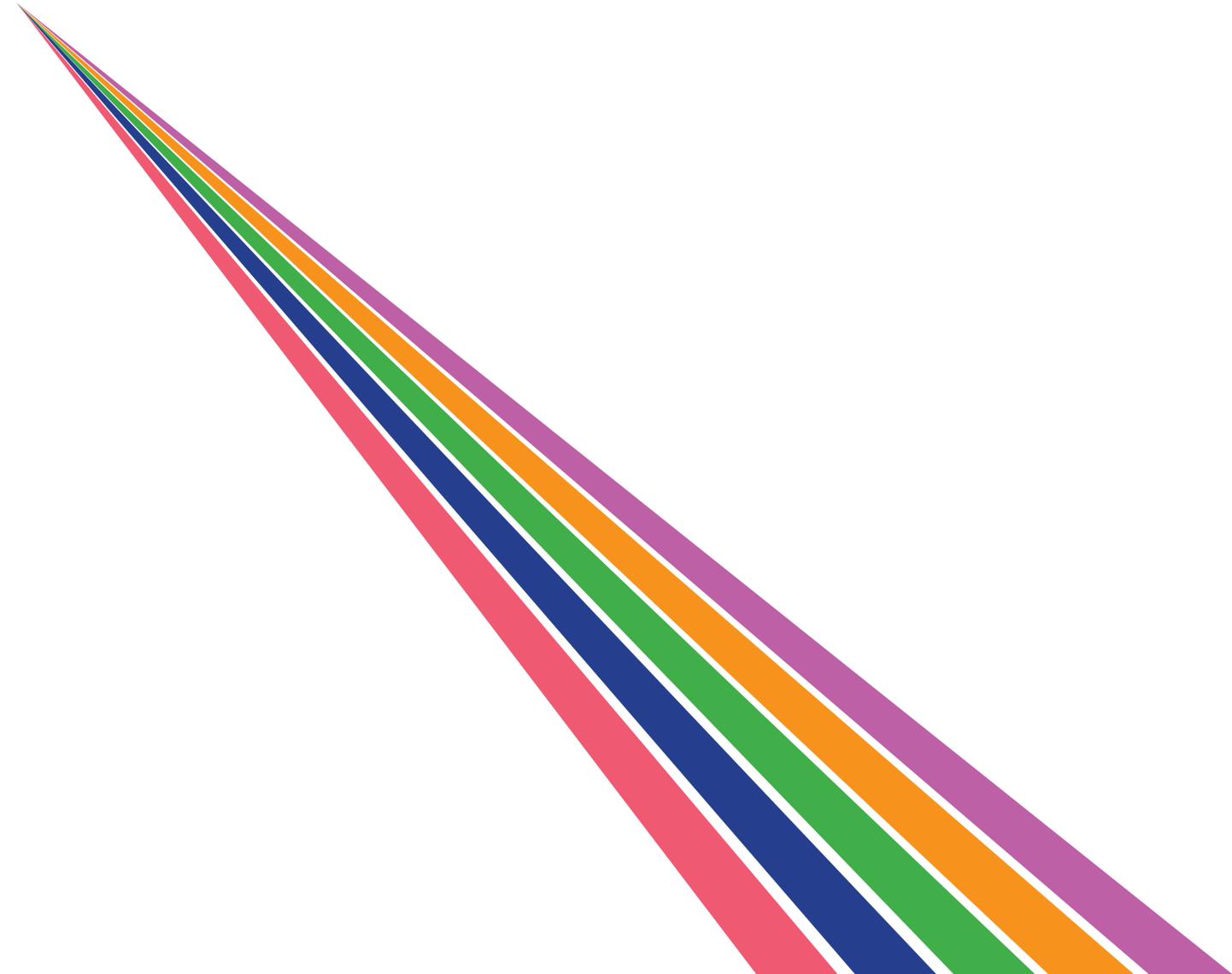


THE
PROTAGONIST



Working in the theater industry is all about giving, the audience takes priority and the show must go on. Sometimes, however, the act of giving becomes all consuming. This is the point when the artist needs to take the role of audience member and treat themselves with priority.

