

University of California San Diego, 2024

Professor Vanessa Stalling, Chair

This thesis explores my experience directing *X* by Alistair McDowell as a lens through which I identify, meditate on, and codify directorial challenges and experiences that feel unprecedented, but are in fact essential and deeply rooted parts of my process.

I have always been tormented by the tyranny of the “original idea.” As a child, I had weekly homework assignments that required me to write short stories using new vocabulary words. Even at that early age, I was petrified by the thought that the stories I was writing for class might be construed as derivative--a concern that continued to haunt me as I grew up and pursued a life as an artist. I find it hard to shake the pressure that I should be singularly creating something new, bringing something fresh, producing something unprecedented. This is a rather ironic fixation for me to have, considering my introduction to theatre was through my Hebrew School’s abridged version of *Fiddler on The Roof*--a play which begins by asserting that “because of our traditions, we’ve kept our balance for many, many years.” In fact, tradition is a big gravitational pull for me towards theatre. I am enamored with stories, by the ancient act of gathering, by ghosts, by rituals, by the preciousness a thing develops the more hands that have touched it. And yet--tradition in theatre can be used as a tool for shutting out new ideas, rejecting progress, and gatekeeping art. It’s a mystifying conundrum, to be simultaneously hyper-aware of the way stories repeat themselves and to be pulled to make things that feel new. Throughout the process of directing my thesis production, I found myself confronting this familiar dilemma, only to find that one does not actually preclude the other.

For my thesis production, I directed *X* by Alistair McDowall. *X* is a play which investigates personal and collective memory by using the metaphor of being lost in space as a way to examine dementia. The play has a structure that feels groundbreaking in form: time is nonlinear, facts are intentionally manipulated, and the text itself is slippery. There are moments of the script that make the play feel edgy and form-defying, such as a line of dialogue not being assigned to a specific character, the letter “X” being repeated for several pages, and impossible

stage directions (like the presence of a giant, dying bird). And yet, the play is ultimately about an idea that is as old as human existence: the preciousness of the relationship between a mother and her daughter. Throughout the play, there is a repeated motif wherein Gilda, the play's protagonist, finds herself experiencing situations she has been in before as if they are happening for the first time. This motif exists to help theatricalize her battle with Alzheimer's, but it also underlines the way human beings often fail to recognize experiences as familiar despite their personal memories and inherited historical consciousnesses.

Ironically, as I staged this play where characters failed to recognize that they had been where they were before, I myself often needed the reminder that I'd been where I was before. I'm anxious by nature (what Tevye leaves out in that famous opening line of *Fiddler* is that tradition has gotten significant assistance from Xanax in helping my people keep our balance for many years) and throughout my thesis process, I needed to remind myself constantly that the challenges I was facing in tackling what at times felt like an impossible play weren't as unprecedented as they felt. So, in the spirit of embracing tradition and learning from the past, I am looking inward at my own process creating *X*, and using it to investigate those milestones of directing a play which, though they feel unprecedented in the moment, are in fact a recurring part of the process. Drawing from the journal I kept throughout the process in which I recorded weekly reflections and takeaways, I intend to boil down my process, challenge by challenge. It is my hope that I can meditate on the successes and failures of my time crafting *X* as a way of identifying for myself, and for other directors, a lens through which to view the directing process which honors what is difficult and demystifies recurrent challenges. What if instead of viewing those tough moments as hiccups without parallel, I saw them as necessary steps in the creative

process? Because the truth is, in each of those moments, I eventually found myself exhaling and saying, “Oh right: I’ve been here before.”

So here they are: my personal trail-markers for directing a play. I’m leaving a little tag on them so I can find my way through a little easier next time. Feel free to follow along if you find yourself on the same path.

You will read a play and find that it perplexes and seduces you until it becomes all you think about for the next several months. When I read the ending of *X* for the first time, I found myself weeping, even as I simultaneously questioned my understanding of it. In moments like that, follow your intuition—the play is haunting you for a reason.



Figure 1: The First read through with the cast and creative team

As you grapple with what the play looks like, you will find yourself fixating on an image.

