

How Moment Work Leads to Narrating with the Elements of the Stage: Drew University's collaboration with the Tectonic Theater Project

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I loved how, whenever we got stuck on how to do something, we would revert back to that original, explorative process. We filled holes with “Moments” that we wove into the piece. We tried to bring as many elements of the stage in as we could. In doing so, I realized how much we had grown our skill set. We stopped thinking about what we *should* do and started thinking about what we *could* do.

-- Drew University student, class of 2017

Introduction

In naming their company The Tectonic Theater Project, founders Moisés Kaufman and Jeffrey LaHoste wanted to signify “the company’s interest in construction—how things are made, and how they might be made differently” (“Mission & History”). This structuralist investigation led to Tectonic’s creation of a system of devised theatre designated as Moment Work. Not only has the company used this method to create their own works (such as the renowned *Laramie Project*), but they have also shared this technique with future devisers through residencies at schools, both domestically and internationally. In the spring of 2017, Drew University had the privilege of partnering with Tectonic to devise a play with its theatre capstone class entitled *A Metamorphosis*, inspired by Kafka’s well-known story of a man transformed into a giant insect. This year-long residency provided an opportunity for Drew students to implement Tectonic’s Level One and Level Two Moment Work training and experience the final mastery of threading Moments into a fully-produced play (Level Three). In doing so, they were able to deepen their understanding of what Tectonic calls “the elements of the stage,” a non-hierarchical inventory used to structure a narrative and heighten theatricality. This essay focuses on how Tectonic’s technique of narrating with

non-textual elements leads to a richer, more engaging theatrical experience—for both the creators of the production and the audience.

In situating this work, it is helpful to first define the term “devised.” In *Devising Theatre: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook*, Alison Oddey describes devised theatre as “a response and reaction to the playwright-director relationship, to text-based theatre, and to naturalism, and challenges the prevailing ideology of one person’s text under another’s direction” (4). While this classification implies a certain practice of theatre-making—one that is ensemble-based and experimental—it mostly articulates, to borrow a phrase from Moisés Kaufman, “what something is not” (qtd. in Groff 18). By contrast, Kaufman, the artistic director of the Tectonic Theater Project, offers a positive vision of what devised theatre can be:

To me, devising is about creating *theatrical* narratives, starting with the elements of the stage. When I speak of Moment Work, I often say it’s “writing performance as opposed to writing text” ... So, for Tectonic Theater Project, we have spent the last twenty-five years asking that question: What is theatrical? How do we create theatrical narratives, stories for the stage...?” (qtd. in Brenner et al 239; emphasis in the original).

Tectonic’s Moment Work is a technique that explores how to create form and content simultaneously. The devising process is broken into theatrical units of time (called Moments), with each Moment bracketed by the words, “I/We begin” and “I/We end.” Moments are based on playing with the aforementioned non-textual elements of the stage: These can be physical (light, sound, props, gesture, etc.) or conceptual (surprise, suspense, representation, etc.).¹

Moment Work thus functions as a process akin to sketching in the rehearsal room: a means to explore ideas without needing to know where or how these theatrical units might fit into an emerging narrative. The group then observes what themes, images, characters, and stories rise to the surface and begin sculpting the play. However, once you've built the script from Moment Work, how do you then continue heightening the theatricality with the non-text elements? Rather than merely "dressing up" the text, Moment Work helps devisers find a theatrical vocabulary to create dramatic tension.

Project Overview

A brief description of our process, timeline, and a synopsis of the play that emerged from the students' work will make our examples more meaningful. In 2016, I (Lisa S. Brenner) met with the rising seniors to unearth a point of departure, also called a "hunch." In the fall, Tectonic lead a four-hour Level One training (over a weekend). Throughout the year, Tectonic teaching artists Barbara Pitts McAdams and Scott Barrow continued this process by attending the capstone class (two hours, once a week). The first term was comprised of Moment Work around the hunch and learning Level Two concepts, such as layering and sequencing moments, making plot timelines, and juxtaposing the various narrative lines of individual elements. Over winter break, the students who wanted to write worked with the Tectonic artists and myself (via Google docs) to cull together a working script from the Moments, ideas, and text that emerged during the Fall term. In the Spring term, the weekly two-hour capstone class continued, along with a mainstage rehearsal schedule.

