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Directing Whitewashed and Dismantling Hierarchy

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Directing *Whitewashed* and Dismantling Hierarchy

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
Dmitri Ades-Laurent

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2021

This Senior Project is dedicated to Morgan Barnes-Whitehead. To have a theatrical partner who not only gave me the gift of one of the best scripts I've ever read, but to put the trust in me needed to carry this story to the stage is the greatest imaginable conclusion to my college experience. At every turn, we faced obstacles that I would not have had the chutzpah to combat without your constant support, love, and partnership. I feel so honored to have been able to work with you, and after the year we've had, I know that we can get through anything that comes up against us. I'm so lucky to have been able to work with you, both on this project as well as in all of our theatrical endeavors through the years. Thank you.

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Introduction

The Senior Project assigned to every graduating Bard student is hailed as the capstone to their college experience: the result of four years of work that represents dedication, quality, and mastery in that student's field. To write a paper on a piece of theater, especially one that means so much to me, feels in vain. I will never be able to put into words what it feels like to have the things I love most about theater come to life through imagination and collaboration. With that being said, I will make an attempt to discuss my senior project in its semi-finalized state. Maybe in a couple of weeks, when the performance happens, I will look back at this paper and laugh at the things I thought were important enough to write in here, but only time will tell.

Part 1: Hatching A Sproj

Finicky Specifics

Coming to Bard, I was convinced that I'd end up an actor. I've always loved theater deeply, but had gotten comfortable with the idea that I had nothing left to learn. I had found a channel to the world of theater that I knew I could do, and I wasn't about to risk walking a new route that *might* work out, but that was unfamiliar and strange. I didn't want to lose my connection to theater by learning that I was bad at something. Looking back, I recognize just how contradictory this is to true theatrical growth: if you never open yourself up to change, your art becomes static and unchallenging. Regardless of whether or not I bore any level of consciousness to this philosophy, I maintained my stubborn connection to acting and refused to try out any new roles in theatrical structure.

Through the mandatory Introduction to Playwriting course for everyone moderating into Theater and Performance, I took my first steps outside of the confines of acting as a theatrical expression. It was this course that rapidly progressed my passion for playwriting, and brought me to the realization that I was denying myself so many vehicles for storytelling that I had never even considered in my comfort zone of acting. Was I not made to take that particular course, I think that it would have taken years for me to take the plunge into other theatrical realms, and be willing to take the risk of being bad at something. I've written some *really* bad plays, and that's okay because I also developed a love for writing that is unparalleled. When I first started writing, I felt like I had an obligation to write what other people wanted me to write, which in hindsight is a very actorly way to go about it. As an actor, I would be given a direction, and say yes to it. I figured that playwriting would run on the same engine, but have since come to realize that if I

am writing anything other than the world's truths as I see them, I am doing a disservice to my own love of writing.

Once I realized that confining myself to a singular theatrical study was doing me no favors, I expanded my horizons further and started the Bard Bards, the student-run Shakespeare performing company on campus. This was yet another found passion of mine, taking a leadership role in making space for others to perform. However, I realized that in taking on that role, I had sacrificed the option to act, and I was the head of the Bard Bards for three years and never got to perform in a show. As much as I loved administrative work and leadership, I missed a lot of the creativity that acting and writing had provided for me. Looking for more guidance in finding the perfect fit for my theatrical expression, I decided to study away for a semester at the National Theater Institute, in which I would eventually discover my drive for directing. Directing gave me both creative freedom as well as the leadership that I had loved in being a club head, but relies heavily on collaboration. This was where I truly began to bloom as a theatermaker, and returned from my semester away with a good idea of how I wanted to approach the senior project.

Initial conception

When deciding what kind of theater I wanted to use as a springboard into the professional, post-college stage, the first thing I had to consider was who had the same drive, the same tenacity, and a sincere desire to tell the same stories as myself. This was when I found a strong collaborator in my classmate and friend, Morgan Barnes-Whitehead. She and I had worked together closely on class projects, in shows for the Bard Bards, and had developed a powerful dynamic built on mutual trust and love. Our uncanny theatrical parallels provided a solid foundation through which it made the most sense to choose each other as artistic partners,

especially since we both wanted to utilize one of the typical senior project structures: Morgan would write a 25 minute play, I would direct it, and we'd work as a team from the beginning through to the final performance.

