

*Final report:*

# Don't Spill the Sacrament – Silence in the Rehearsal Process

## A Nightswimming Pure Research Project

Vanessa Porteous, Director/Lead Researcher.

[vbporteous@mac.com](mailto:vbporteous@mac.com)

*“Don't spill the sacrament.”*

Advice received by director David Hare regarding over-talking his response to an actor's work.  
(from *The Blue Touch Paper*)

**What is the power of silence in the process of making theatre?** Do we let thoughtful silence fall in the rehearsal room? If we did, would the work grow? What is the role of non-verbal communication in the director/actor relationship? If directors increased our skill in this area - if we talked less - would actors reveal new subtleties of expression? Would silence lead us to uncover more profound resonances for the audience?

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## I. The Project

### Rationale

Verbal exchange in the rehearsal hall is, to me, the most delightful, stimulating, challenging conversation in the world. Specific talk clarifies a moment; jokes bond us and give us courage; analogies startle us into new ways of seeing. These are the tools of good directing, hallmarks of a fruitful relationship between director and performers.

Still. So much talk.

I am an acutely verbal director, one who works hard to find the right words to help the actor unlock a nuance. It is a necessary strength. But do I talk too much? What do I miss because of it?

I am not alone. Verbal analysis and spoken feedback led by the director are the standard mode of rehearsal in our current theatre ecology. Arguably even 'non-traditional' processes, ones that emphasize physical work for example, still rely heavily on verbal instruction and debriefing. Yet our contemporary audience receives meaning in so many non-verbal ways, and our sister performance disciplines have always operated beyond the word.

Speaking personally, the ancient theatrical texts feel newly urgent to me. I long to undertake them. Yet they redound with almost pre-verbal significance. I question my basic rehearsal tool-kit of spoken analysis. Are there realms of interpretation and discovery that lie beneath words?

In short:

- Good conversation is the wellspring of discovery when exploring text-based plays.
- We spend a lifetime cultivating the spoken aspect of conversation.
- Yet we know from theatrical dialogue itself that silence is an equal partner to speech. Silence shapes speech. It illuminates it, sometimes contradicts it, therefore deepens it. Gives it tempo, feeling, complexity. Silence makes speech music, makes it art.
- So, let us turn our attention to that shadow partner of speech: *Silence*.

Such a field of inquiry could drive a lifetime of work. We undertook one small experiment over three working days. We limited our exploration to two scenes from a Classical Greek play, specifically: *Elektra* by Sophokles, in Anne Carson's translation.

#### The Team (all Calgary artists)

- Director/Lead Researcher: Vanessa Porteous (she/her)
- Assistant to the Director/Researcher: Kathryn Smith (she/her; they/them)
- Actor/Researcher (Elektra): Helen Knight (She/her)
- Actor/Researcher (Chorus): Elizabeth Stepkowski (she/her)
- Actor/Researcher (Orestes): Braden Griffiths (he/him)
- Observer: Lara Schmitz (she/her)
- Observer: Conrad Belau (they/them)

Also in the room, at times: Nightswimming's Artistic Director Brian Quirt, Producer Brittany Ryan, and Intern Dramaturg Jeff Ho.

#### Date, time, location

Monday November 12, 2018 – Wednesday November 14, 2018  
University of Calgary School of Creative and Performing Arts  
Eckhart-Grammate Auditorium.

#### Context

Don't Spill The Sacrament was conducted as part of the Pure Research program operated by Nightswimming (Toronto). The Pure Research Calgary projects were part of a conference entitled Symbiont, which included a gathering of Nordic artists from Denmark, Iceland and Norway through the Performing Arts Relay, and a symposium of the Articulating Performance Research Seminar.

#### Compensation

Though this research activity fell outside the purview of the Canadian Theatre Agreement, artists were compensated at the equivalent to a workshop fee as outlined in the CTA, plus GST where applicable. The two observers received an honourarium.

#### Summary of Approach

We investigated three strategies in studio, one approach per day:

##### Day One: Restricting the Director's Speech.

We did full company textual analysis around the table on both scenes from *Elektra*, first with the restriction that the director (VP) could only speak one sentence at a time before another person intervened, and then, after a break, that she could only say one word.

