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**Jekyll and Hyde
in the Middle East**

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Jekyll and Hyde in the Middle East

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Abstract

Directing Jeffrey Hatcher's *Jekyll and Hyde* at the American University of Kuwait posed a number of challenges. But I was convinced that the theme would resonate with people in Kuwait because the play speaks to Islamic religious concerns.

In a culture in which mixed-sex productions are viewed askance, how do you cast for a play in which one or more parts may be cross-cast? My female Kuwaiti students work hard and do wonderful work in acting class. But they hesitate to perform onstage, where they might be judged by a mixed audience of friends and family. In the end, I was able to cast the female roles, and even able expand the number of female roles to three, because I had a number of strong females audition.

Commitment is another challenge in Kuwait, particularly among male students. Many males don't work hard in class. Still, they tend to believe they can perform brilliantly in front of their peers and the community, at least until it takes dedication and effort. A few weeks into the production, I lost my male lead, who found the workload not to his liking. I recast the role, but it created a domino effect of problems within the company.

Replacing Jekyll meant moving someone up to the critical role of Utterson, the male narrator and confidante of Dr. Jekyll. The male I initially offered the role to turned it down because of his own insecurities. Eventually, I cast a female in the role; adding another bend to an already gender-bending production (Hyde 4 usually is played by a woman). How would this be received in a Muslim country?

This paper will reconstruct these challenges, dissect the female roles, and discuss the female actors' attempts to raise the curtain within the confines of local cultural norms.

Keywords:

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As an American woman, a neophyte in the Middle East Arts scene and a first-time director at the American University of Kuwait, I was faced with new challenges that I had to turn into new opportunities during the rehearsal process for my spring production of Jeffrey Hatcher's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. The original intent of this paper was to look at how cultural norms impact the role of females in a Middle Eastern theatre production. However, this proved to be of less importance than the problem of discipline and commitment in a Western-style theatre production, particularly among my male students. That is what this paper examines.

Building an ensemble is central to my role as a director during the rehearsal period for any production. At the heart of my approach to directing is the attempt, at least in part, to recreate my own little Group Theatre. The Group Theatre was an *avant garde* American theatre group in the 1930s that left a legacy of working with actors, playwrights and designers within an ensemble setting similar to what Constantin Stanislavsky had done at the Moscow Art Theatre (Downs, 4). For me, the process of developing an ensemble is as important as the end product. For plays such as Hatcher's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the emphasis on ensemble work is more crucial to the success of the theatrical production than it is for other, more traditional, plays.

If the narrative is to be told effectively in *Jekyll and Hyde*, then it is necessary to coordinate the dialogue with all the scenic units, and the movements of the actors as they worked together to manipulate the one essential scenic unit — “the red door” — onstage (Andrucki, 5). In addition, the ensemble had to integrate those theatrical elements with the precise movements of each other as new scenic pieces were introduced or removed from the twenty-nine scenes of the play. Lighting cues also were essential and had to be executed with utmost precision, because they established the rhythm of the narrative as it propelled the ensemble and the audience forward in the story (Hodge, 52). If the production was not fluid, then the narrative would become problematic. The actors and crew had to become a cohesive group throughout the play, much like The Group Theatre (Downs, 59).

Major focus was placed on the ability of the actors to coordinate all their actions, verbally or nonverbally, with each other, the crew and the other member of the ensemble: “the red door”. The red door, which is moved from one location to another during the performance, is the one vital piece of scenery in the show (Hatcher, 1). It defines the performance space for the performers and the audience as we moved inside or outside rooms and buildings. It is through this door that Hyde frequently enters and exits, which allowed the playwright to define the two worlds of the play (Andrucki, 5). It separates the external world of everyday reality from the internal world of Dr. Jekyll's mind as he fights his inner demons.

Kinesthetic response is defined as “your spontaneous physical reaction to movement outside yourself” (Bogart, 42). Anne Bogart's popular directing manual, *Viewpoints*, doesn't speak directly to “dancing with a door,” but her basic premise seemed applicable to the show that we were developing. I originally trained as a dancer, and that part of the rehearsal process asked me to

call upon my physical training as a former dancer and choreographer. The player's also had to respond kinesthetically to each other within the confines of a limited space as multiple "Hydes" interacted with Dr. Jekyll and other characters on stage (Wallace, 98).

Here lay many of the challenges I encountered as I directing Hatcher's *Jekyll and Hyde* in the Middle East. Aside from the problem of not being able to easily get a script because of the nonexistent snail mail and censored escripts, putting together a theatrical ensemble in the Middle East is much like "herding cats". As a first-time director in Kuwait, I thought I would encounter problems related to Islamic religious concerns. In a culture in which mixed-sex productions are viewed askance and even my Acting One classes are segregated, I anticipated that I would have to be careful about physical contact between the sexes on stage.

