

ARACHNE: THE ORIGIN

Integrative Project Thesis Paper

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In the beginning, there was only one thing I aspired to achieve for my integrated project, putting on a show. I knew I wanted to embark on creating a production which would allow me to explore my love of costume design and construction, as well as story telling, and experimental theatre. I am fascinated by multi media and collaboration, and the ability to fuse different fine arts together to create a spectacle on stage. This stage magic helps bring the story to life in a way that could not happen under normal circumstances. I wanted to test my ability to bring an entire production together, but more importantly, I wanted to witness the collaboration that needs to occur for such a production to exist. All of the inspiring, motivational, collaborative moments are what have made my IP project so rewarding.

My challenge at first was to create the story, the heart and soul for which the whole project would revolve around. I searched for inspiration in every element of my life. The song “The Origin of Love” from the movie *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, a contemporary rock musical, opened my eyes to the mystical and beautiful world of mythology. I began researching stories from all over the world that tell of natural phenomena in an unnatural way. In other words, these are ancient cultural creation myths that explain how something we are used to seeing everyday, yet don’t know of their origin, came to be. I found that this natural human desire to believe in something even when the story might seem a little far fetched, or scientifically impossible, is a beautiful thing. This “believability” was what I was searching for in my story. While researching the psychology behind creation stories, I also came across an article by Philip Freund, in his book [Myths of Creation](#) explaining why artists themselves are very much like heavenly creators in a way. We have the desire to create something out of nothing, just

like the universe itself. It is an ongoing cycle, a reincarnation. From there I started learning about the different cultures and religious and performance traditions that circled around these creation myths. From the research I gathered, I found that many of these stories were in fact quite similar, and were explaining the same mysteries of the universe. It led me to a realization that no matter how diverse the different nations of this world are, they are all very similar, and we are all searching in our past to try and understand the same things; why we are here and what our purpose is.

With these thoughts in mind, I still needed to find a creation story that I could relate to, one that would relate to an audience today, and one that would work for this performance. I found it while reading the “Tales of Ovid” by Ted Hughes. The Greek myth of the mortal Arachne who challenges Athena, the goddess of weaving, to create a tapestry better than her own, captured my interest right at the start. The story tells of a young artisan who challenges authority to get the chance to be creative and innovative. At the end, Arachne proves her tapestry is more beautiful because she wove a story about love and compassion, rather than Athena’s story of greed and vengeance. Athena’s jealousy and rage shamed Arachne into hanging herself. Athena then begins to feel remorse, and through the help of Tiresias, the narrating sage, realizes Arachne’s brilliance and beauty, and decides to transform her into the world’s first spider, to weave forever more.

In order to incorporate some of the other themes I had been exploring about creation myths and multiculturalism into the piece, I adapted parts of the classic story and fused it with other cultural mythologies. In my research I had come across an Indonesian myth about a spider who descended from the heavens to create the universe. This tied

into the myth of Arachne perfectly. By opening the play with a version of this Indonesian spider myth, and then by Arachne's transformation into a spider at the end, it would appear as if the entire world were being reincarnated with Arachne's transformation. Arachne would inspire a new world with compassion, equality, and strength to test the old traditions and establish the new more hopeful age. This sense of reincarnation was also inspired by my research on Hindu beliefs, as well as Native American. Hinduism believe that the god Shiva re-creates the world after the passing of four phases by dancing the world back into existence, which is why I decided to incorporate dance into the performance. Some Native American tribes believe that the world reincarnates itself through the four seasons every year. For this reason, the play is broken up into seasons, rather than scenes.

Another significant alteration I made to the script was the content of the tapestries. When attempting to fuse multiple myths together, I realized that the descriptions of what each of the women wove acted as a natural framing device to tell a different story. For Athena I incorporated another Indonesian myth. This story was about the sun who scorched the earth with his power and heat, thanks to his eight sons who join him in the sky. The people then turned to the moon and begged of him to convince the sun to get rid of his sons so that the earth would not be quite as hot. The moon succeeded by convincing the sun to eat his eight sons. The sun falls for the moon's trickery, yet continues to burn with rage in the sky alone, just like Athena. Arachne's tapestry was also modified. The mortal artisan believed in the power of human emotions and creativity, so her tapestry became a dance performance of the song "The Origin of Love." This modern mythological song tells about three creatures that preexisted

humans, who were made up of a man and man, a woman and woman, and a man and woman. They tried to fight the gods, yet were stricken down by being split in half. This separation, and longing for one's other half is the origin of love, as the story tells.

