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Jessica Yates

Macalester College, jscheere@macalester.edu

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Macalester College

The Honors Program

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Challenging Oppressive Expectations in American Theatre from Within:  
a Comparative Analysis of Whitney White and Elizabeth LeCompte

by

Jessica Yates

Class of 2022

A critical essay submitted to the faculty of Macalester College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
with Departmental Honors in Theater and Dance

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## Introduction

In 1866, Duke George II of Saxe-Meiningen created the Meininger Company, a theatre ensemble that offered a “model of an integrated, unified theatrical aesthetic and a demonstration of the potential of a tightly controlled, director-focused mode of theatre-making” (Innes 10). These aspects of his ensemble served as an influence for credited leaders in Western theatre. The structures of his performances with the Meininger Company inspired artists including Henrik Ibsen and Konstantin Stanislavski. Many of the structures he developed in 1866 are still alive in Western theater companies today. For example, professional theatre hierarchy dynamics with directors, choreographers, and designers holding primary artistic positions (often in that order of authority), aesthetic unification of a production, and the requirement that actors would attend every rehearsal and engage in acting research are expectations that have held strong in major theaters across the US. However, Saxe-Meiningen proposed such work ethos in a time and place when artistic leadership consisted almost exclusively of white men.

What does it mean to be a director in theatre with identities and social positions that do not align with the 19th century, western European definition of director? Inspired by the incredible lack of qualitative information on most female directors—compounded by racism experienced by directors of color—I will not return to the expositional information about the European male theatre makers; instead, as I seek to uncover the aesthetic pursuits outside of such traditional circle of theater directors, focus of this essay is an analysis of directors Elizabeth LeCompte and Whitney White.

Whitney White and Elizabeth LeCompte are radically different theatremakers, from their generational differences to their artistic journeys as directors. At the same time, they share many similarities: both LeCompte and White are relatively well-documented female directors in

mainstage theaters with filmed recordings of their work, hours of recorded interviews about their processes, and articles about their productions. Additionally, they both have a history of transforming “classics” into something unexpected; they take old, well-known western scripts written by white men and turn the scripts into something new with experimental text, performance styles, or aesthetic visions. As an early-career theatre director who will work within the same power dynamics both LeCompte and White have had to navigate as female directors, I am deeply interested in studying their methods of directing adaptations. My honors production, *Seph* by Tori Keenan-Zelt, that was produced by the Theater and Dance Department at Macalester College in March, 2022, is another example of this adaptation work. *Seph* is a reimagining of the Greek myth *Persephone* that reconstructs the characters and dynamics familiar to the original Greek mythology introduced by Hesiod and Homer by queering the main character and delving into both environmental and reproductive rights themes. This paper will analyze Elizabeth LeCompte and Whitney White’s directing processes through specific performances of their work: Whitney White’s *An Iliad*, and Elizabeth LeCompte’s *Hamlet*. I will then formulate approaches I recognize in their finalized productions, and study these patterns for synthesis into my own artistic style as a young director transitioning from the educational field into a professional career path through *Seph*.

### **Whitney White: A Brief Introduction**

Born in Chicago, Illinois, Whitney White graduated from Northwestern University in Chicago and later earned a Masters of Fine Arts in Acting from Brown University’s Trinity Repertory program. In White’s still-growing career as a Brooklyn-based director in her thirties, she has earned numerous awards, including an Obie Award and Lilly Award. Her credits are

many: her directorial work has appeared at Ars Nova, The Drama League, 59E59, SUNY Purchase, South Oxford, Luna Stage, Steppenwolf, The Lark, The Movement, Jack, Bard College, Roundabout, New York Theatre Workshop, NYU Tisch, Juilliard, Princeton, Williamstown Theatre, Long Wharf, The Public, and more.

White's website states, "Whitney is a believer in collaborative processes and new forms. Her musical discipline is rooted in indie-soul and rock. She is passionate about Black stories, reconstructing classics, stories for and about women, genre-defying multimedia work and film." Such artistic commitment is evident in her work: she has collaborated on pieces that investigate race and gender in the US such as: *The Amen Corner* by James Baldwin, *for all the women who thought they were mad* by Zawe Ashton, *A Human Being*, *Of A Sort* by Jonathon Payne, *What to Send Up When it Goes Down* by Aleshea Harris, and many more. As I write this essay, White is currently exploring the deconstruction of female ambition through women in Shakespeare in a five-part musical series commissioned at the American Repertory Theater in Boston.

White's experimentation and exploration of identity within white supremacist and patriarchal structures places her at the forefront of one of American theatre's big questions: how do professionals in American theaters create work that critiques or challenges these oppressive power structures? In an interview with Wilson Morales, White states, "No one can hold an identity hostage. I have one black female experience ... I hope to always be making work that allows many people to see themselves inside the piece while also being honest to what I am observing and experiencing in the world" (*Black Film and TV* 6:24). Her experiences and motivations influence her directing work in a direct and open relationship, which is fascinating in contrast with Elizabeth LeCompte's more indirect artistic motivations and processes.

