Spring 5-1-2011

Ensemble Theatre Techniques: Butoh Electra

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**Introduction**

There once was a young theatre student, who, shortly after being cast as King Richard III in his university production of Shakespeare’s tragedy, told his teacher that he hoped to “leave his mark on the role.” His teacher replied that leaving his mark on the role should be the least of his concerns, and that if anything he would be wiser to allow the role to “leave its mark on him.”

Like the young theatre student in this story, when I began this project, I hoped to “leave my mark” by revolutionizing the theatrical form. Now, I realize that this project has actually left its mark on me by helping me to identify the seeds of my very own artistic point of view, one which – far from being revolutionary – may already be quite well established in the global theatre community.

That point of view includes the beliefs that 1) experimentation is necessary for the evolution and survival of theatre, 2) global awareness is a necessary obligation of the twenty-first century artist, and 3) collaboration (best understood in my work as “a sense of ensemble”) is required to create theatre which has any widespread significance.
Chapter 1: Evolution in Art

The first tenet of my newly discovered artistic point of view has two parts. Part one is that evolution is necessary for the survival of theatre as an art form. Part two is that a degree of experimentation by theatre makers is necessary for that evolution to occur. A common kind of experimentation I have noticed in the work of other artists is the intermingling of several artistic disciplines, such as theatre with modern dance or different styles of dance with one another. I consider such intermingling experimental because it involves the integration of known variables or quantities to produce an unknown outcome. Another kind of theatrical experiment is the reconfiguration or adaptation of classic stories and dramatic texts. I consider both of these art-making techniques experimental because there are certain degrees of risk, not knowing, and uncertainty involved in each.

In nature, evolution of biological organisms occurs as a result of mutation from generation to generation. This mutation is possible because of the coming together of different strands of DNA – a constant intermingling of new information and creative materials. In art, I believe it is also an intermingling of creative materials from different artistic disciplines which causes evolution and ensures the survival of a given form.

My understanding of this process is based on observations of this phenomenon in the work of others. For example, within the world of
butoh dance, there are subtle differences between the present-day work of Amagatsu Ushio, one of the world’s leading butoh artists, and the work of his predecessor, Tatsumi Hijikata who first invented the form and gave it a name. To a casual observer, their work is remarkably similar; it is all butoh dance: seemingly primitive, chaotic, often slow and painfully precise. However, there are subtle differences. For example, Hijikata worked largely as a solo artist while Amagatsu and often creates dances to be performed by his company of dancers, known as “Sankai Juku.” Hijikata often performed on film, outdoors, or in modest indoor performance spaces with simple lighting and in the nude, while it appears the majority of Amagatsu’s work is performed on large stages in conjunction with elaborate theatrical lighting and costumes. Hijikata also quite frequently seems rooted to the floor while Amagatsu’s dancers traverse space using a variety of floor patterns for dramatic effect. I believe that the differences between these artists stems largely from an intermingling of new creative materials or integration of other disciplines. In a documentary interview, Amagatsu says that “in addition to butoh” he’s “been studying modern dance” (“Sankai Juku - Butoh (Buto) - interview with Ushio Amagatsu”). By doing so, Amagatsu hopes to create his “own style”, his “own butoh.” In the same way, by studying butoh and incorporating it into my work, I hope to create my own style of theatre.
In my project I have sought to create my own style of theatre by blending several very different performance idioms. The first of these is the realistic theatrical tradition of the West, which was pioneered by such artists as Konstantin Stanislavski and Lee Strasburg and has been the predominant style of performance seen on American stages for the past century. The second is butoh, an aesthetic of movement from Japan which emerged shortly after WWII as a reaction against both western dance and traditional Japanese dance-theatre forms like kabuki and noh. The other performance idioms include gymnastics, kung fu, and a style of acting distilled from analysis of movies from the Chinese wuxia film genre. The most notable contrast, however, lies between the first two. While theatrical realism is usually linear, narrative, and verbal, butoh is traditionally non-linear, expressionistic, and interpretive. The result of this intermingling is something which I hope is still classifiable as theatre, but somehow unlike any other piece of theatre that audiences have seen. In this way, I hope to subtly push the envelope of what an audience is willing to accept as a part of the discipline and expand their conception of the entire form.

