***Casting Subjects***

**Rachel Kauder-Nalebuff, Daimaah Mubashshir and Evan Webber**

**Nightswimming · Pure Research · Final Report**

*This Nightswimming Pure Research project was conducted at the University of Toronto's Centre for Drama, Theatre, and Performance Studies in the Luella Massey Studio Theatre from October 21 to 23, 2019. Thank you to the Centre for its support and collaboration on Pure Research, and the artists who participated in the research activities.*
*This report published August 2020.*

*For more information about Pure Research, visit* nightswimmingtheatre.com.

Brian Quirt – *Artistic Director* | Brittany Ryan – *Producer* | Olivia Shortt – *Associate Producer*

**Preface in light of COVID-19**

Since we completed the last phase of this research project in 2019, the realities of theatre production have changed both suddenly and dramatically. Our subject–the process of casting, its conventions and the meanings of these–is, like theatre itself, in a state of suspension.

Rather than reframe our findings within some speculation about post-pandemic reality, we have chosen to present this report more or less in the format that we had originally intended, and preserve its content, including the implications we drew from our research at the time we conducted it.

The findings of this report point towards factors that we, the authors, have experienced as artists working in institutional contexts, but we've neither been able to avoid when working, as it were, independently. It is our opinion that these factors are in part responsible for theatre's predicament (which the current pandemic only underlines) which might be described as exhaustion: standards that confuse the art form and its attendant industry; a frequent inability to identify and prioritize care in the course of process.

This predicament will perhaps sound like a general description. We hope this report offers a glimpse of practices that might lead to a more transparent, inviting and caring work in the theatre and elsewhere.

—Rachel, Daaimah, and Evan

As long as the structure of the group is informal, the rules of how decisions are made are known only to a few and awareness of power is limited to those who know the rules. Those who do not know the rules and are not chosen for initiation must remain in confusion, or suffer from paranoid delusions that something is happening of which they are not quite aware.
–Jo Freeman, *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*

**Summary**
This report aims to provide theatre-practitioners and other power-brokers with outcomes of some experimental work on what we are calling casting processes. In our use, casting processes means the range of systems or methods by which actors and other performing artists are invited into and assigned roles in artistic productions. We have tried to share some of the experience and thinking that prompted this experimentation, as well as the formal coordinates of our all-too brief work. We offer feedback and reflections from the participants in the experiment described herein, and finally we offer questions that artists and creators may want to consider when engaging with or employing casting processes of their own.

These conventions, this subject, the people and practices (both past and present) that adjoin casting processes remain an abiding interest of ours. We are excited to share these findings and invite readers and fellow artist-researchers to contact us with any reflections or provocations this work may invite.

**Meeting Places**

A shared experience was the impetus for this research. In 2017 the authors participated in an experimental workshop of Daaimah Mubashshir's play *The Immeasurable Want of Light*. The workshop was hosted by Public Recordings and Life of a Craphead at Fado Performance Art Centre, in Toronto. A collective known for choreographic projects and a visual artist duo known for comedy, working together at an artist-run centre–these partners may give some indication of the tone of this workshop and the disciplinary uncertainty we were intentionally pursuing: knowing that theatre, dance and visual artists use the idea of "workshop" in wildly different ways, we hoped that a productive confusion about pedagogy and production would be an outcome of our process, and provide insight about the play, its dramaturgy and poetics.

The four-hour workshop centred on a reading of Daaimah's play which necessitated a process of role-assignment among the participants. The play is vast and features dozens of characters. There were only a dozen participants in total and Daaimah didn't really know anything about them, personally–it was her second day in Toronto. Time was also short. So for these reasons, the casting process for the reading relied on personal information connected to the play's themes. Participants received a brief questionnaire on arrival at the workshop and filled it out; Daaimah considered their responses and quickly assigned roles, taking strong agreement or disagreement with questions as a general indicator of willingness to be involved, sympathy towards the play's subjects, and curiosity.

Once we had read the script, the discussion turned to the possibility or impossibility of staging the play; and if such "impossibility"–whatever that would look like–would formally extend the logic of the play's poetics: of how Black Bodies generate–or accrue–cultural gravity. "Possibility" of course relates to economic feasibility, so this practical discussion was really an essay of our own variously colonized imaginations. Standing in for "impossibility" in our discussion was the event we had just participated in, as readers and facilitators.

This reading was unremarkable, given that we had no other experience to contrast it to. But when we all talked after, we observed something noteworthy: The absence of an audience produced an unusual attention towards the experience of the people who had chosen to attend the workshop and been cast by Daaimah to read. The people who'd disclosed the most about themselves in the casting process expressed the deepest connection to the experience of reading; and the ones who believed that their questionnaire responses had mattered with respect to their casting said that they were more engaged in the reading and curious about their roles. Correlation? Causality?