With *X*, I was fixated on the image of a woman looking out a window. *X* is a play with striking moments of astonishment and spectacle. But when I closed my eyes and thought about it, the dominant image in my mind was always a woman looking out a window. Chasing that instinct is what led me to the ending I ultimately staged. In my ending, the actor playing Gilda took a step off the “space station” (which for the past two hours, the audience had understood to be the show’s container) and that platform rolled back to reveal a void. The audience was left with the simple image of a woman looking out towards the audience through an invisible “window”. The juxtaposition between that moment and the rest of the play helped land the sense of longing Gilda had for her daughter and for “home,” and the enormous pain a person with Alzheimer’s experiences when they believe they are waiting for something. When an image stands out to you, notice it, and let that visual hunch guide you until its purpose reveals itself to you down the road. And let the things that are less clear become clearer as time progresses--if it had an obvious roadmap, it wouldn’t need a director.



Figure 2: Gilda and Mattie look out the window together at the end of the play

You will get excited about an idea that won't work. Sometimes ideas float through your mind and sound exciting, but they are ultimately not as useful as you think they are. An early idea I had for *X* involved a scenic design that was impossible to execute, and a way of approaching staging that would have ultimately held me back and weakened the visual metaphor. Your first idea is not necessarily your best idea. In the words of Anne Bogart and Tina Landau: “Hold on tightly, let go lightly.”



Figure 3: The scenic design in its final form

You will be tormented by the BIG SCARY THING. You will read the play over and over, thinking that you alone can solve the BIG SCARY THING. You alone will not solve the BIG SCARY THING. Every play has a moment that feels unsolvable. In my process directing *X*, that was the sequence in Act 2 where Clark and Gilda stop using language and instead repeat the letter “X” for two and a half pages. Not only can you not force a brilliant idea, you also don’t need to know exactly how you’re going to solve the BIG SCARY THING yet. You’re in pre-production. You’re dreaming still. Let yourself grapple.

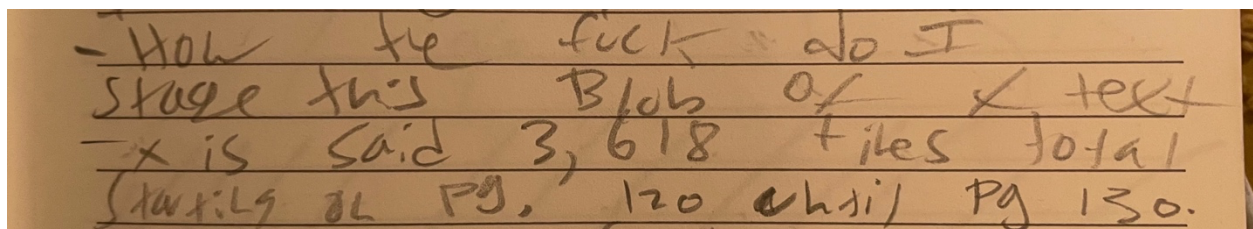


Figure 4: A note in my journal from one of my first times reading through the script

You will have the “Oh Shit--I don’t know” moment during tablework. No matter how well you prepare, there will always be that moment (likely more than one moment) where you find yourself unsure. Because the conceit of *X* is that time is moving at a rate that is untraceable, the show has an intentionally skewed timeline. But I still felt that it was important to approach the play with a clear idea of what the characters *perceived* sense of time was. Because of this, I came into tablework with prepared answers to the questions of how long the astronauts’ expedition was supposed to be, how long the characters *believed* they had been on the space station, and roughly how much time had passed between scenes. But on our second day of tablework, a discussion with my actors about the timeline revealed that what I thought was an airtight explanation had several holes in it. I felt a little flutter of panic in my stomach, but instead of crumbling or refusing to see the holes, I shifted gears and allowed for a group discussion about timeline. Later that night, I went through the notes of that discussion and returned the following day with a chart which clearly tracked the play’s timeline. This document helped everyone feel sturdy, and became an invaluable reference for our team moving forward. Allowing for that dialogue gained me my team’s trust and investment, and we were able to land somewhere dramaturgically satisfying. It can feel important when you’re leading a room to have all the answers. But you don’t need them. It’s ok to not know. Find it together.