The idea that adaption or reconfiguration of a classic story could be risky or experimental first occurred to me when, at the 2010 International Festival in Edinburgh, I saw a performance of *Tempest: Without A Body* which was an example of both reconfiguration and blending of storytelling disciplines. The piece was based on William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*
and choreographed by Lemi Ponifasio using traditional Samoan dance and chanting. This adaptation focused on the themes of enslavement and oppression, which were familiar to the citizens of Samoa, who had experienced a great deal of enslavement and oppression during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries at the hands of Germany and later New Zealand. While I, who was quite familiar with Shakespeare’s *Tempest* absolutely loved Lemi Ponifasio’s adaptation, most of my peers, who were only casually acquainted with the source material, did not seem to understand the production and even claimed to hate it. They criticized the repetitiveness and slowness of the movement, the absence of a clear storyline, and the mishmash of styles in the costuming – each of which are traditional taboos in contemporary theatrical realism. When they finally considered the fact that this was not intended to be theatrical realism, they suggested that the production had barely anything to do with Shakespeare’s *Tempest* and could not therefore be considered a legitimate adaptation of that play. I, on the other hand, saw how the torturously slow pace and repetitiveness of the movements vividly conveyed the pain one might associate with slavery, which, besides being purely an invention of Ponifasio, is an integral and often overlooked theme in Shakespeare’s original play.

As I might have guessed based on my experience at *Tempest: Without A Body*, the audience response to *Butoh Electra* was varied and depended largely upon the viewer’s familiarity with the story of Electra and
knowledge of butoh. Some loved the play. Others were confused. This result helped me to realize that the audience’s level of familiarity with an artist’s source material is a huge variable in the artistic experiment. I now hypothesize that the outcome of that experiment (the audience’s response) could have been predicted by paying closer attention to the variables in the experiment that I could control: the degree to which I diverged from the source material and the extent to which I departed from the conventions of realism.

Difficult though these variables may be to accurately quantify or describe, the challenge implicit in the process of adaptation / reconfiguration is an important question for the modern day artist to consider, since it is precisely those few, powerful, age-old stories like Electra and The Tempest which speak to the human condition and beg to be re-examined by generation after generation, consequently lending relevance to the mediums through which they are shared.
Chapter 2: Global Awareness

One week before beginning formal rehearsals with the cast of *Butoh Electra* I led a workshop on butoh as part of Lutheran Campus Ministry’s “Spirituality and the Arts” workshop series. It was attended by a handful of community members, including clergy from a local church, students from the drama department, and a pair of Syracuse students who happened to be Korean. During the course of the workshop we explored the process of embodying images from nature such as a snake swallowing an egg, or a rose blossom in the lips, exercises which sometimes require the dancer to distort his or her face in rather strange or unusual ways. In the talk-back following the workshop, one of the Korean students remarked that these exercises would be useful for him since children in Korea were traditionally brought up to limit their range of facial expression. As a member of the Toastmasters club and an aspiring public speaker, this student sought to break his former cultural conditioning and discover the full and complete range of expressive possibilities available to him. I was amazed at both the unforeseen practical application of this work and its ability to transcend cultural boundaries. Moreover, this experience made me feel proud to participate in the cross-cultural exchange of ideas.

That an artist in the 21st century is obligated to have global awareness almost goes without saying. 20th century advances in communication technology and transportation dramatically accelerated the process known as globalization to the point where we can now arguably
refer to everyone living on the planet as part of one global community. In this highly globalized world, it behooves everyone – not just artists – to know at least a little about the diverse range of people with whom we are connected.

In creating *Butoh Electra*, I demonstrated a degree of global awareness, by 1) identifying patterns in the historical attitudes toward justice of the ancient eastern and western worlds, 2) contrasting those patterns with what I believe to be the prevailing view of justice in contemporary western society, and 3) creating an attractive collage of multicultural images, sounds, and ideas to encourage critical thought on the role of culture in defining justice.