### **Elizabeth LeCompte: A Brief Introduction**

Elizabeth LeCompte was born in 1944 in New Jersey. Shortly after she earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Fine Arts from Skidmore College, LeCompte joined The Performance Group, an experimental New York theatre troupe. When The Performance Group began to separate in 1975—leading to a full disbanding in 1980—LeCompte founded The Wooster Group, where she has directed, composed, and designed over forty artistic works in the past four decades. LeCompte has lectured and taught at the Lincoln Center Theatre Directors Lab, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Northeastern University, American University, the Art Institute of Chicago, Columbia University, Connecticut College, the O’Neill Center, New York University, Smith College, the University of London, and the Yale School of Drama.

LeCompte is regularly credited for continuing the Western avant-garde art form in the theatre: the work of Bertolt Brecht, Vsevolod Meyerhold, and Jerzy Grotowski which followed through to the postdramatic theatre movement in the United States. LeCompte is famous for her reconstructions of Western classics like Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (The Wooster Group’s *Hamlet*) and Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* (The Wooster Group’s *Brace Up!*) with multimedia technology. She interweaves the relationship between historical and contemporary visual arts and architecture into her pieces. She stepped into an artistic leadership position in the 1970s, when it was more difficult for women to be encouraged to do so. As *New Yorker* article “Experimental Journey: Elizabeth LeCompte Takes on Shakespeare” describes, “Luminaries of the theatrical avant-garde—Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson, and Peter Sellars among them—describe her as first among equals” (*The New Yorker*). While intended as praise, the statement is condescending and evidence of the hurdles that her gender meant for LeCompte as an emerging director in the

1970s: as a white woman playing by the patriarchal rules of Western theaters, while being incredibly careful about how she navigated her artistic journey, she was “uplifted” to be held in regard with her white male counterparts, a very rare occasion.

**Adaptation, Accessibility, Identity: White’s *An Iliad*:**

In White’s *An Iliad*, Lisa Peterson and Denis O’Hare’s adaptation of Homer’s poem, the relationship between past and present are separated through design, and blurred by the characters’ behavior and words. Produced at Long Wharf Theatre in 2019, this two-person performance addresses audiences with casual conversation, Ancient Greek, English translations of Homer’s *Iliad*, and song in a woven braid that highlights historical cycles of war and generational violence. Played by Rachel Christopher, the Poet enters the scene wearing modern clothes to tell the tale of the Trojan War with a handful of props. The character shares the stage with The Muse, played by Zdenko Martin, a musician who supports the entire 90-minute production. White’s production is an old tale of war told by a young woman. The positionality of Rachel Christopher playing The Poet is a shift from the premiere production of *An Iliad*, when an older white man, Denis O’Hare, played this character. In a play about Homer’s poem where women were kidnapped, raped, and killed, the positionality of Rachel Christopher represents a major shift and refashions our relationship with this story. Associate Connecticut Critic Noah Golden writes:

This *Iliad* ... reminds us that the things which drew the Greek heroes to war—greed, anger, power, sex, xenophobia, revenge, classism—are what still drives our demise so many centuries later. Having a Black female as our narrator—telling a story where women are rarely more than props—can’t help but highlight the toxic masculinity that



has undone so many civilizations and the role survivors (especially ones of marginalized populations) have in preserving their culture by storytelling (Golden).

Christopher's performance as The Poet holds a depth of understanding for every character The Poet portrays. Instead of acting *within the role* to communicate which *side* of this war should earn the audience's sympathy, Christopher maintains an objective outside perspective while fully embracing the emotional range as she recites a story of war among people. In committing fully to every character representation that The Poet narrates, *An Iliad* invites us to sympathize with every character while simultaneously calling for characters in power and spectators to be accountable. In a review by the Greater New Haven Arts Council, Lucy Gellman writes:

If there's a feminist tilt here, it's a very intersectional one. In *The Iliad*, Helen of Troy is a foil: her one job is to be so beautiful that she can catalyze a war. Christopher denies Homer—and the audience—that time-honored tradition. Instead, she shows her audience the horrors of war, eerie and stunning under Kate McGee's lighting design. She shape-shifts into Hector and then hardens into Patroclus; she turns from a vengeful, furious Achilles to King Priam, made small and begging for the body of his son. She is Trojan one moment and Greek the next, blurring the lines between aggressor and victim, he who has stolen life and he who is owed reparations (Gellman).

Additionally, the story connects the past to the present in direct acknowledgement of both simultaneously. In Part Six of the text, audience members have just learned of Hector's death in the Trojan War. The Poet seems to lose her place in the story, rambling, "Just like...there was one time...uhhh...yes yes...it was a terrible hot day during the Conquest of Sumer...I mean the Conquest of Sargon—uh—the Persian War...." The Poet then goes on to list names of wars across history for four pages straight, starting with the Peloponnesian War and ending with "Iraq,

Pakistan, Afghanistan, Liberia, Syria...” (47). It takes Christopher five minutes with no more than a breath in between names to complete the list in its entirety. This chronological flow connecting 2003, the year when the play was adapted, to White’s production in 2019 heightened audience awareness to the vastness of such unending war times. One violence at a time, the performance makes the past become the present. The Poet ends the long list slumped on a chair. Lost, she lifts her head, sees the audience, and makes her way back to the story of *The Iliad* right where she left off, throwing us back in time again. The Poet jumps between narrating an English translation of Homer’s Ancient Greek and conversational American English, playing violent men and victimized women, from voicing rage and to embodying quiet clarity—in the process, the character distorts time and power dynamics, and commands how the audience should emotionally connect with either.

