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Type Z

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Type Z

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

By
Zazie Ray-Trapido

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I would first like to thank my adviser, Jack Ferver, for all his help and for pushing me to always ask “What am I saying and why am I saying it?” Thank you Jude and Paul, for without your constant support and love and encouragement, I could not have completed or even begun this project. Thank you Nona, always. Thank you to all my amazing actors.

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For Chase

When I was little, acting was about escapism. It was about playing, as kids do, and the freedom that comes with being someone else in another world. As I got older, acting became something different. It was no longer about having fun, but it was my way of pushing back at the world. I was shy, chubby, couldn't dance or sing, and unbearably self-conscious. Over and over again I put myself in positions that made me incredibly uncomfortable. In school plays, camp, and acting classes I humiliated myself as I was forced to face what talents I didn't have. Even though I remained sensitive rather than strengthened by failures, I kept at it, each time a little less willing to put myself out there than the last. What I feared more than anything was being judged, being seen, and failing again. I knew that I didn't fit the conventional outgoing "child-performer" type, yet this only strengthened my resolve. To this day, that feeling remains. When I originally began this process, my artistic goal was to prove that I could be anyone—that a good actor can play any type of role, and that at its best, acting is about talent, not appearances. I wanted acting to feel like it did when I was a kid—before I was shown and told that there were certain roles I would never play. I wanted to expose how stereotypical casting was and that the best performances come out of people who are playing roles unlike themselves and often counter to their looks. I wanted to push back against the roles that limit actors as artists and as people by asking why these are so popular in the first place.

As my creative process for this project unfolded, I got stuck navigating my own insecurities and self doubts. I tried to ignore them and stick to my plan, but after a while (and after talking to my mom and adviser), I realized that I could incorporate that part of myself *into* the project by utilizing those qualities that I fear the most and by playing a character I don't ever want to be, but could easily see myself becoming. I came to see that

there is beauty and there is art in failure. There are artists whose work is entirely about their anxieties and the mistakes they make. I wanted to confront the combination of luck and calculated business decisions that so often drive the casting process in feature films and television “head-on.”

From there, I built a narrative in which I could frame the more abstract and non-linear parts of the show. I chose a multi-media exhibition because that format allowed me to layer and deepen the larger thematic questions that typecasting represents and physically immerse the audience in the repetitive and obsessive nature of that world.

I studied abroad in the film-acting program at the Prague Film School in my junior year. It’s a fairly new, small, conservatory style program started by an internationally known casting director named Nancy Bishop. Our teachers were working actors she had professional relationships with and her assistant casting director. On our first day in class we did two exercises and were assigned two books to read, both written by Nancy Bishop. These exercises and readings came to represent the ideals that our training was built around and ultimately inspired the topic of my senior project.

For the first exercise, each of us slated for the camera. A slate is what one does at the start of every audition. The actor states their name, agency, possible casting age range, height and what role they are auditioning for. For purposes of getting to know one another we also had to speak about our general background. While one person slated, the rest of us anonymously wrote down three things about that actor’s appearance and three types of roles we could imagine them playing. At the end, we were given all of those assessments and instructed to read them out loud to the whole class. The second exercise was of a similar nature. We each posted our headshots on the wall above a blank piece of paper.

Then we wrote what type of character the headshot looked like. After, we once again read the responses out loud. From the first exercise, words like shy, sweet, silly, awkward, and unsure were listed on my papers. On my headshot, my classmates wrote “free-spirited hippy girl,” “Jane Austen character,” “romantic lead,” “shy friend,” “therapist,” and “drug addict.” The teacher then told us that of everybody’s headshots, mine was the most accurate representation of the actor. Maybe I should have felt flattered, but I also didn’t really know what to do with any of that insight. None of the characters related to me at all.

