

Friedrich Ebert Gymnasium

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How did writing and directing a One Act “The Death of the Duke” alter my ability to creatively solve problems and interact with people in an international context?

Project Documentation of the process of writing and directing a One Act up to the final production

Written for Certilingua

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Starting point and my motivation

Introduction and description of the project

The project “Writing and Directing a one-act: ‘The Death of the Duke’” took place from October of 2022 until January of 2023 during the first semester of my exchange year at Hugh Boyd, in Richmond, Canada, in grade 10 (The equivalent to the German EF) with the members of the drama club.

Arriving in Canada as an exchange student in summer 2022, I was both terrified and extremely excited. I didn’t know anyone, I was in a completely new country, and while I did know the language, which was English, I wasn’t confident enough to immediately start making new friends.

The first weeks of school were, while very exciting, also very lonely. It was difficult getting used to my host family, the Canadian school system (which was fundamentally different from the school systems I was used to) and the new language, all while trying not to get left behind in the school subjects such as Sciences 10, Social Studies or AP Calculus. And outside of the occasional exchange student group meetings on weekends, it was challenging to meet new people who weren’t exchange students like me.

However, after a few weeks, ‘clubs day’ took place. Essentially, ‘clubs day’ is a day where different school clubs, for example the debate club, the book club or the drama club, had their own stands with a few facts and information about their club. While a lot of different clubs caught my attention (and I did join a few), the drama club fascinated me. Not only were the members, who presented the club, really nice and helpful, but the club supervisor, who was also the drama class teacher, Ms. Jacobsen, welcomed me warmly into the club as well.

It was my first real opportunity to meet and work with Canadians while doing an activity we all enjoyed, and even if it was a hobby and a voluntary club, everyone took it very seriously. So serious, that a few days into the month of October, Ms Jacobsen asked us if we wanted to work on an end-of semester project, which would consist of two of us directing two different one acts with about six to eight actors and actresses each. Before I even knew it, my hand was up, and I volunteered to direct an approximately 45-minutes long theatre play which would

consist of one act, even though I had never directed anything before, and the last time I truly acted in a theatre piece was in grade 5.

It was a huge responsibility; I had to research possible one-acts before the end of October, then I had to talk to people I wanted to act in my theatre piece, and finally, I had to figure out *how* to direct the piece, something I'd never done before. But Ms Jacobson reassured me; I wouldn't be alone, I would have to work closely with the actors, who were all teenagers, just like me, from the ages 13 to 17. And because they were Canadians and most of them had drama class in their curriculum in school, they all had more experience and more knowledge than I did.

I had so much support that I gained enough confidence, so that when I realized that I couldn't really work with any of the royalty-free¹ one-acts I found online, I decided to *write* a one-act myself, which was also something I had never done before.

But I knew that if needed, I had the support and cooperation of Ms Jacobsen and the other members of the drama club, thus I felt reassured and confident about the project.

Personal expectations

Even if I did not exactly know why I chose to do this project the moment I volunteered for it, I realized it pretty quickly afterwards: I was curious. And the only way to satisfy that curiosity, to find out how structuring a one-act, an entire theatre production, would work, was to carry out the project.

I wanted to work closely with people who were used to a completely different school system and everyday life than I was, all while working on a project we all enjoyed thoroughly.

We all knew that the production would take place at the end of January, and that we'd have to start rehearsals directly after the Halloween play, which would take place at the end of October. This meant that I only had roughly about a month to find a royalty-free one-act online, or to write one myself, before I had to finally start directing the play.

Of course I was excited, because this was a new experience and an opportunity to learn and develop my skills with the cooperation of other teens my age, and every rehearsal on Thursday afternoons was like a completely different experience, where I sometimes had to overcome minor issues or disputes with different actors.

¹ Royalty-free means one doesn't have to pay any royalties to the original creator (Lizenzfrei)

Different actors; who, even though I was in Canada, had all kinds of different ethnic backgrounds. My closest friend during the project, Rio, was originally from Hong Kong, and because they had also been in a theatre group back in their hometown, we exchanged information and our experiences and compared them to the drama club at Hugh Boyd.

The fact that I met so many different people with so many different backgrounds made me forget my initial expectations of my exchange year *before* coming to Canada, which were, to be honest, quite stereotypical. I just wanted to know what going to school in Canada was like, and I just desperately wanted to try playing Ice Hockey and see moose and grizzly bears.