In my mind, the tragedy of Electra is that she and her brother, Orestes, define justice differently, but never discuss it or try to understand the other one’s point of view. Orestes wants to avenge their father’s murder by killing the man who usurped his throne. Electra wants to avenge their father’s murder by killing not only the usurper, but his accomplice, their own mother. This is the misunderstanding which results in Electra’s tragic deed, the destruction of her brother’s life. (In Aeschylus’ version of the story, Electra convinces her brother to kill their mother, after which he is pursued by the furies, mythical creatures whose sole purpose is to torment and punish those who murder their own family. Eventually he finds shelter in Athens, where after a long and drawn out trial, he is vindicated by the goddess Athena and a jury of Athenian citizens. In my
mind, at least for the time in which Orestes is pursued and tormented, Electra has effectively ruined her brother’s life. Therefore, in my version of the story, Electra actually ends up killing her own brother in a passion when he betrays her by refusing to kill their mother.)

While at the beginning of the project, I was unsure how exactly a multicultural mise-en-scene would serve Butoh Electra, I understand now that the way we define justice is an issue of possibly global importance, which I hope to have highlighted through the multicultural aspects of the project. How we define justice often involves questions of vengeance and forgiveness. What is it to exact vengeance on another person? What is the cost? Does it solve anything? Is vengeance ever acceptable? What is the nature of forgiveness? What strength does forgiveness have against the power of revenge and hatred? These are the kinds of questions I asked myself and others in preparation for this project. My personal, religious, and cultural values initially led me to the point of view that vengeance has little utility or social value, while forgiveness is an ennobling and redemptive aspect of humanity. Therefore, in adapting the script and directing the actors, I tried to present vengeance in its ugliest, most repulsive incarnation, hoping that doing so might persuade others to share my point of view.

Nevertheless, vengeance and murder have historically been an acceptable part of justice in human cultures across the globe. In fact, as I began to learn more about the history and culture of ancient China and
spoke with our dramaturge, Hoi Ning Yau (Crystal), who grew up in Hong Kong, I was quite shocked to discover just how commonplace murder actually was. One day during rehearsal, while Crystal was teaching the cast traditional styles of bowing to parents, superiors, and people of other varying social stations, one of the cast members asked what would happen to a servant if he or she refused to bow in the way we had learned. Crystal replied that the servant would simply be put to death.

I compared this to what I knew of murder, forgiveness, and justice in the West, and was reminded of an observation I made as a college freshman in a course on the history of medieval and renaissance Europe. I observed a historical trend during this time period toward a more centralized source of authority, which often stood at odds with traditional conceptions of personal justice. Monarchs in medieval and renaissance Europe consolidated power and established a monopoly on justice by arbitrating disputes and enforcing settlements between parties which might have previously been governed by an “eye for an eye” approach to justice and grown from personal vendettas into bloody multigenerational conflicts. Kings were wise to consolidate power in this fashion, since almost any examples of revenge and vengeance one reads about in epic poems from this time period, like *Beowulf* or *The Battle of Maldon*, contribute to the personal honor and glory of individual heroes, but weaken the health and stability of society at large. In short, revenge and murder were at one time justified in the ancient world (both Western and
Eastern), but generally detrimental to the perpetuation of lasting social order.

Forgiveness, an idea which flourished during the birth of Christianity, is a more modern concept and possibly the most important component of justice in contemporary western culture. In the construction of this play, I have chosen to challenge the old-world affirmation of personal vengeance and murder present in Sophocles’ version of the story, pointing instead to forgiveness as the nobler alternative.

Admittedly, the most visible theme in *Butoh Electra*, as it was presented in Syracuse in 2010, was vengeance. Promoting forgiveness did not occur to me until halfway through the rehearsal process, while using the play to draw attention to the multiplicity of ways we define justice did not even occur to me until at least three months after that production had closed.

