
The Forever Quest

A Reflective Summary of my Internship

October 23, 2021 - January 10, 2022

**CRY
HAVOC**
THEATER COMPANY



Summary of Experience

Serving as the Assistant Director on *The Forever Quest* at Cry Havoc Theatre Company in Dallas provided me the opportunity to achieve several learning goals I wanted to achieve in connection to devising with youth. Cry Havoc is a teen devising company founded in 2014 by Mara Richards Bim. They are known for creating new works that are socially relevant, bold and topical to the political issues facing the United States of America today. I selected Cry Havoc as the site of my internship because its mission (to create art that amplifies youth voice and serves as a conduit for community dialogue) and vision for a more empathic and equitable world align strongly with my own.

Not only did this internship provide me a chance to work with young people developing an original piece of theatre, but it also prompted me to devise a TYA play, which I had never done before. Because my ability to fulfill this internship was funded by the Don & Elizabeth Doyle Fellowship, it was even more fitting that the product of this experience be a TYA play. Because of the target audience of the piece, a large focus of the devising centered around narrative structure in a way that had to be secondary or nonexistent in previous devised pieces I have worked on which followed a more thematic or post dramatic structure. As such, I have become more attuned to the role that narrative plays in dramatic pieces, particularly as I work toward adapting this piece into a musical.

While the overall experience was beneficial and extremely useful for my future work, it occasionally chafed as I navigated collaborating as an assistant with a new director, Ashley White. Ashley is an accomplished director as well as a nationally renowned fight and intimacy director. Her approach to collaboration and ensemble was similar in theory to my own, but in practice I sometimes found it difficult to know how to best support the work at any given moment. Occasionally the interpersonal dynamics at play in the room challenged me to find the opportunities where I could more fruitfully support the project. Due to this, I feel more confident in my abilities to lead, rather than assist projects like this in the future.



Learning Goals

Goal #1: Devise socially relevant work with young people

Goal #2: Gain experience with narrative driven devising

Goal #3: Personally practice a Theatre of Radical Compassion approach to collaboration

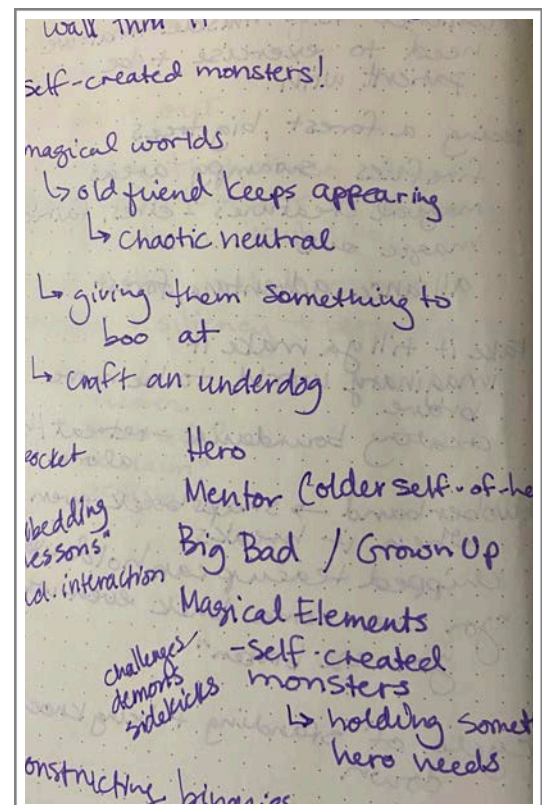
Narrative Reflection

November 2021 - Devising from Afar

The Forever Quest marks the third experience I have had devising with young people. Each experience has been unique and this was no exception. Coming into the project I knew that we would be making a TYA piece about resiliency with a protagonist who goes on a quest. Because the prompt was fairly open, I was excited to see how the teen devisers would contribute to shaping the work and in what ways resiliency resonated with them, particularly in the midst of a pandemic.