This meant that I did not know *what exactly to expect* with the project. To me, it was totally spontaneous, but I hoped that this project would develop my creative skills as well as my cooperative and conflict-solving abilities. Of course I hoped that the actors I worked with were happy, comfortable and excited about the project as well, and finally, I hoped for lots of applause at the big show at the end of January.

But in all honesty, I knew and expected that the project was going to fundamentally change my perspective of other people and how I communicated with them, both as a director and as a friend.

Linking the project to a school subject or to the school curriculum

As mentioned beforehand, drama class is an actual subject in the school I was in, Hugh Boyd. However, I personally did not attend this class, as I chose to focus on subjects such as Science 10, English New Media and Social Studies. This project was a voluntary project.

While the project had no direct link to any class I attended, it still required analytic skills, the ability of creative writing and communication, and had I not completed the project and gained the insight that I did, it might've influenced the abilities that I possess in English, German and French class today. But not only did the writing of the one-act influence me, also the working with actors and the first hand experience of having the opportunity to direct a play led me to choose German as second *Leistungskurs* (AP German) as soon as I came back from Canada in the summer of 2023, because I knew that in German we'd discuss and analyze dramas and theatre plays.

Carrying out the project

Matter-of-factly description of the project's realization

As stated beforehand, the project was a process which went over a few months. At first I had to figure out what I wanted to direct in the first place, so in order to do that I had to ask myself multiple questions: What should the one-act be about? What topic would be fun, but would still captivate the audience? How was the script showcasing my own interests? And most importantly, how should I create characters that the actors would love and want to play? I looked through multiple royalty-free scripts online, but they either had too many roles (I only needed 8 or 9 actors), were too long, or were just plain boring and I knew I'd take no pleasure in directing, and the actors would take no pleasure in playing out.

It was almost the end of October, when we actually had to prepare for Halloween, when Ms Jacobsen jokingly said that I should just write the one-act myself. After some consideration, I thought, "why not?" since I couldn't find a good free script online and didn't want to pay for one. I didn't have anything to lose, I had enough free time before and after school and I liked creative writing anyway, so I figured that this would be an interesting project where I could really test my skills. Ms Jacobsen was surprised when I told her that I actually wanted to write the script for the one-act myself, she didn't think that I'd take her suggestion seriously. But she encouraged me to pursue this goal, and she probably suspected that the audience would relate more to the humour of a one-act written by a student.

So I got to work. As I watched multiple sitcoms and police shows such as Brooklyn 99, Criminal Minds or Law and Order in my free time, I thought about integrating that topic into the play. I figured that the props would be easy to get, and there would be no hassle if we only needed a table and four chairs to simulate an interrogation room. Also, a police interrogation would be fun to the audience, because I could create all kinds of characters as suspects and as police officers, and the actors could add their own little twist on the characters.

At first, I struggled with the creation of the characters. I didn't want them to feel flat, but didn't know how to give them distinct personalities in a single act which only went for 45 minutes. I also struggled heavily with the story: How could I include some subtle

foreshadowing without making the plot twist painfully obvious and therefore predictable and boring?

This is where my friend Rio came in. Although they had never written a script for a play either, they had acted in multiple plays, and therefore knew what aspects made characters three-dimensional. They told me to give the characters distinct personalities, and, for a play as short as this one, to introduce those distinct personalities at the first possible moment. They also highlighted that in order to create a sort of “conflict” between the (main) characters, their personalities would have to differ the most. And as for the story, Rio explained to me to drop hints that the audience would perhaps want to know more about, but which wouldn’t really alter the story much, then later on in the play explain these hints should be explained and the reasons why they were mentioned in the first place should be given. So in the end, it was more a collaboration based on my ideas and my “raw” script and Rio’s suggestions and corrections.

I created 3 detectives, a German one called “Detective Knoblauch”, a French one “Detective Ail” and a Canadian detective called “Detective Garlic”, and then I knew that I wanted two characters one could call “stupid” or ridiculous, and at least one who’d appear snobby. To really test out the acting abilities of my actors, I wanted to have a wide range of characters with very different personalities where they’d be able to act out the character they wanted in the casting, and then we’d decide together who’d be the best person for the role.

