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Choose an Eye

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Bard College

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Choose An Eye

A Senior Project submitted to
The Division of the Arts
Of Bard College

by
Rebecca Eve Capper

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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Mom, for your boundless love.

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Foreword

I believe that the world cannot be entirely understood through a logical or even realistic lens. The theatre has the capability to act as a medium in which people, including myself, can deal with incredibly real human issues in absurdist and otherworldly situations. It may sound like a non-linear way to experience one's feelings or confront one's reality, but the bypass of the rational mind is sometimes what it takes to push just a bit further and reach a worthwhile discovery. I employ darkness, outlandish extremes, and abnormal circumstances to prompt audiences to arrive at this place. The macabre has always fascinated me and I wholeheartedly embrace the amount of discomfort that comes along with it.

Choose An Eye

A New Play by Rebecca Eve Capper

CAST OF CHARACTERS

BIRCH, a sharp and bitter orphan of seventeen. Twin to Yew.

YEW, an endearing and melancholy orphan of seventeen. Twin to Birch.

SILVERFISH, a grumpy and confused man in his early forties. Adoptive parent of Birch and Yew.

THE MOP, a speechless and watchful housekeeper. He is half human-half mop.

PLACE

The decrepit home of Silverfish.

TIME

Timeless. May have a post-apocalyptic feel.

STOP HOLDING

(BIRCH is in a room filled with plants. She stands behind a table with two jars of soil on either side of her, a potted plant, a plant in a vase, a teapot, some tree bark, etc. She rocks back and forth. She closes her eyes, reaches out her arms to the sides and makes four small circles with each wrist. BIRCH slowly moves her arms in front of her and folds her fingers in and out. She continues this gesture as she bows her head down to her chest. She brings her head back up and then down again in a slow gesticulating motion. She reaches each hand into the jars filled with soil and takes small handfuls. She reaches her elbows up and to the side so they are in line with her shoulders. She then makes a small pile of soil on each shoulder. She pushes the piles into the crevices of her collar bones and then lets it fall away by bending over slightly. She hovers one hand over a flower in a vase and picks up a small bunch of roots in the other.)

(YEW enters. She stares at BIRCH. She digs her fingers

into her own collarbones and reaches to hug herself, but then runs at BIRCH instead. YEW pulls and tugs at BIRCH.)

YEW

We don't do that.

BIRCH

I'm trying to do that and I am doing that. I am going to talk to her.

YEW

What is our problem?

BIRCH

My problem. Mine.

YEW

If I may suggest... you're wrong. Our problem.

BIRCH

You may not suggest! I'm suggesting, no, I tell now. I am telling now.

YEW

Just hold on for...

BIRCH

That's exactly what needs to stop, Yew. Stop holding!

(SILVERFISH and THE MOP enter. SILVERFISH runs to separate the girls. THE MOP stands watching as SILVERFISH pulls BIRCH and YEW apart. Some plants and dirt tumble off the table in this struggle.)

SILVERFISH

Girls! Off! Off! Stop it right now. What is going on here? C'mon you two.

(BIRCH and YEW are silent.)

SILVERFISH

Start explaining...

(BIRCH and YEW are silent.)

I... uh... say some nice things to each other. Birch, Yew... when I'm back you better be holding hands.

(SILVERFISH leaves. THE MOP pulls out a hand broom and starts trying to reassemble the fallen soil and plants on the ground. YEW nods her head at THE MOP. THE MOP looks back at her and nods his head quickly and repeatedly in response. YEW walks over to BIRCH and grabs her hand. THE MOP stares intently at the girls. SILVERFISH re-enters.)

SILVERFISH

Good.

(BIRCH and YEW swing their joined hands.)

SILVERFISH

Good.

(Light change. BIRCH and YEW separate hands, reach for each others collarbones,

and touch gently. THE MOP exits and then pushes/slides four chairs onstage. SILVERFISH brings out a small table that is already entirely set. The plates might be glued down. THE MOP lifts up BIRCH and sets her in a chair. THE MOP lifts up YEW and puts her in a chair. THE MOP and SILVERFISH sit.)

LITTLER

(Silence.)

SILVERFISH

How's the fish? Yew? Birch?

YEW

Good. Cod again, that's good. It has a nice feeling between the teeth, kind of like a spongy butter... I know it well now, cod.

SILVERFISH

Well, I like catching it. I also know it well, cod.

(THE MOP nods. Awkward silence.)

SILVERFISH

I also found a thing today.

BIRCH

A thing?

