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Death of a Salesman: A Theatrical Examination of the “American Dream” on the Human Psyche and the Effects on Aging on the Mind.

Kylie Chisnell

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Post-Production Evaluation

What did you do (what did your audience experience) to the audience with your production? Anything? Was it what you intended?

My intention with this production was to help highlight the importance and nuances of mental health, especially when it comes to Alzheimer's/Dementia and suicide. I was also hoping to highlight the potential dangers outlined in the show regarding the pursuit of the American Dream and what happens when it falls apart. I think that my audience was able to have the experience I wanted, though it was a heavy one. I know following the production we had bit of a decompression conversation with Willy and the audience as the end of the play did get very tense.

What did you want the audience to take away from this production? Did you succeed? What (or where) did you fail?

One big takeaway that I wanted people to have was the importance of mental health and the understanding of the complex nature of A/D and suicide. I think this message of mental health was something that was very clearly to the audience. I think that it was well highlighted through technical aspects and the actors. However, I think our connection to the active minds organization really hammered home this key theme. By being able to prime people with Active Minds resources, I think they were ready to really look into the ideas of mental health presented and were prepared to take on that lens.

On the other hand, I also wanted for the audience to understand the dangers that the ever-elusive "American-Dream" can pose. Willy continually chases it and tries to sell it throughout the play, ultimately leading to his demise. This take-away I think was a bit more niche and less obvious to my audience. I did not prep them the same way as with the mental health elements so I do think this theme may have been missed by a more casual viewer. However, there were also several audience members whom in speaking to later were able to understand this theme. So I would say that I was moderately successful with this theme, but could have done more to make this clear.

Has the production process served as a genuine learning experience? If so, what have you learned? Did you really challenge yourself? Or, did you merely orchestrate and implement what you already knew?

This process was definitely a learning experience. I had experience overseeing almost every technical area of theatre and acting but doing it all at once required some adjustment for sure. I know that one thing I had to learn a lot more about on the fly was lights. Luckily, Howie is great and was able to help a lot but plotting the lights and helping hang them in the Blackbox was a unique experience which I was not quite used to. I also recorded all of the sounds for the show myself which I hadn't previously done. That was an interesting challenge of attempting to determine how to layer sounds together and decide on the easiest way to record on the board operator.

This process was also a large challenge to my leadership abilities and interpersonal skills. I had to do a lot of growing as a leader and simply socially. Especially after the pandemic, I have had a tendency to go off on my own island. In order to make this project successful, I couldn't

do that. I had to take the time to foster connections with my cast and crew and work to make sure I was being a strong and effective leader.

Was the production process creatively challenging for collaborators and cast? Or, did you waste their time by merely enlisting their expertise?

This production was definitely creative challenge for collaborators and cast. There was a lot of part scrambling among the cast and because of this they all were required to be really engaged with what they were doing, I spent time talking with cast members to educate them on mental health and explain the importance of certain aspects of their character portrayals. The cast I had did a great job of creating characters who were larger than just the immediate show and I think this really came through by the end of the productions. In terms of crew, Adam and I spent time working together creatively on the set. I sketched out and initial design and explained the reasonings behind placements and set pieces. Adam and I were then able to work together to figure out how to realistically put it together in our space. One example being the bed facades. I had explained to Adam making this half-bed stand ins that would give the illusion of a full bed without using all that space. Adam then realized that in making a modification to two benches we already had the process would be easier.

Kylee Lorio offered similar assistance by helping act as a sounding board for ideas and issues with that show. Her and I often worked together creatively to solve issues and to help adjust cast members as needed. Kylee had also recently received stage combat training, so she was able to help make the fight scenes more creative and real looking. Elysia was also very helpful in her collaborations with costumes. Elysia and I had several discussions about what color schemes and vibes were needed for each character.