In total, I had nine characters: The grumpy, strict German detective Knoblauch, the chill, relaxed Canadian detective Garlic, the haughty French detective Ail, the simple-minded gangster couple Gary and Mary, the arrogant and snobby Duchess with her two lawyers and finally the nervous teenager Bob Knoblauch. By then we were just at the end of October, and had to start with the castings and then the rehearsals.

The drama talked about the murder of a duke, therefore the name “The Death of the Duke”, and about three detectives, Garlic, Knoblauch and Ail, trying to solve the case by interviewing different suspects. At first they question the widow, the Duchess, whose two lawyers forbid her to talk, without any success. While the detectives discover that she wasn’t the killer, she does give them valuable information which helps them get closer to the killer. In the following scene, the detectives bring in a gangster couple, Mary and Gary, who are famous for never having been able to successfully pull off a crime. They don’t have anything to do with the murder either, but their story gives the detectives a few last clues which help them get their last suspect, Bob Knoblauch, the son of Detective Knoblauch. In the end, the



detectives Ail and Garlic find out that Detective Knoblauch and her son had been the murderers all along.

²I was pleased to learn that plenty of the people in the drama club were excited to try out for different characters in my play. This showed me that my script was a success. I managed to

bond so well with the members of the drama club, that we also started spending time outside of school as well.

I even started going out with one of them; Adrianna, who tried out for the role of the Duchess. This, however, is where I had to overcome my first hurdle:

Another person had also tried out for the role of Duchess, and they were objectively better than Adri. I, however, being a teenager who couldn't really separate my personal life from my duties as director, didn't act professionally and was biased when I chose Adri over the other person that had tried out as the Duchess. I was lucky that the other person wasn't resentful and understood my decision, and they were excited to play another role. Back then I hadn't realized how my decision had not only been incredibly biased, but also unfair and that it could possibly pose a problem for the future. But neither Ms Jacobsen, nor Rio realized that I had let my personal feelings influence my judgement, so I didn't learn from this.

This happened at the beginning of November. Although before I realized my mistake, I had to lead my cast through different steps: at first we just read our scripts while sitting in a circle, just to get comfortable with the role, then we went through a process called "blocking", before I finally instructed my cast to learn their scripts by heart. Blocking means that the actors all have their scripts in hand, but are already going through the correct placements on the stage. This was the most important step, because it offered my actors the possibility to familiarize themselves with their roles and characters without having to concentrate on memorizing their texts yet. This was also the phase where I made the most notes on things I thought the actors could work on, such as "more exaggerated mannerisms" here or "stronger facial expressions to mimic a reaction to the previous action" there. During this process of

² From left to right: Izzy playing the Duchess, Kyan playing Lawyer 2, Patrick playing Lawyer 1, Carly playing Detective Ail and Nyla playing Detective Knoblauch

blocking, by the end of November, I realized my mistake of choosing my then girlfriend for a role which she wasn't able to portray in a satisfying manner. The quality of the play would increase by a lot if I switched the roles played by Adri and the other person. But because I wasn't sure how to address this problem, my first impulse was to inquire with Ms Jacobsen, who stated that though she'd always be available if we needed help, she also expected that we'd try to come up with solutions by ourselves first. So instead, I asked Rio, who I now fully trusted to help me out with issues such as those. And Rio just told me to be "brutally honest" and talk openly with the entire group, that it was a subject which all of us could and should discuss.

At the next rehearsal, I followed Rio's advice, which was my second mistake. I announced that Adri and the other person would switch roles, without consulting either of them or Ms Jacobsen. Without question, this led to confusion, and in the case of Adri, even a sense of betrayal because I hadn't spoken to her beforehand even though I should've. After I announced my decision, Adri left the group and didn't return, understandably devastated by the news. The other person who had tried out for the duchess was glad to have obtained the role, but worried about Adri not agreeing with my decision.

I was mortified by Adri's reaction. I worried about her feelings because back then she was still my girlfriend, but on the other hand I panicked because I thought that she had definitely left the play, leaving a role empty without an actor or actress to play it. And while the other members of the cast, who were partly older than me, reassured me that the play would work out fine, I did not know how to solve this issue.



³Fortunately, it solved itself on its own relatively quickly. A few days after the announcement, Adri asked me for a conversation, where we both apologized for our behaviour. While this conversation led to the end of our relationship, she agreed to play the role I had switched her to. After a few rehearsals where we continued with

blocking, she agreed that she felt more comfortable and was objectively better at playing the other character. So we were able to resume to normal rehearsals by mid-December, where I

³ From left to right: Adri as Detective Garlic, Kai as Bob Knoblauch, Carly as Detective Ail

had already instructed the cast to start learning their scripts by heart, so that we could start with rehearsals without scripts after the end of the winter holidays.