Once Morgan and I had decided that we wanted to partner up for this undertaking, the next step was to decide whose story we wanted to tell. As members of the queer community, she and I had both felt underrepresented in the world of theater. There is plenty of room for cisgender, white, gay men, but beyond that, queer folks are so rarely represented onstage that we felt a deep desire to contribute to that greater conversation by producing a show that showed not only queer people who did not fit into the aforementioned category, but who were allowed to feel joy on the stage. In all of my years of seeking out LGBTQ+ media, I have found barely a handful wherein the representation is a joyous one. There is almost always death, pain, and suffering; which is undeniably an aspect of queer livelihood, but there is room for so much more.

In addition to our queer experiences, Morgan approached me about telling the story of being “whitewashed”. While this is not an experience I can speak directly to, I have heard this term come up frequently in the circles I find myself in, going back to the predominantly white school I attended for thirteen years prior to Bard. The term itself is an expression of assimilation, the idea that people of color (more specifically, I have heard it used to describe Black folks) can spend so much time in white spaces that they themselves lose touch with their Blackness. It is an ugly term that suggests there is but one way to live in a Black identity, and a term that encourages the idea of stereotypes within Black communities. “Whitewashed” also denies the experiences of folks of color who have been forced to some degree of assimilation in order of self-preservation. Being white myself, I thought that white meant “raceless” for many years of my life. I subconsciously equated it with neutrality, which was the result of having never truly

examined where I stand in relation to those in society around me. Of course, this was no way to exist, let alone be an artist. Throughout my time at Bard I have grown immensely, and recognize my place in regards to intersectionality. I have a much more well-rounded view of the privileges and obstacles that affect me. Much of this is due to the trust and care taken in constructing *Whitewashed*.

When Morgan told me that she wanted me to direct this particular play, I felt not only a great sense of humility and respect, but genuine concern as to how I'd feel directing a play that did not align with my own lived experiences when it comes to race. I felt truly honored that she trusted me to undertake this task, as well as determined to end this process with a show that felt wholly authentic to those it represented. By the time summer of 2020 came around, we were already in script development. Wanting to keep each other involved as much as possible, we came up with a system of symbiosis, wherein Morgan would send me a draft, and I'd write comments and give feedback. This way we could ensure equal labor during every step of the process, and also end with a script that we both felt deeply connected to. By the first draft of the script, I had already fallen in love with the two main characters: Amira, a slightly awkward yet very warm Black college student working on her own senior thesis, and her girlfriend Hannah, described as a having a supernova of a personality, born in Japan and adopted by her white family as a baby. Both of these characters spent much of their lives in predominantly white spaces, and have difficult relationships to their own races as a result. The two women are spending a month with Hannah's white family so that Amira can observe their dynamic as research for her senior thesis. Since the first draft, this has been the story Morgan and I wanted to tell: queer women who find joy in their love for one another, despite the outside pressure to be someone who they aren't. It is learned very quickly that Hannah has started going by her birth

name in college, where she met Amira, and thus begins undoing some of the assimilation that she has been forced to undergo by being adopted by a white family. As the summer went on, the script became more and more concise and true, and we began the Fall semester with a good idea of where we wanted to go from there.

Part 2: Development

Workshopping

Once we had a pretty good idea of how the script would look, we were able to start workshopping. The structure of the play was thus: there would be four total scenes, one with Amira and Hannah's brother Colin, one with Amira and Hannah in the midst of Hannah's birthday party, one with Amira and Kate (Hannah's mother), and one final scene where Hannah and Amira get to be by themselves on their own planet. I had loved the script at each stage of the drafts, but the reality was that we had to eventually cut some of Morgan's words down, simply for time. I recognize the value in a time limit for theater, it's a challenge in and of itself, but just because some sections had to be taken out does not mean they are lost. I'm sure they'll find their way back into our lives in the future.

