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White Girl on the West Side

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At the start of our final day of rehearsal for a reading of Maria Alexandria Beech's *Lima Beans,* I encountered a challenge in the rehearsal room. I was still staging a scene between Rain and Joan when the two actresses, Wendy and Lori, began to speak rapidly in Spanish about the scene. As we were running out of rehearsal time, I stopped them. I apologized and asked for a translation of what they were saying. Then I asked the actors in the room to please speak only in English for the remainder of the rehearsal. I immediately felt a shift in the room. Lori and Wendy exchanged looks and Tanya Saracho, the Artistic Director, frowned. I felt uncomfortable and embarrassed, but I also felt a pressing need to move forward, which we did. In that moment of asking for the actors to speak in English, I needed access to the rehearsal. I could not have understood the dialogue otherwise. I was conscious of the tension caused by directly asking for the language switch and this affected my ability to direct. Simultaneously, I was aware that the company felt wronged by this action. Though it was not my intent, silencing the use

of the Spanish language in the room in favor of English was an act of oppression, almost an act of destruction.

What was my job as a director in this moment? Was it to support the process or the product? In this action there was ethnic tension and there was discord about my role as director. I was focused on the public reading of the play and I realized the company expected a director focused on the workshop of the play. Teatro Luna is a company founded on the principle of fostering safe expression through a collaborative process. This workshop process was interested in creating work using local Latina actors and performing first and foremost for the Logan Square community. Standing in that rehearsal room on the West Side, I began to think: I don't speak Spanish, I took two buses in from the North East Side, and I just silenced two of my actors…am I the right person for this job?

I was hired in August of 2009 by Tanya Saracho, Teatro Luna's Artistic Director at the time. The theatre's mission is to support Hispanic artists and female artists; part of their supporting the female populace means every once and again they work with a *gringa*. Thankfully, because aside from work I had produced myself, Tanya gave me my first directing gig in Chicago. After she hired me, Tanya gave me the script of *Lima Beans* and put me in touch with the playwright Maria Alexandria Beech (Alex), who would be in the rehearsal room with us for the duration of the process. Alex is a fantastic playwright and a unique voice in the American theater. She is a recipient of the Aspen Theatre Master's Visionary Playwright's Award, a long-time collaborator with Primary Stages and the Lark Theater in New York, and a graduate of the MFA Playwriting

program at Columbia University. Her work is characterized by multicultural advocacy and passionate portraits of characters often underrepresented in the American theatre.

When I first read *Lima Beans* I was struck by Alex's eloquence and fearlessness in subject matter and structure. *Lima Beans* is a play-within-a-play. As Alex explains in the description of the setting, "The play…opens during a rehearsal at a theater. Rain, a playwright, is the narrator of a play she wrote about the women in her family. Joan, the director, is helping Rain iron out the kinks in the play."[1] The primary frame for the piece is the relationship between playwright and director and the tension that comes from that interaction. The play-within-the-play is about three generations of women in Rain's family, and also about Rain's abortion a few years earlier. In our initial conversations about the work a bond formed between Alex and me. I loved the script and we were able to find common ground in the dramaturgical dialogue. We also bonded over discussions about the state of theatre, our backgrounds, and our lives. Alex and I formed a friendship before even entering the rehearsal room.

Yet walking into any ensemble process is an awkward negotiation. There has to be a trial-and-error period of mistake and adjustment until you learn the nature of the relationships and the vocabulary of the company. When I first walked into the rehearsal room I felt the comfort of being a woman in an all-female process and also a bit of culture shock. I was the only white woman in a rehearsal room otherwise composed of Venezuelan, Columbian, Dominican, Mexican, and Puerto Rican women.

