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Merlin

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Merlin
Tankred Dorst's epic play,
explored through the lens of Chinese opera.

Senior Project submitted to
the Division of the Arts
of Bard College

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Directing Merlin	6
Conclusion	22
Works Cited	25
Appendix 1: An Annotated Script	26
Appendix 2: Make-up	40
Appendix 3: Production Photos	42
Appendix 4: The Program	46

Introduction

Arthur goes to pull the sword from the stone. Suddenly, it starts wiggling on its own.

Then, it pops into the air. Arthur catches it in midair, astonished. Then, the stone cracks.

It's a stone egg. It snaps in half, and out pops... Sun Wukong!

Sun Wukong was trapped under a mountain for 500 years, and released to travel with

Xuanzong - replace Xuanzong with Arthur? Accidental release through the drawing of the stone?

This was the first thing I put on paper about my senior project, way back in November 2016. I intended to combine two of my all-time favorite stories, that of King Arthur and the knights of the round table, and 西遊記 (Journey to the West). Both stories featured wise men on spiritual quests, companions and advisors who deal in illusion and magic, parades of monsters out for blood, and epic battles. I mapped out the characters. King Arthur would be the central figure, the leader and moral guide that he is in his tradition, and that the holy man Xuanzong is in Journey to the West. King Arthur's advisor Merlin, the magician, disjointed in time, would be replaced with Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, who can fly on clouds, transform into any shape, and who crossed his name out of the book of life and death. Then there would be knights, of course. Bedevere - or maybe I would make him Zhu Bajie, the deeply loyal but easily fooled companion? Those two could merge quite nicely. And one more knight to balance it out.

Lancelot, perhaps, or Gawain. I would have several extra actors as a chorus of sorts, for Sun Wukong can create duplicates of himself by plucking hairs from his arm and blowing on them. It would be action packed and fun, and perhaps I would blend some Chinese theatrical techniques in with a more Western naturalism. All I had to do was write it.

Then I started talking to my peers, and thinking that I would really like to present my work in the senior project festival in the Fisher Center. It felt important to me that given one chance to show my work in this wonderful space, I take advantage of that. So I started looking for a partner.

The problem I saw was that my idea was too complete, and too specific. I knew that I was unlikely to find someone willing to join in on a fully-formed project, and that I needed to think about what elements of the project were essential to me, and which I would be willing to compromise on. After a lot of thought, I decided that what interested me most about the project was the idea of bringing together two things that aren't usually found in such proximity. I was willing to let go of the specific stories I had chosen if I could still play with this intersection of different cultures. I am a cross-culture kid, born and raised in Hong Kong, with an American father and an Australian mother, both of whom have lived and worked in Asia their entire adult lives. This merging of different places, peoples, and traditions is my life. I realised that that could be really cool to play with, and that would open up space for collaboration. I would take what had been a footnote in my original plans - the use of Chinese theatrical techniques - and make that my focus. My partner would write a play, and I would tell it in a Chinese style.

With this pitch, I found a collaborator, and we both got very excited about our plans. Shane had also grown up somewhat between cultures, in Arizona, at the intersection of white America, latino America, and native America. We talked a lot about identity, and how language is crucial to the formation and maintenance of a cultural identity. We asked each other what it means to be an American. What a national identity looks like in as diverse a place as this. Whether that identity is necessarily different for each person, or whether there are fundamental threads that are shared by all. In particular, we talked about being an outsider to a shared culture, and the perspectives that being in proximity to but different from something can give you. We had a lot of very engaging conversations and debates, and ultimately disappeared so far into theory and ideas that we lost track of the end goal. Beginning to feel the time pressure, we decided we needed to get started on something concrete. She would write something, and I would read it, and we would take it from there.

That was when we really hit a roadblock. She handed me her first piece of writing, and I realised that although it was an interesting text, I didn't know what to do with it. She was writing about identity, about a character in a similar position to the two of us, far from home and trying to adjust. She had taken our many long conversations about culture and distilled them in a lovely way into the beginnings of a play, and my overriding reaction was that the approach she was taking was not compatible with what I was interested in. I didn't want to have an explicit conversation about culture on stage. I wanted to be putting different cultures together and letting that proximity speak for itself. I also realised that I wasn't interested in culture and national identity in the abstract way we had been talking about them. I was interested in Chinese culture,

and the perspectives that could bring to bear on an unexpected story. At this point, I decided to end our collaboration and go back to working on my own.

So, it was time to reinvent my project again. Initially, I intended to go back to my original idea. “Journey to the Even Farther West” revived. But I’d lost a lot of time, and my advisor, Professor Miyagawa, pointed out to me that writing my own play as well as directing it was going to be a lot of work, and that I would be much better off choosing an existing text and putting all of my energy into staging it effectively. So I looked around for a play that would give me the space I needed to play, and to be innovative, and eventually I settled on *Merlin*.

Directing *Merlin*

Why *Merlin*

Merlin is a beast of a play. In its full form, it is over 15 hours long, and its subject matter and structure are equally unmanageable. With hundreds of characters and no fixed sense of time or place, this play starts with the creation of the universe, and ends with the death of the Earth, and encompasses the entirety of the Arthurian tradition, and of human morality. Prose, stage direction, and dialogue are all mixed together, often without indication of which is which, and certainly with no clear sense of how this is to be tackled theatrically. The first time I read this play in its entirety, my instinctive reaction was that it was unstageable. Reading it through again as a potential source material for my senior project, I realised that the truth was a little different. There is no way to approach this play naturalistically. And that is exactly what I needed. The biggest question I had been struggling with so far was why I wanted to use Chinese theatrical conventions and techniques. I knew why I was interested in that conceptually: I was interested in

taking the familiar, and making it strange, in creating a dialogue between different cultural modalities of thinking and seeing what that produced. But while that “what if” curiosity was my spark, it wasn’t enough on its own to make the production work. Choosing *Merlin* as my play gave me another answer, a better, more concrete one. *Merlin* is such a monster of a play that it needs a theatrical construct that can handle the weight. Chinese opera is exactly that structure.

Why Chinese opera

Traditional Chinese opera has very established conventions. Unlike in Western theater, different actors don’t reinvent parts, and new interpretations of characters are not the goal. In Chinese opera, faithfulness to the established performance is prized, and audiences watch performers with a critical eye, to see how well they are able to replicate the previous generation’s great performers. Most stories are drawn from Chinese classics, so audience members are familiar with the plots before the show even begins. Furthermore, it is a highly codified art form, so an experienced viewer will be able to understand everything about the characters at a glance. All of this makes Chinese opera like a language - the epitome of familiarity to those who speak it, and utterly opaque to those who don’t. Given my interest in playing with familiarity and strangeness, this was the ideal art form to draw upon. Everything about Chinese opera feels alien and strange to an unfamiliar, Western, audience putting, them at an immediate disadvantage. At this point, my intention was that the traditionally Western story would serve to draw them back in, keeping them in a tension between discomfort and familiarity. For a Chinese audience, the effect would be reversed, with the initial use of the form establishing a base level of comfort,

before the unfamiliar tale - and the breaks from the traditional style and technique - pushed them too into unfamiliar territory.