SILVERFISH

I was looking back at before. I found a photo from when the two of you were just little. Littler, I mean. Little twins. I didn't know you used to have wool knit eyepatches... your mother made them?

BIRCH

We grew out of them.

YEW

I thought most photos were lost in the... before we came to you.

SILVERFISH

They were tucked inside some of your mother's old books that got through it. Maybe I'll frame it or something.

YEW

Sure.

BIRCH

Mother told us once that photographs live in this infinite moment, like those same seconds just happen over and over and over again for them.

SILVERFISH

Them?

YEW

All that's in the pictures. I think all moments are infinite moments though. Infinity, infinity, infinity.

SILVERFISH

That's nice. Infinity, infinity, infinity.

BIRCH

I think she thought it was nice...

(Pause.)

Are we going to talk about it?

SILVERFISH

You held hands.

BIRCH

Holding hands is not talking about it.

YEW

It's kind of like it.

BIRCH

No.

SILVERFISH

I think it's kind of like it.

BIRCH

No. Maybe I should ask Mom what she thinks. She would know.

SILVERFISH

Okay, Birch, okay. We'll talk about it soon. For now just eat your fish and...

BIRCH

I just tried to contact my dead mother and you reply "we'll talk about it soon"?

YEW

Our dead mother.

SILVERFISH

Girls.

YEW

Ours. And yes you "tried"... you didn't actually do it.

BIRCH

Our dead mother. I could have done it if you hadn't taken me out.

YEW

And that was only fair because you already took me out.

BIRCH

I don't think it would have ever happened if I kept you in.

YEW

What?

BIRCH

I'd do it again.

(BIRCH stands.)

SILVERFISH

You both want your mother I know, I know. I'm not your mother and I'm not your father. I know, I know, I know. I also know I am here and they are not.

(SILVERFISH yells at BIRCH.)

They are not. I am. I am. I am. I am.

(SILVERFISH grunts and storms off. THE MOP points to himself indicating that "he is there" also.)

(THE MOP walks over to BIRCH and holds her hand. BIRCH pulls away and exits. THE MOP holds onto the air where BIRCH's hand just was.)

(Light change. YEW opens THE MOP's eyes with her hands. They push the table offstage together.)

MY CONDOLENCES

(SILVERFISH empties a giant bag of cards onto the ground. He plops himself down on the pile. He reads a few to himself. He lies back into the pile. Movement. YEW enters quietly. SILVERFISH continues movement until he sees YEW.)

YEW

Silverfish, what is this?

SILVERFISH

It's nothing.

(YEW picks up one of the cards and reads it.)

YEW

Thinking of you during this difficult time...

(YEW picks up another card and reads it aloud.)

YEW

My deepest sympathies...

(YEW picks up another and then another and then another.)

YEW

None of these are signed...

SILVERFISH

After your mother died and before you twins moved in with me this happened.

YEW

What do you mean?

SILVERFISH

I used to buy myself a condolence card three times a week.

YEW

I didn't know that.

SILVERFISH

Only The Mop knows about it really. *(Pause.)* I came up here one day to find most of 'em packed into a bag and I knew he must have shoveled them in there. I've never told him to clean up or order things in any way. He just... maybe he likes it... maybe that's just what he does... I don't know.

(YEW sits in card pile with SILVERFISH.)

YEW

She did it without me.

SILVERFISH

I know.

YEW

We were going to wait.

SILVERFISH

I know. I can hear you speaking at night. Yew and Birch. I can hear you both. When you talk. You both talk and I can hear. Sometimes it's hard to tell which of you is speaking, but I know it's the both of you.

(SILVERFISH pats YEW on the back awkwardly.)

SILVERFISH

It used to just be buying them, then it was just reading them, now it's this.

(SILVERFISH makes a few snow angels, tosses and turns, etc. He sits back up.)

SILVERFISH

And now you know. We both know.

(YEW lies back into the pile. She moves around like he was doing previously. SILVERFISH sits blank.)

(SILVERFISH picks as many cards up off the floor as he can, stuffing the cards in pockets, shoes, maybe his mouth, etc. THE MOP enters, picks up SILVERFISH and carries him off. YEW stands and look around. THE MOP picks up YEW and carries her offstage.)

SOMETHING SMELLS FISHY

(BIRCH walks onstage. She pulls open a few drawers. She pulls on one that appears to be jammed shut. After some time she opens it. She reaches her hand inside and pulls out an empty box of Gorton's frozen fish sticks. She huffs in frustration, shoves it back into the drawer, and exits.)

GREEN JUICE

(BIRCH enters. She pulls two blenders onto the table so that they each have a blender in front of them. BIRCH and YEW pick leaves off of a single plant also on the table.)

