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## Writing a Play, Creating a World: The Stars Come Out at Night

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Writing a Play, Creating a World: *The Stars Come Out at Night*

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

by  
Emily Kaufman-Bell

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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## Acknowledgements

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# The Stars Come Out at Night

A play by  
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### List of Characters

JESSE, 24, Stuck in this place he knows little to nothing about. His brain has tucked him away from reality, as he is currently in a coma due to injuries sustained from an explosion during war.

SKY, 24, made up by Jesse and/or symbolizes death.

SONNY, 24, Jesse's friend from the war who died in an explosion.

THE COLONEL, 30, made up by Jesse, is in charge of this dream-like world.

VERNON, 32, also made up by Jesse and is also in charge.

HOPE, 28, Jesse's sister from the real world trying to pull Jesse out.

*Playwright's Note: The scenes in this play should melt together. There doesn't need to be a reset after each scene. The tent and fire can be onstage for the whole play.*

Scene One

*The desert. JESSE and SKY are setting up a tent.*

JESSE

My brain is like this desert – barren, dry.

SKY

Your brain is hot in the day and cold at night?

JESSE

Precisely.

SKY

Explain to me how that works.

JESSE

Well, during the day my brain is:

*(proceeds to act out a heatstroke, panting, sweating, etc)*

And at night it's more like:

*(proceeds to shiver)*

SKY

I know how hot and cold work.

JESSE

So why did you ask me to explain how it works.

SKY

I didn't mean the temperatures. I meant your brain. How is your brain hot and cold.

JESSE

Isn't your brain hot and cold?

SKY

My brain is always cold.

JESSE

Always?

SKY

Always.

JESSE

But your brain must be hot at least some of the time.

SKY

What makes a brain hot?

JESSE

Why camp in the desert?

SKY

Because our brains are like this desert.

JESSE  
That's what *I'm* saying!

SKY  
A brain is hot when it is happy.

JESSE  
Is it cold when it's sad?

SKY  
Sure, why not.

JESSE  
Well then my brain is always cold.

SKY  
I'm sorry.

JESSE  
For what?

They have finished setting up their tent. They grab their sleeping bags. SKY begins to place their sleeping bags on the ground in front of the tent.

JESSE  
What's the point of the tent if we're just going to sleep outside.

SKY  
We can look at the stars.

JESSE  
*(looking up)*  
I don't see any stars.

SKY  
That's because it's still light out. You can only see the stars when it's dark.

Suddenly, as if on cue, it becomes dark. The stars are visible.

JESSE  
*(looking up)*  
I see them!

SKY  
Aren't they beautiful?



JESSE doesn't respond.

Jesse?  
SKY

They are.  
JESSE

I have a surprise for you.  
SKY

SKY pulls out stuff to make  
S'mores.

S'mores!  
JESSE

Now we just need a fire.  
SKY

SKY pulls out a fake  
firepit.

JESSE  
*(entranced by the fire)*  
It's beautiful. Did you make that?

SKY  
Come on, let's roast these marshmallows.

JESSE  
*(proud)*  
I never burn mine. Always the perfect golden brown.

SKY  
I actually like mine burnt.

JESSE  
Really?

SKY  
Yeah. The burnt part creates the perfect shell for the gooey inside.

JESSE  
I like that. It's kind of like a metaphor.

SKY  
A metaphor for what?

JESSE

Humans. Or maybe just me. But I'm a human.

SKY

You feel burnt on the outside and gooey on the inside?

This makes JESSE laugh.

JESSE

No! I guess I'm just trying to say I have a shell. I mean, don't you have a shell?

SKY

I have skin.

JESSE

Right.

Pause.

I've never seen stars like this before.

End scene.

### Scene Two

*The desert. JESSE and SONNY face each other and do planks.*

SONNY

5 more seconds.

They both grunt at  
the effort.

SONNY

And... done!

They both fall flat on  
their stomachs.

JESSE

That was brutal. I can't believe people can plank for hours.

JESSE stands up and  
pats himself down.

JESSE

I was really starting to shake at the end.

SONNY also stands up.

SONNY

Me too. But think about it – if we keep planking for a minute every day, we're going to get totally shredded.

JESSE

Totally.

SONNY

You know, you can't take those other guys seriously. When they give you shit for being small.

JESSE

I try not to most of the time.

SONNY

If they ever make fun of you again I'll teach them a lesson. Because I care about you.

JESSE gives SONNY  
a playful push.

JESSE

Oh Sonny, what would I do without you?

SONNY

Let's play a game!

JESSE

Sure.

SONNY

You have to close your eyes.

JESSE

Why?

SONNY

Cause that's part of the game!

JESSE puts his  
hands over his eyes.  
SONNY proceeds to  
spin JESSE around and  
around.

SONNY

Okay! Now open your eyes and catch me if you can!

SONNY runs off  
stage. JESSE stumbles  
after him.

SONNY (O.S.)

Open your eyes and catch me if you can!

Scene Three

*THE COLONEL and VERNON enter the space carrying folding chairs, a folding table, and a deck of cards. They set up the chairs and table and begin playing cards.*

THE COLONEL

Remember when we were young and messed around like that.