Later in the semester Nancy Bishop visited the school to teach a workshop and launch her new book, “Auditioning for Film and Television: Secrets from a Casting Director.” She gave a power-point presentation about making sure you market yourself as a certain type, like “ghetto character” or “class clown.” This led me into my first phase of research, exploring how gender and race played into this system of casting.

My original idea for the exhibit was to have a series of films playing on a loop. In the videos I would play different classic “types” known in film, a western hero, or a damsel in distress. In each I would do the same monologue or scene. The videos would be highly stylized to look like they were actually taken from the movies, except that I would be reading to someone off camera, as if in professional auditions. I would be in character and acting to my full ability, but it would be slightly off. I was very influenced by Cindy Sherman’s work. I wanted the show to be modeled on her complete physical transformations but a live-action version of them.

The purpose of these videos would be to parody the characters most commonly seen in film and television. Throughout the process and in the end result, humor needed be a big part of my show. I also wanted there to be an interactive element to the show for

which the audience would be handed papers with types listed on them and a copy of my headshot. They could select the type they most thought the headshot represented. At this stage, the project was about figuring out what my type was, and going on a journey with the audience into the world of all possible types. I planned to have posters set up with pictures of famous actors who became stars only when they were cast against type. The posters would chart the trajectories of their careers and chart the types of roles through history, so that the audience could learn which actors first made these types famous and when they became popular. Most importantly I wanted to show how they changed over time into many of the most popular contemporary roles we see in film now. At this point, my vision for the show was much more like a conventional, multi-media museum exhibit set up in an all-white gallery space.

I immersed myself in background research, studying the history of casting and film in American society. What I kept seeing again and again in the history books were mentions of stars whose professional (and sometimes personal) lives went downhill because they didn't have any power over their careers and the roles they were getting. Often these stars were women and this was especially the experience of actors who were not white. I listened to many episodes of a podcast called *You Must Remember This*. The podcast thoroughly researched stories of Hollywood myths and legends within their historical contexts and social climates. The subject of one episode in particular related to my project and altered the way that I understood the relationship between film actor and celebrity. That episode was about Theda Bara.

Theda Bara came up in the 1910s and supposedly inspired the term "Vamp." She was curvy at a time when that wasn't the fad. Her first role was in a movie called "A Fool

There Was” about a good American family man who was brought to ruin by a witchy woman. Fox Studio, which she was contracted to, marketed Bara as an “Arabian woman of mystery, because it was the only type of exotic woman not visible elsewhere on the screen.” They fed the public a story that she was an Arabian Princess rescued in wartime by an American soldier. Bara continued to be cast as “Vamps,” home wreckers, and women who dragged men down. She fought to be put in serious films and roles, but those movies would bomb partly because Fox would intentionally poorly promote them. In reality, Bara was a homebody and a bookworm who lived with her mother and brother. She didn’t date, drink, or party. To Fox, that wasn’t what was going to sell. They went so far as to rent out a hotel room and fill it with sexy and exotic decor for her interviews, pretending it was her home. Her career was over by the early 1920s as Clara Bow became the new “It girl” and vampy roles went out of fashion for a while.

This story is similar to what happened to countless other actresses and actors. We (as actors) don’t have control over the ways that we are cast. It’s timeless and the types may change, and the variety of roles may expand, but the major players, studios and stardom still operate within the same star-making system. Society and popular culture are still bewitched as stars are shaped and filtered through the lens of the white male gaze. Yet what so many actors say is that when the audience thinks that you are playing a version of yourself, it’s the biggest compliment, because it means that you’ve done your job as an actor. Yet, because the “star-making machinery” thrives by blurring the lines of reality between film and life, that role can then become the hardest part to break out of. That’s just a risk that the actor has to take to achieve success or to just work at all.

