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Our Grandparents / 旧识

Brooke Taylor Tyborowski
Bard College

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Our Grandparents / 旧识

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

by
Brooke Taylor Tyborowski

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Acknowledgments

First, I'd like to thank my senior project partner, Bill Wang. I couldn't have asked for a better co-writer/director to go on this journey with. Even when it all felt so huge and impossible, you reassured me that everything was going to turn out okay. We really did it!

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How Did We Get Here?

Before the real work began, I knew very little about what exactly I wanted my senior project to look like. Even so, I never thought it would end up being what it was. I knew I wanted to act, and I knew I had an interest in dramaturgy, but would I write? Who would I work with? I was happy when Bill reached out to me and asked if we could work together. We had collaborated previously in our Introduction to Theater Making class, and we had a good working relationship. He was studying abroad in Berlin at the time, and then he would return home to China for the summer where there is a 12 hour time difference from New York, so it was difficult for us to develop our ideas into anything cohesive really until the start of our senior fall semester.

Bill also didn't seem to have anything particular in mind, which was good, so that the project could end up being something we were both fully committed to. At least that is what I thought. He did say he was thinking about the changing of actors' consciousness on stage, and I thought that seemed like an interesting theme to work with, although I wasn't quite sure what exactly that meant at the time, or rather, what that would look like in our piece. We were also both interested in adaptation, maybe with a focus on something relevant to our own lives.

After meeting with Jonathan Rosenberg, both of our advisor at the time, he suggested we look into a group called *She She Pop*. Bill actually got the chance to see their work since he was in Berlin at the time, and their piece got us thinking more about memory, conversation, and how we might come up with specific rules to motivate the action of our piece. Given that we were still interested in adaptation, Bill mentioned his interest in an episode of a show called *MUSHI-SHI*, which was a really touching story about aging and memory. This led me to think

about the loss of memory, alzheimers and dementia, and looking back on elders' childhoods. I wasn't sure at the time how exactly I wanted these themes to translate into our specific project, but Bill had the idea to focus on how we tell stories about our elders, and how exactly we connect, or fail to connect, with them. At this point, I was open to anything, but I really wanted there to be an emphasis specifically on trauma and how it affects who we become as we get older. I had questions like, how do we make peace with memories, perhaps traumatic ones from childhood, that have haunted us? How do we escape the cycles of memories that have been ingrained in us since childhood, and are those then passed down through generations? How are our identities reflections of those who have come before us, and how will we portray those who came before us in a way that is authentic and respectful?

I always knew I wanted to make work that focuses on human connection, bringing us together through shared experience, particularly shared experience that we don't talk about often enough. The fact that we keep these shared struggles to ourselves makes us feel alone when we don't need to be, and the theater to me is a place where we can help people to feel less alone. I also wanted to make a piece about memory and trauma that is not emotionally manipulative. By emotionally manipulative I mean, I don't want to take part in the type of performance which is written or directed so that it forces the audience to feel a certain way. This often tends to be the case when we put narratives on stage that speak about difficult subjects, but I wanted to make something that would not necessarily tell people how to feel, but rather to connect with it in a way that is productive and healing as opposed to potentially harmful or triggering. I think we need more works that lend themselves to this.

One of the things that got me thinking a lot about this was actually some of the theater and performance I saw during Miriam Felton-Dansky's Contemporary Theater Tutorial in January of 2019. When we saw Diana Oh's *Infinite Love Party* at the Bushwick Starr, and Jack Ferver's *Everything is Imaginable* at New York Live Arts, it got me doing a lot of reflection on the different ways childhood memories and traumas can translate into performance. I really wanted to incorporate my own perspective on this into my work somehow. Ultimately, I wouldn't say that this was incorporated into my piece in a way that was obvious. At the end of the day our piece did not end up being about childhood, but thinking about my own childhood as I was raised by my great-grandparents for the first 8 years of my life, I had to do my own personal work to be open enough to remember that time in my life and those memories. That was going to prove more difficult than I thought.

Once Bill and I wrote up our proposal and it was approved by the faculty, Jack Ferver was assigned as our project advisor. My first meeting with Jack was my first roadblock, and would sort of set the tone in a sense for what the rest of the process would look like for me. I was embarrassed that when Jack started asking questions about my project I went completely blank. I was feeling disconnected from what Bill and I were doing. I was panicking a little bit, unsure of how I would be a part of a project I felt I had nothing worth contributing toward. Looking back, it's hard to remember how frozen I was, unable to allow myself to access memories and feelings that would help drive this piece. I've grown so much since May of last year, but it wasn't easy getting there. I'm proud of what we were able to make because I allowed myself to be open and vulnerable, and to remember things I'd rather not always think about otherwise. In this case, it was worth it.

Bill and I were both in for a vulnerable experience, using our own personal histories and families to make up the material for our piece. But we wanted this to be a three person cast, not including Bill, since he needed some distance as the director. An important question then became, who were the right people for this, and who would be willing to come on this deeply personal journey with us? Who was up for an unconventional rehearsal process, willing to open up and talk about things college students don't typically talk about? In the initial auditions we were really just looking to get a sense of their acting skills, and how they present on stage. From there we called back three people who we could imagine working well with, and who might fit the style of our piece. In our callbacks we discussed more in depth what the hopes and specifics were for our project, and we wanted to see if it was something they would be interested in and able to commit to since the piece would rely on the whole cast contributing to the devising process and discussing sometimes difficult topics such as family, aging, and trauma. Next, we wanted to get to know them more, and also see how they told a story. We did not know at the time exactly what their role would be, we merely had a structure set for the piece, but we felt confident that Lukina could adapt to any role we would come to develop. She proved to be a strong actor who brought a great maturity and intelligence to our rehearsal room.