VERNON

We didn't know each other when we were young. Your turn.

THE COLONEL

Huh. I guess you're right.

VERNON

What were you like as a child?

THE COLONEL

Who's asking?

VERNON

Just me, old friend.

THE COLONEL

I was stubborn. Yes, a stubborn little kid. But certainly respectful.

VERNON

Did I just go or did you?

THE COLONEL

No matter, let's not play anymore. We've got business to discuss.

VERNON

He's clueless.

THE COLONEL

He'll figure it out soon enough.

VERNON

Nothing left but wisps of memory.

THE COLONEL  
gets up and goes  
to stand by the fire.

THE COLONEL

Well this is a fire hazard.

VERNON gets up  
and goes to stand  
next to THE COLONEL.

VERNON

It's not real.

Pause.

VERNON

The fire. It's not real.

THE COLONEL

Oh!

HOPE enters.

THE COLONEL

Who are you?

HOPE

I'm Hope. Who are you?

THE COLONEL

I'm The Colonel and this is Vernon.

VERNON

Can we help you with something?

HOPE

I'm just looking.

THE COLONEL

For anything in particular?

HOPE

I think you've seen him.

THE COLONEL

Who?

HOPE

The one I'm looking for.

VERNON

You're on thin ice here lady.

HOPE

I don't know what you mean.

VERNON pulls  
THE COLONEL  
to the side and  
slings his arm over  
his shoulder and  
whispers something  
to him. HOPE  
warms her hands  
by the fire.

THE COLONEL

We're going to have to ask you to leave.

HOPE

Oh.

THE COLONEL

Nothing personal we just, um, well, we just don't usually have visitors here.

HOPE

Jesse.

THE COLONEL

I'm sorry?

HOPE

I'm looking for Jesse.

THE COLONEL

Join us.

THE COLONEL  
motions to the  
table and all three  
walk over. VERNON  
grabs another chair.  
They all sit down.  
THE COLONEL  
deals.

Scene Four

*JESSE and SKY come on stage, not noticing the card players.*

JESSE

I think I ate about a million s'mores.

SKY

*(giggling)*

That's not possible!

JESSE

You're right. There probably aren't a million marshmallows in the world.

SKY

And if there were...

SKY

You wouldn't be able to eat them all.

JESSE

I wouldn't be able to eat them all.

SKY

I would be able to eat them all.

JESSE doesn't respond.

Just kidding!

SKY

Oh.

JESSE

SKY  
fades away and  
SONNY takes her  
place.

Let's go.

SONNY  
(cheerfully)

Where?

JESSE

A memory. One that we share.

SONNY

What's it about?

JESSE

I can't tell you that. You'll find out soon enough.

SONNY

How do we get there?

JESSE

We're already here.

SONNY

SONNY motions to  
the cots and they both  
lie down.

### Scene Five

*In the past. A barrack.*

JESSE lies in one cot,  
SONNY lies in the other.

What do you do when you're alone?

SONNY

Sometimes I write. Sometimes I cry.

JESSE

SONNY

What do you cry about?

JESSE

Home, usually. I get very homesick.

SONNY

You're lucky.

JESSE

How so?

SONNY

I don't have a home to get homesick for.

JESSE

I'm sorry.

SONNY

It's okay.

JESSE

What do *you* do when you're alone?

SONNY

I used to be really good at origami. I wish I remembered how to do it.

JESSE

What did you make?

SONNY

Oh, all kinds of things. Swans usually. Just cause they're the easiest.

JESSE

I don't really think about swans.

SONNY

They symbolize love.

JESSE

Really?

SONNY

Why not?

JESSE

Have you ever been in love?

SONNY

Once.

JESSE

What did it feel like?



SONNY

Like nothing else I have ever felt before.

A loud bang. An  
explosion.

JESSE

What happened to them?

No response.

Sonny? Sonny!

SONNY lies lifeless  
in his cot. Origami swans  
fall from above. Lights down.

Scene Six

*JESSE and SONNY sit upright on their cots facing each other.*

JESSE

*(somber)*

You're dead.

SONNY

Yeah.

JESSE

What happened?

SONNY

Our unit was bombed. In the middle of the day. No warning or anything, we were just unloading new shipments.

JESSE

Where was I?

SONNY

Somewhere else. *(teasing)* Probably sitting around on your ass. Look, it is what it is. You were in the right place at the right time and I wasn't. You just got lucky, that's all.

JESSE

So that's it? It just all comes down to luck?

SONNY doesn't respond.

JESSE

Oh!

They stare at each  
other in silence.

HOPE

I've been looking for you.

JESSE

I don't know who you are.

HOPE

Tell me something, Jesse, do you want to be here anymore?

JESSE

Well considering that I don't know where here is—

HOPE

*(gesturing)*

Here is here. It's really not that complicated.

JESSE

I guess I don't really care.

HOPE

You can't just not care. It's *your* life!

JESSE

Why do you even care?