Like most industry outsiders, my image of “Hollywood” and how it functioned was either shaped by or resembled mainstream media and celebrity culture, interviews, autobiographies, documentaries like *Casting By* and *My Big Break*, feature films from *LALA Land* to *Mommy Dearest*, *Singing in the Rain*, *Valley of the Dolls*, *Mulholland Drive*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Birdman*, *Tootsie*, and TV shows such as *The Comeback*, including more than one season of *Entourage*. In short, products of Hollywood shaped my vision and understanding of Hollywood.

What I saw in all of these stories, real or fictional, were three types of actors and narratives (with some variation in each). The first is the underdog success story. This character works their butt off despite being told they’re never going to make it. The actor can’t catch a break until he or she takes a big risk or ends up in the right place at the right time. An important person notices and this ultimately leads to success. The second narrative is the failed Hollywood wannabe. A talented but naïve dreamer, the wannabe arrives in the land of motion pictures only to be confronted with the harsh reality of failure. They learn they’re not the “one in a million” they once believed themselves to be and must either put their dreams to bed or lose themselves completely in the chase. The final and more common narrative is of the Hollywood star, past their prime and washed up. Like the failed Hollywood wannabe, this character starts out naïve and even has the world at their fingertips. After years of being taken advantage of and the crazy demands of fame, broken down by the grind of the industry, he or she (usually, she) is cast aside and left to start from nothing once more.

These were the possibilities my career offered if I wanted to be film actress. Celebrity culture and celebrity types are also innately tied to the dream of becoming a

screen actor for many and function, I began to notice, as a powerful counterpart to the narratives I just described. So on the one side lay failure and the wreckage of personal dreams and on the other improbably idealized adoration, wealth, and success doing what you love most. These thoughts came to inspire my own personal narrative, which contained both extremes of the “Hollywood” or “Showbiz” myth. The format in which celebrities are presented in popular culture, in interviews and on the radio, comes from a long tradition of public image creation. As far back as feature film making goes, as seen with Theda Bara, acting is deeply rooted in the idea of celebrity.

Today, the publicity circuit is structured a little differently. Interviewers like Charlie Rose, Oprah, and James Lipton attempt to get close to the “genuine” heart of their subjects. They dig deep into the past and talk about emotions and life lessons. Stars today are given the chance to be relatable, for example, by talking about their childhoods. Lipton likes to ask every guest their favorite curse word. Yet the overarching narrative of success is still rooted underneath. They talk about acting, where their love for it all began, the ups and downs of their careers, and finally, when they landed their first major roles. These celebrities are on a pedestal and giving a performance for the public. They know everyone is watching, and they are trained for this. It’s part of the job. Whenever I watch an interview, I can’t help but see myself up there, talking about the moment my life changed and my future opened up to me. This is where the idea for making the celebrity interviews came from.

The second part of my research was about making connections between the past and present. I decided that before I depicted the world of Hollywood and the system of casting, I would need to hear from those who have actually been in it. I wanted to find out if

my stereotype of Hollywood and the life of a working actor was rooted in any truth, and if so, how much. I conducted interviews with casting directors and actors, worked at a casting office, and read casting calls posted on casting databases. This phase was crucial in inspiring and informing the artistic and theoretical content for the rest of the project.

My job at the casting company was simple. I spent most of my days watching audition tapes. Occasionally I would get to sit in on auditions. The company I worked for is a very established company in New York City that does casting for film, television, commercials, and Broadway. I had access to audition tapes for most of their projects from the past 5 years. I watched celebrity after celebrity read for the same parts, doing the same scenes. I also watched one-liner auditions with “unknowns,” people auditioning for roles with no names. Two things became very clear to me early on: The bigger the role, the better looking the actor and the less diverse the pool of contenders became. For smaller roles, all of a sudden the actors became more varied in shape and size and more diverse. Sometimes I would watch a series of auditions and ask why one person was chosen over another, if I liked the person who wasn’t chosen more. The answer was usually that the person either wasn’t known as a dramatic actor (if it was for a dramatic role), or the director wanted someone with classical training or more theater experience. Being “chosen” had nothing to do with the performance or talent of the actor, but more often than not, it was a business decision.

