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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Framing the Initial Design Meeting on Three Questions

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

in

Theatre and Dance (Design)

by

Matthew Herman

Committee in charge:

Professor Robert Brill, Chair
Professor Judith Dolan
Professor Alan Burrett

2018

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The Thesis of Matthew Herman is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2018

DEDICATION

To all my friends and family.
To the designers whose worlds inspired me to design my own.

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File 2. 100 Giving Way

File 3. What of the Night?

File 4. Othello

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Framing the Initial Design Meeting on Three Questions

by

Matthew Herman

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Design)

University of California, San Diego, 2018

Professor Robert Brill, Chair

The initial conversation between a director and a designer is the foundation upon which an eventual world will be built. While the path of that the design process might shift wildly from one idea to the next, the foundation built in that initial meeting can act as guiding force towards a clear final goal. The system I've developed to help establish a foundation are to ask the following three questions:

1. When the audience arrives into the theatre, what expectations do we want to build?
2. During the show, what moment is the emotional core of our story?
3. As the audience travels home, what discussions do you want them to have?

Notice that each of these questions do not pertain to any design area specifically, nor do they even answer anything directly about the design. The goal of asking the larger questions in this

initial meeting is to establish a common language between the director and the rest of the team separated from any design field's specific way of communicating. This then allows the team to think about the problems that arise without having to worry about separate design goals.

Questions one - “When the audience arrives into the theatre, what expectations do we want to build?” - explores the idea of world building. What is being communicated to the audience before the text begins? How does this space feel similar or separate from our own world? Are there any pre-established ideas about the show that this production might want to push back against and how do we prepare the audience for that discussion?

Question two - “During the show, what moment is the emotional core of our story?” - puts emphasis on emotion versus plot points. This helps design break away from attempting to fulfill the requirements of the text and instead makes the process about trying to maximize the key emotional moments in the show.

Question three - “As the audience travels home, what discussions do you want them to have?” - turns the discussion now towards the intellectual goal trying to be achieved by the show. Every good show should have a goal whether that be encouraging heated debate over hot button issues or to give the audience the opportunity to experience joy in the company of others in a dark theatre. By now, the stylistic and emotional goals of the show have been established by the first two questions, so the conversation around the intellectual goals of the production can be framed around audience experience instead of personal desires.

In many cases, the questions can't be fully answered from the first meeting, but by centering the developmental process around them, a clear framework for the shows development has been created and helps continue to place the design process on a solid foundation.