Date	Scene/Event	Time Since Intended Pickup Day	Time On Pluto	Time Gone From Earth	Time Since Ray's Death
Decemeber 15, 2123	Training on Earth Begins (2 Weeks)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
January 1, 2124	Characters leave for Pluto (6 months travel)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
July 2, 2124	Characters Arrive on Pluto, begin 1.5 years of work on base.	N/A	N/A	6 Months	N/A
August 9, 2125	Act 1 Scene 3.	N/A	8 months	1 Year, 2 Months.	N/A
January 2, 2126	INTENDED Pickup Day <i>and</i> Day of Final Contact Delaying Pickup	N/A	1 Year, 6 Months	2 Years	N/A
January 23, 2126	Act 1 Scene 1.	3 Weeks	1 Year, 6 Months, 3 Weeks	2 Years 3 Weeks	N/A
June 2, 2126	Act 1 Scene 6.	5 Months	1 Year, 11 Months	2 Years 5 Months	N/A
June 18, 2126	Act 1 Scene 7- Ray's Death	5 Months 2 Weeks	1 Year, 11 Months, 2 Weeks	2 Years, 5 Months, 2 Weeks	N/A
July 4, 2126	Act 1 Scene 2	6 Months	2 Years	2 Years, 6 Months	2 Weeks
September 4, 2126	Act 1 Scene 4	8 Months	2 Years 2 Months	2 Years, 8 Months	2 Months, 2 Weeks
April 15, 2127	Act 1 Scene 5	1 Year 3 Months	2 Years 9 Months	3 Years, 3 Months	10 Months
***I've assigned fake days/years for ease of following the timeline. The day/year is meant to help with calculations, but doesn't need to be adhered to as we progress.					
Note for Act 1 Scene 3: I think it makes sense to have this scene pre-emergency, so I picked a somewhat arbitrary time during the mission					
Note for Act 1 Scene1: Ray says "We've done 18 months", and this is just over that by some weeks, but I think still works since its within the same month and not more than 3 weeks.					
Notes For Act 1 Scene 5: 2 Years 9 months is nearly 3 years, which is the amount of time that Clark says they believe has passed.					
Also: When Cole says it's been more time than 3 years, I'd like to think of what I've tracked here as their trackable, perceived concept of time. We should assume and understand that what we have measured here as "trackable" time is ****actually moving much slower than can be perceived****. So it's correct that the characters have together perceived time to move per this chart, but that time itself has elongated, making their perceived calculations inaccurate.					

Figure 5: The chart I made tracking the character's perceived sense of time

The first day of blocking will be challenging. It doesn't matter how complex the first scene of the play is, it will always take about a day for you to adjust to your circumstances. You and this group of actors are establishing a new vocabulary to work within an imagined world. The first scene of *X* doesn't have dance numbers or intricate fight sequences: it's just two people sitting at a table talking. And yet, it took time to establish topography, relationship, and rhythm. Allow that first day to be full of discovery.



Figure 6: Blocking a conversation between Mattie and Clark in Act 1 Scene 2

You will feel pulled to do things quickly. But things take as long as they take. Time is such an antagonist in the directing process. You never feel like you have enough of it, and you're constantly trying to strategize ways to streamline. But art needs time to breathe, and it's important to be honest about how long things take you. You can't make a minute go faster than a minute. There were times during the *X* rehearsal process that I budgeted less time than I knew I would need in an effort to move through steps swiftly. And almost every time I did that, I ended up having to circle back to finish those things later. It's important to move efficiently, but it's also important to be honest about how much time you know you need.