I also was troubled about being able to cast a show with too many females, because I was afraid I would not have enough women audition. Many of my female students work very hard in classroom situations and do wonderful work in class, but are hesitant to perform onstage, where they might be judged by a mixed audience of friends and family. Other local cultural norms involving language, nonverbals and costumes also were of concern. In the end, however, it was easy to eliminate the one onstage kiss between Hyde and Elizabeth, the female love interest (Hatcher, Act 1, Scene 18). And more than enough females auditioned to fill the roles.

Another concern was what would happen as I switched gender assignment because of the playwright's demands. One of the Hydes is female. Once again, my fears proved unfounded. People were curious about a female Hyde, but when I explained why the playwright might do this, it was understood by audience members. Switching the role of Gabriel Utterson (the narrator and confidant of Dr. Jekyll) from male to female was not even noticed by the audience. The actor who was cast in the role did a wonderful job of making it her own, and she was stronger than the person I originally wanted to recast in the part. However, another problem I encountered in the rehearsal process was not as easily solved because it dealt more intimately with human beings rather than scenic units and kinesthetic responses.

Commitment and discipline were perhaps the biggest challenges I faced during the production, particularly among male students. Many of my male Kuwaiti students don't work hard in class. Still, they tend to believe they can perform brilliantly in front of their peers and the community, at least until they realize that it takes dedication and effort. This is not to say that I've never encountered commitment problems outside of the Middle East. I have worked in small colleges where my students were, at best, minors who wanted to go on to be majors. As a one-person department working with non-majors, my motto has been I'll work with anyone, but if you don't want to do the hard work when necessary, you don't have to work with me on the productions. It has served me fairly well because if the students are just in it for the easy grade and the fun aspects, they are of little use to me in getting the theatrical productions produced.

During my first show at the AUK last fall, I learned that what I was encountering from my male students in class also threatened the rehearsal process for the production of plays. The lack of understanding on the part of students, particularly males, about the discipline and commitment part of theatre caused the fall production almost not to open. Thankfully the play, *The Odd Couple* by Neil Simon, did open and went fairly well.

I learned from that experience. I thought rehearsals for the spring semester production of *Jekyll and Hyde* were much better and I did not have nearly the problems that I had encountered in the fall show. If that had been totally true, however, I probably wouldn't be writing this paper.

About three weeks before the show was to open, many of the earlier problems started to reoccur. Building the ensemble for the show started to prove elusive, not for everyone, but particularly for some of the males. Earlier in the semester I had a warning that maybe not all was going to be as well as I hoped. A few weeks into the rehearsal period I lost my male lead, who found the workload not to his liking. I recast the role, but it created a domino effect of problems within the company. Replacing Dr. Jekyll meant also moving someone up to the critical role of Utterson. The male I initially offered that role to turned it down because of his own insecurities. Eventually, I decided to cast a female in the role; adding another bend to an already gender-bending production. I also had to split or regroup several other characters when I did this, because the actor who was moved up to the Utterson role was making a pretty large leap, and I wanted to limit the amount she was responsible for other than Utterson.

Another problem early on was that I had to reschedule the dates for the opening of the show twice. In both cases it was my female lead, who had to fly back to the U.S. for her sister's college graduation, who caused the problem. Initially, we pushed the date up a week to late April or early May. This was not a major problem, but then we had to move the opening again because the female lead had misremembered when she was flying. That extended the rehearsal period until the end of May. Luckily, no publicity material had gone out at that point, but I was still concerned: She would miss one week of rehearsal less than a week before opening night. Still, after the initial problems of losing the male lead and changing the dates of the run, things settled down — until three weeks before the show opened.

I usually have a 6-8 week rehearsal period, but this time, because the university does not offer release time for directing, the production was a class that met for the entire semester. In the beginning, we met once a week. By two to three weeks before we opened in May, we were rehearsing nightly. It was at this point that the 'disciplined artist' started to disappear. Without this ingredient, trust started to erode between the ensemble members (Cohen, 5). Punctuality and responsibility became an afterthought for several key players whom I thought understood that part of the process.

The casualness of the activity evaporated within the rehearsal setting, and the needed intensity of the theatrical ensemble to collaborate fully did not happen. I want to reiterate that this is not the first time I've encountered this

problem in a small collegiate setting, where it is very often necessary to combine the community, teachers and students to do a show. But much like the season changes in Kuwait, the suddenness of it had a different twist that I did not fully appreciate or understand.