HOPE

I just feel responsible for you, that's all. Because you are my— nevermind, it's not important. I just want you to let go of the past.

JESSE

Are you going to tell me who you are? Or am I just supposed to take advice from someone I don't even know.

HOPE

I wish you could see, Jesse.

The lights go down  
and when they come  
back up:

Scene Seven

*The desert. JESSE and SKY are standing facing each other like they just got teleported there.*

JESSE looks  
around and  
pauses.

JESSE  
Do you feel that?

SKY  
What?

JESSE  
The clouds are very heavy, they're weighing me down.

SKY  
I don't think I feel them.

JESSE  
Maybe if you come stand over here.

SKY walks over to  
where JESSE is  
standing.

SKY  
Hmm. Still don't feel it.

JESSE  
God, that's annoying.

SKY  
It's okay. I'll pretend.

Pause.

SKY  
*Dramatically*  
Oh, this weight! It's so heavy! The clouds are crushing me.

JESSE stares  
blankly at SKY.  
SKY snaps out of  
it.

JESSE  
I don't think you ever told me your name.

SKY  
Oh, yeah of course.

JESSE  
So... what is your name?

SKY

Sky. My name is Sky.

JESSE  
(Smiling)

Like above. That's beautiful.

Suddenly, JESSE  
covers his eyes  
and yells in pain.

JESSE

Oh God. My eyes! My eyes!

SKY

What happened? Are you ok? Jesse, what happened!

JESSE takes his hands  
away from his eyes and looks  
at SKY.

JESSE

They're gone! My eyes are gone!

SKY

Jesse, Jesse, your eyes are *not* gone. Okay? It's going to be okay? Why don't you sit down. I'll get you some water.

JESSE

Oh God, I thought they were gone. It was so bright.

Lights down.  
Back up on:

Scene Eight

*JESSE runs his hands along whatever structures are on stage (the barrack, tent, etc.). He examines the fire closely. He goes to the table where the cards are stacked and picks them up and turns them over in his hands. He sits down at the table and THE COLONEL and VERNON join him.*

THE COLONEL  
(to Vernon)

Gin Rummy? Or Go Fish?

VERNON  
(motioning to Jesse)

Let's ask our guest.

THE COLONEL

I'm sure he'd prefer Go Fish.

VERNON

Jesse I'm assuming you know the rules.

THE COLONEL

Classic childhood game, he ought to.

VERNON

Really would be surprised if he didn't.

THE COLONEL

Yes, that would be quite odd.

JESSE

I've played before.

THE COLONEL and  
VERNON go silent  
as if they weren't  
expecting JESSE to  
speak.

JESSE

I used to play Go Fish all the time, actually. Everyday after school my sister and I would sit on the floor of my living room eating chex mix and playing Go Fish.

JESSE pauses  
and looks around.

JESSE

Hm, something feels off.

THE COLONEL

Nothing feels off to me.

VERNON

Yes, everything feels completely normal.

JESSE

I think I'd like to leave.

VERNON

Really? Just as we're all getting acquainted?

JESSE

Yes.

JESSE stands up.  
THE COLONEL  
and VERNON stand  
up. They all just  
stare at each other.

JESSE

Well, I guess I'll be going.

## THE COLONEL

Sure, Jesse.

Lights down  
and a blueish  
light back up on:

Scene Nine

*JESSE and SKY sit by the fire.*

JESSE

I thought we were just camping.

SKY

We are camping.

JESSE

*(motioning around the stage)*

But what's all this about?

SKY

It's you. It's all you.

Lights fade to green.  
SONNY enters and  
sits on his bed.

SONNY

Come on Jesse. We're not supposed to be out past dark. You might get in trouble.

JESSE looks  
back to SKY.

SKY

Go ahead.

SKY freezes in  
her spot.  
JESSE goes to  
his cot.

JESSE

Sorry, I, uh..

SONNY

Gotta be careful, buddy. When the stars come out you have to be inside. Or else you'll get in trouble.

JESSE

In trouble? With who?

SONNY

*(chuckling)*

What do you mean with who? The Colonel, silly. You act like you just got here.

JESSE stands  
up.

SONNY

Whoa, where are you going bud?

JESSE

I-I gotta go.

Lights fade to  
pink. HOPE sits  
at the card table.  
JESSE joins her.  
SONNY freezes in  
his spot.

HOPE

Oh good, you're just in time. Have a seat.

JESSE sits down.

HOPE

You remember the rules right? I mean you have to. We played this all the time.

JESSE

*(hesitantly, quietly)*

Go Fish?

HOPE

Yes! You always beat me when we were younger but that's because I let you win.

JESSE

I'm not sure I want to play.

HOPE

*(insisting)*

But it's your favorite!

JESSE

No, I don't want to.

Lights fade to  
orange. JESSE  
stands up. SKY,  
SONNY, and HOPE  
are all frozen in their

spots.  
JESSE watches as:

Scene Ten

*THE COLONEL and VERNON enter from opposite sides of the stage. THE COLONEL closely observes the frozen SKY while VERNON closely observes the frozen HOPE. They both meet in the middle and closely observe the frozen SONNY. Then they closely observe each other.*

THE COLONEL

Shame. Things could've gone differently.