Most of our time on this day was spent around the table, breaking the scenes down into beats and intentions. We also made sure we did some blocking, with the director restricted to one word at a time. The focus was

the director not talking, rather than full company silence. That said, we also instituted two minutes of silence and stillness before and after each reading of the full scene around the table.

This day was eight hours including lunch and breaks, 10am-6pm.

Day Two: Intermittent Silence (including modelling a Quaker meeting as a note session).<sup>1</sup>

We looked at one scene in the morning and the other in the afternoon. We were on our feet. We began and ended the run of every chunk with two minutes of full company silence and stillness. We used a singing bowl to initiate the silence and a small glockenspiel to end it. These were played by Assistant to the Director/Researcher Kathryn Smith.

The group agreed that the director would maintain her restriction of one sentence at a time.

Twice that day, in the morning and in the afternoon, we held a note session using the conventions of a Quaker meeting (for more details, see appendix at end of this document).

For example, that afternoon after a brief planning discussion we undertook the following uninterrupted sequence:

- Singing Bowl
- 2 min silence
- Chime from glockenspiel
- Run scene
- Chime from glockenspiel
- 2 min silence
- Singing Bowl
- Quaker meeting note session
- Singing Bowl
- 2 min silence
- Chime from glockenspiel
- Run scene again
- Chime from glockenspiel
- 2 min silence
- Singing Bowl.

This day was eight hours including lunch and breaks, 10am-6pm.

Day Three: The Silent Room<sup>2</sup>.

When in session, the only speaking was the text of the scenes we rehearse<sup>3</sup>

We had a planning meeting before we entered the space. Once in, no words were spoken except the text of Carson/Sophokles until our break, which we signaled without words. We exited the space before speaking. In addition, we maintained our practice of bracketing the runs of chunks and scenes with two minutes of silence before and after, using the singing bowl and the glockenspiel. We worked on both scenes on our feet in this format.

This last day was twelve hours long, including two hour-long meal breaks and regular coffee breaks. We continued our exploration during two rehearsal blocks separated by lunch. We then held a short meeting to plan the evening's proceedings. After dinner we held the demonstration and Q and A. End of day was officially 10pm.

<sup>1</sup> The idea of using the model of Quaker silence came from Dr Julie Salverson, Queens University, who responded to a query I put on the LMDA Canada listserv.

<sup>2</sup> On the first break of day three, we renamed this exercise 'The Wordless Room' as being more accurate. It was far from silent.

<sup>3</sup> The idea of the silent room came from Andy Massingham who tried this with students.

### Observation

- All participants, regardless of primary role, also acted as Researchers. We made time to take notes on our experiences at the end of each rehearsal block.
- Two artists were designated to be Observer/Researchers. They took notes, offered real time feedback, participated in discussions, and made significant contributions to process design as we went along. They were charged with shaping the Q and A with our invited audience on the final day.
- An Assistant to the Director/Researcher was charged with logistics, while also observing.
- The sessions were open to interested witnesses, primarily staff of Nightswimming and attendees at the Symbiont conference at U of C that week. They were invited to enter at a break, keep stillness and silence, and after leaving, add a written comment to assist in our inquiry. Notecards were provided.
- At the end of day three, we shared some of our work in a demonstration format to an audience consisting of participants in the Conference. Our two Observers facilitated a Q and A session so as to include the audience in the last phase of inquiry. We invited the audience to leave written comments on notecards. Regrettably, I have subsequently lost those written observations from the audience.

### Background info

Though I couldn't find much research into silence as a creative tool in theatre making, there is some thinking around how silence fosters creativity and reveals truth. Here are some resources that influenced my approach.

- 'Conversation and Silence' by Geoffrey Proehl (from: *Toward a Dramaturgical Sensibility*)
- 'Silent Worship and Quaker Values' by Marsha D Holliday, from fgcquaker.org
- 'Silence in Quaker Tradition' (unsigned) from hermitary.com
- 'Science Says Silence is Vital for our Brains' by Azriel ReShel, upliftconnect.com
- Conversation about silence and wordlessness as a rehearsal practice with theatre practitioner Andy Massingham, October 23, 2018<sup>4</sup>

## II. Summary of results

I think all involved would agree that the experience was profoundly enriching, surprising, informative, illuminating and inspiring. It felt like we **had just begun** an investigation that could and should go much further.