To arrive at what Tectonic calls “the hunch,” or a point of departure, I gave students a writing prompt, the results of which we anonymously read aloud:

What’s something you want to see on stage?

What’s something you want to understand?

What’s a story you need to tell?

What’s something you fear?

What rose to the surface was “fear of the Other” and fear of feeling “Other.” When one student half-jokingly added “fear of cockroaches,” our inspiration became Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*. A semester of Moment Work began, with our subject matter informing the types of props, set pieces, text, and other elements we explored. (See Figure 1).



Fig. 1: Philippe Abiyouness as the Author (Kafka) in *A Metamorphosis*. Photo credit: Lynne Delade.

By November, with the election of Donald Trump, the hunch (fear of the Other/fear of feeling Other) seemed prescient. Indeed, the need to make a play that gave voice to their anxieties felt urgent. Kafka's story famously begins, "One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that while in bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug." Fearing his transformed state, his family quarantines him, attacks him, and ultimately eradicates him. In our play, *A Metamorphosis*, Gregor would stand in for all the "Others" in our current political climate (immigrants, Muslims, LGBTQ, etc.). The Moments focused on theatrical forms for Kafka's world as well as experimentations with found text from current culture (Trump speeches, anti-gay pamphlets, anti-immigration sound bites, to name a few). Anything was fair game, which led to enlivening and sometimes uncomfortable discussions. Eventually, three students took on the task of writing a script that synthesized this material.

The play that emerged began with the Author presenting the audience with a straightforward adaptation of Kafka's story, until the Samsa family balks at their portrayal. A reality TV crew enters and promises the Samsas money if they share their struggle on television. (Figure 2). Eventually, the Author is silenced, as the family comes to believe the reality TV crew's "alternate facts" about the threat Gregor poses. Having reassured the audience that he can control such threats, the Producer gains fame and power. Once finished with the Samsa family, the TV producers search the audience for the next "Other" to exploit.



Fig. 2: The reality TV producers offer the Samsa's a contract. Photo credit: Lynne Delade.

With a plot mapped out and dialogue written (actually quite over-written in the first draft), we could return our focus to how the non-text elements might carry the narrative. With mentoring from design faculty and constant access to our performance space, our student designers were able to design and construct a set and rough-in the light and sound design weeks before our first performance. The advantage of having all designers present as we rehearsed cannot be overstated, as they were as much creators of the narrative as the playwrights.

The following are a few chosen examples of how students used the non-textual elements. We offer these details to demonstrate our contention that Moment Work teaches theatre-makers show to effectively communicate using theatrical language.

Architecture and Space

The theatrical space doesn't just house a production; it provides an opportunity to submerge the audience into the world of the play. Our production took place in a hundred-seat, raked, proscenium-style theater at Drew called "the Director's Lab." The

class initially assumed that we would present the story of the Samsa family via a traditional seating arrangement; however, Moments exploring every nook—in the wings, the vestibules, the prop closet, the aisles—led to questions about audience placement. In a perfect example of the dialogue between form and content, students began asking if perhaps using some immersive staging could allow us to engage our audience more directly. As their mentors, however, we were adamant that the students not layer in an immersive form unless it had a clear narrative purpose.

For research, we went on a class field trip to see the immersive play *Sleep No More*. The students observed that audiences for that show are aware that they are seeing only a version of the content, as they choose their own journey throughout the space. In the current political climate of “alternative facts” and news that caters to our individual “bubbles,” we increasingly live in a world where our concept of the truth is based on what information we receive. With that insight, the students created an Act 2² in which the reality crew instructs the audience to literally abandon the world of the Author. Half the audience went to the Green Room to watch Grete (Gregor Samsa’s caring sister) be manipulated by the Lodgers (who are hired by the reality crew to bring in more drama). (Figure 3). Meanwhile, the rest of the audience followed Gregor’s father to an adjoining space near the Director’s Lab for his interview (Figure 4). The Mother and Gregor’s Manager simultaneously had a short scene in the dressing room in which a smaller subset of audience is pulled; likewise, Grete pulled a few audience members into a stairwell for a conversation about being ashamed of family members.

