

Claire F. Martin

2018-2019 'Travel and Research Award' Winner

Report

In the spring of 2019, the Royal Holloway awarded me a Travel and Research Award that enabled me to undertake a dramaturgical ethnography in New York City. The goal of my project was to interrogate the artistic implications of international theater-making. More specifically, I wanted to determine the potential creative consequences of rehearsing an English language production on one side of the Atlantic (i.e. London, U.K.) and opening it on the other (NYC, U.S.).

The genesis of this project lies in a remarkable opportunity that arose out of my postgraduate course at the Royal Holloway. In July 2018, I had the privilege of studying under esteemed British director, Katie Mitchell, as part of RHUL's Master's in Theatre Directing. Over the course of three weeks, Katie instructed the members of my M.A. cohort in the nuances of her artistic methodology, the fundamentals of which can be found in her director's manual: *The Director's Craft* (Routledge, 2009).

At the conclusion of our summer intensive, Katie invited me to serve as Assistant Director under her longtime associate, director Lily McLeish, on a production she was sending to New York in the spring. The play, a fast and loose adaptation of Euripides by classicist Anne Carson, titled, *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy*, was to be the debut theater production in the brand-new Hudson Yards arts complex, the Shed. Due to her ethical opposition to air travel, Katie would not be traveling to America with *Norma Jeane*, and Lily's schedule prohibited her from staying in the United States beyond opening night. My job, as Katie explained it, was to learn the precise ins and outs of Lily's role as Associate Director, with the endgame of stepping into her shoes for the six-week run. As Katie's and Lily's artistic representative in New York, I would attend nightly performances and curate directorial notes for the two performers: British actor, Ben Whishaw, and American opera singer, Renée Fleming.

With Katie's blessing, the Royal Holloway's permission to leave campus and complete my M.A. dissertation by distance, and seven months of rehearsals stretched out ahead of me, I decided to parlay this professional credit into an intellectual exercise. Assisted by my course tutor, Dr. Bryce Lease, I formulated an ethnographic study of the collaborative process by which *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy* was to migrate from London to New York. Critically, as the third artist in a three-artist directing relay, I wanted to interrogate the creative implications of such a unique theatrical surrogacy. Transferring a complete, mounted theater production overseas is one thing; uprooting a production at the critical juncture of tech week to open it in another country, under the stewardship of an associate director, is quite another. That *Norma Jeane's* entire creative team was British (apart from me) and its entire production team American—to say nothing of the fact that the five-hundred-million-dollar Shed was drastically behind its construction schedule—only confirmed my suspicion that there would be no shortage of data to collect and analyze over the course of the production.

Rehearsals began in the Jerwood Space in London October 2018, and I began taking notes. Katie Mitchell's habit of making piercing observations about human nature in the course of ordinary

conversation, paired with her tendency to spontaneously designate long-form tasks, had long ago taught me and my fellow cohort members never to be without a pen and paper in her presence. The added imperatives of documenting Lily's complex duties as Associate Director and transcribing every ethnographically rich detail I could capture in real time meant that, between the months of October and March [2019], I filled up three entire notebooks with data (and also, incidentally, gave myself carpal tunnel).

My primary ethnographic takeaway from Phase One of the *Norma Jeane* process was simple: in all things, Katie minimized risk. Whether she was devising budgeting spectrums for her creative designers to account for possible siphoning; scheduling an extra recording session for Ben [Whishaw] to ensure that he would be able to practice his forty-page monologue from home; or recruiting a loyal-but-unqualified postgraduate student with wide eyes and a valid U.S. passport to be her eyes and ears in New York, Katie did absolutely everything in her power to safeguard her work against potential upheaval or external chaos. Looking back, I am convinced that this is the only reason *Norma Jeane* went the distance, as it were. By the time Katie dispatched the show and the creative team in mid-March, she had designed a near-impermeable architecture for Lily to build upon.

Armed with six months of artistic contribution in the London rehearsal room, a collaborative spirit, and a unique ability to model Katie's leadership (right down to her precise vernacular) Lily she successfully steered *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy* through two weeks of tech, dress rehearsals, and preview performances, spite of a slew of unforeseen complications. These obstacles included, but were not limited to, an unfinished performance venue, a voracious media, and—strikingly—a seismic cultural disconnect between the British mode of intuiting rehearsal schedules and the dogmatic scheduling dictates of American theater unions.

Ethnographically speaking, the greatest breakthrough I made during our two-week tech stint was my realization that imitation is the highest form of continuity. Lily's mode of working, from the moment we landed in NYC, was to emulate Katie's calm, focused ethos, her steely gravitas, in every artistic conversation, even while the chaos raged all around us. The bonds of trust between Lily and Ben, forged over the course of our half-year in London, gave rise to a kind of artistic fellowship by which they joined forces to construct and stabilize the walls and roof of Katie's blueprints. As they collaborated, the distinction between "actor," "director," and "dramaturg" blurred, and I saw a tiny, brilliantly efficient creative democracy emerge.

In this way, my ethnography served a dual purpose: it indicated the artistic and behavioral practices of a directing pedagogy by which new theater might survive international transplantation, but—in a much more insular, immediate way—it provided me, as Lily's successor, with an empirically tested map of the language and behaviors I would need to imitate in order to keep the production of *Norma Jeane* on an even keel throughout its six-week performance run. Never before had I appreciated the scope of the potential artistic value in bisecting practice with scholarship. Thanks to the aid of the Royal Holloway, I was able to grab hold of this once-in-a-lifetime experience and learn the contours of my directing craft in a whole new light.

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