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Our Grandparents/旧识

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Our Grandparents/旧识

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

by
Yibin (Bill) Wang

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Before the last performance of *Our Grandparents/旧识* began, I sat in the Luma theater with an audience, feeling extremely nervous. I did not know if it was because this performance was the last one ever, or maybe I felt a little bit empty since I did not have to take any notes during the show. Then, the show began with dense energy from the actors at the very beginning when Lukina said her first line. Since then, I knew that they were giving it their all and were enjoying it so I also became relaxed. I started to try breathing with them at every moment. For example, in Brooke's two monologues playing her "grandfather," I could see that she was taking her time and making her emotion as full as possible, which deeply moved me even though I had seen the monologues many times. I believed it was Brooke's concentrative physical and mental texture as both an actor and herself that touched me - she really made me feel that she was trying extraordinarily hard to act as her grandpa and spiritually connect with him. That was something I had not seen in the shows before. The actors' great effort led to a generally slower tempo of the show but I could perceive that each of their actions was clear and naturally came from their characters or dramatic situations.



Brooke in her second monologue as her "grandfather." Credit to Chris Kayden

As we went to the end of the show, my heart was beating really fast again, full of excitement. I was really proud of them. Though, after the show, I did feel a bit disappointed by the energy from the audience on that day - at least on the surface they were not very responsive - maybe because it was in the afternoon. I really valued the audience's spontaneous response because genuine interaction with the audience is crucial in this piece. In general, I do think that the deeper connection between the performers and the audience was built in the theater and the power of the real story and the realness in the actors impacted the audience every night. In some of the feedback that we got after the performance, people shared their own personal stories, especially with Brooke, talking about their grandparents or parents who had recently passed away. We believe that they felt they could confide in Brooke somehow with their own stories since she had gone up and shared her own on stage, which was really touching.

I think this successful audience-performer connection was attributed to the ending that we actually struggled with during the devising process. The idea of "sharing our stories" came up at the beginning of our project and the medium of acting as our own grandparents was frequently discussed - what does it mean to play our family members and present family stories? What is a better approach to play them instead of mimicking stereotypical elderly characters? How can we internally connect with our characters in acting? Without presupposed answers, these difficult questions kept being explored throughout the process. As a result, the ending naturally comes back to these questions and ideas. In the ending, Brooke says, "I don't want to act as my grandpa anymore. I just want to talk about this. Let's just talk about our grandparents." Then the actors start to be totally in themselves, talking about their own grandparents. Thinking back, this ending seems right for us. On the one hand, until the end of the creative process, we still cannot answer

the question of “are we playing them - our grandparents and old people in general - right?” Or “do we reconnect with them by playing them?” I think it will take longer in our life to figure it out. On the other hand, we do have a lot about this topic on the mind to express as the creators of this project. As a result, I think this ending truly and sincerely reflects the current phase of our mentalities and progress in terms of this core theme of “playing and reconnecting the old generation.” We stayed true to ourselves until the end.



The ending in which the actors individually talk about their grandparents. *Credit to Chris Kayden*

Nevertheless, it was definitely not an easy journey since we met a lot of difficulties and challenges from the beginning to the final stage of the creative process.

In March 2019, Brooke and I started to find specific materials for our senior project, after we decided to work together and assigned roles: I as the director and Brooke as the actor/dramaturg; we would be writing together. At that time, we just discussed that we would like to explore the “reality” on stage and we should find stories, facts, interviews, or scripts that interested us. I was in Berlin back then, and I was intrigued by the interference of reality on stage in German theater in general. Whether in the works of She She Pop, Rimini Protokoll or Gob

Squad, the power of the realness on stage impressed me strongly. I believed that telling and discovering real stories of common people in the here and now created a kind of instability and uncertainty within theatrical forms that smoothly let the audience face and think about reality instead of escaping from it, which fits my creative heart and artistic objectives.

