

Appendix D

[Excerpts from director's pre-production and rehearsal notes]

Jan. 26 First Design Meeting ...

... I asked the designers for their gut reactions to the play as a whole, but they were more hung up on specifics: how naked are they (i.e. how many costumes)? Where did I want to use multimedia? ... why did I choose this play? I tried to explain the Beckett/Pinter-meets-Zen nature of the work, its exploration of identity in terms of language and the other, of humans trying to connect across an impenetrable gap, of language engendering violence, &c. I suggested that the Man and Woman be looked at in terms of a montage of action-units, rather than as fully three-dimensional characters engaged in a logical, sequential plot.

I said that I wanted the acting area for the couple to feel constricted, within the stage space. That I would like the space treated as three-dimensionally as possible. That lighting should be dealt with as a musical score. I think I expressed that we were going for minimalism and abstraction, but at the same time aiming to stimulate the senses. I mentioned Robert Wilson's work with light & projections, but also suggested that the kind of colour-abstractions I was after might be achieved with light affected by fluids and reflective surfaces. I had an image of costumes as light, gauzy or translucent, but I wasn't sure whether this was desirable throughout, or just in the first or second act.

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10 Feb.

The 'bed' should consist of layers of soft, puffy quilts etc. on the floor that appear subtly obscene against the hard lines of the set. ...

... Act 2: off-white [costumes], everything (incl. shoes) translucent.

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'apartment' suspended within the space. On a rake.

Music: strings (cf. Webern 1906-1928) in Act 1, electronic (?) in act 2. Percussion by monk.

Could the music be orchestrated exactly to the lines & actions?

17 Feb.

design meeting with Patrick, quite productive, or at least stimulating. He will look into the technical possibilities of live cameras and video wall / projection. ... I am moving towards a space that needs to change appearance over time (this can be accomplished with lighting, I think, if the surfaces are appropriate, but I don't mind a physical change between acts either.):

Act 1: concrete space, which quickly becomes fractured, but each "shard" (isolated eg by lighting) remains tangible.

Act 2: indistinct, blurred space, softer, like in a light fog. Hence more open than act I, but still confined. This finally cracks open, to reveal an infinite nothingness, like a blank sky.

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26 Feb. notes to set design mtg.

concerns about: the Monk's performance space (visibility, texture); use of multimedia (i.e. televisions) in Act II; vertical space; heads; the execution of the final effect (crack/opening the void).

thoughts: I am still hesitant about using extensive MM in Act II, but mainly because I worry that we're spreading ourselves thin for budget. I don't want to compromise the usage and aesthetics of space/set. I also don't want it to end up looking gimmicky, so we really have to be sure that we have the resources to "do it right." Conceptually, I believe there to be a big shift in the significance of the screens if we move them from Act I to II. In act I, the idea of surveillance, of voyeurism, of technological/cultural entrapment, of obsessively looking at and reflecting each other - at the physical surface, the skin-level - works well with the situation and the action. But in Act II, I believe the emphasis needs to be on their internal transformation. What floats around them aren't the eyes of judgment or even curiosity, but their own (worldly) thoughts and memories, that, as the screens turn to snow, evaporate one by one. As [Patrick] pointed out, they should not be illustrative of what is being said, but they can certainly be related. Words, images from Act I, those dream landscapes we talked about, some live cam or recorded close-ups of their bodies, images of the city, family photos going backwards in time (... effective if it's something the audience catches on to only peripherally, because they're - hopefully - mostly paying attention to the action). The pacing and patterning of these sequences would be one hell of a job, though ...

11 March

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Movement: think about balletic, responsive/echoing/counterpointed movements, determined as much by formal/musical structure as by character objectives.

Video: fragmentary, ultra-slow, alternating with time lapse, loops. If the "blank" parts are white, can the (black) shapes cut in & out without the impression that a projector is kicking in?

