

Head-space theatre

Radical thinking inside the box

BY MICHAEL BIGELOW DIXON

IT'S A CURIOUS idea to begin with: a head in a box, talking, telling you a story. If you encountered this in a dark alley, you'd likely run the other way, but in a darkened theatre it's different. You were expecting ... something else. Your attention zooms into a small, illuminated square, the expressions on the face within, the voice. There's something hypnotic about it. Dreamlike yet tangible. Impossible, yet there it is: a talking head encased in a tiny stage-within-a-stage. It's called headspace theatre, and it certainly gets your attention.

A key ingredient of this unique mini-theatre is the element of surprise. Important to any good storytelling, surprise is central to a theatrical sensibility that can be traced to Serge Diaghilev. In 1917, the Ballets Russes impresario challenged Jean Cocteau by demanding, "Étonnez moi," and Cocteau did astonish Diaghilev, writ-

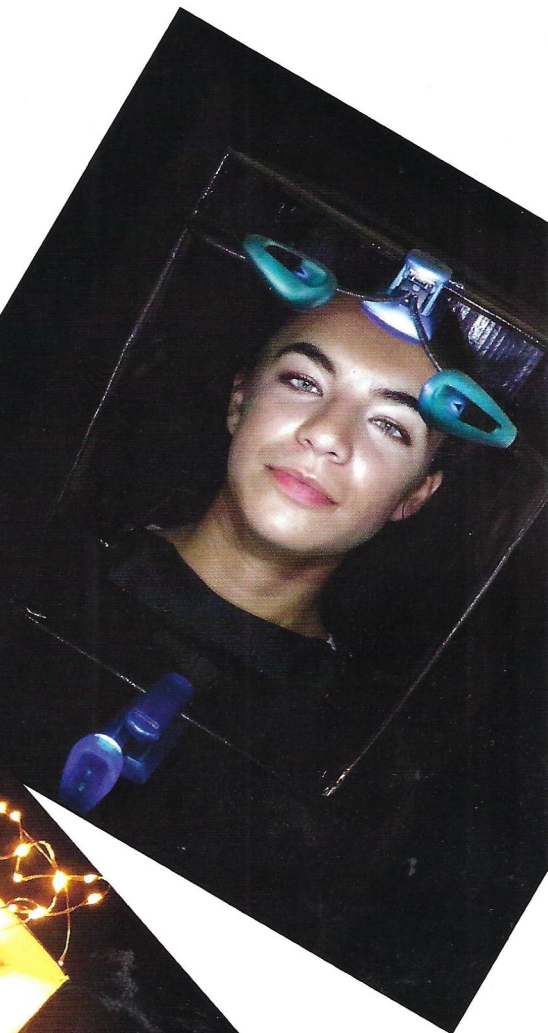
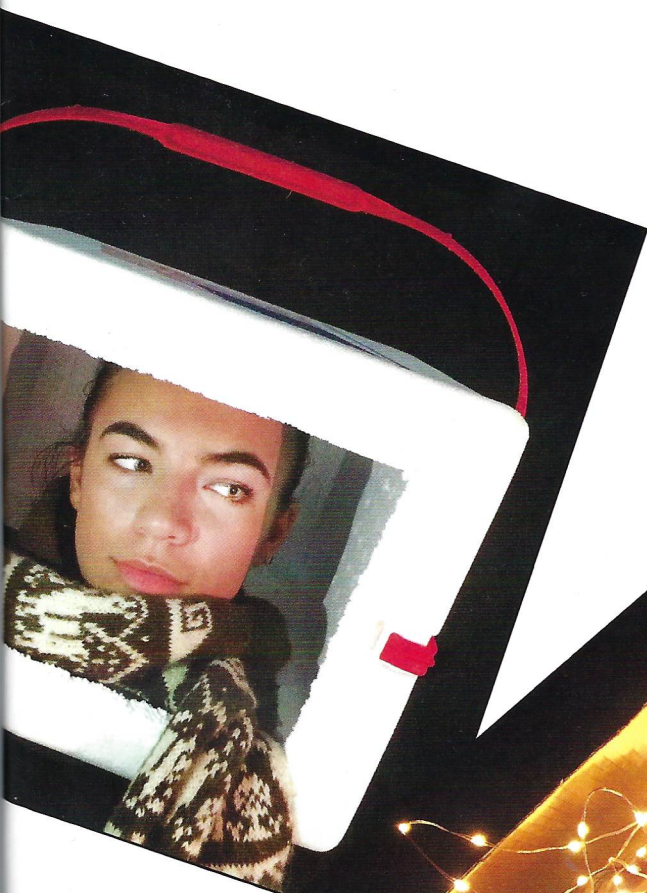
ing the scenario for the first Cubist ballet, *Parade*, a *succès de scandale* with sets by Pablo Picasso, libretto by Guillaume Apollinaire, and music by Erik Satie. Experimental theatre artists continue to surprise by pushing boundaries and breaking conventions in their never-ending quest to engage or awaken audiences.