What stuck with me most during that time was how hard it was to watch tape after tape of auditions. The job of a casting director is not easy, not by a long shot. Much of the time is spent making negotiations, scheduling, researching actors and shows, watching the same scene over and over again, and somehow knowing when the smallest thing about a

person can distinguish them and make them right for a role and right for the director. But casting directors have the power. Being on the other side of the camera, sitting with them and hearing them make decisions that could change a person's life, gave me constant anxiety. Everyday I felt that I was in such close proximity to my dream and people living my dream, and yet I was powerless and insignificant. I found out later that this is a common feeling among working actors in LA.

I ended up becoming friendly with one of the actresses who landed a leading role in a film that the office was casting. She is a year younger than me and has been living on her own in LA for the past year. While on set, people often thought we were sisters. Disposition-wise, we were also pretty similar. Her career is just beginning to take off—she was at Sundance this past winter for a movie in which she starred opposite Jenny Slate.

I interviewed her for my project and discovered that there are many more layers and versions of success in an actor's career than the movies depict. I asked her if there was a certain type of role that she was auditioning for. She said she can play younger so she gets sent out for 15-19 year-olds, but the majority of the roles written for teenage girls are bratty and snarky. 80% are described as "witty with a dry sense of humor." Her look isn't necessarily the romantic lead in huge films, but that might be a reflection of her own insecurities. She said there was one audition where the character was described as wearing all brown. She went to the audition wearing all brown but when she got there, sitting in the room were twelve girls also all decked out in brown. Going into it she felt super prepared and clever by wearing all brown, but the reality is that every person wants it just as badly and will work just as hard to be the original one. She said that her love for acting was always there but sometimes she couldn't help but think that all of it really sucked—she was

alone and isolated from her friends and people her age. More than anything she felt uncomfortable with the life that came with the acting, rather than acting itself.

“A lot of people tell stories of being out there for years until they went on one audition and it finally happened. But you also hear the story of people scouted at restaurants and right away they get a major role and become famous. In every story is the idea that it happened overnight or one instance catapulted a person into fame. The reality is everyone puts in a ton of work before that and puts themselves in the position of being in the right place at the right time. Little things add up to the one thing that will take you into the next element of success or fame. Feeling like you are so close is a constant because there are always huge opportunities surrounding you. There’s a sense that you are always on the brink of being discovered because who knows who will see your next audition or come across your headshot. The big part of it is accepting that. It’s easy to get caught up when reading a script and imagine how fun it would be to play a character in a certain place with certain people.”

This feeling of being so close yet so far, is the one I described having while working at the casting office. It’s a feeling that I haven’t seen depicted in the movies about Hollywood, yet I know that it is a shared one for many actors. I wanted my project to communicate this feeling. To me that meant showing my character going through it, feeling and expressing that frustration and longing.

I read Tumblr blogs written by actors, chronicling their week to week lives in Hollywood. There's something very self indulgent about the personal blogging culture and practice. They read as curated diaries, but with the goal of inspiring by being open and honest about their "struggles," Most times there is also an underlying sense of self-promotion. I could see myself becoming one of these people in telling a story of my "journey" to Hollywood. Thus the title, *Type Z* was born. As much as that idea frightened me, it also inspired me. Why shy away from this stereotype? Going in this direction allowed me to shift the focus from making videos in which I play different types of film characters, to showing a side of Hollywood that is real and not generally seen: the auditioning process.

Working in a casting office gave me the tools to set up my own audition room. I wanted viewers to see how typecasting works and the business of acting through my experience, rather than by putting up images and timelines about the evolution of these types. If they could connect through a character, and maybe even find a point of relation, then the idea would be communicated emotionally rather than through information and facts.

