(In)Determinacy:

Incorporating Openness in Programmed Music and Performance

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DEATH OF A SALESMAN

extracted

Introduction

My collaboration with Aleksandar Sasha Dundjerovic and The Drama and Theatre Studies (DTS) department at University College Cork (UCC) began when I approached Sasha in February 2013. I was interested in working with actors to develop multimedia systems for theater, as thus far, in Cork, I had mainly worked with musicians. I introduced myself and my work, and asked how I might be able to work with the Department of Theatre Studies.

Upon our first meeting, Sasha mentioned that he planned to direct a production of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*[1] in the Everyman Palace Theatre the upcoming May, bringing the Irish-American actor Patrick Cronin, and his son, James Cronin, to Cork to play the main roles of Willy Loman and Biff Loman.[2]

According to Patrick, Death of a Salesman was originally titled *The Inside of His Head*. Sasha asked if it would be possible to have the scenes which take place in Willy's head, based on his—somewhat questionable—memory, portrayed as projections.

This aligned with my own interests at the time in exploring memory and psychology through programmed video. The idea of working in the Everyman excited me as well.

The Everyman Palace Theatre is a highly decorative Victorian proscenium theater. Originally built in 1840, the Everyman has had several identities, including The Cork Palace of Varieties from 1897-1912, where artists such as Charlie Chaplin, George Formby and Laurel and Hardy have performed, as well as later becoming a cinema from 1930-1988.

This historical context of the building as a theater and a cinema drew me in as a video designer. In my work I like to blend the physical and digital—the old and the new. Through

my work, I saw an opportunity to combine these two histories—theater and cinema—in one performance.

Theory & Structure

Our process began with Sasha, Patrick, and I, as well as the costume and stage designer, Lisa Zagone, collectively pooling creative inspirations and ideas. Sasha presented Robert Lepage as an inspiration in regards to multimedia design in theater. He showed us vintage advertisements from the 1950s as inspiration for the overall design aesthetic. I introduced The Wooster Group's *Hamlet*[3] and Big Dance Theatre's *Comme Toujours Here I Stand*[4] as aesthetic inspirations for video backgrounds and characters, proposing the use of fragmented video segments and multiple projection screens of varying sizes. Sasha and Patrick thought this collage aesthetic would work nicely with their concepts of the piece. Lisa was tentative about so much of the stage design being reliant on video, as her aesthetic relies on lighting, shadows, textures, and traditional theater techniques.

Sasha wished for the staging to resemble the inside of a house, as the play is traditionally done. I wanted to keep the set malleable to portray the outdoor and restaurant scenes as well, as this would be possible through projections. Between Sasha, myself, and Lisa, we developed a series of five screens, three in the front and two in the back, which could abstractly be made to represent the rooftops of a house. I planned to use the front three panels for video characters and indoor background scenery, and the rear panels for outside background scenery. Lisa was skeptical that I would be able target the rear screen with the video projections, and throughout the process insisted on adding decorative elements to these such as wallpaper or windows. I did not want to do this, as then the scenery would be

permanently stuck in 'house' mode throughout the performance. In the end I convinced her I would be able to project on them, and they remained blank. She convinced me that the screens should be placed some distance apart from each other, with one at an angle, to create a better sense of depth to the stage, despite it making it more difficult for me to target them.

From past experience and from conversations with other actors, I knew that most performers find that altering their own timing to match a pre-recorded video was very difficult: the acting feels forced, and the energy of live performance is lost. Therefore, I proposed to create a system in which the recorded video characters would be filmed and edited in a manner where the dialog of the video characters could be triggered in real time when the stage actors finish their lines, allowing the performers to retain control of the timing of their own delivery. Patrick agreed when I proposed this; he was tentative about working with video up until this point, but was eager to try this method.

We marked all of the scenes that occur in Willy Loman's memory within the script, and recorded these with a green screen so that I could superimpose backgrounds. We used student actors to portray Willy's sons as children. The actress who played Willy Loman's wife was already significantly younger than Patrick, so she remained the same for the filming, and was aged with makeup for the stage. Sasha wished for the film actors to be excessively vibrant and happy, to match the 1950s advertisement aesthetic, and to contrast with the tragic nature of their present-day counterparts.

The collaborative method used in this play was much less open than what I was accustomed to. Beyond my initial push towards a collage aesthetic and a fragmented, multi-screen video layout and triggering process, the play was produced fairly traditionally. Sasha

assumed the role of a traditional director, and had us stay true to the original script and

descriptions found within the play. I directed the filming of the video to be used for

projections, and was in charge of designing and implementing the interactions of the stage

characters with the video characters. Much of the remaining background design consisted of

a collage of visual elements mentioned in the script, adjusted to match the aesthetics of 50s

television and film, and the stage design.

