


Spring 2023

Goodbye? Reflections and stream of consciousness on, underneath and around the creation of “Hello?”

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Recommended Citation

Gurevich, Leonard Shevel, "Goodbye? Reflections and stream of consciousness on, underneath and around the creation of “Hello?”" (2023). *Senior Projects Spring 2023*. 119.

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Goodbye?
Reflections and stream of consciousness on, underneath and around the creation of “Hello?”

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

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2023

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to:

My best friend (my mom) - for all her endless support, guidance, love and belief.

To my wonderful family for being the best team you can possibly wish for.

For leading me to this project and for these 4 years at Bard, that transformed me I would love to thank the Theater and Performance faculty:

My advisor Jonathan Rosenberg - for your wisdom and for teaching me how to be specific, intentional, how to always dig deeper and move more forward. How important it is “to do the thing and not the idea of a thing”.

Jack Ferver - for teaching me how to not to be afraid to be ridiculous, to experiment and for helping me to open up new things about myself and the world.

Geoff Sobelle - for opening up a new source of oxygen, for the discovery of a clown, for being an inspiration and for giving so much priceless advice.

Bhavesh Patel - for teaching me how important it is to be doing, instead of “acting”, for being demanding and for teaching me the art of immersion.

Miriam Felton-Dansky - for opening so much about what theater can be and how to critically and with curiosity look at all of these possibilities.

Ashley Tata - for your supervision, for sharing your incredible erudition, experience and opening up new dimensions.

Lindsey Liberatore - for guiding me through more exploration of physical theater and being a great support in my attempt to imply it on stage.

To the other faculty members, that I was happy to work with throughout my time at Bard.

Each of you taught me something really important about art, craft, life and myself.

To Jen Lown - for your positivity, help and incredible support.

To my wonderful cohort for all the support, advice and the community feeling they brought in.

To Andrew Crisol, my brother in crime - for your constant willingness to experiment, for always catching me in all senses, for always finding great references, and just for being a great collaborator you are.

To Ifigeneia Gianne - for suddenly jumping on board, while I was getting out of the artistic crisis, for brainstorming ideas with me, for caring so much, being an incredible support and help in all little details.

To Maya Lavender - for being a wonderful person you are, for your attitude and being always ready to have some fun onstage and backstage.

To my Conservatory teachers and all the music teachers in the past.

To my wonderful friends here at Bard and all across the globe.

To all the inspirations.

To all the people, who supported me and gave me even a tiny piece of advice, that moved me forward.

To the production team of the Fisher Center, that makes magic possible.

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Prelude

This paper is in a way a stream of consciousness. It does not pursue the task of bringing the interpretations or explaining my own theatrical piece (maybe just accidentally a tiny bit), but rather to invite a reader to take a peek into my mind, in this case, the mind of a creator. Partially it could relate to my wish to not give out some dramaturgical secrets. If this would ever appear on stage again in any capacity, which I hope it will, I would want to leave people a space, free of assumptions, and full of ambiguity. Structurally sometimes it would go back and forth, mixing the sections, maybe even rambling, but isn't that how our mind works?

The path to the birth of an idea

There were several moments in my life as a theater appreciator, lover, and eventually a theater-maker that appeared to be significant roots in the formation of me as an artist I am today and subsequently for the creation of my senior project performance. Seeing "Donka" by Swiss director Daniele Finzi-Pasca became one of the brightest theatrical, aesthetic, and human impressions of my life. This performance dedication to Chekhov did not have a straightforward narrative, it was not a biopic performance or an interpretation of one or more plays by Anton Pavlovich, but rather a collection of images, associations, scenes full of theatrical beauty, expressed visually, in the message and in the acting. For me it was an example of scenic magic. More specifically, the performance conveys the spirit, state, atmosphere and evokes nostalgia for what you have never experienced, memories that do not belong to you, fascinates the breath, touches, while you are not able to fully rationally explain why at the end you come out with tears on your eyes and the full of oxygen chest. Isn't this magic? "This hectic madness turns into

a touching tragicomedy, forcing you to laugh sincerely, then swallow a lump that rolled up in your throat”- says in one of the reviews of “Donka”.

An integral part of the performance were the elements of clowning and buffoonery, acrobatics as well as a combination of technologically advanced theater and craftiness when intentional meta-theatricality became one of the elements of the performance.

Not fully realizing this, but probably, this was the beginning of my conscious path of being interested in becoming a creator of a theater based on clowning, a poetic theater, an absurd theater, a so-called theater Féerie. Being at Bard, I opened up lots of new and unexplored territories. One of the classes that undoubtedly led me to the style of my senior project is the Advanced Acting Clowning class, that was taught by Geoff Sobelle and had in its basis the Jacques Lecoq technique. Clowning became a concept that I fell in love with. The idea of bringing out the inner child and so-called ‘le jeu’, which would imply playfulness, expressing the naivest and most sincere essence of our being operates in a lot of different ways: first of all, it liberates, but secondly it deeply touches, makes us relate and can make us hysterically laugh, and when that all happens simultaneously - it’s an absolute gift. That’s how Lecoque himself described that and the technique of neutral mask: “Deep down there is a child who has grown up in us, which can no longer be expressed in our social relationships, it’s the child with their own gestures, their own voice, and who is extremely personal to us, which we sometimes show to our friends when we are freer... it’s a state of openness and naivete and very direct, very defenseless and very sensitive...”