Now that we had cast Lukina, and of course myself, we needed to decide who would play the character based on Bill. It was important that the character be someone close to Bill, and someone who speaks Chinese, so Bill recruited a couple of his friends to come to our first rehearsal and see who was a good fit for the piece. That is how we cast Henry, a charismatic sophomore who had never acted before, and little did he know that he would teach us all a thing or two about finding our own pleasure on stage. At this point we'd found our cast, we had a

sense of the structure for our piece, and we had approximately four months to figure out what exactly we wanted to say, how we wanted to say it, and share our story.

Research, Lived Experience, & Devising

I spent my summer reading *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk, MD, in addition to looking into any literature or research on portrayals of trauma in theater that I could find. In doing this research I came across a graduate school thesis titled *Theatre of Trauma*, which then referred me to a lecture by dramaturg Dr. Tiffany Ana Lopez, where this quote in particular stood out to me.

“By bringing the audiences together to bear witness to live storytelling, theatre is very particular as an artform because it recovers what violence seeks to destroy. Violence seeks to destroy a sense of presence - that you don't matter, it seeks to destroy the voice, the perpetrators voice, whether it be institutional perpetrator or individual perpetrators that will squelch your voice. And through those things that would have happened to you and to your people...that they don't matter. Because they are without a witness. Trauma is defined as 'the unspeakable.' Literally, we are traumatized because we lack an ability (or a language) to talk about what's happened to us. Things are traumatic because they don't make sense to us in the larger story of our lives. This is why we process and repeat stories over and over again, because we are on a quest to try to make sense of them. To put them into stories so that they are no longer unspeakable. Theatre is a very important artform in the healing of trauma because it gives us a narrative anchor. It gives us a framework of the story. It recuperates presence - because we are all together. It assembles us not just as an audience but as witnesses, we are bearing witness. And the actors on the stage who are perhaps telling their own stories, or engaged in fictional storytelling, are telling someone's story. By proxy they are taking us out of the shadows of things that are silent and have no testimony. They are giving testimony, they are giving witness. They are helping people see that they are not alone. But, most importantly, they are putting things in a framework of storytelling so that we can take things that are private and traumatic and make them public. So they become legible and no longer private but given to us to make a decision (when we leave the theatre) about how we are going to participate in change. Do we want to be part of what we have just seen on-stage? Or, do we want to help in ending the cycle of violence that is seen depicted onstage?” (Lopez, 2017).

Despite not knowing what exactly my project would be, I knew that it was going to be about something typically unspeakable. That this project was going to take the private and make it public, just as Dr. Lopez talks about. I just didn't realize at that time that I was going to go on such a personal journey, performing my own version of the unspeakable as well as my grandfather's, but this quote was indicative of the hard work that was ahead of me.

My summer research gave me a basis of knowledge going into the semester. Furthermore, once Bill and I had a better idea of what the exact focus of our piece would be, Jack encouraged us to continue research on elder related trauma and ageism, and representation and portrayals of elders in theater. We were asking questions such as what happens to the body as it ages? Physically, what is the science of aging in the body, and how can we represent that on stage as college kids just trying to understand something we personally are unable to understand right now in our own bodies? What are the generational differences in seeking help for mental health issues? Jack posed the question to us, *did our grandparents know what self care is?* These were the types of questions people our age likely don't think about so often, or at least I hadn't considered this question before, and so over the next few months we would come to explore these questions both through our own individual research and reflection, and in conversation with the rest of the cast. Making the connections between both Bill's and my lived experiences growing up with our grandparents, no matter how similar or different, in combination with research based in trauma, ageism, and mental health in this population, Bill and I were in a good place to write and rehearse, and devise with a cast.

We realized that the way we could best talk about these things was to be honest and authentic, so we were transparent in discussing our lack of understanding about our own

grandparents with the audience. We recreated the distance that we felt in our own lives and we put it on stage for everyone to see without pretending that just because we had done the research, we knew everything about aging and trauma. Instead, we acknowledged that we didn't have all the answers, and by showing different perspectives of misunderstanding and frustration and confusion in conversation with others, we were able to create something that felt successful in the end. This was in part the function of Lukina's character of the Director, acting as a heightened version of ignorance for the audience. Instead of putting answers on stage, we put the conversation itself on stage, and I think that is what made our piece one that did not tell people how to feel, but left room for them to explore their own feelings and relationships with regard to aging and trauma.

In order to put conversations on stage that were authentic, we held numerous of our own conversations in rehearsal as part of the devising process. Bill and I led these conversations in rehearsal, influenced by the research we had done, and we were then able to work these conversations into something cohesive with a narrative. We also took what we knew from our own personal experiences, Bill's recordings of his grandmother and memory of a conversation with my own grandfather, and we used those materials to write our individual characters' monologues separately before working them into group conversations with the rest of the cast. An example of this type of conversation was about my character's feelings about acting my own grandfather. After a run of my monologue in rehearsal, Bill began asking me questions about how I was feeling about the acting, and he encouraged Lukina to ask her own questions in her character's role as the Director, as well. Bill recorded the conversation in rehearsal and my verbatim responses, and we later met outside of rehearsal time to write it into the script. It was

also helpful when I was acting to be able to remember well the first time we had that conversation in rehearsal, and the revelations it felt like I was having about my character and my own relationship to my grandfather.