Choosing Merlin as my play gave me several more reasons for wanting to work with Chinese opera. Chinese opera is excellent at telling big stories. Gods and mortals frequently interact on the Chinese stage, and multiple worlds can coexist, side by side, as pieces of the same play, as they do in Merlin. Furthermore, for all of its visual splendour, Chinese opera is a heavily performer-driven art. Costumes and makeup establish character, but there is essentially no set, and no lighting, and all the work of situating the play is done by the performers, often through use of gestures. Precision and clarity are crucial in Chinese opera, and there is little space for any movement or vocal cadence that has not been thought out beforehand. Working with actors to achieve that level of precision and to create a fully fleshed-out world through the use of bodies in space was very exciting to me, and made Chinese opera a perfect medium for me to use.

Set

That was where I began: with my stage. The section of the play that I was working with is very nebulous in terms of physical and temporal setting, and so I didn't want to pin it down with many set pieces. Instead, I followed the traditions of Chinese opera, and began with a completely bare stage. This put the focus and work of telling the story on my actors, their bodies, and their voices. To this bare stage, I added a table and two chairs. These are very usual, adaptable stage pieces in Chinese opera. A chair behind a table represents a throne. A chair on top of a table represents a mountain (Siu, p.28). My play had need for both a throne and a

mountain, and these were symbols that I felt, while not explicitly known to my primarily American audience, would nonetheless translate and be understood.

Although I was creating a fluid space that was not specific to one place or time, I didn't want the space to feel untethered, or at a loose end. Although time is not a constant in this play - much of this section takes place in a temporal limbo before "the first day", then hundreds of years are passed in the blink of an eye before the story refocusses in the time of King Arthur, and then moves quickly to the end of the universe - it is nonetheless a driving force. Merlin is born old, but he does get born; he can see the future, but the future still comes; individuals like Merlin or Mark Twain can move backwards through time, but the general progression of time is forward, and there is a heavy sense of the inevitable. I wanted to find something in the staging to emphasize that, and create that sense of drive and constancy. To achieve that, I turned to another convention of the Chinese stage: the structure of entrances and exits. In Chinese opera, the stage right entrance is referred to as the upper door, and the stage left one as the lower door. Most of the time, characters enter through the upper door and exit through the lower door. The only exceptions are when a character is returning to the place they came from, in which case they exit through the upper door, and when they are coming from indoors, in which case they enter through the lower door (Liu, p.31). This was integral to the effect I wanted to achieve, as it channeled the momentum of every scene, allowing for a little push back against an overriding current.

Cutting the play

Before I finalized my decisions about set, I had to cut the play - or rather, extract a section. This turned out to be a lot simpler than I had anticipated. I knew that I wanted my play to focus on the character of Merlin, since he is the focus of most of the magic in the play, as well as the heart of the play's non-linear relationship with time, both of which gave me scope to experiment. I also knew that I wanted a small cast, because I wanted to be able to do in depth work on physicality with each of my actors, which would not have been possible with a larger cast. Finally, I wanted a section that could stand alone and not feel like a fragment. Although Merlin is the protagonist of the play, he is usually seen in the background of other character's stories, manipulating them to try to achieve his aims. There are relatively few scenes that are actually about Merlin. For all these reasons, I settled on scenes 2 and 3.

This section begins with Hanne - pregnant with Merlin - and her brother the Clown, wandering around trying to find out who the father of Hanne's child is. After a series of failed confrontations, they encounter the Devil, who pleads with spirits for Merlin to be born, and prophecies that he has a big role to play in the course of fate. The universe is torn apart, and Merlin is born as an old, bearded man. He quickly figures out to move, talk, and read, and then meets his father, the Devil, who teaches him about his powers of prophecy, and tells him he is destined to "save mankind for evil". Merlin, unconvinced, hides from the Devil up a tree, reciting the bible in Latin.

Casting

The other decisions I made regarding cutting the play were guided by my casting, so I will briefly discuss that and then return. The most important thing to me in casting this production was that I have flexible actors. I knew this was going to be a very physically and vocally stylized piece, so I needed actors who were going to be willing and able to explore a range of movement and speech patterns with me. As a result, much of my audition process asked the actors to perform a task, and then perform it again as differently to the first time as possible. I also asked the actors to improvise movements to the sounds of lines, drawing out vowels, punching consonants, and responding to the shape of those words in a physical way.

From this I found my cast. Initially, I had planned to have a cast of five: one actor for Merlin, the Devil, Hanne, and the Clown, and one actor to play an assortment of small parts. In this iteration, most of the actors were going to play more than one part, partly out of convenience, to make multi-character scenes work with a limited number of actors, and partly because in Chinese opera each character is identified by their makeup and costume, and not by the actor portraying them, and it is fairly common for a famous actor to switch characters mid-show, playing all the best bits of each character. I was interested in this mutability of character, and the distinction between actor and character, and was interested in bringing that to bear on my production. As it happened, that fell by the wayside. There was too much else going on, and without a concrete sense of how that character shifting would serve the play, I reluctantly let it go. I also lost several members of my original cast to conflicting commitments, and so, with a final cast of only four, had to go back and rethink my cutting of the play.

More cutting

Cutting within the play proved a much greater challenge than selecting a section. The main decision I had to make was which of the men Hanne and the Clown confront in trying to find Merlin's father I should keep. Initially, I kept the Man in Lilac and Mr. Rothschild. At my first read through, however, it became clear that the remaining section of the play was going to run too long, and would be impractical to stage with only four actors. Furthermore, I didn't know why I'd chosen them specifically. So, I started over with a fresh copy of the script, and this time I kept the Knight, and some of the interactions with the Member of the Audience. I also now had a reason for the characters I had chosen to include. Merlin's struggles in this play are largely about the nature of humanity, and what it means to be a good or bad person. Keeping the Member of the Audience allowed me to push those questions directly at the audience right off the bat, establishing a relationship between the characters and the audience that be maintained throughout the show. As for the knight, he represents Camelot, which in turn represents those central questions of morality and humanity. Cutting him took away the first nod to the argument that powered the entire play. Putting him back in fixed that, and helped me tie the play together, as I will discuss later.

Character types

The first thing I did when we got into the rehearsal room was to go over the basic character types of Chinese opera. There are four basic categories of characters: *dan* (woman), *sheng* (man), *chou* (clown), and *jing* (painted face). Within each category are sub-categories, for example *wudan* (warrior women), *laodan* (old women), *xiaodan* (young women), and so on (Siu,

33-37). I talked each of my actors through their characters. The Clown was a *chou* character. He is petty, coarse, and greedy, humiliated by the play, and has some physical or slapstick humour. Hanne was likewise a *chou* character, and for similar reasons, but for her it wasn't as exact a fit. In Chinese opera, each character fits their archetype neatly, but this play wasn't written as a Chinese opera, so it called for a little more flexibility. To that end, I told the actor to think about her character as a *chou* who thinks that she is a *xiaodan*, or young, beautiful woman. Initially, I asked her to explore both character types simultaneously, and the result was fine, but not especially interesting. Eventually, as an exercise, I asked her to move through the space, snapping between the two character types when given a cue, and trying to make each as large and specific as possible. That gave a little more space for her to explore all aspects of her character, while also keeping her tethered to specifics. It also gave us a vocabulary for the rehearsal room, as we would later have discussions about whether a moment was a *chou* moment or a *dan* moment, and I could give her notes like "more *dan* in that section", or, "that was too much *chou*". That served as a very strong base for us to work off, and we stuck with that for the rest of the process.