In planning the next production of the play, my focus has definitely shifted away from a fairly narrow-minded condemnation of vengeance to a broad exploration of justice in all its forms. I draw inspiration here from the philosophy of the contemporary, Buddhism-inspired installation artist, Wolfgang Laib, who, in his exhibition of work at the Rubin Museum of Art in March 2011, wrote:

“I was interested in non-European cultures because I feel that if you take them really seriously they offer a big challenge to our own cultures.”
They can give a totally different perspective on what you think is right and wrong and what you know” (Laib).

In this way, I know that global awareness will continue to be an integral part of my artistic process as I continue to refine and develop the play.

The third way I drew on my sense of global awareness to craft this piece was by trying to create an attractive and exciting collage of multicultural ideas, images, and sounds to frame the themes of the play. Although my personal opinions on issues like murder, violence, forgiveness, and justice are deeply rooted in my upbringing in the Lutheran church and that particular faith tradition, I wanted to share those opinions in an easily accessible, universal, and relatable context, free from the stigmas associated with organized religion and Christianity.

Like Christianity and organized religion, which I find neither attractive nor necessarily exciting, Greek tragedy has been stigmatized in popular culture. To the majority of the Western world it is something utterly foreign and irrelevant. Kung fu movies, on the other hand, are a hip and fun staple of popular culture in both China and (to a lesser extent) the U.S., which is why I chose to use kung fu and ancient imperial China as a cultural framing device to free Butoh Electra from the stigma commonly associated with Greek tragedy. My hope is that the theme of this play is accessible to even the least educated members of our global community, which is why in choosing kung fu (and butoh), I have also privileged
physical, visceral, nonverbal storytelling idioms over the highly verbal and rhetorical idiom of classical Greek theatre.

Finally, in choosing the style and creating the mise-en-scene for this production, I borrowed behaviors, images, languages, and rituals from a variety of cultures. These elements include everything from Japanese butoh dance to Chinese tea ceremonies from both the Ming & Tang Dynasties; from Japanese sai to Chinese Wushu butterfly swords; from judo to kung fu, as well as costume pieces produced in modern-day Thailand and text from English encyclopedias, Chinese screenplays, and ancient Greek plays. I would hope that, just as each of these elements was carefully chosen to support the message of this piece, we as a global community will learn to value, respect, and use ideas from all cultures in the art, politics, governance, and commerce of the twenty-first century for the betterment of the world as a whole.
Chapter 3: Collaboration and Ensemble

The third component of my emerging artistic point of view is the belief that a high level of collaboration (like that which characterizes the work of a musical ensemble) is required to create theatre of any widespread or global significance.

First, it deserves to be noted that I believe creating theatre of global significance is possible because of an idea that Peter Sellars once articulated when he came to speak at Syracuse in September 2010. Sellars claims that he can change the world simply by envisioning it as he’d like it to be and then depicting that world onstage. I have taken this idea further by exploring how and why it might be true. I believe it works because of the collaborative nature of theatre and the transformative nature of collaboration. The way I understand it, true collaboration does not occur unless the collaborators are each transformed by the experience. Therefore, if I hope to collaborate with the global audience, transforming it into a more peaceful and forgiving community, I must first uncover or craft opportunities for us as artists to be transformed.

Section I: Transformation of the Story (Audience Participation)

In Butoh Electra, as it was presented in Syracuse in 2010, I flirted with the idea of audience participation as a way of trying to collaborate with the audience. At the end of the play, the audience had the opportunity to vote on whether or not they believed Electra was justified in
her actions. However, this was not collaboration in the *transformative*

sense, since the vote took place *after* the show had ended and the verdict

was never revealed and never had an effect on the story as it was

presented each night. The audience participation was in this way almost
to

entirely tangential to the rest of the theatergoing experience.

The vote did, however, provide me with a small measure of

success. Since, at that time, I understood the story as a simple morality
tale about the atrocity of murder and vengeance, I did everything I could to

craft a presentation in which Electra would be found guilty. If I had had my

way, the audience would have voted Electra guilty every night, reassuring

me that I had successfully imparted my values creating a scenario in

which vengeance was conflated with sin and forgiveness was regarded as

an ennobling act of grace. My theory was that, by including some element

of audience participation, it would somehow engage the audience’s

capacity for critical thinking and they would consequently buy into the truth

of my opinion more deeply than if I had simply told it to them.

