

Enter, Stage Right

Let's face it: theatres work hard to fool us. From a play's initial conception in the playwright's idea-womb to the final standing ovation it receives, there's a lot that goes into a theatrical production, all to persuade us that what's happening before our eyes is real. Of course, everyone knows that because a play occurs in real time, there's quite a lot at stake. The slightest prop malfunction or one line misspoke can evoke a waterfall of tears from a director, or a hissy fit from an aspiring diva. Indeed, for those involved in its creation, theatre rides the fine line between euphoria and utter depression. To put it plainly, the world behind the dramatic stage is a stranger to us spectators, and unless we take that leap deep into the costume room, the mystery is there to stay. Therefore, I plan to take you on a tour of that mystical realm, stuffed with miniature set designs and swearing actors, to fill you in on the pressures and joys that stem from producing a play.

Directing

For this year's Studio Theatre season opener, MFA directing student and well-known Edmonton actor Julian Arnold decided delve into Nicholas Wright's *Mrs Klein*, a dark yet humorous play that squeezes its way into the psychological crevices of the human mind. Better known for his involvement with the River City Shakespeare Festival and numerous roles in Citadel productions, Arnold chose to follow up on his BFA degree (which was also earned here at the U of A) by coming back to school and taking the next logical step.

However, from Arnold's perspective, directing uses many different theatre muscles than acting. Acting was always in his blood (when he was in grade four, his dad, who was a drama teacher, cast him as a little Japanese boy in a school play, and he's been in love with the art ever since) and having Prospero-like powers to command those around him is a big change.

"I'm what you call an actor's director," the soft-spoken Arnold says, after pausing for a moment to gather his thoughts. "I'm able to see the acting challenges from the actor's point of view a bit more than those who went straight into directing. In a way, it engages you on more levels than just acting. You have to be engaged on an intellectual and visual level. The one thing I miss though, that you get being an actor, is the emotional level, which you don't necessarily always get as a director. Directors get to watch and be moved, that's all."

"There's a lot to [directing]," Arnold continues. "You have to choose the play, read it over and over again, and every time you read it, you pick up something new. The research has been great, because it's based on a real woman, Melanie Klein, whom I've never heard of, but she's basically the second-most famous woman after Freud in psychoanalysis."

Like choosing a play that bears layers of evocative questions and comments on the human psyche, Arnold says that considering cast size, humor and the contemporary nature of a script are also important. For him, the females in *Mrs Klein* and their underlying struggles are what caught his attention.

"The [director's] challenge is to keep it active and make sure it doesn't get too talky or too intellectual," Arnold explains. "In any good play, there's a lot of emotion stuff going on beneath the words, and that's what I'm looking for."

"The challenge is to get out of your head. Theatre happens on a visceral level. The intellectual is there, but if it's all happening on an intellectual level, it's not going to be exciting. I always notice that process of going from the mind to the heart."

And if you think that going from mind to heart is intense, going from script to memory is just as complicated.

"You have four and a half weeks, basically," Arnold says. "You spend the first week reading at round table, and then you block it, which takes another week. Then, you go back and rework what you've done with the blocking, and that takes another week. Then, in the final week, you get into runs, where you take notes as a director and flag things that need to be louder or faster. That last little bit, then, is adding all the technical stuff, like lights and sound."

Besides modeling and shaping how the play looks visually, Arnold's job also consists of making his actors actually melt into their characters. Being an actor himself, Arnold knows this isn't an easy task, but nonetheless encourages his aspiring pupils to plunge inside, into a person they know they may or may not be.

"You know how people always say, 'How'd you learn all those lines?' Well you learn them by going home every night and working on them until 3am," Arnold says. "It's hard, hard work. From the time you block the play, to the time you start to want to do run-throughs without the script, that's usually two to three days."

"Sometimes you do improv during the course of rehearsal, especially if there's a scene implied by the script that isn't in the play. Sometimes you can get the actors to improvise what's in that scene and then they have a deeper understanding of what happened, and ultimately, their character."

From the inspirational spark to the full-blown production, a director is ultimately responsible for it all. Alongside the good, though, comes the bad, and although Arnold might give a play his all, when production night comes, he's no longer pulling the strings.

"[Watching the performance] can be the most thrilling and most terrifying thing ever," Arnold says. "As an actor, you might be nervous for the first scene, but as a director you're nervous throughout the whole play. It's because you're no longer in control anymore. You just have to sit back and watch."

Set Design

Back in the spring, set designer April Viczko began collaborating with Arnold in order to come up with what is now the interior of Mrs Klein's house. Viczko, who's also an MFA student, was living in Toronto at the time, and for a number of weeks, the designing process consisted of a series of phone conversations and scanned sketches. Arnold did end up flying himself over to that epicentre of arts for a period of time, a trip that involved him biking across the city on a too-small bike in order to meet her, but after hours of pouring over the script and discussing what sorts of images would rope the audience into *Mrs Klein*, a set design was finally born.

"Your set designer is a psychoanalyst," Viczko says enthusiastically. "You spend a lot of time analyzing characters, what world they live in and what world they create for themselves. The trick about it is that it looks realistic when you first look at it, because you notice that [on the set of *Mrs Klein*] the size of the tulips are quite large, and the moldings are quite a bit thicker than they would be in normal life, and it's all intentional. The audience should feel, it but they shouldn't know."

According to Viczko, being a set designer isn't all about painting provocative pictures on walls or building miniature dollhouses, but rather, it's a role that's nearly as important as the director's job. Viczko must work hand-in-hand with actors, stage managers and technicians as the glue that holds the entire performance together.

"You sort of create this little imaginary world where a director can tell a story, and you become a part of that story," Viczko explains. "It becomes banal in some sense, because I have to pick teacups, and I'm like, 'Well, I'd like it if they didn't all match,' just to create more texture visually."

Although choosing teacups and decorating sofas seem to be fairly straightforward, Viczko also has much larger tasks to tackle, especially when it comes to straddling the line of what's appropriate and what's not.

"The wallpaper is a little bit of what you would call 'evocative of genitalia,'" she laughs. "I didn't want to hit the audience on the head with it, though; they'll read into it what they want. I did a limited market survey, and some people gasped and some people were like, 'I dunno, they're tulips aren't they?'"