I was able to join the initial devising rehearsals via Zoom as they were held weekly in November. Ashley led a series of exercises that alternated between free-writing on prompts and physical movement workshops to develop characters or ideas. These activities yielded several things.

First it identified some of the assets of the young people in the room. We had poets, creative writers, dancers with various training backgrounds, movers with a range of skill, and experts on bullying and youth peer-relationship trials. The creative writing skills helped us identify aspects of the setting and characters that would set up the premise for the magical world of the play. The movers and dancers contributed to the concepts for transitions that Ashley would later try to incorporate. The personal stories built out the motivations of the characters as we moved into scenarios, which later became core scenes within the play.



Secondly, these initial devising rehearsals and conversations led us to identify key relationships that would factor into the play. At right are my notes from the first rehearsal, which note discussions about key characters - a hero, a mentor, and a big bad. This triad would help fuel some of the narrative structure around our quest later as we began to sequence the show.

Thirdly, these early rehearsals were clearly designed to encourage ensemble building. The first day Ashley facilitated a process for crafting a community contract limited to 5 rules. Although we ended up with six, this limiting milestone was useful in helping us to consolidate our needs and desires around collaborative strategies into major headings. These included:

Community Contract
(five rules)

1. No phones out during rehearsal, within reason. - if you need to have your phone on you because of personal reasons - just alert the team and we will respect that need
2. Respect pronouns in and out of space. Come as you are and be who you are. Respect each other's boundaries.
3. Celebrate moments of risk-taking
4. Keep an open mind
5. Mental health check-ins, give your 100% while respecting your capacity
6. Using a button word to alert folx to potentially harmful comments or language ("Whoa" with hand up and head turn)

The contract itself reflects the make up of the ensemble which included a majority queer and gender non-binary company. Particularly given the nature of the topic of resiliency, it was particularly useful to include agreements around mental health and button words (Ashley's rephrase for "trigger warning"). I found it interesting that she asked the company to come up with a gesture and a word to signal this and while I like this concept for future practices, I found the elected gesture/word to be too commonplace to be an alert. However, as I was on Zoom and was unsure how incorporated the adult staff and young performers and staff were in actuality in the space. (In reflection, moments like this contributed to some of the challenges I faced personally in the space.) The other major ensemble building moment Ashley facilitated was the closing ritual that would become our opening and closing ritual.

While Ashley facilitated, this was all teen-driven. The cast selected two activities that touched on physical and vocal warm ups/cool downs and a mental/physical health check in.

The final thing these activities yielded was dramatic text. During our third rehearsal, Ashley asked me to lead an exercise I had described to her in a planning meeting that could bridge the physical work with the creative writing we had done. Building off a gesture-centric activity led by choreographer Quintin Jones, I asked our actors to choose one of those gestures to further explore character. Moving



with that gesture I led them through a series of prompts around the given circumstances of that gesture. After physicalizing for several minutes, the actors came back to their writing and wrote a letter from the perspective of the character they had just been moving as. This letter pleaded to someone to assist them in getting their desire. The letter activity moves through a few phases but eventually yields a monologue. Below is one example of the pieces that the teens wrote from this exercise:

I want you to see me for me. I want to be seen through a lens of love. For just one moment, let me escape my flaws. I'll wear the mask, and you can put on those rose-tinted lenses, and we can fall in unconditional love and play this beautiful game of pretend from dawn to dusk, and I can rest peacefully knowing that I can be acceptable, that all of me that you can see can be accepted. And together in our dreams we can love and understand and let every passing event just be. Yes, in that dream I can finally take off the mask, and you can finally pop out the lenses of those rose-tinted shades, and perhaps my beauty and your appreciation will still remain.

Personally, I found that these texts presented several opportunities to push further into the character narratives that the teens were exploring. The idea of wearing a mask or the need to escape one's flaws, to be accepted, to have connection and fellowship are all strong markers of childhood insecurities and anxieties that relate to resiliency. However, these texts were never re-incorporated into the devising process. Had I been directing this piece, I would have loved to pick back up with these pieces to identify key concepts in them that the group identified with and then craft scenarios around them to fuel the story.