Another connection that White utilizes to heighten the contrasting relationships in her piece is her casting choice for The Muse. In the premiere of *An Iliad* in 2012 directed by M. Craig Getting at the Lantern Theater Company, The Muse was played by Liz Filios, who sang and played piano while The Poet told the story. In White’s version, actor Zdenko Martin played electric guitar. When interviewed about the process, White mused, “I started thinking about bands that I love that really utilize the power of two and really bump up the power of a duo—bands that are cosmopolitan and worldly, and engage with some of the political themes that this play is engaged in... I thought of a band called Massive Attack... “How do we make this sound where The Poet and the text and the play are always at the forefront but there’s a vibe around it that encases it?” (Long Wharf Theatre Promotional Video 0:56). In her production White focused on the accessibility that *An Iliad*’s text provides through casual address to the

audience when she chose music that supported the piece as it aligned with current audiences' contexts.

In White's YEAR masterclass for New York Theater Workshop, she walks students through her script reading process for *An Iliad*. "The text manifests itself in three ways: Ancient Greek... contemporary language... and translation from the original text, Homer's *Iliad*" ("The Text in Space" 20:35). In the video, White demonstrates how in the production she focused on showcasing all three of these text styles to fully understand the piece as she prepared to communicate the story to her audiences. White engages such care to accessibly communicating in all of her work. In an interview with *Slate*, White states:

I think the key to being able to direct is: are you connecting in a tangible way that you can communicate and translate in space and time to the work? Be honest with yourself when you're approaching texts about what you understand and what you don't understand. Because if you lie, then five weeks later you're going to be in trouble.

(Butler)

White's prioritization of clear communication with the audience by "making work that allows many people to see themselves inside the piece while also being honest to what I am observing and experiencing in the world" (*Black Film and TV*) is present in how she cast *An Iliad*, directed performers to explore a range of acting styles, and collaborated in creating the production's sound design.

### **Layers of Technology and Time: LeCompte's *Hamlet***

Similar to White's direction in *An Iliad*, LeCompte's *Hamlet* explores the relationship between the past and present. It is a tale of ghosts and actions long past being brought to light in

the present. In her article, “Two Hamlets: Wooster Group and Synetic Theater,” Sarah Werner writes, “The play is full of sons called upon to avenge their fathers, and yet that vengeance is so rooted in the past that it threatens the future—which of the play’s sons are left alive to carry on their father’s legacy?” (1). LeCompte not only works with text from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in her production for The Wooster Group, but also puts her *Hamlet* in conversation with Richard Burton’s 1964 Broadway production of Shakespeare’s play, this one directed by John Gielgud. As many of LeCompte’s productions do, The Wooster Group’s *Hamlet* opens with an expositional monologue directly addressing the audience: playing the title role, Scott Shepherd sits on a chair center stage and explains the process the company went through to get to the performance. The Wooster Group’s program notes mirrors Shepherd’s monologue:

We decided to develop our *Hamlet* by mixing and repurposing previous productions of the play. We settled on Richard Burton’s 1964 Broadway production as our main template.

The Burton stage production (directed by John Gielgud) has been made into a film. It was recorded on videotape shot from 17 camera angles during live performances at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre, and those recordings were transferred to film and edited into a feature. When it was released, the movie was promoted as a new form called ‘Theatrofilm,’ made possible through ‘the miracle of Electronovision.’ It was shown as a special event for only two days in nearly a thousand movie houses throughout the U.S.A. with the idea that it would never be seen again. In our *Hamlet*, we attempt to reverse the process, reconstructing a hypothetical theater piece from the fragmentary evidence of the edited film.

Shepherd finishes this introductory monologue by saying, “Channeling the ghost of the legendary 1964 performance, we descend into a kind of madness, intentionally replacing our own spirit with the spirit of another” (Werner 1).

The opening expository monologue blurs the boundaries separating Shepherd the actor and Hamlet the character, thus presenting the production as Hamlet’s own, in turn sustaining his image as the puppet master Hamlet believes himself to be to the audience. As The Wooster Group’s production progresses, the actors adjust their places in space onstage when “jump cuts” on the projection of Burton’s filmed version occur, moving ever so slightly forward, backward, side to side, or angling themselves differently as the film cuts from one camera angle to another. The spirit of the filmed *Hamlet* is brought back to life and becomes in itself a live performance. Onstage, the actors speak over the film, word for word and stutter for stutter in synchrony with the actors on the screen—until they don’t: in certain moments, the actors in LeCompte’s production silently mouth the words spoken in the film; or the sound in the film is turned off and The Wooster Group takes over the text. In the famous “To be or not to be...” soliloquy, Richard Burton fades away visually and sonically, leaving a nearly blank stage behind Shepherd as the live actor speaks Hamlet’s lines. In Shakespeare’s plot, the spirit of the present takes over during the famous soliloquy: Hamlet processes his father’s murder as he arrives at the conclusion that his uncle is the murderer and his mother the accomplice. Hamlet vows that he will avenge his father. As Shepherd takes the forefront, Hamlet takes over the course of the plot, crowning himself judge, jury, and executioner for his accused villains and suspecting victims.

