

Literature Review

Before I could begin making the project itself I had to conduct extensive research in two major areas: the American university and devised theatre. While I could not possibly review all available research in either of these fields with the time I had, I was able to cover enough ground to gain a clear understanding of the current situation within each of these arenas. I was also able to use the information I gained to make decisions on what our devised piece should be about and how we should make it. For the American university, I focused on the major issues and concepts surrounding the undergraduate liberal arts institution, particularly those present in its relationship to the public. For devising I focused on companies and techniques related to our process and product which were: Gob Squad, The Tectonic Theatre, Viewpoints, and Forced Entertainment.

Literature on the American university exists in abundance. Despite the substantial number of sources available, they were still somewhat limited in that most sources are written by those working within the system. The opinion of both members of the university and government officials are highly represented. However, there are very few discussions led by those on the outside, making it difficult to get a clear picture of what effect the university is actually having because it is primarily those who have been impacted by it who are granted a voice on the subject. Within this relatively homogenous pool of authors there is much contradictory evidence and starkly oppositional perspectives throughout, which does allow for complex thought on multiple concepts.

An example of this helpful contradiction can be found with Jerome Karabel, the author of “Open Admissions: Towards Democracy or Meritocracy?,” who presented overwhelming findings that students learn very little at college, and then proceeded to state that it is evident that attending a university still has a positive impact on the individual, facilitating “the growth of autonomy and intellectualism whereas early employment and marriage seem to retard and

possibly even suppress development of these traits” (Karabel 83). However, the majority my sources argued that the primary role of education in our society today has nothing to do with the development of its students, it is that of a gatekeeper to the middle class, America’s new frontier.

Many of the scholars [Karabel, Liu, Young, Nahai, Meroe, Alvarado] that I researched pointed to the meritocracy as the most important aspect of the university. The ‘meritocracy’ is a concept coined in the satirical and dystopic book by Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. It is a social system in which those who have the most merit are given the most rewards and those who have the least merit are given the least rewards, and “is both a procedure for distributing scarce educational and occupational resources and for determining how the work of society shall get accomplished in an intricate, still largely industrial world” (Riesman 217). Universities actively participate in this system, choosing what merit is, who has merit, and then providing merit in the form of credentials. Patricia Cross, the author of “New Learners” contested that, although this is clearly not an equal system, it is the only option because the alternative would involve lowering standards which would jeopardize the quality of the university as a whole. However, most of my sources that discussed meritocracy focused on the fact that, when looking at who is accepted into colleges, we find that this system strongly favors the wealthy and therefore cannot be declared purely meritocratic.

While there are many indicators to show that the system favors the wealthy, the clearest example, and therefore the one that many of my sources presented, was the use of SAT scores to define merit. These scholars showed that SAT scores have nearly no correlation to achievement in college. As a consequence of the manner in which the SAT is written and the test-prep industry, statistics show that “the SAT is actually more reliable as a ‘wealth test’” (Guinier 20). Towards the tail end of my research I arrived at the realization that universities are actually

shifting away from their reliance on the SAT. However, new sources quickly manifested themselves to reassert the claim that the system favors the wealthy, such as a New York Times article claiming that “at 38 colleges in America, including five in the Ivy League... more students came from the top 1 percent of the income scale than from the entire bottom 60 percent” (“Some Colleges”). Regardless of which statistics sources provided, all pointed to there being major benefits for the rich and obstacles for the poor in pursuing higher education.

Despite the difficult class barriers that exist within the university system, scholars universally regard education to be the primary way for individuals to move up the economic ladder. However, the growth of the university has inadvertently placed an additional barrier between the dreamer and the dream, that of accreditation. When a college degree became a given for any white collar job a large amount of the population was cut off from pursuing these careers. While accessibility to higher education has widened because of multiple factors including an increased number of local community colleges, with such a high percentage of the American population attending college, scholars such as Jerome Karabel predict that the “hierarchical system of higher education may merely change the basis of social selection from whether one attended college to where one attended college” (Karabel 89). So, in order to gain access to the most opportunities later in life, students are attempting to go to the highest ranked colleges now, which also happen to be the most expensive. Therefore, universities today are also inadvertently taking on the role of burying people under debt in exchange for a degree. No scholars that I encountered attempted to argue that America doesn't have a major and increasing problem with student debt.