During the Fall semester, we were lucky enough to have a professional cast read our script. Our advisor, Chiori Miyagawa, reached out to three fantastic actors: Nilaja Sun, who had worked with both myself and Morgan in the previous semester in her playwriting class; LeeAnne Hutchison, who would play Hannah's adoptive mother, Kate; and Maria-Christina Oliveras, who would read for Hannah. I had already cast fellow student Gavin McKenzie as Colin, so he joined the reading with us. Hearing the words for the first time in workshop, especially through such powerful voices, was a moment of magic. This was my first opportunity to give direction, and by

asking each actor to think about the tempo their character existed in, whether eight-four, or four-three, or one-one, allowed the four of them to find their footing with the script and gave me an ear into the pace that this script needed to live in. This reading was how I learned that the play is driven by being out-of-sync: Amira does not match the tempo of Kate and Colin. Their conversations try to work their way into connection, but circumstance and misfooting cause unbreakable tension that is only rectified by the outro, with Amira finally finding familiarity and a tempo she matches with Hannah. After the staged reading, and with the feedback from my advisor as well as the three professional actors, I felt like I had a deeper sense of where I needed to go to get *Whitewashed* to its fullest potential.

Building a Team

I had worked with Gavin closely in many respects; in student theater shows, classes, and generally as an artistic partner. Colin was the easiest character to cast, being a white cisgender man. We had endless options in Bard's theater community, at least based on identity. However, this cast needed to be one built on trust and conscientiousness, considering the material we were working with. As the director, I had to be extremely careful with who was in the room as we were discussing such delicate issues as code-switching and racial identity. Thus, performing an excellent rendition of Colin for his audition, Gavin was a clear choice. Having worked so closely with him in the past, I knew him to be a reliable, respectful collaborator who was open to listening and contributing where appropriate.

When I set out to cast the show with Morgan, I knew it would be a challenge, in part due to the racial makeup of Bard, and specifically Bard's theater students. One of my worries in casting was that I'd end up default casting: having so few actors to choose from that aligned with

Amira and Hannah's identities that I would have to go with whoever was available, regardless of whether or not they were right for the role. However, Morgan crossed paths with an actor who would end up being a perfect fit for Amira: Ogechi Egonu, a transfer student who we had never met before, but who had a tangible passion for acting. I asked her to read one of Amira's monologues, and she brought the perfect blend of self-assurance yet awkwardness that Amira needed. Her Amira was curious and sincere, yet maintained a snarky edge around those who she deemed less self-aware than her. Ogechi was excited and eager to join our team, and gave us so much light in each and every rehearsal.

We went a couple solid months with no leads on how to cast Hannah. There are so few East Asian actresses in the Bard community, that we worried we might have to seek elsewhere, and hire an actor from the greater area. However, Chiori recommended that we reach out to Bill Wang, a Chinese student who had graduated from the Theater and Performance department in 2020. He suggested that we connect with Julie Reed, a student in the year below us. Having seen Julie act in a number of shows, plus being in classes with her, I knew instantly that she'd be a great fit. After a couple of exchanges and readings, she was on board as well. Her Hannah has always been spunky and heartfelt, and she brings so much energy to all of our meetings.

Finally, I had to cast Kate, the only character of a different age than our acting pool. It wasn't until the Bard Bards Fall Monologue Festival that I found out who would play her: a Sophomore named Allie Sahargun. I had directed Allie, albeit briefly, in my halted production of *King Lear* in the Spring of 2020 as the Duke of Albany. I knew her to be a committed, engaging actor, and with her first read of Kate, I got a sense of her understanding of this complex character. Playing a role that diverts from one's own identity in regards to age is a challenge in

and of itself, and finding an actor who could play a character like this without passing judgment on her was essential.

Trust Establishment

A director is always a complicated role to undertake, especially in the context of college. I felt that I had to preemptively ask my collaborators, who were my classmates, friends, and peers, to put their trust in me as a leader of this process. Even though I've had quite a bit of experience directing by now, it's still uncomfortable to think of myself as an authority figure who the actors have to answer to. In light of wanting to avoid that status structure, I approached our rehearsal process as a democratic, synergetic one. Instead of painting myself as the boss, the figure in the room who always knew best and had final say, I utilized my past experience as a director to communicate to my team that we were just that: a team. My position as director did not give me any hierarchical power over them, rather we would do this altogether and my directorial status was more of a guiding one than an authoritative one.