Recalling my own memories was one of the things that scared me the most about this piece, and I think it put a stop in our ability to get started earlier. I remember after Jack advised Bill and I to sit in a classroom in Olin and figure out our piece back at the very beginning of the semester, I finally gave in and allowed myself to remember some of the more difficult conversations between my grandfather and I. These were the conversations I needed to talk about, and the conversations I had never told anyone about before. The unspeakable. Suddenly I was remembering a couple of years ago when my grandfather told me he was suicidal, and that was when I really realized and could acknowledge that I had a story worth telling here. I did have something to contribute. I knew my grandfather wasn't the only elder who lacked proper mental health care. But how often do we hear about it? How often do we acknowledge it for what it really is, and why don't we? There were questions worth asking here, and posing them to a greater audience. Similarly, once Bill had acknowledged the recordings he had of his grandmother I think we were able to really dig deep and open up to each other about what we wanted this project to be. We just had to get over the initial hurdle of opening up and actually defeating the stigma which ultimately we would end up trying to address in the piece.

When the Personal Becomes Public

It's funny how I say I don't like playing myself on stage, yet for both my moderation and senior projects I've written and performed as some version of myself. I used to think that I did theater because it was a medium where I didn't have to be myself; in fact, I could be anything

but. At least, that's what theater used to be for me. It used to be an escape. But I have learned through my training here at Bard, that that's not sustainable. How was I ever going to get anywhere if I didn't unite the stage version of Brooke with the everyday version and even who I am in rehearsal? More recently, however, I've used theater as a tool for confronting parts of myself I'd rather people not see. The parts that I'd rather even hide from myself.

This project ended up being a much larger undertaking of personal and emotional confrontation than I'd never envisioned. For this I also have to thank two professors in particular: Jack Ferver, and Nilaja Sun. I've learned more as a performer in their classes alone than I had in my entire life. As an actor, these lessons translated into the work I did in my senior project. Nilaja told me that my work is always about trying to speak up. I didn't realize that until now. You might wonder how a project about my grandfather and ageism and the trauma of getting older has anything to do with me being able to speak up, but this was another added layer to the project I had to explore on a personal level alone, as well as in the rehearsal room among Bill, Lukina, and Henry, and it wasn't easy. This piece helped me to confront my own traumas, and that was not initially my intention.

There was an additional element of writing and performing this piece that led to an important personal breakthrough for me. That is, this piece really served as a way to bridge the gap between these two very different sides of myself, and this was at the heart of the piece whether it was made clear to the audience or not. This piece was me bringing a piece of where I come from and my home life into my school life and the person I am here. It's hard to explain, but essentially, I have always had a hard time feeling like I belong in this setting: academically, artistically, etc. What am I doing here? It's something I've had a hard time understanding myself,

but it's always been a core reason for my hesitation and anxiety around speaking up and telling my story. Thankfully, Bill had this idea of telling a story about older people. It wasn't always going to be about our own grandparents, necessarily, but I think that for both of us, it was beneficial that we did tell our own stories and our family's stories, and not someone else's.

All of this is to say that throughout the process I had a lot of anxiety surrounding the premise that this was not just a play, I was not writing an unfamiliar story, I was making a piece that was very personal and typically unspoken. In fact, I have always come from a place where it was not okay to talk about the personal. This isn't so uncommon necessarily, but it created a block in me at the start of Bill's and my process. I cannot speak for Bill, but even when he proposed the idea of making a piece about elders, I wasn't entirely sure why. It wasn't until we were a couple months into the process that we both came to discover that we both shared the experience of being raised by our grandparents. I don't know about Bill, but this wasn't something I was used to talking about with people. I didn't even know Bill had these recordings of his grandmother from a conversation they had over dinner. He was sort of secretly recording her, so I suppose he was hesitant to share, but this became a pretty crucial turning point in our creative process.

It was the first or second week reuniting back at Bard to begin working on our project together, and we had scheduled a meeting with Jack Ferver, our advisor. This meeting was a huge slap in the face, and one that we desperately needed. We went into the meeting proposing we change our initial project idea, explaining that we were unable to generate a script or flesh out any ideas that made sense for the piece we had initially proposed. At this point we were shying away from the idea of writing an original piece, and instead, explained to Jack we had a plan to

do one of two plays that might still speak to the themes we felt were important to our project. I proposed *Mary Page Marlowe* by Tracy Letts. I had seen it a couple summers back at Second Stage when I was a literary intern with Signature Theatre, and I felt strongly at the time that it would be a perfect piece for us. It had themes of aging, trauma, memory, and it would be a good challenge for me as an actor. I tried really hard to convince Bill that this was a good idea, but he had never seen the show or read the script. Bill proposed we do *The Visit* by Friedrich Durrenmatt. I had never heard of it before, but honestly, at this point I was just getting nervous and thought we should decide on a more solid idea for our project, so I said, why not? Maybe it would be a good challenge for me, and I trusted Bill. We were going to propose these new, safer ideas to Jack at our first meeting of the semester, and we figured he would be fine with it; after all, it was our project anyway, why would he care, really? Of course, this was not the case.

