

“A Summer of American Theater”

2024 Arts Award Outcome

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This past summer was an invaluable period of artistic and personal growth, made possible by the generous support of the Miller Arts Scholars program. With their encouragement, I was able to dedicate my time to exploring one of the most powerful aspects of performance: the connection between audience and performer as shown through modern American theater. Through my experiences, I examined how artists create moments of shared energy, emotion, and understanding, transforming a performance into something deeply immersive and communal. This journey allowed me to engage more fully with my craft and gain a deeper appreciation for the ways in which performance fosters meaningful relationships between artists and their audiences, which I applied to my work on Doug Grissom’s adaptation of *Three Sisters* this fall.

*Rhinoceros* (5/17)

Starting my American theater journey with a play by a Romanian-French playwright, set in a French village, entirely performed in Russian may seem like an odd choice. However, this performance by the DMV based Experimental Theater Group seemed like an apt warning during a tense election year. The satirical play has strong anti-fascist themes and deals with the absurdity of conformity and mob mentality within the context of a once “civilized” French town. While very far from American itself, this play taught me that as American theater practitioners we can learn vital lessons about our own democracy and political systems through foreign theater, and we would do well to listen to what the experience of others has to say.

The sound design of the play was incredible. From gentle, lilting French melodies during the opening scenes, to the custom heavy metal “Rhinoceros” song that played during the final scenes, the rise of the Rhinoceroses was chronicled in the background music. Furthermore, the thundering of the off-stage rhinoceroses seemed to shake the entire theater, and paired with the flashing harsh lighting, and generous use of smoke machines, created a terrifying and overwhelming effect.

I had a slight gripe with an element of the set design. Throughout the play, there was a inverted cone shaped, tiered creation of circles held together with string. It loomed above the entire stage, but remained wholly unused throughout the entire play, until the very final scene, when it collapsed after Daisy chose to leave Bèrenger and become a rhinoceros herself. It seemed to be a symbolic final collapse of society, and I saw it as an abstraction of the Eiffel Tower. However, I feel as though if you are to have such a large structure centerstage, it should be used at least somewhat throughout the play. Because it was so ignored, the ultimate collapse of the structure seemed slightly disjointed from the rest of the play.

On the other hand, the structure could have symbolized the structure of society that we often take for granted and ignore in our day to day lives, until it fully collapses. Perhaps there is something to be said for ignoring a piece of set!

*Hair* @ Signature Theater (6/4)

A celebration of American Youth Revolution on a different level! It’s so fascinating to see how each generation has its own revolutionaries—the average person in the theater was a young adult/teenager in the 60s/70s, and yet the experiences presented onstage seemed so relevant to

youth anti-war movements today. Much to be learned here from the way in which certain lessons remain eternal within theater, and how some themes stretch across generations.

Notably, during the Central Park “orgy” scene, when the entire cast was supposed to strip nude, some people retained their undergarments. I thought this was a great indication that there was an intimacy coordinator on set, and it reminded me of how the comfort of performers should always be the main priority of productions.

Another theme that seemed remarkably relevant today is that of hair itself. When this show was first performed, it was with a predominantly white cast, but this production was with a predominantly African American cast. This allowed the significance of hair in the play to take on a whole new meaning. In the era of the Crown Act and discussions about “acceptable” and “professional” hair, it is important to remember that hair has been significant throughout history, including in very recent history.

The show experienced an incredibly dramatic tone shift when Claude emerged with his hair cut. Up until that point, it almost felt as if there was no plot, and the show was just music and fun and drugs and sex and singing and dancing. It was held buoyant by the rhythm and movement of the characters wild and free hair. But when that was removed, when Claude was shorn, he could no longer shake his locs. He was still, and stiff, and life suddenly felt a lot more serious for all of us—not just the characters. He almost seemed younger, betraying the young age of many who were drafted during the Vietnam War. It was a sobering reminder of how these young people, who loved and were free, were just a draft card away from becoming killers or killed.