My background is primarily in ‘educational theatre’ with a strong emphasis on developing critical thinking, problem solving, decision making and communication skills within the small group situation of a theatrical ensemble. I come out of a Western Liberal Arts tradition that may, as historian Christopher Ohan argues in his article, “The Western Liberal Arts Educational Model in Kuwait and the Arab Gulf Region,” be incompatible in Kuwait because of the social and cultural traditions of the Arabian Gulf (Ohan, 43). Nizer Hamzeh , current Interim President of The American University of Kuwait, says that the liberal arts are “a way of life that values open minds, freedom, tolerance, and celebrates the rich diversity of the world cultures” (Hamzeh, 2006; Whitaker, 2009, 26). It has been suggested by several scholars that Kuwait, along with other Gulf States, feel that their traditions are being threatened by the liberal arts model because of the emphasis on critical evaluation.

If this is true, then I had a larger problem than I realized. In my classes, including the production class, I place a strong emphasis on critical evaluation. Most universities in the Gulf Region stress vocational and technical skills that will equip the students with specific knowledge about areas of study such as Business, Science and Engineering. Again, I am not unaware of similar problems in the U.S., where the Humanities and the Arts are not considered to be on the same level as Science and Math. Nor am I unaware that in the past, the ebb and flow of curriculum changes in the U.S. has not always favored the liberal arts curriculum, and that Theatre Arts was a poor relation at best, even within the liberal arts. But this was not because universities lacked the tradition and experience of a liberal arts curriculum, or because educational changes were coming out of a society where critical thinking is looked at askance.

Many of the students in the ensemble of *Jekyll and Hyde* were not purely of Kuwaiti origin. Several were mixed nationalities, Kuwaiti/Syrian, Egyptian/Irish, Kuwaiti/Italian, while others were one nationality, Kuwaiti or American, but the members of the company were not exclusively an expat community producing theatre in a Western style. The students were from all majors, and had varying degrees of experience in theatre. A few had been educated in the U.S. or Great Britain, but even these students had also spent time in the Middle East or Arab educational systems.

I do not tend to be dictatorial when I work with the actors — unless I am pressed for time and someone has to make the decisions. Therefore, I did not advocate one specific way for the ensemble players to achieve their characterizations. I did spend some early rehearsal sessions examining the dramatic text from an acting standpoint using basic Stanislavsky division of beats and exploring some of the possibilities of interpretation that were possible in the script (Cohen, 191, Stanislavsky, 107). This was particularly

necessary with Hatcher's script because, while some of the students had heard of Robert Louis Stevenson's late 19th-century book, the ambiguities of Hatcher's adaptation with its expressionistic techniques and Brechtian overtones were another matter. While I used some of Michael Chekhov's physical-psychological techniques during the rehearsal period, I didn't label them as such but, instead, jumped into physical mannerisms and manifestations as our four Hydes moved with Dr. Jekyll and each other (Chekhov, 44). One of the students was keenly aware of how the physicality could be a key factor in showing the audience the transformation that the character was undergoing and was able to execute the moves so expertly that I let the cast talk me into adding him as another Hyde in one scene where Hyde has to jump into the lecture theatre of a hospital and scoop up the cadaver of a girl and carry her off (Hatcher, Act 1, Scene 5). I know better than to do this, but in the excitement of the early rehearsal period I gave in against my better judgment.

Both physically and vocally the actors walked a fine line between honest, believable depictions of their characters and melodramatic caricatures (Stanislavsky, 120). There were a few actors who were much more comfortable with the melodrama, and went there whenever they felt insecure about what they were doing on stage. As we struggled with this problem I tried to help the actors balance between what was comfortable for them — because it is what they frequently see on local television — and the honesty that I thought was crucial to make this script not a 19th century melodrama. This was basically successful, but at times I felt like I was watching excerpts from a silent movie.

My own background is in some of the physical work as a choreographer and dancer, but not in dialect work. Not having easy access to a vocal coach, and being concerned about using accents at all because I have found it difficult to get beginning actors to all be in the same world when using dialects, I minimized the accents that were to be used. Just making sure that many of their own Arabic accents would not interfere with the understanding of the audience was challenge enough for the ensemble. But I did give the students access to British recordings of different accents they could listen to and practice on their own. I went over some of the articulation and pronunciation problems of each student individually, and that was relatively successful until my lead female decided that she would add a little more British accent to her role during opening night.

One character, Dr. Lanyon, was changed from Scottish to Irish because our Irish/Egyptian actor had much less trouble with that accent. This actor seemed to find his way into the role through the voice of his character. In particular, he found a growling, husky whisper of a voice that worked extremely well for Hyde 3. His contribution in this area, and some additional help he was able to give some of the other members of the ensemble regarding British pronunciations, was extremely helpful to the production.

What was not so helpful was the lack of trust that I began to feel because of his limited discipline. Hyde 3 is the most important Hyde in the script. He is central to the telling of the narrative and has key scenes with Dr.