When the primary reason for attending college is obtaining a degree, the degree becomes a commodity and the university becomes a business, often compelled to focus on the bottom line by social expectations and a lack of government financial support. The major difference

between big business and universities being that “what money is to Wall Street... status is to the academy” (Schrecker 156). I came across a large number of sources that discussed how the typical university was now operating like a business, however I only read *The Lost Soul of Higher Education* by Ellen Schrecker because this topic was more related to the internal structure of the university than the impact of the university on society.

Regardless of the many issues that my research showed me the university faces, a primary point that some of my sources [*Higher Education in America*, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, “Democracy, Meritocracy and the Uses of Education,” “The American Scholar”] pointed towards was how integral an educated public is to a functioning democracy. Within a democracy, education must act as a promoter of equality, a critic, a servant, and a leader; “not merely ... meet[ing] the demands of the present but... alter[ing] those demands if necessary” (Bok 6). Scholars also pointed towards the fact that higher education humanizes students in the same way that all education is “supposed to be humanistic and humanizing, divorced from occupational requirements, so that students would have leisure and space to think, experience and criticize” (Hitchcock 93). This development of the human through the university became the primary topic of interest for my ensemble. Specifically, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “The American Scholar” became a major reference point for us and we even pulled excerpts from it for the performance itself. Overall, my research on the university informed me on each of the major issues facing the undergraduate liberal arts institution, opened me up to multiple perspectives on these issues, and then allowed me to specify what elements are relevant to our piece.

When it comes to devised theatre, there is a seemingly endless amount of literature to study. Since devising can be described simply as the process of taking the hierarchy that theatre is generally made within and tipping it on its side so that everyone is creating equally, there are

huge number of methods that fall into the “devising” category. Therefore, I did not attempt to research all of devised theatre. Instead I only looked at literature that was directly relevant to the creation of our piece.

School was inspired by Gob Squad's *Work*, a site-specific performance that took place from 9AM - 5PM, Monday - Friday in an office building. I had learned about Gob Squad's *Work* when researching their company's history in my experimental theatre class. However I still didn't fully understand by what methods and towards which means Gob Squad was creating. Therefore, it was important to research Gob Squad and understand their style of ‘hyper reality’. Most sources focused on the history of Gob Squad, while what was most useful for our comprehension of the company were those sources that discussed the theory behind their work. Because of this, one of the only articles that dug into their theory, “Reality Enchanted, Contact Mediated: a Story of Gob Squad,” became our main source text on this company. In this article, Nina Tecklenburg defines their approach in relation to the history of experimental theatre by stating: “if the artistic enterprise of the *discovery of the real* that began with Dada and Artaud and moved on to Brecht, Cage, the Living Theatre, Boal, and environmental theatre culminates in Kaprow's demand for art as ‘doing life,’ Gob Squad's approach might be described as *over-doing life*” (Tecklenburg 9). Gob Squad expands our view on reality by adding an artificial layer. These hyperrealistic effects reveal “‘reality’ to be charged with more than what is at first evident” (Tecklenburg 10). This is how one can present a full work day, or a full school day, as a performance piece and have it be engaging to an audience – by pushing these typical experiences to the edge of reality.

Early on I decided that we would devise using Tectonic Theatre's Moments and Paper Walls and so research was necessary on this company and their process. While the step-by-step