This is a method that I picked up during my time studying at the National Theater Institute. As a theatermaker, I always prioritize humility and conscientiousness, and to guarantee that, I enter every rehearsal process by letting the cast and crew know explicitly that we are equal collaborators in the room. If I give a direction, and they try it out but it feels untruthful, they are more than welcome to pass up on it. If my rehearsal methods don't work for them, they are encouraged to speak up about it, and we can figure something out together. In my experience, this gives actors a sense of autonomy and safety in their personal artistic development, and in turn allows them to take more risks.

This relates to my overall drive in being a director. The thing I want most as a theater artist is to be a leader while simultaneously dismantling the idea of authority and hierarchy. What my goal was throughout the process of Senior Project was to develop my own style of directing through trial and error with a team who I trusted enough to hold me accountable and give me room to grow. Once I had assembled our team, I put together a kind of statement of accountability to them: their security and comfort in the room was always going to be my priority. Dismantling hierarchy while maintaining my role as the director was a complex undertaking, so my first instinct was to let everyone know how I would hold rehearsals. We would begin with a check-in, and hold space for anything folks wanted to bring into the room. If they were feeling tired, or stressed, or physically affected, it was always welcome in the space. I don't believe in restraining our human emotions or realities in the name of professionalism in rehearsal. By letting me know where each of my actors was at, I was able to tailor rehearsals to their needs and in turn have a much more honest process than if I had demanded full presence every day, regardless of what they as people were dealing with at the time. I know that my actors also really appreciated this, they let me know in their own ways how not having to worry about what my reaction would be to them facing difficulties allowed for a more fulfilling rehearsal process.

I believe that I was able to achieve this due to myself and Morgan sitting down and planning out exactly what our time frame would be back in the Fall semester. Had we not given ourselves the right amount of time for each step in the production, tailored based on our past experiences in producing, we would not have been able to treat our actors and team with such understanding. When I estimated how much rehearsal time this piece would need, I took into account the reality that each of us is a human first, a student second, and a collaborator in this

project third. I could not ask either my collaborators or myself to prioritize our SPROJ over their mental or physical health, as well as their own classes and projects. Again, this stems from my own negative experiences in certain theatrical productions, wherein people became secondary to their commitments.

Comfortability with Discomfort

In addition to grappling with how to skirt around authority, a challenge I had in my role as a director was understanding the inherent dynamics at play. I am a white director, asking actors of color to be incredibly vulnerable onstage when it comes to identity. *Whitewashed* is a play about interracial relationships, both romantic and otherwise, and intersectionality. The ways that Amira interacts with each other character in the script is rich with subtext detailing how these dynamics come into play in every interaction we have. When Colin, Hannah's white brother, asks Amira if she had been in the foster care system, he is asking because he has made an assumption based on her identity. When Kate expresses to Amira how *different* Hannah was growing up, she is subtly suggesting that Hannah's racial identity was one that Kate never addressed. In a script so delicately written, I had to be just as delicate in how I went about directing the actors so as to ensure no vagueness about what the play was trying to do. As a white person, I have made those mistakes in my life, same as Colin and Kate. We all have. It is part of what living in this society looks like, and a way I have found to combat that within myself is to constantly engage with active anti-racism work, such as this play. It makes me confront the ways in which I have contributed to said society, and thus makes me more and more conscious of my societal standing in every subsequent interaction I have. I have found this to be an invaluable aspect of developing my own style of theatermaking. As a producer, looking at the demands of

We See You, White American Theater was an effective way to measure where my priorities were. I tried to emulate those principles in our production, for example making sure that Morgan was always in the room for rehearsals, and keeping the voices of my P.O.C. collaborators at the forefront of our conversations.