This use of the space had never been done at Drew, and it compelled audience members to feel complicit in the Producer’s hijacking of the narrative. At a talk back, one

student commented that she felt terrible abandoning the Author, but she was afraid not to comply with the Producer. This was a world where reality shifted quickly, and she didn't want to be singled out. Other students remarked that they had FOMO (fear of missing out) because they wondered what information they were missing out on from the other rooms. Rather than be told through the dialogue that truth can be manipulated, the audience experienced this notion through their interactions with the space.



Fig. 3 & 4. Immersive staging in *A Metamorphosis*. Photo credit: Lynne Delade.

This feeling of manipulation only heightened as the play continued. Act 3 begins when the reality crew interns burst into the immersive scenes to say there has been an accident and everyone must be contained in one space. As the audience returns to their seats in the Director's Lab, they see the set toppled over and the stage floor littered with apples. The cameraman shows Grete (on his iPhone) the footage of Father attacking Gregor with apples. She can't believe it, because she didn't see it happen with her own eyes; yet, here she is being shown the footage as proof. Again, reality is shaped by the information we're given. Nonetheless, the Producer and his associates manage to spin this attack on Gregor as a moment of self-defense – Gregor is not the victim, he is a

security threat. The Producer convinces the Samsas that the Other must be eradicated. The audience now becomes passive voyeurs who, like the Samsas, serve as surrogates for the audience (and U.S. citizens) who remain silent as the producers seek out the next set of “roaches.” The physical space and the audience’s movement within it, informed the construction of the story-line as well as the audience’s emotional response.

Props: The Red Tape

Rather than mere objects for stage business, props can also convey narrative—but only if they are used strategically throughout the production. The students had created a Moment earlier in the process (before any script had been written) in which an actor’s eyes and mouth were covered in duct tape. Being silenced with the duct tape read very viscerally to many of the students. They were struck by how a simple prop could create such a gut punch, and they knew they wanted that Moment in the show. Toward the end of our play, as the Producer is usurping the narrative from the Author, a piece of duct tape is finally placed over the Author’s mouth. (Figure 5).



Fig. 5: The use of props and color to convey narrative in *A Metamorphosis*. Photo credit: Lynne Delade.

The students found a wide roll of red duct tape, which made the Moment even stronger due to its color. The props designer describes this theatrical discovery³:

... I mentioned using caution tape as a [theatrical] form for the tape used to silence outspoken characters. [Another student] brought up the idea of using red tape, and that immediately made me think about red tape as a symbol for government and media censorship... by using the red tape to silence or censor Grete and The Author, the TV crew sneakily controlled who had the power to speak in the world of the play.

This theatrical use of the tape, however, had to be earned. As their Moment Work advisor, I (Pitts McAdams) suggested that if that very bold prop is going to appear in Act 3, we needed to discover a way to track it back to Act 1: How can we foreshadow and build to this use of the prop? How can we expand the theatrical vocabulary of the red

tape? The student director and contributing cast members realized it could be part of the cameraman's equipment. The costume designer had already layered bold color into the reality TV crew's arrival, so seeing the red tape on the belt of the character could contribute to the destruction of the sepia-toned world of the Author. They created a Moment in Act 1, as the reality TV crew is taking over, to rip several strips of the red tape as part of the cameraman's prep to secure his camera cables. Now, the theatrical arc of the prop grew from innocuous utility (taping down cables) to an object used to violently silence any opposition to the reality show's agenda (first the Author is silenced, and then when Grete attempts to fight back, she too has her mouth taped). A similar trajectory can be used to describe the use of apples in the play (another red prop). In both cases, the props were not used to merely illustrate the text or to create a realistic rendering of the world. Rather, they were mindfully used to convey dynamic change and thereby add dramatic content (information about the world, the characters, the action) and heighten the theatricality of the play (its potential for lyricism, symbolism, and visceral response).

Lights

Moment Work with lights often leads to explorations of shadow and silhouette that evoke a particular mood. For *A Metamorphosis*, this vocabulary was an effective way to create mystery and suspense. The class subtitled the play: *A Horror Story for Our Time*, so Moments with light were essential to creating an off-kilter reality. The students liked the theatrical form of never seeing Gregor as a literal cockroach but rather hinted at

in silhouette, thereby allowing for the audience's projections of Gregor's signification.