Then, one day I found a story beautifully conceived in episode 13 of the anime *MUSHI-SHI The Next Passage*, which is about an old couple living in a village in a mountain for their entire lives and their sudden recovery of memories about their childhoods and past. This story touched me deeply. When I think back, that was because of my own experience of living with my grandparents since I was a child. I realized that we, as the younger generation, did not pay real attention to the older generation who are getting generally excluded by mainstream society. It is hard for me to connect with my grandparents' memories and early life experience even though I grew up with them and found their stories back in those times to be wild and interesting. Furthermore, I also thought of the issue of the portrayal of old people in theater and how young people usually try to play them by using a low voice and hunchback, which is sometimes not the case in reality. There seems to be a gap between a young actor's mental-physical understanding of an older body/mind and the reality of an elderly character that Brooke and I could explore.

I communicated with Brooke about this topic of old people and aging, which she also expressed interest in. We decided to search for materials that we could work on. When we were still not sure which direction we would go to, we did mention the idea of starting from our own experiences with elders in the family. For instance, I once wrote a brainstormed character description based on my grandfather, but this idea was just not emphasized. At this phase, we were both a bit unsure about the importance and the proper boundary of bringing up our own

experiences, so we turned to adapting characters in existing plays and fictionalizing stories, which we were also opened to. I raised up reimagining *King Lear* and she tried to write original scenes, but we could not develop them further. This struggle lasted throughout the whole summer.

When the summer ended, we came back to school with a little anxiety. Before the first meeting with our advisor Jack Ferver, we decided to come up with proposals of adapting two existing plays about elders and memories - *The Visit* by Friedrich Dürrenmatt and *Mary Page Marlowe* by Tracy Letts. That gave us a certain sense of safety. However, in the meeting with Jack, our “safety-zone proposals” were challenged by him because they digressed from our original point of reconnecting old people in society. He raised important questions for us that brought us to ask “why old people? What do we really care about?” We began to share our deeper motivation in this project: my personal connection with my grandma who has a health issue now and a recording of a casual conversation between me and her after dinner, which contains many interesting old memories and her personality; Brooke’s interests in the trauma and dementia of old people and her childhood memories with her great-grandfather. These were the important things that we had not specifically talked about before. I kind of secretly recorded her maybe because I felt that what she said could be her spiritual heritage for me to remember, but I did not intend to share it before. Accordingly, we opened up to each other and found an important common ground in both of our experiences: we grew up with our grandparents, which is not a common thing in America. Jack encouraged us to think about what we can communicate with the audience with this identity of ours and find more research that is closely connected to the social issues about elders.

After this meeting, we contemplated a lot and realized that what really matters to us is our relationships with the older generation who are actually marginalized in the society. We found research including issues of caregiving to aging Holocaust survivors and the treatment of anxiety among older adults in nursing homes. We started to understand the unfavorable situation of these social issues of elders in more depth. For example, part of our research indicated that “past experiences of trauma and the interaction with aging and, in some cases, cognitive impairment can also result in emotional reactions, such as anger and paranoia. These emotional reactions can further increase the stress of caregivers in interacting with care recipients.”¹ We realized that there always would be a mental distance between these caregivers/children/young people and these elders who have unique memories that the young could never experience. This distance could even burden the caregivers and bring about the insufficient care of elders, which causes more problems in the field of caregiving to elders and the general lack of attention to old people. Moreover, I related back to the question of the physicality and mentality when young people play old characters. How do younger actors truly feel for their old characters? How do old people actually behave in reality? Consequently, we raised a central question that we felt strongly about: given the distance between the younger generation and older generation, how can we, as young people, lessen the distance with them, their past experiences and their memories through playing them?

Finding central questions has become a crucial step for me since I took Jonathan Rosenberg’s Intro to Theater Making class because it really helps me to dive deeply into a topic

¹ L. Fields, Noelle; A. Anderson, Keith; A. Dobb, Lynn. “Caregiving and Early Life Trauma: Exploring the Experiences of Family Caregivers to Aging Holocaust Survivors,” *Family Relations*, March 2013.

or essence of a piece without judging it. In *Our Grandparents*/旧识, centered on this question, we agreed to devise the show based on young people's real experiences with grandparents to have more genuine communication, which also went back to my original thought about reality in theater. Next, we had an important discussion about if we should invite more people to share their stories on stage. There was a concern that the power and specificity of the real characters and their humanity will be degraded if we reach this generality, so we decided to focus on our own unique experiences of living with our (great-) grandparents. We were clear that, with this experience and identity of ours, we still felt the distance between us and our grandparents, which motivated us to ask the central question and explore it in this project.