I appreciated the high level of audience interaction within this performance. Especially within a Black Box stage, I think it is often more productive to directly engage with the audience and accept the proximity of the performers than to try to ignore it and put up a fourth wall. This engagement is something that I will remember as I move into developing *Three Sisters*.

#### *Where The Mountain Meets the Sea @ Signature Theater (6/28)*

I expected very little from this play, or was it a musical? But the first thing that struck me was the set design. The walls of the theater were covered in wood paneling with a winding cutout through it, which was lit up with different colors throughout the performance. It reminded me of a river, while the edges of the wood paneling reminded me of the mountains. The winding path of the cutout also paralleled the winding journey taken by both father and son on their respective road trips.

The performance opened with the cast addressing the audience directly, giving the usual pre show announcements. I thought this was a bold choice, and risked breaking the illusion for the audience. However, due to the intimate nature of the tiny black box, acknowledging the audience may have been an effective move, and embracing the viewers made the following performance even more personal. This may be something to consider in developing *Three Sisters*, as this production will also take place in a tiny black box.

The parallel stories of father and son were incredibly haunting. I was struck by how this story was not a tragedy. Sure, both men left some things unsaid, but they did not have a bad relationship—it was just slightly unfulfilling. As the two men travelled, moving towards their final destination, I found it beautiful that the climax of the story did not occur when the men reached their actual destination, but rather when they discovered the music that built a sense of deep connection between the two: even if, in the case of Jean, he was unaware of this connection.

I was surprised by how much of a connection I felt to the story. On the surface, I have very little to relate to. Jonah is a gay, black PhD student living in LA, and his father is a Haitian immigrant living in Miami, working at an airport. They have a complicated relationship, marred by a lack of outward affection. My mother and I, who I watched this performance with, are none of those things. However, as we left the performance, my mother told me how she, like Jean, was a teacher back in her home country. When she moved to America, she was a waitress and a babysitter. It's funny how we always find something to relate to.

*Migrations: Reflections on Jacob Lawrence @ Arena Stage (7/3)*

Despite UVA having a rich panhellenic culture, I have yet to visit a step show. This performance showed me just how much I was missing. I have never left a performance feeling more energized or pumped up—I wanted to jump and shout and everything! I felt the rhythm of the performance the entire time, and it can be best described as a full body experience.

One thing that especially struck me was the level of audience participation throughout the show. Members of the audience would occasionally shout out encouraging ad libs, but even those who remained silent couldn't help but clap their hand or tap their feet to the beat. At times, the dancers led the audience in a chorus of calls and claps, adding our voices to the already cacophonous soundscape. It was a traditional end on stage, but I have never felt less of a divide between audience and performers. It truly challenged me to think about how I define connection between performers and the audience, and I am feeling inspired to approach this theme of connection when staging *Three Sisters*.

The stories and the emotions expressed through dance were haunting, and the costuming was a fantastic addition to the storytelling. They were a perfect indicator of the passage of time, gradually turning from the loose-fitting skirts and shirts of the enslaved individuals of the early 1800s to chic 20s flapper dresses. While the emotional story was told through dance, the chronological story was best told through costuming. This was a reminder to me to not discount any element of production.

*Sleep No More (7/7)*

When I first heard about *Sleep No More*, I was in high school in Brunei, and I was immediately captivated by the entire concept of immersive theater. When I moved to the US a few years later, I travelled up to New York to see it, and it was completely magical. I saw it again a year or so later, and this was my third visit to the McKittrick hotel—and by far the most disappointing.

In a word, the show was overcrowded. It was not the beautifully intimate show I had fallen in love with, but a scramble to find your own space among the hundreds of spectators, many of whom seemed to know absolutely nothing about the etiquette expected of them. People were holding hands, whispering to each other, taking their masks off, pushing. I found myself far more preoccupied with the people around me than with the performance itself, and it was all incredibly distracting. *Sleep No More* has lost what made it such an incredible artistic experience and has become nothing more than a tourist-trapped cash grab, selling as many tickets as fire code will allow.

On paper, the format of *Sleep No More* should be the most intimate theater experience possible. Ironically, it was the most disconnected I felt from any performance I have seen all summer. It was a cautionary tale in overcrowding, and a sobering reminder to not sacrifice art for cash.