After quick introductions and a warm-up, we began to read through and discuss the play. It quickly became clear that Spanish and English were used in the rehearsal

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[1] Maria Alexandria Beech, *Lima Beans*, July 20, 2009, 1.

room, as in the play text, interchangeably. It also quickly became clear that I do not speak Spanish. In the immediate conversation, the women would usually pause and translate to me. I had translated the Spanish in the text before the rehearsal began. This had not been very difficult as the Spanish in the text was rather limited. In fact, during the first rehearsal the amount of Spanish in the text became a subject of debate. After we read through the script Tanya asked Alex why there wasn't more Spanish in the play. They began to discuss the difficulty of writing in Spanish while often performing to mostly white audiences. Alex argued that you have to bring the work to the people, meet them halfway, and speak their language—literally. Tanya argued that white audiences need to grow accustomed to Spanish language; that sacrificing language is sacrificing heritage. Tanya often includes entire scenes and monologues in Spanish in her plays; she toys masterfully with the limits of comprehension. In Tanya's adaptation of *The Cherry Orchard,* for example, the characters change languages every time someone flips a light switch.

This line of inquiry fascinated me and I thought of a Shepsu Aakhu essay entitled "The Safe Black Universe" that had recently been circulating around the theatre blogosphere. In the essay, Aakhu discusses the complexities of trying to format your play for a white audience: "Can it be healthy to think of oneself as exotic? This is by definition an outsider's viewpoint. Forming one's self-image from an external viewpoint has to be considered a destructive practice."[2] As the dialogue in the rehearsal room heated up I could not help but wonder if changing languages to suit a white audience was

[2] "The Safe Black Universe," *New Terminology for Dramaturgy* 13 August 2007, <http://ntfd.blogspot.com/2007/08/safe-black-universe.html> (18 February 2010)

an act of destruction. What about filtering a black or Latina perspective through the lens of a white director? Is that a destructive act?

When Andre Bishop, the artistic director of Lincoln Center Theatre, slated Bartlett Sher to direct *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* in 2009 there was uproar in the black community. The main argument against Sher's direction, as outlined in Patrick Healy's *New York Times* article, was that Bishop took an opportunity from a black director. Charles S. Dutton, who starred in the original production of the play in 1986, said, "August told me himself that the reason he did not want white directors was because if one ever had a chance to do one of his plays on Broadway, it would be very unlikely that a black director would ever be chosen again to direct his plays on that level."[3] While the controversy surrounding Sher's direction of Wilson's play focused on the African American and Caucasian experience, similar questions can be asked of my own position. When a white person directs a play written by a person of color, does that take a job away from a person of color? And second, with an eye toward power dynamics and the long history of oppression in this country, is it unethical to filter a minority perspective through a majority lens?

An interesting practice has developed in Chicago theatre, where there is a pattern of white women directing the "minority play" at the larger regional theatres. There are many recent examples: at Steppenwolf, Tarrell McCraney's *Brother/Sister Plays* was directed by Tina Landau in 2010 and Hallie Gordon, the white Director of Education at Steppenwolf, directed Tanya Saracho's adaptation of *The House on Mango Street* there in 2009; and, also in 2009, Kate Whorisky directed Lynn Nottage's Pulitzer Prize-winning

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[3] Patrick Healy, "Race an Issue in Wilson Play, and in Its Production," *New York Times*, April 22, 2009, A1.

Ruined and Anna Shapiro directed Regina Taylor's *Magnolia,* both at the Goodman. I am intrigued by this trend in Chicago theatre to place white females at the helm of minority work. Is it fair that white women are selected to direct plays by men and women of color? Does the experience of social adversity as a woman give us insight into every marginalized cultural experience? These are questions that I pondered having joined the ranks of these women in accepting the job at Teatro Luna.

But I was not the only one familiar with these issues of representation. In *Lima Beans* Alex addresses these issues artistically. As Rain and Joan are rehearsing, LuLu, who does "creative development at a production company,"[4] enters from the audience. In our reading Tanya played LuLu. However, if I were to direct a full production, I would cast a white woman to play the role as her main function is to be culturally insensitive. In an early conversation with Alex she joked with me about LuLu: "Do you like the capital L in the middle of her name? It's the second time that character surfaces in one of my plays. In another one, she had an 'unusual' haircut."[5] In LuLu's scene she suggests that Joan and Rain find a different actor to play Rain's role, so that Rain can just be a playwright. In the following discussion LuLu initiates a conversation about a possible replacement:

LULU
What about that girl?