Through clarifying materials and motivations, we were ready to start the devising process at that stage. We cast Lukina and Henry. Henry is my friend and did not come to the audition but I invited him to join our project to "play me" on stage. I felt that I could not direct and at the same time act because I have to see what is happening on stage with a certain distance. Also, it artistically raised interesting layers in terms of acting and theatricality when Henry, as a non-actor, plays other people's grandparents and Brooke, as an actor, plays her own great-grandfather. Before he joined us, we had several conversations about our grandparents and the motivation of this project, which he showed interests in. We both grew up in the Chinese speaking world and shared many similarities in our experiences with our grandmothers. After our first rehearsal that I invited him to, his intelligence, openness and simplicity confirmed to me that he was the one I was looking for. Another actor was Lukina, who we cast through the audition. We felt that a third character, as an interviewer or an outsider, was needed in this piece even though we did not know what kind of specific character she was going to play at the time. As a result, one of our most

essential criteria for casting in this devised piece was if the actor showed empathy and resonance with the topic of aging and elders. During the improvisation exercises and the conversation in the callback, Lukina resonated with our topic a lot and showed her passion for this piece, which is more important than her acting skills because I believe that her personal resonance could strongly motivate her in the devising process and lead to a broader resonance in the audience.

In early October, the rehearsal process started. In our first two or three rehearsals, I mostly just led some acting games and exercises in order to create the ensemble and chemistry, and we had many conversations about our grandparents - their hobbies, the most “grandparents” gifts they gave us, the kind of songs they heard when they were young, etc. We collected some of our thoughts as materials, and we began deeper conversations outside of the rehearsal time with the aim of creating more concrete scenes. Brooke, clearly focusing on her own great-grandfather who had dementia, mentioned a classic activity that my grandparents would also do - watching TV for a long time. She started to write a scene in which her great-grandpa, who cannot keep a clear mind, just keeps complaining about his life to her. She told me this is a typical daily conversation, and sometimes that makes her think about his mental situation at this age. I felt it was a great scene to start the piece with. It was casual, daily, and conveyed a deeper hint about the things we wanted to explore - trauma in aging, our understanding of their mentality. However, when I discussed with Henry about the old person he was playing, we were stuck a little bit at the beginning. My original thought was that the source material of this character was mainly from my grandma, and, in order for him to better connect with this character personally, he can adapt his own grandma’s habits, way of talking and personal backgrounds to this character. I thought this way of finding realistic reference is helpful for Henry who was not used

to building a character himself. However, that confused him because he was not sure about how to balance the information between his grandma and mine. After I understood his confusion, I decided to focus on the facts of my grandma first since she was a more concrete and essential character and he was going to pretend that he was playing his grandma on stage. Brooke also chose to say she was playing her grandpa instead of great-grandpa on stage.

Then, we started to come up with proposals for a specific event on stage that could involve scenes of actors playing their own grandparents in a dramatic or postdramatic structure. After brainstorming several abstract thoughts, such as the moment of dying, flashback of memories, etc., I thought of filming. What if we have a live film on stage showing us playing our grandparents? This idea traced back to my long contemplation about the difference between film and theater, the effective role of the camera for acting, and actors' state of mind through the alienation of screen. Later on, in my Design Studio class, we read Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in which he discusses how the actor in front of a camera is alienated from the audience and loses the aura. As Benjamin indicates, "'The film actor,' wrote Pirandello, 'feels as if in exile - exiled not only from the stage but also from himself.' [...] The singularity of the shot in the studio is that the camera is substituted for the public. Consequently, the aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays."² I think these words are significantly related to our thinking and questions in terms of actors' mental connection to their characters and staying true to themselves. I was wondering: what if the public is watching the shot in the studio? How does that change actors' mentalities

² Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>, 1936.

and also the audience's perception? An important reference is Milo Rau's production of *Five Easy Pieces* that I saw. It was a production about several normal children's re-enactment of a murderer's life (without much violence), which is filmed by a role of a director on stage. In this production, the fact that children were presenting a murderer's life on stage and the subtle distance created by the camera for the audience to think about the actors' relationship with the scenes and stories struck me a lot. Also, people acting in front of the camera on stage with the audience as the witness raises a lot of interesting questions centering around what acting is. I was excited to see our own exploration through this medium, and so was Brooke. The central question became more precise: can we be more connected to our grandparents through playing them in front of a camera on stage?