In future productions, I hope to take this idea of collaboration even

further by creating alternate endings to the play which will allow the

audience’s participation to transform the very nature of the story itself, so

that rather than shallowly encouraging the audience to buy “more deeply”

into my own personal values, I am encouraging everyone who sees the

show to think critically about the way in which he or she defines justice,

whether or not their definition is the same as mine.
Section II: Transformation of the Cast into an Ensemble

Having played flute for five years in middle school and high school and performed for almost a decade before that in the children’s chorus of countless community theatre musicals, I am highly attracted to the idea of ensemble and use it as a benchmark for measuring collaboration. In music, ensemble means the cooperation of several musicians to produce a song or sound. If there is a strong sense of ensemble, it suggests that each of the players is playing in harmony with one another. Perhaps above all things, ensemble play requires a sensitivity to each member of the group, a quality which is not necessarily innate, but can be the transformative result of an ensemble-building process.

There were a number of ways in which I sought to cultivate a sense of ensemble among the actors throughout the rehearsal process. From the very beginning, I made it clear to all 24 students who auditioned for the play that this project was going to be an “experiment in ensemble theatre,” to which end the cast would be encouraged to participate in various shared learning experiences both inside and outside the formal six-week rehearsal period. The majority of the cast was able to join me in taking judo classes two times each week from our fight director, Felix Ivanov. Two of the actors were even brave enough to join me in auditing the Army Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) physical training (PT) course, which met outside on the quad three days each week at 6:30a.m., rain or shine, to engage in rigorous physical exercise.
Once we finally entered rehearsals, I reinforced this expectation by suggesting to the cast that our measure of success for this project should be not the critical acclaim of our faculty or peers, nor audience attendance, but the extent to which each actor felt ownership of the final product.

And while I did not have enough trust in my skills as a director to make this project entirely ensemble-devised like Steve Cross’ *bar play* or Irondale Ensemble’s *Murrow’s Boys* – two very clearly *devised* theatre projects I have been privileged to observe being created – I attempted to model our creative process off the work of the accomplished ensemble theatre artist, Brian Clark, and his method of “working-out” a play, which I read about extensively in his book, *Group Theatre*. According to Clark, “working-out” is a method by which the group utilizes techniques like improvisation and game theatre to discover the physical life of the play and satisfy the proposal of the script (Clark).

Many theatre artists besides Brian Clark, including Viola Spolin and Augusto Boal, have written books filled with ideas for games, improvisations, and acting exercises intended to promote a sense of ensemble and harmonious play between actors. Here, however, I was interested in finding an ensemble-building mechanism that might also help to generate material for the production, which I knew from the beginning was to be highly physical and revolve around at least two core movement disciplines: butoh and kung fu. I therefore hypothesized that group
In order to test my theory, we devoted approximately a third of our rehearsal time, almost 10 hours every week for six weeks, to group physical training. This training included practicing the judo forms we were learning in Felix’s class, as well as a variety of strength training, gymnastics skill building, and butoh dance. Gymnastics training was largely overseen by our gymnastics coach, Emily Robinson, a senior acting major in the Department of Drama who coached us for one to two hours each week in the first three weeks. I led the training in butoh myself, being quite possibly the most knowledgeable person in the discipline available to us. (I had recently had the privilege to study with Joan Laage, an accomplished practitioner of the form residing in my hometown of Seattle, WA. Thus, many of the exercises in butoh which I had the company perform were either copied or adapted from my work with her.) Even without the supervision of Emily or Felix, we performed exercises in each discipline for at least an hour each day, six days each week, for six weeks.

The most obvious example of this process’ success is the unanticipated integration of judo into the dances within the play. It began one day during the first or second week of rehearsal when, during our daily judo practice, one of the actresses remarked how the violence and
volume of being thrown in judo reminded her of the mother-daughter
dance halfway through the play in which we hoped to somehow convey
the abusive relationship of Electra and her mother. The final iteration of
the dance ended up containing an extensive amount of judo. Thus, the
creative material from which we built the play evolved directly from our
ensemble-building process.