### As a director

When I consider the experience as a whole, three principles stand out from all the others, notions that will continue to guide my directorial work.

1. Undertake every run (of a chunk, scene, or full play, in rehearsal or for audience) in a **spirit of inquiry** (rather than with an intention, for practice, or in order to implement notes). "Let's find out what's there."
2. When a note session has unearthed enough material (questions, ideas, unsolved things) **to feed another inquiry**, i.e., another run of the chunk, that's enough notes. Time to stop.
3. *Reverence* is a necessary condition for deeper creation, and **you cannot have reverence without silence**.

### Our discoveries

1. It is inarguable: Taking **two-minute intervals of full company silence and stillness before and after the run of a scene or a chunk** was the most compelling thing we tried by far. The impact of that practice has stayed with all of us. It is hard to put into words how instantaneously transformative we found it to be.

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<sup>4</sup> Please ask me for these articles if you are curious.

On day one, after taking our first interval of silence, the actors read the scene around the table, followed by another two minutes of silence. We all immediately noticed the difference from the way a cold read usually sounds. Over the three days, as we diligently stuck to our ritual pre-and post-run silences, the acting was rooted, truthful, released, and, when called for by the text, frighteningly raw. People accessed the depths seemingly without effort, though it did require tremendous focus and commitment. There was an ease to it. It took loads of energy but no strain.

The material was dense of course. We did not 'crack the scenes', far from it, and our work was a beginning only. But our approach felt radically different to us, and it seemed to yield different results. This was not the usual method of working in layers, where you shape the scene, then dig for more. Rather, it felt like the actors were always instantly in the scene. In that state, some sections had an astonishing clarity while others were confusing and muddy. Those parts would require more exploration. Maybe in the next run, after a bit of discussion, they'd reveal themselves.

For the first time in my life, I felt I might be grasping what the Greeks meant by *catharsis*. Watching my colleagues act, I felt pity (as in rue, compassion, anguish,) and frankly, real terror at the plight of the characters. Our intervals of silence and stillness were undeniably the key.

The focus of our experiment was silence as a creative tool rather than silence within the dialogue. Still, inevitably, our work on silence outside the scene influenced how we approached the silences within it. Unlike modern drama, this text does not indicate the pauses or the pace, so we decided we would allow the rhythm to emerge through discovery. Let silence be the baseline, we agreed, don't worry about cues. Speak when you need to, not before. The result was, **silence became at least as expressive as words**.

Characters spoke from a natural urge, organically, not because it was their cue. There was a kind of shocking naturalism to it – or was it actually a heightening, a classical monumentalism? Hard to describe, but regardless, it worked. Only by the very last run when the performers were exhausted did it feel necessary to suggest that they cue it up a bit. Quite organically we had discovered the outer limit of workable pausing and pace.

I am the opposite of mystical, but when we were taking our two minutes, I felt like the ghosts of those ancient characters were approaching slowly through the mists. When we closed the bracket after a run with another two minutes, they had time to leave our bodies and imaginations and depart – back to Hades, I suppose. **The intermittent silences were like donning a mask and then removing it: a necessary step in a summoning.**

In a nutshell, **we felt we were tapping into levels in the material we would never otherwise have reached**. Our answer to the question that prompted this project, "If we let thoughtful silence fall in the rehearsal room, would the work grow?" was a stunned and emphatic yes.

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2. True believers by first break, we enthused about taking the practice of two-minute silences into other rooms, then immediately imagined the resistance we'd face. We came to a depressing realization: as theatre makers in (English) Canada now, **our working process, and our very imaginations, are held hostage by the rehearsal schedule**. We all know we don't have enough time, but that scarcity seems to have leapt off the Excel spreadsheet into our heads and frozen our imaginations.

Think about it. We felt it would be hard to convince people to spare a total of *four minutes* per run of a scene. We noticed we were striving to articulate a water-tight case that those extra minutes would end up being more efficient. We knew the only acceptable argument would be that those additional minutes would actually save time!

We suddenly saw the standard rehearsal schedule as a form of institutionalized panic. We concluded, perhaps provocatively, that **at present, the only truly rigorous art making 'practice' we share and uphold as a**

**theatre community is the schedule.** Its values (punctuality, preparation, time management), trump almost all other considerations, and when you don't or can't abide by them, you are scorned.