VERNON

Yes, Jesse, why couldn't you play along.

THE COLONEL

If you think it's better out there, you're wrong.

VERNON

Why do you think you came here in the first place?

THE COLONEL

To escape.

VERNON

Get tucked away from reality.

THE COLONEL

Who wouldn't want this?

JESSE

I think you two should go now.

*(looking around)*

I think all of you should go now.

Blackout.

Scene Eleven

*JESSE and SONNY sit by the fire, drinking beer.*

JESSE takes a sip  
of his beer, looks  
repulsed, and says:

JESSE

I hate IPA.

SONNY

I dunno, it was the only thing they had that wasn't Bud Light or one of those other beers that just taste like water.

JESSE



Who names a beer Goose Hunt?

SONNY

Apparently OMB brewery does.

JESSE

I think saying “brewery” after OMB is redundant. OMB stands for Olde Mecklenburg Brewery.

SONNY

Interesting observation.

JESSE

What? I’m just saying.

SONNY

You know, this is nice. Just hanging out drinking beers. It almost feels normal.

JESSE

I agree. It does feel weird though, like we should be doing something.

SONNY

Come on, we deserve this break, after all the shit we’ve been through.

SONNY glances at  
his watch.

SONNY

Shit. I gotta go, I told the Colonel I’d come back to camp to help unload the new shipments.

JESSE

Be safe, okay?

SONNY

You know I always am.

SONNY stands up then  
turns around.

SONNY

Hey Jesse?

JESSE

Yeah?

SONNY

When are *you* going to leave? You gotta get out of here, man. Live your life. If not for yourself then do it for me.

SONNY walks away.

SONNY

For the record, I hate IPA too. Makes my brain feel fuzzy.

SONNY exits.  
Blackout.

Scene Twelve

*JESSE gets up.*

*JESSE goes over to the barrack and gets the partially made swan.*

*JESSE goes over to the crumpled tent, sits down, and finishes making the swan.*

*JESSE gives the swan to an audience member.*

*JESSE takes down the tent.*

*JESSE exits through the entrance door leaving the world of the play behind.*

*End play.*

## Reflecting on the Process: Writing a Play, Collaborating With a Director, and Putting on a Show

### Introduction: Where It All Began

The brainstorming began at the end of junior year, going into summer. I was going to write a play and my collaborator, Ali Kane, was going to design it. Ali and I threw whatever ideas we had on the table, no matter how abstract or random. We would Facetime a couple of times a month over the summer and loosely talk about ideas, though nothing was concrete. Our first idea surrounded the concept of fake worlds, and we made a list of movies that could potentially give us ideas. These movies included *The Truman Show* and *The Village*. I was feeling inspired by the concept of a world within a world. However, I was having a hard time coming up with original story ideas of my own. I began feeling frustrated because, as much as I enjoyed watching these movies, I didn't want to simply replicate them. Though we weren't completely done with this world within a world idea, we put it to the side to start thinking about some other possibilities.

One of our big ideas for staging was audience immersion – we envisioned making a show that would have the audience move around. I was interested in the idea of having different rooms that the audience would walk into. Ali also supported this vision so I made a sketch of what the stage could look like and started brainstorming story lines. Something that was constantly on my mind was Ali being a joint theater and architecture major. Because of this, I was overthinking

what to write about for the first few months. I felt that I needed to fulfill some kind of expectation for the architecture program, or at least write a play that would give Ali room to incorporate architecture. Ali would keep assuring me that no matter what I wrote she would find a way to make it work, but it was already rooted in my consciousness that this play would need to meet architectural requirements. In hindsight, I would say this was one of the biggest barriers I had to overcome.

Looking through my brainstorming notebook, I'm seeing how many fleeting thoughts I was having. From murder mystery dinner party to family drama, it felt like my brain was shooting out ideas a million miles per second – the problem was none of them were sticking. By this point, the summer was coming to an end and I knew I had to start solidifying ideas and writing a script. I started thinking about how I had done pre-med throughout my entire time at Bard. Maybe I could incorporate science into a play. The first actual pages I started to write centered a character known as “Dr. Murder,” who was, as you might guess, a doctor who killed his patients. Now obviously this wasn't a new idea, as there are plenty of movies that revolve around this concept and even a documentary about Dr. Christopher Duntzsch, a real life “Dr. Death.” I started doing research on toxic chemicals and compiling ways for this Dr. Murder character to intentionally kill his patients but make it look accidental. I came up with paraquat dichloride poisoning via the use of thermometers. Long story short, this idea didn't last very long. I was trying to force myself to acknowledge my science background in my play, but this storyline and characters weren't clicking with me; I needed to find a storyline that I could work with for months and it wasn't going to work if I was forcing it.