While these initial exploratory sessions were fruitful in mapping assets, developing foundational elements of the story, and acquainting all of the collaborators to each other's processes, I wish that there had been more intentional connection between one section and the next to build the momentum of the story development. In the end it was difficult to tell if the main driver of the story development was coming from the ideas presented by the teens or from Ashley and her reference point of her six year old son and his interests.

December 2021 - Arrived in Dallas

As we entered into December the process began to shift from weekly rehearsals to daily rehearsals for two weeks through the holidays. I arrived in Dallas on December 7 and was in-person rehearsing the following day. My first rehearsal with the cast happened to coincide with a day that Ashley was out of town. Before leaving, she had set a plan for Quintin to lead the staging of the transition from the "real world." I was to assist Quintin in developing this piece and then end on some creative writing on the ideas of loyalty, braver, and trust. Because Quintin and several cast members were significantly late for this rehearsal I started the group off with our ritual warm up and asked them to stretch in preparation for choreography.

After Quintin arrived, we got down to work. I found collaborating with Quintin to be seamless. He was very generous in soliciting feedback from performers and me after each run or exploration. This helped us develop a common vocabulary and identify key moments in the choreography. The interaction and collaborative chemistry in this rehearsal emboldened me to speak up more assertively throughout the process. When it came to choreography I found a natural gap for my skillset, especially as Quintin could not be present at every rehearsal. Thus I served as a dance captain of sorts and coached choreography or helped the cast sharpen certain moves or sequences throughout the run.

The following week we moved into daily rehearsals. I joined the cast for the opening ritual and helped facilitate as Ashley was running late due to childcare issues. When Ashley arrived she was very forthcoming with her rehearsal plan and specific goals, but often struggled to articulate how I could support them. Thus, I tried to hang back until there was something I could do in order to fill a need. As daily rehearsals began - a two week process overall - we ran into several obstacles with absences due to family emergency or COVID-19. This caused a lot of strife, particularly for Ashley as she tried to nail down the story and staging.

One odd transition I noticed here was a shift in protocol during the opening and closing ritual. When I had observed on Zoom, cast and directors participated in the ritual, but once we got into daily rehearsals, Ashley did not join the cast in their rituals. This may have been

an intentional separation to ensure that we started on time while the artistic team handled logistics. However, I found this a distancing moment with the cast. Considering I had just arrived, it made it more difficult for me to connect with the teens in a collaborative way and distanced me even more as a collaborator in the process. This may have been a personal perception, as when I worked one-on-one with the teens they responded to my leadership and were friendly, warm and professional. I stopped participating in the ritual because I was following Ashley's lead and assumed she wanted to promote the ensemble's autonomy and community. But I don't think this was a good enough reason for me to stop at this point in the process. If I could do it again, I would ensure that we at least all start together.

I noticed that the timing of rehearsals was not always used efficiently or effectively. The process included 7 hour rehearsals with a one hour lunch midday. The first week we would start at ten and take lunch at noon. The following four hours of rehearsal would trudge by as energy sank post-meal. I suggested that we shift to a 1pm lunch the following week, which did help our morning productivity. With regard to time management, I also found a lack of effective scaffolding to be a contributor to the slow progress and memorization - especially as changes happened on the fly. There were several distractions Ashley was navigating as we tried to polish up the show heading into tech week, such as issues with the load-in schedule, scenic design, and illness among the staff and cast. In these distractions, I also found opportunities to make usefully impact the work by taking over rehearsals in order to free Ashley up to navigate artistic decisions.