Then there was the Devil and Merlin. The Devil was straight forward. As a powerful spirit character who controlled the actions of all the other characters, and who dominated every scene he was in, he fit into the *jing* archetype perfectly. Merlin was more complicated. We see him born, so he is very young in this section of the play, and he is the protagonist, which is usually a *xiaodan*, or young man type. On the other hand, we are told that he is born as an old man with a beard, which would indicate a *laodan*, or old man. Then again, Merlin is an immensely powerful being, which could suggest that he should be a *jing* character, like the Devil

his father. However, in the section I was working with, he hasn't really come into his powers yet, and even once he does, he remains a rather subdued character who prefers to work in the background, rather than having eyes on him the moment he steps on stage, as a *jing* should. I didn't make a decision about this for a while, briefing my actor on all three options and waiting to see what came out in rehearsal. This was a mistake. At the midway point of my rehearsal process, after our first full run, Professor Miyagawa pointed out to me that while the other three actors had very distinctive physicalities that fit in the world we were creating, Merlin was physically vague and didn't click with the others. Trying to figure out why this was, I thought back to the work I'd done with Hanne, and I realised that I'd made the same mistake again. Where the others had specific modes of being to explore, I'd given Merlin three polar opposite ways of being, and expected her to find clarity on her own. When I realised that, I opted to make her a *laodan*, as I felt that the physicality of advanced age would be the most specific prompt for her to respond to, and would best help her find a distinctive physicality.

Physicality work

I wanted this story to be told as much through the body as through the lines, so finding that distinctive physicality was my first priority with my actors, and our early rehearsals focussed on exploring their characters physically. This exploration began with the idea of presenting to the audience. In Chinese opera, actors traditionally introduce themselves to the audience when they enter the stage (Liu, 33). It was important to me that I use that moment of introduction, because it sets the tone for the relationship between the characters and the audience. In *Merlin*, as in Chinese opera, there is no hard barrier between the audience and the characters. On the second

page of this script, the Clown accosts a member of the audience, an interaction that turns into an ongoing conversation running across several scenes. Having had to cut many sections of that conversation, as well as most moments of direct interaction between Merlin and the audience, I wanted to be very clear about preserving that relationship. So, I decided to have each of my actors initially enter as themselves, then slowly become their characters, assuming their physicality, and making that transition from actor to character in full view of the audience. Once onstage, they formalized this transition by striking a pose, announcing themselves as if to say directly to the audience, “I am here”. What was lost in lines was preserved through gesture.

To figure out these entrance sequences, I began by getting my actors to come up with three gestures inspired by their understanding of their characters. Then I had the entire cast work through each gesture together, taking turns to do each gesture, with instructions first to copy the gesture the previous person made as exactly as possible to see how they evolved, and then with instructions to take the previous person’s gesture and make it larger and utilize more of the body. The gestures we arrived at through this process formed the basis of the rest of our work with physicality. Next, I had the actors present to one another, or use their presenting gestures in power dynamic exercises, which helped them navigate the relationships between their characters, and also helped them refine their ways of moving.

The Clown quickly found her gestures through this work, but for the other actors it was the useful beginning of a much longer process. Later, as another approach to physicality, I asked each actor to move through the space, switching between two contradictory elements of their character’s personality. For example, I asked Hanne to switch between graceful and flirtatious, and coarse and vulgar. I asked her to make each of those ideas as clear and distinct as possible,

and move between them on my cue. I gave a similar task to Merlin, asking her to switch between shy and skittish, and powerful and cocky. The Devil I asked to switch between threatening and bullying, and enticing and gentlemanly. These exercises helped pin down physicality for Hanne and the Devil, but Merlin still wasn't quite there.

The answer for Merlin came when she got her beard. I knew from the start that I wanted Merlin in a traditional Chinese opera beard, one that hooks around the ears and rests on the upper lip. The script called for Merlin to be bearded, and I wanted that particularly striking, non-naturalistic look, but actually the beard proved most useful in the rehearsal room. After a lot of experimentation with it, we came up with two rules for the actor to follow: 1) do not let any body part touch your beard while you move to create a sense of distance and separation, and 2) never move directly forward, but move on angles, because Merlin is a very circumspect character who prefers to work indirectly. The awareness of the beard as a physical presence, and the idea of it as a partner to be moved with, as in a dance, finally put the last piece of the puzzle in place and Merlin's physicality clicked into place.

Through all this, specificity was my goal. Not only in the actual movements being performed, but in what the movement was saying about the character. Each of these characters is multi-faceted, and having this layer of physicality to work with allowed us to isolate each facet of their persona and present it separately for examination. Rather than trying to play all the nuances all the time, I wanted to push each piece of the character as far as it would go. So the Clown, for instance, would enter as a cunning con man, then switch and be a coward, then switch again and be self-important, and so on, moving between aspects of his character as appropriate.

In this way, physicality would reveal a piece of the emotional story of the play at a time, while the text bound these distinctive images together into a cohesive whole.

Putting the play on its feet

Having found a basic movement vocabulary, I began to block the play. In this process, the opening paragraph of text was particularly important in shaping my understanding and presentation of this play. This section is written like stage directions, but formatted on the page like a monologue, though not attributed to any particular character. This uncertainty of form is a common quirk of Dorst's writing in this play, and it is very distinctive and puzzling on the page. Although I could have simply decided that these lines were stage direction, or chosen a character to speak them, I wanted to give them the same attention on stage that they call to themselves on the page. So, I decided that if this section looked like it was both stage direction and spoken lines, I should trust the text and let it be both.

This choice proved to be a very useful one, giving me a lot of tools to play with. Having the lines spoken first by the Devil and Merlin - as their introduction to the audience helping to establish that convention - and then performed off-stage as stage directions by Hanne and the Clown allowed me to establish the Devil and Merlin's ability to see, and possibly influence, the future. It also immediately put the value of those powers in question - they can see the future, and they choose to tell us about a domestic squabble? Or maybe it's our understanding of what we're seeing that we should doubt - does this fight have significance, and are these ridiculous characters important? I wanted my audience to have questions from the start, and this opening gave me a vehicle for those questions.

Makeup

With the play getting on its feet, I turned my attention to the look of the piece, and in particular, the makeup. This was one of the biggest challenges for me. From the start, I strongly felt that in order to push this production all the way away from naturalism and into the more symbolic, heightened style I was aiming for, I needed powerful makeup. The effect I wanted to achieve was twofold. First, I wanted the audience to look at the characters and immediately know that they were in unfamiliar territory. I wanted my audience off balance. Secondly, I wanted the world to feel cohesive, and for the actors to feel comfortable with the heightened physicality we were developing. The rules of the world had to be constant, and I wanted everyone, actors and audience alike, to look at the makeup and think “yes, these people should be the way they are.” Since the other elements of the piece were grown out of interactions between Chinese opera and the text, I knew that I wanted looks that were reminiscent of and drew influence from Chinese opera, but weren’t just imitation.

I arrived on the makeup for three of the four characters relatively easily. The traditional clown makeup in Chinese opera, a white circle around the eyes and nose, is so expressive, and crosses cultural lines so well, that I knew I wanted to preserve that for the Clown. Merlin I had already put in a beard, and so no other special makeup was necessary. Hanne took a little more experimentation, but by rooting her makeup in the choices I had made about character types, I found a look that worked. I wanted to bring together visually what we had discussed, about her being a *chou* character who thought she was a *xiaodan*. To that end, I blended the white patch of the *chou* with simple, if dramatic, eye make up intended to look striking and beautiful. We experimented with the size and exact placement of the white patch, and with the color and shape

of the eye makeup, and eventually found a balance. The look didn't quite work in action, with the eye makeup getting lost a little on stage, but we worked on that each night, making it bolder and stronger until it was effective.