In another example of the relationship that LeCompte establishes between filmed/past and live performance/present, Kate Valk’s voice as Ophelia in The Wooster Group’s performance consistently overpowers Linda Marsh’s voice as the character in the 1964 film. Throughout

Ophelia's monologue after Hamlet's "Get thee to a nunnery" rejection, the film behind Valk bursts into light. Linda Marsh is repeatedly snapshotted in frozen pictures on film while Valk continues as if nothing is happening behind her. Unlike the other utilizations of film and movement throughout the play, Valk acts independently from what happens on screen: her Ophelia has broken from *Hamlet's* plot. The Wooster Group's Ophelia steps outside of it to observe what other characters are ignorantly walking into and she decides to fully disconnect from the narrative that they acquiesce to. While Hamlet continues to guide the audience, Ophelia has deserted her role. If the original Ophelia comes onstage mad and later dies, Valk's Ophelia stops playing along.

It is interesting to note that LeCompte made the unusual decision to cast Kate Valk as both Gertrude and Ophelia. Her artistic vision aligned the two named female characters in the play to symbolically merge their motivations and influences. This choice highlighted for the audience another aspect in the fragility of women in Shakespeare's plays: the two people who love Hamlet the most are in the powerless position of receiving his fury.

Valk is onstage as Gertrude when Shepherd's Hamlet "realizes" he will need to skip past Ophelia's demise as described in Shakespeare's play. In the scene in which the actors prepare the play-within-the-play scene, Shepherd's Hamlet stops the moment, stating to Valk's Gertrude: "Actually, we better skip this Ophelia stuff." The director makes a clear statement as the audience watches the filmed scenes of Ophelia's madness and death quickly fast-forwarding: as LeCompte separates Valk's Ophelia from Shakespeare's plot, she returns Ophelia's agency to the female character. If the audience knows what *could* have happened to Shakespeare's Ophelia, they do not know what happens to *this* Ophelia. She has saved herself from the white male playwright's script. While the film projection fast-forwards through Ophelia's scenes, Shepherd

crosses the stage to a microphone stand to directly address the audience, “In fact, why don’t we take an intermission here? Can we do that? Yeah, we’ll take a ten-minute interval.” The actors who had been busy preparing the play-in-a-play scene rise and exit with him. Combined with the casual way in which Shepherd “suggests” an intermission, the interruption of their preparations is sudden and seemingly spontaneous if not for the projection of the word “INTERVAL” in place of Burton’s film. LeCompte’s directorial decision is jarring and evokes a Brechtian-like maneuver to let the audience know that this is a performance.

In an interview with journalist Linda Yablonsky, LeCompte details her artistic process. When asked to clarify her intention of “making the stage a dangerous place,” LeCompte articulates, “I meant for the audience. I probably meant there is the sense that anything can happen, that it isn’t as controlled an environment as might be expected ... When accidents happen, the audience is unclear about whether they are in the present world or in an illusionist world” (42). This is incredibly clear throughout The Wooster Group’s *Hamlet*, from the film starting without sound at the top of the show and Shepherd halting the process, seeming to restart the film himself with a quick, casual apology to the audience and actors, to the abrupt intermission. *Hamlet* is the kingpin through Shakespeare’s script; LeCompte’s use of Shepherd to usher the audience through spontaneous addresses and the entire performance structure heightens this centrality. Gertrude witnesses another woman survive Hamlet’s violence, and Hamlet is forced to a “change of plans” as a result of this.

Spectators can see these two very separate but not necessarily conflicting ideas on the stage simultaneously: LeCompte’s production either recreates or turns away from the patterns and staging in Burton’s film; the actors take a Brechtian approach when they address the audience or provide commentary on the play. In LeCompte’s interview with *Drama Online*, she

details her directing process from picking a project to working on the production. LeCompte states, “[after several read-throughs] I’ll have a vision of how to stage it. I’ll have some idea of the style, how I want to hear it, or how I don’t want to hear it. Then we start by trying to stage it. I usually have sometimes two or maybe three ideas in mind at the same time, and they don’t augment or illuminate each other. They’re two totally separate ideas” (“The Art of the Rehearsal” 1:24). LeCompte works with interruptions as well as with accumulation. In The Wooster Group’s *Hamlet*, such aesthetic manifests in Shepherd’s opening direct address as the title character to the establishment of a parallel screen/stage performance of *Hamlet* the play; in the Shepherd’s return to a Brechtian direct address to the audience to call for an intermission into scenes in which actors sit as if watching the film with the audience; to finally circle back into a performance that runs parallel to the dubbed film. LeCompte’s directorial shifts create a jarring yet smooth production that heightens audience awareness to the relationships between the past and present, other and self, and generational cycles, all at play within Shakespeare’s plot. LeCompte’s direction seems to focus on finding drastic experimental methods to radically heighten Shakespeare’s themes. The director states:

When you talk about having your senses rearranged—that’s how I feel when things come together in the work. It disturbs me at times. Part of the pleasure for me is surprise, and that’s why I build in so many random moments—I can never really turn it into a system. A system would bore me. Like if I hear a line reading and know what’s coming next, I’m bored. I need some element of hedonistic surprise—that’s a little perverse—to fool myself, to surprise myself, and yet, at the same time, I need to maintain control.

(Yablonsky 45)



LeCompte prioritizes “combining Brechtian story-telling, direct address, and...extreme subjective naturalism” (45) to reconfigure this well-known, powerful theatre piece in ways that ask new questions about gender? agency and power dynamics in this story. In The Wooster Group’s production, such an approach is clear in the manner in which LeCompte focuses on the relationship between live performance and multimedia technology.

