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Joseph Samuel Wright

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Constellation Nightglow

Joseph Samuel Wright

As College Scholars Thesis Project

Mentored by Casey Sams
Spring 2008

Constellation Nightglow

A Theatrical Presentation Utilizing a Collaboration of Expressive Media

By Joseph Samuel Wright

Spring 2008

Mentor: Casey Sams

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Supplemental Materials:

Constellation Nightglow script

Sheet music for the show's song repertoire

DVD of the matinee performance on Sunday, January 27, 2008, also includes the video elements

I. The Mission

The challenge I undertook for my College Scholars thesis project was to combine the mediums I had been working with in school: writing, theatre, dance, singing, and cinema/ media, into a coherent project, ideally with an advocacy objective. I also decided from the beginning that the piece would be a one-man show that I would perform myself. Over the course of eleven months, I brainstormed and slowly pieced together an original theatre project incorporating video, song, dance, and drama and on January 25, 26, and 27 I produced a successful staging of the piece titled “Constellation Nightglow” in the Clarence Brown Lab Theatre at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

II. The Process

The process of creating Constellation Nightglow was the most challenging I have undertaken. For the first time, I was working from a structure and trying to find an idea that fit as opposed to being inspired with an idea and then working that idea into its own structure. Nonetheless I had to mold the idea so that it was organic to its multi-medium, one-man structure lest it look like the concept of the piece was forced or contrived. Because of this difficult onset, I spent an extended period in the first stage of creation, and morphed through myriad plots, concepts, social issues, characters, and project objectives all of which contributed to the final project but most of which are not directly present in the final draft of the piece.

I knew I wanted the project to be theatrical in nature, but could not decide how realistic or plot-based it should be. My ideas ranged from writing a narrative script and then inserting the songs, videos, and dances where they could best be fit to creating several pieces in each medium linked by a common theme that flowed together temporally but could also stand alone. In the end, however, I decided that the answer was to find a balance between letting a base script inform the use of mediums and letting the expressive potential of each medium inform the chart of said script. This was difficult to do efficiently, though-I had to rely on hypothetical videos to inform the script, for example, rather than spending 10 hours creating a two minute video I may decide I did not need.

The first thing I nailed into place was my character constellation and the central conflict. With John, Miss Stella, and Boi in place and having stationed the first two in video format and the latter on the stage proper, I had to go about determining the story I wanted to tell and how I could tell it without any real-time dialogue or other bodies on stage. Initially I wondered if Boi could be dating a character in the video world, but I quickly decided that Boi's love interest would be an off stage character and that the people in the videos would instead support that storyline through narratives of their own perspective on the situation. And as I thought, Miss Stella and John went from being narrators to observers with opinions and their own stories to tell.

Still, I did not want *Constellation Nightglow* to turn into *Ours 2: The Next Generation*; I wanted it to be more specific and not just three diverse perspectives talking about different sides of issues. For the sake of that specificity, the notion of a climax dealing with finding one's inner strength through a malaise of spiritual, romantic, social, and emotional problems gave way to an issue of simply trying to find one's way (without necessarily trying to create that moment of discovery) through a more specific conflict of misguided trust placed into glittering pyrite.

By cutting away the spiritual confusions and excess concerns and streamlining the script to the basic issues of Boi's bad relationship, Miss Stella's precious fabulousity, and John's loneliness all meeting at this bar, I was able to reconnect to one of the original ideas which had been lost: to show how these two superior people were witnessing this young, impressionable kid making terrible choices but not intervening in any way. This also made the failed relationship an event in the story instead of the whole point and alleviated my concern that the project would become a cliché of the same old heartbreak tale.

Still something was missing; I needed caulk between the tiles. So I created an ethereal character to oversee the events and guide the course of the play. I was wary of the triteness of a character who speaks for the audience or a character who is altogether controlling the action of the play, and instead tried to make something simpler—a character who was above the action of the play, who was a buffer between characters and between the show and the audience, but who had limited powers.

At this point there was no more time for script editing. I had to begin production duties. I began shooting the videos earlier, but most still needed to be shot—including Miss Stella and John—and all of the footage needed to be edited. I also needed to record accompaniment tracks for the finalized songs and learn them, cut the music for the major dance and refine the movements, buy props, set pieces, and costumes, and do all the other odds and ends involved in production. Because I had so much to do and exactly enough time to do it, I became very much in my producer mindset at this point and allowed no leeway for my artistry thoughts.

So the literal putting together of the pieces of the project was minimally creative. There was creativity when I had mapped it out, but now I was simply following that map pragmatically. This was not ideal, although it was premeditated and so how the pieces would fit had been well thought-out in advance, if there had been a producer to take care of practical matters I could have continued to live more in my right brain, tweaking and creating still. As it was, I tweaked what was necessary, but left alone what was not blaringly wrong.