This case study documents a ten week intervention into the life of such an artist.

Patrice is a choreographer, theater artist, writer and educator. She lives and works in New York.

–Introduction

New York is the center of the theater world and off-broadway theater offers the most creatively challenging and artistically rewarding avenue to express yourself as a director, writer or actor. But how does one survive in an industry in which budgets are extremely tight and efforts are rarely appreciated. One option is by working on multiple productions at a time, doing additional teaching and grant writing during the day and working in a bar in those evenings when there is no rehearsal. This is an option, but not necessarily a sustainable one, and certainly not one that is good for the soul.



–Issue Identification

Due to the low financial rewards in the theater industry Patrice finds herself in a position in which she has to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. Her biggest complaint is that she does not feel centered. When not overwhelmed by her commitments and financial insecurity she talks to me with passion about her work. She has an admirable appreciation for the arts and its effects on society and learning, but she is stretched so far that she cannot see her own character strengths.

“I was asked to speak at a producing conference and have two spring projects sitting in my inbox. I’ve started research on the show I want to write/develop. Yet, I still feel stuck. Financially I’m no better off. How do I keep this going, how do I find a way to put a price tag on the work I do?”

–Problem Definition

The intention of this project was to make Patrice realize that no matter how many directions she is pulled, she is a single strong minded and passionate person who should be proud of her accomplishments. She is smart and has a clear appreciation of the arts and its heuristic possibilities. By allowing her the opportunity to stand back and evaluate herself as a whole, I was able to make Patrice focus on the areas of her life that she finds most rewarding.

–Constraints

Patrice’s busy life meant that it was not always easy to find time to meet. I would often catch her whilst she was running between jobs. I was very aware of the issues of time and scheduling and pulled this into the project, the last thing I wanted was to become another burden.



HOW I FOUND MY PUBLIC

I met Patrice through a friend of a friend. I had been looking for a musician to work with on this project, as I wanted to design for somebody who themselves had a direct relationship with their own public. I found my way to Patrice and although she was not a musician, her background in choreography and her involvement in theater were a perfect fit with the demographic that I was looking for.

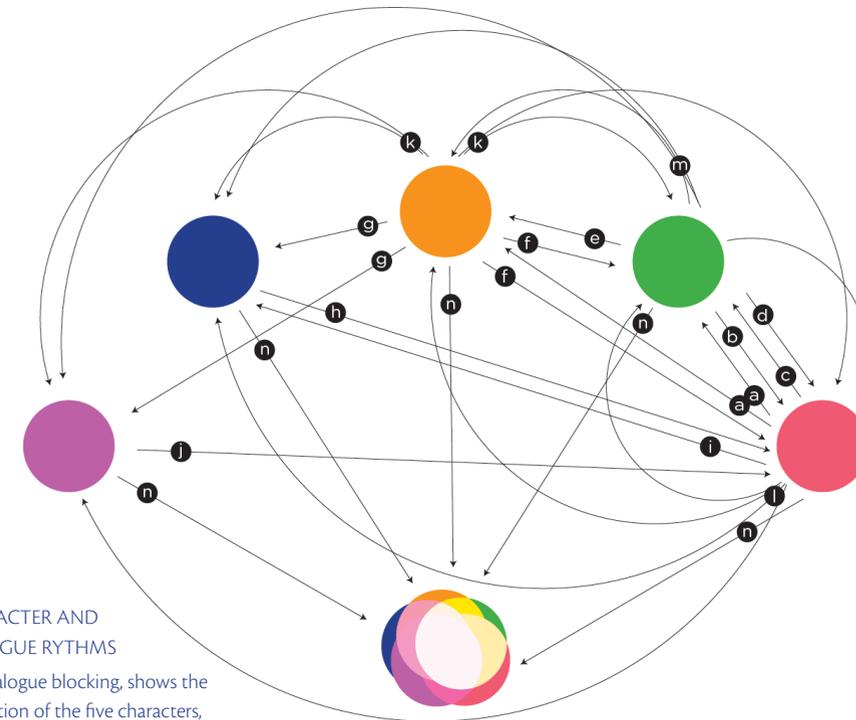
–Protagonist: The Script

This project uses the conventions of a play script to create a scenario in which a feeling of centeredness and control is felt within the subject. The project uses the concepts of rhythm, mimicry and conflict as tools to provoke deep resonances within the individual. These are used to offer a deep sense of self-awareness. A mixture of familiarity and the unusual are used to create a new, and slightly surreal, viewpoint from which the subject can enter a dialogue on the problems that are of worry.