I wish that I had figured out a better way for Ashley and I to interface on the scaffolding and rehearsal process design for a production with young people. This is an avenue where I bring significant experience and in which Ashley has limited knowledge, a point which she indicated herself. However, we never communicated a time or a process to share these ideas or feedback, and as Ashley would often take other calls or work appointments during the lunch break, it was difficult to find a time in the process to address these issues. Thus, I occasionally felt shut down as I would try to find moments within the process to suggest something or help in some way and would never know if my offering would be met with welcome or with dismissal. I should note that every time a dismissal occurred there was always a youth-driven reason behind it. Even so, as we found ourselves backs up against a wall on a deadline, I became frustrated by the lack of effective project management that I was confident I could help contribute to.

January 2022 - Arrived in Dallas

Heading into tech, I focused on fine-tuning actors' performances and helping to track movement, transitions, and blocking for consistency as our stage management team needed to focus elsewhere. This freed Ashley up to focus on the big picture items and technical integration. When asked how I could best serve her process during dress runs, Ashley did not have a clear role for me, so I stepped in to play fake audience members, so the actors could practice different scenarios in direct address sections to the audience.

During the final dress rehearsal I was given the task of running the filming of the production as Ashley had to go out of town (this was supposed to be our opening night, but due to COVID became a filmed dress rehearsal). Having run filming for YAA productions, I was confident in my ability to ensure we got what we needed. However, some scheduling snafus and a technical error during the run set our time frame back. This resulted in my having to prioritize certain close ups over others and to communicate and reset very quickly. I work well under pressure so this was not too difficult for me, but because I was trying to serve the needs of others who didn't fully communicate their needs, I can only hope that we got everything filmed that was necessary.

Opening weekend I was the only member of the production team to support the show. Considering I wasn't able to attend the second weekend, I almost preferred this as it gave me a chance to network and relationship build with the company members and artistic director more. I felt more useful even at this late stage to support the production as a clear leader in the project, yet still understood my role as a steward of Ashley's vision.



Reflection on Product

Considering the challenges that this production faced, I'm proud of the work that was achieved on *The Forever Quest*. I found the foundational story to be a strong premise, but the overall integration of the elements devised into the story structure that Ashley had very intentionally laid out for the cast, to be weakly finessed. This led to several plot holes or moments of underdeveloped story that we kept pushing off, much to my dismay. However, the core concept and first act have a solid enough structure that I felt drawn to developing the play further.

From a staging perspective there were several dynamic elements and great ideas. I can see the potential of Ashley's work if she was with professional or fully adult performers. However, I think the overall product of the piece may have improved if more attention was paid to the assets and skills in the room and if we could have better scaffolded the actor's learning over a longer period of time. For instance, we incorporated two full length dances and a movement piece when only two of our seven performers were dancers. Only two of these choreographic sequences actually added to the story. The hours spent working on these dances - while fun for me - may have been better utilized in other ways to support the overall product. I noticed a mindset of two phases of the rehearsal "developing" and "staging" which under different circumstances I would also subscribe to. However, because we had such a limited time to put the whole show together, it would have been more effective to stage or refine scenes shortly after their development rather than waiting to block or given notes on character physicality and projection in the final week.

In performance the piece played pretty successfully to audiences of 4-6 year olds. However, Cry Havoc's proposed age for this piece was 10-12. There was a lack of sophistication in the dialogue that partially led to this effect, as well as the way in which direct address was handled. However, because the only children we had access to in testing out the show were 5 or 6 years old, and because Ashley's son was such an inspiration around what would play to the audience, this may have been inevitable. If I were placed in a similar situation in the future, I imagine that I would review instructional standards for this age group and coach the devisers more actively into the level of dialogue and story needed to engage 10-12 year olds.

While the final piece was not perfect, I do think that it has a lot of potential and overall good bones. After returning to ASU, I contacted a former collaborator and pitched him the idea of *The Forever Quest* as a TYA musical centered on youth anxiety and the idea of using

one's own artistic practice as a resiliency and coping tool. I secured permission from Cry Havoc and Ashley to continue working with the piece. We have currently written one song and developed a revised story outline and are applying for grants to finance the development process. I hope to use youth devisers to help develop the second and third acts of the story as we continue to build out this adaptation.