Getting exposed to Sobel’s work as an artist, and having a chance to get taught by him, inspired me on a personal level and augmented my curiosity and passion for this type of theater.

The other huge, similar to “Donka”, inspiration for me became a “Snow Show”, created by famed Russian clown Slava Polunin and directed by Viktor Kramer. This show, in addition to the incredible level of clowning, captivates with its versatility. Children endlessly laugh, and adults cry through a smile. The non-linear structure of the performance is noteworthy. The performance does not really tell the story of the character but plunges into the atmosphere of dreams, childhood, and fairy tales. It is a set of conventionally unrelated scenes, with the only thing that unites them being the unchanging yellow clown and the green clowns, that are always somewhere nearby.

Another significant feature of Polunin’s show is that there is not a single spoken word, but lots of music and sound. “I wanted to understand whether clowning can be lyrical, poetic, dramatic, or even tragic” says Slava. A quote from his website that interested me and which resonates and coincides with my ideas: “Polunin wants to reconcile the grotesque and the epic, "to dive headlong into something similar to the world of Gogol and Beckett."

The art of James Thiérrée became a huge theatrical inspiration for me. When I stumbled upon the excerpts from his shows “La Veillée des Abysses” and “La Symphonie Du Hanneton”, they truly blew my mind and I thought to myself: why wasn’t I the one who made it up? The bed scene in “La Symphonie Du Hanneton” consisted of everything I love: something very relatable and universal, meaningful, deep and touching, absurd and surreal, funny, mysterious and beautiful. I was mesmerized by his art, in particular how out of fairly simple ideas and gestures he is able to create a spectacular, breath-taking action. Him being a musician and successfully incorporating that appealed to me on a personal level, since I am also a musician. The combination of the two disciplines, Music and Theater, and bringing both of them together on stage, has always been at the core of my interests.

On a different note, several of the aforementioned artists and performances have deep roots in circus and working at the interconnection of these two conditional disciplines. And here I find it important to mention “Cirque du Soleil”, the ultimate example of this intersection, although with a stronger accent towards the circus elements.

The exposure in those experiences brought me to the formation of a term: "visual theatrical poetry"- a combination of beautiful imagery, a nonlinear narrative created with the usage of set design, lighting, and supporting acting, that might not even be necessary. Bodies in that scenario often become a tool, a paintbrush, a color, a sense. Here I would like to quote Polunin again: “I was interested in the concept of “total theater’ - a spectacular space that itself represents the world of clowning, regardless of the presence of an actor. We are used to the fact that in clownery it’s just a couple of little props and nothing else, space doesn’t matter, such was the tradition, but I became interested in fully visually creating the world“. I was very much interested in the same matter, about which I’ll talk further.

A great example of visual scenic theatrical poetry would be the work by Greek director Dimitris Papaioannou, and in particular, his show “Transverse Orientation”, which I was happy enough to see at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Papaioannou’s approach could be summarized by his own words: “I work with colors and sensations, I try not to overwhelm my material with meanings... you may not find the reference, or you may find it. The enjoyment, however, is the same.”

I have realized that I have almost always been drawn to bringing absurdity and eccentricity into everyday life. I remember when in high school, while working on a small performance, that was dedicated to graduation, I came into the auditorium and all of a sudden proposed, haven't even thought about this as much, that what if in the middle of a generic scene,

when two classmates talk about what they're going to do after they graduate, two workers would just very loudly burst into the hall with a huge table and then look around, realize that they're in a wrong place, apologize and just leave. Everyone looked at me with a bit of bewilderment. I don't know what actually compelled me to this idea, I didn't even think much of its level of funniness, but I remember that I found it very interesting. In the Performance Composition class, we were introduced to the artist Dynasty Handbag, who uses a lot of expressionism and eccentricity in their performances. We were asked to create a theatrical response piece, and I found so much enjoyment in immersing myself in that state.

Thinking back, my interest in clowning started way earlier, when at the age of six I saw the one-man show of American clown Avner Eisenberg. This performance left a visible footprint in my mind. For years after I would still remember some skits, and scenes and try to reproduce some of them. I came back to it after I took a clowning class, and once again, while working on my project. Eisenberg turned out to be Lecoq's student and one of the major theoreticians of clowning. I have watched a great number of interviews with him, which became a great source of fuel for my artistic brain. Later on in the paper I'll come back to him.

Great opening, introduced to me by my advisor already on the path of workshopping my performance, was the German director Herbert Fritsch, and some rare excerpts from his shows, which would very graphically convey this idea of pushing the very ordinary situations far beyond themselves. Of course, I've been interested in the text-based theater of absurdity as well - Beckett, Ionesco, Apollinaire, and Harms, with whose texts I had a lot of pleasure working to create a movement-based performance for a directing class a couple of semesters ago.