Figure 7: Rehearsing a particularly challenging scene in Act 2 between Gilda, Clark, and Cole

Early on, you will feel in your gut that something isn't working, and you will be hesitant to act on it. In every process, I find myself experiencing several instances wherein I have a nagging suspicion deep in my gut that something is not right. I hear a little voice telling me I need to make a change, and I often try to silence it. Those instances can be tough, because you worry that your actors may have become attached to a moment, or that you don't have a better idea, or that dismantling what you have built will be destabilizing. Trust your gut. In directing *X*, I found that happening a number of times--in moments where I saw room for improvement in a section of staging, as well as times where I realized a particular design element needed to shift. Early in the process, my designers and I were really excited about an idea we had for our transitions. But a few weeks into rehearsal, I realized our idea wasn't going to allow for complete blackouts. I knew that being able to completely mask what was going on during transitions would be necessary in order to have moments of surprise and amplify the play's horror. Broaching this conversation, though daunting, allowed for us to land on a transitional device that added to the

show's suspense and was visually stunning. Ultimately, I was a better leader when I acted on my instincts, and the play was made better because I honored that little voice.

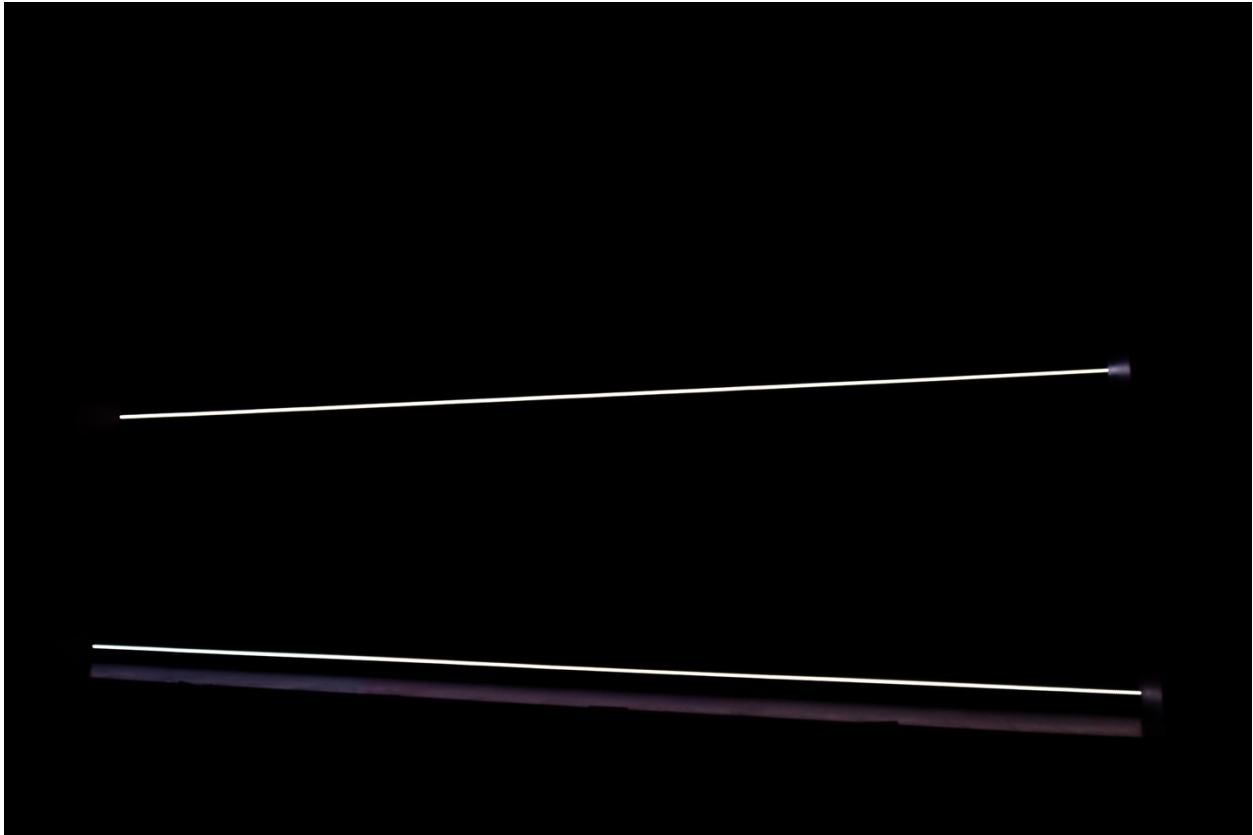


Figure 8: The final transition design which allowed for complete blackouts

Your first stumble-through will be messy. Was our first stumble-through for *X* bumpy?