YEW

Do you think... *(pause)* when you see a bunch of leaves crowded on a single stem do you think of them as a bunch of little hands or a bunch of little heads?

BIRCH

Little hands.

(BIRCH holds a leaf on the plant before her as if she's holding a baby's hand.)

YEW

I think that's right. I just needed to know. Which plants did you feed today?

BIRCH

Jimson weed, finger cherry, angel's trumpet, belladonna, sago palm, white snakeroot, rathbone, and Sheila.

YEW

Sheila?

BIRCH

Joking.

YEW

Oh.

(Silence.)

YEW

Should I have laughed at that? Sometimes I'm not sure.

BIRCH

I'm not sure either.

(BIRCH and YEW both turn on their blenders and stare straight ahead.)

(BIRCH begins screaming.)

(YEW turns off BIRCH's blender. BIRCH turns it back on and starts screaming again. YEW turns it off again.)

YEW

What are you doing?

BIRCH

Screaming.

YEW

I know.

BIRCH

I'm covering them, *(pause)* my screams.

YEW

What?

BIRCH

No one's listening to them, so I'm drowning them out. Okay?

(YEW turns on her blender and BIRCH's. YEW begins)

screaming. BIRCH turns both of them off.)

BIRCH

What are you doing?

YEW

I want to scream with you. I want us to scream.

BIRCH

Our screams, they're different. Mine is mine and this is how it comes out now. You need to get yours out another way. Yew needs another way.

(BIRCH leaves.)

(YEW turns both blenders on and watches them.)

(Blenders stay on for a few beats. YEW stares. THE MOP enters and turns them off. THE MOP pulls out two sponges from his pants and begins cleaning the blenders.)

I FOUND THIS NOW. I FOUND THIS.

(THE MOP sits cleaning out the blenders messily. BIRCH enters pulling a large trash bag.)

(BIRCH opens up the bag, many frozen fish boxes tumble out. SILVERFISH enters.)

SILVERFISH

What are you doing?

(Silence.)

SILVERFISH

(Angry.) What are you doing? You don't take out the trash. I take it out. That's what I do. That's what Silverfish does. You don't do that.

BIRCH

It was building up.

SILVERFISH

No. Birch does not get to do that. Birch does not get to take out the trash.

BIRCH

I found one and I thought, "just one... I can live with one box of this... I can" and then I found THIS. I found this now. I found this.

(SILVERFISH starts shoving the boxes violently back into the bag and storms off with it.)

YEW

(Devastated.) He's never caught a fish in his life has he?

BIRCH

Maybe not.

(YEW shuts her eyes tightly.)

You're going to do it again, aren't you?

BIRCH

I need her.

(SILVERFISH starts furiously looking through the trash can. THE MOP enters the spotlight, looks SILVERFISH up and down, and then takes his spot as SILVERFISH leaves.)

YOU TALK TOO MUCH

(The song “You Talk Too Much” by Joe Jones plays. THE MOP pulls a hand mirror out of his many pockets and stares as the song plays. After the first verse he pulls out another and stares into that one. At the instrumental part of the music he begins crossing the two mirrors and staring into both. YEW enters the spotlight, looks THE MOP up and down, and then takes her spot as THE MOP leaves.)

TRY

(YEW saunters on swinging an unplugged microphone and it’s cord. “Try A Little Tenderness” by Otis Redding starts to play. She lip syncs to it enthusiastically and seems to deeply enjoy it at first, but by the end- when the buildup happens- she is at the point where she is clutching her stomach and screaming the

lyrics silently. She is out of breath.)

SPILT MILK

(THE MOP stands in the background. SILVERFISH enters with six cups and a tea kettle. He sets them down all over the space. He fills each cup with a little bit of milk. He stands waiting. BIRCH enters wearing a silk robe.)

SILVERFISH

Hi.

(BIRCH is surprised and she accidentally knocks over a cup or two in shock.)

BIRCH

You scared me. What are... what is all this?

SILVERFISH

I know you haven't been sleeping well and I also know that warm milk used to help you fall asleep. It's for you.

BIRCH

How do you know I haven't been sleeping well?

SILVERFISH

Because I care. About you. About if you're sleeping well or not. And because I'm not sleeping well. I hear you get up at night. I'm already awake and I hear you get up and come in here. Maybe for milk or maybe to go somewhere or to lea... I don't know.

BIRCH

How do you know it's me and not Yew?

SILVERFISH

I know.

BIRCH

I can't drink all this milk...