This discouraging discovery was the second most compelling insight gained over our three days.

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3. 'Quaker meeting note session' was probably next on the list of revelatory explorations. The format allowed us to **tap a deeper level of discussion** than the usual director to actor 'try it this way next time' note session. Most interestingly, it **allowed space for more voices and perspectives.** As with the intermittent silences, it **gave honour and respect to the process, and to ourselves as artmakers.** It made us feel we were doing something important and profound. Of course we are always trying to do that, but the discovery was: **When your artmaking process has reverence built into it, you are guided to work more deeply.**

We wondered what would happen if we were working on a comedy or a farce. Would all this process-gravitas weigh the show down? All I know is, I would like the chance to find out.

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4. Don't get the wrong impression. Our time together was not overly solemn or weighty. On the contrary, **we were often joyous, at times silly.** Doing table work with a director who can only say one word was a bit like that parlour game, Celebrities; there was much gesticulating and goofiness. And trying to unpack the history of the house of Atreus in gibberish was exactly as ridiculous as you'd think.

I enjoyed our work under those conditions. Especially for weighty material like *Elektra*, **having to communicate in gibberish got us out of our heads and brought us to consider key story points with ease and lightness.** And restricting my speaking, which we did on day one, was so valuable to me that I vowed to **implement the 'one sentence at a time' rule from now on,** whether my colleagues know I'm doing it or not. Alas, it remains an aspiration honoured more often in the breach, but I persist.

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5. Some of my colleagues felt those wackier experiments were fun but ultimately not successful. In my view they did achieve at least one important outcome: **They subverted the conventional hierarchy that puts the director on top.** The actors had more space, agency, and control over their own choices and because of that, many discoveries were made.

How we work determines what we make. As the Quakers say, 'God's leading may come through any one of us.'<sup>5</sup> Anything that dismantles the rigid top-down approach we seem to have fallen into as a theatre culture is worth consideration.

As we talked about all this, I was stuck by how quickly the discussion defaulted to "But it's not efficient. It doesn't make sense to add an obstacle like that. It's just so off-side. And it takes more time than if you can just talk."

Have we trained ourselves to be blind to any gains besides effective use of time? Isn't it ok to try something, not knowing what we'll find? When we are outside a research context like this one, must that be the end of our explorations? What if we seem to be 'wasting a bunch of time', but then something amazing emerges? Might it take more than a 90-minute experiment to really get cooking with a new process? And what if we do head down a path for a while before realizing it isn't yielding anything, only to turn back? Is that effort wasted? Is that really a mistake? Is it not, rather, the very definition of creative process?

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<sup>5</sup> Fcgquaker.org 'Silent Worship and Quaker Values'

We have become so severe! **We are like authoritarian parents to our own creative selves. We frown upon any extra play time.**

We need to *take some time*. We need to *allow some slack*. As painter Robert Rauschenberg urges, we need to ‘waste some paint’. We must *keep silence, listen, wait*. Only then perhaps, slowly, from the mist, something might emerge.

### III. Written Observations from Participants

NB: Most regrettably, I have lost the written notes of Conrad Belau, Observer/Researcher. Conrad contributed immensely to the process throughout. Conrad’s influence is felt both in the results outlined above, and in the observations by the group, noted below, which were often recorded after group discussion in which Conrad was a strong voice.

#### Discoveries about the material and interpretation of the scene itself:

“[What if] The basic is silence. We speak when we need to.” – Braden Griffiths (Actor/Researcher, Orestes)

[Day one reading the scene around the table after 2 minutes of silence] “I thought the reading was focussed, compelling, on a really good course, but I don’t know how it would ‘normally’ be without the silence tools. Except everyone obviously loved it!” – Barbara Simonsen, Seachange Lab

“[Elektra’s] suffering really comes from (in the Buddhist sense) deep silence. Shouting into the void and receiving no answer.” – Kathryn Smith (Assistant to the Director/Researcher)

[Discussion about ‘pity’, a word used frequently in the text, and one ingredient of standard definition of Catharsis = pity + terror] “Surely Elektra doesn’t pity herself, nor is she striving for pity from us, despite repeated use of the word. When she says pity, what does she mean? Must have strength – must find that strength... what is it? Where is the strength located in grieving?” – Vanessa Porteous