Headspace theatre, like many experimental projects in America's contemporary theatre scene, highlights one aspect of performance. For example, practitioners of physical theatre, such as Yehuda Hyman's Mystical Feet Company, emphasize dance and movement to convey a theatrical

narrative — with or without words.

Site-specific theatre takes performance out of the theatre and into unexpected public spaces. For instance, Specific Gravity Ensemble once offered two-minute performances to enliven elevator rides in a Louisville, Kentucky, office building. Meanwhile, immersive theatre artists invite audiences to interact with characters and to influence the plot, determining their unique experience of a play. In a famous blend of immersive and site-specific, Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* required audience members to don masks and follow individual characters around New York's McKittrick Hotel.

The particular aspect of performance that headspace theatre highlights is, well, the character's head,



which of course is stuck in a box, either literally or metaphorically. The remainder of the actor's body does not figure into the performance. This quirky monologue form therefore emphasizes the workings of a character's mind. Because there's nowhere for that mind to hide, this brand of solo performance provides an ideal space to more closely examine truths of human psychology otherwise hidden by the distractions of a conventional stage production.

Headspace theatre also offers an affordable, low-tech approach to the-

Athena Frasca, a senior at Sayre School (Lexington, Ky.) demonstrates different costume, lighting, and scenic designs for headspace theatre performances.

atrical innovation. In short, it's cheap, compact, and portable. Baseline requirements include a cardboard box, an actor, a text, and an audience. It's a natural for fringe festivals, street theatre productions, and school projects. Actually, if you think of an astronaut's helmet as a rounded, high-tech headspace theatre, there's no reason these monologues can't be performed on the moon. NASA, are you listening? The first play has yet to be performed in outer space.

Since the format is unfamiliar to students, headspace theatre presents a challenge that invites risk-taking, experimentation, and creative problem-solving. Along the way, students participate in every aspect of theatre: from playwriting and design to acting and performance. This article provides basic information and strategies to help teachers incorporate headspace theatre into a school curriculum, with culminating performances for a class or larger audience that demonstrate the artistic fruits of situating the familiar (a head) in the unusual (a box).

Playwriting

In addition to referring to a kind of experimental genre and kind of theatre space (such as black box or arena stage), Headspace Theatre is also the name of a new company in Lexington, Kentucky, dedicated to exploring the possibilities of the cube as performance venue for talking heads.

Last spring, playwright Elizabeth Wong responded to the company's call for new material by assigning a timed exercise to her playwriting students at University of Southern California. "I personalized the exercise by saying, 'I have given you a box. You open the box. Inside is a head, and

Headspace theatre presents a challenge that invites risk-taking.

it's talking. What is it saying?" She added, "I explained the head can be anything — animal, vegetable, mineral, historical, mythological — and the head should be talking to someone specific."

Then she set a stopwatch to five minutes — time pressure can help students conquer the blank-page syndrome. They wrote, read aloud, and discussed their works, then revised. When responding to monologues-in-progress, Wong points out that there are several things to address. First, is it dramatically effective? In other words, does it grab your attention, progress in an interesting way, and arrive at an unexpected conclusion?

Second, does it incorporate dramatic elements: colorful ways of speaking, strong passions, discoveries, accidents, decisions, confessions, accusations, and revelations?

And third, does it take advantage of the box: Do we understand why the character is speaking from a box, and does that animate the character? For example, is the character's head literally in a box, perhaps as punishment or hiding or participating in an experiment? Or is the box a metaphor for the character's dilemma, are they feeling paranoid or shut off from the world, or have they found — like an ostrich burying its head — a personal

happy space to escape life in the crazy 21st century?