In the Audition Videos viewers walking past monitors would see my peers auditioning for character types they resemble and most likely be sent out to go and audition for in the real world. I didn't audition any of the actors but selected them based solely on looks. I typecast them to be in my show because I wanted to make sure that a range of different types, personalities, genders, acting styles and backgrounds were represented, except for the white male. I met with and interviewed each actor individually over the period of a month. First we talked about their experiences with auditioning, being in shows or films. I had never had these kinds of conversations with any of them before,

and I got to see a whole new side of each actor. We talked about what actors they get compared to, who they think they look like or who others say they look like, and which characters they personally relate to or see themselves being *able* to play, even if they didn't really want to play those roles.

I compiled all the types, from all the genres, that came to mind and from there we narrowed the roles down to five or six different types as well as what I termed as their anti-types. I wrote the scripts for each role, we met and rehearsed, and then met once more to film. I was surprised by how much I enjoyed directing. It was a very collaborative effort. I met with Satwik Srikrishnan and Aniya Picou and we wrote some of their more stereotypical scripts together. Satwik and I wrote the Hotel Worker audition and the Best Buy Employee role as a team. Aniya and I wrote the Cheese Haberdashery Employee and Ade together as well.

In between the Audition Videos viewers would watch "my" Video Diaries, in which "Zazie" fights against this very real system, begins to lose herself, and ultimately becomes either just another failed Hollywood actress, or the underdog "one in a million" success story. My hope was to bring into question if "type" is even a real thing. Or is it a tool casting people use when they bring people in for roles because it makes it easier to sort?

Beginning to work with each actor by interviewing them in this way strengthened my conviction that the project could reflect the insecurities that many actors face, and their need to come to terms with wanting to go into a business so often based on looks rather than talent. Yet it is my dream. In telling it this way, I am giving the audience a chance to put me, Zazie, in a box, and judge my dream. I wanted viewers to get caught up in the projection of myself and my fears, and risk their believing that the person they are

watching is who I actually am, rather than a character I am playing. I hoped my approach would elicit a strong emotional response and a more personal level of understanding.

Having the experience be fabricated and making a persona of myself within is also meant to give viewers the sense that the story they've been following isn't showing the whole picture about the person on screen, as is true in films that appear to tell the full story of a person's entire life.

The way that I shot the Video Diaries mimics the style of films that have informed me about Hollywood and celebrity. Together they form a fictional narrative that unfolds over the course of three months, following "Zazie," a bright-eyed ingenue on the eve of her take-off for Hollywood. Three short pieces, projected onto large screens, as distinguished from the eight Audition Tape monitors, start out as "homemade vlogs" shot on my computer that seem impromptu, confessional, and for personal use only. Right away the actress's persona and the character she is playing are seemingly one and the same. The second video diary takes place in a bathtub and was also entirely staged. I shot it on a professional camera, however it still gives off the appearance of being an in-the-moment vlog. In it I wear a bathing suit, which gives some indication of me being aware that people besides myself will be watching this. The third video was shot to look like a fictional film. Zazie doesn't address the camera at all, and it is unclear who is shooting and editing, although it is me doing all of that as well. Again, I wanted the audience to choose whether or not to believe this is the real story of Zazie, "the actress" all along, or me. In reality, it is a little bit of both. The earlier parts of the script were adapted from the journal that I kept while in Prague.

When it came to designing the scenes, most of my inspiration came from still photography. The bathroom scene aesthetics and color choices were influenced by Nan Goldin. The look and feel of the auditions were influenced in part by a photo series by Ari Versluis and Ellie Uyttenbroek entitled *Exactitudes*. In terms of playing with film as a non-linear medium, and conceiving of the show as a multi-screen exhibition rather than project just one continuous movie, I was very much inspired by a number of video performance artists. Alex Bag's *Untitled Fall '95*, Cynthia Maughan, Tracy Ullman, Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, Shelly Silver's *Meet the People '86* are some of the key people and pieces that opened up the possibilities of what my project could look like. I was drawn in by the way that their performance art critiques and satirizes everyday life via stereotyping people and making fun of their dramas, melodramas, traits, and limitations.