For the Devil's makeup, I experimented with my designer to come up with a look. Right off the bat, I knew that I wanted to avoid stereotypical western ideas of what a devil should look like. I definitely didn't want horns, and I wanted to steer clear of black and red as the colors of evil. Instead, I drew my pallet from Chinese opera convention, choosing blue, white, and yellow as the three colors for the Devil's look. Blue traditionally represents high status characters, who are staunch, fierce, and astute. White is sinister and crafty, often used for villains, as well as being the color associated with death (Li, p.13). Finally, yellow stands for treachery, ferociousness, and slyness, as well as being similar to gold, which is the color of gods and demons(Siu, p.4). I knew that I couldn't expect my audience to understand these color associations, but they were useful as a guide to my makeup designer, suggesting to her the characteristics I wanted to highlight.

As a first try, I gave my designer those colors and a range of examples of makeup for *jing* characters in Chinese opera, and asked her to come up with a new design. The result was a really interesting pattern that said absolutely nothing about the character. On thing I did like about the look was a harsh line across the cheekbones, so, I asked her to make it more angular, taking the same symmetry and full face coverage of the Chinese opera masks, and building in a sense of harshness that felt appropriate for the Devil. This second attempt felt better to me, but I still wasn't sure that it worked.

To shake things up, we tried a totally different tack, recreating a facial look from a medieval painting of the Devil seducing Merlin's mother. This Devil was mostly blue, with white highlights, which fitted perfectly with the color scheme I had prescribed. However, the painting was of a Devil with very odd proportions, not to mention horns, and when transplanted onto a normal human face, it didn't look right. It looked very tribal, rather like aboriginal Australian face paint, which was not what I was going for. I didn't want to confuse my piece by accidentally suggesting an additional culture for no good reason!

With that idea a bust, we went back to the design that she and I had been developing together. This time, I asked her to cut the look off at the cheek bone, restricting the mask to the upper half of the face. This turned out to be a good decision, as it emphasized that angularity, and gave the actor a rather aquiline look. The Devil in this play is a very predatory character, so the impression of him as a bird of prey, circling over the other characters, was one that I liked very much. We continued to clarify this look over the run, and I think we found a look that worked, but I was never totally satisfied with it. I think I never really had it clear in my head what I wanted to achieve with the Devil's makeup, and that showed in the result.

Percussion

The last element that I added to the production was percussion. It was important for me to have percussion in this piece in order to create an aural environment that would complement the stylistic movement and speech we had worked to create. For my instruments, I chose a drum and cymbals, both very standard Chinese opera instruments, and also a *bolanggu*, or hand pellet drum, which is more usually a children's toy, but which I felt would create an interesting

dialogue with the drum. I also appreciated that association with childhood. This is a story about Merlin's birth, and about the process of self-discovery and establishing identity, and so in that sense is about childhood. Having one of my instruments be an emblem of that seemed appropriate.

I began percussion work by establishing a few basic rules for us to follow. First of all, most of the percussion in this piece was connected to the Devil and Merlin, as the two supernatural characters, with Hanne and the Clown - the two mortal characters - generally only having sound effects, and not other percussion behind their scenes. Following on from that, each instrument was associated with a character and primarily plays in connection to that character. The drum was the Devil's instrument, as a powerful and commanding instrument. The pellet drum, smaller less decisive relative of the drum, was Merlin's instrument, to establish that connection between him and the Devil, as well as to build the power discrepancy between them. The cymbal is a martial instrument, traditionally used to represent military characters, so that was the Knight's instrument

Having these specific associations between characters and instruments allowed me to keep those characters present even when they were offstage. For example, although the knight is only briefly present - and never physically onstage - the cymbals were used at many moments of conflict or confrontation, as well as being incorporated into the Devil's presentation percussion. The knight is a minor character, but he is a very important symbol, representative of King Arthur's round table: the world that Merlin wants to build and the Devil is desperate to destroy. Having his instrument recur throughout the piece kept that idea alive, and served to ground the play in its central conflict. The Devil's drum was more regulated, only sounding once when the

Devil was offstage. This was at the very end of the play, once Merlin had come down from his tree. In response to Merlin's assurance that "yes, [the Devil's] gone," the drum rapped out 4 loud beats before the lights went to blackout. This drum beat, only previously heard when the Devil was onstage, acted as an answer to Merlin's confidence, to imply that although the Devil was currently gone, this conflict was far from over.

Conclusion

Like the conflict, my exploration of this play is far from over. This is an immensely complex play, and for every answer I found, a dozen more questions popped up. How does time work? What is being said about humanity? Who has the real power at any given moment? Is this an optimistic play, or a pessimistic one? This complexity gave me a lot of valuable material to explore, but was also a challenge, because I wanted to explore so much that I wasn't always able to keep it all active and in play.

So: to my questions. How does time work? Time is very fluid in this play. Merlin is conceived before "the first day", and born an old man, and has the ability to remember the future. Other characters, too, have an unexpected relationship with time, as the Arthurian knight appears before the existence of Camelot, and famous figures such as Rothschild and (in a later section) Mark Twain exist at the beginning of time, or in Arthur's court. My initial take on this was that time in this play was simply another dimension that characters and ideas could move through freely. That sense of permeability felt right, but once I started working more with the text, I realised that there were rules at play. If time was infinitely permeable, then why, do none of the knights appear out of sequence? Why is it only Merlin, the Devil, and these thinkers from the

future who move through time differently? Perhaps the answer was that there are two layers of time in the play: linear time for people who are living the story, and mutable time for those on the periphery, who interact with and comment on the story without truly being part of it. This felt more true, but then I noticed one anomaly. In a scene late in the play, King Arthur, who is very much living the story, and otherwise has a thoroughly linear relationship with time, finds himself with Merlin, out of his time and place, in a planetarium. This threw me, and I reexamined the question for a third time. Finally, I found clarity in one of Hanne's lines. On page 3 of the play, well before Merlin's birth, Hanne shouts at the Clown, "The kid's screaming." It occurred to me that while this could simply be a comment meant to deflect blame, it could also be read as another moment of non-linear time, in which Merlin's presence is felt before he has really arrived. That was the final piece of the puzzle, adding a third possible relationship to time. Not only does Merlin personally have a non-linear existence, he also warps time for those around him.

Finally, is this an optimistic or a pessimistic play? This was a question I went back and forth on many times, and it was closely intertwined with the power dynamics at play, and the presentation of humanity. My instinctive response was that it had to be optimistic, because that is the legacy of the Arthurian legends: hope in the potential perfection of humanity. However, this play in its entirety ends with the destruction of the planet - a rather bleak note! That sent me back to the text to try to distinguish what was being said as opposed to what I wanted it to be saying. Combing through the play, I came to realise that I was asking the wrong question. Optimistic versus pessimistic was an intellectually interesting question, but I needed something more active to guide my work. The alternate question I settled on was: does the Devil win? The answer I

arrived at was that it depends what scale you're looking at, or when in the play you stop. When the Round Table is formed? The perfect society the Devil was afraid of is formed, so the Devil has lost. At the battle of Camlaan and the fall of Arthur? The Devil has won. Perhaps the failure of humanity after coming so close to harmony makes the Devil's success more complete. But then in the enduring legend, there is hope that humanity could try again, and perhaps succeed. In that case, the Devil would have lost after all. Everything in this play goes in cycles, and because of this play's extreme length, that becomes palpable. So, even though I was only directing a 25 minute section, I needed to draw from my reading of the entire play, and find a way to leave that sense of uncertainty and potential for the future open. I chose a section that ended with conflict, and pushed that conflict literally into the audience, sweeping them up as the cycles started turning in earnest.