Because the performance venue focuses on a character's thought process, Wong explained to her students that headspace monologues must achieve at least one of the following: reveal why the character's head is stuck in a box, follow a character's attempt to problem-solve their way out of the box, or convince the audience of something represented by the box.

Given that the confined intimacy of headspace theatre typically leaves little room for a fourth wall, the character tends to explicitly and even consciously address the audience. As with any form of theatre, the "want" motivates the character and helps shape the narrative, but in headspace theatre, the characters tend to seek what they want — whether sympathy, answers, or conversion to their beliefs — directly from the audience.

Wong's students wrote about gods and goddesses, allegorical figures, and characters imprisoned by outside opinions. Their pieces were sent to Headspace Theatre, where they joined a library of 300 monologues containing, among other characters, a lion, a cryogenically preserved skull, a gorgon, a death mask, a ping-pong ball, a magician, a mannequin, and a cartoon character, as well as a host of humans trapped, scheming, addressing a screen, or waiting for the remainder of their bodies to arrive. The bizarre confines of the headspace premise seem to unleash imaginations.

Design

Once students have written a draft of their monologues, it's time to design and craft the theatre, transforming a student's vision from paper to a three-

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dimensional theatrical object. This part of the creative process doesn't require much: a cardboard box, paint, glue, elastic straps, maybe a few decorative elements.

Set design. The box, like a traditional set, should help tell the character's story. Students begin by asking questions inspired by the monologue. Is the character speaking from a specific location (a prison, a picture frame, the other side of a computer, the underworld) or an unspecified theatrical space? Would the monologue benefit from a strong visual mood: dark and gloomy, fiery and hot, frozen and icy? Do we know what the box symbolizes at the start of the monologue or is that only revealed at the end?

Once the students have answered these questions, they conduct online research and select images to inspire their set designs. They make sketches or collages of their research, specifying color use, props, and lighting, before proceeding to paint and glue.

Depending on the needs of the monologue, the inside of the box can be lined with bubble wrap or aluminum foil, decked with hanging holiday ornaments, painted with a mini-galaxy of stars, "crawling" with plastic bugs, or lined in front with prison bars. Finally, to safely secure the boxes to the actor's body, elastic straps can be secured to the bottom of the box, then threaded under the actor's armpits.

Costume and makeup design. Though only the actor's head and neck are visible, costumes still make a major contribution to a performance. As is often the case, the fewer the items, the more significant each item becomes in terms of what it reveals about a character. Shirt collars and scarves, eyeglasses and earrings, hairstyles and hats all add visual interest

and help establish a character's identity. There's also a great opportunity for makeup, not only for fashion but also for characters beyond the normal scope of *homo sapiens*: vampires, zombies, aliens, and mythological creatures, among others.

Lighting design. Lighting inside the box ensures the performance and scenic elements stand out against a darker, plainer background. There are a number of simple solutions for lighting. Battery-operated clip lights (the ones you use to read a book in the dark) are easy to attach. Holiday and ornamental strings of lights can be incorporated into or wound around the box. Also, LED lights can be wired with a switch and battery pack, which the actor can operate as a miniature version of proscenium theatre lighting.

Acting

Performing with only the voice, face, and head places serious limitations on actors — especially when that head is stuck in a box. Sullivan Canaday White, artistic director of Project SEE Theatre, suggests three homework assignments helpful for headspace performance.

1. **Scoring.** This is a Stanislavsky technique that helps students vary their vocal instrument and make the language sing. Using shorthand symbols that make sense to them, students mark ideas on the script that the character wants to emphasize, passages where the intonation could raise or

lower, words that can be stretched long or spoken in a staccato rhythm, and thoughts that should be carried through to the end of a line or paragraph without an interruptive pause.

2. **The Five Senses.** Fortunately, the human head typically contains all organs of sensory perception — sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch — so students can activate their storytelling by writing, in detail, the character's sensory observations of significant settings and events depicted or referenced in the monologue. The actor should then analyze the script, marking passages that relate to those senses and reflect on how to conjure vivid images as they perform those words — both in their heads and for the audience. This involves the actor more deeply in the telling and helps animate details of the story for the audience.

