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norway.today: An Exploration of Media, Technology, and the Search for Inner Truth

Connor Feeney

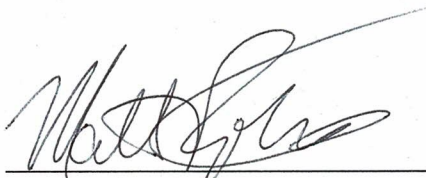
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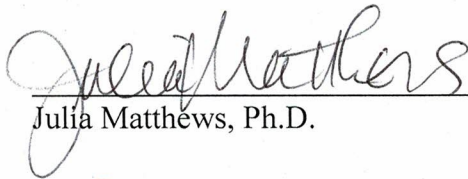
Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

College Honors

Departmental Distinction in Theatre



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norway.today: An Exploration of Media,
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How do we find our identity? Is it by the reception of our Facebook posts? Is it by how many likes our latest Instagram photo got? Is our identity our ever-changing Snapchat story? The search for self in a world filled with incredible advancements in technology is at the heart of the story for August and Julie in Igor Bauersima's *norway.today*. Not only are August and Julie searching for some inner truth, but they are also searching for a purposeful life. It is how Bauersima tries to answer these big questions why I was instantly drawn to *norway.today*.

I first read *norway.today* in Dr. Julia Matthews' Postmodern European Drama class in the spring semester of 2015. *norway.today* kicked off our semester because, one, it was written before most of the plays we were going to read, two, the way Bauersima dramatizes and ask questions about suicide, depression, self worth, and happiness in relation to 21st century technology is very much a contemporary concern among college students, and three, Bauersima asks directors to stage the impossible (a challenge that I would eagerly encounter myself less than a year later). Additionally, the way Bauersima incorporates video recording and projection was a new idea when the play was written in 2000. After reading the play for Dr. Matthews and discussing it in class, the play stuck with me. When it came time to submit a proposal for an opportunity to direct a show for the Domino Player's mainstage season later that semester, *norway.today* jumped to the top of my list for shows to propose to the theater faculty.

This reflective analysis is going to detail the process of directing *norway.today* for the Domino Players from early production meetings through rehearsals and performances. Additionally, I will be reflecting on the successes and

challenges of the process. I believe that the most successful way to convey this analysis is by dividing into three sections which will be pre-production, production, and post-production, which correlates to the timeline of my goals for this production.

PRE-PRODUCTION

Once the theater department announced the 2015-2016 season for the Domino Players, I found out that I would be sharing the February slot with fellow senior theater major Sarah Crake; she was chosen to direct Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*. The department felt that Sarah and I were both equally qualified to direct for the mainstage season, and I was very excited to get a chance to collaborate and share the theater and a set with my friend.

Over the summer Sarah, Jeffrey Lentz, Cocol Bernal, and I held design meetings where we would talk about what each of the plays need and how we can share a set. Jeff agreed to serve as Artistic Director for the project and as a mentor for Sarah and myself to help us throughout the process. Graciously, Cocol also agreed to serve as scenic and projection designer for both of our shows. That summer we discussed how a director needs to approach and prepare to direct a full-length show. We talked extensively about the intentions of Bauersima, what I loved about *norway.today*, and my initial interpretation of the text.

Building a production requires the production team to try to uncover what the playwright's intentions and desires were when they originally wrote the piece. Some playwrights give production teams a lot of explicit detail about the scenery, costumes, and characters, but this is definitely not the case for *norway.today*.

Bauersima gives very little details about his world. At the beginning of the play he only tells us, "The air resonates with 'I'll See You in Another World' by Nurse with Wound, and with silence. Whit noise. Enter Julie. She is wearing a T-shirt with the slogan *julie@home.shirt*" (3). Bauersima does not even explain that August and Julie are in a chat room, it is up to the production team to establish for the audience that we are in some kind of cyber world online chat room. After this scene, we see August and Julie again, but this time on a Norwegian fjord 2,000 feet above sea level. It is thrilling to work with a text that does not tell a production team exactly how to build a production because we can make all the choices and feel and even greater sense of ownership over the material, all while doing Bauersima's words justice.

Before we ended our summer design meetings, Jeff encouraged me to pick a moment in the play that all of the design elements (lights, costume, scenery, and projections) needed to work for. For me, the central moment of the play is when August and Julie are discussing what would happen if they had sex and then, according to Bauersima in a stage directing, "The images evoked by Julie slowly become real in front of our eyes. A kind of 'dialogue' begins to develop between scene and stage, the two seem to merge into each other" (Bauersima 44). This abstract idea of text, imagination, and scenery becoming one took me awhile to wrap my head around, but I knew that I had to make the design for this moment work to make sure the whole play could succeed.