8 April

The Monk is of crucial importance, carrying the entirety of the "traditional" Zen teaching, and, appropriately (yet paradoxically), having to express it (mostly) wordlessly. The Monk's actions must express the eternal in the moment, and the identity of body and universe. The couple's actions must show the fleeting nothingness of the words, desires, fears etc. that entrap them. But this too, we must recognize as Tao, for are they not engaged in the same 'search' and the same moment? Both fleeting and eternal, profane and spiritual, nonsensical and all-consuming? ... Everything generally thought of as acting must be kept at bay.

The whole point of the play is that the play cannot reveal Buddha-nature, through imagery or words, it can merely point. Thus the performance must destroy itself as quickly as it happens. Whatever comes next must contradict what came before. Whatever comes before must burn itself out by being only itself, leaving nothing behind. There are echoes and reprises, like in music, but they must cancel each other out, like soundwaves.

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First Rehearsal, April 15 (introductory notes)

My own understanding of this work is still pretty fluid, and I refuse to be any more linear or direct about it at this point, certainly not before it has made its way into rehearsal. I'm still learning new things, and making discoveries based on the text and other readings, let alone what will happen in this process. At the same time, I am confident that ... I have enough of a grasp of it to steer us in the right direction, and towards a definite goal. I am not interested in laying down these rails to just take us there; we'll miss too much on the way. ... so bear with me while we figure out the best way to do this.

This is a work with a lot of concepts beneath, which is part of the reason I want to get it on its feet. Because any questions that will come up will ultimately have to be answered by action rather than conceptualizing.

This play can be viewed as structured more musically than plot-driven. Conventional tools such as characterization and super-objectives may be useful crutches, but they won't suffice as core devices for approaching the acting.

what's the play about?

Gao's play(s) deal(s) with - embody, in fact - opposing tensions, so that the actor's craft is a perfectly suited vehicle, as long as we recognize the primary importance of remaining true to it. That is why the meaning of the text lies in pure action, while at the same time remaining aware of the sense of play that underlies Zen.

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Objectives (starting points only): Woman: to lose herself; Man: to grasp (i.e. hold onto his ego); Monk: to purify herself. But the moment of realization for all three is triggered by a cough. Without "dust" there would be no enlightenment, even for the Monk. Buddha became enlightened when he gave up fasting.

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There are three parts to the play as I see it, each of which ends in a moment of attainment that is also a moment of (increasing) annihilation. The first such ends with the consummation of desire at the start of the play. The second ends with mutual (physical) destruction, the third with the destruction of the ego. The *fourth*, if you will, is the return of the audience to the world-as-it-is.

April 15

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to work on once basic actions have been decided on: take all the excess vocal "intentions" etc. and migrate them into the body. Leave the voice pure and clear, as close to neutral as remains effective, but explore speech *patterns*. Goal: to sound unaffected, conversational, spontaneous.

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process: to work on action "naturalistically" first, even exaggerated actions, then to strip away & physicalize / find essence (try this as soon as you feel ready for a section or even a line).

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April 16

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characters: shifts in behaviour attributable to the fact that they are drawn as much closer to irrational/unconscious motivations than “normal” socialized people. Corollary: the knife in a dramatic sense does not exist until he pulls it out. But: both characters, motivated by - how far will it go this time? Blurring of boundaries between reality & fantasy, waking behaviour & dream. Keep pursuing authenticity in the moment over coherent dramatic intentions. Vary behaviour on similar dialogue.

When Gao introduces the knife, in the way that he does, he forces the spectator to re-evaluate everything that happened before. This needs to happen at that moment, not before. Therefore, the Man does not “think” about the knife at an earlier moment. We destroy the play if we “foreshadow”. The characters are engaged in that moment, fully, only (there may be “premonitions”, but they’re specifically identified in the text). We may construct “superobjectives”, but they are imposed to “make sense”, and that sense shifts as the characters shift. This explains the structure of the play as well as the baffling ellipses, and also why the text works so much better when the action is not tinted by (streamlined, flattened) what came before or after. therefore, at the moment he wants to get to “know” the woman, he is not thinking of killing her.

