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(Aleph-naught)

A Play & a Plan

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Cover design by Vernon Press.

For those countable infinities
whose lives I cannot begin to imagine.
And yet
whose voices never cease to haunt my imagination.

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Anyone who is familiar with my work will not be surprised that this is yet another writing project about Immersive Theatre. After all, this is a form that has consumed me for over a decade now; an 'obsession', if you will, that has led to a series of multi-faceted and multi-modal explorations about immersive, theatrical aesthetics.

Aleph-naught is part of a larger oeuvre in my repertoire as a theatre practitioner and scholar.

It contains the script for a play; it contains a plan for manifesting that play.

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A Note on the Play

Until this book, I've tended to write about the positioning of theatre within socio-political contexts in which I have/had direct experience: places I've worked in; people I've worked with. The content in my books thus far has primarily derived from the practice of creating theatre with communities experiencing conflict (i.e., work that was done/is being done 'on the ground').

And so, when I began to think about how to craft a new challenge for myself as an Immersive Theatre researcher and practitioner, I kept coming back to three questions: how could I create an immersive, theatrical work that would be based in imagined realms, rather than in experience 'on the ground'? How could I use strategies that I have learned over a decade of devising material in community theatre contexts, to shape a theatrical immersion that will draw on my imagination as its primary source of inspiration? And *despite* this focus on unknowns, and *because* of this focus on the imagination, how could I craft an immersive, theatrical experience that would speak to a contemporary, pressing, and 'real-world' conflict?

As a result of these questions, before deciding on a 'real-world' conflict to focus on, I first articulated the concepts that I wanted to use in the framing of *Aleph-naught:*

- *Fragmentation:* Fragmentation is a quality that has underscored all the conflicted contexts that I have dramatically explored over the years. A quality that, when transposed into the dramatic form, can serve as a powerful reminder that fraught socio-political contexts cannot be wrapped up within easy-to-digest packages. That the realities of such conflicts are messy and unpredictable; more so when being dealt with by someone who does not have the lived experience of the injustices in question (like me). That disjuncture and discordance can function as poignant allegories for the cacophonies that rupture so many communities and individuals in crisis.

- *Autoethnography*: Like the use of fragmentation, my work over the years has unearthed the need for autoethnography to be utilized as an aesthetic, pedagogical, and ethical tool in immersive, theatrical environments. Given that my interest in immersive aesthetics focuses on making relatively privileged Others – like myself -- become better-informed allies with those who have not had the same luck of the draw as we have, I have come to realize the need to foreground my own biases in the creation and execution of such work. To problematize the work's vicarious quality. To question its relevance.

- *Fiction*: And finally, I knew based on the questions with which I began *Aleph-naught,* that I wanted to draw more from my imagination, rather than direct experience 'on the ground'. All this while creating an immersive work that would speak to a 'real-world' issue, and be sculpted with pedagogical underpinnings, i.e., where the work would intentionally aim to leave its performers and spectators considering their 'real-world' connections to the issues being addressed in the world of the work. In this vein, given that this book is being written at a time when I live as an immigrant in the United States; a time when I hear narratives of 'walls' and 'illegals' at many a turn; a time when communities like the Rohingya emerge and disappear with the same frequency in mainstream news cycles; it seemed only natural to write *Aleph-*

naught as my response to global refugee crises. As a homage to those who are displaced outside/within their own nation-states. To those who have to/choose to flee from the places that they call 'home'. To the countable infinities who wander the earth searching for a new space to make their own. To the countable infinities which are paralyzed by our own insignificance in the face of these crises; an insignificance that makes us both impotent and complicit.

And it was in imagining the connections and fractures between/within the abovementioned questions and concepts, that I began to articulate the notion of a 'flash-act'.

Somewhere on the border between a work of flash fiction and a one-act play, the flash-act is an intentionally hybrid framework, both in form and in content. It refers to a self-identified style of writing – I daresay someone else might well have coined a better term for such an aesthetic -- that exists between the generally accepted construct of a flash fiction story (of being around one thousand words long; of being composed of short narratives that might/might not contain links to a larger story; of being based, as the name of the genre suggests, in the writer's imagination), and the conventionally agreed-upon characteristics of a one-act play (of being around ten to fifteen minutes in length; of taking place in the proscenium for an audience that watches and listens; of being centred on dialogue). And with this framework in mind, alongside the desire to stay true to the particular Immersive Theatre aesthetic that I have developed over the years, the flash-acts in this script take the form of character profiles and scenarios, rather than the dialogues/monologues/text-to-be-spoken that many of us expect from play scripts.

Fine, you may say. But why the imposed brevity (of crafting profiles and scenarios that are around one thousand words in length, each)? Why create this kind of 'limit' on the creative process?

Partly, because it's a new challenge.

But mostly, because the flash-acts in this text thrive on a permeating sense of incompleteness.

I do *not* want them to allude to any sense of completion.

I do *not* want the flash-acts to even risk an allusion to certainty when addressing complex questions of war.

I do want the texts to 'perform' – through their form – their approach to the content.

I do want the texts to embody my pedagogical affinity for devised theatre. Where the work is always in motion; always in progress; always in flux. Always. Always created in collaboration.

I want the brevity of the flash-acts to intentionally embody a murkiness
– to intentionally perform a dazzle of incompleteness –
so that they remain honest;
so that they remain self-effacing.
There are so many so stories, after all.
The countable infinities.
The aleph-naught.