After Brooke and I decided to go deeper with this idea of filming, we continued our conversations with the cast about their roles, and at the same time improvised scenes with the essential materials: my grandma's recording and Brooke's memories of watching TV with her great grandfather. Every time after a rehearsal, we would edit and update our script. We further discussed with Lukina and settled her role as "the Director" in this filming process on stage. Following that, we came up with proposals of this director's background and motivation for doing this live film project: maybe she simply feels that this theme of elders is an interesting topic as an artist but is not with the same experience of living with grandparents? Or she deeply feels for them and has the same experience? More questions followed up: is she an experienced director? Is she filming a documentary? Also, why do Henry and Brooke join this project? What's the relationship among these three people? We constantly came back to these questions as we devised. One of the biggest difficulties was that the characters' backgrounds and motivations

were blurred with the actors' backgrounds and reality. Even though it was effective and exciting in terms of letting the reality invade a theatrical space, it was also hard for the creative team to draw a boundary between them in order to clarify the stake. As a result, these questions above were always under exploration and the answers were constantly changing until the very end of the rehearsal process.

By mid-November, we had developed three scenes: a general and honest pre-production conversation, Brooke's grandpa watching TV while daily complaining, and Henry's grandma cooking dinner while sharing her past (based on what my grandma said in the recording). In the first scene, I wanted to set a certain tone of genuineness and to convey clear information to the audience - we have something to share with you and hopefully what we experience on stage can make you think of something about old people too. Consequently, the setting is not naturalistic. Brooke and Henry answer the questions from the Director, show their grandparents' costume to the audience, and talk about their feelings about acting as their grandparents.



One of the staging examples of what we have tried for the first scene in a rehearsal. *Credit to Yibin Wang*

During rehearsals, we were still trying to define the role of the Director by exploring her motivation/background in this beginning scene - she was taking notes while listening to them

talking, so what kind of key words would she take down? Is she interested? The answers remained unclear for a while. In Brooke's first scene playing her grandpa, I discovered she could easily be in the state of her character, maybe because she had more acting experience, which also gave me more possibilities in terms of filming perspectives. With the help of our video designer Rock Huang who came to the rehearsals and developed the aesthetic of the film, I decided to switch between zooming-in and zooming-out to catch her subtle facial expressions.



A perspective on the frame from the camera that Rock and I were experimenting with. *Credit to Rock Huang*

I realized that, on the screen, many of her expressions and actions were easier to be seen by the audience. Meanwhile, the audience's awareness of their own presence - that they are witnessing these scenes being filmed in reality - creates a certain space for thinking. Nevertheless, at the beginning of Brooke's exploration of her camera acting, she did feel a little unsure if she should act as a "real old man," such as lowering her voice, changing her tone, etc. After discussing her great grandpa's physical traits that are typically masculine and with a heavy-loaded body, I encouraged her to try playing these traits out without worrying about being stereotypical. From what I saw, that worked out because I specifically saw her own personal relationship with the

character that she plays and knows well. In other words, I not only saw the image of her grandpa on the screen and stage, but her understanding, puzzle, and distance with her grandpa. Then, in Henry's grandma scene, I tried to provide a realistic reference again, which is a clip of the original recording of my grandma, for him to feel or sometimes imitate her voice. However, after trying with effort, he seemed unable to make his voice and also physicality very convincing that he was my grandma. That raised another question: if we are exploring the texture of young people playing the old, how much should we work on "performing well" given at least 50 years of the actual physical gap? Inspired by Brooke's case, the answer and direction I gave to Henry was that the more important thing is his passion and spiritual concentration when playing a different person who is somehow connected with him. The training and practice of voice and gesture are necessary but not the priority.