The characters, while haunted by / defined by memories, behaviour patterns, etc, are, like children, engaged in the game of the moment - which may change at the drop of a hat, so to speak. It’s dreamlogic, which becomes increasingly fractured.

The action can also be seen as layers of thoughts - in some of which, the knife exists (i.e. the will to inflict harm), and not in others (I want to fuck/love/protect/rehabilitate/kill you).

April 17

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Different levels for characters, how to behave when they’re putting on a character, i.e. when the characters are acting? When are they doing this, and why? need to create a structure. The scene reveals character (eg. him as compulsive - start working this in, etc).

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Listening: engage & react. What Gao is (probably) getting at is the subject- & object-lessness that is possible in Chinese, and represents the state of full being/doing. Eg. in Zen etc., (there is) “knowing” without knower or known.

to clarify intent & also the difficulty of translating text to stage, read Gao’s instructions to the actors.

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The “Writer” scene is a mirror of the “Tibet” scene, revealing the “inner” life of experience vs. thinking, while the other character is trying to get something else out of what is being said.

April 18th

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characters hold on to existence, ie self, so pursue objects/desire etc, because they exist only in relation to the other

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April 19

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character modalities, work through voice & body:

from a pulp novel: “He spoke in a strange, slightly lilting way, as if he couldn’t decide whether or not to give his sentences an ironic twist, though his eyes suggested intense amusement.” - could be one mode for Man; another: speaks in a flat, dead way, eyes dangerous, hiding a great darkness. a third: like a child whose cat doesn’t want to play. a fourth: lost, tripping over words, embarrassed teen. It’s ironic that he talks as if he knows all about writers, but (claims) never to pick up a book. Does he read Harlequins?

Woman: seductress (Siren/Salomé); lost child; indulgent mother; hardened vagabond.

April 21 [in response to lack of character development from the actors]

The Man is pushing forty, and thinks of himself as shorter, scrawnier and more cultivated than he actually is. Consequently, he is sometimes surprised at the effect of his physical aggression. We’ve already established that he is obsessively meticulous; through controlling his environment, physically as well as through understanding (esp. others’ minds), he feels that he defines who he is. ... His movements are precise and controlled in “neutral”, but can vary from grand/sweeping to stunted/atavistic depending on the situation. His darkness remains carefully folded away most of the time, but he lusts to give the nihilistic feeling of power reign.

The woman is ... just on the other side of mid-twenty. She is terrified of getting old, because she wants to believe herself somewhat more beautiful than she is. She compensates with practised allure. All men are swine, but they also carry the key to her desire. She doesn’t think of them when she has sex, but of the delirious abandonment of her self.

April 23: Notes from 1x run

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Music ... Beautiful overall; too much during some scenes, need to find silences.

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April 24

What are the strongest dramatic choices for each scene, regardless of “plot logic”? Commit to them, unquestioningly).

Body & gesture, voice, character. Let’s start with 3 “states” & 5 emotions/intentionalities:

states / self:

no mask (instinct/loses conscious control/ no editor/atavistic/feral) - neutral (“who I am”; self-editor -thinks itself- in control; but there are still habits, obsessions, “tells”¹) - big mask (puts on an act; “who I imagine myself to be”; high stakes in terms of “taking over” the other’s focus with your self/needs/goals)

¹ eg. man may have a slight stoop, which he pulls up once in a while, esp. going into “big mask” mode

relationship with other/object:

5 poisons/emotions/intentionalities (in act 1, the characters are caught in them, ergo the rapid shifts &c.; in act 2, they start looking at the essence & seeing that the “reality” conjured by these emotions doesn’t really exist):

attractive (desire) - unattractive (anger)² - neutral (ignorance)³
considering own experience as predominant (pride) - “judging our own position in relation to the object perceived” (jealousy).⁴

starting points:

Man (neutral): slight stoop, continually works on straightening himself and everything else. Linear movements, focussed on physical objects, empirical. (big mask): expansive, lecturing, nerdy/showy, in the head and hands. [a little note: avoid slipping into Britishisms]. (“no” mask: arcs, flailing, clumsy)⁵

Woman (neutral): in the chest, arcs, comfortable in body, elegant secondary motions, follow-through. (“no” mask: choppy, linear, sharp, in head) (“big” mask: in the hips, seductive, swaying, may become crude/lewd)

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tempo of body vs voice; who are they talking to; rhythm; juxtaposition: body vs words.

April 27

Very good run of Act 1. Nice detail, natural sense of presence, active listening

(very important: most of the intensity in this play comes from listening, rather than emoting. Even whoever talks is listening/watching the effect of their words almost all the time, and adjusts accordingly. This is also a tenet of Gao’s acting theory, b.t.w.).

Scenes 4,6,8 need the most work. Sc. 4: humour, revealing character; sc.6: sexual dynamic, game-play tactics; sc.8: scenework, transitions (esp into last game), blocking etc.

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April 29

We’ve reached a stage when the dynamic needs to shift/evolve in some way. We’ve made some good discoveries, such as the end of Act 1 and parts of 6. Except for scene 4 and parts of Act 2, which are still a bit formless, the structure is there. I need to attend to overall form, rhythm, tone, pace and shifts now as well, so I have to rely even more on you to be on, be specific, commit to every line even if it hasn’t been fixed yet. If something doesn’t work, I’ll notice and we’ll work on it, but you have to keep & improve on the intensity and interest of each line, action, exchange even more so than up to now. You have to make strong choices, some on the fly, all the time. If you’re not sure, let me know, but otherwise keep it - adjust it, etc. but commit to it until/unless I question it (I may need to see it twice or three times).

² also, fear, which is corollary to anger, i.e. anger is a response to being afraid of losing one’s self/freedom/life/status; maybe “repulsion” is a better word, but it blurs, too.

³ probably always accompanied by a hint of the other two (cautious/curious), if the indiv. continues to engage with the object.

⁴ i.e. defining self through ‘interior’ knowledge (intellectual/sensory) vs defining self through (lack of) control over other.

⁵ note: this doesn’t deal with when he’s deliberately aggressive, eg sexually.

May 1

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More “on”, more engaged in each other, quicker on response (eg, p. 86 - talk about yourself). Every line can evoke interest if the characters are interested in saying it. Irony is generally more effective than sarcasm, challenge than “wall”. A lot of the dialogue in 1-3 seemed a bit generalized. So the choices, even “neutral”, have to be clearer to travel. Telescope “thought” pauses, except where the pause is part of the action.

Man is getting much more sharply defined, now needs a slightly more mature physicality (add 10 years, more deliberate movement, more controlled/still until eruption). Woman: more “unconscious” sexuality, except when mask drops. ...

Music:

same idea, FX as a challenge in the air - eg: “you can’t have it” - except during physical fights (“don’t go” is good), rather than metal scrape. ... Not as physically violent - the FX are somewhat aestheticized. I’ve been warned that the space amplifies music, esp. strings. ...

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p.109 (trip) think how scary it is to be blindfolded, to trust, then be tripped. “what are you doing?” scared-angry - trust broken.

May 4

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p.124 “And so ... heart.” Give this section more intention. Before & after is more stylized. Make us feel what the characters are feeling.

May 7

Actors: work on:

sharper transitions, pacing: shifts at beats, & timing. Danger & his/her temper - surprise, effect of, believability, seduction, fear, desire, need, ... heighten, commit: it’s not necessarily a question of acting it, but of the energy behind the actions. ...

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work physicality for “crack” - where was it? This is not an argument with arms in the “L” position.

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