What did you learn? What did you discover? Were you so deeply challenge that you can say you are aware of new insight about - what? Yourself as an emerging director/performer? Collaborator? Your creative process? Production techniques and values? Communication? Group dynamics? Developmental timing? Or, did you merely develop a better facility in avoiding issues and responsibilities? Did you accept and work within the safe limitations of knowns?

Think that I gained some new insights into many different things. Firstly, I was able to realize a lot about my abilities as a director. This project required me to really step up and lead a relatively large group of people. I think that I was really able to realize my strengths and my faults as a director. For example, I think one strength I had was my attention to small moments that later had large impacts. The scene at the end of Act 1 where Biff grabs the stockings is an example of this attention. However, I think one failing I realized that I had as a director was failing to motivate certain cast members to do more. One actor needed extra monitoring to make sure they showed up on time and was active in the process. Though I definitely could have done more to engage this person.

I think this also revealed a lot to me about my ability to handle shifting group dynamics and communicate. I had a lot of issues in this show with important cast members leaving, or even just being very busy at that. I had to constantly deal with unforeseen circumstances and unknown mishaps. This really led me to need to take a look at my ability to interact and communicate with others. I had to work with the cast members I had and work to help develop

relationships between their characters and communicate the motivations of new characters. I really had to go beyond my usual social comfort zone in this way. There was a lot of normal limitations that I set for myself that were tested and surpassed during this process.

What has the experience stimulated toward ongoing learning? In your next creative responsibility, what elements would you like to explore? What elements do you need to learn more about?

This process involved ongoing learning for me and my cast. Especially with all the shifting parts, we all were required to consistently adapt and learn to new parts and each other. This process also required a lot of ongoing learning on the part of my cast about issues of A/D and suicide. In order to properly portray and understand the show, the cast had to be able to identify what incidences were showing elements of mental health crisis. It would always be really rewarding to see cast members start to make connections and have “AHA!” moments as they began to better understand the script and themes! In terms of personal learning, I had to learn a lot more about lighting and directing. Both I had some experience with, but not to the same capacity that this required. While I learned a bit, there is surely a lot more I could learn from this experience.

I think that in the next creative responsibility I undertake I would want to explore mental health of other generations. I think that continuing to explore that theme with different ages and generations through a modern lens could be really interesting and serve as a base of comparison between my shows. I also would like to be able to do more interesting things with lighting design. I had a lot more creative ideas for lighting for this show, that ultimately weren't feasible. I think in the future learning more about how lights work and exploring all the different moods and themes they can help enhance would be a really worthwhile endeavor.

How did your ideas (or concepts) grow and develop over the rehearsal process? Did they grow, or were you locked into your original ideas/conceptions?

I had a lot of growth and change in my ideas over the course of the rehearsal process. Technical elements all had to develop over the rehearsal process. Set had to adjust to having the limited space of the Black box theatre and had to accommodate the need to move pieces around. Throughout the process exact elements and spacing had to be refined as actors settled into their spaces. In terms of lights, I initially wanted to use blue and purple lights to help show the times where Willy is acting irrationally. These colors would have helped emphasize the switches between Willy thinking clearly and his displaying signs of mental illness. In the script this was denoted using flute music which I had originally planned to cut. By the end, there was only one blue light that I could use, and I instead used the flute music as recommended.

My original concept for this play also was meant to have the actors be memorized. For reasons I will cover in the next section, the performance became a staged reading of the play instead of a straight memorized performance. While not my original idea, I think that the show did not suffer for it. The main benefit lost out on from this change was that it broke some of the illusion I was trying to create of getting a glimpse into these people's natural lives. I think that being flexible in this though made my cast overall better off and allowed the show to go on.

I also always wanted to provide resources for audience members following the production. Initially, I had planned to create my own sort of mega pamphlet of resources and containing information about mental health. However, one of my actors recommended connecting with the Active Minds organization instead. This ended up being a phenomenal idea. They were able to provide us with pamphlets to hand out to audience members with mental health resources and advice. Adam also did a wrap up talk following the show to help reinforce using the pamphlet. I honestly am extremely happy with making this connection! This allowed for us to offer so many more resources and support than I had thought possible before.