SILVERFISH

Oh, yeah. It's, a, uh, a gesture.

BIRCH

Try and get some sleep. You shouldn't be up doing this kind of thing.

(BIRCH exits. SILVERFISH walks over to the milk puddle. He kneels down and puts the palms of his hands into the spilt milk slowly. He closes his eyes and weeps a bit. He pulls himself together, stands up, and exits. SILVERFISH reenters holding a mop and hands it to THE MOP. SILVERFISH exits. THE MOP stares at it and then begins to tremble. THE MOP exits as BIRCH enters. BIRCH does not acknowledge THE MOP, but THE MOP acknowledges BIRCH.)

I'M TRYING AGAIN

(BIRCH stands with a piece of tree bark. She carves something into it with a knife and places it in front of her. She stirs a cup of tea with leaves poking out of it and

takes a sip. She twirls some stems around her fingers and opens and closes her eyes. She rolls her neck a few times and begins to mumble. She rocks back and forth.)

BIRCH

Mom? I'm trying again. Please. I hope you see that I'm trying again and that you can help me here and now. Please just reach. Please see me. I don't know how to be responsible to me... for me... I...you were supposed to do that and you're not here and I still am and I don't know what I'm doing and what she's doing and what they're doing and apparently what we're doing. I don't know how to do... just do anymore. Listen to me! Listen because I can't listen to me anymore. Please?

(Lights flicker/surge a few times.)

(THE MOP enters with a knife behind his back. He looms in the back.)

Mom?

(Lights flicker/surge again.)

(THE MOP grabs BIRCH and blinds her. YEW hears BIRCH's screaming and comes in. THE MOP then blinds YEW. Blackout.)

IT IS

(BIRCH and YEW sit next to each other. They now wear eye patches covering both of their eyes. THE MOP stands in the background.)

*SILVERFISH is framing the
photograph he spoke of
earlier.)*

SILVERFISH

It's a nice, nice picture really.

(Silence.)

BIRCH

Is it dark in here?

SILVERFISH

What?

YEW

She asked if it was dark in here.

SILVERFISH

It's a little dark.

BIRCH

It's very dark in here.

YEW

It is.

BIRCH

Are we going to talk about it?

(Silence. Blackout.)

END OF PLAY

Analysis of a Process

Eight months ago I drew a picture of twin girls wearing eyepatches. Ten months ago I met a guinea pig named, “The Mop”. One year ago I imagined a man who desperately wished he was a fisherman. I let a small bunch of characters live inside me for a year and then I let them out in public for four short performances. I cannot say it has a real starting point, but if I were to pick one moment that pushed me into this play’s orbit it would have to be a visit I made to Oblong Books & Music in Rhinebeck, NY last summer. I was sauntering through the botanical section when I found a book titled, “Wicked Plants; The Weed That Killed Lincoln’s Mother and Other Botanical Atrocities” by Amy Stewart.¹ I was absolutely intrigued by all of these plants sprouting into this world with what seemed like an already assigned role. This find started the ball rolling for me in thinking about the roles I’ve played in my own life and the pain I have faced (and am still facing) rejecting or growing out of them. I bought the book and as soon as I started reading I both fell into a feeling of love and a feeling of panic surrounding the sheer power these plants have had over humans for centuries. They can heal us and they can kill us. We can use them to heal each other or to kill each other. Later, in the depths of the internet I found out that some people even use plants to attempt contact with the dead; these people are called, “necromancers”. Upon reading descriptions of the usage of necromantic herbs on “greynecromancerjournal.wordpress.com,” I knew almost instantaneously that the two young

¹ Stewart, Amy. *Wicked Plants: The Weed That Killed Lincoln's Mother and Other Botanical Atrocities*. Illustrated by Briony Morrow-Cribbs, Algonquin Books, 2009.

ladies with eyepatches I had drawn were necromancers.² Originally, I had thought gardening would be a simple hobby for them; something they did together. Now it had become something much darker. It was more than a hobby and more than simple. It was something they would do together and then do without each other.