A nonlinear exhibit/installation that contained a linear (traditional) narrative (my "story) freed me up to create a multiplicity of characters, multiple storylines, and explore genres themselves that require typecasting. It allowed me to break the boundaries of those imaginary limits imposed in the audition room right to the end product.

From the beginning I wanted it to be an immersive installation rather than a live performance or narrative film because this is a show about how dreams and films are the most dreamlike artistic expressions of our culture. I believe that film is one of the most powerful forms of fantasy projection that we have. You sit in a darkened room, watch images flash by in partial dreamlike state, and in silence. Because they are both a visual and oral form of communication, films represent the way we experience dreams more than paintings, music, and books. They can evoke visceral emotional states and reactions without our even knowing it. Once the Old Gym was offered for the installation, I was able

to design the dramatic black box space to enhance that dreamlike quality with minimal rope lighting on the ground to guide viewers through the show.

On top of the dreamlike environment, I wanted to replicate the feeling of being back in the audition room, watching people read that one scene over and over. It's overwhelming, immersive, all consuming and even gave people headaches. But sometimes that's the feeling of what it's like to be a casting director. By watching the videos on smaller screens which all look similar, it's hard for one performance to stand out next to another. Film acting is such a subtle art form that every facial movement comes across on camera. But when you're watching one scene after another, those start to blur together. I wanted to bring to light and make a show out of the realities of the job and the everyday work that actors have to do.

There were concepts that I had to cut out because of time constraints, but I would have liked to have put them into the final show. For example, along with the videos of the auditions I had also produced a series of counter-videos, in which the actors play what I termed Anti-Types, characters that they thought they never would be cast as. This idea was modeled after my original idea in which I was to play the most common types of characters, no matter how different they were from myself. I wanted to give the actors a chance to defy their types and have a chance to play their dream roles. I planned most of the shoots and even shot most of these pieces, but in the end, I kept them out because juxtaposing them with enough thought, and not just randomly editing them into the typecast auditions would have taken more time than I had. In part this is because I spent much more time writing the scripts for each of the auditions than I planned for. I initially thought that I would use breakdowns found online for each character. As that stage of the process came nearer, I

decided that it would be more interesting and more succinct to write my own sides. It turns out that all the hours I spent watching movies and television over the course of my life had not been a waste. Somehow the sides became an integration and compilation of all these voices and characters that I had picked all these years.

This project made me want to continue to expand upon what I already put up in my show. I hope to get the opportunity to integrate the history and stories of actors in a creative way that doesn't just involve posters or timelines. I wish that there had been a way to show the actors doing their dream roles, roles that they feel they will never get to audition for in reality. It would have showcased their talents, talents I got the chance to see, and further pushed the idea that acting is about transforming oneself.

There were many creative and technical challenges that I ran into along the way. Before this project I'd never directed anyone, written scripts for film, designed all of the costumes, hair, and make-up for each role, or even put up a show of any kind. I had used Adobe Premier and shot footage for a couple of film classes, but it was nothing like what I wanted to do for this project. Each aspect, except for the acting, was new to me and I was doing most of it alone. Even though I was playing a version of myself, I still felt that I was discovering a different side of acting and forcing myself to be honest and truthful in my performance. It was not easy and I had to push myself to be completely open to the camera, listen to my instincts, and be in the moment—something that my character really struggles to do in her day-to-day life. What was great about filming was that I could shoot the video diaries as many times as I needed, until I was happy with the performance and the look of the video. In the beginning I thought that it would be best if I were the only one acting in the project. It would be less to manage that way. However, I realized soon enough that if I

wanted to make a project about stereotyping people, demonstrate how limiting typecasting can be and force viewers to judge for themselves not only the actor but the acting skills presented, I would have to go beyond myself.

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