[From Quaker meeting note session] Elektra’s inner child came out in the scene... I have begun to really imagine the world and the scenery.” – Kathryn Smith (Assistant to the Director/Researcher)

[Regarding Elektra] “Find her strength. Where is her power located? Possibly in: ‘And I wait’ (related to stillness, funnily enough). Is that her power?” – Vanessa Porteous (Director/Researcher)

[On our feet, day two] “I believe I noticed a different quality of voice and tone (also volume) in performers during scenes. For example, things said quietly were spoken with such care, almost a whisper. Things said loudly felt staggering... Is holding silence during production a way for the audience to appreciate the sound more when it occurs?” – Kathryn Smith (Assistant to the Director/Researcher)

[Wordless rehearsal hall] “Great fun, like Mump & Smoot... The physical/spatial aspects of the scene came to the fore as our focus, but it wasn’t superficial ‘blocking’, it was still rooted: a clarification of Elektra’s position (‘Fuck them all’), the Chorus’ objective (‘If you keep going they’re going to execute you’), and her tactic (calm, covered) in contrast to Elektra (free, a mess).

So, what came forth [in gibberish notes and exploration of the scene] was: given circumstances of the environment, some backstory/plot, state of being of the characters, stakes (‘They’re going to kill you if you don’t stop’ vs ‘the Cosmos is sick! Emergency!’). Not bad. Basic doesn’t mean trivial.” – Vanessa Porteous (Director/Researcher)

[Realization brought home over the three days] “Cannot make Elektra do these scenes twice through in one day, especially second scene. Costs too much. Impossible.” – Vanessa Porteous (Director/Researcher)

#### Day one: Table work

##### Two minutes of silence & stillness prior to, and after reading full scene

“Singing bowl fantastic. Better and better. The way the sound grew out of silence, as an effect of the friction/movement, was like a beautiful symbol of how the theatre we make comes out of nothing, or of the same kind of magic friction. I’m going to use that for sure. Two minutes of silence, also good effect. I was a bit stressed by it though, at one point, afraid to move or make a sound and ruin it!” – Barbara Simonsen, Seachange Lab

### Director limited to one sentence at a time

“Finding beats is always so stressful as I struggle to articulate the pictures and feelings that I have. Often then, this struggle of mine is filled with the offerings of others – often the director. When these offerings are more limited, I am forced to find my own words. Nail down my own objective language. This was a challenge, but it got easier as the morning progressed. ... So did collective’s involvement in interpretation... It snowballed a bit. Feels exciting. Like a high.” – Helen Knight (Actor/Researcher, Elektra)

“The constraint didn’t seem to change anything at the table...” – Brian Quirt, Nightswimming

“The one sentence rule was not as radical as I would have thought, but it was very effective communication...” – Barbara Simonsen, Seachange Lab

“...This discussion... now feels mediated as opposed to led, the information, emotion and understanding of each moment is in the performer, not on the performer.” – Elizabeth Stepkowski (Actor/Researcher, Chorus)

“The hardest part was deciding if it was my position to silence the director. Silencing someone has negative connotation but the exercise begs for it.” – Kathryn Smith (Assistant to the Director/Researcher)<sup>6</sup>

“The table work seemed more collaborative and welcoming of actors’ contributions...” – Jeff Ho, Nightswimming

“If we get the why, you can trust team to figure out together the how” – Lara Schmitz (Observer)

“Never repeat, so reason has to be juicy enough. Otherwise, harm/insult to actor’s craft” – Lara Schmitz (Observer)

### Then one word at a time:

“Body language away from me – good...” – Vanessa Porteous (Director/Researcher)

“This reminded me of Greek text – distilled, reduced vocabulary, specificity – and sometimes ambiguity. I liked that we all experienced VP’s challenge and everyone tried to help/assist.” – Brian Quirt, Nightswimming

“Weirdly more superficial than the morning... VP doing ‘one word at a time’ does not lead to silence, and therefore was not more profound or deep. The sound/atmosphere of silence is the key. One word at a time is an exercise in power-sharing, but not earth-shattering, more of a game...”