One of the greatest clowns of all time George Carl, and his ability virtuosically out of one gesture to create a whole story, reaching the highest levels of so-called clown's flop taught me a whole lot.

When it began to appear that I am working on physical comedy, I started taking inspiration from the cinematic titans of physical comedy - Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and the Marx Brothers. As Polunin claims in one of the interviews, Chaplin once said that you only should do clowning when the tears are seen through it. This idea resonates with me a lot and will be further developed throughout the paper. Something that I was thinking about as well is the tradition to direct and act in a physical comedy simultaneously, which was manifested by Chaplin and Keaton and which I myself tried to do.

I've always been drawn to movement, as one of the preeminent ways of expressing yourself and manifesting emotions, some of which can't truly be conveyed with the usage of words. A lot of inspiration for me as an artist comes from my huge appreciation and love for contemporary dance. In particular I would like to mention expressionist pieces by Mats Ek (specifically "Place"), Ohad Naharin, Pina Bausch. The sharpness and eccentricity of the movement. I haven't really thought of it, but looking back now, I could clearly see the influence of these works that I've seen way before starting my project.

I would have to mention the great Marcel Marceau and the high art of pantomime. Using his body as a main and often only tool for storytelling, Marceau imitates the pressure of the objects, incredible sensitivity in the transmission of the tactile sensations, that become tangible. Marceau's importance of micro gesturing, often using hands as a tool and a portal that transforms reality, in many of their sketches it is they, that make metamorphoses with his face, and also convert into different objects, and he, as a character, is often in dialogue with them, either as

independent characters, or as part of the environment, which he creates. Now, this again has started a full dialogue with me, already after I started workshopping my ideas. A great example of Marceau's work, that I want to mention would very straightforwardly, but at the same time very indirectly talk about political and social is "Bip As A Soldier", where Marceau, using just his body and the sound design, of which silence is an essential part, achieves a concrete and highly dramatic narrative. Another important note is that nevertheless Marceau was certainly a virtuosic master, his work lacks the technical difficulty often exhibited by acrobatic clown artists, and he is in a way a prime example of the less is more approach. As if delivering the maximum result with minimal effort. In the process of creating my performance, I was constantly trying to catch this very line. Funnily enough, I would want to put this approach - maximum result with minimal effort, that also seems to be Lecoque's approach to movement in dialogue with Eisenberg, who said that he at some point started being interested in the opposite maximum effort leading to a minimum result. I found this "dialogue" fascinating.

One of my interests in the devised clowning theater technique became commonalities of interest in objects as a material for different clowns, for instance Polunin, Eisenberg, Sobelle... I as well had an unconscious tendency and interest in it, even before the senior project. In one of the performances for one of my classes I decided to bring the entire content of my closet, and the piece was basically just me interacting with them and exploring them. I was not hoping for a lot, but surprisingly got some great feedback and since then started thinking about what exactly that is. Eisenberg says: "I'm trying to discover a magic that's in the object... what might be interesting in the object, what you can do that you didn't expect." Sobell's extraordinary usage of the hat in "all wear bowlers", Polunin's usage of the hat, a suit, a coat rack, a suitcase, Thierrée's usage of the chair. It all revolves around the same principle: objects become

independent characters in their works. In Theirree's case I found fascinating as well the usage of people, that in a way become objects, by acquiring a particular function, instead of being represented as psychological characters. Meyerhold writes in his diaries, that he would devise his shows, by assembling furniture and objects and they would serve as an inspiration for him. I found it to be true for me too.

The other general inspirations would include some giants of physical theater such as DV8 and Complicité, the music comedian Victor Borge, that I adored since I was a teenager and probably consciously and subconsciously many-many more artists.

So?

Diving into the process of the creation of my piece, it was clear for me, what I want the stylistic of it to be, it was only left to figure out what the story or the stories are going to be. I had some very inconcrete images, associations and just words: adventure, chaos, dreams, loneliness, longing, wind, childhood, mystery. Aforementioned several times nostalgia in a way became one of the most powerful sources of inspiration for me, but I think I fully realized that only after the start of devising. Thinking a lot about political and social...thinking about war. A question that I asked myself was how to talk about serious matters through comedic, absurdist lenses. The challenge of finding the theatrical container, that would speak not as a pure comedy, if there is in general such a thing. Watching and reading about clowning I found fascinating how often the word 'magic' appears. And I always, as probably many of us, have dreamt of becoming a magician...

I never intended on creating a full clowning performance, a comedy, and wasn't happy when it would be labeled as such on the path of devising it. I was interested in using some of the techniques, principles and elements from this world. I started brainstorming and at first my

thinking process revolved around ideas, which would be more suited to something vaguely reminiscent of the parody genre: real situations that would be exaggerated to reach the level of absurdity. These were separate ideas that had some themes in commonalities - social connections, political agenda, but weren't necessarily connected. Most of them originally had several actors included. I started workshopping them, and wasn't really satisfied with the content. Slowly, I moved away from this, replacing real people with objects and images that served my wishes much better.