Over the course of the beginning of the semester I wrote various short scripts that I don't think are worth getting into. Eventually, come mid September, I started creating the world that would end up being mine and Ali's SProj. The evolution of this world, and the play, was the longest I've ever spent on one concept and grew so much throughout my senior year. My advisor, Chiori Miyagawa, was a great help in guiding me in the right direction of diving deep into the world of the play. In our meetings she would challenge me to dig deeper into the message I was trying to convey. I'll get into the specifics of this process soon.

### Welcoming Jesse Into My Life (and Others)

Jesse is the main character in the play I wrote, which is titled, *The Stars Come Out at Night*. Quite simply, I chose the name Jesse because Jesse Pinkman from *Breaking Bad* is my favorite character of all time. That's just a fun fact – my Jesse has no resemblance to the *Breaking Bad* character. So now I had a central character, but the story itself was still in the early stages of development. I knew I was headed towards a simulated world and Ali and I had been discussing the involvement of the military in the play. The use of the military stemmed from both me and Ali's interest in fake worlds and simulations; Ali had done research on these simulated military camps out West. This concept certainly piqued my interest, but I still didn't feel completely connected to it. The idea, however, of my new character, Jesse, being in the army did settle with me and I thought it might be a good catalyst for launching Jesse into a fake world. I think the reason writing a character who had military ties appealed to me was because it was such a tangible subject in a play that was otherwise very abstract. My idea was this: Jesse sustained injuries from war (an explosion?) that sent him into a coma. His state of consciousness in the coma was the play.

This idea would be essentially the final product but, before we reached this decision (made once the script was written), I initially pivoted from having Jesse be in a coma to having Jesse be in a fabricated simulation, conducted by the military. I was feeling inspired by *The Matrix*. This being said, something I had to keep in mind was how I was informed by the genre I was writing in – I didn't want to accidentally recreate something that is already out in the world. I did still draw on concepts from *The Matrix* for this first draft of the script. I envisioned Jesse being hooked up to some kind of contraption that sent him into a liminal space. So this was the decided story line for the central character. Now I needed to build the world around him, which, little did I know would be a work in progress late into the rehearsal process; even after the play had been written I was still learning more about the world of the play. The second character I started to develop was Sky. I figured Jesse needed some other being as a companion in this world, even though I wasn't sure yet what purpose this companion would serve. One by one the other characters came along: The Colonel and Vernon, then Sonny. I initially had a character named Shawn, who was Jesse's brother but he was quickly cut – he didn't add anything to the play in my opinion. I did, however, decide Jesse should have a sibling, so I gave him a sister, Hope. Now, you may be thinking, if a brother didn't add anything to the play, why would a sister? It's not really about the gender of the sibling or even the fact that there is a sibling, more like Hope came into my mind at a different point of working on the play than Shawn did. I wasn't ready for Shawn, but when Hope came along, I knew she had a role in this play.

The reason Jesse was in this coma/dream-like state was still to be fully confirmed. As mentioned above, I was considering two possibilities: he was injured in the war and was now in a coma or he was sent into a simulation world by the U.S. government. Now I can't remember

exactly, but I believe all of my first drafts were written with the latter in mind – the simulation route. Speaking of drafts, I wrote a lot. There are many versions of this play sitting in my Google Drive. I was honestly adding and deleting lines up until a couple months before the performance (just minor changes). The point being, this world was constantly changing.

### World Building

I have written several plays throughout my time at Bard; however, this play felt like the first complete world I built. That might have something to do with it actually being performed or with the fact that I spent so much time with it. I wrote the first scene between Jesse and Sky much earlier than the rest of the play. It's a poetic scene that I honestly didn't know where it was going, but the words were flowing out of me. I was personally in a weird head space so I was thinking a lot about the human brain – are our brains hot and cold? I also really wanted to write something in the desert because the desert feels so open and full of opportunities. Of course, the desert isn't the *only* location in this play but I would consider it the foundation.

I wanted Jesse and Sky to be doing something while they were having their conversations about the temperature of brains; I decided pitching a tent could be interesting. Then along came sleeping bags and a fire, so I guess they were camping... or were they. Spoiler: they were not just camping. At this point, I definitely wasn't thinking about the logistics of having a tent on stage. I knew that the act of camping was a way for me to facilitate conversation, but ultimately the play would be much deeper than two people camping. I created a world where memories coexisted with this reality that wasn't actually a reality. Something I was struggling with that I really needed to work on was creating rules – rules are very important for a play. This doesn't mean the

audience has to know the rules (they should know some), more like I should be solid with the rules of this world I created. The five rules I came up with are:

1. This is a liminal space. There is no concept of time and place.
2. Jesse can only leave this world of his own will.
3. Sonny only exists in memories, except at the end when he breaks this rule.
4. The Colonel and Vernon remain on stage for the whole play (this does not mean they are necessarily visible to the audience at all times).
5. Jesse does not remember his sister (Hope), until the very end.

I honestly didn't think about rules as much as I probably should have, which is why I believe I had trouble articulating what this play is about.