Lucky for us, Jack was the perfect advisor for Bill and I. He didn't let us give up on our original plan. He reminded us of the piece we had proposed, and he was confused as to why we were changing our direction all of a sudden. Why were we taking the easy way out? He told us about his own parents, he discussed the body's response to trauma delving deep into some of its neurological effects, and the way the body breaks down with age. I was panicked and uncomfortable, but not in a bad way. I was being asked to really confront something people my age normally don't, and the fact that I did is definitely for the best. I was overwhelmed and worried after the first meeting that I would regret proposing this project. Now, looking back after having completed a show I'm proud of, I couldn't be more grateful. Jack encouraged us to work with the personal and guided us through his explanation of why he chose to advise us on our project in the first place. We had the opportunity here to make a piece that gives a voice to an

overlooked and underrepresented population in theater, and we had the chance to use our own unique perspective as college aged students who grew up with their grandparents to do this. We discussed elders and trauma, and soon enough got on to the subject of our own grandparents where Bill and I found what we had in common. Jack pushed us. I'll never forget that first meeting. Jack told us we needed to stay in this room for the next couple hours and figure out the true core of our project and really get on the same page, and then quickly walked out the door. Bill and I just sat there in silence for a couple minutes. I was not expecting for our advisor to actually push back on our new proposal. I don't think a professor had ever pushed me like that before. This sounds overdramatic, I'm sure, but it was intense and Bill and I really were speechless, trying to process what had just happened.

What was interesting for me on both a personal and creative level was the way that memories started to come back to me. There were things I'd blocked out before, or maybe forgotten for whatever reason. Things I maybe did not want to remember that I was sort of forced to confront given the weight of what we wanted to explore here. This was in part why Bill and I were both stuck over the summer and why we avoided the personal, or at least why I avoided the personal. I was disconnected from this part of my life with my grandparents. When Bill said he wanted to do a piece about old people I didn't feel any connection to that idea. And looking back now, I don't know how I wouldn't. It's as though I had forgotten a huge portion of who I am and where I come from. Having been raised by my grandparents, how could I not feel a connection to the subject matter? It wasn't until we started talking about it more, after that first meeting with Jack back in September, that some part of me opened up. And as we kept writing and devising, I began remembering more and more. Having thrown so much of myself and my time into this

project, I actually feel like a different person from who I was in September. I think about my childhood all the time now, I think about my grandparents often, and I don't know for sure, but maybe I am less afraid of confronting the personal and making it public.

Needless to say, we did leave the room that night with a far clearer idea of what we were hoping to do. Those two plays we had proposed were off the table. Now it was time to return back to our original plan, this time with a better understanding of our intentions. What were we trying to say, and why? This is the question we would have to return to throughout the entire process, and to my surprise, even during tech week.

Reflecting on this project I even have a better sense of my strengths and how I want to utilize what I've learned here to make a difference outside of myself. I can continue telling my own stories, and I can also help people in editing their own and sharing their truths. This is an element that combines my interest in psychology and dramaturgy in a way that I feel can really help people; for example through therapeutic dramaturgy. Since our performances, people have come up to me to tell me about their own grandparents, or parents who had recently passed, sharing personal information I had somehow helped them feel safe to tell me by telling my own story on stage. This was one of the most rewarding aspects of this project for me, and I hope to continue to use my own story and presence to help people feel less alone, just as Dr. Lopez suggested theater about trauma and the unspeakable can help to do. Not only could I use theater and performance to provide a narrative anchor for myself, but by letting the audience witness that process, I had something to offer them and their own healing just as well.

Midway

The difference between what we had at the midway and what ended up in Luma on our final Sunday performance was huge. We knew what we had at the midway showing was nowhere near close to a complete draft of the piece. At that point we did have approximately twenty-five minutes of material, however, it only covered about sixty percent of the content and structure we were envisioning. We knew it would have to move faster, but also that a lot of cuts would need to be made to the script, while still maintaining the overall structure and premise of the scenes. It felt like we had made so much progress from the start of the semester, clueless as compared to the midway when we were able to present three fully formed scenes. Even so, it felt like the bulk of our rehearsal and development time for the piece had been used up. The month of January would be thrown out the window, so we would have to come back into February with increased hours spent in the rehearsal room, more time spent writing with Bill outside of rehearsals with the rest of the cast, and a very clear and focused sense of where we were going next.

After our midway showing we met with Jack, our advisor, to receive feedback. I don't think Bill or I were quite sure of what to expect, but we were somewhat blindsided by some of the notes from the faculty. Issues came to light that we had never even considered previous to the showing. The most subtle moments were setting the tone for the entire piece, it seemed. For example, misogyny became a recurring theme, and neither Bill nor I were aware of it. It became clear to me once I saw the footage of the midway, and then it became something we were acutely aware of for the next couple months we were working on the show. We were able to use it to our advantage in a way, though, emphasizing the points in the piece where I was no longer accepting

my voice being ignored. It was my senior project too, as I would come to say in one of the final scenes of the show. Since we had a set idea of the overall structure of our piece, we knew what we were building up to, but we had wished to have more of it completed for the midway. We were building up to my character's breaking point, but without seeing this at the midway I worried that the message, and my role in the piece was being perceived differently than we intended. We had a lot of work to do from this point on to make sure we were telling the story we wanted.

Tech Week

Bill and I knew we had a lot of work left to do after the midway, but we weren't prepared for how much the piece would transform in the final days leading up to tech week. Two days before tech week officially began, our advisor came to a rehearsal to see the progress we'd made since the midway showing and give notes. We were excited at this point about how far we'd come, and our biggest challenge was coming to find a solid ending for our piece. I really thought we had come to something pleasurable at the end, and by that I mean, an ending I found some sort of joy in performing. It was a conversation about what we wanted to be like when we were older if we lived to be as old as our own grandparents. It felt cute, but I realize now that cuteness was the problem. Our piece was not supposed to be cute. There was a huge shift in tone, and we were trying to wrap everything up nicely so that the audience wasn't left feeling down or hopeless. There was no need for that at all, but I was still wondering then, how I could find pleasure in acting something that wasn't going to be pleasurable. Nothing about this piece was feeling pleasurable to me.