Technical Devices

Video representing characters and background imagery was edited and montaged

using Final Cut Pro and programmed for stage using Isadora.[5] The video scenes were

recorded on two separate days due to restrictions on actor availability. Willy Loman was shot

first, alone, in the Cork Opera House Half Moon Theatre. All other scenes were shot in the St.

John's College production studio without him.

A rough storyboard of the projected character's locations on the stage was

determined, and Sasha and I co-directed the video shoot to optimize both acting and

programmability. I instructed the actors to look in the general direction of where the stage

actors would be in relation to the projected character's location. The dialogs were filmed one

line at a time. I instructed the actors to hold still in a resting position after each line, as our

production manager spoke the lines which the stage characters would say on stage. In this

manner, if the stage actor took longer than the duration of the clip to finish his or her line, the

video would stop on the last frame of the clip, and the video character would appear to be

holding still and listening.

Using footage from two separate days of shooting in two different locations with different equipment, I set to work on my video collage. I edited the videos to be grayscale with a high contrast. This both added to the highly stylized black and white 1950s aesthetic we were aiming for, and helped the background imagery blend more seamlessly with the video characters.

I edited each scene to be triggered line by line by the video operator (myself), cued by the performance of the live actors. As Patrick Cronin was the only character to interact directly with the projected characters, I worked closely with him in rehearsals, working through the script line by line to get a feel for timing and editing any footage that felt 'off.' For our rehearsals in the DTS studio and the Granary Theatre, I used Isadora to piece together the film actors and tentative greenscreen backgrounds using Isadora's Luma Key feature.

Once we were set up in the Everyman Palace Theatre for tech week, I introduced backgrounds, such as fences, cars, trees, and wallpaper, to get a feel for size and perspective relative to the space. We introduced 1950s cars and wallpaper to give the memories a vintage feel. Once Patrick, Sasha, and I were happy with the overall composition, I solidified these edits within the clips themselves using Final Cut Pro, to save on processing power during the live performance.

In Isadora, I localized the audio coming from specific clips on specific screens to correlate to the nearest speaker. Video characters speaking from the front right panel would be audible via the right speaker: voices of characters on the front left would come from the left speaker: voices from characters in the center would come equally from both speakers. In this manner, audio would match image from the audience's perspective, and the actors could

tell where the video characters were located without having to look back at the screens. As we only had two speakers to work with, We placed these in the boxes to the right and left of the stage: this way the actors could hear them and they were close enough to be convincing to the audience that the voices were coming from the stage.

Additional imagery for the projections was sourced from online sources and montaged within Final Cut and Isadora to be re-purposed for background imagery. For specific New York City background imagery, like project housing and the Brooklyn cemetery, I asked a friend, Oscar Torres, to take high resolution pictures of these and send them to me. I then used warping and duplication techniques in photoshop to adjust them for use in the projections.

To be able to target two planes of screens while maintaining focus, we used two projectors, hung side by side above the audience in the center of the auditorium. Lisa chose a parchment-like material for the screens, giving the projection surface an archival appearance.

Summary

Combined with music composed and performed by Hollas Longton and Neil Quigley influenced by Early American, Eastern European, and Irish influences, the theatrical environment created for this play was a multi-media collage of a wide range of source materials and influences, highly stylized both to match the architecture and history of the theater and the aesthetic of Arthur Miller's play. The media and music channeled aesthetic influences from early 20th century film and 1950s advertising. This was set within a minimalist stage setting and limited color palette as to complement the Victorian architecture.

At times the video imagery was cinematic; other times it served to blend the set with the existing architecture, borrowing its colors and patterns.

Reflections

Through this experience I learned that a term in one field can mean something completely different in another field. Site specific for me means taking a specific space and transforming it; the same term to Sasha means taking a specific space and using it as a narrative aspect of a performance. Interactive in theater terms tends to mean audience engagement; interactive in technical terms means a computer system that requires feedback from an outside user to function. This production drove home to me how important good communication and mutual respect is within a collaboration. Perhaps through communication errors on all ends, or due to our vastly differing approaches to the creation of theater, Lisa, Sasha, and I never seemed to be on the same page. This caused many unnecessary setbacks throughout the production process.

This reinforced in my mind the necessity of choosing one's collaborators based on complementary aesthetic preferences and personalities, as well as the need to, as a director, trust your performers to act in a manner that is true to their talents and specialities. I felt that in several cases within the rehearsal process, over-directing and lack of room for experimentation stifled many potentially beneficial elements of this piece.

Despite this, there were many talented people working on the play, and we were able to overcome most differences in preferences and personalities to create a unified, functional piece.

Notes

1. See Arthur Miller.

2. On the accompanying USB drive, see Death of a Salesman/video/DOAS.mov for video

documentation.

3. See Hamlet.

4. See Comme Toujours Here I Stand.

5. On the accompanying USB drive, see Death of a Salesman/showdocs/DOAS.izz to

view show file.