Definitely. Because that's what it looks like to put scenes that have been rehearsed separately together for the first time. It lays bare the sections that need your attention, and helps you get an idea of the overall flow of the piece. It will always be messy. It's a stumble-through, not a saunter-through.



Figure 9: A complex scene in Act 2 which benefited from the work done after our first stumble-through

You will completely re-block a pivotal moment of the show—maybe more than once.

Sometimes you need to go through several drafts of a piece of staging in order to arrive at the best option. In *X*, this happened with the BIG SCARY THING--the section with the two and a half pages of X's. This section of the play is meant to theatricalize Clark and Gilda's loss of information and ability to speak in complex language, and I knew it was important to help guide the audience through that storytelling. Initially, I thought this moment required a lot of movement, and I staged Clark and Gilda repeatedly saying "X" as they ran around the space station, cycling through the positions that we had seen characters begin in during the first seven scenes of the play. I didn't feel this version was landing emotionally, so I tried adding in some gestures that represented scenes from their "real lives" outside of the space station. Once again, I

wasn't satisfied. I tried a third version where instead of having the actors move to the spots each scene began in, I had them move to more "iconic" moments of blocking that I thought the audience may be more likely to remember, such as Clark cleaning the bloody X off the wall, or Gilda and Mattie listening to the sound of Pluto as they sat together by a window. Still, the section wasn't quite landing. After that, I came up with a fourth option where instead of running around the room, the characters were somewhat immobilized, and dragged themselves around the station. This too wasn't it. Finally, we found the version that we landed on: the actors began by moving inquisitively from place to place in the station and eventually found themselves sitting paralyzed at the table. Finally, they dragged themselves to the floor, stationary, holding one another and repeating "X" back and forth. This version physicalized the feeling of descent, allowed for a focus on the deterioration of language, and ended up being extremely powerful to watch. I am confident that we never would have found that version of the scene had we not tried all the other versions first. First drafts allow for second drafts. Second drafts allow for thirds. Keep going until you are satisfied.