JOAN
What girl?

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[4] Beech, 1.

[5] Maria Alexandria Beech, Private Conversation, St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Chicago, July 27, 2009.

LULU
Did you see "Three Days of Fog?" That girl is great.

RAIN
She's Filipino.

LULU
She looks remarkably Latin.

RAIN
She sounds remarkably Filipino.

LULU
Is your audience going to know?

RAIN
That she's Filipino?

LULU
The difference between a Latino and Filipino?

Pause.[6]

LuLu serves as a comedic character, as well as a commentary on the type of creative producer who often misrepresents Alex's work.

A few hours after I asked for only English in the room, we were rehearsing the LuLu scene and inspiration struck. I suggested that LuLu actually come out of the audience during the reading. Alex then suggested that we add one more frame to the story, and she wrote both of us into the play. Just before the Filipino debate with LuLu, Alex wrote a mini-argument as to whether this was the correct draft of the script. The argument ended with this:

ALEX
My flight was delayed...I'm...the playwright. I...I should've been here for the rehearsal. Did you not get my latest draft?

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[6] Beech, *Lima Beans*, 18.

MARTI
You sent like seven in the past seven days.

ALEX
Your point?

MARTI
Can we keep going? I mean this is what we have.

ALEX
I'm sorry, I mean...OK, I hope this isn't the one where Rain tries to strangle her mother. That was a joke...

MARTI
It's not. Don't worry. You're going to like this.

ALEX
Okay.

MARTI
Trust me, Alex.

ALEX
I do trust you.

MARTI
Should we continue?

ALEX
Go ahead.[7]

Alex asked if I would mind adding it and if I would read my part. The women in the room laughed and nodded at this addition, and I laughed as well and agreed to read it. This addition to the script served two purposes for our reading. First, it added a clever frame that resonated with the themes in the script. Secondly, Alex was able to empower herself as an artist in our rehearsal process. While I was representing her script and her story, she was now also representing me. This leveled the playing field, and allowed Alex

[7] *Ibid*., 17.

and I to collaborate as equals. This went over well with the cast and Artistic Director. The dynamic in the rehearsal room shifted and the process became an inclusive one.

When the *New York Times* interviewed LaTanya Richardson Jackson, the actress playing Bertha in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, about Sher's directing, she said, "When they told me Bart was directing, my first response was, 'But isn't he white?' — so I was intrigued…And from the start he was so collaborative. He would say, 'I know this,' and we would say, 'Yeah, but you don't know this'…As directors go, he was an amazing listener."[8] As a director in this process, I had to learn to listen. I realized, as I imagine many other white, female, Chicago directors working on minority plays also have, that it does not have to be a destructive process as long as a director opens up a room to validate the many experiences and perspectives of those involved in the production. If a director does not too strongly impose her expectations, ethnic differences can be productive to a creative process.

The public reading of the play, at St. Luke's Church in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood, had an audience of about 50. It was a warm, receptive house, and when my big scene came we received laughs. It was one of many effective moments in the text and one of many shining moments in the evening. As I looked around the room at the Logan Square locals, my friends from the North Side, Teatro Luna's company members, the friends and family of the cast, and my parents, I realized that I was part of this community. It was during the talkback, when Alex, Tanya and the actors spoke of a great artistic experience they were having that I realized I fit right into this project. All in the same day, we had shared an intense dialogue, faced an important uncomfortable situation,

[8] Healy, A1.

and had even added in a last minute textual addition that changed the dynamic of our process. I realized that it was in that moment, when the process opened up and I operated as a director helping a play develop with an ensemble, that I became the director Teatro Luna needed me to be.