Although based off of the Greek philosopher Aristophanes eulogy of love given during Plato's Symposium, the lyrics and music to the song were derived from *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. I felt it was important to incorporate such diverse stories into the play in order to capture that feeling of multiculturalism, yet connection amongst these varying types of creation myths.



Athena's Tapestry



Arachne's Tapestry

When it came to the production, I felt it was important to maintain that similar sense of variation found within the stories, yet my challenge was to produce a cohesive performance piece. After assembling a talented production team, we were able to sit down and come up with creative interpretations for all of the elements in the show that would require more spectacle, or “theatre magic” as I like to call it. In order to recreate the opening creation myth of the spider descending from the heavens, we used the classic Indonesian technique of shadow puppetry, but with overhead projectors. In order to recreate the narrative of the sun and the moon in Athena’s tapestry, we looked at more African tribal methods of dance and performance including masks, to embrace multiculturalism. Arachne’s tapestry is sung live, with a cello accompaniment, and has original modern choreography. This stark difference between the methods of performance for the two tapestries increased the emotional, human connection the audience has with Arachne’s tapestry, compared to the two dimensionality of the masked characters in Athena’s. Arachne’s death, as well as the spider transformation, are more abstract interpretations of the actual events. Using fabric and lighting, and other tricks, we created a cocoon, spider legs, and a web that were manipulated by the actors, and created a beautiful spectacle of mixed medium and movement.

As the story developed, so did the characters, and so did my designs for the costumes. Arachne, as the script described, was a simple artisan, and humbly born. Inspired off of simple East Asian peasant wear, her dress was loose-fitting and comfortable. Yet her poverty and her craft have lead her to scrap her own costume together out of all the different fibers and silks that inspire her. Her dress is made up of loosely hanging square pieces of fabric based off of Tibetan flags. Just as all humans and

fibers of the world are loosely related, yet woven together by passion and art, so is her dress.



Athena's costume, on the other hand, is a model of rigidity and structure, beauty and mystery. The goddess of weaving wears a corseted dress with a pannier, based off of traditional European dress of the 18th century. Woven out of black metallic wool, her dress is structured, constricting, and empowering, just like her work. The squared panniers that emphasize her hips are a reference to the buildings that make up the civilizations that she literally overlooks and oppresses. Tiresias's costume is a fusion of dreams, and ethereal forms. Although Tiresias is traditionally a blind seer, in our production she was an all seeing mother earth figure. Her neckwear, is an extension of her shoulders and gives her a more masculine stance, while emphasizing the importance of her head and her thoughts. It is in the shape of an eye and also resembles the African

neckwear worn by tribal women. In particular, her character takes after traditional South African Sangomas, who are healers. The blues and grays in her costume symbolize the heavens and stars, yet her character was also down on the ground, symbolizing the need to connect the heavens with the earth, religion with culture, and gods with mortals.



Left: Tiresias. Right: Athena

The nymphs were more simple and playful. Their silhouettes were based off of research from the Ballet Russes. This beautiful Russian ballet company from the turn of the century was the perfect inspiration for costumes that encompassed multiculturalism in a playful and theatrical way. The colors and design elements of each individual costume came from images of three different natural plants or landscapes that told a story. For example, Love, the yellow nymph's costume, was based off of an image of Namibian Fairy circles. These crop circles have been found in fields of wheat yet their origination is not determined. So the native people have created their own fairy myth to explain the mysterious disappearance of some of the field. Also, all three nymphs are actually