The final step before we could begin rehearsing was to make sure that we were telling this story as accurately and truthfully as we could. In order to do this, Morgan and I asked a Junior who we both had positive working experiences with, Faith Amrapali Williams, if she would come on board as the dramaturg for our project. As neither Morgan nor I can speak personally to the experience of being a person of color adopted by a white family, we reached out to Faith who has that as her own lived experience. Having her join our team provided us with a lens into portraying this story accurately, as real world experiences are crucial to any kind of storytelling.

Part 3: Rehearsal and Performance

The Rehearsal Zoom

When I began planning rehearsals, I knew that the reality of the current situation meant that they would mostly have to be virtual. Having done some Zoom theater in the Fall semester through the Bard Bards, I had gotten a sense of both the difficulties and benefits of this. Of course, nothing compares to being in person with each other, building an ensemble based on our physical dynamics in the room, and really learning how to walk in your character's shoes. This was one of the aspects of the rehearsal process that I really missed, and cannot be replicated virtually. However, being forced to do most of our process over the screen made certain other

aspects pop in a very new way. For instance, our table work was incredibly rich and intricate. Since we couldn't focus as much on physicality, I decided to structure our rehearsals around building an incredibly strong sense of character developed through using the text and the actors' imaginations. We spent the first several weeks of rehearsals doing very close readings of each scene, and I had asked each actor to keep a character map of who they were playing. We would always work as an ensemble, and everyone had equal opportunities to build our world. For example, we spent some time imagining what this family's Fourth of July looked like based on each of our team's own experiences, we came up with clear images of the posters on the walls of Hannah's room that she was embarrassed of, and we figured out each litmus test that Amira gave to Hannah's family members and the results of them. Additionally, having rehearsals via Zoom meant that we could be more relaxed and go at our own pace. Our tablework and character work rehearsals felt extremely productive, and I think that by the end, everyone knew their characters inside and out, and with the help of Faith, a sense of how they moved around in their worlds. From there, the actual rehearsals of each scene came very naturally to everyone, since they had done so much work to understand their character, their wants and needs, and their relationships. In our meetings, I would have the actors warm up by reading the scene once through, and then breaking it down moment by moment to figure out their individual journeys throughout the play. One method that worked excellently was in structuring scene 3 with Amira and Kate: I had the actors stand at opposite ends of the room and take a step forward every time they reached out a proverbial hand to the other character, and step back with every line of defense that went up. By the end of that particular run, Ogechi and Allie both had a much deeper understanding of the scene, and utilized the physicality each of them had when we did the exercise through their

words while sitting next to each other. The result was artistically striking, and we left rehearsal that day excited and fulfilled.

Collaboration, Communication, and Compromise

The rehearsal process is the aspect of my Senior Project that I am most proud of and artistically satisfied by. I don't remember ever thinking to myself that a rehearsal had been fruitless. However, a huge part of this process was balancing being a producer and a director. The directing came easily, but trying to keep track of everything else was extremely challenging. Even though both Morgan and I have had producing experience, we've never had to work within a pre-established hierarchy, instead we've been pretty much confined to the student theater circle, in which we have a much clearer understanding of who does what. In the Senior Project, however, we had to cover everything instead of assigning different tasks to an overall production team of our peers, the way that we have done in the past. The result was that I got very overwhelmed, especially when we had proposed strategy after strategy for working with COVID protocols, but everything we suggested was vetoed out. I think that having our ideas so frequently shut down had a huge impact on the joy I had felt during our rehearsal process. It's not any one person who is at fault for this, rather the result of us not being sure of our options until late in the game, at which point we were determined to provide alternate solutions that would meet our needs. The only thing we really wanted to be sure of in our final show was that actors would not have their faces fully obscured by masks. We tried having them livestream onto the stage, having one actor masked onstage while the rest of them had a live video feed onto the stage from another room, and pre-recording half of each scene, but one by one these ideas fell apart due to the various restrictions. Since the atmosphere I had tried to create in our rehearsals

was one of anti-authority and hierarchy, facing this challenge was completely antithetical to the rest of our process. It was disheartening to provide solutions that were safe and otherwise possible, but to then be simply told “no”. For a while, we appreciated the challenge of having to do theater in this climate, but after every creative solution was denied, we lost a lot of steam. Truthfully, the only thing still motivating me is the consistent reliability and enthusiasm of my team, which I am eternally grateful for.