So even though me addressing this issue and deciding the solution all on my own had started out complicated, openly talking it out and working together with the others had not only solved it, but given me and Adri a chance to grow and learn, which maybe wouldn't have been the case if I had involved Ms Jacobsen.

With every passing rehearsal the date of the final production neared, and my nervousness increased. But the last few weeks went smoothly, and I was proud of my cast and myself for having worked so hard to finalize this project.

The date of the final production was on January 25th. We all agreed that we'd make the entry free so that everyone could watch the play.

The entire process of rehearsals right up to the play was a success. We received lots of applause, donations and compliments by the audience and the cast from the other play which had been directed by Rio and another friend. Ms Jacobsen was equally impressed by our work, and stated that she was proud of all of us for having organized ourselves so well. But even if the production unfolded in such a professional manner, the childlike excitement and enthusiasm was palpable in the atmosphere just before and after the production, coming from the fact that we all had been mere teenagers back then.

The realization of this project is to this day still one of my proudest achievements.



This picture was taken just before the final production.

From left to right: Carly (background), me, Nyla (background), Julieta, Kyan

Reflection

Retrospective reflection on the intercultural experiences gained in the project

To me, the project was an intercultural one, because it took place in another country where I had to converse and work with people with all kinds of backgrounds (Rio was from Hong Kong, Adri was half Dutch, another person was a Japanese exchange student, and another participant had Colombian roots, etc.), but also because I had to write the one-act and direct the actors in a language other than my mother tongues German and French. The entire concept of a drama club with the students having creative freedom was new to me, and offered a new sense of individuality, adding to the independence I already had by being alone in a new country.

The project widened my horizon and opened up new opportunities to exchange with and learn from other people, because it offered us a fixed framework in which to cooperate. Even though I was the one who had written the script and directed the play, we still worked all together, and I would've never learned as much about theatre, dramaturgy, comedy and the process of directing a cast as I did without the cooperation of the actors of my play. They improved the story, increased the comedic elements of the script, and gave the characters life in a way that I'd never have imagined possible. Even outside of the drama classroom we shared intercultural experiences, I showed the cast what "real" Pretzels looked like (with Laugen, which they hadn't heard of beforehand), and they introduced me to Tim Hortons and S'mores, which I wouldn't have been able to do without this project. The project also introduced me to a lot of people with whom I'm still in contact today, nearly two years later. It is relevant to state that this project was carried out before I had learned of the Certilngua Standards of Excellence in Intercultural Competences and I therefore had neither asked myself the questions relevant for the reflection before starting the project, nor taken notes about the intercultural aspects of the projects. I will, however, answer the questions about the retrospective reflection.

This project has fundamentally changed my ability to act in an international context and attempt to creatively solve problems on my own because of the difference in school systems which directly influence the feelings of independence. The classes, clubs and projects offer the students much more creative freedom and independence in problem-solving, which I wasn't accustomed to. Whenever I had to overcome hurdles, my first impulse was to address

them with Ms Jacobsen instead of looking for ways to solve the problems alone or with my cast. This therefore made me more aware of the differences between the German and the Canadian school system and how these systems fundamentally influenced the behaviour of the students. In my experience, the students I met in Canada in the framework of this project were more creative, more open and more independent than German students. And this difference in behaviour due to cultural norms possibly explains how at first I wasn't as open and independent as the other students, even if I was on my own in Canada. But this project helped me learn how to be more open and to solve problems creatively.

In conclusion, this intercultural experience in the framework of the project offered the opportunity to learn and grow, to not rely as much on adults, to trust myself and be confident with my own choices and decisions, and to approach possible hurdles with a much more open and creative mind. This project and what I learned from it still has a great impact on my life now, and I hope that it'll influence the way I'll handle every decision or complicated situation in the future.

Appendix

Declaration of independent work

I hereby declare that I have written the project documentary on my own and only used the listed references and aids.

Bonn, the _____ 2025

(Signature: Isabel Auracher)

Permission for anonymous publication

I hereby authorize the anonymous publication of my project documentation

I hereby deny the anonymous publication of my project documentation