3. **Transitions.** Have students mark all conceptual transitions in the piece, then list the subtextual thoughts that allow the character to move from idea A to idea B. They should do this with the first line in the play, as well, even if it does not reflect a transition. In rehearsal, before you begin or when you get to a transitional moment, pause the action, then reference the transitional thoughts the student charted between discrete ideas. This may delve into background character details that the audience may or may not discover or into other expository material. Don't worry about how long it takes you to get to the next line, just talk out the thoughts until you arrive at the next scripted moment. Make this a scheduled exercise for one rehearsal, then reference this subtext in future rehearsals as needed.

Performance

For performers in headspace theatre, there are several things to keep in

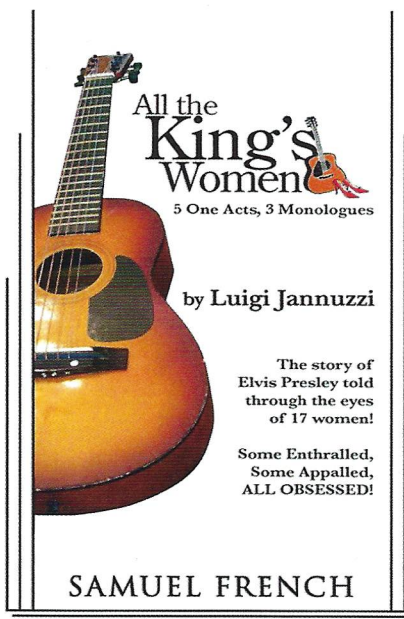
mind before showtime. First, yes, this is strange, and that's a good thing. The audience almost certainly has not encountered a theatrical performance quite like this before. Therefore, they will watch and listen closely. You will have their attention.

Second, your job is to make the story clear and compelling, and a big part of that is "playing the box" for the audience. Consider the following questions before performing: "How does the design of the confined space affect your character's psychology and delivery?" "Does it enhance your status, like a gilded frame surrounding a portrait, or interfere with peripheral vision, thus making your character paranoid about what they can't see?" Either way — or in a hundred other ways — the box needs to constantly affect your character's thoughts and animate their needs. It's ever-present for the audience and needs to remain so for the character, as well.

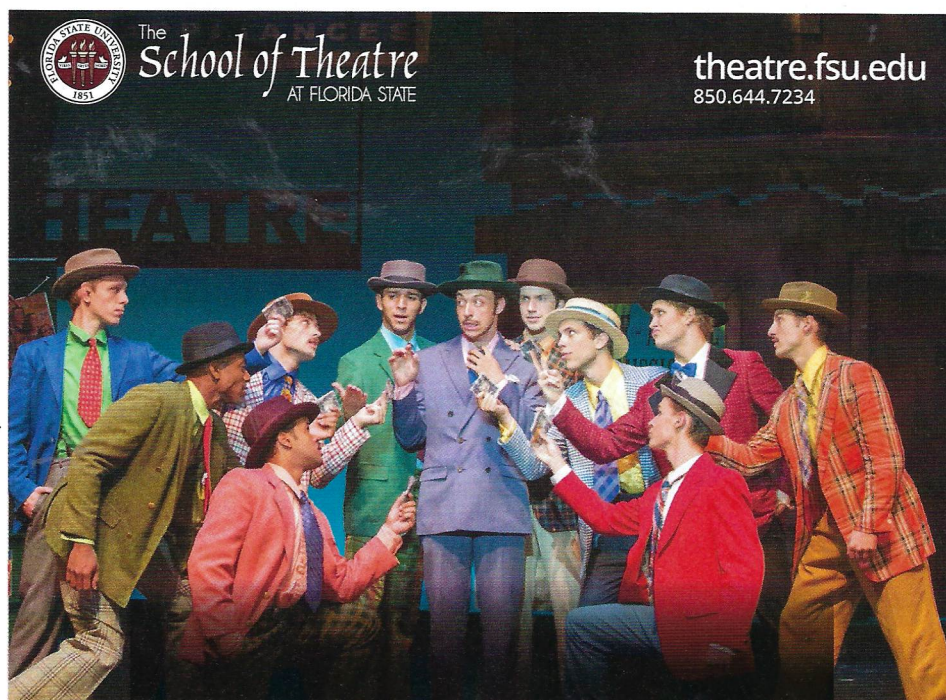
When preparing for your performance, remember that sightlines are important. Audiences need to see the face in the box. Depending on the degree of detail in makeup and scenery, the audience may also need to be close. Also, once the performance starts, it should play through to the end. Most headspace performances last only a few minutes and play like a short story by O. Henry or Guy de Maupassant, both of whom understood the link between brevity and surprise in effective storytelling.