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Appendix 1: An Annotated Script

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Tankred Dorst - MERLIN 1

Christ drives out the heathen gods. 1

Christ lit by a thousand lightbulbs drives out the heathen Gods. Flashes of lightning split the sky. Bellowing. Shrill screeches. Searchlights pick out the heathen gods. They fall from the heights down into the darkness. They flee into the woods, they hide in the cities.

Devil music
Merlin music

Enter M & D 2

Hanne: Maxine } Man
Clown: ~~Bill~~ Axelon } Devils
Merlin: Rema }
Devil: Billie } devil

Someone shouts, someone curses together
A man and a woman are quarrelling, the man apparently wants to abandon the woman.
The woman is whimpering. A pane of glass clatters. Someone tears open a door. Someone falls down. Silence! Then a man's voice:
- There wasn't any balcony!

Stage direction or spoken text?
both

Exit M & D together
The clown, a massive coarsely built man, limps in, stops, stares. present to audience

WOMAN'S VOICE (screams): Where are you?

CLOWN: (listens silently)

WOMAN'S VOICE (screams): Where are you? Where are you?

CLOWN: (screams): Here I am. (He runs to another place, stops, freezes, holds his breath, shuts his eyes)

Enter H. HANNE: (a pregnant giantess, appears at the spot where the clown was and present to audience shouts): Where are you?

CLOWN (is silent, blinks, holds his hands in front of his eyes)

HANNE (listens, then screams): Where have you gone to?

CLOWN (shouts): Here! (He bounds away with a leap, throws himself flat on the ground)

HANNE (runs to where he was before): You're not here! I can't see you.

CLOWN (shouts): Yes I am! (Gets up quickly, is about to run away, bangs his head against an iron post, yells): Owww! I've done my head in!

HANNE (runs, finds him, shouts): There you are! I'm glad! I thought you wanted to run away from me.

CLOWN (shouts): No, no! I was just lost in thought!

HANNE (shouts): What were you thinking?

What's the difference between 'shout' and 'scream'?

Dorst - MERLIN

2

CLOWN (shouts): What was I thinking? I was thinking what terrible luck it was that I had such a stupid sister, she doesn't even know who the father of her child is!

HANNE (shouts tearfully): Yes! Yes!

CLOWN (shouts): And I've got to run around the whole world looking for him.

HANNE (shouts, tearfully): Yes! Yes!

CLOWN (shouts): What did he look like?

HANNE (shouts): It was dark.

CLOWN (shouts): Did he say anything?

HANNE (shouts triumphantly): Yes, yes! He said something! *don*

CLOWN (shouts): What did he say?

HANNE (shouts, triumphantly): Sugar mouse. — *don. finkeln, finking.*

CLOWN (pointing to one of the audience): Did you say that?

MEMBER OF AUDIENCE (shakes head)

CLOWN (breaks down and wails): We'll never find him! Who's going to pay for its keep! Poor me, being your brother.

HANNE (shouts tearfully): Oh dear, oh dear!

CLOWN (shouts): Don't shout like that, I need to sleep now. (He rolls himself up into a ball, to sleep. He spots another member of the audience. He leaps up and stares at him for a long time)

HANNE (shouts): What's up with you?

CLOWN (shouts): Pssst! (He points at the member of the audience)

HANNE (stares and shouts): What about the man?

CLOWN: Pssst! — Describe your seducer.

HANNE (makes an outline with her hands) — *use water sleeves.*

CLOWN (points triumphantly at the member of the audience, goes up to him and shouts): You're the father! Admit it?

Devil

MEMBER OF THE AUDIENCE: (Wants to make a joke of it and show his good humour) The lady's not quite to my taste.

CLOWN (shouts): What? Not to your taste? Yet she looks very like the lady you have with you.

Martin

MEMBER OF THE AUDIENCE: (pained): Don't joke!

CLOWN (shouts): Sir, I'm not joking! (He slaps the member of the audience hard)

Tankred Dorst - MERLIN

3

~~Devil~~
 MEMBER OF THE AUDIENCE: (*jumps up, takes his wife's hand*) It's unbelievable!

If you think that is funny, I don't think it's at all funny! If you think that you'll get more audience into your theatre with such stupid tricks, you're mistaken. Not here. Perhaps in the provinces, but not here. Not me at any rate. Not me. ~~(He leaves the auditorium with his wife, banging the door)~~

CLOWN (*shouts after him*): Do you think an actress is a nobody?

HANNE (*shouts*): Oh dear, he's gone!

CLOWN (*shouts*): Don't shout! He wasn't the right one.

HANNE (*shouts*): Oh, if only I knew who the father was, if I only knew who the father was!

CLOWN (*shouts*): We'll chuck the kid in the rubbish bin.

HANNE (*shouts*): No, no, no, no!

CLOWN (*shouts*): Don't scream! My ears hurt!

HANNE (*shouts*): I'm not screaming. The kid's screaming.

CLOWN (*shouts*): If the kid's screaming, it has to be beaten. (*Hits her on the stomach*)

HANNE (*shouts*): Owww! Owww!

A MAN IN LILAC comes in, calls affectedly: Oh, stop it now, do stop it.

CLOWN (*stops hitting her, stares*): What does he want?

THE MAN IN LILAC: I pity the little worm, I'm moved by the little worm.

CLOWN (*Stares, then screams with laughter at Hanne*): Little worm! He's calling you a little worm! Hahaha!

HANNE (*hops, screeching*): Hahaha!

THE MAN IN LILAC: Don't misunderstand me. I'll take care of the child -

CLOWN (*shouts*): Are you the father? (*To Hanne*) Was he like him?

HANNE (*stares*)

THE MAN IN LILAC (*embarrassed*): The father? No, I'm not the father. I want to adopt the child.

CLOWN (*shouts*): What? You want to adopt the child and you're not even the father.

THE MAN IN LILAC: Ah, I'd like a child.

CLOWN (*shouts*): Go and make one yourself.

THE MAN IN LILAC: I... do try to understand, I don't want to... I can't.

CLOWN (*shouts*): What. You can't? (*To Hanne*) Did you hear that, he can't.

CLOWN and HANNE (*laugh terribly*)

Tankred Dorst - MERLIN

5

fine son!

ROTHSCHILD Let me be. ~~I have other worries. I have an enormous financial deal on.~~

CLOWN (shouts): Are you going to leave your son in the lurch? That's cruel and mean of you. At least leave us your top hat! (Takes off R's hat)

Members of the Audience ~~ROTHSCHILD~~ If you don't leave me in peace, I'll call the police.

CLOWN (shouts): Here, have your mouldy hat back! But at least give me a quid for it.

Wife of Merlin ~~ROTHSCHILD~~ gives him money, puts his hat on again and leaves

CLOWN (shouts): That's only ten P. I can't bring up a child on that.

A knight enters (no actor, indicated by C's response)

CLOWN (shouts): Here comes a tin can! No, it's a person after all. I'll do this differently. I'll not say a word, stay quiet. I'll lie in the middle of the path and pretend I'm a stone. He'll fall over me and we'll tie him up. *down in a ball*

HANNE (shouts): But you're not a stone

up CLOWN (shouts): He doesn't know that. I'll pretend. *down*

HANNE (shouts): But you're not a stone!

up CLOWN (shouts): Yes I am. I'm a stone! *down*

HANNE (shouts): No, you're not a stone!

up CLOWN (shouts): Yes I am! I'm a stone. *down*

The knight meantime has gone past around them..