I spent my first semester senior year learning about the importance of pleasure in theater and performance and acting in general, but especially how important it would be for me on stage. I always thought that the reason I did theater was because it was the one thing that brought me the most pleasure, and now so close to our tech week, I was being told that not only did I look like I was unable to find my pleasure in this piece I'd poured everything into, but also that it looked like I didn't care about it, either. This couldn't have been further from the case, but that didn't matter. I knew something was missing in the piece, something didn't feel right about it for me. I was having trouble making eye contact while acting this character version of myself, and this wasn't a problem I typically had when I was acting. In my Physical Theater class I could escape into the body of one of the Real Housewives of New York City, and I could make eye contact with every single person in the room without hesitation. Now, as myself, for some reason I was looking down at the floor delivering these lines I had written. When Jack came into the rehearsal room he pointed out it seemed clear to him that at least in terms of my acting, the reason why I felt like something was so off about our piece was because I was finding zero pleasure in this character version of myself.

It was two days before tech week officially began and I needed to find my pleasure, and Bill and I had to find an ending that made sense for our piece. We had worked hard to get to this point, and it felt like everything was falling apart. After that rehearsal with Jack, Bill and I had a late night of writing. It all came back to the question of what kind of story were we trying to tell. We had to go back to our initial questions that motivated the piece, the heart of the characters we had developed over the past few months, and decide what we wanted to leave the audience thinking about.

Once we had figured out our ending, it was time to give up my part in this project as a writer, and dedicate myself solely to my role as an actor. That was how I was going to find my pleasure on stage. I was playing myself, sure, but I was also playing a character version of myself. I had to find pleasure in the moments where my character let go, fought back, and found a reason to speak up. Developing an ending that made sense helped me to find this pleasure.

Performances

Months filled with hard work, personal growth, and a number of fears confronted later, it was time for the real work to take the stage with our final collaborator, the audience. Our first performance had come so quickly, and I honestly wasn't sure if we were ready, but it didn't matter because it was happening no matter what. The time had come, and I had to trust myself and not only all of the writing and acting work I had done, but most significantly the personal work, as well. I had to give up my role as a writer, and trust in Bill, so that I could be most present as this version of myself and my grandfather that I had to play on stage. It is difficult not to let the personal affect what happens on stage, especially when the two are so dependent upon one another. I was about to perform something so personal, something about family, and I couldn't help but think about how I didn't have family coming to support me. I kept thinking about how I would go out into the audience after I finished performing, and everyone would be receiving flowers and hugs from their moms and dads and whomever, and it all just felt a bit ironic and sad. That's why it meant the world to me when I was able to see so clearly my friends taking up one of the front rows of Luma all coming together for me. Sometimes you have to learn to create your own family, and sometimes you're aware that it's not the same at all, but this opening night my friends were my family. It felt no different. They were loud and laughable and

happy for me, and my cast was grateful for that, too. Their energy was unmatched, and we played off that energy.

The trouble with that then came when our Friday audience did not bring that same energy, and I felt it affected my performance. I think it was just a result of the major shift from Thursday to Friday. Our expectations were maybe too high. I was disappointed in myself after our Friday show, and the rest of the cast was feeling a difference in their own energy, as well. We made it a point to be more aware of keeping high energy despite the audience feedback, especially seeing as afternoon matinee shows tended to be quiet, and Saturday was a two show day that would require a lot of focus. Another interesting point about these quiet audiences, and our awareness of the audience, was that I don't think I've ever felt so aware of who was in the audience as I did in this show. In part, I think it was because I was talking directly to them and asking them big questions. I was specifically trying to make that connection with people; although, aren't we always trying to do that in theater? But this time that awareness felt different, and I was looking for specific people more so than usual. Something that came up was the identities of people in the audience. We were very aware of this when writing and devising our piece, most specifically our ending, as to what older people would be thinking when they saw our piece. Finally, when we actually got on stage and I could clearly see the faces of people in their 70's and 80's, grandparents of my friends, it made me nervous. I wondered what they were thinking. Did I say something that could leave them feeling offended? Did they care? I don't think I've ever really cared so much about what an audience would think or feel about something I put on stage.

When the Sunday matinee performance, our closing, came along, I wasn't as worried anymore about telling my story in front of a bunch of people. The last performance really felt like it was more for me than anyone else, and for my great grandfather who gave me this story to tell in the first place. That felt huge. Of course, I still wanted people to like it, and I remained aware of the audience, but I also knew that my happiness and my contentment with what I would put on stage that day would only be dependent upon myself. The energy in the audience on Sunday was low, it was 4 pm, but it didn't matter. I was present, and I left the stage with no regrets. I really tried to act every moment as hard and long as I could, preserving the moment, one last time. The other two projects in the festival also ran their final performance a minute longer than before. The feedback from Bill and others who had seen our show multiple times was similar in that they told me that specifically the monologues where I was acting my grandfather on camera felt the most moving out of all five performances.

It was weird to think that I would never have the opportunity to tell this story again to a live audience. Once it was over, I felt content, and I didn't feel a post-show depression or burn out. I felt fine, but I didn't feel like I was done. Bill even told me he still felt nervous after the performance was over. I understood the feeling. It was weird to go back into my normal life after this was over as if I hadn't just put a huge part of myself out there for anyone to see. Again, though, the remarkable part to me was that I did not quite have that same usual post-show depression. The kind that is not sustainable. I was sad that it was over, but at the end of the day, I had nothing else to give. I gave everything I had and wanted, but I was completely aware of it the whole time. I don't think I'd ever been so present in a performance out of anything I'd ever acted in. It was a true challenge in acting, and I was proud that I think I was able to rise to that

challenge. So much to say that I wasn't necessarily planning on this being my last time performing on stage, but given the abrupt ending to my senior year and my uncertainty that I will have an opportunity to act again, this might be it for me. And I'm okay with this being the way I go out.

