

21M.710 F'11

First Paper

This fall, the SpeakEasy stage company chose to put on a production of *Next Fall* by Geoffrey Nauffts. Working in collaboration with Nauffts, the company created a production that stayed true to Nauffts' vision and expanded it. The SpeakEasy stage company, through director Scott Edmiston's choices, created a production that drove home some of the more subtle dimensions and deep layers of meaning in *Next Fall* while still staying true to Nauffts' lighthearted, slightly comedic air.

Next Fall centers around Luke, a young aspiring actor living in Manhattan, and Adam, his significantly older lover of five years. The play takes place in the waiting room of a hospital after Luke has been involved in a car accident and ended up in a coma, with intermittent scenes from the past five years tracing the development of Luke and Adam's relationship. In a note at the beginning of the script, Nauffts remarks on the need for seamless transitions occurring between the past and present as well as the light, humorous air that should pervade the entirety of the play, even when the situation becomes increasingly dire for Luke.

This comedic nature is very apparent in the script. Scenes are filled with jokes, even when talking about some of the more serious topics of the play like death and religion. Although the script is filled with one-liners, the play is still very dense and the written dialogue does not impart a sense of rhythm that is found in other plays. Stage directions are sparse, and almost always only impart the necessary physical information, with only a few noting beats of silence in the entirety of the play. This makes reading the script seem almost like one continuous flow,

which, at times, becomes rather confusing as the scene breaks create a very jarring stop to the text.

This is contrary to the “seamless” flow Nauffts calls for in his author’s note. Without the visual transitions that a live production produces, the text seems to stop and start whenever it hits a time change, resulting in brief moments of removal from the story and making it so that the reader needs to reintegrate himself at the beginning of each scene. In addition to being disorienting, this works against Nauffts’ desire to have a movement of meaning throughout the entire play.

In fact, Nauffts gives the reader very little information as to the visual aspects of the play. Many of the descriptions of locations that he gives do not help create a picture and, instead, act as little factoids that help the readers with the storyline. Scenes occurring in the past always have a description of how long ago they took place. Rather than describe the waiting room, Nauffts includes the necessary information regarding furniture and proceeds to describe the rest of the room as “Mint green” and “Sterile.” Nauffts also gives no more description of the characters than their ages and a single line stating their occupation in life. Physical descriptions are entirely absent from the play, as are descriptions of costumes (with the exception of certain, necessary pieces).

This lack of certain information creates a strange phenomenon. It empowers the reader with important facts that aid the story, such as an actual timeline for the plot, and leaves a lot of the visualization to the imagination. This allows the production designers and the director a lot of leeway in terms of the visual aspects of the play, but locks in a lot of the action.

As a result, walking into the theater, there are very few expectations for what scenic elements will be seen. The SpeakEasy production was done at the Boston Center for the Arts

Stanford Calderwood Pavilion, a small, black box style theater space. Since there was no inherent architecture to the space, the director and scenic designer had a lot of freedom with the set. For this production, they created a small room on stage, dressed like an ICU waiting room. Large fluorescent lights hung from the ceiling, giving the space the stark, painful lighting one typically sees in a hospital. Stereotypically green chairs and a sofa, along with bare wooden tables decorate the room. The only splash of real color apparent is the walls, painted a light blue (contrary to Nauffts call for a mint green set). Two doors can be seen, one in either side wall. In the back wall, a window dominates the space, covered in closed white blinds. To either side of this center room are smaller areas, covered with a large pulled curtain, in which some of the flashback scenes take place.

The most prominent feature of the set is the maple leaf silhouettes scattered on the drawn curtains and the floor. This instantly creates a familiar picture for the audience while relating directly to the title. This feature, combined with the artistic, leaf goboed lighting of the set, makes it difficult to identify the space as a hospital waiting room before the opening of the show.

The differences between the script and the production become instantly apparent as the opening of the show differs between the two. In the script, the play begins with the sound of a car accident and horn, eventually fading into a trumpet's call, all heard in a blackout. This opening immediately informs the audience and the reader as to the circumstances of the play.