### **Production Affects Story: LeCompte’s and White’s Directorial Focuses and Effects**

American theaters continue to foster directors who are at the top of a given production’s power hierarchy, reproducing a system that originated from the Meininger Company. Whitney White and Elizabeth LeCompte exist and work from inside this structure, but their work pushes against these constraints by exploring questions that deconstruct the patriarchal and white supremacist *modus operandi* in texts written by white men.

The Wooster Group’s *Hamlet* premiered in 2006 at Festival Grec in Barcelona, Spain. LeCompte, sixty-two at the time, explored women’s agency in Shakespeare and multimedia technology in performance. She stretched the boundaries expected of a Shakespearean piece by questioning both the sexism in the highly-revered story of *Hamlet*, and the audience’s complicity and comfort with the expected storyline of Ophelia. While her production highlighted the female characters played by female performers—it is important to remember that the original *Hamlet*’s cast consisted exclusively of male actors— LeCompte’ casting choices in *Hamlet* also upheld the cisheteronormative expectations of gender in a play that subscribes to the male/female binary. Moreover, LeCompte’s casting of exclusively white actors in *Hamlet* reflects an unwillingness to see how such casting choice aligns with theater’s normative white supremacy. If LeCompte’s positionality as a woman supported her critical refashioning of female agency in *Hamlet*, her

whiteness led her to directorial decisions that differentiates LeCompte from Whitney White and *An Iliad*.

When beginning to form her vision for *An Iliad*, White quickly discovered that she wanted to build the production around her decision to cast a Black woman in the role of The Poet: “When I started interpreting this text, I knew that I wanted to have a point of view on who The Poet was.... I knew that my Poet...when I think of someone who’s traveled the world and been a part of every war and been a survivor of every war, who is constantly left to pick up the rubble, I thought of Black women” (New York Theatre Workshop 19:32). In *Howlround Theatre Commons* article “Identity Conscious Casting: Moving Beyond Color-Blind and Color-Conscious Casting,” Lavina Jadhvani and Victor Vazquez define identity-conscious casting is “about making space and embracing how actors and artists can bring their whole identities or even parts of their identities to a process, to a character.” Unlike LeCompte, who works with a company of predominantly white performers, White approaches casting from an racial identity-conscious perspective. She changed the casting choices in the original production of *An Iliad* by altering both the race and gender of The Poet, as well as the gender of The Muse. These shifts allowed heightened perspectives of the text to come through to audiences; several critical reviews of the piece noted the commentary of the patriarchal and racial power dynamics of war throughout empires and the laborious responsibility that is set upon those in oppressed positions to maintain their histories. Other aspects of performance that I note as intriguing similarities in White’s and LeCompte’s directorial focuses are movement, sound design, and time. Movement followed by stillness onstage is present in both White and LeCompte’s pieces, and used for similar purposes: heightening intensity, directing audience focus, and locational grounding onstage.

White's piece uses stillness to represent chapters of the text, and fast action in the characters' actions within the text's chapters. About *An Iliad*, Noah Goldman writes, "Under White's inventive direction, Christopher prowls the set (by Daniel Soule, think a rock-concert-by-way-of-Sparta) in a succession of striking tableaux. The Poet huddled on the floor next to a flickering fire. A conversation with an empty Greek helmet, Yorick-style, bathed in Kate McGee's fluid lighting. The Poet writhing in orgasmic rage mid-battle." The actor changes location as The Poet switches characters or the story's time period, and then uses engaging, quick and detailed movement as she engages with her audience and story. White uses movement to put space and place in relationship within worldbuilding. Fixing different locations in *An Iliad* to different points onstage allows audiences to easily track the perspectives they witness in this complicated and multidimensional script.

In *Hamlet*, the actors are most still when intense dialogue is present—a rapid back-and-forth between characters, or during the close-up sequences of Burton's monologues. Their stillness heightens intensity of these moments in which their slight turns to match camera angles, or short bursts of movement in between cuts are made to appear normalized in their bodies. Their switches between explosive movement and intense stillness provides energy that drives the play forward, while allowing space for the text to shine through, whether it is spoken by the film or the live actors onstage.

White's production of *An Iliad* and LeCompte's *Hamlet* heavily depended on sound design. Lisa Peterson and Denis O'Hare's script of *An Iliad* has two characters, The Poet and The Muse. As the narrator and main focus of the piece, The Poet calls for The Muse to join in by performing the music that is the soundscape for The Poet's words during this 90-minute performance. Sound becomes a design element that envelops the performance as it offers a range

of emotional tones and historical contexts: while in the original production The Muse played piano and sang softly, Zdenko Martin's Muse played electric guitar and a music score that was heavily influenced by trip hop band Massive Attack, known for their anti-war, environmentalism, and human rights advocacy. By placing this sonic context on the performance, White grounded the ancient story further in present time, connecting the audience's current understanding of war to the Ancient Greek battle.

In LeCompte's *Hamlet*, the actors are in constant relationship with the voices of the actors on the filmed recording of Richard Burton's production of *Hamlet*. For a large majority of stage time, they speak in the same cadence, tone, and rhythm as the performers onscreen, creating a doubling affect that intertwines the live performance with the 1964 production. The choice of using Shakespeare's text also layers past and present, looping the two. Departures from this performance structure—the moments when The Wooster Group actors perform without the projection of the film—highlight departures from the structures created in the past, representing change in the future of characters within Shakespeare's play, Shakespeare's work being performed, and larger societal changes in Western culture.