[However] Positive views of one word at a time expressed by Lara & Brian Q at meeting: actors seemed more embodied, group energized, fruitful ambiguity of ideas. Maybe not how we’d work for a week but an interesting & fruitful exercise [to them].” – Vanessa Porteous (Director/Researcher)

“The director settled into stillness. I noticed she stifled certain comments and reactions. Through silence, the group seemed to unanimously accept unanswered questions.” – Kathryn Smith (Assistant to the Director/Researcher)

“Not prompting opened the room for discovery even if it’s less efficient” – Vanessa Porteous (Director/Researcher)

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, after a break during ‘Director one word at a time’, the observers spoke up. They noted that we should stop letting VP cheat, and that we should honour the spirit of the exploration by not throwing in a word just so she could keep talking. This intervention was effective and courageous, and set the tone for the group’s mutually held seriousness of purpose during the rest of our time together.

“Interesting to have another meta-task to focus on while doing a play. Do we begin to focus more on the task lying underneath, than the ‘main focus’ of making a production?” – observation from Brian Quirt of Nightswimming, a visitor to the process, recorded by one of the participants.

“At what point does it feel as though there is *no* director?” – Kathryn Smith (Assistant to the Director/Researcher)

“My core feeling is that *familiarity* has led to an ease in this early ‘sorta silent’ phase. This would be very different, perhaps empowering, perhaps frustrating, in a context where familiarity was lacking.” – Braden Griffiths (Actor/Researcher, Orestes)

### Staging one word at a time

“Sometimes our physical beings arrive at a place before our minds do. Would we arrive at the same conclusion in a ‘traditional’ rehearsal process?” – observation from actors recorded by Kathryn Smith (Assistant to the Director/Researcher)

“Is two words rather than one word more necessary/useful?”

Is the goal to see how difficult it is to direct through silence? Or is it to see how silence affects the process as a whole? Sometimes it teeters on the verge of more ‘game-like’ than experimental.” Kathryn Smith (Assistant to the Director/Researcher)

“I am not sure it is useful in table work as much time is spent in guessing what Vanessa’s intent is. I think that one word for blocking purposes is not useful. When notes are given though – one word was interesting – the thought process on what it means and how to implement it is very exciting.” – Elizabeth Stepkowski (Actor/Researcher, Chorus)

### Day two: Bracketing runs with two minutes of silence and stillness

#### (VP still restricted to one sentence at a time)

“The one sentence structure for the director today seemed more like a conversation between performer and director than yesterday. It’s a lovely thought that notes would also be given more in a conversational way as opposed to a leader giving commands...”

Speaking sensorially is helpful in one sentence...

I felt the instinct to maintain the stillness from the two minute session. Moving into the scene, turning pages, even writing sounded *so* loud.” – Kathryn Smith (Assistant to the Director/Researcher)

“Why do we do another run? [Should be:] Inquiry. But in real life: to perfect, to correct, to get correct/right.” – Lara Schmitz (Observer)

“Performers observed the silence made them take the time to visualize and ponder character intention. Did the work that we think we’re doing at the table, in our heads, and privately. Not all character work has to be done so publicly.” – actor observation noted by Kathryn Smith (Assistant to the Director/Researcher)

“We ask actors to verbalize quickly after experience, and for who?” – Lara Schmitz (Observer)

“Treating it like a musical endeavour, in the silence after the cacophony. Inserting musical implements into a creative space.” – Observation recorded by Kathryn Smith (Assistant to the Director/Researcher)

“Waiting & singing bowl supports the feeling of preciousness, of sacredness (of the text, of what we are doing), which otherwise is not valued in our actions. *Reverence*, which will make room for later discovery. Reverence might be a necessary condition for deeper creation and you can’t have it without silence.” – Vanessa Porteous (Director/Researcher)

“Two minutes at the end gives us a break to let it settle. It’s a reset. Because on [actual] break, we don’t stop thinking about it. For work/life balance you need rest within a regular [rhythm]. Your holidays should not be used for recuperation. A holiday is for preparation and filling up.” – points of group discussion by Lara Schmitz (Observer)

“Take the time to not do. The Sabbath, a rest, an interval (in music, in fitness), like agriculture.” – points of discussion recorded by Vanessa Porteous (Director/Researcher)

“When the ground lies fallow, doves return to the land” – a saying offered by a witness, recorded by Kathryn Smith (Assistant to the Director/Researcher).