CLOWN looks, shouts: Now he's gone past.

HANNE (shouts and wails): He was the handsomest! What a shame, he's gone.

CLOWN (shouts): I'll be gone too. I give up. Goodbye.

He goes off

HANNE (shouts): No, no, stay here, don't abandon your sister.

~~CLOWN (imitating Rothschild): Leave me in peace, I have other worries. I have an enormous financial deal on.~~

HANNE (shouts): The baby's coming! The baby's coming! Owwww. Owwww!

CLOWN (shouts): No, no, not now. You're mistaken.

HANNE (shouts): It is! It is! Take a look!

CLOWN (shouts): No! No (Lifts up her skirt) Stay in there! Stay where you are! We only have ten P to bring you up on.

HANNE (shouts): It wants to come!

Tankred Dorst - MERLIN

6

CLOWN (shouts): But I don't want it to.

HANNE (shouts): Owww! Owww! Owww!

CLOWN (begins to shake): I'm scared, I'm scared! (He curls up into a ball, rolls, a screaming ball, over the whole stage and into a corner, where he lies whimpering.)

3

A swarm of heathen demons break out of the forests. The earth grows dark, the devil's wings cover the sun.

** (the following is taken from Rowley - The Birth of Merlin - Will trace original blank verse in English - meantime rough translation)

THE DEVIL: Mix Light and Dark, melt Earth and Heaven

Be one and return back into the old Chaos

Break up the work, destroy the world, ye Powers!

Yet shall the earth remain, give space

And life to this Birth, the miscreated,

Who will increase your oracle by its fame!

Hecate! Queen of the Shades! Lucina!

Hear me, Prosperina! For Ceres sake

Summon from the stygian night the Fates (sisters)

Oh speed on the winged wind!

So that death does not find her and her child.

Aid us, Spirits of the subterranean depth

Squint-eyed Erictol! Come quickly,

Appear and help the wondrous child

Thanks, Hecate! Hall, Sister to the Gods.

Hurry! Aid the Fates

And end her terror of bitter pain,

By which the young shoot from the seed of Hell

Becomes a human being.

Hanne groans and screams.

An evil devil A SPIRIT OF THE UNDERWORLD

possession

For this child Fate is glad to unite

All its powers, science and art,

Knowledge, Wisdom, the secret favour

Of prophecy, to foresee

Future times. His wisdom's vision,

Will form itself like a wall of brass around this island.

quick down beats

an answer

百毒頭

6 <

Tankred Dorst - MERLIN

7

THE DEVIL ^{little drum} Merlin! His name will echo through all the lands ^{down}
 As long as men shall live, he will give — ^{add cymbal}
 Reason for wonderment, and make envy weep.
 Misfortune moves its dark wings ^{build}
 The future world will sing of Merlin's deeds.

^{Cacophony - all percussion}
 The demons circle around, flutter around the pregnant Hanne. The air vibrates with a whimpering of a hundred voices, that swells and dies away, and swells again, and in which the groans of the woman in labour are drowned. The whimpering finally explodes in a shrill, hundred voiced scream. The mighty body ejects Merlin.

Now there is silence. The Earth lies in the grey light of the first day. The devil and the spirits have disappeared. Merlin, a great, bearded, naked man lies in the position of a new born baby on the ground. He rubs his eyes, looks at his hands, waggles his fingers in front of his eyes. He sits upright, looks at the game his toes are playing with interest. He stands up, falls down, stands up again, walks a couple of paces, gets used very quickly to moving his limbs in the right way. Finally he finds a newspaper and sits down on a stone to read it.

Hanne crouches on the ground and looks at her son Merlin with a radiant expression.

CLOWN (whimpers): It's so quiet! Sister, is the baby here?

HANNE doesn't listen to him, looks at Merlin.

CLOWN (approaches with hesitation): Oh, what a difficult birth! I'm quite done in. (Stares at Merlin) Who is the man there.

MERLIN (looks up from his newspaper, solemnly): I am the baby.

CLOWN What? You're the baby? (walks around Merlin)

MERLIN Good day, uncle.

CLOWN What? Do you know me? (He draws back and shouts at Hanne) You gave birth to this stick of celery?

HANNE (proudly) Such a beautiful baby.

CLOWN Are you blind? It's an ugly baby, a baby with a beard! A baby with glasses! A baby with buck teeth, a baby with a terrible basso profundo! What are we going to do with him? What are we going to do with him? He'll eat us out of house and home. No one will take him off our hands! If only we'd sold him off when he was still in

Tankred Dorst - MERLIN

8

your belly. When he hadn't been seen yet. Who's going to take him now! He's too fat to be a beggar!

HANNE Such a beautiful baby

CLOWN If I throw him in the rubbish bin his legs will hang out.

MERLIN Don't worry, uncle!

CLOWN Don't worry? Don't worry? How are we going to feed you? I've ten P. in my pocket.

MERLIN You've a hundred pounds in your pocket.

CLOWN You've a cheek on you, too, you celery stick.

MERLIN A hundred pounds!

CLOWN Ten P. *(makes to hit him)*

HANNE Leave my baby alone! My poor little baby!

MERLIN A hundred pounds.

CLOWN See! Ten P! *(He makes to pull out his ten P. from his pocket, finds that there are a lot more coins, keeps pulling them out, grinning with every fresh coin, then puts on a severe face again, trying to hide his good fortune from Merlin.)*

MERLIN Well? How much do you have in your pocket, uncle?

CLOWN That's an impertinent question! Are you spying on me? If I don't watch out.... *(mimes - stealing)*

HANNE How much have you?

CLOWN I've worked hard for the money in my pocket! ~~I did business for Mr Rothschild, he told me I was indispensable.~~

Merlin once again reads the newspaper. The clown observes him the whole time with suspicion: does Merlin know how so much money got into his pocket?

MERLIN *(greet someone in the audience)*

CLOWN What are you doing?

MERLIN I was saying hello to the gentleman back there.

CLOWN Do you know people here? Who is it?

MERLIN It's the man who you clouted earlier.

CLOWN Clouted? Me? Not me! Who was he?

MERLIN He's sitting at the back. He came back.

CLOWN *(embarrassed)* Oh. Nice of him.

MERLIN Apologise to the gentleman

Tankred Dorst - MERLIN

9

CLOWN (to the gentleman in the audience): Sir, I apologise. (to Merlin)
How come you know about that?

MERLIN (doesn't reply)

CLOWN (confused, bows again): Sir, I'm sorry you got your just deserts.
(To Merlin) Will that do?

MERLIN (nods)

CLOWN There you see all the things I do for you? We've gone all over
looking for your father for you. We've even had blows for our pains.
We've had a terrible time! We've had to do with such a lot of
people. With a right mixed lot of candidates.

MERLIN I know, I know.

CLOWN One was even made of tin, I bet you didn't know that.

MERLIN Yes. That was a knight.

CLOWN What was that?

MERLIN That was a knight, Sir Orilus, who was making his way to Camelot, to
King Arthur's round table.

CLOWN What's that? King Arthur's round table? Never heard of it.
Doesn't exist.

MERLIN (irritated) Doesn't it exist yet?

CLOWN Why's he going to somewhere that doesn't exist yet?

MERLIN (ignores the question and says after a lengthy silence) You needn't
have gone to all that trouble, I know who my father is.

CLOWN You know who your father is? Hanne, he knows who his father is.
Why didn't you say straight away?

MERLIN How could I? I wasn't born yet.

