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Blending Hierarchy and Empathy: How Trust Shaped a Cross-Cultural Leadership Journey

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Publication Date

2025

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Blending Hierarchy and Empathy:
How Trust Shaped a Cross-Cultural Leadership Journey

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Stage Management)

by

Huai Hsuan Huang

Committee in charge:

Professor Lisa Porter, Co-Chair
Professor Lora Powell, Co-Chair
Professor Aysan Karagasli Celik
Professor Kuiyi Shen

2025

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The Thesis of Huai Hsuan Huang is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego

2025

DEDICATION

To my parents and grandparents, for your unwavering support that allowed me to pursue what I love without worries.

To the all my senpai, douki and kouhai at Takarazuka Stage, for your education, the opportunities you gave me, and for shaping me into a stage manager.

To Mu shan and Jo shan, for flying around the world with me and being my strongest mental support. I could not have done this without you.

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LIST OF SUPPLEMENTAL FILES

File 1. Huang Calling Script pp. 3-8 (Huang Calling Script pp3-8.pdf)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you, Lisa Porter, for your patience, guidance, and teaching. Thank you, Lora Powell, for your encouragement and support. Thank you to all the instructors and production staff who have taught me along the way.

Thank you, Ludmila de Brito, for directing this play and for being my best partner throughout the process.

Thank you to all my fellow MFA in Theatre and Dance for an incredible time in grad school, and to Harper Justus and Gabi D'Amico for all the late-night chats we shared.

Thank you to my Taiwanese friends, for always reminding me who I am.

Thank you, Alina Novotny, Katie Davis, and Lily Fitzsimmons, for growing together with me.

Thank you to my stage management team—Katie Davis, Juhi Sabharwal, Meera David, and Rosemary Montoya—as well as the entire cast, creative team, and production team. I could not have done this without you.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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by

Huai Hsuan Huang

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Stage Management)

University of California San Diego, 2025

Professor Lisa Porter, Co-Chair

Professor Lora Powell, Co-Chair

“Who you are is how you lead.” — Dare to Lead, Brené Brown

My stage management journey began at Takarazua Stage Company in Japan. Takarazua employs a strict, hierarchical system where responsibilities are clearly defined, and production needs take precedence over everything and everyone else. In that environment, I learned to value directness and honesty, as feedback was given bluntly, focusing solely on achieving the best results as efficiently as possible. This approach became an intrinsic part of my identity.

When I started my graduate studies at UC San Diego, I encountered a leadership model centered on empathy and individuality, where company members had diverse working styles that felt unfamiliar to me. I feared my previous style would be too harsh for some people and ineffective outside its original cultural context. At the same time, abandoning the structural working method entirely to adopt a new approach felt like erasing a part of myself.-

During *The Rogues' Trial*, a production with thirty cast members, I faced numerous challenges, including scheduling conflicts and the sudden illness of a lead actor, requiring three understudies to step in at the last minute. Feeling overwhelmed and unsure how to proceed, I turned to my core values of directness and honesty. I openly shared my struggles with the company and asked for their support. The response was remarkable. The company members rallied behind the process, offering me their full support. Even when I had to use a firm voice under pressure, they understood my intent rather than perceiving me as too harsh. Setting clear expectations with honesty, vulnerability, and transparency became the bridge to trust. By fostering trust through open communication and feedback, I discovered a way to serve both the process and the people.

Through my journey, I have learned that leadership is not about choosing one approach over the other. It is about intentionally creating my leadership style. The discipline and efficiency I developed in the hierarchical system remain valuable, but those qualities are most effective when paired with trust, openness, and adaptability. I have shaped a leadership style that honors my past while allowing me to continue

evolving with new experiences. Trust became the bridge connecting these two worlds, allowing me to lead with clarity and compassion.