Jack came to one of our rehearsals during that period and pushed us further to dive into a process of researching our grandparents on stage. For instance, in Henry's grandma scene, there is a conversation between him and the Director in which Henry expresses his challenge and difficulty in presenting the physicality of an old lady, which was an actual thing in our rehearsals, and the Director directs him by some psychological instructions - "now imagine your body is being heavier..." Jack pushed us to dig into more details: her labor, her living, and some scientific facts about aging bodies. These details all specifically affect my grandma's way of walking or gestures. If we can explore them on stage by ourselves, we can also awaken the young audience to relate to what would happen when they are old. The language barrier - the fact that he would speak Mandarin as grandma - would not be a resistance for the audience to see this old character when we focus on her physical aspect and the visual images. That inspired us a lot. Many

memories about my grandma came up and, thinking about her aging process, I became nostalgic of my childhood and missed her a lot. At that point, I totally felt for the importance of this piece - this is about an exploration of compassion, care, and trauma. We are all going to be old one day after all and we invite people to openly think about that with us together. In order to achieve this artistic goal, I understood that there were works in terms of directing and playwriting that needed to be done, such as a clearer point of using a camera on stage and eliminating the trivial parts of the conversation, making sure every time characters stop talking for a reason.

In the following rehearsals, we slowed down and revised each scene that we had so far carefully. We re-wrote the conversation between the Director and Brooke in her first filming scene with the help of improvisation. After revision, it directly concealed Brooke's grandpa's personality and her inner reflection on her distant relationship with him. I found this conversation similar to an interview, so I first experimented with them leaving their filming area for a face-to-face interview presented to the audience. Then, after seeing Thomas Ostermeier's *History of Violence* in which microphones were used smartly, I was reminded of the idea of having Brooke get a mic and speak directly to the audience. I believed what she answered to the director in that conversation was what she wanted to communicate with the audience, which she agreed with, and having a mic creates a form of ritual and a sense of importance/intimacy for the audience. This form also gave me freedom to let reality intervene the stage further - while she is talking about her grandpa, Henry in the back can use the camera and projection to show the photos of her and her grandpa.



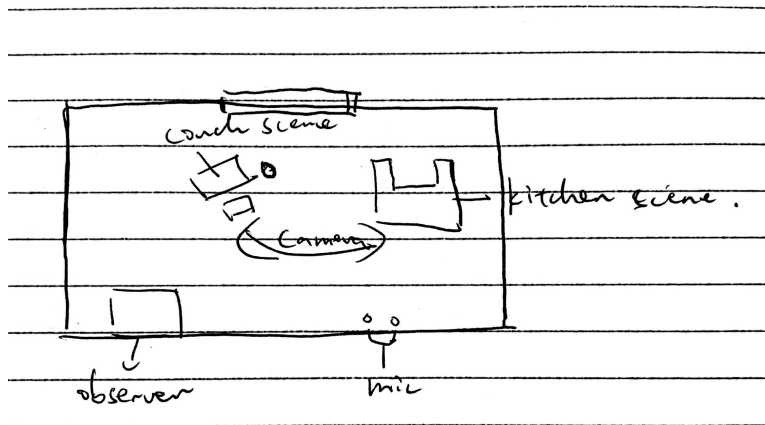
Brooke's interview conversation with the Director. *Credit to Chris Kayden*

Following this idea, I thought this action of her going to the mic needs a trigger, a kind of personal inner reaction, in the text and we kept experimenting with it. Moreover, the role of the Director was being updated as we worked on this conversation - she is their peer; she does not have a strong personal connection with her grandparents but she is intellectually interested in this project.