*Stereophonic* (7/27)

I will preface this journal entry by stating that it was probably my favorite performance that I have seen all summer.

One of the themes that I have exploring this summer is the idea of connection between performance and audience. I have been to performances that break all the boundaries of the fourth wall, but this show kept it firmly in place. In fact, they added an extra layer of separation, with the upstage section of the stage partitioned by a glass wall to mimic a real sound studio. In a theater that lacked a proscenium arch, it was a bold move, and the juxtaposition between the lack of a traditional stage barrier and the addition of a new one was brave and struck exactly the right chord. I never felt emotionally disconnected from the performers, despite never having been more physically disconnected from them.

As I compare this performance to my underwhelming experience at *Sleep No More*, I begin to realize that perhaps audience connection relies less on audience proximity and participation than I previously believed—perhaps it was the stunning realism and raw emotions that drew viewers into *Stereophonic*. Moving forward, I will consider the ways in which I can break down the emotional barriers between performance and audience, especially since this is likely much better suited for a realistic, classical play like *Three Sisters*.

*Illinoise* (7/28)

The performance of *Illinoise* was a breathtaking display of music, movement, and emotion, weaving together Sufjan Stevens' intricate compositions with a deeply human storytelling experience. What stood out most was the way the performers forged an almost tangible connection with the audience—through raw vulnerability, shared nostalgia, and the universal longing for belonging.

As the dancers and musicians moved in harmony, their energy radiated beyond the stage, drawing the audience into their world. A quick glance around the theater revealed tear-streaked faces—easily a third of the audience was crying, some openly, others subtly wiping their eyes, a clear expression of the powerful connection between audience and performer.

The show resonated not just through its beauty but through its exploration of identity—of self, of place, of memory. In the performers' expressions, we saw our own struggles with who we are and where we fit in. That shared recognition, that unspoken understanding, was what made the performance connect so powerfully with the audience.

*The Book of Mormon* (7/28)

An all-American take on the all-American musical, the performance of *The Book of Mormon* was a masterclass in comedic timing and audience connection. From the opening number, the performers had the crowd in the palm of their hands, using sharp wit, exaggerated expressions, and impeccable delivery to create an atmosphere of shared hilarity. Every joke landed with electric precision, and the laughter rippled through the theater like a wave, building momentum with each absurd twist in the story.

What made the performance so engaging was the way the actors fed off the audience's energy, leaning into the humor with just the right mix of sincerity and self-awareness. The more the crowd laughed, the more the performers seemed to thrive, creating an infectious cycle of joy. By the final number, the entire theater felt like a single, unified entity—strangers momentarily

bonded by the sheer delight of laughter. It was more than just a funny show; it was a reminder of how humor can bring people together in the most unexpected ways.

*Three Sisters*

Performance Recording:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/15\\_A2kjUjkgReBZD5EAzSDevtpSAQycTA/view?usp=drivesdk](https://drive.google.com/file/d/15_A2kjUjkgReBZD5EAzSDevtpSAQycTA/view?usp=drivesdk)

After a summer of experiencing the best that American theater has to offer, having the opportunity to work on a production of my own was incredibly rewarding. The performance was staged in B006, with audience seated around two walls of the room—on chairs, or on the floor (due to high demand!). While this proximity undoubtedly helped to foster a strong sense of connection between the audience and the performers, I found that ultimately, it was the themes and performances of the actors that brought the play closer to our viewers. The hauntingly relevant themes of love, family, and watching the world slip by rang true in the faces, bodies, and voices of each performer, pulling the audience into the world of the show. However, it is important to remember that this was aided by the physical proximity of the audience, which helped them to better see the intricacies of the performance.

**Budget for DC Area shows**

Item	Cost
Tickets	427
Total	427

**Budget for NYC Area shows**

Item	Cost
Tickets	530
Lodging	1200
Train	407
Transportation	100
Meals	400
Total	2,637
<b>Total with DC</b>	<b>3,064</b>