Finally, never forget Serge Diaghilev's aesthetic of surprise. Headspace theatre should provide an experience that amazes us: It's mysterious, memorable, and most of all, strange. At its best, art is a means of accessing truth — and that is a tall order, since, as the saying goes, truth is stranger than fiction. **T**

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Roomie Skype

BY ANNE FLANAGAN

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Stacie is 13. However, in casting, the age/gender is open. The monologue should be played as if the audience is Roomie, watching Stacie on the computer screen. Feel free to update the pop culture references.

STACIE: Hi, Roomie! We finally meet! OK, so it's only by Skype, but still!

It's me! Yes! Your college roommate!

No, silly, not my sister! Me!

I'm thirteen.

Yes! I was in this totally accelerated school program and graduated high school waaaay early! I'm actually a sophomore this year. No, I'm NOT kidding — it's ME!

(STACIE holds up an iPad.)

So, Roomie, here's my 3-D conceptual rendering of our dorm room. I'll take the top bunk — that way I can hang my *Stranger Things* poster on the ceiling, so Finn Wolfhard is the first thing I see every morning. HE IS SO CUTE! I also have posters of Maisie Williams and Yo-Yo Ma!

I checked you out on Insta. I was totes surprised you're a cheerleader. Cheerleaders don't usually go to college. Usually, they end up fat and working at Kmart. Your parents must be totally psyched!

That guy in your pics must be your boyfriend — he's SUPER cute! I used to have a boyfriend. Sort of. I had to keep it a secret from my mom, because he was in the dumb class, but

we were in marching band together — but then I had to drop band 'cause I got braces and my flute kept bouncing against them and cut my lip, so I switched to the viola. I can play a fugue if you want!

So, like, I hacked into the admin records, and you're only signed up for the minimum number of classes this semester? So, I guess you have to work or something? If you need cash, I can hook you up with Dr. Barrick in psychology. I'm his T.A., and we're always hiring students to get shocked by electrodes and stuff.

You also might wanna rethink the communications major — I mean, it's such a weird thing to study — like, don't you already know how to communicate?! JK! I'm majoring in biochem — the lab here is the best! You're totally welcome to use my chemistry set, just don't mess with the phenolphthalein 'cause you KNOW what can happen! Duh!

And you can totally borrow any of my stuffed animals or hairclips or glitter tattoos or even my rock polisher. Look how it shined up this agate!

(Skype, therefore STACIE, freezes. Static. Speaking in halting gibberish, STACIE moves in a stop/go herky-jerky way to display her agate. More static. Then Skype rights itself.)

AARGH! I hate it when Skype does that! Anyways, you have SO many pics on the Gram, Roomie! You must have like a million friends! I used to have a lot of friends — well, maybe not A LOT, I had SOME, but that was before I started skipping all these grades and ...

Whatever!

It's just, like, everyone says, "We'll be friends forever!" but then —

well — they get busy or they get a boyfriend or they get boobs or they plaster all over Facebook how you're a pathetic loser and a hashtag ButtFace and anyone lame enough to hang out with you is a "total Philadelphian."

She probably meant PHILISTINE but ... it didn't matter.

Everyone got the gist.

Yikes! I gotta dip — I've got competitive chess at five. Hey — if we're still roomies at Christmas, maybe we can do secret Santa?

Oh — I didn't mean you might flunk out, silly! Although twelve percent of freshman do in their first semester. I just meant if you're still my Roomie! I hope you are, but you wouldn't exactly be the first to ditch me, y'know? The last one, she said it was 'cause of her asthma but COME ON. One, Gandalf, that's my pet skink, he's totes hypoallergenic, and two, I got perfect SATs. So, like, I'm not stupid.

Anyway, you totally don't have to talk to me in public if you don't want to, but maybe we can hang out in the room sometimes? And, like, give each other makeovers? Or order a pizza from Domino's, the delivery guy is REALLY cute! Or we could choose nicknames from the *Iliad* and reenact the Fall of Troy! Dibs on Hecuba!

Oh, Roomie — I really, really think we're gonna LOVE our room, right? And we'll sort of be friends, right? And this year's gonna be different, right? This year's gonna be SO MUCH FUN!

Right?

END OF PLAY