Select Production Photos

by Chris Kayden







Script***Our Grandparents/旧识***

By Brooke Tyborowski and Yibin (Bill) Wang

Characters

Brooke (a bit shy, skeptical, contemplating her relationship with her grandpa)

Henry (confident, thinking it's a good chance to think about his grandma - he has a really close relationship with her, and he is open to share)

The Director (she does not have a similar experience to Brooke and Henry. She is a bit nerdy, does things out of curiosity, sticks to facts and methods - she had done a lot of research before, and she is actually a bit arbitrary)

Settings

In a theater, where there is filming equipment around. A big screen connected to the camera is in the middle, upstage.

Scene 1

(Brooke and Henry sit facing the audience, and the director is sitting somewhere else, taking notes.)

Director

Okay, Henry and Brooke, have either of you played an old character before?

Henry

No, I haven't played old people before. I mean, I'm not a theater major, so I don't act that much.

Brooke

Yeah, I played Berthe from *Pippin* in high school and some old Shakespeare characters.

Director

Did these characters have anything in common?

Brooke

The older characters I've played are always pretty comedic. They're usually like *(Brooke imitates stereotypical old characters.)*

Director

Were they fun to play?

Brooke

Yeah, I had a good time.

Director

So, does it make any difference acting your own grandparents?

Brooke

Yeah, I think it'll be more difficult. I think my grandpa's tone will be more like... *(She acts this out.)* Or his body language will be more like... *(She acts this out.)*

Director

What about you, Henry?

Henry

Honestly, I don't know yet, but I'm pretty excited to act my grandma though, I already thought about the costume. *(Takes out the costumes and puts them on as saying)* That's exactly what she will wear. *(Showing to the audience.)*

Director

Did you also bring the costume, Brooke?

Brooke

Yeah... my grandpa... he would always just wear something like this *(Takes out costumes and shows the audience.)*

Director

Cool... (take a look and think, then take pics)

Henry

Who do you wanna start with?

Director

Um... I like these [color of costume?] Let's start with yours then, Brooke.

(Transition music on. They comment on the music as transitioning.)

Scene 2

(Three of them are busy setting up a scene with a couch and a TV.)

The Director

(Setting up camera.) Brooke, you ready?

Brooke

(Hesitant.) I think so...

(Lights change. Brooke gets into character as her grandfather. Maybe a costume piece or something. The director starts shooting.)

(The sound from the TV blares in the background. Brooke takes some time to watch the TV before beginning her monologue.)

Brooke

There's never anything good on. I don't even know what I'm watching, Cookie. You can change the channel 'til my soap operas come on. *(Focuses on the TV again for a second.)* It's just these big women running their mouths. I don't even think they know what they're talking about. They just love being loud! *(Pause)* It's almost Christmas time, right? Would you get me a cup of coffee?

Henry

No, not quite. It's June.

Brooke

Oh, I thought it was December.

Henry

Do you know what day it is today?

Brooke

(Thinks for a second.) Today must be a... Tuesday.

Henry

No, it's Friday.

Brooke

Well, could you just get me a cup of coffee, Cookie?

Henry

No, I'm sorry. I can't. *(Pause.)* Do you know how old I am?

Brooke

Oooh, you must be about... 25?

Henry

No, I just turned 19.

Brooke

I knew that.

(They both sit in silence and watch TV again for a bit.)

Brooke

I don't really care for that bullshit over at the home. Heather, your mom, she worries about me, I suppose. Goes off to work all day, and thinks she's gotta find places for me to go or useless nonsense for me to get into, but I'm ok here by myself. I don't care for bingo. And they don't treat me good there. It scares me. But I got my friend Buster here with me. And my shows. Mostly just reruns all the time, though. Never anything good. But I like to watch

the news and my soap operas. Young and the Restless. The Bold and the Beautiful. Oh, and the Westerns are on sometimes. *(Pause.)* Would you get me a cup of coffee?

Henry

I already told you, I can't, I'm sorry.

Brooke

Oh, come on, you can get me a cup of coffee! Goddammit! I get hungry. There's never anything good to eat here. I'd like some bacon and a nice cup of coffee. But she never lets me have what I want anymore. Would you just get me a cup of coffee, Cookie? Black. I want it nice and hot. None of that lukewarm shit. They give it to me cold and think I won't notice because I'm an old man, but I'm not stupid. Would you please just get me a cup of coffee?

(End staring at the camera.)

The Director

Cut. That's good. How did you feel?

Brooke

I don't know. It's difficult to act his personality since I feel like he really started to lose himself as he got older, and we grew further apart.

The Director

Yeah, it's hard, but it seems like it's getting better. I can see you starting to connect more with him. *(Pause.)* Is that the clearest memory you had with him?

Brooke

Yeah, I mean that was basically the daily conversation. Sitting in front of the TV all day, not really knowing what's going on.

The Director

Was there a specific time when you began to see his condition getting worse?

Brooke

I stopped spending as much time with him when I was a teenager, so I feel like I wasn't there enough to see it starting to get worse. But I remember when he moved in with my mom and I out of the house that he owned, he didn't seem to know where he was anymore.

Like, he thought we were still in Delaware. He would be like: "

The Director

Uhuh. How long did he live in his old house?

Brooke

He lived there for over 50 years--

The Director

Wow, 50 years?!

Brooke

Yeah, that's a long time. He lived in the house with his wife, but then she died, and he stayed there for a few more years until he couldn't manage it by himself anymore.