Respectively, the transmission of something deep and personal in that kind of stylistics seemed fully possible only with solo performance. The genre of parody wouldn't fit the descriptions above. One of the other artistic challenges I stumbled upon in the very beginning of the creative phase was the fact that almost whatever comes to my mind already exists in one form or another. At times that has frustrated me. Of course, I want to create original material. But as my advisor noted, when we let the idea through us, it becomes something own and personal, not like anything else, no matter if something similar has been done by a different artist. At the end of the day, we must not forget that we live in the era of the remix, the era of postmodernity.

I started workshopping something very inconcrete. For instance, coming into the studio and playing with my hands, as if they were objects. I've realized that hands can have and show their characters, their personalities and that hands are one of the most expressive parts of our body. That in part could have been the background of a pianist talking to me. That's how my work started on devising the first sequence of my piece. At first, I thought that the story was going to revolve around them, and the rest of my body would be hidden from the audience, but then it changed with the formation of a particular narrative and realization of the chemistry that can be born between hands and the rest of my body, primarily my head. In the process of trying

things out I would film myself, and write down the potential set of actions and their order, thereby forming a more particular narrative. Taking a physical theater class at a time, obviously, helped me a lot, by giving some practical tools, as well as great warm-ups, perfectly fit for that kind of work.

Quite often, music serves for me as an inspiration. On my headphones suddenly I heard the beautiful cinematic theme by Pierro Piccioni, and immediately started imagining this scene: the romantic date, my character tries to get to it, but he has an obstacle, it's the wind that blows him off and the date leaves before my character gets there. I thought to myself, what a simple, but beautiful idea. Devising it I've realized at some point that I don't want a human being to play the role of a date, which would create a very particular conventional association and also it shouldn't really be a date. It would make so much more sense for my character to fall in love with... a stuffed animal, giving much more freedom of connotations and opening up possibilities, plunging into a more surrealist world of dream and fantasy, that I really wanted to achieve. After that I thought, how subconsciously in part I might also have been driven by the notion that clowns in nature are asexual, pure beings.

This is how it all started to shape into a one-man show. I invited my friend to the studio to help me out with some technical things to be able to workshop the piece: to turn on the fan, when it needs to be turned on, and to help take the clothes off me, because that's what the fan will blow off. We showed the draft version of this scene in the senior project colloquium and what started as a practical help, in-studio stage hand, developed into a whole different character that I wasn't even planning on adding. It's interesting how many things become an artistic choice, being at first a practical necessity. It can visibly turn the content and give it a new dimension, as happened with the stage-hand character. People loved the fact, that there is this other power, that

exists in this world, but doesn't give a fuck, while my character has the huge struggle and an insane motivation to overcome all obstacles. It creates a sense of comedy and adds a new layer of context. And this is how a one-man show became in a way a two-man show. In the fall performance, the function of the character was limited to this one exact sequence, but in the second iteration of the piece, this character got much more expanded.

I knew exactly from almost the very beginning how the piece should end. It should end with the music coming out from these same hands, which were the main characters of the first sequence. The non-diegetic sound transforms into diegetic sound and creates an important shift for my character's ark and for the piece in total. My character would discover this music that has been a soundtrack for his action, but now within himself and fill the void with it. I created these several different scenes, and then I needed to build a connection between them. And that became one of the main challenges throughout the course of working on my senior project. On the one hand, I had the example of "Snow Show", in which there is barely a visible connection between sequences or etudes, as some might call them. What holds it all together is the fact that it all happens in the same world with the same characters, as I stated earlier. On the other hand, I have heard a lot of feedback that would relate to the importance of the connecting tissues in between the small pieces. The great discovery for me was the fact that the connecting tissue can be manifested in many different ways. I would love to inaccurately quote Geoff Sobelle from a personal conversation: "Everything that happens to your character has to leave a scar". Consequently, connection can be built by acting, and not necessarily by narrative.

For me, the main task was to create a world. What I especially love about the chosen stylistic of my performance is that everything is possible in a clown world. We had some really

engaging conversations with my advisor regarding the conceptual building of this world, whether it's being created by the character or conditionally for the character.

Going back to the first sequence, while working on it I have realized that it certainly needs music. From the very beginning, I knew that there are not going to be any words. I started trying it out with different pieces of music, and finally, I stumbled upon a particular performance of the C-minor Ground by Henry Purcell, the piece I deeply love and it immediately clicked. There is something about a lot of baroque music in general that seems to perfectly fit physical theater. Thinking about it, I established several possibilities as to why it might be the case. Baroque music usually has a very stable particular meter to it. Baroque pieces, of course, can be different, but in many cases despite being very emotional, they often don't convey a very particular and strong emotional message in comparison with the romantic music of the 19th century, for example. That leaves us a potential space to fill in with our narrative. Composers of the baroque era have produced a lot of miniatures with a very capacious form. Music of that period is often polyphonic, which gives us an existing dialogue within the music that can be translated into the action. A great example of that was the Ground. Music in physical comedy either supports the comedy, produces a separate context, or stays relatively neutral to allow the action to speak for itself. For the hands sequence, I chose the last one, for the bear sequence - in a way a combination of all three. In the end of the day, music became another valuable character in my piece.