Both LeCompte and White conceptualize movement and design in relation to historical time. In the productions that I discuss in this essay, both LeCompte and White explore the historical travel between the time period when the play's story takes place and that of the performance—for example, the listing of every war in between Mesopotamia and Iraq in *An Iliad* or the placement of the 1964 Broadway production in *Hamlet*. The original texts inspiring The Wooster Group's *Hamlet* and Denis O'Hare and Lisa Peterson's *An Iliad* are from 1607 and around 672 B.C. (Shurkin). The current and future contexts of these pieces are exemplified in multimedia in *Hamlet* and modern technology and the contemporary costumes that The Poet and

The Muse wear in *An Iliad*. This culmination of histories leads to the present, the year when these performances were produced, and the audience's context and understanding of the present as something that can influence the future. These stretched, multidimensional communications of time result in effective adaptations of the historical origin to something very new.

### **Values, Focus, and Effect: Working Towards My Directorial Voice**

I chose to direct *Seph* for my honors production for several reasons. Like LeCompte and White, I have an interest in adaptation of classic texts; playing with the concept of established expectations holds incredible potential for exploring history, layers of performance within productions, and stretching audiences to recognize the oppressive origins of modern societal and theatrical structures. For example, *Seph* is a contemporary adaptation of the Ancient Greek myth *Persephone*, first told by the Greek poet Hesiod and soon after by Homer.

In the myth, god of the Underworld and ruler of the dead Hades kidnaps Persephone, the goddess of spring growth and daughter of Demeter, goddess of agriculture. After deceit, a famine caused by Demeter as a negotiation tactic with several gods, and Persephone's consumption of 6 pomegranate seeds from the Underworld, Demeter and Hades reach a deal: for six months of the year, Persephone may live on Earth as Demeter's daughter—Demeter finds her joy in these six months and fills the world with warmth, creating spring and summer. For the other six months of the year, Persephone returns to the Underworld as Hades' wife and co-ruler of the dead. Demeter, in her loneliness and bitter passion, freezes the world while her daughter is way, thus creating autumn and winter (Hesiod 912).

In Keenan-Zelt's reconstruction of the myth, *Seph* is the fourteen-year-old child of separated parents Demeter and Hades. She travels between the two over the river that represents

the barrier between life and death in a sort of custody arrangement. Demeter is obsessively fixated on her child when she is present, so in the six months that Seph spends with Demeter the Earth is heated to the point where nothing can grow. When Seph is with Hades, the world freezes: humankind struggles to survive the harsh weather that can cause hunger and death. Also an echo of the Greek myth, *Seph* counts on the presence of the Fates, who comment on the extreme climate variations. Early in the play, Seph meets Heather, a nineteen-year-old mortal: her awareness grows beyond her privilege as a beloved daughter and she is able to understand the ultimate consequence of her parents' behaviors: the end of the world as she knows it. My director's note for *Seph* reads:

What do we do when we acknowledge the generational cycles our parents have imprinted upon us? The company of Seph has been exploring this question throughout this year of extreme temperatures and legislative attacks on reproductive rights. Seph and Heather, Demeter and Hades, and the Fates who came before them all must face the now ruined world with the same question we face with today's political and natural climate: what do we do now?

In this essay, I focus on the design and casting choices in this production of *Seph* for the purpose of displaying how I implemented similar methods as White and LeCompte, the two directors I researched, in my directorial process. By analyzing and then incorporating these female directors' approaches into my artistic process for *Seph*, I experiment with my own artistic journey while intentionally considering their work as directors who actively challenge oppressive expectations of race and gender in their adaptation productions.

Tori Keenan-Zelt's script introduces the world that *Seph* takes place in as follows: "Place: Big Sky Country, The Woods, and The River between them. Time: Another now. Note: This

world lives as much in the physical space as in the dialogue. Designers rule. Forget what you know about the gods” (ii). The stage directions ask for three specific locations, an abstract distortion of time, and a request for bold design.

I considered White’s drive to be intentionally inclusive of her audiences as I engaged with the design team for *Seph*. Sound designer Lucas Martin and I collaborated on discovering how time and location in the natural world could be established through sound. We identified different wind, bird, and other sounds from nature that could be employed based on plot location and time of season. Martin and I extended this exploration to highlight the play’s many “flashbacks.” Martin was able to control the location of a given source of sound by using a surround sound system composed of ten speakers placed in different areas of the theatrical space.

Light designer Alice Endo plotted out the measurement of time on a more detailed level. By using many color gels on a large cyclorama set upstage, Endo was able to convey time of day in fluid, subtle visual shifts. Season can be tracked through the warmth or coldness of the lights that washed the stage suggesting the change of seasons, while Endo’s use of darkness and brightness isolated a given character onstage. The combined use of these two design elements culminated in a visual soundscape that led the audience through the performance as a measure of both time and place.