Zoomed Out

I do also feel as though this is an accurate view of how things will work once I am making theater in greater scope. Regardless of how passionate I am, or how hard I work, there will always be obstacles. I think that my biggest takeaway from this particular experience is how to cope when everything feels like it’s falling apart. When we realized that most of our material would have to be prerecorded, we were still facing issues. At every turn we would have some kind of preventative force disallowing us to get to the final product. I had reserved a practice room on campus for us to film in, but we were kicked out because the reservation format I had used was apparently defunct. We tried to film outside, but the camera couldn’t adjust to the brightness of the sun and our actors looked washed out. Every practical step has been fraught with hindrances that were we not in a pandemic, would have been completely avoidable. I think about where we would be in the process if Senior Project had gone off the way it usually does every year. We would have already had our performances, there would be no need to pre-record and grapple with all these technical difficulties, and I probably would have felt more artistically satisfied. Instead, and this is no less valuable than what might have been, I am filled with the motivation to change systems in place to reduce hierarchy and I am more proud than ever to have

gotten to this point in our process. We are still nowhere near done, but the number of times I have felt like giving up but didn't because of the tenacity and determination of my collaborators invigorating me is astronomical. Our resulting project is one of continuance, of fierce hard work, and of sticking together at our lowest points.

One completely unexpected element of bringing this project to fruition was when I had to learn in a heartbeat how to edit video footage. We had recorded each actor's half of three of our scenes, and the next task was to splice them together. I am not a film major. I have never utilized video editing software, and was completely unprepared to take this on. But the reality of the situation was that if I didn't buck down and figure out how to work these programs, seventy-five percent of our project would have fallen apart. Within two days, the week before we went into tech, I had to put all of the footage together, which had been filmed in different lighting, acoustics, settings, and circumstances in a way that looked theatrical and intentional. I quickly learned the basics of the program I used, and stitched our scenes together within the very tight deadline we had to complete the pre-recording process. As it turns out, I'm actually really good at video editing, and surprisingly had a lot of fun playing with the artistic elements of combining theater and filmed material. Who would have thought.

Epilogue: From Here On

Reflecting on this process before it's complete has led to a lot of speculation about how I *will* feel as opposed to how I *do* feel. How I feel right now is tired and stressed, because this project has not yet come to fruition. But what I also feel is that Senior Project has taken every ounce of effort and strength to get to where we are now, and that until it is complete, I will

continue to put everything I have into it. Even though I know that the final product will not be what I imagined for four years, it will be the result of care, creativity, and working with the circumstances. It is something that I can look back on for years to come and think “I made theater under *those* conditions, anything is possible”. Throughout my four years at Bard, I have studied theatrical intricacies, styles, vernacular, and inspiration. I have also taught myself endurance, communication, and producing skills. The combination of these led me to my desire to be a director, someone who maintains a role of leadership but does so by catching the vibes of my collaborators and structuring an artistic undertaking informed by their needs and wants. In all of my theatrical endeavors at Bard, I have found that more often than not, I have a good instinct in selecting collaborators who end up having a very similar style of storytelling as myself, and as a result have made pieces that feel truer to me than ever before. The process of *Whitewashed* is no exception: we began with a script that touched partly on my experiences, but also delved into a world that I only understood peripherally - that of being in a non-white interracial relationship - which in order to more wholly understand, I listened to my peers who have had those experiences. When faced with difficulties, it was my own resilience as well as the support of my team that got us through. While I never imagined a world in which my senior thesis would be around 75% filmed, we added enough creative elements to it that it still feels like ours, and I discovered an unknown spark for technical artistry through editing. Most importantly, I found artistic partners who I feel a deep kinship with. There is no connection like connection through mutual storytelling. The most priceless, rewarding, and joyful chapter of my whole Senior Project process was finding a group of people who I want to make more theater with in the future, and to have them put their trust in me as a leader was the true capstone to my college experience.