Challenges and reflections on the process

I would like to mention some of the acting, creative and technical challenges that I faced throughout the progress of this piece. Perhaps, the main question for the first sequence was how to create an illusion that my hands indeed operate separately from the rest of my body. How to

show the lack of control and at the same time be convincing. The task for the second sequence was how to act as if I would be blown by the wind and imitate the pressure that is being put onto me by strong air movement. To make a choice, whether my acting is intentionally grotesque and parodic or realistic.

I ended up combining both approaches. This process included taking into consideration feedback, as well as some practical outdoor research, that included always finding a chance to stay in the actual wind and experience it, try to remember how it feels in the body and reproduce it, asking people to pull me back with ropes, which ended up becoming another element of the performance itself. This all puts me in dialogue and in recall with one of the quotes I mentioned earlier, - a minimum effort with maximum result. In the beginning, I was putting a lot of unnecessary pressure on my muscles to create this tension, but I have slowly realized that I don't necessarily need to do that, because it doesn't actually add that much to the effect, but it adds a lot of physical exhaustion. Only in the very last stages of preparation I saw a video of Marcel Marceau fighting through the wind in the "Silent Movie", which is a great example of easiness in performance that successfully conveys the feeling.

Creating the effect of blowing several layers of the costume off became another technical challenge in preparation. At first, it was just me coming behind the wind and Andrew (the role of the stage-hand, written in a program as a "performer") pulling off the clothes. In the second semester, we were able to add straps and use tear away clothes. The challenge of creating the effect of the clothes flying off involved trying out different things, and failing many times till finding the working solution, which I won't disclose in this paper, although it is very visible in the actual performance.

It hasn't fully successfully happened, as I would imagine it. Took a little more scenical time than I ideally wanted it to. That in a way became one of the hardest practical elements in the performance. Physical theater requires precision. In order to work properly it needs to be in a way like a clock, a stable mechanism, but with flexibility and live breath of the performance.

In between the two performances, fall and spring, I faced some sort of an artistic crisis. I didn't know whether I should keep developing the piece, add something to it, cut something out, or create something totally new from scratch. I thought that I had reached a certain level in the development of this piece, that at the moment within the structure of the senior project and its limitations, I couldn't do much. I was partially wrong, but it took for me a while to get back in the studio after the break and start working on it again, since the excitement didn't come back straight away. I was thinking whether or not I should stay in LUMA theater or move to try to develop the piece outside. To share some of my reflections behind that, the one plus side of that I thought would be the absence of time limitation and that was quite tempting. The one minus side is the absence of the production support. Eventually I decided to go with LUMA, and one of the main reasons for that was my wish to experiment with multimedia elements, which would be easier and much more efficient to do in this space and the possibilities for lighting, that could serve my idea of poetry much more successfully.

Devising and revising the second sequence was an absolute pleasure and the flight of fantasy. Applying all of the ideas, cutting some out, putting things in order - that wasn't the easiest part, and required a lot of choices to be made and decisions to be committed to. Intentional craftiness is another interesting idea, that I was thinking about a lot, while devising the piece. How much should be seen from the wing, how crafty should it feel, how much of it as

a choice, how much of it as a necessity, and how do we transform practical necessity into an artistic necessity.

This thinking process came to a conclusion of a stagehand person fully coming onto the stage and visibly physically dragging me back, and by that expanding his character's function, while before he would only appear on stage to turn on and off the fan, and dragging would only happen semi-visibly from the backstage.

The process of development in between two iterations consisted of two elements: progression and revision. Progression implied moving from low tech to high tech, instead of having five lighting cues, having an unlimited amount of lighting cues. Expanding the world with the addition of new scenes, having more balloons and more fans, bigger fans. Instead of electronic piano, now it's baby grand. Expanding the scenical dimension, the world of the play and the character's cosmos by adding a live-feed element. Revision implied working on clarity and improvement in performance, dramaturgy narrative and in acting.

Another problem for me became the relative satisfaction with some of the results and consequently an inability to imagine a different outcome. It was the case with the lighting plot for the two sequences that migrated from fall to the spring performance. For a hot second I was internally resistant to changes, due mostly to inability to spend much more time on working on precision in lighting performance.

Another challenge is endurance. I voluntarily put myself into a position, where my character would have to move a lot and run. That, on some level, recalled my first-year experience when I took the practical class on endurance and durational performance art. Some of these practices might have stayed with me. This of course was not an example of such art, but the performance needed to be done several times in a row and required a constant tonus of the body.