I was making this world up as I was writing; I hadn't necessarily planned it all out because that's how I usually write, just go with what feels right. I wanted the audience to be absorbed by this world and really feel the motions of Jesse's journey. This journey being Jesse coming to the realization that he is surrounded by his own brain and is caught in a state of memory and dream-like quality, not in fact just camping. Since some scenes are of memories, I wanted to find a way to differentiate the tone of these scenes from the scenes that weren't memories. With staging it was fairly straightforward to set apart memories from non-memories with lighting; however, with the writing aspect I aimed to make the dialogue more comfortable and literal, rather than poetic. The dialogue between Jesse and Sky (non-memory) was much more poetic than between Jesse and Sonny (memory). Creating this world in my head was one thing, but watching it all come together in real life was wild. I admit, the beginning was rough;



everyone including myself was not quite sure exactly how the world worked. I greatly credit Ali, and the cast, for helping bring the world to life.

### Auditions, Casting, Midway Showing

The time to cast our play had come; all in all this process took about two months due to some minor hiccups. We held auditions in the first half of November; we had two official days of auditions but it was more complicated than that. Seven people total showed up to rehearsals – six people the first day and one the second. We had really liked three of the people but I still hadn't found my Jesse. We started reaching out to people asking if they wanted to audition. That's when we got Jordan to come in and as soon as I heard her voice I thought, "This could be what Jesse sounds like." Her voice was raspy but it was less about how her voice actually sounded and more about how she fully committed to the dialogue, no holding back. Now we had most of our cast but we were still looking for a couple of characters so we had zoom auditions with a few of our underclassmen theater friends. I saw how talented they all were and was excited to potentially work with them. Once we finally had our cast assembled we did read throughs for the first couple of rehearsals and eventually began doing some blocking in preparation for midways. Midways came much quicker than I had anticipated; it felt like we had just begun rehearsing. This was actually true, we had only been rehearsing for a couple weeks and had just started blocking. Our midway performance would end up looking very different from the final production. We did run into some minor casting problems when the actor who was supposed to play Sonny had to drop out because his schedule was too busy, but we quickly found a replacement. I was a little sad because I thought our original Sonny fit so well into the role but I

quickly realized that with direction from Ali and rehearsal, our new Sonny was going to be just as good.

In retrospect, I think one of the biggest elements of change throughout the rehearsal process was one of the characters, Sky. For me, and Ali as well as the cast, Sky was an enigma. My writing of the character was ambiguous as to what the purpose of the character was. She went from being a companion purposely sent in for Jesse, to being another version of Jesse, to symbolizing death. We had fun with Sky, though, figuring out her rules and how she was able to move within the world was tricky. For the midway performance, we made her movements very robotic because I envisioned Sky as a non-human entity created by the simulation. This was something we changed drastically for the final performance. With further thought about Sky's role and why she was even in the play, I decided she had to be less autonomous than I initially imagined her being, meaning the choices her character made were never for herself but for the overall being of the world. She was a dependent variable of the world, not an independent one.

The feedback I got from the midway showing was minimal but still helpful. My peers didn't really offer any critical feedback; they were really only giving praise, which is nice but not necessarily productive. Jack mentioned something about not worrying too much about what the audience will get and not get, which was reassuring. Chiori offered helpful commentary about specificity and transitions – transitions from scene to scene were something we thought about a lot during the rehearsal process, especially in the second semester. In the end, I think the show ended up being really well casted. Everyone fit nicely into their roles and really embodied their characters. For example, Allie has a really goofy personality while the character she plays – Vernon – doesn't; however, the way she was able to completely get into character brought me

joy. It's interesting because since the show ended, I still partially associate the actors with the characters they played. I think this is because I've never had characters I've written be so fully brought to life.

### What the Rehearsal Process Felt Like for Me

In this section, I will be reflecting on how I was feeling throughout the rehearsal process. When the rehearsal process initially began, Ali and I were planning to co-direct. During the first few rehearsals where we tried to co-direct, it just felt like we were confusing the actors; Ali would say one thing and I would offer something different and then we would discuss it in front of the actors, which would just ultimately throw them off. Ali and I had an open, honest conversation about how rehearsals were going and areas we were having difficulty with, such as giving direction. It was a mutual decision to make Ali the director and just keep me as the writer; it made life easier for everyone. I was very new at all of this, I didn't know half the rules of directing; Ali had some experience, so we decided it would be best if she took on the role of director by herself. I think I secretly felt some kind of relief from this, though it meant I was just the writer... I had no idea what this would mean for me – would I just sit and watch? What was I supposed to be doing? So my role in the rehearsal process was definitely something I was unsure about at times. However, I quickly learned that I would always be on the lookout for edits that needed to be made. I was still in the rewriting phase and this time, during rehearsals, was the most crucial time to make discoveries.