CLOWN (Ach so). Well, you could at least have given us a hint. I went to
all that trouble! - Who is he then? Is he rich?

MERLIN Immeasurably.

CLOWN (to Hanne): Hanne, he's rich!

HANNE beams.

CLOWN But tell me, he's not generous surely.

MERLIN He throws his money around! You only have to please him..

CLOWN Your mother has already pleased him!

HANNE (grins): Yes, yes!

CLOWN Hanne. We're made.

HANNE rejoices.

little
down

Gymbel

slow throughout

slow throughout

Tankred Dorst - MERLIN

10

CLOWN Where does the gentleman live? We must go there at once.

MERLIN That's not so simple. He's always away travelling.

CLOWN (looks at Merlin, deeply disappointed) Then we're back to square one. Rich, distinguished and generous, - ah, if only you hadn't told me. If we can't get at him, he might as well be poor and miserly! That would be preferable.

MERLIN Look, uncle! Here he comes!

CLOWN (turned away) Leave me alone. I'm a disappointed man.

Drum

The devil has changed his form. A man of choice elegance jumps out of a neapolitan funeral coach. He has a slight limp. Wearing make up, a large, black hat, gloves, and over the gloved fingers rings; a rat sits on his shoulder.

DEVIL (looks around, goes towards Merlin) Ah, my son?

HANNE (has seen him, sighs with delight) Oh, oh!

DEVIL (doesn't look at her, walks around Merlin): Excellent! Excellent!

Let us see now! (Feels his head, looking for horns): Very good.

Everything as it should be! (grabs him like an animal at a cattle market) Good muscles, good, good. (With a sudden move wrenches his jaws open and looks into his mouth): Exquisite! I like it. Powerful!

(Puts his hand to Merlin's crotch to feel his private parts): Good, good. A Man! (Merlin jabs him, the Devil laughs): Ah, charming! The young man's embarrassed. I'm sorry to laugh. I am delighted, I'm glad my son is a real man. (With an expansive gesture): Your father stands before you, my son. I am your father! (He waits for some form of greeting)

drum
tailMerlin as
product,
merchandiseMERLIN (stiffly): Good day, father.proof he's
not human

DEVIL (suddenly, fearfully): His feet! - 5 drum beats

*something drums

(He seizes Merlin's foot. Merlin falls down. The devil looks at the bare, white human foot with delight) How well formed! How beautiful! Oh beautiful, white human foot! - (tail)

HANNE (stands close by, wants to be noticed): My dear sir!

CLOWN (has also approached): I am my sister's brother and I will soon be your brother in law, once you have led your child's mother to the altar.

HANNE Oh, yes, yes, my dear sir!

Tankred Dorst - MERLIN

11

DEVIL *(does the delicate steps of a minuet to the music, takes Hanne's hand and leads her aside with unprecedented elegance:)* Madamemoiselle, I have every reason to think with particular pleasure of the hour I spent in your blissful embrace. *(Music stops. The devil kicks her, she tumbles, falls and sits open-mouthed and stares.)*

drum + cymbal

CLOWN Sir. That's not allowed! You can only do that once you are married to her.

DEVIL You are impudent.

CLOWN Or a kick costs a hundred pounds.

DEVIL Since I'm in such a good mood today, rejoicing over my fine son, I feel like being generous. Do you see this ring? Come nearer! A sparkling diamond! Isn't it?

CLOWN *(looks):* Yes, yes.

DEVIL And finely cut!

CLOWN Yes, yes. We'll take the ring.

DEVIL It's yours. *(He slashes the ring quickly across the clown's face - a bloody gash)*

drum + cymbal

CLOWN *(stands dumb with terror, crawls across to Hanne and stays by her silently)*

DEVIL *(takes the ring from his finger, throws it across to the two of them)*

CLOWN *(doesn't dare pick it up)*

DEVIL *(looking over Merlin's shoulder):* What's that you're reading?

MERLIN Today's paper.

DEVIL And what do you gather from it?

MERLIN The heat of the moment. "The now, now, now"

DEVIL You find that funny?

MERLIN I seem to be missing something....but I can't say what.

DEVIL You mean: the Future.

MERLIN Future? - Now, is now. But the other...

DEVIL That which is still to come, that people in the present don't know about yet.

MERLIN *(ponders, says cautiously):* Death -

DEVIL Yes. Everything ends in death.

MERLIN I don't know my death.

formation of the world

Tankred Dorst - MERLIN

12

DEVIL (points to Hanne and the clown) And the two over there? In the midst of life? *Cymbal*

MERLIN (looks across, starts): What a terrible end! Oh the poor people, all over the earth (He looks at the audience) They have such a terrible end. (He doubles up, he covers his head with pages of newspaper, a keening cry)

DEVIL *Cymbal* Not you! Not you! Be glad you're my son, your life will not end in death.

MERLIN (sits up): I will sit in a whitethorn hedge.

→ DEVIL Other pictures! *Use your eyes,* my son.

MERLIN Iron men. *Cymbal*

image is changeable and can be tracked

DEVIL What....

MERLIN Iron men round in a circle... around a pond? Is it a pond?

→ DEVIL No, no, other pictures!

MERLIN (tries to see): A horse...

DEVIL What kind of horse?

MERLIN Inside there are soldiers crouching. *C*

DEVIL Aha, the Trojan War, the Trojan horse. That is the past, that's not the future. *Go on!* *9+0*

MERLIN A puppet with lead shoes dangling above dust and boulders.

DEVIL Yes! Mr Neil Armstrong on the moon.

MERLIN On the moon? (He looks up) When was that?

DEVIL That hasn't been! That is the future. That's still to come.

MERLIN I have memories of the future? *9*

DEVIL Yes, you get that from me.

○ MERLIN (hesitant): The king and the massacred children...

DEVIL That's been. Herod - a magnificent king.

○ MERLIN A giant bubble floating... in the air...

DEVIL Zeppelin. Still to come.

○ MERLIN Black swarm of people.... Winter palace?

DEVIL Yes. They're storming it! Still to come!

○ MERLIN Hearts inserted...

DEVIL Organ transplants! Still to come.

○ MERLIN Waltz king? (shakes his head): King? - of which country?

DEVIL They all dance.

Johann Strauss

*Pity,
what the
devil looks.*

*Devil
beat*

Tankred Dorst - MERLIN

13

Recognition cut out

MERLIN Yes, beautiful! I can see it, I remember, beautiful. My ear remembers, my feet remember. *power shift*

DEVIL Bravo!

MERLIN (*has now understood*): Still to come!

DEVIL (*nods*)

MERLIN (*with sudden recognition*): It isn't a pond. It's a round table. A hundred knights round the huge table.

DEVIL What kind of table?

MERLIN Still to come! Still to come!

DEVIL (*trying to divert him*): No, that's only a figment! There are also figments of your imagination, my son! That has never been and never shall be. *gaining confidence*

MERLIN Yes, it will. Yes, it will, that's to come. I know now. I met a knight from the round table this morning. He was a great fat man... I even know what his name is.

DEVIL (*in a rage*): That shall never be.

MERLIN You're annoyed, father? *sensing weakness, seeing that he isn't all-powerful.*

DEVIL Other pictures.

MERLIN (*wants to rile him*): The Round Table, the Round Table. *devil hear*

DEVIL Nonsense!

MERLIN Sir Orilus! He's called Sir Orilus. I can see the table! A beautifully ordered world!

DEVIL Other pictures! *changing what he sees, interesting pictures*

MERLIN No, no, no!