Developing design concepts continues to be one of the greatest challenges for me as a director, but by thinking about where the "center of the maze" is for the design needs of a play is one of the greatest tools I learned from this process.

Whenever I was stuck on a problem, I knew that I could always go back to that scene in the tent to help me make decisions about other parts of *norway.today*.

The more plays I read, the easier I recognize when a play resonates with me, and I felt a strong resonance with *norway.today*. During my first reading I was intrigued by the idea that what we see on a camera is not the same as seeing something with our eyes. After witnessing the awe inspiring aurora borealis, Julie and August review their filmed version of the event and she says to August, "It looks like some kind of disturbance. Like something extraterrestrial" (Bauersima 35). This scene reminded me of when I was a child and tried to take a picture of the full moon at night, but it did not look the same as seeing it with my own eyes. It is this moment in *norway.today* that proves the necessity for video projection and this idea only continued to germinate and become more and integral to my interpretation of the text as we entered rehearsals.

It was over the summer that I realized that I wanted my production of *norway.today* to focus on technology's role in our lives. Even though the play was written in 2000, it feels ultra contemporary. Aside from the references to analog cameras, I easily imagined August being an avid Tumblr user and Julie disgusted with cell phone apps like Snapchat and Twitter. August and Julie even sound like people I know in my own life, and I knew that other Albright students would feel this way too. I was interested in exploring how social media and technology informed August's own sense of identity and why does Julie have such a strong reaction against social media, but wanted to film her final moments of life with a camera. I also wanted to explore what it means to be depressed and can someone

still choose to commit suicide if they are not depressed. My production of *norway.today* would attempt to find an answer to these questions, and it was with these goals that I left our summer meetings feeling excited and energized about *norway.today*. However, there would be a large challenge before starting rehearsals for *norway.today*.

In the fall of 2015 I was an Advanced Directing student at the National Theater Institute at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, CT. While at the National Theater Institute I had very limited internet access and was taking classes from 7:30 AM to 10:00 PM seven days a week, so finding time to talk to Jeff and Cocol about the production during the fall semester proved to be very challenging. However, the laboratory environment of the O'Neill helped me prepare for directing *norway.today* more than I could have ever imagined. I was directing scenes from different kinds of plays every week and taking master classes with the top professional directors in America and the UK. I learned so much about who I am as an artist and human being and what I bring to the table (both positive and negative baggage) that I know *norway.today* would have been the success it was without that conservatory training. However, it was challenging to have to cast my show via Skype and to only talk with Cocol once or twice, but once I got back to Albright in December we jumped right into it.

PRODUCTION

The day after I returned from the National Theater Institute Jeff, Cocol, Sarah, and I met again to finalize our visions for the productions. Over the course of a week we all met daily to play with the set model and experimenting with different

materials and discussing scenically and thematically how to connect *4.48 Psychosis* and *norway.today* under one design concept. We came to the realization that both plays are about fracturing and isolation. In *norway.today*, August and Julie feel a fissure between themselves and society because they view society as phony, and this fracture might be the root cause of their depression and the reason to commit suicide; they feel isolated from society. This idea of isolation fit perfectly with the *norway.today* being set on a Norwegian fjord. However, in *4.48 Psychosis*, the isolation and fracturing were internal. We decided that both plays needed a cliff, one inside the mind for *4.48 Psychosis*, and a literal cliff for *norway.today*.

After some experimentation in the model, we decided that all we really needed was three walls to build an apartment for *4.48 Psychosis* and a raked platform that would hang over the edge of the stage for *norway.today*. Once the rest of the production team approved of the design concept, I started to imagine all the possibilities of staging a two person play on a 16'X20' raked platform, and we started rehearsals with the actors.

While I was at the National Theater Institute I learned that I had the tendency to be too lenient on my actors, scared for some reason to constantly keep push them. For *norway.today*, a 100 minute, two person show with lots of monologues and speeches, I was determined not to let them slack on learning their lines and committing themselves to diving deep into the text. I would say I was mostly successful because both of my actors underestimated the amount of work, time, and effort it would take to pull off a quality production of *norway.today*, so I realized that I had to set an early off-book date and have memorization drills outside of

scheduled rehearsal time. I got the sense that my actors resented me for it, but after a lot of pressure they were able to memorize their lines early enough where we had time to play with the words and intentions. On the other hand, I did not spend enough time just sitting down at a table combing through the script analyzing why August and Julie were saying what they were saying and doing what they were doing.