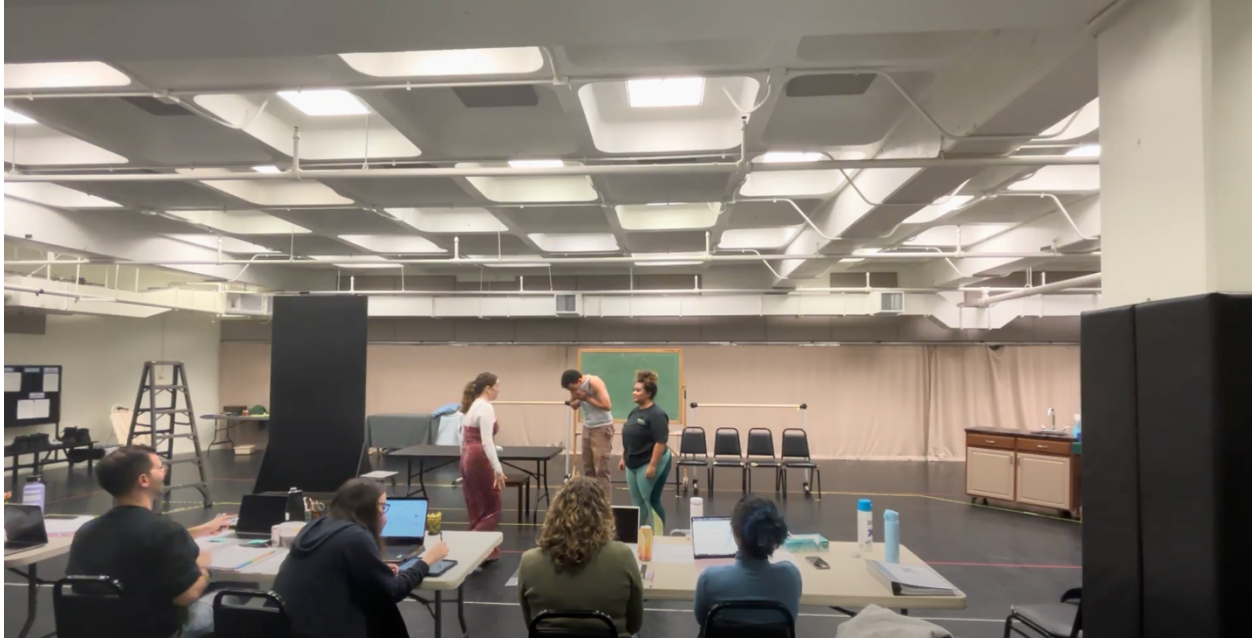


Figure 10: Working on an early draft of the X Sequence



Figure 11: Re-blocking the X Sequence



Figure 12: The final version of the X Sequence

You will blink, and tech will be nearly over. No matter how much time you are given, you will always wish you had more time for tech. I had more time to tech *X* than I had for any other show I directed in my time at UCSD, and it still felt like the shortest fever dream.



Figure 13: Finessing a moment with actors in tech



Figure 14: Working on the rhythm of a complicated moment in tech

You will feel in your gut that you should make a last-minute change. You will resist making that last-minute change, because you will think you are out of time. You aren't out of time: make the change. In tech, the way we were executing the moment in *X* that called for a giant bird wasn't quite having the impact we were hoping for. The bird was oriented upside down which was making it unintelligible, the buildup to getting the puppet onto the stage had too many steps which was diffusing the surprise, and overall the moment just wasn't landing. We only had the opportunity to run through the sequence once before we began dress rehearsals, and after our first dress it was clear the moment needed to change. I could see the problem, but I worried that changing it would fluster my actors, require too big a lift for my designers (who had other notes they were trying to address), and provide insufficient time for our crew to practice the sequence. It felt scary to change it, and comfortable to blame time and leave it where it was. But I pushed myself to do the hard thing, and I made the last-minute change. And because I made that change, that moment of the play was able to reach its full potential. Night after night, when the lights came back on to reveal a giant bird puppet lying in a hospital bed (the new configuration we found in our second to last dress rehearsal), audience members shrieked in terror and surprise. The feeling in the room was electric when the bird appeared, and it remains the number one moment audience members bring up when they talk to me about the production. Don't shrink your play's potential. Be brave and make the change.



Figure 15: Gilda sees the giant, dying bird

When you watch the show with an audience, you will learn something new about it. It's not a show until there's an audience. *X* is a play that asks its audience to rapidly experience every human emotion, and which inspires vocal reactions. Watching our production with an audience, I was reminded of all the moments that were funny, heartbreaking, and genuinely terrifying. These were things that I knew when I first started crafting those moments, but that I lost sight of as I watched run after run and focused on granular details. An audience helps you remember what you built. But I also learned that there were moments that elicited reactions I wasn't expecting. It's an amazing thing to watch your play breathe without you, to be a spectator as it takes its first independent steps, to learn about what you built through the eyes of the people who get to naively experience it.



Figure 16: The Girl crawls out unexpectedly from a cabinet, a moment that always elicited gasps from the audience