### Day Two: Quaker Meeting Note Sessions

“I have some discomfort with things left unsaid in the Quaker meeting.” – Braden Griffiths (Actor/Researcher, Orestes)

“Quaker silence observation: silence and stillness are very cherished in the scene.” – Kathryn Smith (Assistant to the Director/Researcher)

“It was profound to witness *and* participate in the Quaker meeting as the silence led to an incredibly beautiful internal reflection that seems so rare in a normal rehearsal process!

“The performers had to seek clarity through self-discovery and that was beautiful to watch. At first I was very nervous about the silence and how it may block creative conversations, but the opposite happened: the parameter released new ways of communication.

Directors are often tasked with the roles of educating as well as dramaturg – a clarifier of sorts. When language is restricted, then I felt the director become like *Yoda*, or a spiritual leader, where wisdom is presented but not overwrought. Where clarity was discovered not lectured upon. Very profound.” – Jeff Ho, Nightswimming

“It felt like room to breathe, which is maybe all we need.” – participant observation noted by Kathryn Smith (Assistant to the Director/Researcher)

“Only thing is: reroute the expectation that notes is director to actor only” – Vanessa Porteous (Director/Researcher)

[After second meeting] “Had our first little overt ‘dissent’ (to do the scene or not) – good!” – Vanessa Porteous (Director/Researcher)

“Very fascinating using the Quaker meeting to finalize a decision...

I did find [second meeting] became more conversational, and I felt a little less confident saying something in between, during silences. As though I were interrupting...

I would like to discuss with the group about the Quaker meeting yesterday (2<sup>nd</sup> one) and how I felt like I had to be quiet, like the hierarchy and roles became implemented.” – Kathryn Smith (Assistant to the Director/Researcher)<sup>7</sup>

“Dynamics of power: especially as director. [These practices allow] vulnerability of all, director welcoming dissent, role of dissent in the room.” – Lara Schmitz (Observer)

### Day Three: Wordless rehearsal hall

#### We maintained the 2 minute brackets of silence before and after every run of the scene

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<sup>7</sup> The second Quaker Meeting Note Session was unlike the first one, which took the form of stand-alone testimony from the participants. The second was more of an indirect discussion filled with pauses.

“Silences & tones before and after scenes – very powerful for observers too – we also must prepare.”  
– Brian Quirt, Nightswimming

“It was commedia, exaggerated, clownlike... and surprisingly effective... Only one note remained ambiguous to me. The nice thing about the ambiguity though – I just had to try it. Put it into action first, then see if I understood what VP was trying to communicate. That’s a bit of a leap of faith. But how nice to be in a situation where it doesn’t really matter if I was mistaken.”  
– Helen Knight (Actor/Researcher, Elektra)

“Hmmm. There is a sacred nature to the space when I think of only speaking the text. But that feeling was quickly dissipated once the pantomime began... interesting, but not enlightening... I would have to really practice this for a while before it would not seem frustrating.” – Elizabeth Stepkowski (Actor/Researcher, Chorus)

“Absence of words means the text of the play *leaps* out. After a scene, non-verbal communication onstage quickly generates its own physical vocabulary unique to the artists & situation. Often hard to follow from outside, which suggests specificity has been developed through language of collaboration.” – Brian Quirt, Nightswimming

“I wonder if it was a *bit* of a game...” – Kathryn Smith (Assistant to the Director/Researcher)

### General thoughts

“It’s interesting to me how much of the process of theatre is non-verbal; this experiment only highlights that for me. There is a natural electricity to a choice that ‘works’ and the room feels it.” – Braden Griffiths (Actor/Researcher, Orestes)

“We talked about power!” – Kathryn Smith (Assistant to the Director/Researcher)

“Break becomes talky: we resort to words to process” – Lara Schmitz (Observer)

“For the first time in my career, I wish I were the leader of an ensemble, so we could work on these principles over a long time.” – Vanessa Porteous (Director/Researcher)

“Silence is respect! Respect for text, for those speaking (“At the meeting”), for the ideas spoken... Silence is intentional and demands that the sounds that fill it are likewise intentional. Silence is sacred. Silence is breath. Pneuma = breath of god. The creator breathed life into existence...” – Helen Knight (Actor/Researcher, Elektra)

“Performer observed that [silence] is also about trust.” – Kathryn Smith (Assistant to the Director/Researcher)