One student explains:

We started with the use of light, and then discovered how that led to the use of shadow, which seemed to be able to create almost a character onto itself and gave us a new way to express different points of view. During the stages of the show, we discussed quite a bit how we wanted to showcase "the Other" for the audience, and how we wanted them to perceive it. Then we thought of all the elements of the stage, and how important each element is in putting a story together and thought that it would be possible to represent the Gregor character while using [only] light and sound.

We made many Moments exploring how to create the shadow silhouette of Gregor as a cockroach. The play began with the author silhouetted behind a door, typing. This door set piece was an asymmetrical wooden frame with stretched fabric that could be lit from behind. (Figure 6).

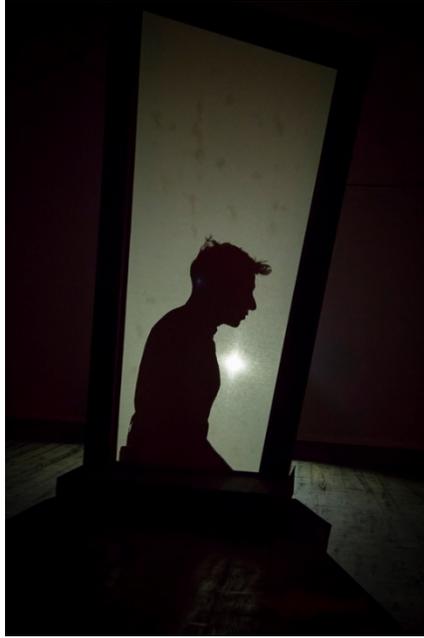


Fig. 6: A silhouette of The Author (Kafka) in *A Metamorphosis*. Photo credit: Lynne Delade.

We again used a silhouette behind the door in Act 1 when the Father and Gregor have a physical confrontation. As their Moment Work advisor, I instructed the class to question how this silhouette vocabulary could literally “grow.” Recalling their prior experiments with lights and shadows during the Moment Work process, the students decided to create a climactic Moment in which Gregor as symbolic Other would appear as a silhouette that filled the entire back wall.

Despite the excitement surrounding this concept, its execution onstage was another matter. Initially, as the set was being built, the black curtain on the back wall had been struck, revealing a cyclorama. As we all watched this climatic Moment, we agreed that the exposed cyclorama was undercutting the dramatic effect—the back wall was now bright white, instead of receding into a black abyss. As much as they hated the extra work of re-hanging the black curtain, it made all the difference. When the Moment was incorporated in Act 3 for the final destruction of Gregor, the curtain was pulled, and

Gregor's cockroach form was now in silhouette about ten feet tall. In Moment Work training, when we broke down the "element of suspense," an important component was concealment/revelation. Re-hanging the black curtain to heighten the reveal was critical to create the necessary effect, and it became a lesson: effectively implementing a form starts by focusing on its essential elements.

Sound

When Tectonic teaches Level One, they urge Moment makers to look beyond merely using sound as underscoring. In this case, as the teaching artists and faculty watched Act 1 come together, we realized we needed sound to support the heightened gestural vocabulary and style of performance. The students explored having all sound be generated live by our stage crew, but it was distracting and at the same time not impactful enough. We needed sound to help convey the tone of this world, and thus urged our student sound designer to look for expressionistic ways to heighten the *mise-en-scène*. For instance, when the Manager arrived to see why Gregor hasn't come to work, each time she removed her pocket watch an unnervingly present ticking sound would become the primary element. (Figure 7). Similarly, when Gregor attempted to speak, a distorted metallic/nails on a chalkboard sound was uncomfortably projected.



Fig. 7: Katie Newton as the Manager in *A Metamorphosis*. Photo credit: Lynne Delade.

The element of sound, however, was also used to communicate the increasing sense of menace. The sound designer researched music from 1915 and discovered a lullaby for Grete to sing to Gregor. This song became a recurring motif, at first to express tenderness for the quarantined Gregor. In Act 3, it was sung ominously, in the dark, by the Female Associate Producer as she searched the audience with a flashlight for new “roaches” to exploit and scapegoat. Again, an element of the stage was used to create dynamic change: Sound that had been used to communicate a connection with Gregor transformed into an expression of peril.