Over winter break we had a couple of zoom calls with the cast and mainly did table work. Though we had already had a couple of rehearsals, this was when I was able to really focus on how the dialogue sounded. The fact that there was no blocking and only reading really

emphasized my understanding of how differently dialogue can sound out loud than it does in my head. This isn't a bad thing; I had to force myself to consciously acknowledge that even though it's my play, I can't completely control how it is read so it may not reflect exactly how I would read it in my head. Second semester was when things really started to pick up. We started having rehearsals consistently twice a week in Resnick. I definitely looked forward to rehearsals because they were genuinely enjoyable and provided a sort of break from the rest of my school work. Since all it felt like I was doing was sitting and watching, Chiori asked me to write up weekly reports and send them to her. This ended up being super helpful – for reflecting on my thoughts but also for writing this process paper. The strongest aspect of my collaboration with Ali, that ultimately made the project go smoothly, was our communication skills. Since we were already friends, we were able to be very open and honest with each other. For example, before we decided not to co-direct, Ali wasn't afraid to tell me that certain things I was doing, such as line readings, weren't appropriate. In return, she would not invade my space as a writer; she wouldn't give suggestions on the actual text and wouldn't push me to write or edit things I didn't want to. We realized we needed a stage manager to assist Ali with smaller tasks, so we found Rosalind, who was an amazing addition to our team. Having a stage manager meant Ali could focus more energy on communicating with me.

Something we were struggling with right off the bat was keeping the cast focused; they were all friends and very chatty. For me personally, some walls I was hitting in the first weeks of rehearsals included going back through the text to adjust the tone to fit the new interpretation of the text – this was no longer a play about a simulation but more of a display about the effect of trauma and how a person can create a whole world inside their head to shield themselves from

reality. I had some insecure thoughts about this – I have never experienced any kind of physical trauma so I was unsure if it was appropriate for me to center my play around it. I decided that the play wasn't a play about trauma, though. It's really a play that envisions the power of the human brain. I had also changed the title a few times and nothing was sitting right with me. I think I was overthinking it because in my mind there was so much pressure to come up with a good title so people would want to come see the show. I had a few variations that included "swan" in the title, but ultimately they felt forced. I ended up settling on the original title, *The Stars Come Out at Night*. I honestly wasn't sure if this title was perfectly fitting but I couldn't afford to put any more brain power into thinking about a title.

By week three (the last full week in February) we did our first run through. I had also made edits to the script for the last time. These edits mainly included dialogue between Sonny and Jesse, especially their first shown interaction in scene two. I wanted to increase the sexual tension but keep the dialogue as natural as possible. In addition to tweaking this scene, I did add another scene at the end which felt a little weird because we had already been rehearsing a lot but both Ali and I decided it was necessary for there to be a more conclusive ending. This new ending served the play in a few ways. It seemed fitting to have a final memory scene between Jesse and Sonny after Jesse tells everyone else to leave because these two characters' relationship is at the heart of the play. Also, the new ending emphasized Jesse's newfound control over this world and made it clear that it was because of *him* that he was leaving, not any outside forces.

The run through went well, though we were missing one of our cast members. The actors were yet to be off book but I wasn't worried about that yet. By the time we had this run through,

I had added more scenes with Sonny than I originally had, and I was pleasantly surprised by the results of this; Sonny was a lovable character and I believed he would evoke empathy from the audience. That being said, I still loved the original scenes between Jesse and Sky. There was something about their dynamic that was so amusing. Comedic relief isn't the right word for the relationship between Jesse and Sky, but their interactions were so whimsical that it allowed for the more heartbreaking moments between Jesse and Sonny to really hit.

During rehearsals, I would mainly sit and watch and jot down my thoughts. I felt like I wasn't really contributing anything and Ali had a lot to do but nothing I could help with (it was mainly work for the architecture side of the project). Since I was in a place where I felt like I wasn't being very productive, I felt a little disconnected to the show, but once we started rehearsing regularly in the Old Gym, I regained my excitement for the project. I also wasn't completely uninvolved in the directing process. Ali often asked for my input or asked if I was okay with something being blocked a certain way. Or she would ask for clarification on a certain part of the text. Both of these things helped bring me back to the process because otherwise my mind would wander and I wouldn't be fully in the rehearsal space.

A huge part of this process that I was scared to admit but finally did in colloquium was that I had been feeling like this script was not my favorite thing that I'd written but I was okay with that. Chiori said this is a good thing because it means I can be objective about my work. The main reason I didn't consider this play as my favorite is because I was insecure about how complicated it was. I do believe that spending so much time with this play made me build up some kind of aversion to it. I've been thinking a lot about this because I hope to write many more plays. I expect they will take just as long if not longer to finalize than my SProj play. I think I

need to be critical but not too critical of my work so that I'm discouraged. This especially includes not overthinking the logistics of how the play will be performed. Through this process I learned that almost anything is possible with theater because a lot of it comes from imagination. For an audience who goes to see a play, they are watching it knowing it is all fake so they have to go along with the imagination of the play in order to have an experience.