The big example of a change made during the well into the “production” period was the revised ending of the piece. I was given the critique that the ending was editorializing, and it switched the light back on. The note was accurate and the problem needed to be fixed. Luckily by this point the production issues had mostly been handled and so I was able to reclaim authorial focus and carve a simpler, more effective ending—a change which benefited the piece immensely.

III. The Outcome

The produced version of Constellation Nightglow was a culmination of brainstorming before writing, molding and planning a piece with multiple mediums in the script writing phase, and fine-tuning the script in production, as with a workshop. The piece was solid, took advantage of dance, song, video, drama, and theatrics in a way that was cohesive and balanced (although not equal), and successively carried a socially-relevant theme. It was not without its shortcomings, and I do not consider it to be finished, but it was successful.

Speaking broadly, the piece was reasonable and realized as a one-man show, it incorporated its predetermined mediums without grotesque seams or a sense of superfluity, and it touched on an issue that is important to the author, local community, and a broader community without being preachy or unaffected. Those three things alone, I believe, made it a success.

Additionally, there were some lovely phrases and images in the script, an affective use of the mediums not only separately but also simultaneously, and a genuine response from the audience.

IV. Reflections

A. Creating Within Boundaries

Although it was very difficult, it was great practice for me to create for guidelines. Professionally speaking, the ability to write to given guidelines is invaluable and presumably how most freelance projects are structured. It is a much more taxing process of writing, involving more time, more stress, and more effort, but in the end I succeeded in weaving a theatre piece around my own preset guidelines of cast and concept without too overbearing a sense of contrivance or force. It even felt organic at times.

B Social ideas

In the same way that I knew I needed to create something that could be performed by one person and could support a collaboration of mediums, I knew I wanted to create a piece in the realm of advocacy art. Since socially-relevant theatre is my personal mission in the field, I wanted my thesis to reflect that value and highlight a social issue. Once again I did not want anything to be forced or contrived, though, which can be a challenge when setting upon a social issue.

Initially that was the problem; I wanted to make a statement about how to cope with trauma, etc and the manifesto was unavoidably impersonal and staunch. So I took the focus away from that goal and allowed the social aspect to be more general and underlying.

Instead of setting out to show how a person must pick himself or herself up after a difficulty, I decided to set something in the distressing world of lost, underage gay boys and let the natural conflicts of that unfortunate circumstance create the social commentary. This approach created a much subtler, more affective revelation.

C. How I used the mediums

In combining theatre, video, song, and dance I wanted to find a way optimize the potential of each medium separately and together while avoiding the clichés of obvious uses. I knew that theatre would be my grout and that the other elements would be layered over that, and I knew that I wanted to keep the seams between mediums to a minimum. I wanted the whole project to grow and develop collaboratively instead of simply affixing each element along a predestined timeline. I allowed the mediums to influence each other, seeing what pieces came out of each and letting them impact the through-line as a whole.

C i. The Script

The script was the groundwork and the anchor for this project. It provided a traditional, comfortable baseline for me to use in taking on the challenge of element-mixing.

The script is strong. I am proud of several of the images and the ideas embodied in the writing. I am also proud of the characters I have created. There are problems in the script, including an ending that had to be revised in production, but they are small and will be fixed with further work on the piece.

C ii. The Songs and Music

The songs were the easiest piece to establish in the world of the piece and the least fussed over. It is arguable that my use of the songs was not interesting as it was simply the usual musical theatre convention of soliloquy, but it was a choice I made to use the songs in the Rodgers and Hammerstein model that when you feel something so deeply saying it is not enough, you have to sing it. The songs were chosen for high emotional moments, trying to avoid songs that would be too recognizable or trite.

Gladly I was able to incorporate music in other ways as well, through the dance, in the club scene, and most importantly with the Tennessee Williams allusion ending when Boi hears the dance mix float down to him in his troubled state.

C iii. The Dancing

The dance pieces in this project were the weakest points. The first mini-phrase “Inside Out,” was a solid use of movement abstraction expressing the idea being discussed in the accompanying video and as such was conceptually successful, but was only passably executed and incorporated mediocre body shapes and use of space. The second, longer piece “Burgeoning Salome” was less successful from both a choreographic and performance standpoint.

Originally supposed to be an abstract expression of awakening sexuality and Boi's developed ownership of his sensual powers, the dance was forced to fall back on a more literal presentation of dancing in a club. This awareness of the piece's shortcomings contributed to a lack of commitment in its performance. The dance fell far short of its trajectory and as such was unable to utilize the potential of the movement medium.

C iv. The Videos

Obviously the videos served a practical purpose, allowing Miss Stella, John, and Compacion to narrate, explicate, and be present. In this first capacity of the media, Miss Stella and John were given framing that minimized their screen size and aspect ratio thus affording Compacion a larger appearance and the illusion of a higher plane. And because of the screen's placement and size, all three characters were placed on a higher level than Boi, symbolizing their seniority and advanced power position.