The sound and light design deliberately affected the acting onstage. The thuds of birds hitting the roof of Hades’ house, visually represented with carefully-timed spots of light coming up on feathers set in front of the house, interrupt a conversation until it changes to an argument addressing the sounds themselves. The sound of wind brings with it another layer of an isolating and dangerous winter storm in the dark, blue stage, signifying the looming mortality of a pregnant nineteen-year-old stuck on Hades’ side of the river.

Designer Lily Turner focused on creating costumes general enough to not be distractingly identifiable while remaining within current fashion trends so as to better fix the play's time period within "Another now." Oversized puffer coats, shawls, and leather jackets communicated season changes as the story progressed into colder and colder weather. In contrast, the Chorus of Fates linked *Seph* to the Greek myth: chorus members wore draped materials with natural details that corresponded with the prairie grass and forest onstage. Ancient Greek theatrical masks influenced the design of the Chorus' masks. Directing advisor Barbra Berlovitz taught me exercises that I could practice with the actors as they familiarized themselves with mask work.

In rehearsal, actors experimented with the relationship between distance and emotional tone. This experimentation resulted in a first encounter of characters, staged to circle one another using the entire length of the stage. Set designer Eamon McGuigan and I borrowed from White's strategy of fixing certain story locations to locations onstage. Eamon's set presents large stretches of open space that create depth; and moving screens made of prairie grass on Demeter's "Big Sky Country" and forest trees in "The Woods" where Hades resides. Hades' 8-foot by 8-foot space is framed by large grey beams representing a home. It is in this contained space that family members argue; to me, Hades' home suggested a pressure cooker. A river runs across the center of the stage; intimate, pivotal moments of the plot take place at this crossroads.

Throughout this story, the chorus, The Fates, watch *Seph*'s journey through the climate and *Seph*'s own growth of awareness by hovering along edges. They represent the audience's connection to *Seph* as they cluster in the land of the living "Big Sky Country" as *Seph* shoots and kills a deer with Hades in "The Woods," they shiver as the weather turns more frigid and inhabitable for a young Heather trying to survive, and they beat their hands on their chests in rhythm with the heartbeats *Seph* can hear as she comes into connection with living beings.



In Keenan-Zelt's script for *Seph*, the role of the main character, Seph, is listed as "Female or Non-binary (script uses she/her), 14." One of the largest themes that called to me when choosing *Seph* for my Honors production is its exploration of queer femininity; more specifically, a nonbinary child whose parent(s) perceive them as feminine. This theatrical representation is important to me both as an artist exploring queer femininity in my personal life and because historically queerness has not always been allowed or wanted on stages and pushing the cisheteronormative expectations of Western theaters is my method of challenging oppressive expectations in comparison with how White and LeCompte approach their works.

In my artistic journey with *Seph*, I wanted the queer aspect of Keenan-Zelt's intent to not be overshadowed by a cisnormative binary casting. Keenan-Zelt offered that the role could be played "Female or Non-binary," yet used she/her pronouns. The playwright's decision did leave room for a director to drop the exploration of gender queerness from the narrative by not prioritizing the possibility of casting a non-binary actor. Thus, it was vital to me that the cast and the performer playing Seph be open to actively engaging with this character's identity journey. Finding a cast that supported this journey was not difficult; we advertised the play as an openly queer piece before auditions. The majority of those who auditioned *and* the finalized cast openly identified as queer, a still rare occasion in Macalester's theatre history—another recorded event of this nature in recent years is Macalester honors graduate Miller Shor's script reading in 2019.

In casting a nonbinary performer as Seph, gender dynamics became a lens the audience (made of mostly college students) was able to connect to throughout the piece. Demeter creates life and is regularly accused of being "too emotional" by Hades, who Demeter refers to as violent and unfeeling. Both parents attempt to influence Seph through their perspectives of the

world, and Seph struggles with feeling lost in their very gendered battle. In a final scene between Seph and Hades toward the end of the play, they argue:

HADES Our job is to make a clean cut quick. Women and babies are a tangle.

Understand? There's no in-between.

SEPH Yes there is.

HADES Not between life and death.

SEPH I live in-between. (60)

This admittance from Seph to Hades highlights the position of a nonbinary child with two cisgendered parents. The nonbinary identity Seph holds layers the text from a conversation about life and death between gods to the moment when a child admits that neither of their parents will ever be able to fully relate to the way they navigate the world. This acknowledgement is well understood from a queer standpoint for college students today, as most are in Gen Z, the generation spanning 1997 to 2012, who, as a generalized population in the US, hold a generational identity of being more openly queer than the generations before them—this and other research into Gen Z collective awareness and expressions of identity has been collected by Catherine Cheng Stahl and Ioana Literat at Columbia University. This example of the way casting can complicate a text to hold new meanings for certain identity groups is consistent with the entire production of *Seph* through a queer lens examining generational cycles at Macalester College.