Edmiston, in contrast, decides to leave the audience in the dark as to the actual circumstances of the start of the play. In the initial blackout, Luke and Adam walk out to the front of the stage, where they are spotted. Luke then proceeds with the line:

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. (1 Corinthians 15:52)

This line is found before the actual start of the script in various printed copies of *Next Fall* and refers to the Rapture, a theme found throughout the play. While it leaves the audience floundering in the dark as they try to figure out where they are and what is going on, it also changes the initial focus of the play. Rather than placing emphasis on the tragedy and the character, it asks the audience to think about a broader idea and brings the audience in with a sense of familiarity.

The production then begins with the written script. Immediately, the actors set up a pace to the dialogue. They begin to break up the lines with pauses and physical gestures, changing the flow of the written words. This lends itself well to the writing and, when combined with good comic timing on the side of the actors, increases the humor of the script. It is especially apparent in the case of Arlene, Luke's mother, who tends to go on long rants through the course of the play. The breaking up of her speeches, combined with the actress's physically searching for attention, makes these strange rants into extended, funny moments.

In addition to this pacing, the visual presence of the actors imparts a lot of knowledge to the audience that could not be garnered in the script. For example, it is very apparent that Arlene is, or is at the very least old enough, to be the other character's mother. In terms of costumes, it also helps to establish the social classes and the general standing of the characters. Holly, the bohemian candle shop owner, is dressed in a very relaxed, somewhat hippy-like manner while Brandon, the homosexual property developer, wears a business suit and with a very bold, colorful tie.

In a more extreme instance, Edmiston attempts to accentuate the age difference between Luke and Adam. While the character list in the script lets the reader know that Luke is 15 years younger than Adam, the age difference is not brought up within the script proper except in the

form of various jokes and Adam complaining about being old. Though it does not seem to be a major point in the script, Edmiston has the actor playing Adam, who is already significantly older than the one playing Luke, in age make-up. This highlights an aspect of their relationship which, in the script, seems to be of less importance than their individual beliefs.

While the actors' pacing keeps the individual scenes moving, the production's visual transitions help to create the seamless flow desired by Nauffts. Whenever a transition occurs, the curtains are adjusted to reveal one of the side areas. These transitions are, almost always, done by the actors themselves as they move on and off the stage. This helps to keep the transitions themselves within the realm of the story, removing the awkwardness of a suddenly appearing run crew and quickly exiting cast members. In the one instance where a run crew appears, they are dressed in scrubs so as to look like they are a part of the hospital and not of the theatrical machine. Music overlaid on top of the transitions eases them even more as, oftentimes, the past scenes open with a radio or MP3 player playing.

One thing that is lacking in the production, unlike the script, in these memory scenes is a sense of time. At the start of every scene, Nauffts states how many years into the past the scene takes place. In the production, however, there is no indication of what time things are occurring at and even that these scenes are memories.

However, despite this lack of time, there is the sense of space that Nauffts calls for. Because the transitions need to be so smooth, the main part of the set, the waiting room, is present for almost the entirety of the play. The only thing that changes is the way in which the area is lit. This allows it to act as both a hospital waiting room and an apartment realistically. Despite the shifts in time, it helps the audience to feel like the play is a whole.

It is only towards the very end of the play when the waiting room area is covered up. At this time, the curtains covering the side areas are drawn across the stage, similar to a curtain in a proscenium, giving the sense of a traditional theater space. This separation of space for two scenes, however, is very different from how Nauffts describes the space. It breaks from his transparency of space and, instead, isolates the two scenes as they occur in very different settings. While most of the play occurs in either the waiting room or in Adam and Luke's apartment, the two "apron" scenes occur in a park and in Luke's hospital room. This separation helps to give these scenes more importance in the overall architecture of the show.

While the visuals and aesthetics of the production give it a different sense from just seeing the script, four scenes in particular, because of the direction, stand out. The first of these is Act 2 Scene 2 in which Butch, Luke's father, comes to New York to visit. At this time, Luke is not out to his parents and, as such, is attempting to "de-gay" his and Adam's apartment. Eventually, Luke runs out to buy Windex and Adam ends up alone in the apartment with Butch.