Conclusion

We have used the above as examples of how the Drew students consciously examined and explored non-textual elements, but this is by no means an exhaustive list of their discoveries (space permitting, we could include the use of gesture, make-up,

costumes, etc.). In the department debrief of *A Metamorphosis*, it was gratifying to listen to the capstone class articulate this process so clearly to their faculty and peers. They had a deep and sophisticated understanding of every choice they presented—in both content and form. It is our contention that Moment Work helped these young devisers create a more engaging, impactful artistic experience than they would have if they had worked in a traditional (autocratic and text-centric) theatre praxis.

Moreover, the students' final reflection papers reveal that Moment Work also helped them build skills valued in the professional theatre, such as collaboration and artistic risk-taking. In his essay, "Exploring Students' Perceptions of Devising," James McKinnon argues that "knowledge about how students experience devising can help practitioners, educators, and students define and achieve their learning objectives" (182). Using reflections from his own devised production as a case study, McKinnon concludes that devising helps students to be better collaborators—including learning how to deal with conflict and learning to take on leadership roles—as well as becoming more creative and able to take risks, embodied by "making offers, trying them out, showing them, giving and applying feedback" (188). Similarly, in "The Pedagogic Value of Undergraduate Devising," Beth Watkins reports that her devising students felt a greater sense of ownership over the work, resulting in an ability to take on collaborative projects on their own. She credits devising with creating "a laboratory for experimentation, for intellectual and physical exploration, and for opportunities to falter and regroup" (178). Our findings concur with these studies; students expressed learning to work as a team and to listen to others. In their final reflection papers, one student shared, "We weren't ever stuck in our heads about who is going to be the 'lead' in the show; it was completely

about the ensemble and final product. The [devising] process not only broke the way we have been trained to think when putting on a show, but also allowed for more open communication with all the people in the room.” Another advantage of devising is that it enables participants to let go of the fear of failure, of not being “good enough” or “getting it right,” and a fear of not knowing (the answer, the result) —not easy feats in a culture of instant knowledge and gratification. In another reflection, a student concluded, “It takes bravery and confidence in trying something that might not work out in the end, but these were necessary risks... If a particular movement or idea is uncomfortable because of its difficulty, then bathe in that experience.” As these comments exemplify, Moment Work not only promotes creativity by encouraging devisers to explore the theatrical potential of the non-textual elements of the stage, but also by reinforcing qualities such as cooperation and risk taking—qualities that we believe foster innovation.

Ultimately, Moment Work reaps these benefits because it is a *systematic* way of creating *theatrical* narratives. Moment Work proceeds from experimentation (sketching in the rehearsal room) to a product based on the needs of the show. As another student articulated, “We are told to either build on the idea, reframe it, or acknowledge it and maybe table it for another idea or project.” Ideas are not worked out in the abstract, but on one’s feet. This process leads to thinking and speaking theatrically, as Kaufman describes it:

I really think that there is a way in which theatrical narratives often begin by being an act of translation, meaning that we speak our everyday language, right? Or we write our everyday language. But when you’re creating a piece of theatre, what you’re doing is you’re finding a way of articulating your ideas, your

concerns, your passions—theatrically. And if we agree that there's a thing called theatrical language, there is a theatrical language we're constantly learning to translate, right?

But to me, the ultimate goal of Moment Work is to teach people to think theatrically so that you can become so fluent in a theatrical language that you can write performance as a point of departure. So, you're not translating—you're speaking the theatrical language. (qtd. in Brenner, et al 243).

If, like the Author in *A Metamorphosis*, our job as theatre artists is to convey truth on stage, we must learn to communicate in theatrical language—taking the time to deliberate, to play, to speak and listen to one another anew.

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Notes

¹ Unlike Viewpoints, Moment Work does not define a set number of elements. In fact, each group begins by writing down as many of elements as possible; this list is determined by the participants in the room (e.g. a group of circus performers might suggest "acrobatics"). The list can also be added to throughout the rehearsal process.

² The final play was a continuous ninety minutes, but for the sake of clarity, we will refer to Moments as occurring in Act 1, Act 2 or Act 3.

³ All quotes from student reflection papers were obtained using IRB consent. Names of students remain anonymous throughout.