Another big challenge, that I should point the attention to was multitasking: act and direct simultaneously, as well as being the designer. Technically that implied me recording everything during the rehearsals, looking back at it, revising, recording it again and so on. Then at some point it required me to invite other people to sit in on my rehearsals and ask for their feedback and observations. Fortunately, I allowed myself to start delegating by adding in the process a role of the project assistant. That whole described above system was especially heightened during tech due to the time constraints. After each run, I had to look at the footage, make notes and communicate them to the production team as fast as possible.

I would like to comment on the fact that the limitations both in the senior project guidelines and LUMA rules, although having a lot of upsides and learning capability, do not allow one to fully work in the stylistics of Feerie and visual scenic poetry. The Senior Project structure, especially from the production point of view, despite having versatility and openness to a lot of new material, still seemed to me more oriented towards the text-based performance, which doesn't necessarily require lots of props and a lot of multimedia. I myself had some predisposed assumptions, partially based on the experience with the fall performance and partially in observing the approach and the processes with other projects. It all made me more reluctant in asking some things, and I had to overcome myself, since my wishes were stronger than fears.

The approach to the working process from the production team from time to time seemed partially discouraging. Hearing phrases such as, "the less you care or less you need, the happier we are" isn't the approach, I personally believe, that leads to an artistically encouraging atmosphere. But, despite that, it was a pleasure working with the production team of the Fisher Center, and seeing my ideas convert into reality. Another matter is not having enough time to

work on a technical precision of the scenes that require an active participation of stage-crew. For example, the speed with which balloons should be dropped on stage, the angle in which they should be directed. The complex choreography, that included a lot of cues appeared to be a complicacy in implementation within this system even with such a professional team, like the one at the Fisher Center.

Having several multimedia elements that are only possible to be tried in the space and not having enough tech time, created another layer of preparation difficulties, and became a challenge that have manifested in the performances itself. Camera would fall, wouldn't focus properly, or would fully turn off... I would like to recall one of Eisenberg's interviews in which he talks about approach to these kinds of situations: "When something goes wrong, I think: "Oh, this is interesting, I wonder how I am gonna get out of it."" This became a huge interest for me during the performances, when that would happen. First of all, obviously, despite anything I would stay in character and that would allow me to go with it and usually successfully. The best feedback on that matter that I have heard is: "oh, I thought that's how it was planned". And if that's the case and that's how the audience interprets it, then in fact nothing went wrong and in a way, it was a gift.

After the dress rehearsal my advisor shared with me a very important note. He said that a very important thing for an actor, and especially the one who directs their own work, is a release. I have to stop worrying about the technical side of things and just exist as my character, fully immersing myself in it. This was precise advice that I tried my best to implement.

The other artistic/creative challenge that I faced was that at some point after the Fall performance I started over-intellectualizing the approach to creation, while originally the process

was driven mostly by intuition. At one moment it turned into an internal conflict, but was naturally resolved by making a decision to combine both of the approaches.

Finale

I would love to dedicate a chapter to the finale of the piece. The only significant cut I made from the Fall iteration was the scene with the tray and the tiny fan. Instead, the finale that I created for the second iteration became for me on the practical level a small manifestation of aforementioned visual poetry, and on the artistic level a tonal shift from the comedic element of the play to much more serious and intense. Still using the balloons, a symbol of something happy and celebratory, but in a very different context, that was provided by the sound design, lighting and action. A significant addition was a certain level of clarity in a couple of gestures, despite the whole final sequence being, perhaps, the most mysterious part of the whole piece. For example, there are two elements that have a very particular association. First - sounds of explosions in the background. And the very last gesture. Last both in terms of its appearance in a performance and in terms of its creation - the sound of a crying newborn. A very straightforward and strong association. A very last-minute decision that came to my head right before tech and gave me goosebumps. I understood that upon that decision is a shift of the entire piece. Should I include it and exclude the last phrase, or should I have both present? I was struggling with whether I want this shift to happen or not, whether I want to add this level of clarity or not, debating between one or the other, I came to the conclusion, that if I will do both in a particular order with beats in between, it won't actually derail the piece, but rather, add more ambiguity and would give a variety of options in interpretation. The fact that baby sound was the very last addition, that I decided to disclose to the audience member and in this paper (I might possibly regret that decision) made them very surprised, because it seemed to them a core part of the entire project,

that might even have been the first foundation for it, and that's exactly what I was talking before, and the reason I had a fear of adding it. In fact, having two versions of endings for the piece is a curious, but expected outcome of the two-sequence senior project structure. Both of them are in my opinion equally strong, but for sure carry different amounts of weight. Second iteration in my opinion appeared to be a much more ambiguous, visually convincing and artistically strong choice. Without the time limitations and other constraints, for a possible future development I see a way of bringing the elements of the first ending in and realizing a combination.

I found the inclusion of small theatrical gestures very appealing to my aesthetics and fitting the concept of theatrical poetry. The example of it would be the scene of my character putting the torn jacket on. The design work to make this jacket look the way it did took a disproportionately longer time and effort, considering that the audience isn't able to clearly see it, while it appears on stage in a darkness for only a minute. The significance of the gesture is not proportional to its duration and very clear noticeability. And that in a way leads me back to the aforementioned importance of micro gesturing in Marcel Marceau's art.