The manner in which I hoped to elicit collaboration from the performers in performance choices included considering how their personal identities would contribute to design and other choices. For example, early on in the rehearsal process I assigned the performer playing Seph to create a music playlist based on what they thought their version of Seph, a fourteen-year-old

nonbinary child of gods, would listen to if they were a current fourteen-year-old in the US. They created a playlist with one hour and twenty minutes worth of music in it. On that playlist was Phoebe Bridgers' "I Know the End." The biography of Phoebe Bridgers, a bisexual musician with divorced parents, holds several parallels to Seph's life story. Unsurprisingly, "I Know the End" is filled with lyrics that directly connect to the script of *Seph*. Below I parallel the links between the two:

Song Lyrics (Bridgers)	Analysis with Information from <i>Seph</i> (Keenan-Zelt)
<p>████████████████████ ██████</p>	<p>Sunsets became a large aspect of how light design communicated time passing to the audience - both in days, and in Seph's growth as an adolescent.</p>
<p>████████████████████ ████████████████████ ██████████████ ████████████████████ ██████ ████████████████████ ██████ ████████████████████ ██████ ██████████████</p>	<p>Demeter and Hades, Seph's parents in the play, are drawn together as 19 year olds and quickly jump into a very serious relationship; they have never known adult relationships before, and hurt one another in their inexperienced communication.</p> <p>They separate, but continue influencing one another through their child, and address one another as older adults at the very end of the play.</p> <p>Birds represent the harm they caused to one another as well as those they harmed through the responsibilities they neglected together.</p>
<p>████████████████████ ████████████████████ ████████████████████ ██████ ████████████████████</p>	<p>The mythology of the original Persephone myth offers an explanation for the creation of seasons: the simplified version of this creation myth holds true in Keenan-Zelt's tale.</p> <p>When Seph is with Demeter, the world warms, and spring and summer exist. When Seph is with Hades, Demeter becomes lonely and vindictive, and the world freezes over in fall and winter. In Keenan-Zelt's play, Demeter and Seph share a fantasy of driving</p>

<p>[REDACTED]</p>	<p>away together in a world that stays warm forever. In the reality presented by Hades, hot weather all the time will kill the earth just as fast as the rapidly fluctuating hot and cold seasons in the play.</p>
<p>[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]</p>	<p>Seph and Heather share a plan of escaping this endless back and forth between violent weather.</p> <p>The last lines they say in the play to one another are:</p> <p>Heather: So what now?</p> <p>Seph: I don't know. But I'm here. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere.</p> <p>This is an acknowledgement that Seph will be present with Heather through whatever comes next, wherever they go next - the haunted house of their experiences meets the white picket fence, a metaphor for achieving their goals..</p> <p>They are the newest generation in this cycle of unsurvivable conditions; while they don't know what to do next, they acknowledge that the ways they have been existing do not serve anyone. They look toward a future together while acknowledging that that future doesn't hold a definition in the end of the world.</p>

“I Know the End” by Phoebe Bridgers became a deeply special symbol for myself and the cast of *Seph* at Macalester. As such, “I Know the End” is the final song in *Seph*'s pre-show playlist. During “I Know the End,” the lights over the house slowly dim as Alice Endo's light design creates a sunset onstage. Audiences are slowly pulled into the world they are about to witness through the rise and fall of Bridgers' song. When roughly four minutes into the song we hear the chorus “The end is near,” spectators watch *Seph*'s chorus walk onto the stage. They wander around Demeter's side of the stage, searching for something or someone who the audience has not yet been introduced to until the chorus settles into still positions with one hand over their hearts. As Bridgers' voice fades away, the echo of sharp breaths fill the now quiet space. Lucas

Martin's design brings the sound of sweeping wind to the theater. The chorus catches their breath before launching into the script. This fluid flow from pre-show into the first scene of the performance perfectly set the audience in "Another now."

### **Another Now: Concluding My Researched Analysis of Directing by Looking Ahead**

Generationally, LeCompte and White have been trained at very different cultural moments for the arts. While the patriarchal structures inherent in major American theaters today have impacted the style of direction the two of them use, their methods of questioning oppressive structures in their work differ. Acknowledging that their work is considered "successful" *inside* of the theater structures that originated in 1866 Western Europe allows exploration of the questions: What do "successful" directors of the 21st century who do not align with the 19th century, Western European definition of director look like in the United States today? How do they work *within* these structures to challenge and strengthen the future of theater? The lack of recorded information on a majority of directors of color and non-male directors inspired this researched analysis of Elizabeth LeCompte's *Hamlet* and Whitney White's *An Iliad*. The strategies I discovered in their directorial methods are tools I incorporated into my work on *Seph* by Tori Keenan-Zelt, another adaptation of an old well-known story written by white men while exploring themes of generational accountability, and sexuality and gender. These methods focusing on design, time, accessibility, movement, and casting are not new—they have not been introduced to the theatrical world by White and LeCompte. However, LeCompte and White utilize these tools and this hierarchical structure of theatre to continue stretching audience expectations when it comes to the stories and characters told within American theaters. They work within the system to slowly challenge the oppressive expectations that have come with it,

and they deserve recorded acknowledgement for their work in this field; my essay serves as this recorded acknowledgement, and by learning these methods through them and incorporating it into my work, I honor these modern female directors on both an academic and artistic level.

My intention as an early-career director stepping out of academia into the professional world is to both explore structures of American theater that exist outside of the rigidity of the structures originating with the Meininger Company so long ago, and exploring how to question and challenge oppressive structures from inside these major theater systems as well, like Whitney White and Elizabeth LeCompte have done. I will continue to advocate for the visibility of directors who do not have adequate representation in recorded archives today in relation to white male directors. Like LeCompte's *Hamlet*, White's *An Iliad*, and my Honors production of *Seph* communicate, it is necessary that we keep track of the trajectory of the past so as to embrace the changes that will push the boundaries of our current contexts toward a better future.

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