We spent the first week of rehearsal sitting at a table all together reading and re-reading one scene at a time until we touched on all five in one week. We had a lot of great discussions about the nature of depression and even though Julie tells August that she is not depressed when they arrive at the fjord, is she just in denial? We also talked about technology's role in our own lives and do we feel that they isolate ourselves? We also provided a lot of background information and answered questions about August and Julie's background that fit our vision for the production.

Initially, I thought this was going to be the most successful use of our time and then once we touched each scene we were ready to start exploring the space and blocking. Unfortunately, I assumed that my actors were doing their script analysis homework on their own and finding the beats and rhythm of their interactions before coming to rehearsal. Because we did not assign specific actions verbs and intention behind each line together as a team, they did not quite know exactly why they were saying those specific lines and the flow of the scenes were never consistent. As a result of not having specific intentions for each line and section of the text, my actors were not able to memorize their lines easily.

About half way through the rehearsal process we all felt that we were struggling and hit a giant fjord-sized wall of frustration and complacency. As a director, I did not know how to help my actors, and as team we were worried about the production. Jeff was an enormous help with how to help my actors. We talked about how much script analysis I actually did with them and then told me that the answers always lie in the text; If there is problem or issue, always go back to the playwright's word and your initial vision of the production. I stopped all that we were doing that was not working in rehearsal and we brought the proverbial table back out to uncover what Bauersima wanted August and Julie to do.

My actors did not quite know what to do about this sudden change in gear, however, I assured them that this would help them memorize their lines and illuminate the blocking. Over the course of a week and half we did not worry about blocking or how their bodies moved in the space. We just focused on what they were saying to each other and why. We went through the entire play marking each change in intention and action. After only a day or two, the results were immediate and tremendous. With the background information that we already established and discussed, the memorization came quickly we were able to play with the text and intentions, making each pass through a scene more and more dynamic. In addition to discussing why they were saying those specific lines and what those lines were trying to accomplish, I also used a variety of "status" exercises to discover who had the power in each moment.

We did so much table work that it made the actors hungry to get back on their feet and experiment with how to physically execute the play. Looking back, if

there was one part of the rehearsal that I could change, it would have kept working at the table longer until we all established intentions behind all of August and Julie's lines. If we spent more time at the table my actors would have been desperate to get on their feet and play in the space, and they would have known exactly what they were saying. Once we established that baseline, the blocking of the play unraveled itself beautifully, something which posed a challenge earlier in the rehearsal process.

Once we knew who had the "power," who was in control, it made it very easy for me as a director to create stage pictures and to direct the actors in such a way that amplified what they were saying to each other. Before we went back into table work about half way through the rehearsal process, I did not want to give complicated blocking to my actors because they were still struggling with their lines. So, at the designer run through three weeks before the show opened the show looked very flat and boring.

I was giving the amazing gift of a diamond shaped playing space that jutted several feet into the audience and I did not use it at all. I accidentally created a proscenium show when my playing space was on a diagonal. August and Julie spent almost the entire play looking at each other and giving almost no face time to the audience. This closed the show off almost entirely from the audience and severed the actor's connection from the audience. We all realized that there was a lot of work to do to fix the show, and once again, Jeff was an enormous help.

As a team, we played with Jeff in the space discovering angles that were strong and the staging possibilities of the space. We also all worked together to

build what the “cliff scene” would like. About half way through the show Julie rappels down the side of the fjord to get a better look at what is at the bottom. Bauersima tells us in the stage directions on transitioning to this new scene “We see a cliff towering in front of us. Way up the white sky. We see Julie’s head appearing over the edge of the cliff” (Bauersima 26). In the pervious scene we watch August and Julie on top of the fjord looking out into the horizon, however, Bauersima wants this “cliff scene” to change perspective and to create a sense of verticality in the space. Additionally though, Julie also goes back on to the top of cliff and off again a handful of times, requiring several shifts in perspective. This scene was the biggest impossible feat I mentioned earlier.

I was very fortunate to have a team of diverse and incredible artists and friends to help me solve this impossible staging challenge, and it was in that moment I realized that the primary job of a director is to assemble an amazing and collaborative team. This wasn’t a new revelation because I’ve worked on many shows in several different capacities and it’s fairly obvious that theater is all about team work and collaboration. However, I did realize that it is okay for a director not to have the solution to every problem. A director is someone who assembles a group of artists and provides a vision and viewpoint for everyone to work through. It was excited to blow through ideas and experimenting with them on the spot.

In roughly fifteen minutes we came up with the ingenious solution to use the strongest side angle of the platform and a narrow path of light to convey that Julie is sliding down a cliff compared to when her and August are on the top of a cliff in a full wash of light. To help sell the idea that Julie was rappelling down the side of the

fjord, we also developed the idea of breaking the convention of August and Julie not leaving the platform to have August lie on his back and put his feet on the side of the platform to make it look like August was leaning over the edge of the fjord. My team also helped me figure out all of the philosophical and technical challenges the script presents.