“THE SCHEDULE takes, leaving us empty to fill on our own time, instead of nourishing the artist. Exploitative?”  
– Lara Schmitz (Observer)

“The most profound idea should be communicated with the simplest language” – Kathryn Smith (Assistant to the Director/Researcher)

### Two months later: a written response from Lara Schmitz & Conrad Belau, Observer/Researchers

As the director, your struggle normalized struggle for the whole room. You role modelled engaging with big challenges (limiting and reimagining your method of communication) that echoed and created permission for the performers to engage with the profundity of the classic Greek text. We observed great ownership and personal connection to the text, the characters, and the world that was quite incredible for only three days of rehearsal.

In this ‘brave’ space, the performers had the opportunity to sit with uncertainty and questions that necessitated exploration. Many times you could not offer direct answers and, as the experiment went along, the performers seemed to look to you less out of insecurity or for approval that they were correct, but, instead, more for guidance from you that instilled trust that their instincts would uncover something worthwhile the next go without having to know what that might be. The non-verbal communication also allowed them to engage in the material and direction in many ways that were embodied beyond the ‘head’ or intellect.

“Do we have enough material/questions/food for thought to do the scene again?” came up as, once you could answer yes to that question, a ‘note sessions’ had done its job. This attitude reinforced the importance of *doing* over *talking* and inquiry based exploration over trying to resolve or fix everything externally.

While at least one performer expressed a preference for talking through notes, we wonder whether performers have a preference for this method because it is known to them, it is the pervasive process in many rehearsal halls, and the conscious mind is dominant. With silence, however, it creates space to work on and with the subconscious – a critical element likely in heightened work especially! Therefore, we believe that investing in silence and non-literal communication may have been challenging, but ‘saved’ time by deepening the eventual work and passing power to the performers.

#### Limits to our thoughts:

We did not have a baseline of how each of these performers typically works, nor how they work with you, so our thoughts are extrapolated from what we observed and felt in conjunction with what we have experienced in other rehearsal halls not actively employing silence techniques.

We were uncertain how our role as the silent observer fit within the room and so we went off of what we thought was best. We entered in with our own connection to silence and interpretation of the experiment, so our focus may not align with what you were directly investigating. And, indeed, the experiment evolved in a beautiful way to reveal broader insights about approaches and attitudes within theatre that we have consciously omitted because we did not directly observe them in the room.

Thank you for including us in this project. While we only had a chance to meet in person this week, Conrad and I both haven’t been able to stop thinking about it and how it could potentially impact our own work. We hope you are proud of your work and look forward to seeing or hearing how it has influenced the way you approach directing or theatre in general.

– Lara & Conrad

## IV Appendix: Quaker Meeting Conventions

Note: I borrowed these conventions, which I found in articles online, in a spirit of respect and admiration. However, I acknowledge that by undertaking this experiment based only on reading and without consultation with the Quaker community, I have risked leading my group to an appropriation of traditions. I take full responsibility for that. If/when I pursue this exploration further, I will be sure to seek counsel with a member of the Quaker community, proceed according to their guidance, and ensure that we follow all protocols respectfully.

Of all the material I discovered about the power of silence, the Quaker writings were, for me, the most potent and relevant to our work of making theatre. If you want to pursue these questions, that is a good place to look.

The conventions for Quaker meetings vary considerably. We adopted the following:

- Sit in a circle. We face each other as equals.
- Anyone may speak in any order.
- We value the silence that we share.
- Only speak if the message is good for the community and beneficial to the meeting.
- Friends (aka members of the community) should not answer or argue during meeting for worship (though we can respond, or share our message in light of the previous message.)
- We stand to speak.
- We return to silence after the message, to examine ourselves in the light of the message.
- Meeting ends when one friend, designated in advance, shakes hands with his or her neighbour. Then we all shake hands.
- No two meetings are the same.
- ‘A meeting is to seek unity in decision making, which is not agreement without dissent, but rather agreement that acknowledges dissent, staying together despite differences, moving forward with

guidance from our common values. The more opinions we consider, the more closely we may come to the truth... Quaker diversity, while invigorating, is not always easy.' (see: [fgcquaker.org](http://fgcquaker.org), 'Silent Worship and Quaker Values'.)

End.