We wrote in our Pure Research proposal: "The casting process is always a process of misunderstanding. An artist appears before other artists so as to impress upon them her suitability for a role on the basis of an impossible display–impossible, paradoxical, because her display has to reveal both who she is and who she is not. Even the best-case-scenario–you got the part!–is a double-bind. Why, exactly was I cast in this role? she has to wonder. On the basis of what mixture of truth and falsehood, what literal and figurative makeup, what acculturated residue?"

**Devising an experiment**

Casting is a part of many western performance traditions. Theatre auditions seem broadly loathed by participants and are frequently avoided, but casting processes in the broader sense–that is, the sorting of people along axes of desirability, skill and availability–are apparently constitutive of performing arts writ-large. As three artists who've worked in oscillation between the centres and margins of theatre and performance in the USA and Canada, and worked intentionally with both professional and non-professional performers, we share discomfort with the prevailing systems of casting employed across the milieu. But in the workshop for Daaimah's play we witnessed a process that seemed not to produce alienation in its subjects.

Informed by this observation and fed by our own reservoirs of prior experience and anecdote, we made what we thought was a common-sense formulation: casting processes in theatre are fraught sites of complex, performative competition; moreover, the competition takes place in a group setting and is informally structured (in the sense that activist and social scientist Jo Freeman uses), that is, governed by unstated, unsystematic and unaccountable systems; and that participants pay a price–emotional, intellectual and physical–for their participation in them.

Both to reveal some of what this price consists of, and to begin to isolate principles for an alternative economy, we devised an experiment in three parts. The experiment formalized and developed some of what Daaimah had proposed in the workshop of her play. We took the form of a group audition, and ran a series of exercises that gradually shift conventional elements of the casting process. While they took different forms and seemed to emphasise different faculties each of the three exercises had the same goal: to reduce the overall degree of uncertainty operative in the casting situation. One experiment would not be enough to prove any case, but it might prove the start of a grounded and sensible hypothesis.

To help us we invited a hypothetical, prospective cast of six actors and performance-makers to participate in our experiment. These artists were between the ages of 25-40, and were half M/F identifying and half white and half BIPOC individuals–a group such as one might expect to find at a typical, contemporary, venued North American theatre. Participants were invited to participate in some experiments relating to a casting process for a hypothetical production of *Richard II*.

This group participated in each of the three exercises, each of which began with a verbally administered questionnaire. The participants recorded responses and then read them out. In the case of the first two exercises, the responses were then interpreted by the administrator / director, who gave a schematic casting assignment on their basis.

We then read through, and performed a short text–the last scene of Shakespeare's *Richard II*. (In the third experiment, this interpretation by the administrator / director was not applicable.)

Prior to, and during, the experiments, we behaved in all respects as though the performance of the dramatic material was the goal of the days' work, and casting, was a necessary step towards this goal's achievement.

This text was, we believed, useful, because the language of Shakespeare would likely evoke other experiences of performing. The selected text also displayed, at a glance, a field of possible roles ranging from the archetypally prestigious (the verbose and philosophical king) to the unimportant and functionary (the non-speaking guard).

**Exercise #1: CARTESIAN MODEL**
Evan Webber

**Instructions:**
The first questionnaire was administered very formally.

"I'm going to speak a number of statements and I'm going to ask you to reply to each statement by writing down a number between 1 and 5. 1 means, I don't agree. 5 means, I strongly agree. These questions take different forms: remember to answer according to how true that statement is or would be from your perspective, not whether you support that statement or believe that statement's truth to be positive or negative."

The statements were:
A) Determination is more important than flexibility.
B) I empower others more than I acquire power myself.
C) Physical safety is an attribute of one's power.
D) I usually know what I want.
E) History is written by the victors.
F) May the best idea win.

After recording their responses, participants were asked to add the numerical value of their responses to statements B, C and E to find a value for X, and to add the value of their responses to statements A, D, and F to find a value for Y. These two values produced a plottable coordinate for each participant.

The "X-axis" statements were formulated to relate generally to respondents' senses of agency, determination and potential. The "Y-axis" statements related to responsibility, duty and intention.

Prior to the experiment, Evan had plotted coordinates for the characters in Act V, Scene V of Shakespeare's *Richard II* following the criteria outlined above. Once respondents had delivered their coordinates, roles were distributed on the basis of the closest match.

Then the group were given sides; they read the scene; then got on their feet to perform it.