I find it worth mentioning my decision to get rid of the comedic bowing that I had in the Fall, due to the changes of the finale in order to not discount and devalue it, by giving a chance for a dramatic aftertaste.

A couple more thoughts on 'clowning'

Despite using some of the techniques and inspirations from clowning, I think my piece can hardly be fully put under the term, due to its lack of some essential elements of clowning, such as being fully aware of the audience and maintaining the visible and noticeable rapport with them and also might have lacked on the problem-solving element, at least in a straightforward way. As Eisenberg states: "clowning is problem-solving in unexpected ways". At the same time,

there are elements that are very present, some of which I mentioned above - such as 'le jeu', the conditional rule of being wordless, the character, the concept of childishness is very present through curiosity, naivety and sincerity. Someone from the audience asked me: "were you playing the baby, is your character a baby?"

Audience participation and engagement

With the absurdist, visually rich type of theater I decided to distinguish three types of perception of such art, based both on my perspective and on conversations with the audience. The first approach would be an intellectual one. The viewer examines each image closely, and finds associations, either based on general knowledge or on knowledge of culture and literature. They might find solutions to narratives by intellectualizing their meanings. The second approach is the emotional approach. The viewer empathizes with the lyrical hero, laughs, and allows themselves to fill with the colors, senses, and music. This is a very fitting quote by Daniele Finzi-Pasca, the creator of "Donka": "If someone really knows Chekhov well, he will understand that we are jumping from one of his stories to another, but this is not at all necessary to know, it is much more important to feel everything that happens." The Papaioannou thought, that I have used earlier in the text, that talks about trying to convey sensations, and him as a creator caring more about emotional engagement, than intellectual one would also fit that type of perception. And the third, of course, is a mix of both.

In my attempt to create a visual poetry element, besides taking the influence of text-based poetry just as a genre, but also reading a lot of the poetry from after-revolution Russian immigration, paintings, in particular by Marc Chagall, I was thinking a lot about classical instrumental music, and how it conveys strong feelings, without being didactic and particular,

since that's just simply impossible. I always loved the thought that the music speaks on a higher level, which words simply don't reach, and is able to convey much stronger and more delicate emotions than words will ever be. I was in a way inspired by that thought in an attempt to create an experience, full of imagery, sound, and action but without any words. The success of a 'clowning' performance depends a lot on the audience engagement.

Something that I found interesting in the performances itself, is how much they would change at least at its feeling from the performer's point of view, as well as from the audience point of view, depending on the audience's energetical engagement. The more people were present (in all of the meanings of this word), the more the audience tended to like a particular performance. I am not entirely sure, whether it's because my performance would improve based on the engagement, or because other people sitting in the next row reacting would increase one's own level of inner engagement, since we instinctively tend to read the room and adapt. Most likely a combination of both.

The audience is more prepared, willing and ready to laugh than to cry. I was striving to create an instant, when 'funny' would be coexisting with something mysterious and inherently not funny. The transition from "very funny" to "is it funny anymore?" was very fast, and one of the sources of my interest after the creation of the piece was the reaction of the audience to the final scenes of my play. Laughter in that section was never fully absent, it just became rare and short, as if it was rather a continuation of the default assumption of the setting that this is a comedy and it is funny and you have to laugh here. Was I able to create an atmosphere in which the viewer began to wonder if it was appropriate to laugh here and whether it was funny or not? Intentional confusion coming out, of course, primarily, from the dramaturgical necessity of a piece and the journey of a character would logically put the audience in that position. I became

interested in how it manifests into the reaction soundscape in the hall. Laughing through tears is, in my opinion, the best outcome of an artistic gesture in the world I was trying to build.

Being able to perform the spring iteration of the piece four times in a row, two of which were in the afternoon and two in the evening gave me food for thought and in retrospect the possibility of analysis on many levels in terms of differences of technical performance, audience participation, and so on. It has become an endurance experience and an artistic challenge to every time, no matter what, be professional and hold the performance on the same level of output. It, for sure, is a very useful experience for the future practice as an artist.

Generally, matinees seemed to have a much lower level of engagement. People might not be ready to inject art right after lunch. I think it has to be getting dark outside for the audience to fully be able to immerse themselves and not worry about many other things that need to be done on this day after the show, they need to be able to breathe out and let the magic bloom.

Working on the second iteration of the piece, revising it and developing truly gave me hope that this work can be developed much further: in duration, in professionalism, in expansion.

Some final thoughts

It's been a struggle for me to answer the question from the people who haven't seen it: "So, what's it about?". Mostly the struggle is coming from my personal wish of not putting descriptive words onto something that is intentionally wordless. Genre of absurdity certainly implies a lot of existentialism in its nature, and mine probably would not be an exception, but the rest I would leave for the audience to think about, if they really want to.