The Director

Do you remember much of what he was like when he was still in his house?

Brooke

Sort of. He cared a lot for everyone and he was like the man of the house, but other than that... It's hard to remember because even though I grew up with him, I feel like adults

don't talk about anything very personal with kids. I was too young to know who he really was as a person.

The Director

Yeah, that makes sense. (Looks at the "map") So, after he got dementia, did he treat you differently? Or, do you think he had a sense of who you were as a person?

Brooke

Yeah, it's just complicated because he always knew my name, but sometimes he treated me like I was my mom, or my aunt, which was weird. Like sometimes he'd say "Your mom, Robin," but actually that's my grandmother's name, and I--

The Director

Yeah, what was that like for you?

Brooke

I don't really know, but... it would make me kind of upset. I don't know, it's just hard to explain. I... it's... just...

The Director

Oh! It's okay. You don't need to talk about this.

Brooke

Okay... is there anything else you want to know?

The Director

No, I think we have enough for right now.

Scene 3

The Director

So Henry, what is it about again?

Henry

Oh, that was when my grandma was making dinner, and she was telling me about the past, and then she told the story that she met a wolf on a mountain.

The Director

Right, the wolf story. Let's just see what happens.

(Scene changes. They turn that into a kitchen scene. Brooke steps aside and watches. Henry gets into character as his grandmother. He is chopping vegetables.)

Henry: 我講給你聽，文化大革命裡大家打架，喔唷，（笑）打得頭破血流哦，然後還有批鬥...（頓，語氣變輕）那个时候我们单位里鬥死好幾個人勒...（語氣更輕）一個是活活打死的啦。就是批鬥的時候，關在隔離室，打，打得很厲害，後來死掉啦。可憐啊，真的可憐啊。（頓）還有一個是和我同一個部門的，也是被活活打死的，（頓）很殘酷的。

（嘆氣我）和你講，你奶奶遇到的事情多了。（頓，想起另外一件事）還有以前我們去科研，要搞那種放射性油，那種做原子彈的，铀235嘛，都要到山上去的，那種油礦裡嘛，做科研題目。礦在山上，我們就住在半山腰... 在 半山腰...（頓）那種搭起來的房子，廁所也沒有的，晚上就出房子上上廁所，結果，我們晚上出去解小便（頓，惊叹）碰到狼啦！眼睛瞪亮瞪亮啦，真的啊！真的啊！真的啊！（*He gives up on acting.*)

The Director

(Interrupting) Cut.

Henry

(Goes out of the scene) I don't think that was good. I think the problem is I still don't know how to have an old voice while still being strong, and also the posture.

The Director

Okay... So maybe don't worry about that now, but let's go back to the scene. What is she making?

Henry

Oh... It's uh... braised fish with soy sauce and stir fried vegetables, I guess.

The Director

So she usually makes that.

Henry

Yeah. I mean, she grew up in a fishing village.

The Director

So how does it taste? Is it good?

Henry

Oh... it's pretty salty actually.

The Director

Salty? Why?

Henry

To preserve. They don't have too much food back then in the village.

The Director

So that's like a habit thing, even though she's been living in the city for like...

Henry

More than 60 years.

The Director

Right. She always likes to preserve food.

Henry

And in a really unhealthy way. She would save the leftovers in the fridge for a week and eat them all. I am always like... come on grandma, we don't need to do that anymore.

The Director

Okay cool... so does that affect her way of cooking?

Henry

(Demonstrating as speaking) Yeah sure. I guess she will just... like this carrot, she will chop a small part of this top out and keep everything else. So she maximizes the food.

(Demonstrating)

Director

(Interrupting) And you mentioned that she has a hunchback, right?

Henry

Yeah, but not like very hunchback. You can see that she still tries to be up.

The Director

What did she do... She was a researcher?

Henry

Yeah, nuclear energy.

The Director

Right, so not like... heavy lifting labor. She would probably spend a lot of time in a lab
(demonstrating) not having too much space.

Henry

Yeah... and everything is very organized I guess...

The Director

Yeah! Interesting. Does that affect her physicality, do you think? Like... that must change her way of walking. How does she walk usually?

Henry

I think so. So maybe like a bit restricted. (demonstrating)

The Director

Yeah! And I remember you also mentioned that she is an iron lady, right?

Henry

Right. (Nods)

The Director

So try to think about the contrast here cuz... Can you try that? Like a tough lady and at the same time taking up a limited space? It's very interesting... (Look at his interpretation for a while, and to Brooke) As opposed to Brooke's grandfather who's like this typical American man, so it was acceptable for him to take up more space.

Brooke

Yeah, maybe.

The Director

(To Henry) Ok, Henry, can you start cooking?

Now, imagine that your spine is shortened, and your bones are losing calcium. Your Vertebrae lose some of its mineral content, making each bone thinner. Your Muscle fibers reduce and they shrink in size, so you feel more friction. You feel like you are lighter, and that changes your posture. Now thinking about the habits and labor we just talked about. How do you deal with food? How is your body reacting to it?

Brooke

(To the audience) I wonder if his grandmother really feels that way. I don't know. It's just weird. I mean... can we really understand what was going on?

Director

Okay, now jump back into the rest of the scene.

(Back to the scene.)