The play was quickly developing a mysterious and, dare I say, spooky feel. While I did not consider influences at the time I can now see how admiring the works of Tim Burton, Shirley Jackson, David Lynch, and Ransom Riggs over the years have probably influenced my style. What links these artists is a profound sense of darkness, quirky humor, an edge of horror, and a very clear presence of mood. Oddly enough, none of the individuals previously mentioned are playwrights nor theater artists. The only time my senior project work was ever likened to another playwright or theater artist was when my advisor for the fall semester, Brooke Berman, suggested that I had written something that somewhat resembled the feelings of Martin McDonagh's, "The Beauty Queen of Leenane," which I accepted as an incredibly generous compliment.³ However, I slightly disagree with that comparison. My play, and McDonagh's, both deal with the painful wish of escape from a broken family unit. Both plays also have an esoteric vibe about them and have characters generally confined to their homes. Though, McDonagh's play lives in the real world, focuses on a mother-daughter relationship, and frankly is sexist. While the feeling of my work may live in the realm of Jackson or even McDonagh, I do know that I walked into this project without any intention of trying to emulate other artists for fear of not letting myself be one hundred percent "me" and I believe in that arena I succeeded. I

² Faolen (manannanschild). "Necromantic Herbs: Plants of the Dead." *The Grey Necromancer's Journal*, 8 Dec. 2013, greynecromancerjournal.wordpress.com/2013/12/08/necromantic-herbs-plants-of-the-dead/.

³ McDonagh, Martin. *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2011. Modern Classics.

have never made a work of art that felt so authentically mine in my entire life. It felt as if my psyche jumped out of my head, onto paper, and then magically made its way onto a stage; somehow all with my permission.

I originally chose to write because throughout my college career, writing has provided me with the richest access to the depths of my own person. The program has taught me to devise with others, make performance art on my own, create new imaginings for older works, and while all have been gratifying, the place in which I have found the most truth for myself has been in the realm of playwriting. Though I have directed, designed, and created multiple productions from the ground up, this project is the first time I have ever both written a text and directed it myself. One of my strengths as an artist is the ability to create strong visual worlds and that's why though I originally had planned to do a staged reading, I planned to have it fully produced . Once I knew there would be a production of the text there was never any question as to who would direct it; I was confident that it had to be me. I naturally see all the action unfold in my head as I write and I know the characters personally. I know how my plays breathe.

For me, characters come first. I have to meet them before I can find out about the world they live in. For *Choose an Eye*, I happened to meet small pieces of the characters over time. For example, while working at the Marin Humane Society this past summer I met two guinea pigs; Agent Nibbles and The Mop. I found both their names theatrical and fun, so I jotted them both down into my "ideas and doodles" notebook knowing I might be using at least one of them as a character name in the future; it's small everyday moments and things like these that help me build my players. After accumulating some discoveries like these, I spent a lot of time with my eyes closed. I would let myself see the person. I would let them in. I saw the color of their hair,

the way their clothes fit, their eyebrows, their belly button, their toenails, and the small of their backs. I took them to imaginary bars in my mind and watched to see what drink they would order. I took them to my favorite places and they took me to theirs. Once I was able to hold them in my mind, I drew them. I looked at them in ink and thought about how they each must have a message for me. I promised each one I would find out what it was they wanted to say (I should have known that I was also making a promise to myself then). I would like to add that they all came to me willingly and relatively open, but if I ever found myself stuck on mining their innards I would make a pinterest board for them. I'm a highly visual artist and I tend to think in pictures, so pinterest, (which is a website that helps you create visual catalogues of ideas) was an important tool for me. This semester, while simultaneously directing my senior project, I enrolled in a 35mm analog photography course for non-majors. I have found a great joy in the theatricality of photography. Each photograph at its heart is just a still piece of performance, whether it's staged or entirely spontaneous. It's exciting to find another medium in which I can carry over one of my theater skills. I hope and plan to keep exploring different areas in which I can apply the tools I've learned in theater to other aspects of my life. That said, I am sure film photography will continue to be an important artistic tool for me in the future.

Next, I found names for them all. I had Birch, Yew, Silverfish, and The Mop. They are all names of objects. Before they were all granted official names, I knew that their story would concern the assignments we are dealt at birth and how they more or less fit us. Birch and Yew's names came from research on necromantic herbs. Yew is known as the tree of death. It is planted in graveyards to protect the spirits of the dead as well as used to banish the malevolent ones. The sister tree to yew is the tree of life, birch. Messages and petitions are commonly carved into the

bark of birch trees and then burned or buried in the grave of a spirit of the dead. This idea that one sister tree is used to contact the dead, while the other is used to protect as well as banish the dead made a world of sense to me and to the characters that had already started to emerge.

Silverfish is named after the little creepy wingless insect that is not a fish at all. I have always marveled at the fact that this poor animal is named after something that it only resembles, but isn't. The inability to live up to something, whether it be a name or the role of parent, is exactly Silverfish's greatest dilemma. The Mop is not just a mop, The Mop is actually half human and half mop, however, the name is designed as an easy pigeonhole. His name is the thing that people want him to be and so see him as. It's easier for them to put him in a clear classification rather than to explore that he could be, and is, more.