As we moved forward, in Henry's filming scene playing his "grandma," we made the concentration of this scene an exploration of acting because of his real challenge of playing old people. Through his description of his "grandma's" job, childhood, and habits, etc., the Director was trying to direct him to overcome his difficulty and shorten his distance with elders in a physical sphere - "how does her job influence her way of walking? What forms her habits? What does her physicality look like?" I divided his filming scene into three parts: playing his "grandma" in front of the camera, expressing difficulty and exploring in acting exercises, and playing his "grandma" in front of the camera again. Naturally, this concentration and the

concentration of Brooke's filming scenes explore our central question in two different aspects: the one about acting and another one about mental distance.

Consequently, I drew a draft of the stage setting according to what we had rehearsed:



The first attempt on the full stage according to this draft. *Credit to Yibin Wang*

Under the form of ritual and direct communication with the audience, I divided the stage into four areas and each one has its clear function: observer area (downstage left), speech area (downstage right), Brooke's filming area (upstage left), and Henry's filming area (downstage right). This structure and settings were shown in the mid-way showing and worked really well.

Actors organically moved among these four areas to create a live filming experience and an inner reflection process.

After the showing, Jack gave us really constructive feedback. He precisely pointed out what he had seen: the use of mic was still unclear; Lukina's role needed more energy and a clearer stake to get excited and pushy; there was something that seemed a bit misogynist according to the scenes we had worked on. To be honest, I was shocked when he said the word "misogynist," although it made sense. Brooke expressed the same feeling. He further explained that, in the three scenes that we presented, he saw Brooke being pushed to the side, especially in Henry's filming scene in which she was just sitting aside and watching. That was actually intentional and leading to an action that we were going to work on: because she is pushed aside and has more puzzle in her mind, she will be triggered to emotionally break the rules and talk about her true deep feeling more directly to the audience in the next scene which is deep and sad. I suddenly knew the importance of people watching from the outside because there is always a distance between what actually happens on stage and what you think happens. Thanks to Jack's feedback, we were clearer about going into this direction further - we should build up more before her breaking down and be aware of this question of misogyny. What's more, I also remember he said that this piece needed to be more sentimental instead of being narrative. That struck me and made me work harder on stimulating the deeper connection, humanity, and emotions in each of the characters and also cast members. "Now we know it is important, but how are we going to put great effort and passion in it as each individual?" This question for me came up later again in the rehearsal process.

During the winter break, we kept working on the script. I tried to clarify Lukina's stake at that point: she was even a little nerdy in doing this project; she does not have the similar experience but she also feels intellectually interested in this topic; so she directs them as if she is solving a math problem. This idea conforms to the way in which she uses scientific facts instead of personal reference to achieve her success of the project. Following this logic, I wrote the part in which she directs Henry's acting style differently. She is seemingly leading him to solve this "math problem" together and they inspire each other as the conversation goes deeper because Henry also gets excited in researching his grandma.



Henry and the Director in the exploration of playing his "grandmother." *Credit to Chris Kayden*

As a result, even though this approach is an acceptable approach for Henry (the character), it puzzles Brooke (the character) more and develops her inner anxiety. Then, following this line of character development, I also thought that Lukina could be more "aggressive" in the interview conversation with Brooke by gradually approaching Brooke as she takes notes on the ground.

These ideas about staging and stake were tried to be realized in the first three scenes after we went back from the winter break. As for my job as a director, I found much work about

specificity and clarity that needed to be done. For example, in Brooke's first grandparent scene, when the Director calls "cut," they will directly start their conversation. We went through various ways for Brooke to go to the mic: for several times, they started the conversation in the filming area; then she went to the observer area where the director usually sits; lastly, Brooke would be triggered by the line "I remember..." and go to the mic spot. I felt this transition from a face-to-face talk with the director to a mic talk in front of the audience was not smooth, and so did Brooke. After struggling with it, I finally recalled the clear nature of this space - since there were four areas with different functions, and she wants to speak to the audience with an internal force, she could go to the mic spot at the beginning of the conversation and the director would also be comfortable with going directly to the observer area. This solution satisfied us all.

Then, we went to work on our last scene and the following ending. In the last scene, the grandpa's lines that Brooke wrote were really powerful and sentimental - they were based on her great grandpa's original words, which struck her at that time - so I did not make much revision on that. She also expressed that doing this project and thinking back on these words really made her want to know more about him and do something for him, but she does not know how and is unable to anymore. All of the information and emotions led to a sense of importance in real life for Brooke to reenact this on stage in front of a camera and also made sense of her emotional breakdown in the script. What she acted out fits to the theory I mentioned above and, seeing this myself in the rehearsal room, I strongly believed that this power of a person's real personal connection and concern on stage would spread to the audience and create a collective concern. Then, the challenge was creating her action after she refuses to keep filming and breaks all of the rules. After several times of improvisation, we decided to focus on the conflict between Brooke

and the Director since there is an internal conflict between them for the questions of who has the experience of living with grandparents and how do we know the right way of approaching grandparents. In this version, their conversation would be ended by Henry who tries to help by saying “maybe we should take a break?” and they remain silent and still, leaving the problem unsolved. We wanted the scene to end this way because I thought it reflected on the real phase we were in - trying hard to explore, being a bit tired, but having no solid answer. Lastly, Brooke and I thought we needed an ending without any character but with all of our honesty, so we raised a question which we talked about before: how do you imagine yourself when you were at your grandparents’ age? We tried this with our sincerity and a sense of delight - someone said they would have many pets and a house in lower Manhattan; some said they would stay healthy and independent. It was just interesting to hear young people’s visions for their far away future.

Then, as we approached nearly the end of our whole rehearsal process, we invited Jack to see what we worked on two days before the tech began. As expected, he saw the problems and pointed them out immediately after we showed him. He indicated that the ending could be problematic when there would be old people watching this piece even though the young actors’ comments were just their good wishes. That made us contemplate. I realized that we would feel differently when we share these visions with real old people who may have experienced lives way more heavily and complicatedly than what we envision. Generalizing or even stereotyping elders is not our intention and I do not want to convey this hint to the audience because of my inclarity. I realized that, as artists in general, we should be aware of being satisfied with our own perspectives rooted in our personal experience and neglecting the complexity of reality. Art should be able to lead both the artist and the audience to see a different world. Also, he pointed

out that it seemed for him that it was Henry who stopped their fight. They could have continued fighting and seen how far they can go. As for Lukina's role, he thought she lacked certain care for this project. He encouraged us to put more passion and pleasure in this whole process, which was still lost so far. Again, his comment and advice really impressed me, especially as a creator and director. Implicitly, I did sense a low energy sometimes in the rehearsal room that could be stemmed from various aspects. Although I always hold a theory from the beginning of the process that actors will be much motivated to devote to a piece as long as there is a strong personal connection, I had to admit that I needed to put in more work, such as perceiving subtle relationships in the room and giving clearer direction and options, to really make that happen. I had to take care of my actors more so that they could stay present and connected.

When Jack left the studio, we were still digesting the words he said. I felt that I needed to try to rebuild the dynamic in the room so I asked everyone if they wanted to sing *When I'm 64*, the song we planned to use in the ending, together. After singing, I tried to be organized in myself and find joy in the last scene with them together. I discussed with Lukina about her character's stake again. We finally found out that the way in which she uses scientific method/math-solving logic to direct does not mean she is so nerdy that she does not care for this project. She actually cares for it much and thinks it was a very important issue to communicate with the audience but she just uses an approach she feels right about. She is, to some extent, a representative for the audience to talk with Brooke and Henry.

In the following limited time and rehearsals we had, I tried various ways for us to push ideas as far as possible and have fun. I encouraged Brooke to play or even dance with the mic when she used it; in their quarrel scene, I felt that Brooke should break the rules even further -

not just breaking the rules in this piece such as the division of the space, but breaking the rules of theater by calling me, who sit in the audience, out. That made sense for us because Henry, who was playing my grandma, and Lukina, who was playing my role on stage, were actually in the shadow of me and, by acknowledging this situation and saying “Bill, you are the real director just sitting there, watching this fall apart, and I don’t want to do it anymore,” she was finally liberated. It was also fun to fight longer and break the rules on stage.



The quarrel moment between Brooke and the Director. *Credit to Chris Kayden*

Nevertheless, even though we were working in the right direction, the urgency of time made most of us anxious. We went to the tech with an unfinished ending and we had additional rehearsals usually after the tech or spacing rehearsal. This sense of uncertainty has finally stressed us out. On the Friday night before the show opened, after the spacing rehearsal, we went to the Resnick Studio to keep working on the transition from the last scene to the ending. I could tell that Henry was already a bit unhappy in the spacing rehearsal - he was mad at me being “flexible” and always saying “let’s figure that out later after this spacing.” Then, in the additional rehearsal when I was exploring the possibilities of changing the ending, he was being emotional

and pushing me to clarify every word we edited for the last transition from Brooke's anger to her calm inner reflection. He would say, "what does 'it' exactly mean?" "No, I don't think it's clear. I think..." At that time, I was under the pressure to communicate with both Henry and Brooke. Henry's unhappiness was obvious and he needed to express that to me. Meanwhile, I was also communicating with Brooke to find a solution to the ending that we both felt good about because she did not want to end this piece with her madness or sadness and insisted on a sincere ending to directly face the audience, which I agreed but also struggled with.

Moderating between the two and still trying to be creative, I survived this situation and learned a ton. After a short meeting with Brooke outside of the room, we came back to the room and I stayed calm and rational, working on this transition to the ending line by line. We decided to make the ending a short talk given by the actors about their reflection on the relationship with grandparents and what this project makes them think about. The rehearsal ended there and I privately talked with Henry and expressed my understanding, hoping that he would keep exploring with us through this unconventional rehearsal process. After another hard night of editing the script, Brooke and I found the key in this transition is Brooke's action of regaining agency and expressing that "it's my senior project too. I don't want to play my grandpa anymore. Let's just sit and talk about our grandparents." We worked on it and ended the show with the actors sitting on the edge of the stage and talking about their reflection. This was truly an incredible experience for me to understand the difficulty of collaboration and the importance of communication. I learned that when I face the conflict in the team, I have to keep listening, keep communicating, keep calm, and carry on.

For the rest of the tech rehearsals and shows, I would take down notes and send them to my actors every night after the rehearsals/shows. I found out that a show is never completed even if it opens because there are always things and details to be worked on or clarified. Also, having an audience makes a huge difference - the audience every night would refresh us with a new understanding of what we did on stage. I kept working on the pacing of their speech, the adjustment of the camera's perspectives, actors' energy on each night, etc. I also witnessed many touching moments of exchanging energy between the actors and the audience. In the ending of one of the performances, there was an old couple sitting right in front of Lukina, Brooke and Henry, listening to them talking about elders. It was very extraordinary to see that the actors were directly impacted by them for simply their presence in the theater and became more aware of each word that they said. After the last performance, I felt proud of and grateful to my whole team including Yuexing Sun who observed many rehearsals and gave creative advice, Rock who provided professional support on film techniques, equipment and aesthetics, as well as a great professional technical team at the Fisher Center.



The significant technical aspect of this piece supported by the team. *Credit to Chris Kayden*

In conclusion, I believe that this project and the idea of this project can go further if there is a chance to develop in the future. I would be willing to listen to more people's stories about their grandparents and develop this idea of filming on stage. Take the framing of the camera as an example. Maybe I could explore more variations of using the camera when it is not used for filming scenes or even try turning the camera to the audience in the ending to create a conversational dynamic. At the same time, as I keep thinking of this project, strangely, I have not mentioned to my grandma that I did my senior project for her so far. I don't know exactly why. Maybe I just did not find the chance, or maybe I feel shy. Maybe. I guess this fact in reality also reflects on what we ask, struggle, and feel for in this project. At this time, all I want to do is just to go back and spend more time with my grandparents and, hopefully, I can say something that I don't usually say to them before: "thank you, I love you."

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*)

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... *(Takes a look and think, and then takes pics)*

Henry

Who do you wanna start with?

Director

Um... Let's start with yours then, Brooke. I like what you have here.

(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: "Oh Cookie, can you go across the street and..."

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. 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... *(Looks 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. Let's just talk about our grandparents.

Scene 5/Ending

(Three of them sitting on the edge of the stage, without any character. What they say might slightly change in every performance but the basic content is written below.)

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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