I would love to quote a couple of masters once again, since they already were able to put some of my thoughts into words, so I don't have to make up a completely new formulation. Polunin said: "Clashing the joyous and fantastic gives us an incredible balance and create such a

vision of the world that makes you shiver and gives you goosebumps.”, and Sobelle said: “I create surreal, poetic pieces that look for humanity where you least expect it and find grace where no one is looking.” These ideas and concepts seriously resonate in me. I myself want to state that creating performances like that are partially, perhaps, coming from my wish to realize dreams and fantasies and to be able to share them with others. And in this particular performance, I talk about some universal matters in hope (to be honest in certainty) that it will reach the audience and I do believe that theater can have a therapeutic effect, both for a performer and for the audience.

Goodbye?

I hope that in the future I will be able to greet the audience many more times with or without the question mark at the end of the sentence. Working on this project has been a great experience, I’m very grateful for it and I’m looking forward to coming back to it, while moving forward. It has taught me a lot, made me have so much fun, produced a lot of thoughts, and revealed something new about who I am in life and artistically.

I am certainly not saying goodbye, since I feel like there are so many thoughts that I haven’t yet expressed, so many ideas that I haven’t dug deeper into or that have not been fully introduced or developed. Well, that’s just the beginning. I’m excited about continuing my journey, and I’m not entirely sure where the future will take me. Full of wonder, determination and uncertainty, I’m finishing this paper with significantly stating: “Hello!”

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And much more, that has been seen, watched, listened and read intentionally or accidentally...

*All translations from Russian to English have been done by me.

Appendix

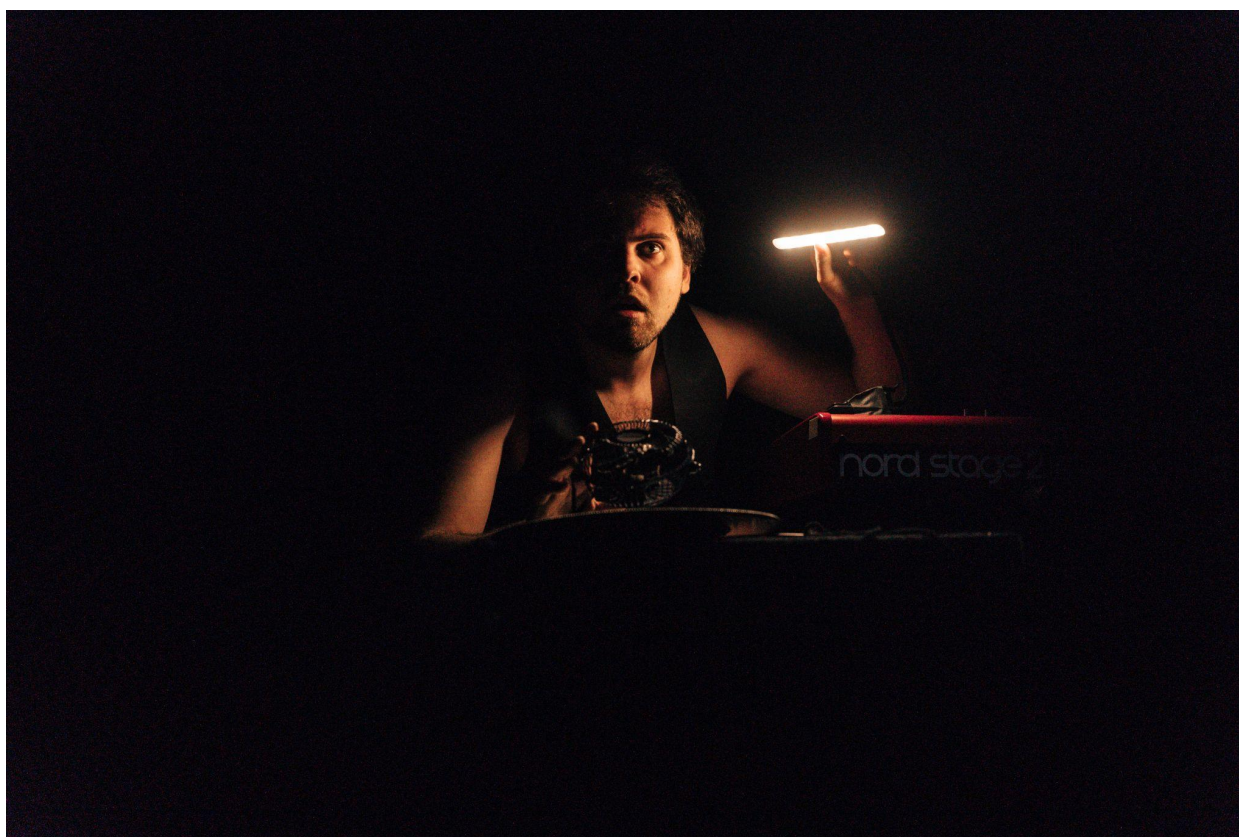
All photos made by Chris Kayden.

Fall iteration, November 2022:











Spring iteration, April 2023:









