The Yellow Boat

An Honors Thesis (THEAT 395)

by

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Abstract

Story telling is an essential part of every culture. The movies, plays, and books that we love become a distinct part of our lives. Often, we do not realize the copious amounts of work that go into telling a story. An analysis of a production of the play *The Yellow Boat*, by David Sarr, directed by myself, will show how knowledge from my content classes and outside research were used in order to tell an effective, coherent story. In this thesis, I will document the process from beginning to end. I will start with the development of a central concept and show how all the other elements of the production are built around it.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Michael Daehn for advising me through this project and throughout my entire time at Ball State. He was the one who first brought this story to my attention and has been there for me every step of the way. His faith in me has meant more than words can say.

I would like to thank the sensational staff of artists at Muncie Civic Theatre, especially Todd Sandman, the opportunity to work at Muncie Civic and David Sherrill for his great technical skills and even better sense of humor.

I would like to thank Louise Cracknell and Holly Brown, my right and left hands. This process would never have been possible without them.

Finally I would like to thank the eight young people who, when I asked them to take a leap of faith with this show, they not only leapt, they flew! It was an honor and a pleasure to be your director.
Author's Statement

This Honors Thesis is based on a production of The Yellow Boat that I directed in the spring of 2011 at the Muncie Civic Theatre. I was asked to consider directing this show with middle and high school students by my advisor, Michael Daehn. I was immediately on board and fell in love with this funny, beautiful and ultimately heartbreaking story.

This was my first time working with middle and high school students independently to produce a full-length production. As a theatre education major with the aspiration of one day being a high school theatre teacher, I was excited and nervous. This project required me to draw on both my pedagogical knowledge and my theatrical knowledge. I used every bit of experience and every resource and contact I could get my hands on. For the first time I knew what it was the have the responsibility of an entire show on my shoulders. This thesis will provide you with a window into this challenging, exhausting but ultimately amazingly enriching journey!
Developing a Concept

What is a concept?

In theatre the concept is the central idea or theme that the director chooses to build her show around. The concept must be supported by the text however, it is not the same as the story. For example the story of Romeo and Juliet can be described as follows: two teenagers from feuding families fall in love. But that is not the concept. A possible concept might be “love and passion make us impulsive”. A concept is an intellectual construct supported by the text. A single play can have an infinite number of concepts.

In order to develop my concept for The Yellow Boat, I read the script numerous times and brain stormed ideas before, during, and after reading. I considered the many themes that existed within the text and chose the one that spoke to me most personally.

These notes give you a look at my brainstorming process and how I ended up with my concept.

This is a story about...
Survival-what do we do to survive?
Imagination-making sense of reality
Disease-hemophilia/ HIV, living with it. What is it?
Public perception?
Death-explaining, making sense of it. Accepting it?
Spirit-enduring, what do we leave behind?
   Livening despite set backs
   Why don't we give up?
Acceptance-of a situation, of other people. Of HIV
Family-sticking together
   Taking care of one another, no matter what
   As a part of our identity
Friendship-what makes someone a good friend?
   Is friendship an obligation or a choice?
   Friends as part of our identity
Escape-how do we escape our world?
Children-everything is a game or a story
   We use stories to teach less on and explain
Things are black and white, good or bad, to children. But Ben sees his world in COLOR.

Ben’s stories and drawings are an escape as well as an explanation of his world.

**My Concept:** This is a story about how a boy discovers and explains his world as he searches for his identity.

This was my final concept that I chose to build my show around. I settled on this concept because I felt that coming of age was a universal theme that not only I, but also the kids I was working with, could identify with. This concept also incorporated many other themes within it. I was very interested in exploring how friends and family become a part of our identity as we grow up and how their importance increases and decreases as we grow and come in contact with the world.

**Backing Up A Concept**

After solidifying my concept I needed to flesh it out so that I could carry it through the entire show. I used information that I had learned in my developmental psychology classes at Teacher’s College.

According to psychologist Lev Vygotsky children develop cognitively based on their interactions with their social and cultural world. Children learn when they work with others and solve problems (Vygotsky, 1978, 1926/1997; Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992)

*The Yellow Boat* is Benjamin’s story. Therefore, as a director I need to know how the other characters are important mainly in the way that they affect Benjamin. Vygotsky’s ideas on social interactions got me to thinking about what each of the other characters help Benjamin to learn about himself and the world.

Joy, the child life therapist, helps Benjamin to make sense of the tests and operations that are going on around him. She bridges the communication gaps between the little boy and the doctors. Joy also helps Benjamin to talk to his parents and friends about what is going with him.

Eddy, Benjamin’s best friend, allows him to feel accepted. He is the first person we see Benjamin interacting with outside of his parents.
Howard Gardner suggested that there are eight different kinds of distinct intelligences that are independent. Kids are smart in different ways. The intelligence that I found was most relevant to The Yellow Boat is spatial intelligence. This intelligence focuses on the “skills used for spatial configurations such as those used by artists and architects” (Walters & Gardner, 1986).

The character of Benjamin is, without a doubt, spatially intelligent. He is constantly using his artistic skills, but he also explains things as if they are drawings. When describing a blood transfusion he says

“Red. Train! Color it in. Takes the factor way inside to my knee. Factor Eight! Looks like...bathtub plugs! The Red Train picks up speed climbs all the way to my knee. Then...all the bathtub plugs spill out, and that stops the bleeding!”

This information was helpful to me when I was talking to the boy who played Benjamin. I explained to him that Benjamin sees the world in colors and that different colors represent different things to him. Whenever something new or scary happens to him, Benjamin draws a picture and imagines it in terms of a piece of art in order to make it make sense to him.
Applying Content to Kids

In order to tell this story, I knew it was essential for my young actors to have an understanding of its content. The play deals with hemophilia and HIV/AIDS, which can be very sensitive topics especially for kids in middle school. To begin a conversation about these things we first needed to look at what exactly they were in a medical sense.

I used the following websites to make information sheets for my actors so that they would be able to understand and have a reference for hemophilia and HIV/AIDS.

http://www.childrenscolorado.org/wellness/info/kids/22251.aspx
http://kidshealth.org/kid/health_problems/infection/hiv.html

As a general rule, the director must be the person in the room that knows the story best. Therefore I did additional research about these topics, specifically hemophilia, in order to be able to answer questions from my actors, provide directions, and talk intelligently about the play.

Below are notes I took and questions/ideas they led to regarding the play.

Hemophilia

- Passed genetically from mother to child.
  - More often found in boys
- Can lead the mother feeling as though she has “failed” over indulging the child
- Father may blame the mother or feel that his son is not what a “son should be” feels ashamed of these feelings
- It is important to keep that child informed so that he can learn to keep himself safe.
  - At around age 8 he should start being able to take a part in managing his own care.
  - Impose reasonable restrictions slow development of a sense of independence.
- Sometimes the child will rebel and engage in risk taking behavior
• The child must also learn to deal with his emotions
• Activity often becomes associated with pain and treatment.
• Parents must take care of their emotions so that they can take care of the child.
• Formal education is important for proper development.
  o Emphasis on normal school with precautions.


Questions:
◊ How does a child not become afraid of the world?
◊ How do we find a balance between safety and independence?
◊ What is Mom like? Protective? Doting? Worried?
◊ Is Dad more playful and light hearted than Mom?
◊ How does this effect mom and dad's relationship with each other? Can we find moments where the relationship is strained?
◊ Are there moments where Mom has a sense of guilt?

The following two pages are handouts that I gave to my actors on the first day of rehearsal. They provide some basic, easy-to-understand, information about hemophilia and HIV/AIDS. They helped open up the room to discussions on these topics.
Benjamin is born with **Hemophilia**.

**Hemophilia** ➝ (hee-muh-fih-lee-uh) is a genetic disorder in which a person's blood does not clot properly. A person who has hemophilia has a tendency to bleed excessively.

**A Bit About Blood**
If your blood is clotting normally, your body naturally protects itself. Platelets, which are "sticky cells," go to where the bleeding occurs and cover the hole, plugging it up. This is the first step in the clotting process. When the platelets plug the hole, they release chemicals to ask for more help. Proteins and other factors come to help. Kids with hemophilia are missing these other factors.

**How is Hemophilia treated?**
Several scenes in the play show Benjamin at the hospital getting shots.

Most kids with hemophilia live long, healthy lives. Cuts and scrapes are not a big deal, but serious problems can occur with internal bleeding.

Internal bleeding ➝ bleeding that occurs within the body. It usually occurs inside tissue, organs, muscles, cavities and joints.

Kids with hemophilia need to get shots or transfusion of other people’s blood that contain the necessary clotting factor.

Factor VIII ➝ the factor that is missing from the blood that allows it to clot.

Benjamin gets shots of **Factor VIII**
HIV & AIDS

HIV ➔ Human Immunodeficiency Virus is a virus that damages the immune system. It attacks white blood cells known as T cells. Without T cells, your body cannot fight off germs or diseases.

Once HIV gets inside a T cell it begins to make copies of more and more infected T cells that spread out and damage the body.

AIDS ➔ Acquired Immunodeficiency Virus A person is diagnosed with AIDS when there is such a low number of T cells in his/her body that he/she begins to get serious infections.

How is HIV spread?
HIV is passed through direct contact of body fluids
- Sexual contact
- Sharing needles or syringes
- From a pregnant mother to her unborn child
- From a blood transfusion

How is HIV & AIDS treated?
There is no cure for HIV or AIDS, but there are many medicines that can help patients live longer. However, scientists are hard at work researching possible vaccines.

A little history:

At first, people in government and most citizens are not concerned about the disease.

1983—newspapers and TV start reporting about the disease

People believe that only homosexuals can get it. Gay workers are fired and people avoid gay communities because they are afraid of catching the disease.

The government is not investing any money in AIDS research because they are afraid that it will look like they are supporting homosexuality.

1985—a famous actor name Rock Hudson dies of AIDS and testing shows that EVERYONE is at risk. Government officials start to pay attention.

1990 the Ryan White Act is passed which provides money to cities affected by AIDS.

1996 Doctors find that certain drugs when used together, including a drug called AZT, can be really helpful in helping people live with AIDS.
Translating the Concept into a Design

Concept: This is a story about how a boy discovers and explains his world as he searches for his identity.

Taking this concept into account and pairing with Benjamin’s love of art, I developed the following statement concerning what I wanted the show to look like: We start with a blank piece of paper and by the end we have a piece of art with color.

Set

My set was made up of:

- 3 periaktoids- three sided walls that rotate on casters
- 5 judy blocks- basic blocks that can be easily moved by the actors and used in various different ways
- a small rake- inclined platform, about 3 ft wide and 5 ½ ft deep
- a chair
- 2 multicolored bins on each side of the stage used to hold props.
- 2 hanging bags (like those used in college dorm rooms to hold shoes) on either side of the stage to hold props.

I enlisted the help of a friend who had some experience painting to help. There were 3 sides to the periaktoids. The first side was white and used at the beginning of the show and then again when Benjamin is very sick and becomes depressed. The second side was painted as abstract scribbles and used for the majority of the show. The third side was painted as a rainbow road and used at the very end as Benjamin’s final drawing.

The next page shows pictures of our progression of painting the set. It also shows two scenes from the play: one where we use the white sides and the other when we use the scribbles.
Lighting

When discussing light we deal with the following terms:

**Hue**- the name of the color

**Saturation**- or vibrancy, the amount of hue in a mixture

**Value**- the “lightness” or “darkness” of the light. The higher the value, the paler the light.

*The Yellow Boat* consists of two worlds: The real world and Benjamin’s imaginary world. The real world had more realistic lighting. The set was meant to look like a child’s bedroom/playroom so for the most part the light should look like it’s the interior of a room. The second world, the world of his imagination, is meant to look like a child’s drawing. The colors should be vibrant and saturated. I wanted it to look like it is taking place outdoors, maybe in a playground.

The world should start out as being very plain, like a blank piece of paper. As Benjamin begins to grow and discover, the world beings to fill with color. In the middle of the play when Benjamin is sick in the hospital and depressed the lights should reflect a lack of color. When characters like Joy and Eddy enter into his life, they should bring colors and warmth in with them.

In order solidify what I wanted with the lights and also to get ideas, I did a lot of images searches online. The following pages show the images and notes I used to inspire my lighting design.
The following sketches show five key moments in the play and what I wanted them to look like in terms of lighting.
Sunlight through windows

Teaching light

Top light on color

Windows, light on furniture

Top side light, shapes on floor

Clamp light

Light on mosaic floor
Real world

- Windows
- Darker corners

Night light
Way it falls on child

Light being filtered
by colors

Evening colored light
Real World hospital

light from window
dull colors

Shadows
light from window
mood's lonely
empty
Imaginary World

7 shades of color from sunlight

Color choices
Texture
Top light
Sun light

Abstract spectrum
Silhouettes light coming from single source of the sun

beauty flower vs. blood
good vs. bad
Blood transfusion
- texture
- contaminating the white - red

Blood transfusion
- texture
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Works Cited


Final Product

The final product was three performances in April 2011 at the Muncie Civic Theatre. The following pages contain photographs from the show. Based on feedback from the audience it seemed like everyone really enjoyed the show. Many audience members left in tears because it was such a touching story.

The measure of our success for me was the experience that the kids had. Everyone had a very positive journey. I saw a huge amount of improvement in each of my actors, which, as a teacher, director and artist, is the best reward I could ask for!