guide on Moment work that Tectonic Theatre is promising to publish in 2018 isn't out yet, this didn't stop us from using this method because Tectonic Theatre intends it to be flexible and adaptable. I ended up getting my information on the Tectonic Theatre from the article "Moisés Kaufman: Copulation of Form and Content" by Rick Brown, from an interview between Lisa S Brenner and Moises Kaufman, and from the Tectonic Theatre's website and informational videos. From these sources I learned that Moments are created by individuals outside of rehearsal, and then presented to the rest of the ensemble. They can be "as simple as a single gesture or breath or as complex as an entire scene complete with multiple characters, scenic pieces, lights, props and sound" (Brown 51). They are presented using the format 'I begin... I end' which establishes clarity for the audience and "helps the creator of the Moment stay aware of dramatic time" (Brown 57). Moment work comes from a structuralist perspective of theatre and is a method of writing performance using all of the 'elements of the stage' rather than just text. For the Tectonic Theatre Project, 'elements of the stage' can be anything from costumes and lights to the element of surprise and the element of theatrical tension. Calling these things the 'elements of that stage' is simply a means of labeling them so that one can "learn how theatre speaks, both dramatically and theatrically" (3 Kaufman). The characteristic that keeps makes one Moment a singular, defined building block, despite varying lengths and elements of the stage being utilized, is that it is exploring a single concept. If a performance is a building, Moments are the building blocks.

'Paper Walls' refers to the practice of recording all of our work and ideas on butcher paper so that everyone in the company keeps track of our progress and our collective thought process. It is a concept that I first encountered when interning for the Portland Experimental Theatre Ensemble (PETE). This ensemble would write every idea generated up on huge sheets of

butcher paper and then tape them up at each rehearsal so that they always had a collective thought map to refer back to in moments of confusion. It was only when reading about Tectonic's method that I heard the practice referred to as 'Paper Walls' and realized it was something that can expand past PETE to be utilized by any theatre process in need of a practical tool for collaboration.

As a part of the devising process, I led my ensemble through a Viewpoints based movement workshop. Viewpoints began as a form of collaborative choreography created by Mary Overlie. Together her, Anne Bogart, and Tina Landau adapted this technique into a method for devising theatre. Training begins with learning about the physical viewpoints of tempo, duration, kinesthetic response, repetition, shape, gesture, architecture, and spatial relationship. The ensemble member is taught to strengthen their understanding of each of these elements individually, and also collectively – working together and listening to each other. Viewpoints is more than a technique for training and creating, it is also a philosophy centered in extraordinary listening and honest reaction. While I already had some experience in Viewpoints, it was necessary to do some research into practical exercises and tips for using Viewpoints to train an ensemble and create new work. Luckily, there is a source for this called *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition* by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau. This source quickly summarized the theories behind Viewpoints and extensively describes a number of training exercises. It also lays out how one gets from producing content to making a full performance piece, identifying the elements of composition as the anchor, the question, and the structure. The anchor is a subject that can serve to lead to the question, and the structure “is the skeleton upon which the event hangs” (Bogart 154). I gained all that I felt was necessary on this subject from this single source in order to introduce my ensemble to the basics of Viewpoints.

The final company I researched was Forced Entertainment because we decided to make a durational performance and Forced Entertainment is one of the only ensembles that devises durational work and also actively publishes literature on their process and theory. Most of the papers on this company were written by the artistic director himself, Tim Etchells, who “has always been the first and most powerful interpreter of their own output” (Malzacher 12). The name of their company strongly figures in to their philosophy on theatre. Throughout the wide variety of work that they create, they “repeatedly [bring] light to the situation of the audience, strangely caught between their sense of responsibility, bearing witness, and voyeurism” (Malzacher 14-5). The company also consistently smudges the line between character and actor, telling the audience that they’re acting so often they start to believe that they aren’t. A primary reason behind their performance of durational works is to push performers to the point when they couldn’t possibly act anymore. Another reason for the exhaustive games that their durational work takes the form of is an exploration of the act of failure – they take on tasks that can never be completed and games that can never be won. Forced Entertainment devises from text, but not a script, it is text “from newspaper articles, film dialogues, fragments of letters or diaries” and text created through ensemble improvisations (Malzacher 16). The certainty that Forced Entertainment has of what they’re doing and why they’re doing it is evident throughout the many documents that Tim Etchells has recorded.

Altogether, these sources on the university and devised theatre gave us a depth of knowledge on the subjects at hand that forbid us from being shallow and a diversity of opinions that allowed us to keep our minds open. While I am certainly not claiming to have read all of the available research on these topics, I did read enough to build a solid foundation for creation.