In the play, Nauffts writes Butch and Adam to be almost foils of each other. To play on this idea, Edmiston adds a specific physicality to the scene. As the two converse and drink tea, Edmiston has them performing the exact same physical movements at the same time during the beats of the conversation, a set of actions not indicated at all in the written script. This adds a new layer to the comparison between Butch and Adam. In addition to being a good physical joke to watch, it helps to enforce the similarities between the two characters despite their drastically different points of view.

The second scene is Act 2 Scene 4 which takes place in the temple in the hospital. During this scene, Adam comes to find Arlene in the temple as she sits reflecting about her options as a mother. The scene takes place in the stage right area, which is a bunch of brick flats that

normally act as the entranceway to Adam and Luke's apartment. To distinguish it, the scenic designer has added in a standing piece made to look like a primarily purple stained glass. This piece alone gives a huge sense of serenity to the scene.

During the scene, Arlene has a long monologue in which she describes coming home from prison to an angry child Luke. While on paper this just appears to be another one of Arlene's rants, in performance, the slow steadiness and solemnity with which it is delivered pulls into away from the humorous realm and turns it into a touching and serious monologue.

The third scene is Act 2 Scene 6 which takes place in Luke's hospital room. In this scene, the critical moment of the entire show occurs. During the night, Adam has been sleeping in the hospital bed with a comatose Luke when Butch walks in. Butch attempts to kick Adam out of the room, resulting in a fight between the two of them. Soon, Holly and Arlene step in to attempt to act as mediators. There is a large amount of yelling when suddenly Luke opens his eyes and stares at Adam.

On paper, this reads as a very powerful moment as the eye opening is written out as a stage direction. This makes it unmistakable to the reader. In performance, however, the power of the moment is lost. This is because the act of opening one's eyes does not read well from a distance. Add on top of that a large amount of yelling and, unless the audience was looking directly at Luke at the time, it became very easy to miss such a crucial moment of the play. This resulted in a strange cliff in the momentum of the play as the climax was lost on a portion of the audience. Instead, the climax seemed to occur in the final scene.

In Act 2 Scene 8, the final scene of the play, the audience is returned to the waiting room to watch the final reactions of the characters. It is during this time that Butch, who has been very strong and gruff throughout the play, finally breaks down. At first, he enters mumbling to

himself about how the doctors remove the organs for donation before pulling the plug on the patient. During this time, Edmiston has him wandering around the waiting room, adding to his sense of confusion and loss. Eventually, he breaks down sobbing into Adam's arms. While the physicality of this leaves a strong impression, the dialogue was spoken so softly that the audience could not hear the reason for the breakdown. While this seemed to have been Edmiston's intent for a climax, it is once again lost in translation of the performance.

The final moment of the play, however, still delivers much more strongly than simply on paper. At the very end of the play, Ben, Luke's brother, finally calls to find out what is going on. Butch, however, has left his cell phone behind, so Adam ends up being the one answering the call. Luke had not informed his family at all about Adam, so Ben has no idea who he is. Because of this, the play ends with Adam introducing himself to Ben.

On paper, this moment reads very strongly as the simple line "My name's Adam" carries a lot of weight with the theme of coming out and being true to oneself. In the performance, however, it seems even more significant. The line is delivered center stage with Adam spotted. As he speaks, he stares straight out into the audience, drawing them in as everything around him fades to black and, finally, the light on Adam goes out.

While some important moments of the play got lost in the movement from paper to performance, the visual and performance aspect greatly strengthen *Next Fall*. Under director Edmiston's supervision, the production chose to emphasize the more personal and religious themes in the play. Though the aesthetics and visuals, along with a very strong cast, help to strengthen the flow and humor found in Nauffts' work, the production stays true and strong to only a few of the themes defined by the meaning of the word "fall."

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21M.710 Script Analysis
Fall 2011

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.