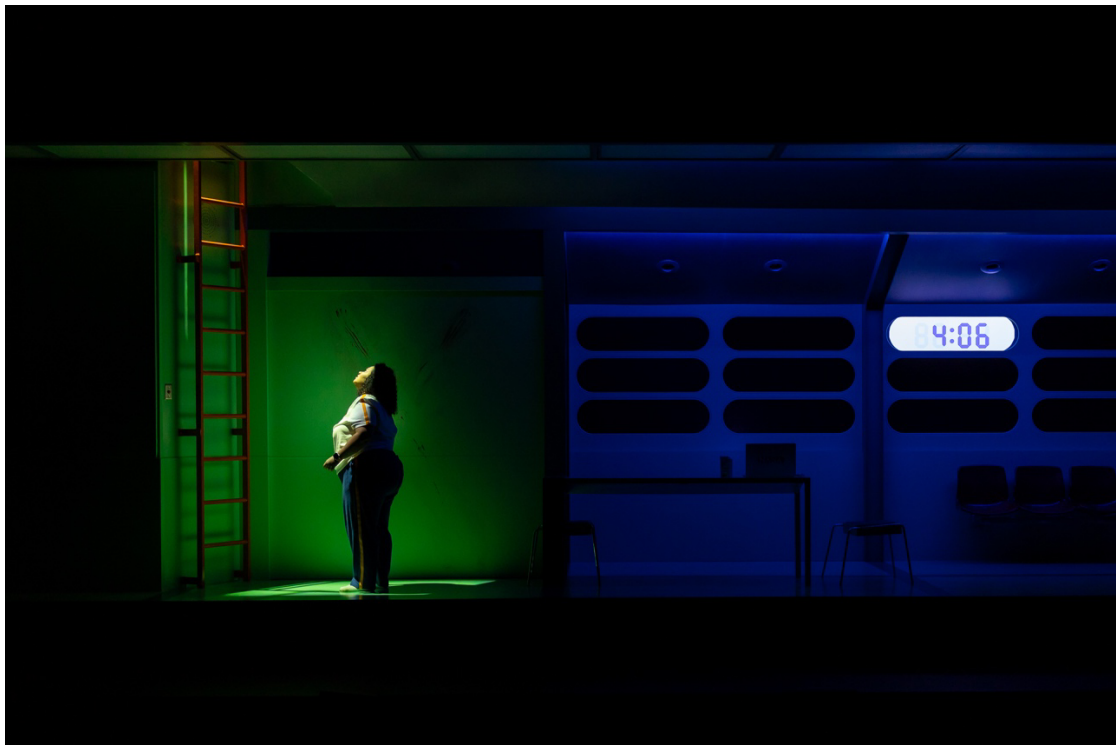


Figure 17: Gilda thinks she hears something up the ladder, a moment of suspense where you could feel the audience holding their breath



Figure 18: Gilda sees herself staring out the window. The revelation of the body double resulted in screams from the audience every night



Figure 19: The moment at the end of the play after Gilda has stepped off the platform and entered the void. Every night you could hear the audience snuffle and gasp when it was revealed that Gilda is in fact an older woman with Alzheimer's and that Mattie is her daughter

Those are my trail-markers for the path I walk when I direct a play. And now for some pebbles I picked up along the way:

Holding your days off as sacred helps you show up better for your days on.



Encourage people during movement work not to get stuck on their first instinct.



Let things be hard! Discomfort is part of the process.



You have to do a first pass, even if you don't like it. You need something to be in response to.



People may sometimes need time to warm up to your style, but that doesn't mean you need to change how you work. The fire is burning—let them find the warmth.



In the early stages of rehearsal, don't hesitate to guide actors away from choices that will hold them back.



Fight for the things that are hard, but that you know will work. They're different from the things that you're feeling in your gut aren't working. You know the difference.



Write down the stakes of each scene in a place you can easily refer to them. You'll need the reminder as you keep going.



You aren't doing this play alone. Lean on your collaborators.



When a choice isn't working, try the exact opposite.



You might walk in on hard days with no plan. You're smart enough and prepared enough to dig yourself out of that hole and build something anyway.



Resist the urge to forego runs in favor of only doing granular work. Runs help clarify the work you've done, and sometimes the problems fix themselves when repetition is allowed for.



Try not to over-finesse things in the early stages of tech. Get a draft and keep moving.



Having cue numbers written into your book during tech is extremely helpful.



Morale isn't extracurricular—it's pivotal to what you do. Ensuring that people feel validated and encouraged will yield better results.



Transitions are key. They're worth putting work into and refining.



Sometimes, you've just gotta bring in cupcakes.



You actually will finish. You actually did do enough. This one isn't going to be a disaster.

The next time I direct a play, I plan to look back at the above markers I've left and the pebbles I've picked up and remind myself that no matter how unfamiliar the trail looks, I haven't actually veered off path. I'm walking a direction that I've been before, one that others have walked before me. I have been here before, and if I'm lucky, I'll be here again.

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