Besides an increased sensitivity to each member of the group, I
noticed other qualities emerge during our group physical training, such as
a heightened investment in each person’s growth and development. For
example, we practiced handstands almost every day for the first two
weeks with the hope that we might be able to build up to handsprings, a
gymnastic skill we would have loved to incorporate into the fight
choreography. We also did pushups in the handstand position to build
upper body strength. However, with limited equipment and resources, we
often had only enough room on our mats for one person to safely practice
at a time. So the remainder of the cast was left to support and encourage
the person practicing. Being able to do one or two more pushups than
you did the day before was an extremely tangible example of each actor’s
personal improvement. Each time it happened, everyone cheered wildly,
encouraging him or her to do even more. This heightened interest in one
another’s personal growth probably emerged by virtue of the obvious
nature of that growth within our training process.
Section III. My Personal Transformation

Besides the various ways I have already described transforming as a result of this project, this experience renewed my commitment to honesty and openness. I learned early in the rehearsal process that as a director I should be more honest and open with my actors. It wasn’t until the end of our first week of rehearsal that I realized I needed to make my artistic intention (or lack thereof) explicit to the actors for them to understand what it was that we were striving to create. It was then that we talked for the first time about communicating to our audience a story in which vengeance was vilified and forgiveness glorified. And even though that idea was in its infancy and not nearly as well developed as it has become today, it helped to unify the cast and suppress feelings of aimlessness or, worse, opposition to the script.

Once I shared my idea with the cast fully and honestly, the idea itself then became available to transformation.
Conclusion

As I continue to browse the internet, read American Theatre magazine, and devour page after page of books on the subject of theatre, I realize that my interest in collaboration and theatre with global significance may not be as revolutionary as I had first hoped. However, the fact that I am able to identify those values by reflecting on my work suggests that through this project I have made progress towards realizing my personal artistic voice. That voice is based on the point of view that intermingling of forms is necessary for the evolution of theatre, that evolution of theatre is necessary for the survival of the form, that global awareness is a necessary responsibility of the twenty-first century artist, and that collaboration and a sense of ensemble are required to create theatre of any widespread significance. In my work to come, I will continue to test these beliefs and push them to their limits adopting new principles as they seem appropriate and abandoning others as they lose their value. For now, I am happy to have undertaken a project which has taught me so much about myself and how I see the world. I hope that understanding the world and my place in it will help me to become not only a better artist, but also a better human being.
Works Cited


Works Consulted


Appendix

Figure 1. Production photo.
Pictured (Left to Right): Eric Meyers, Sarah Nesluson, Brittany Visser, Olivia Gjurich
Costumes: Mary Olin Geiger
Lights: Allison Shumway
Photo: Allison Shumway
Figure 2. Production photo.
Pictured (Left to Right): Eric Meyers, Brittany Visser, Sarah Neslusan
Costumes: Mary Olin Geiger
Lights: Allison Shumway
Photo: Allison Shumway
Figure 3. Production photo.
Pictured: Sarah Neslusans
Costumes: Mary Olin Geiger
Props: Mary Olin Geiger
Lights: Allison Shumway
Photo: Allison Shumway
Figure 4. Production photo.
Pictured (Left to Right): Brittany Visser, Olivia Gjurich, Eric Meyers
Costumes: Mary Olin Geiger
Lights: Allison Shumway
Photo: Allison Shumway
Figure 5. Production photo.
Pictured (Left to Right): Eric Meyers, Sarah Neslusan
Costumes: Mary Olin Geiger
Lights: Allison Shumway
Photo: Allison Shumway
Figure 6. Production photo.
Pictured (Clockwise from Center): Sarah Neslusan, Brittany Visser, Olivia Gjurich, Eric Meyers
Costumes: Mary Olin Geiger
Lights: Allison Shumway
Photo: Allison Shumway
Figure 7. Promotional postcard.
Graphic Design: Chloe Fox
**Capstone Summary**