Before beginning the rehearsal process I did not imagine how much my understanding and interpretation of *norway.today* would have changed, and I have my production team to thank for pushing me. I knew that I would learn more about August and Julie's intentions and background, but it was so exciting to discover revelations about the characters. One example of this exploration that was mentioned above is whether or not Julie is depressed.

As a team, we felt as though we understood August early in the process. He is a kind nerdy kid who has a tendency to be an "emo kid." He loves going on forums and talking to people about depression and committing suicide. August is very clearly depressed because he does not feel a connection to society and, in a very Holden Caulfield manner, thinks everyone is phony. However, as the rehearsal process went on we discovered that there is a very dark side to August. It was exciting to explore the sinisterness of August when he lets Julie dangle off of the fjord and analyzing what would lead him being slightly psychopathic. Since we discovered who August was early, his costuming and design decisions did not change drastically over the course of the process. However, Julie's character was tougher to nail down.

Initially, I took Julie's words at face value when she told August that she wasn't depressed. Based on her opening monologue where she declares her

intention to commit suicide, it seemed like she arrived at her decision to commit suicide rationally because later on in the play she tells August she “had it all. That the whole world held my legs, so I can gaze into the abyss” (Bauersima 53).

However, as we discussed Julie’s background we realized that she was probably never happy and never knew what happiness was. My basis for this detail comes from the “dream sequence” on page 46 when she is in total disbelief when August says that he will love her:

AUGUST: I would love you.

JULIE: You mean fuck me. We would fuck our brains out.

AUGUST: No, I would love you.

JULIE: You mean, like, fuck lamely.

AUGUST: No.

JULIE: You mean, you’d be in love then.

AUGUST: Right.

JULIE: With all the stuff that goes with it, and you say sweet things to me?

AUGUST: Yeah. (Bauersima 46)

We discovered that in Julie’s experiences, sex has only been a source of pleasure with no connection to love. Julie probably believes that only adults in loveless marriages “make love,” a phrase she scoffs. There has been some serious hurt in Julie’s life, and discovering the depth of that hurt unlocked so many possibilities for my actress. Another discovery I would like to discuss is how philosophical the beginning of the play is, and for that matter the play as a whole.

When I first read *norway.today*, the comedy of the piece is what struck me first. I’ve never read a comedic play that seemed to be suicidal young adults, however, over the course of the rehearsal process I came to the realization that

norway.today really isn't about suicide. *norway.today* is about two people trying to find an answer for their social isolation. It's not a story about people trying to end their lives, it's a story about people trying to find reasons to live and come together. Julie and August's view of the world is that it is full of phonies and that there is no reason to try to be "real" when no one else is trying. For them, death is the next moment that they can believe will be real.

It was incredible to explore this concept and idea in rehearsal and to have honest conversations about what acting "real" even means and how often are we actually truthful. Those discussions then lead us to the question, "Can we be honest on social media?" and "Is something that is filmed inherently fake?" It was beneficial to go back to these questions over the course of the rehearsal process to make sure that we were still keeping true to the themes that Bauersima thought were important and I hoped were being thought of by the audience.

POST-PRODUCTION

I believe that my production of *norway.today* was successful. I provided my team with the vision of this production, which sought to answer questions about truth and technology and our place in society. I was able to set my actors up for success by setting a high bar for them and holding them to it. As a team, we fulfilled Bauersima's vision of a production where the impossible is staged, our audience was asked to confront their own feelings on depression and suicide, and by using projections throughout the piece reminding the audience of technology's constant presence in our lives.

During our opening night talk back with the audience, my team and I had great discussions with the audience. One audience member admitted that he felt Julie and August were sort of pathetic for retreating to the internet for potential comfort from life, and that unleashed a debate about the nature of suicide and people who are depressed. That discussion was amazing to witness because it is those kind of questions that I was attempted to generate in my audience because I believe that suicide and depression cannot be a topic that we do not talk about public.

Upon reflection since *norway.today* closed, I am extremely proud of this production. I am proud of all the hard work that my team and I put into the show over the course of the rehearsal process. I am proud of how I brought my team together and worked out every problem that came our way. I have also grown tremendously as an artist over the course of the process. I believe that I have what it takes to be a director and theatermaker in the professional world, and it is what I want to peruse as my career. Going into my next project, I will know how much time to spend at the script analysis table, how to give my actors what they need from rehearsal to rehearsal, and (most importantly) how to develop a commanding vision for a production that can a production team can run with and explore.