If your ideas/concepts did evolve, what elements influenced this evolution? This asks the question – why did your ideas change over time?

Part of the reason for the changes and condensing of this process is due to the tragedy that occurred in Bridgewater in early February. Originally the process should have begun at the beginning of February, but it did not start until the end of it instead. This led to us starting off several weeks behind what was initially intended and expected. Several cast members also suffered greatly academically and mentally from these events.

One of the main reasons for all of the cast evolutions and lack of memorization was the loss of four cast members. Within a month of the show, I had four cast members need to leave the show: Willy, Happy, Charley, and Miss Forsythe. This led to a major shuffling around of parts and some people needed to then double parts or take on leads. For this reason, actors had to do a lot to change characters and also adjust to having new scene partners. Also, with so many changes and additions, I believed that requiring memorization (especially for Willy) was heavily unrealistic. In order to properly care for cast members and maximize the potential of the show, I felt this and taking time one-on-one with cast members led to the best show possible.

The reason that the lighting and sound decisions had to change was simply logistics. In the Black Box theatre, only so many lights could be hung. There was also only so many special commands that could be loaded. For that reason, it was not possible to execute the original idea. Therefore, I had to find a way to get those original ideas across without the original elements I had planned. The set was another thing that had to be adjusted due to the lack of available space. My original design also relied a lot more on being able to have adjustable lighting.

How could you rework certain elements for clarification? Is the statement worth clarification? Would you, in all honesty feel that your time was being usefully fulfilled if you came to the theatre to see this production? Would you consider this production worthy of mature, human attention and involvement?

I think that if I had had more options for lighting, I could have done some more to make my statements clearer. I also think that I could have maybe done some more gradual changes in costume color gradients to show more deterioration. Although for the most part, I feel as though what was done did show a clear and worthy theme. All the audience members who I spoke with felt as though they got a lot out of the show and were moved by the attention paid to mental health. I think that this production was a worthy endeavor which successfully taught people what we meant to. I think that understanding mental health is an extremely important

part of the current push towards self-care. Mental health is something that is imperative to all of us! Especially when it comes to the idea do suicide. Many people have been touched in some way by suicide and I think this helped really highlight this. This also called attention to the sad fact that there is an alarmingly high suicide rate among the elderly. This production led people to really think about A/D, suicide, and mental health. However, it also revealed many lessons about the “American Dream” that were insightful to those paying attention. Those paying attention were able to see the elements of the “American Dream” and the exposing of the negative aspects of such a philosophy.

In what production (acting, design, dramaturgical) or directorial areas are you deficient?
Proficient?

I know that for this show I did get a lot of compliments on my acting. Several audience members and even fellow cast members stated that I had done a great job and were very complimentary of this. I think that in terms of design choices I was pretty proficient. I made the best with the space I had, utilized all available lights and sound technology. Out of all the areas, I do think that I could have taken more time earlier to perfect some costuming elements, but I think they turned out fine. I think that while my directing was pretty good overall, there was one director area I found myself lacking in, and worse off for it, authoritativeness. For the most part, I tend to be very collaborative in my directing style, and especially with this project I also tried to keep thing light. However, looking back there are several instances where I should have put my foot down regarding an actor demand. I also think I could have done more dramaturgical work earlier on which may have helped make certain aspects of the show clearer from the start.

Most importantly – what resources emerged that could not be appropriately included in the final product? These resources would be carefully and seriously honored. It is these latent resources that may be waiting, motivationally, for your next creative commitment.

I think I could have potentially partnered with more campus resources than just Active Minds. While I did not get properly connected to them in the end counseling services, the IDEA center, the psychology department, or even the business departments could have gotten more involved had I thought about it more beforehand. Handing out the Active Minds pamphlet was good, but I feel as though these resources could’ve provided even more for audience members.