**Exercise #2: INTERNAL AUDITION**
Rachel Kauder Nalebuff

Participants were requested to write down their answers to these questions as they were administered verbally. They were told that the answers to these questions would, as in the previous exercise, yield a casting breakdown for a performance of the same scene of *Richard II*.

They were invited to use a yes/no response if such a response was sufficient, and to expand where it was not.

+1 Right now, What sounds more desirable: being yourself? Being someone else?
+2 Do you think there is such a thing as a stable self?
+3 in what way do you really think we change?
+4 What is something you “know” about yourself? / What has been stable?
+5 When you watch strangers, where do your eyes go? Is there something you usually look or listen for? /X
+6 When others see you, what do you think they notice?
+7 What do you wish people could see? / Is there something you wish that people noticed?
+8 If you were to be typecast, what role do you think this would be?
+9 What role is the “opposite” of you?
+10 Is there one of these that sounds more desirable to play?
+12 Do you have any nightmares or fantasies of the stage? :)
+13 How do you show care for a group you are a part of?
+14 Do you prefer: the feeling of being chosen? Or the feeling of being a part of something that you have chosen?

Once the participants had written down their answers, they were invited to share them, verbally, with the facilitator and the other participants. They read their answers aloud. They then had the opportunity to revise any of their answers or clarify them. Rachel then told everyone the results of the casting exercise: in her schematic, participants who had noted that they preferred the feeling of “being chosen” over “the feeling of being a part of something that you have chosen” were instructed to play the role of King Richard II. Everyone else was instructed to play all the other parts in the scene.

Once again they took up their sides and performed the scene.

**Exercise #3: IMMERSION MODEL**
Daaimah Mubashshir

Instructions:
Participants were asked by Rachel to read and synthesize a scene from Act V, Scene V of Shakespeare's *King Richard II*. Using their own words, the participants filled in the blanks of the text below.

Come little ones, let's hammer it out.
My thoughts have tendered these ambitions:

_____

_____

_____

where I am most feeble, most weak
reach in. right through my ribs, touch my:

_____

_____

_____

Because of my ambitions
I beg for :

_____

_____

_____

I found fortitude and strength
Only after I surrendered to :

_____

_____

_____

I let (person, place or thing) ride me like a horse
And it felt like

_____

_____

_____

I rode (person, place or thing) ride me like horse
And it felt like:

_____

_____

_____

This last experiment collapsed the previously differentiated processual phases of “casting” and “performance”; here, participants were given the questionnaire and invited to write their own answers in the blanks; the casting process was also the performance, and the performance was an act of inscription–choosing to scratch themselves in, or not.

Rachel expressed curiosity about what people had written, and what they’d made of this final part of the experiment. Spontaneously, as a form of reflection, the participants read their responses aloud.

**Reflections**
After the third exercise, the participants were led in three related discussions, responding to questions.

The first set of questions was: *Can you describe the casting process as it exists today? How do you experience it?*

With this pair of questions, we hoped to get a snapshot of participants' opinions and attitudes about casting processes; that is, to learn about the range of participants' perceptions of casting conventions–and to learn how members of the group situated themselves in relation to these conventions.

All participants described the casting process as involving or being related to auditioning and that auditions were what first came to mind on considering the question. Most participants also said the casting process involved other work they did (or had done, or now facilitated) as actors outside of rehearsal and performance.

All participants described the experience of casting as a generally dispiriting or challenging attribute of the performing arts industry.

They described a common experience of attending auditions as an individual or participating in group processes in which they understood and accepted a dim imperative to "fight" for attention or "stand out" (even when an auditioner's capacity to "collaborate" is being tested).

All participants described an experience of appearing before misunderstanding or disinterested arbiters as a common one in casting processes; and of frequently being in the dark about which qualities even matter to the casting director behind the table.

All participants described the feeling of not having adequate time somewhere in the casting process.

All participants described experiences of being typecast or quickly assessed based on appearance, vocality or affect. All those who described conducting auditions themselves, described doing precisely this to others. Multiple participants shared the experience of entering a waiting room, filled with people who resemble them. These conditions—the seeming lack of interest in who performers are, and the reduction of performers into types, cut simply along gender and ethnic lines—led multiple participants to abandon traditional theatre and avoid processes of this type.

All participants described "alternative" approaches to casting that were more "organic" or "intuitive": working with friends or colleagues and bypassing a formal, professional casting process. All participants said that, at present, they occasionally employ or participate in such alternative approaches.

Most participants described this alternative as preferential, while acknowledging that this imposed many limitations along vectors of knowledge, access and privilege.