RHYTHM The project makes use of two interactive design interventions that take place throughout our time together. These, along with emails and conversations that are shared throughout the project, become source material for the script. It is not until the subject is handed the script that they consciously recognize the rhythms that are flowing through our meetings.

MIMICRY The script has five characters: Patrice, Patrice, Patrice, Patrice and Patrice. One of the characters is a dancer, one is a director, one is a writer, one is a teacher, and one is a networker. Each character is described within the script. Five actors, who are strangers to the subject, perform a read-through of the script, repeating lines that the subject will find familiar. This is video recorded.

CONFLICT The subject is handed both the script and the read-through and is asked to assume the role of director and offer a critique on what appears to be an early draft of a play. The subject is faced with strangers who are reading lines that sound familiar, and a script in which the subject's name appears as five separate characters. This presents an element of healthy conflict from which the subject is in the position of power as the director who has been asked for comments. The script and performance end with the characters speaking as one.



CHARACTER AND DIALOGUE RHYTHMS

This dialogue blocking, shows the interaction of the five characters, culminating in all performers speaking as one character at the end

–Criteria for Success

This project puts the subject in the position of analyst. Success for the project is shown by the subject's active and serious interaction with the project. If the reaction is amusement or if it is simply not taken seriously, the project will not be effective. The subject should respond to the piece with a careful critique. Ultimately, the subject should experience a feeling of superiority and power over the content, which in turn will allow them to review their current situation and realize how centered and focused they really are.

–Front of Stage

The project aims to show that the subject is a single strong individual who is proud of the many things that they accomplish. In the perfect situation, the subject will push the most resonating parts of her life into the spotlight and allow the areas that do not resonate to retire backstage.

–The Script

The Protagonist is a play with five characters named Patrice. Each Patrice has their own characterization in the script. The characters are distinguished by color.

The Protagonist

by Richard Hall and Patrice Miller

THE CHARACTERS

PATRICE 25-35 years old, a writer of poetry and theater works. Sensitive and structured. She gets on very well with **PATRICE**, and they try and work together whenever they can. She loves to write, and finds it a way to express herself. Recently she feels she has been pulled in many directions and her writing output has suffered.

PATRICE 25-35 years old, a dancer and choreographer. Creative, balanced, insightful. She is the backbone of this group of characters, many of the others will come to her for advice. Her experience informs the advice that she gives. She doesn't see her friends as much as she would like.

PATRICE 25-35 years old, a theater director. Focused, with a vision. She is clear about what she wants to achieve in life, but circumstances are not always in her favor. Particularly in the undervalued world of off-broadway theater in new york.

PATRICE 25-35 years old, a networker. Energetic, quick witted and outspoken. She is the glue that holds together many off-broadway theater performances. She loves her work but is stretched thin. She loves **PATRICE** and **PATRICE**, and would love to see them get the recognition that they deserve.

PATRICE 25-35 years old, a teacher. Sincere. She believes in the pedagogical value of the arts. She loves teaching but hates the bureaucracy and paperwork. She's very close to **PATRICE**.

SETTING

We are in a coffee shop.
The group have managed to find time to get together for a chat. Center stage is a table around which they sit. The setting is comfortable, all characters have paper coffee cups.

–The Read-Through

The read-through is an effective element because it introduces complete strangers into a dynamic that has previously just been myself and the subject. It is important that I myself am not one of the actors. This adds a strong element of confrontation.

The room is set up with a central table and five chairs. A projection on the wall behind the actors sets the scene. Each performer has a different shawl and a paper cup of coffee. The reading was done with stage direction, two of the characters enter from the left of the stage halfway through the scene.