Henry

結果我們倆小便也不解了，趕緊跑回來，后面晚上再也不敢出去...再也不敢出去。然後吃呢，我現在為什麼不要吃洋蔥了，因为那個時候早中晚，三餐都吃洋蔥，沒東西吃啊，三餐都吃洋蔥... 喔唷，什麼事情都見過，什麼苦也苦過。特別是參加工作以後，我那個時候學歷低，但我這個人是好強的。那個時候你爸爸，你姨，都已經在了，我還要晚上去讀夜大，要考出來。我還要學外語，開始學英文，後來學日文，都是業餘的，那個時候都沒休息的，禮拜天也干。我就覺得，我不比別人差。

Scene 4

(Back to the TV scene, the camera is already rolling. Brooke is acting in front of it.)

Brooke

Please, please don't make me go there. I told you I don't like it there. Every morning, 'Dad, dad, come on, get up, time to make the donuts,' Like she thinks it's funny. 'Gotta go to the home!' Jesus H Christ. Tell her to just leave me the hell alone. *(Pulls wallet out of back pocket.)* This is goddamn empty. She expects me to be here with no money. I don't like it. Never in my life have I been without a single dollar bill in my wallet. Tell your mom she's gotta go to the bank and get me some money. I do have money, don't I? It ain't right. But she's not even here. Figures.

(Stares into space for a bit.)

Do you ever feel depressed, Cookie? Like you just don't want to do this anymore? I lay in my bed and watch the TV, or I come out here on the couch and watch the TV, then back to my bed. Do you want to live like this? Because I don't. No money. No food in the house. This ain't my house. No one to keep me company. You're never home... you're just like your mom... never home... *(Brooke starts to lose focus, something isn't quite right.)*

Brooke

Okay, stop. I want to stop. Can we stop filming? Please.

The Director

Cut. What's the matter?

Brooke

(Pause for a while) I don't know if I want this on camera. What are we doing?

The Director

Um...

Brooke

Am I doing this right? *(To the audience)* Are we doing any of this right? Do you believe me when I'm acting my grandpa? Do you really think I'm my grandpa? And he's his grandma?

Henry

No, you can't be your grandpa, but I can't be my grandma, either.

Brooke

Then what's the point? I'm trying to remember every detail so that I can understand what he was going through, but I really can't ever know. Think about how fucking awful it must feel to live like that. And it's just... I mean, he didn't even want to do it anymore. But I don't know... what we are supposed to be doing? *(About the audience)* And what are they all thinking, watching this? *(To the audience)* I mean, what are you trying to do about all of this?

Director

Well, we're inviting them to be witnesses to our process. And we're hoping they'll resonate with something.

Brooke

Is that what we're doing? Resonate? Do you resonate with my grandpa? *(To the audience)*

Can you?

Director

I mean, honestly, I don't blame him for not wanting to live like that. But you never know what he was thinking exactly.

Brooke

Then just stop it! I don't understand the point of this.

Director

The point is we are trying to get as close as possible... I tried really hard cuz I know it's important. We all have to come to terms with it. I don't have your experience, but I know... I know how hard it is.

Brooke

No. You don't know.

Henry

Um... maybe we should take a break?

(Brooke and Director yell back and forth. "Stop!" "You are not helping, you are not helping now...")

Brooke

(To Henry) What makes you think you can tell us what to do? Do you think you're the director? Lukina was *supposed* to be the director.

Director

Oh, I'm "supposed" to be the director. You know who the real director is? It's Bill! *(Brooke: Yeah, it's Bill.)*

Brooke

And he's just sitting there in the audience watching this all fall apart.

(Pause. Brooke walks to the microphone and takes off her costume.)

So let's talk about this. Because it's my senior project too. I don't want to act my grandpa anymore. Let's just talk about it.

Scene 5

(Three of them sitting on the edge of the stage, without any character)

Brooke

Okay, so, I'm not actually mad at Bill, everything's okay. But let's just talk about what it was like working on this show because I think we have more to say. Let's just talk about our grandparents.

Henry

So if we're gonna talk about our grandparents. In the show I'm playing Bill's grandmother, who share's lots of similarities with my grandma. They've both been through war time, chaotic time, when resources are scarce and they cherish everything they have. Even though I didn't act my own grandma, by trying to act or become a grandmother, I looked back into my relationship and memories with my grandma. She taught me how to fold origami and told little stories, and added lots of color to my childhood. Now she's ninety and has dementia. It's sad even though we have a close relationship, she would often forget who I am. On the flip side, it's good that she also forgot how naughty a kid I was. Now, even if I tell her something, she probably wouldn't remember-- but I'll tell her, grandma, this show is for you.

Lukina

I think that this project has made me think a lot recently about the question of who gets to carry on a person's legacy after they're gone. Like, for instance, my grandfather founded

this sort of school here in America, which is very niche. But he's very well known in that circle because of that and has spent the last thirty years of his life being a little bit of a legend for that community. But he is getting older now, and it's becoming a concern among my generation of the family, which has decided not to go into his business as our parents did, that we might not have much of a part to play in telling his story when he's gone. We're worried that his family won't have a part to play in it, and how the world thinks about him after he's gone.

Brooke

In the show I'm playing my own great-grandfather. He helped raise me until I was about 8 and then I started living with my mom full time. But even though I should feel so connected to him because of his close proximity in my life, I still felt really hesitant and anxious about doing this project. But I'm really thankful that Bill encouraged the idea. Because doing this project and writing this show helped me to grieve him and memorialize his life in a way I never had the opportunity to do before. I'd felt guilty about the way his quality of life declined in his last few years and I still have a lot of questions about it. I've just been wondering throughout this whole process...did he look back on his life, and could he remember it all, or at least just the highlights, and could he say, it was worth it? Did he ever think about that while he sat around all day with CNN blaring in the background? Was 87 years, was it worth it? So... I guess that's what we have.

All

Cut!

End.

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