Once we had gotten to a place where we were having consistent and successful run throughs, we had more flexibility over how we spent our time. We were thinking about physicality and if we could add another layer to the piece by emphasizing how the characters move. We did not end up doing this; it felt too forced, so we left the movement where it was. Then it was time to start thinking about costumes. I decided this was something I could do since Ali had a lot of other things going on, plus they are my characters. I was thinking nothing too flashy, plain and simple felt right. Colors are important, I think. For Jesse and Sonny I knew they had to be in some kind of army green; they ended up wearing army green pants and a gray shirt/tank top. It made sense to me for Vernon and The Colonel to be in a kind of black pant, white button up outfit. Hope was tricky because, as Chiori said, I wanted to be careful of having my one feminine character in a nice dress. She ended up wearing a business casual fit. Sky was also a harder one. I wasn't sure if Sky should be dressed in sky-blue or black. Since we decided on the whole Sky as death thing, we had them wear black flowy clothing. Everyone wore boots. Making the costume decisions made me think about how I wanted the audience to perceive the characters in their first impressions. The costumes served the play because they were simple enough to not detract from the play itself, but they still added an element of visuals to the performance.

Tech week came and it was crunch time. Before it even started, though, we found out our stage manager got COVID. The whole week I was stressed that one of our cast members would get COVID. We found two understudies, and if the actor playing Jesse got COVID, Ali or I would step in, since we knew the play the best and didn't think an understudy could catch up on such a big role. I had a really hard time trying to remain focused since all I could think about is if a cast member got COVID, all our hard work wouldn't amount to as much as it could. I was also thinking selfishly – if we had to have an understudy step in, would it make my play look bad? Luckily this didn't happen but it really makes me think about how the performance of a play can affect how the actual writing of the play is received.

One of my main goals with this play was to write something that I felt proud of. I have written many short plays for various playwriting classes and some pieces I have not been very proud of or happy with. This was a fear of mine – to not be happy with my SProj play since it's such a big deal. I admit, at first I wasn't sure if I would be proud of this play but after seeing everyone's reaction to it I felt a great sense of pride. My attitude certainly changed throughout the rehearsal process, it was very much a rollercoaster of emotions. I went from not being very confident about how everything would turn out and about my writing to being absolutely overcome by joy for the process. It was all a rush and it came so quickly and then all of a sudden it was done.

### The Meaning Behind the Swan

The first mention of origami swans in my writing was freshman year in a play for Intro to Playwriting. In this first play, the swans were used to show a cycle (the play was about a woman who endured a TBI from a car crash and suffered from amnesia... she would go to the same bar



and each time would re-meet her sister and her sister would make her an origami swan from a napkin and give it to her, so over time she accumulated many swans). I started hiding swans in most of the plays I wrote, for example, they appear for a brief moment in *A Swan Drove a Subaru*. It was fun for me to have a signature, something that would tie all my plays together. So of course I knew swans had to be incorporated in my SProj somehow.

In this play in particular, the swans symbolize love, as Sonny quite literally says in the script. I didn't feel like the swans needed to be the main focus of the play, but I did feel like they added a wholesome quality. I absolutely fell in love with the set, as it all came together with origami swans (credit to my dad for making them) hanging from the wire; it was truly beautiful. The wire frame really served my play in the way that it emphasized the boundaries of the world, along with the audience sitting around the action so the characters were really enclosed in the space. This play is experimental, so having a large wire structure that is quite magical looking pairs nicely with the play. Other than the wire, the actual set was fairly simple – just a tent, fire place, and table with chairs. I appreciated that the space where the actors actually were wasn't too crowded with props so as not to distract from the action. The end, with Jesse making a swan in memory of Sonny then handing it to an audience member evoked a lot of emotion. I just finished my final play for the political playwriting class I'm in with Nilaja, and I happened to sneak a swan into that one too. I can't guarantee I'll fit a swan in everything I write, but I'll always have it in the back of my mind.

#### Conclusion: Last thoughts, Saying Goodbye

Being a playwright in the rehearsal room is such a unique experience. Again, I learned that every line isn't going to be said exactly how you envision it – it can be close and convey the

same meaning, but in the end it's going to be how the actor says it. This was my first time watching a play I wrote being performed and that's something I'll never forget. I didn't realize how attached I got to the production, and Ali definitely did too – we both put our heart and soul into it. I'm so glad I had a collaborator. Working with someone, especially someone I get along with, made the whole process so much more enjoyable. There's also a special kind of bond formed with someone you collaborate with on a performance because in a way you experience the rollercoaster of emotions together – the stress, joy, pride, grief. It was definitely sad striking the space after the final performance but I felt a sense of relief, not only from the performance being over but because everything went fairly smoothly.

I don't think I've ever been so nervous for anything in my life as I was opening night, and that's saying a lot because I tend to get nervous about things. Watching my own show was kind of overwhelming, half the time I was cringing and the other half I had a feeling of pride. I couldn't help but watch the audience occasionally, but surprisingly I was more focused on the actual play than I thought I'd be. It was a lot to be the center of attention – I've never received that much attention before and I can't say I miss it because it was overwhelming, but it was kind of nice. My parents were able to come all the way up from North Carolina to see the show, which made me very happy. I always send them my plays to read but having them finally be able to watch one was so monumental. Everything I learned and the experience of working on this show was more than worth the stress. It all came together in the best way possible. I think this project prepared me for life after Bard more than I realized; now I can go into the world with a little more experience with writer-director collaboration. I plan to continue writing plays and collaborating with directors to bring my plays to life.