The writing and developing of characters has always come somewhat naturally to me. Trying to write conflict makes me gnash my teeth at night. My senior project advisor first semester, Brooke Berman, learned this quickly about me. In the chapter on conflict of her ebook, which guided me in certain areas of the writing process, Brooke explains that while she believes that there is no way to tell a story without conflict, "Marie Irene Fornes insists that in her plays, 'characters want to talk about the sunset,' that the notion of drama predicated on thwarted desire is inherently capitalist and of no interest to her."⁴ I have not decided whether I agree with Brooke or Marie, but I wanted to try and work out what it was that had me running from conflict so I dove in. Brooke made me face the fact that I would bring my characters right up to conflict and then write in a blackout or a scene change. I was not letting my characters try to solve their

⁴ Berman, Brooke. *9 Juicy Weeks to a Wonderfully Imperfect First Draft: A Creativity Program for Writers*. E-book, Ditch Kills Press LLC, 2014.

problems and I was not letting them cause problems for each other. It made me uncomfortable to acknowledge that the characters would need to claw their way through their struggles and disagreements until a decision was made that would change the circumstances. I am still trying to figure out why I sidestep conflict in my work. I could be afraid of what might happen if I let these parts of myself battle it out or maybe it's just because I find it a little painful playing G-d. With Brooke reminding me constantly to go all the way through the conflict, I made the decision that the play had to start right out of the gate with conflict. Beginning with conflict helped me quite a bit, but my biggest struggle in this area was the fact that the family I was writing about was one to avoid feelings, avoid change, and avoid discussion at all costs. So, I had to make the costs, and the prices for that matter, as high as I could. Breaking a promise, threatening to leave, exposing secrets, and physical violence were all strong candidates. Every one of the previously mentioned items made it into the final script. I pushed and pushed and eventually my characters pushed back; it was immensely satisfying.

Another struggle I faced was this kind of strange drifting I would do. I needed an anchor while I was working. Brooke provided me with many fill in the blanks. Things like, "this is a play about _____ it starts with _____ then _____ and _____ until finally _____".

Another helpful exercise was simply stating what each character wanted, like Yew wants her sister or Birch wants individuation. It seems so easy, but sometimes I really needed to remind myself what it was each of them truly desired and to ask myself what it might mean if they all (or even one of them) got what they wanted. The most helpful fill in the blank for me came when Brooke handed me a notecard and told me to write the play's mantra on it and carry it around. I ended up writing, "old ways no longer work" and that kept me steady through the days where I

was feeling a little lost. Another thing that soothed me in the more difficult times was writing to myself what it was that I loved about my play so far. Generally, I judge myself too harshly and tend to not celebrate any little wins I might make along the way. I made it a real effort this time around to practice compassion in this writing process, especially because I was unearthing some dark and emotionally messy stuff.

Before I finished writing I began searching for a cast. I did not hold auditions because I wanted to cast people with whom I already knew I could work well with. I had a full cast before the start of winter break. However, one week before the end of that break one of my actors informed me she would no longer be able to perform in my piece. After she exited, another actor told me he would also not be a part of my production. The female cited she was overwhelmed with the amount of commitments she had made (which turned out to be a falsehood as she decided to audition for the department show instead and make a piece for FEST). The male explained that he also wanted to be in the department show. I was devastated. I thought of both of them as good friends and I took their deciding to leave as both rude and hurtful. I tried to see what had happened as a gift as I did only want cast members who really wanted to be a part of this journey with me. I set out to find two people who were both excited about the process and kind. I ultimately cast Natalie Durkin ('20), Emily Kuper ('19), Rishi Mutalik ('18), and Ariel Violet Gillooly ('17). Not only was I happy to have a group of talented actors, but also to have a cast member to represent each class year. I was definitely excited to have a range of representations of the different class years at Bard. Additionally, I was glad to have actors of different gender expressions, sexual orientations, and races. I did not intend for this diversity, but as soon as we met for the first read through it became evident to me. The read through was