For my capstone project in Drama, I wrote, produced, and directed an original adaptation of a play by the Greek dramatist Sophocles. His original play, called *Electra*, is about a young woman who conspires with her brother to kill their mother and step-father to avenge the murder of their own father. My adaptation, called *Butoh Electra*, featured a similar story line, but was set in Ancient China, featuring martial arts (in the style of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*) and butoh dance, which is an expressionistic dance style from post-WWII Japan. The play was performed as part of the Black Box Players’ Lab Theatre Series in the Black Box at the Regents Theatre Complex in December of 2010.

One of the many ways this project was experimental was in my approach to creating the play, specifically in the rehearsal process. With this project, I was interested in testing a theory about the way in which a sense of ensemble is created in a company of actors. Ensemble is a word most widely understood in the context of music and fashion, but its significance extends also to drama. In music, ensemble means the cooperation of several musicians to produce a song or sound. If there is a strong sense of ensemble, it suggests that each of the players is playing in harmony with one another so that every individual element is seen only in relationship to the whole. In drama, ensemble can suggest the give and take between actors, a shared sense of responsibility to the play, and teamwork to tell a story, or as in music, a harmonious kind of play.
between the actors. Many theatre artists like Viola Spolin have written books filled with ideas for games, improvisations, and acting exercises intended to promote a sense of ensemble and harmonious play. Here, however, I was interested in finding an ensemble-building mechanism that might also help to generate material for the production, which in this case was highly physical and revolved around four core movement disciplines – gymnastics, judo, butoh, and kung fu. I therefore hypothesized that group movement training (particularly in disciplines in which no member of the company was already expert) could just as easily bond a company of actors and promote a sense of ensemble as other kinds of exercises.

In order to test my theory, we devoted approximately a third of our rehearsal time, almost 10 hours every week for six weeks, to group physical training. Training in judo was largely overseen by our fight director, Felix Ivanov, Assistant Professor of movement and stage combat in the Department of Drama. Gymnastics training was conducted by our gymnastics coach, Emily Robinson, a senior acting major in the Department of Drama who coached us for one to two hours each week in the first three weeks. I led the training in butoh myself, being quite possibly the most knowledgeable person in the discipline available to us. (I had recently had the privilege to study with Joan Laage, an accomplished practitioner of the form residing in my hometown of Seattle, WA. And thus many of the exercises in butoh which I had the company perform were either copied or adapted from my work with Joan.) Even
without the supervision of Emily or Felix, we performed exercises in each discipline for at least an hour each day, six days each week, for six weeks.

It should also be noted that the conditions for this experiment did not allow for absolute control over all the variables necessary to test my hypothesis in the most conclusive or scientific way possible. For example, juggling the dual pursuits of testing my ensemble theory and putting on the best production possible, I ultimately utilized whatever ensemble-building tools I had available to me, even including elements of Spolin-style improvisation, though deliberately to a much lesser extent than the movement training. The company also participated in variety of activities outside rehearsal such as watching movies and plays together and helping to build the sets and hang the lights for the show together, which could have further contributed to our sense of ensemble.

After the production, the cast completed a survey I created. When asked how important each item on a list of activities and exercises we performed was in creating a sense of ensemble, everyone in the cast ranked the majority of our physical training exercises as either “important” or “very important.” Furthermore, at least two of the dances in the final production drew heavily on skills we developed during our daily judo training, the extent of which I could not possibly have anticipated before going into rehearsal, but perfectly exemplifies the usefulness of our specific ensemble-building process to also generating material for this particular play.
The major significance of this project was its ability to help me understand and articulate elements of my emerging personal artistic point of view. For example, through this process I have learned a little more about why I place such stock in the idea of collaboration and ensemble. I have also learned something of the value of experimentation, global awareness, and cross-culturalism in creating meaningful theatre. Being able to articulate these values and understand my own artistic point of view, including how it compares to others, will ultimately make me a more informed and effective artist. For that reason, this project marks a truly significant development in my life as a theatre artist.