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A Note on the Plan

In 2016, 2017, and 2018, I conducted a series of Immersive Theatre 'experiments'. The first experiment explored what Immersive Theatre might 'do' differently – for actors and spectators -- than its more 'conventional' counterparts. The second experiment considered the impact of performance spaces and audience-actor relationships within Immersive Theatre aesthetics. The third experiment considered the impact of duration on performers and spectators in immersive, theatrical environments. The outcomes from these studies were part of the *Memos from a Theatre Lab* series and in the third book of that endeavour, I proposed that the next step in the work would involve a more rigorous investigation into how actors' (and spectators') training might need to be (re)conceptualized in the context of Immersive Theatre. Hence the second part of this book, i.e., *The Plan,* which speaks to how production crews might want to approach working with actors and spectators for a work like *Aleph-naught.*

To better contextualize *The Plan,* I need to give the reader a brief overview of the findings that emerged through the *Memos from a Theatre Lab* series, vis-à-vis the factors that seem to most influence the experience of an actor in an Immersive Theatre work.

- *The characteristics of the performer:* What is the actor's lived experience (or lack thereof) in relation to the central socio-political themes of the performance? What does the actor know about the issue in question, and how willing are they to learn new information that might challenge their existing world views? What is the performer's approach to time, and how might we (as the production crew) be better able to identify/train the performers who are able to channel their concentration when performing in immersive theatrical environments that involve extended durations? What do the performers hope to learn through their experience in the immersive work, and to apply into their lives outside the world of the performance?

- *The contents of the performance's durational quality*: Does the performance utilize specific forms of audience-actor interaction that might consequently influence the demographic composition of the actor pool? What tools might an actor need, to be able to best engage with the demands of the specific aesthetic choices that are included in these immersive worlds?

- *The desired behaviours <u>during</u> the performance*: How might performers be selected/trained to maximize their experience of the very specific demands of immersive environments, and to deal with the unpredictability vis-à-vis spectators' responses at the moment? Furthermore, how can performer selection/training enhance the actors' ability to navigate the rigours of duration; rigours that are caused by such immersive experiences going beyond the more generally acceptable length of theatrical performances?

- *The desired behaviours <u>after</u> the performance*: How do the larger pedagogical aims of the immersive theatrical experience shape how performers might need to be trained for it? Especially when there are specific socio-political issues around which we are aiming to

catalyse critical empathy, how does our hope for what happens after the performance shape what we do in the processes leading up to the work's execution?

- *The pre-performance forums:* What kind of invitation/selection/training processes need to be built to develop the performers' knowledge of the issues at the core of the immersive work? What kinds of exercises might be put in place to locate/develop actors' reactions to/within extended durations? What kind of training might enable performers to identify spectators' needs in this less 'conventional' form of theatre, and to address these needs within the world of the performance? How might exercises be designed to deal with the performers' implicit biases?

Resonating with the abovementioned aspects that were identified as impacting performers' experiences in Immersive Theatre, studies in the *Memos from a Theatre Lab* series revealed similar factors that intersect in varying ways to shape the experience of audience members:

- *The characteristics of the spectator:* How interested is the audience member in the socio-political issue at the heart of the performance? What do they already know about the issue, and what do they need to/are willing to learn? What is the audience members' interest in, and expectations from the theatre? What is the spectators' approach to time, and how can the work identify/develop the audience members' ability to constructively engage with the longer duration of an immersive experience? What does the audience member hope to learn through their experience in the immersive work, and to apply into their lives outside the world of the performance?

- *The contents of the performance duration:* Does the performance invoke particular forms of audience-actor interactions that might influence the demographics of the spectator pool? What tools might an audience member need to be able to best engage with the demands of those aesthetic choices?

- *The desired behaviours <u>during</u> the performance*: How can the production crew maximize the spectators' experience of duration? How can they (the spectators) be supported in maintaining / developing the role that they are invited to take on during the experience? How might self-directed motivation be catalyzed for the spectators?

- *The desired behaviours <u>after</u> the performance*: What strategies and processes might heighten the potential for spectators to develop their critical consciousness of the socio-political issue being explored in the immersive piece? How can such processes and strategies increase the likelihood of spectators' medium/long-term engagement with the theme at the heart of the immersive, theatrical experience?

- *The pre-performance forums*: How might our general understanding of spectatorship need to be re-conceptualized for theatrical works that invoke immersion, speak to socio-political issues, and have pedagogical underpinnings? What kind of 'training' might spectators need to undertake to support their immersion in these environments?

The multifaceted questions above have led to a consolidation of strategies that are presented and discussed in *The Plan* section of this book; a section that has been broadly classified into four categories: Invitation, Selection, Training, and the Aftermath. Each of these categories applies just as much to spectators as they do to performers; each of them includes strategies to guide the production team that is interested in staging *Aleph-naught*.

One might consider *The Plan* a 'how to' guide. A manual. A roadmap.

That said, the roadmap in *The Plan* has been crafted from my vantage point as a writer. A writer who can design processes based on the 'ideal' rather than the 'real'. A writer who does not have to worry – at least not until she has to direct this piece -- about the logistics of implementation. It is understood, therefore, that the strategies offered here might need to be re-adapted and re-shaped to fit the context in which *Aleph-naught* is being experienced.

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