Some spoke about occasionally or frequently enjoying elements of the casting process writ-large, as long as it brought the desired outcome. This attitude was framed as the admission of a paradox: while these participants acknowledged the inadequacy of all casting processes, they felt affirmed by their successes and felt that their talents were validated when they were chosen for a part.

Some talked about decisions made to refuse to participate in the process as actors–and taking on only projects or jobs that were offered to them outright (as per the "alternative means" described above) or else self-generated.

No one talked about always enjoying the casting process as part of their work. As one participant said, "If you're an auditioning actor, you roll the dice. You think you can get better at rolling the dice. But you can't."

The second set of questions asked was: *Is the process that we employed [in today's exercises] different in any meaningful way from what you've just described? In what way were these three auditions different?*

Here we were asking participants to note how they felt about the processes employed in our experiment, and to identify, if possible, the sources of these feelings in the exercises or elsewhere in the experience. Asking about the relationship between the exercises was a means of checking on the perceptibility of our theory, but mostly was an attempt to get the participants to recount their experiences in detail.

All participants said they experienced a feeling of relief in the exercises. Some described a feeling of release at the openness and explicitness of the various casting methods employed.

Some participants did not believe that the systems being applied in each exercise was schematic and functional: during the first exercise, some participants thought the casting schema was completely arbitrary, and the questions posed were, effectively, placebos. By the second exercise however, all participants said they believed that the information they had provided (or hadn't) and played a functional role in their casting.

Some participants described feeling more responsible for the outcomes they experienced through this casting process than they conventionally would.

After being introduced to the third exercise, some participants said they understood the exercises as a whole to be "a lesson" in the way one can approach textual material. Some (other) participants described the third exercise as having rendered, in existential terms, a question of performativity that was, in the first two exercises, more epistemic.

Most participants described a feeling of knowing why they were being invited to play a particular role: because, in some fashion, they had chosen to participate.

They felt that they had appeared to those making the decisions and were either in little doubt about how they had appeared; or else, they didn't think that this appearance mattered.

This prompted a reflection about their work experience in general that was shared by all participants: only rarely did some participants recall ever really knowing why they were cast in particular roles; when these participants did have a sense of why they were cast, they did not feel like those responsible for casting either knew the reason, or could clearly state it. The exercises employed in this experiment left a different impression.

Finally, we asked: *Is there something that you think should be taken into consideration [from these exercises, applicable to] the casting process?*

Some participants imagined that using a coherent and articulable (even if somewhat arbitrary) casting process would improve the cohesion of an existing ensemble when approaching a specific project; some observed that aspects of these exercises could offer a modular and internally consistent method for developing interpretation of text or other material. Some said, you could make one or more of these exercises the basis of a process in and of itself.

Some participants were struck by how experimenting with a schematic approach to casting had shaken the apparent dichotomy of conventional and alternative casting; they were left with the sense that alternative and conventional processes of casting were not as different as they had perhaps imagined. Some noted that the schematic clarity of outcomes in these exercises felt fundamentally different from either conventional or "alternative" casting processes. But some took a contrary position: these participants noted how pervasive the feeling of being part of a mysterious casting system was; how we are all always being cast. Some noted a gradual realization that even our experiment was providing data that might influence someone's–perhaps their own–future audition.

Having something from the experience to take into consideration in the casting process would, all agreed, be a matter of having the power to do anything differently.

**Afterward**

Finally, we are making a proposal that others bring aspects of what we proposed to do in this experiment into their own casting processes: to make an attempt to connect information that one being cast provides to that person's assignment in the fictional sociohistorical trauma schematic or public dream, aka, a play. In order to do this, we need to explore how to ask actors or, really anyone, to define themselves on their own terms. After which, the question becomes, do people want to be who they are on stage? Or be who they are not? Does the actor's sociohistorical data affect this choice?

One startling revelation of this experiment was the fact that none of the participants or witnesses to the experiment, nor the outside-eyes or authors in this work could recall more than one or two instances of being involved in a casting process that laid out coherent and understandable terms for success. In other words, no one could ever recall a situation in which a power-broker had revealed their intentions or clarified the system that was being employed in their casting process; no one had ever really felt like they knew how to succeed or why, precisely, they failed to do so. More startling: even after "getting the part", no one knew why, precisely, they had gotten it. A culture that articulates the value of its participants among its participants would, by itself, represent a break with the present, prevailing conditions.

Undoubtedly, casting processes are rarely coherent. At least some elements of a casting process, some criteria for selection and exclusion, can always be articulated. Coming from those in charge, such an acknowledgement of what's known and what's not known, of what is more or less subject to change, could be a good step, one with far-reaching implications. And a system that is describable–even in part–is a system that all participants may find easier to improve and find agency within.