–Ethnography

Patrice was in the middle of a very busy period when I met her. It is testament to her love of being involved in artistic projects that she allowed me to become an additional part of her life for this ten week project.

During face to face meetings Patrice would talk about her love of the arts and theater. She would also talk about the difficulties involved in holding down multiple jobs, which she needed to do in order to be a part of the theater industry. These meetings were important not just as research, but also as resonant points to place the notion of rhythm.

–Private Contemplation

Patrice was often contemplative when we spoke, she was troubled by her situation and was reviewing the sustainability of her work/life schedule. This led me to introduce two small design interventions into her daily routine, in an effort to make her spend just a few minutes each day reviewing her busy schedule.

–Mini Intervention #1



SIT, SITE, SPACE This intervention required that Patrice choose a chair in her house and spend at least ten minutes sitting in it each day, for a week. Whilst sitting in the chair, preferably at the more contemplative part of her evening, she was asked to log into a private web-site. The site opened with a written reflection that used rhythm and alliteration to let her forget about the stresses and concentrate on defining the things that she was proud of achieving that day. She entered these into the site. Her previous love of live journaling made this intervention very familiar and comforting. This intervention also allowed me a way to collect research on my subject and collect lines of future dialogue for the script.

–Mini Intervention #2

BLOCKING In theater, stage blocking is used by directors to visualize the onstage movement of characters. I appropriated this grid-like vernacular and created a small booklet that could be used to block out how Patrice was feeling during different parts of her day. The booklet was small enough to be carried around in a purse or pocket. After using this piece for a week Patrice noticed that many of her comments were concentrated in a few areas. She loved the piece and felt that it was both appropriate and easy to use.



–Reading Research

Gregory J, Seigworth & Melissa Gregg
An Inventory of Shimmers

Seigworth and Gregg introduce the notion of rhythm within the framework of affect theory. Affect, which they say arises "in the midst of inbetween-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon," is a constant reaction to force-relations. The authors describe rhythms that can be distinguished within these relations as the resonance of the forces rise and fall. The notion of heightened self-awareness through the rhythms of resonant moments is an important strategy in the Protagonist project.

Anna Gibbs
After Affect

Mimicry is often described as an autonomic reaction in which the form, movement or sound of one body is repeated in another. In choreography it is often thought of as a negative attribute as it refers to imitation rather than individuation in movement. Gibbs takes an interdisciplinary approach across the many philosophical and psychological examples and applies them to communications, in which she includes, but does not limit herself to, conversation, acting and branding design. The Protagonist project relies on the involuntary and unconscious effects of mimicry which highlight areas of the subjects own constructs of individuation.

Chantal Mouffe
Agonism and Public Space

Mouffe positions herself outside of the two main approaches of deliberative democracy which, she believes, are unable to come to terms with the conflictual nature of democratic politics. She defines agonistic pluralism as an acknowledgement of the ineradicability of antagonism, and recommends an approach to democratic politics that understands the crucial roles of power, conflict and passion. She goes on to suggest that all social interactions, particularly within public spaces, are political and can be approached through the ideas of agonistic pluralism. Conflict is key to the Protagonist project, the role of mimicry and the splitting of characteristics are directly conflictual. Power is given back to the subject when she is allowed the opportunity to pass directorial comments, this allows the subject the opportunity to move forward whilst embracing her conflictual passions. No passions need to be nullified, they just need to be acknowledged.

“Great title! Incredibly flattering and a little bizarre to read this artistic abstraction of myself.”

–Patrice’s Directorial Feedback

CHARACTERS “This is a great first draft with a bit of a fun absurdist bent of having 5 characters with the same name (on a literal staging level - the metaphor was not lost) -- Having a clear understanding of key characteristics of each of the characters is a great way to build the dialogue.”

The written script played an important part in the piece. Character descriptions and scene direction are as important if not more important than the dialogue.