This alone, however, was convenient and not a full use of what the video medium could express. In “Rural Beginnings,” “Into the City,” “Backscratch,” and the clear leader clips during the “Burgeoning Salome” dance video was used to its specific style and strength. These videos provided a window into the happening of the world of the play, and a chance to show add visuals in a monologue play so rooted in telling and words. The videos evoked emotions and moods, and provided a secondary foundation to the script, allowing an overlap elements beyond the duality of one-camera and in-person performances. Video played over a movement phrase, video playing to illuminate the ideas of monologues, and videos added context to song. The media's support to the piece was secondary only to the script itself.

C iv a. Mis en Scene in the Videos

The videos of Constellation Nightglow marked my first attempt at narrative and realistic scene-setting. There was some accomplishment in this: John's kitchen setting and the bedroom set in “Backscratch” were effective, but the Mis en Scene in Miss Stella's setting, while involved, failed create the illusion of a backstage. It was a valiant effort, and it was believable, but it looked like a domicile.

C v. The Live Aspect

The live aspect was nothing like what was written originally. In working through what Boi could do on stage, the innovation interest became layering the on-stage performance with the video pieces in both compliment and contrast. For example, when Miss Stella and John described Boi's appearance on the gay scene, Boi is reading a book about gay life, and when John describes the hope and promise of the club and its loss, Boi is mooning over Steve's number, then when John talks about the injustice of never being a twink, Boi is below his image dealing with the repercussions of making those “irresponsible choices” of twinkdom.

C vi. Codependence

The use of multiple mediums and the wearing of multiple hats in this project gave rise to a dynamic of codependence. While the different expressions and multiple duties supported one another and made for an inevitable coherent style, they also courted laziness. Some elements were not given the attention they needed because the slack could be picked up by a different but simultaneous element. For example, the writing may have fallen back on the performance to ensure clarity or the performance may have skirted depth because of involvement in the initial writing. Also in the live performance the media performances could be relied on to hold more of the weight of interest or a mediocre video might be made with the assumption that something would be staged during it to add interest. This was a tempting trap that I should have avoided more.

Conversely, interdependence allowed for benefits and learning. Most immediately the production of the piece acted as a workshop for the script, including my ability to edit prose from a character perspective while learning and performing the lines. Also, I was able to enrich the characters in study as an actor by finding things beyond what I had written. And finally, when the different elements were working together there was great potential for mutual support, as in the case of the “Burgeoning Salome” dance when music, movement, acting, lighting, and video all came together to create a coherent, rich mood.

D. The Hats I Wore

It was a challenge to try to write, create videos, choreograph, produce, and perform. It seemed that there were not enough hours in the day, and even more so that I did not have the capacity to switch between those mind sets. It is a very different thought-process, body-investment, and mental situation to accomplish these different things, and this project has enriched my understanding of just how profound that difference is.

D i. Use of Self: The Performance

Surprisingly, I had great difficulty performing the character Boi. I could not get bodily integrated, and I was afraid to inhabit that character because I worried the audience would link me to the character. I wrote myself a character I had issues with, who embodied many of the traits and stigmas I eschew and worry that people will attribute to me. Great attempts were made to loose me of this, but I never was able to fully invest in Boi.

Beyond that, this piece highlighted a greater truth about my talents. Constellation Nightglow proved that I am a better film actor than stage actor and that I am a better writer/director/editor than performer.

D ii. My Creating Style

In this process I explored and recognized the way that I create and the positions I am most comfortable filling. I create like a quilter, stitching pieces together. I created my script by combining monologues and thoughts and of course videos, songs, and dances, moving them around and attaching and detaching each until I find the pattern I like. Editing is even my favorite stage of video creation. I am most comfortable behind the scenes, stitching pieces together, creating a quilt of a show.

D iii. Missing fellow collaborators

Collaborators were the thing I missed most in this process. My experience before Constellation Nightglow involves distributing creative responsibility among a group of people who come together to produce a play. In this case I was writer, sole performer, editor, etc and had only the input of a director and lighting designer. I structured the piece in this way because it was my thesis, but with so many facets the project suffered for want of more minds and more hands. The project was accomplished as it was, but if I attempt a similar endeavor in the future I will look for at least one specialized person overseeing each element of the piece.

V. The Next Step

Initially I was thinking only so far as opening night-I needed to create a performance piece to serve as a thesis, until the script began to materialize and I was prompted to contemplate what might become of the piece after its weekend run. I considered this and decided that the script has merit and deserves continued attention. I kept my charted course for this production, of course, but I began to let my mind wander to what might happen next.

I see this script expanding from here, with the cast opening to multiple people. The elements will stay, but will morph to varying degrees. Compacion will be placed on a high platform above everything and Miss Stella and John will be placed on lower platforms to either side. Steve may become an actual character, and other characters may develop. The songs will probably drift to the pop genre. The videos will remain a window to illuminate what is being described on stage, taking a cue from "Backscratch." And the dancing will benefit by composition and performance from someone more skilled than I.