thrilling and extremely informative for me. I had little understanding as to how dark and violent my play had become. I wondered how it was that I had not realized the condition my work was in previous to hearing it aloud. I was vulnerable. I wondered if I felt this vulnerable sharing this part of me in front of four people how uncomfortable it might be to share this story with a whole audience. Some attending would be total strangers; strangers that would come to know me in a deeply personal way. Even more difficult, people that know me would be able to witness this part of me that even I was just starting to learn about. The idea of letting people in, in that way, was heavy and still is heavy. Jonathan Rosenberg had taught me in his directing seminar that the director is always onstage in some capacity.⁵ By doing the directing, writing, set design, lighting design, and promotional material for this piece I was going to be plastered all over it. In one moment I can recall considering casting myself as the lead female character, Birch, because I almost felt some need to bring all of that “self” full circle by performing in the production as well. Additionally, I have been beyond disappointed by the lack of opportunity I have had to perform in the Theater & Performance program due to the way casting is handled and I wanted to provide myself with an opportunity to perform before graduating (even if it was not in LUMA in a department show). However, I decided against this idea because I felt I could learn more about myself and the work by keeping in my own perspective, outside that of a specific character. I also recognized that I might find out more about Birch by seeing someone else inhabit her. Lastly, I knew that the amount of work I had already taken on was immense and I needed to devote all of my energies there.

⁵ Rosenberg, Jonathan. Lecture. Directing Seminar, Nov. 2016, Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts, Annandale-on-Hudson.

When the first rehearsal came around I had a strong impulse to have the actors build their characters from the outside in. I ran through many exercises to start, but the one that felt the most poignant for all of us was when I asked each of them to dance in character. Once they had all demonstrated individually I had them look in the mirror and dance collectively. The timing, the weight, the gestures, the spirit, it all was staggeringly different. I looked at them and said, “ that is why these people are struggling together” and they all nodded. I led my actors to their character’s inner life by beginning each rehearsal with a lying down meditation. It was my own meditation modeled after the various guided meditations I have encountered with different acting teachers over the years. After relaxing the body, I had the actors envision their character’s within their own stomach. Depending on the rehearsal, I might instruct them to have the character lead them to a body of water and skip stones or show them what’s inside their pockets. The circumstances would change, but the meditation always ended by the actor asking the character what it was they wanted in that moment. Once they had been told what that desired thing was the actor was to turn on their side, whisper the wish into the palm of their hand, and then come to a seated position when they felt ready. I found that this reflection aided in the actors learning to love their characters unconditionally, which I believe is at the forefront of solid character development. It was deeply moving to see the evolution and eventual solidification of each friendship between actor and character.

Another way I began to create the world was by stressing mood as an important facet of the rehearsal process. I kept the lights low, played music when it felt appropriate, and scheduled rehearsals mainly in the late evenings. By striving to set the play’s eerie mood early on in rehearsals I was not only able to help the actors arrive in the world described, but also give

myself the opportunity to begin dabbling in the design process. I imagined the characters moving through purple light and then blue light or behind a wood table and then a linoleum countertop. It was like playing a freakish game of dollhouse and it was fun. In terms of costume design I wanted to pull types of clothing from different eras to aid in the creation of that timeless feel I was going for. I bought two vintage 1950s dresses for Yew and Birch. I wanted them to look feminine and I absolutely did not want them to match. Putting the twins in matching outfits would have been too obvious and familiar. For Silverfish, I went for a more up to date look and purchased all elements of his costume on Amazon. The Mop wore relatively neutral and ageless clothes aside from the wig, which I constructed myself. The twin's eye patches were used throughout the entire rehearsal process; I found it critical that they have the same obstructed viewpoint as their characters. Not only did this prevent them from sudden shock (and possible danger) of limited perspective upon dress rehearsals, but also allowed them to experience what it is like to spend time visually impaired.

Another element of design I enjoyed was creating promotional photos and material for the production. I took all the photographs in black and white, again to follow through with the timelessness of the piece. Once the photographs of each individual cast member was uploaded to photoshop I added their character's name above their image. In the week leading up to the show I would post an individual's portrait to the facebook event daily. The picture would include the caption of "Hi, my name is insert character name here". I would also post the image to my own facebook account and have the actor make the image their profile picture with one line of their character's as the caption. Later, these portraits became an introduction to the performance. The theater doors had large prints of the portraits attached to them, so that when an audience member

came to the performance the first thing they would be confronted with were the character's name and portrait. I chose to include them in this manner because portraits are this strange attempt to capture identity and put it in a position of stasis, which is exactly what the characters are wrestling with in my work. It also granted me a way to highlight the importance of names in the production.

The amount of satisfaction I found in visually designing the show, from the set to the promotional material, was immense. That said, I was blessed to have a technical crew to help me with the set building, programming of the lighting board, performing cues for sound operations, and so much more. Their reliability, positive attitude, and professionalism made my time in the Old Gym a true delight. The combination of a dedicated cast and a lovely technical crew made techweek relatively easy. I was also extremely lucky to have Chiori Miyagawa by my side. Her warmth, support, humor, encouragement, and detailed feedback was vital for me. The three days I had to prepare for my open dress went quickly and before I knew it the work I had created was standing on its own two feet. My piece was living a full life in front of me. Four days later it was over, but the conversation surrounding it continued. I got a facebook message from my friend Krisdee asking me to weigh in on an argument she and another friend of mine were having about a character's role in my play. I gladly offered some of the intentions I had set out with. This moment meant the world to me. Knowing I had provoked conversation and thought surrounding the function of a role was a clear sign of success for me as an artist. Funnily enough, a few days ago another friend mentioned that same facebook conversation to me. Krisdee had shown her what I had said in response to the argument and it had my other friend feeling both distressed and shocked. Again, I was informed weeks after the production's closing that the piece was still

yielding real emotional results. Aside from these instances, one of my other favorites moments of feedback was when an audience member told me that my play had an essence like that of “We Have Always Lived in the Castle” by Shirley Jackson, which is one of my favorite books of all time.⁶ This comment about the nature of my piece provided me with the affirmation that I had retained my individuality, but that the possible reverberations of a favorite artist had turned up. I felt strong and accomplished. I wanted to hang onto those positive feelings, but the post-show blues were coming to get me. Those blues did not last long as I had to edit production stills, discuss elements with the videographer, submit receipts for reimbursement, write this process paper, and more. I did not get much opportunity to celebrate; so I am going to take this last section of my paper to do that.

I forget to have fun. Whenever I get the chance to see my 98 year old grandfather, Sol Capper, he asks me if I’m having fun and then proceeds to tell me how important fun is. Originally the sentence leading up to this paragraph said, “I did not get much opportunity to stop, grieve, and celebrate”. I sat staring blankly at my laptop screen for over an hour stuck on how to proceed. I felt like something was wrong. I didn’t want to stop and I didn’t want to grieve. I just wanted to celebrate. Generally I am more than up for a good cry or a long mourn depending on the inciting event, however this time around I am up for a total jamboree. I went through so much to get to the point of being able to make a work that I am truly proud of. I’m going to celebrate what I went through. Here goes nothing.

I moved across the country to study theater, I ran a student theater collective for four years, I took an entire class on a cult horror film, I studied theater in Berlin for one summer, I got

⁶ Jackson, Shirley. *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Penguin Classics, 2006.

jealous of other's work, I worked with Sarah Michelson, I was an usher one time, I made three fully produced original works, I cried because sometimes I failed, I wrote my first full length play, I had fun with collaborators, I had fights with collaborators, I assistant directed a production with Jack Ferver, I fell out of love with theater many times, I fell in love with theater many times, I cursed when I was not cast, I laughed a lot, I raged when others received unfair opportunities, I got denied from my first grant application, I worked as a receptionist at the fisher center for four years, I got sick from staying up too late making work, I spent a lot of time trying to figure out what devising is, I cried in front of Geoff Sobelle multiple times, I made a bunch of puppets, I covered myself in nutella for the sake of performance art, I created a piece of theater on the back of a truck, I witnessed a lot of nudity, I was overlooked, I read a lot of new plays, I was not chosen, I was chosen, I sprained both of my wrists at the same time, I ran a 24 hour theater festival for four years, I wrote for the 24 hour theater festival for three years, I got an event host violation while running the 24 hour theater festival, I never showed a piece at a Zocalo, I wrote a paper on a piece of live streamed theater, I called my mom when I was excited about something I saw, I got mistaken as a dance major multiple times, I worried about my future a lot, I never had a summer internship, I went to the Career Development Office and cried my eyes out, I wrote with others, I wrote alone, I had Chinese food during an evening class, I performed at The Walker Art Center, I was overwhelmed a good 80% of the time, I was excluded, I hugged Ariel Gillooly, I wanted respect, I had people help me, I took naps on the green room couches, I tried to do my moodle posts on time, I folded programs for shows I wished I was in, I moderated, I made a fictitious family album for a final project, I spent hours and hours watching footage of Pina Bausch's work, I wrote a twenty five minute play I love, I

made my senior project with wonderful people supporting me, I directed a group of people who made friends with the characters who were once just imaginary in my mind, I unearthed some difficult stuff, and I completed my senior project. The best part of all? I had a lot of fun.

Appendix A

Poster



Poster by Rebecca Capper

Appendix B
Production Stills



Photo by Rebecca Capper



Photo by Rebecca Capper



Photo by Martie Stothoff



Photo by Martie Stothoff



Photo by Rebecca Capper



Photo by Rebecca Capper

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