Jekyll and the love interest, Elizabeth. When this actor performed, his work was usually 'on point', although he struggled, somewhat with line memorization. But that was not a major problem, and we worked together on that aspect during the rehearsal period. However, the discipline-commitment problem reared its ugly head even during the run of the play. He was frequently late. Even when other cast members suggested that the way to deal with tardiness in general was a grade reduction in the class, it didn't make a substantial difference with him.

Tardiness in classes at AUK, as well as other universities and schools in Kuwait, is a major problem, so much so that the university has installed electronic attendance-monitoring systems in each classroom for next year. The installation of the system was not thought to be an effective way to handle the problem by faculty, but since they were not able to offer an effective alternative, the electronic monitoring system will be a reality at AUK.

The student playing Hyde 3 was not the only student who was late on a regular basis. Starting the rehearsals promptly was a problem for almost all of the actors and the crew. Despite various measures that I adopted during the rehearsal period, this was a major impediment to developing an ensemble piece in Kuwait. While almost all the actors struggled with this lack of discipline, some actor's roles were more crucial than others to running the show.

In both the fall and spring semesters, getting to the point where I could have a full run-through of the show was a major problem. I thought I had the problem solved by opening night, but that proved not to be true. In particular, the actor playing Hyde 3 was only relatively on time for half the performances. The extra Hyde I added also was late during rehearsals and for a performance. The ensemble also had a sound crew member who not only would arrive a few minutes before the show, but lost a main sound prop, a London police whistle, which we then had to improvise for the show (Andrucki, 6).

When students are asked about tardiness, they are full of reassurances that it won't happen again, but it doesn't change the end result. Just replacing the offending actor doesn't easily work when most of the student-body suffers from the same problem.

Frequent tardiness is not the only example of the commitment-discipline problem. Very often when students had worked hard and things were going well they would take a night off from rehearsals, with or without permission. Family commitments such as weddings and funerals of distant relatives always trumped the commitment they had made to the ensemble. It was not unusual for students to take extended vacations with their families during rehearsals.

According to a 2004 Arab Human Development Report, the most favored style of child-rearing in the Gulf Region is the authoritarian model. I saw evidence of that in the fact that the actors preferred to face my wrath rather than their parents' (Ohan, 48). My lead actor, who spent his formative years in the U.S., often ran interference for me, insisting that the men in the ensemble, particularly as opening night approached, had to be at rehearsals regardless of family commitments. Very often, although not always, the women in the

ensemble arrived on time and did not miss rehearsals, but they were adamant that they had to leave early in the evening because of parent-imposed curfews.

For most of these students, being involved in a show with Western-style discipline demands was a new experience. I tried to structure the rehearsals and the show so that they would go through all of the necessary steps in the process. This included 'strike', a totally foreign concept to members of the ensemble, and a cast party in the theatre — which was also an alien event for them. Often, I used a carrot-and-stick approach as I struggled to establish an ensemble for *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, as well as a core of actors who could grow and develop at the American University of Kuwait.

However, a strict adherence to the implementation of a Western-style educational theatre program based on a liberal arts model at AUK is proving challenging. The production of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* was so successful that we had to extend the run of the play with another performance. To be honest, the extra performance was added to assuage the grumblings of faculty and staff who weren't able to get tickets to the other, sold-out performances. Still, the cast did choose to add another performance to meet the demand for tickets on a day when they had already given a matinee. This meant that students who were barely capable of hanging up their costumes (because maids do this at home), finding their props or showing up on time for rehearsal were able to sustain their energy level and dedication for two performances in one day. The extra performance was their best performance, and they all want to know what we will do next.

I have no illusions that the discipline-commitment problem has been solved. In Kuwait and other places where oil money flows and secure government jobs await, most young people don't have to work as hard as these students did in this production. It has been suggested by some of the international teachers that it is humiliating and degrading for a Kuwaiti to be seen doing work that requires time and effort. I don't know if that is accurate, but certainly a western women asking them to do much of this work was looked at somewhat askance. I do know that they were proud of what they had accomplished in the ensemble. They created something with their own hands that enlarged their imaginations and increased their trust in the ensemble's abilities. This was important to the core of the twelve ensemble players. They respected and supported each other and it had nothing to do with money or a grade.

I imagine discipline and commitment will be an issue at the American University of Kuwait and elsewhere in Kuwait for a long time. As Thomas Freedman suggest in his 2007 book, *The World is Flat*: "People don't change when you tell them there is a better option. They change when they conclude that they have no option" (Friedman, 628). The students had no option when they decided to extend the run. They had one hour between the first and second performance. I was fearful that many elements of the production would evaporate, or that someone would leave campus and be lost in the abyss of Kuwaiti traffic. Instead, they mustered up the courage, discipline and

commitment to give their very best. As a result, both the process and the product were successful.

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