DIALOGUE “The dialogue itself is a good foundation for the ideas that are being communicated from each of the Patrice’s, but a dramatic development may call for stylizing the dialogue so that each Patrice has a rhythm, vocabulary, syntax all her own. For example, red Patrice (poet/playwright) may have a more musical or lyrical syntax characterized by metaphor use or a certain use of punctuation [...] where as if orange Patrice (networker) is quick-witted and outspoken she may have quicker, often shorter sentences and maybe makes witty connections/ light jokes to illustrate a situation.”

Patrice takes the role of offering directorial feedback seriously and offers genuine comments rather than treating the project with amusement. This shows that she is connected and involved in the project.

STORY “The structure/setting is also of interest - I love the coffee shop setting, both personally and directorially - it can be as simple or as complex as a design team wants. The scene itself has an interesting structure - I like that it starts in media res, it certainly indicates that the relationships happening are in the middle of development and maybe even hints at an idea that there isn’t even time to start at the beginning, we have to find the beginning of these characters while experiencing their present as it unfolds. That being said, the end seems to come quickly and the tone shift from problem solving to resolution feels a little sit comy (which can absolutely work if that is the intention).”

Its great that Patrice appreciated that the script seems to start in the middle and does not follow the normal narrative structure. The ending was originally planned to offer a state of resolve and break the barrier of conflict. On reflection, the ending may have been more effective if it was left unresolved.

–Central Character

This project fulfilled its goal of offering rhythm, mimicry and conflict as a strategy to make the subject realize that she is a strong centralized individual. Patrice comments that it is bizarre seeing an artistic abstraction of herself. It is precisely this surreal situation which is the strength of the project. The script is intentionally confrontational in its simplification, the depth of the characters can only offer resonant moments of familiarity at a surface level. Forcing the subject to fill in blanks and question the characters that have her name. The dialogue which derives from conversations and journal entries, adds a notion of reflectiveness that balances the conflict and allows patrice the space to comment on her own experiences from a safe distance.

WORKING WITH THE PUBLIC

It has been extremely interesting working through a design process so closely with the recipient of the design. Real people have real problems and it wasn’t always easy to get hold of Patrice, but by focusing on the ethnographic research that I was receiving, either through meetings or online journaling, it was possible to form a methodology that led to an effective solution. Everything that I needed to create the project I found in the research.

TIMING ISSUES

I was lucky enough to prototype the project with performance rehearsals before the final script was written. However, due to scheduling issues the final production of The Protagonist was created at a faster pace than I would have liked. In less than 24 hours the script was finalized, performed, and packaged for Patrice. I would have liked to spend a little more time thinking about how the play ended, this was the take away moment and I could have utilized it more effectively.

–Successful Synthesis

The final Protagonist piece incorporates elements from two previous interventions, it is this synthesis which leads to the success of the project. I met Patrice after she had sent her directorial feedback on the script and she mentioned that she has found the experience very rewarding. She is currently reviewing the amount of projects that she takes on and is looking forward to 2012. She has made the decision to concentrate on a smaller amount of projects and is signing up to some evening courses that will help her focus on specialized opportunities which receive greater financial reward.

–Future Applications

Although this project is particularly focused on theater, I believe that the methodology of creating a project which includes the tactics of rhythm, mimicry and conflict could be applied to any situation. The strategy of collecting material from a subject over a period of time and then reflecting that material back to them using a medium that they are familiar with, should have a similar effect, if similar needs of centering are discovered in the subject.

“...when we see an action performed, the same neural networks that would be involved if we were to perform it ourselves are activated. In fact we may actually experience something of what it feels like to perform the action, as when we watch someone jump and feel our own body strain toward the movement.”

Anna Gibbs. *After Affect: Sympathy, Synchrony, and Mimetic Communication*

READINGS

Gregory J. Seigworth & Melissa Gregg. *An Inventory of Shimmers* Introduction to:
Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J. Seigworth. *The Affect Theory Reader*. North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011. Print.

Anna Gibbs. *After Affect: Sympathy, Synchrony, and Mimetic Communication*. Essay to:
Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J. Seigworth. *The Affect Theory Reader*. North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011. Print.

Chantal Mouffe. *Agonism and Public Space*. Essay in:
Vishmidt, Marina, and Boris Grojs. *Uncorporate Identity*. Baden: Lars Müller, 2010. Print.