designed off of very dry natural images, even though they are water nymphs. I liked this contradiction, for it might make it appear as if their fluidity and merriment would bring water and life to all dried out parts of the world, spiritually and naturally. The design for the dancers evolved collaboratively with the choreographer as the purpose of the dancers evolved throughout rehearsals. The dancers were similar to the nymphs, in the way that they were both in the story, and were outside of it. They portrayed characters such as the different cultures that grew and populated the earth, and as the people of Lydia who marveled at Arachne's tapestry. But they were also spirits that, like the nymphs, helped Tiresias tell this story. They were the artistic threads that wove the tapestries together, from the sun and the moon, to the early humans that roamed this earth in "The Origin of Love." In order to capture all of these elements, I designed a series of abstract costumes with lines and silhouettes that resemble different cultures, but with a sense of ease as if they had taken silk and tied it quickly around their own body. The colors not only correspond to the nymphs, but are also the same colors that appear in Arachne's rainbow scarf, for they are the colors and threads she uses to weave her tapestry.

Collaborating for all of the other artistic and design elements of the show was by far the most rewarding part of this experience. For the set, the scenic designer and I researched ancient looms, and set out to create a framework for the entire production to happen within. The result was an asymmetrical proscenium made up of three panels that were made out of wood, muslin, and burlap. They had a mystical and sculptural aesthetic, and with the woven burlap, a very crafty look as well. The tree painted on the proscenium was not only Tiresias's home, but was also the tree that sprouted from the ground in the creation myth, as well as the tree that Arachne hung herself from. The

fabric in the background of the stage acted not only as the warp of the loom, but at times as trees, or a river. The lighting designer achieved these magical transformations of the fabric due to her creative ability to manipulate colors and shadows and create all of the different locations necessary in the story. The composer also had a unique approach to creating the re-orchestration of the origin of love. He explained that his inspiration came from a spider web, with its repetitive and geometric natural shape that build from a central point. He wanted to create music that accentuated the strings of the cello, just like the web, with a building a repetitive sound. The choreographer, director and I had several conversations discussing the style of the movements. Sometimes movements are inspired by other cultural dance techniques, while at other times they are more organic and contemporary. The choreographer and I discussed the purpose of the dancers; the characters they embrace, and their roles as early humans, whose emotions of love are the driving force behind the movement. She succeeded in achieving a beautiful harmony of narrative dance and abstract movements that flowed with the lyrics and the music of “The Origin of Love” perfectly.



Arachne turning into her spider cocoon

The most important collaboration of them all, was that with the director, Roman. From an early stage, Roman and I analyzed the myths, explored the characters, researched their historical significance, examined related art and imagery, and worked together to express our passion for this story to our cast and creative team. The rehearsal process with the actors became more of a workshop, an exploration of the self, as well as the persona of the characters in the script. Roman had the actors explore their bodies through different warm ups where sometimes they transformed themselves into clouds and rolled around on the ground. He also had the actors study the characters they were to portray by transforming the heavy language of the text into a more colloquial dialogue and making it more relatable. The intent and meaning behind each monologue delivered by our talented and passionate cast was the bond that held the entire production together. Even with all of the visual artistic spectacle of the production, the hearts and drive of Arachne, Athena, and Tiresias, are really what told the story.



After Arachne's Suicide

Looking back on the entire process now, it is interesting to examine how similar the story line of the play is to the process it took to create it. Beginning with chaos, a whirlwind of ideas of thoughts, the project began to solidify only when more and more people became a part of it. The oppressive Athena could definitely be interpreted as the embodiment of artistic challenges and preconceived regulations on performance as an art form. The intertwining of different myths, and different performance styles is the fusing of all of the talented artistic brains involved on this show, who originated from all different departments in this school. But what was truly the most surprising parallel, yet is now the most apparent similarity of them all, was my connection to Arachne. It was not until later on in the process, that I began to truly feel the relationship between what she was fighting for and what I was trying to create. The project started off as an exploration of human emotions, equality, and diversity. And although it touches on these values, it ended up more as a personal narrative on my dreams as an artist. I learned so much about myself throughout this ordeal. I learned how to collaborate yet be a leader, how to question my own artistic solutions, and push myself and others to create the best art, and theatre, we could out of nothing. Arachne stood for innovation, creativity, and individuality, all values that I hope to exude myself. Although I did not turn into a spider at the end, I do believe I was transformed into a more confident artist. And just like the spider was reincarnated, and was ready to recreate the universe, this conclusion to my college education is also just the beginning of the rest of my life.

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