DEVIL You can see other different ones! *tempting*

MERLIN People in fiery ovens.

DEVIL (*contentedly*): A grand period!

MERLIN (*keeping his eyes closed*): They're burning. I can see them.

DEVIL Don't be so sensitive, my son.

MERLIN I don't want to know the future. Leave me be.

DEVIL Listen, you are not like other men, you are Merlin, my son, I have plans for you. That's why you were conceived.

MERLIN (*a dismissive gesture, wants to disappear behind a tree*)

DEVIL Listen! Listen to me! You have a task ahead of you. You will do great things, you will use your magic powers, your knowledge of the future, your prophetic gift, your life force, which will endure for

Devil on the ropes

Drum stops

gaslighting

Tankred Dorst - MERLIN

14

centuries, your imagination, and your artistic talent, to liberate mankind.

MERLIN (*from behind a tree*) To liberate mankind?

DEVIL Yes. In my name!

MERLIN (*behind a tree*): I'm not listening.

DEVIL I am your father! You will obey me.

MERLIN (*dismissively*): Yes, yes.

DEVIL Liberate mankind for evil! Evil is their true nature. That's what they desire, that's what they were made for.

MERLIN (*dismissively*) Good? Evil? I don't know what they mean, I haven't got a feel for them yet.

DEVIL It is your task, Merlin, to take away their fear of evil.

MERLIN Do it yourself if it's so important to you.

DEVIL I can't. They are scared of me. I need a human son to do it. They won't be scared of you.

MERLIN I don't know whether I'll go along with it... Perhaps... Perhaps not.

DEVIL What! You won't obey me. You must obey your father.

MERLIN How come? I suppose, because it says so in the bible?

DEVIL Impudent rogue! Anarchist!

MERLIN My father may be the devil, but my mother is a pious woman. So I too have pious feelings implanted in my soul.

DEVIL Pious feelings! That slut! That cheap whore!

MERLIN Dominus regnat, maiestatum indutus est,
indutus est Dominus potentiam, praecinxit se,
et firmavit orbem terrarum...

DEVIL I can force you!

MERLIN You cannot! I am a man, I can protect myself. (*Climbs into a tree, praying*):... qui non commovebitur.

Firma est sedes tua ab aevo,
ab aeterno tu es.

Extollunt flumina, Domine,
extollunt flumina vocem suam.

Potentior voce aquarum multarum,
potentior aestibus maris:

devil
drum

devil
slide

Balm 93

devil drum

pause



Tankred Dorst - MERLIN

15

potens in excelsis est Dominus.

(He climbs up into a the top of a huge tree)

DEVIL May the tree rot!

MERLIN I'll climb up and up right up into the open sky!

Pennsion
build

DEVIL (stands at the bottom, in a rage, tries flattery): I was too impatient with you, I'm sorry! - You will have power! You will see, how it is, when one has power. You silly stubborn mule. Come down to your papa! I have great plans for you. Great plans - Go to Wales. King Vortiger will listen to you, you will prophecy his downfall! Go to Wales! - Don't let's quarrel any more, my dear boy. Do you hear me. Just think. Think about it in peace. We'll speak again. Merlin!

MERLIN (calls from up above): What are you saying? I can hardly hear you.

DEVIL Farewell, my son.

MERLIN Vanish, Satan. Whatever you say! I'll found the Round Table.

The devil gets into his coach and drives off. Silence. After a while Merlin comes out from behind a tree, looks about him. Throws his newspaper away.

CLOWN Has he gone?

MERLIN Yes, he's gone.

devil
down 4 beats

CLOWN (stands up, snatches up the ring which was still lying there, shouts after the Devil): You overinflated nullity! You skunk! You arsehole! You - Worm! You child molester! You terrorist! You capitalist! You piss house stench! You hot whore! You ape's arse! You stupid bastard! You nigger! Bootlicker! Bastard! Motherfucker! Barber(??) Shitheap! Catholic! Syphalitic! Jew pig! Trashcan! Literateur! Street walker! Hurenbock. Arselover! Turk! - I've told him now!

HANNE (Schwule Sau)

CLOWN (to Merlin, shouts): Go on reading! We don't want anything more to do with you. It's all your fault! If only I'd never clapped eyes on you!

*

Appendix 2: Make-up



The Clown



Hanne



Merlin



The Devil. Clockwise from top left: Initial experiment; final design; alternate inspiration; alternate look.

Appendix 3: Production Photos









Appendix 4: The Program

The PERFORMERS

The Devil..... **Bill Yibin Wang**
 Merlin..... **Pema Menice**
 The Clown..... **Avalon Blue Qian (錢藍)**
 Hanne..... **Marina Ruojia Yang**

Percussion..... **Noah Shearer**
 **Celia Faux**
 **Kate Brashear**

The PRODUCTION TEAM

Director..... **Kate Brashear (白凱文)**
 Makeup..... **Dani Nordenberg**
 Light board..... **Acacia Mays**
 Lighting..... **Kate Brashear**
 Costumes..... **Kate Brashear**

Thank you to Shane Crowley, Ryan Cason, and Rachael Gunning for help with tech, and to Peter Servatius for filming this show. Thank you to my advisor, Chiori Miyagawa, for advocating for me, and helping me figure out what on earth I was doing!



Merlin

by Tankred Dorst

Directed by Kate Brashear
 A Senior Project in Theater & Performance

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

This play is a beast to tackle. Written in German in 1981, in its full form, it is over 15 hours long, with hundreds of characters and no fixed sense of time or place. Prose, stage direction, and dialogue are all mixed together, with no indication of how this is to be tackled theatrically. The play starts with the creation of the universe, and ends with the death of the Earth, and encompasses the entirety of the Arthurian tradition, and of human morality. It's part medieval morality play, part gory horror, and part science fiction, all with the drama and scale of a Zhang Yimou film. There is no way to approach this play naturalistically. Even only working with a small piece of it, as I have, you need a theatrical construct that can handle the weight. For this production, I found my approach to the play in the elevated physicality and highly coded symbolism of Chinese opera.

The connections here may not seem obvious, but to me, they felt instinctively right. Merfin is exactly the sort of story Chinese opera excels at telling, full of mythology and morality; equal parts lyrical and action-packed. In many ways, it is reminiscent of one of the most popular stories in the Chinese tradition, 西遊記, or Journey to the West, with its mischievous and powerful protagonist, who continually defies the gods, but tries, in a meandering, round-about way, to do the right thing. As for the German-Chinese connection, well, that is well

established. Many of Bertolt Brecht's theories of performance developed out of experiences with Beijing opera, and in particular, from watching the famous performer Mei Lanfang. This connection runs the other way as well, as from the late 1950s onwards, Brecht's work has had a powerful effect on Chinese theater, influencing spoken dramas and opera alike.

As a cross-culture kid, bringing together different cultural threads is something I wrestle with all the time in my own life. How do I bring together Australia, America, and Hong Kong into one cohesive identity that celebrates each and is the stronger for it? They have to be in dialogue with each other, so that the whole not only makes sense of its parts, but is the richer for each of them. I have tried to facilitate a similar conversation here, between this German text, this British story, and this Chinese theatrical tradition.

This production sits at the meeting place of all these ideas. As such, it is not any one of them. This production is not Brechtian. It is also not a Chinese opera. And I'm sure it is not what Dorst would have imagined while he was writing it! Over the last few months, my actors and I have created our own vocabulary of performance, and with it have built this show, of which we are all immensely proud. We are pleased to share it with you now.