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## Domestic Interiors: Reflections on an *Unexpected* Collection of Symbolist Plays

By Sabrina Hykes-Davis & John Paul “JP” Staszal

### Abstract

Exploring the critical value of collaboration and self-conscious reflexivity, this performative script explores the boundaries between a critical essay and a social conversation about the humanities and production. A director and designer reflect on the curricular value of their upcoming production, *Unexpected: A Selection of Symbolist Plays*, the effectiveness of their experimental staging, repurposing a traditional proscenium stage to create an immersive domestic experience and one interior landscape for four different plays. Scrutinizing how the idea of home resonates with everyone and seeking reasonable ways to push the theatrical limits of functionality, the artistic team debate the aesthetic value, effectiveness of design choices and curricular reinforcement in production. The conversation examines how curricular overlap and the continual engagement through course content and practical experience over three semesters with the plays – *The Intruder* and *Interior* by Maurice Maeterlinck, *Trifles* by Susan Glaspell, and *The Wayfarer* by Valery Briusov – allows students to reinforce these important works of dramatic literature through theory, conceptualization and practice.

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The audience peers through an external window, observing a moment of domestic tranquility from Maurice Maeterlinck's *The Interior*. Photo by Kelly Tunney.

Exploring a performative writing approach like Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis's introduction, "Talking Over Ethnography," in their Anthology *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing*, this essay explores boundaries between a critical essay, a social conversation about the humanities, and a performative script. Supporting Bochner and Ellis's goal to "open ethnography to a wider audience" (18), and "to feel the ethical pull of converting data into experiences readers can use" (28), we explore the value in a performative discussion to remind collaborators

to contemplate their results with self-conscious reflexivity and thoughtful reflection when the artistry is complete.

*The director dashes into the designer's office, uncertain and anxious about the proposed production.*

Director: I just emailed you. Did you get it? Is this production a good idea?

Designer: I noticed it, but no, I didn't read it. Cold feet?

Director: No! Yes! Well, maybe. I don't know. Are you sure we can pull it off?

Designer: Relax. We slogged through the logistics. Yes, it's demanding but, I think this is a great project to explore our space and challenge our students.

Director: To recap, we are going to ignore 600 seats in our theatre and built the façade of a house in the opening of our proscenium stage. The audience will traverse our seats to get to our "house," then walk onstage through our front door, cross the 1880s kitchen before taking their seats. There, they enter a world of one-acts by Maurice Maeterlinck, Susan Glaspell, and Valery Briusov. I love it, but the domestic settings of Maeterlinck's *The Intruder* and *Interior*, Glaspell's *Trifles*, and Briusov's *The Wayfarer* will challenge us to create one interior landscape for four different plays.



The audience and the actors share the stage in this immersive adaptation. Photo by Kelly Tunney



As the audience walks through the house of the theatre and the front door of the set to their onstage seats, they become the symbolic guests in this immersive collection of Symbolist works.  
Photo by Kelly Tunney

Designer: Yes! I love the idea, but I struggle with the impact on the audience. Having them enter what looks like a fairytale cottage, only to plunge them into an evening of death, loss, and murder, may alienate them rather than drawing them in.

Director: Maybe, but I think they will find the spine-chilling collection, based on the reality of death within the home, exciting. Despite the collection of plays being classified as symbolism, their length, thematic content and interior setting make them gel. *The Wayfarer* really establishes the mood. A young girl, alone in a cabin, opens the door and falls in love with a stranger, only to have him die in her arms. Then in *The Intruder*, a prosperous family attends to a sick mother. As the clock creeps to midnight, death's presence permeates their home, stealing into the mother's room. The *Interior* continues after intermission, as a group of voyeurs peer through a window upon an unsuspecting family. They lurk in the shadows, reluctant to alert the family that their daughter has drowned. *Trifles*, at least, offers some comedy with the oblivious male characters. A group of men investigate a domestic murder, as the women solve the crime, using clues the men overlook as mere women's trifles.

Designer: Don't forget the curricular value for our students, seeing this collection of plays developed in an immersive manner. This will be a great challenge to stage four plays with very different domestic landscapes on one set. They need distinct settings with quick scene changes. Considering the resources and time that will be spent on creating the exterior of the house, I hope the impact on the students and audience is worth the investment.



Though Symbolist playwrights rebelled against the ultrarealistic scenery of the previous genre, this production makes use of it to create an immersive experience. Photo by Kelly Tunney.

Director: I think it will be tricky, but worth the experiment.

Designer: I agree. These plays work well together because of the strong sense of domesticity and home life they embody. As Gaston Bachelard implies in his essay “The House. From Cellar to Garret. The Significance of the Hut,” our earliest memories center around our homes, where we first learn to dream. The idea of home resonates with everyone. We are these characters, watching our dreams be interrupted by the stark reality of death. Though the period language might put off a modern audience, the stories are still relevant.

Director: I hope so. Thematically the plays work together, but technically and aesthetically I wonder.

Designer: This is an ideal semester for a period piece. The Properties Design class will create period furniture that will be put through the rigor of the rehearsal process. The Scene Painting class will see their work under stage lighting. Working on a box set with period details will be a good experience for students. These are perfect academic and practical circumstances to produce under. In last semester's Scene Design class, each student designed for just one of the plays. It will be great for them to see all four plays represented on the same set. We discussed scenic distinctiveness for each show, and some of their ideas are currently motivating my design.

Director: Exciting, but we will have to discuss how to maintain the uniqueness of each piece.

Designer: One of the things I am struggling with is instilling enough of the individual plays into the generic, box interior. We don't want scene changes to slow the action, so let's consider limiting specific dressing to what could be quickly removed. This goes against the way I was taught to treat scenic interiors, which is best summed up by Darwin Reid Payne's, *The Scenographic Imagination*. Payne suggests the designer must ask, "how will this environment increase the depth of visual understanding of an audience and thus deepen the total appreciation of the production" (212)? We are challenged to take the realistic intimacy of each play and make it unique, despite the shared

domestic arrangement of the set and interior design. I'll focus on the domestic connection of the texts, but also the characters not present on the stage, who still occupy the space to influence the world we are creating. For instance, the woodcutter's father or the farmer and his wife have all left their mark on the space even though we don't see them onstage.

Think about the woodcutter's daughter from Briusov's *The Wayfarer*, daydreaming in her cabin, pouring her heart out to a stranger. She laments, "I've spent all of my life here in the forest...My father's surly, always tramping through the woods for days. But I simply cannot live this life anymore! I'm bored, I'm bored" (68). The affluent family in Maeterlinck's *The Intruder*, waits around the table for the doctor's arrival to check on the sick woman. The uncle states, "Once sickness enters a house, it is as if there were a stranger in the family" (11). Messengers peer through a window at a family sitting in tranquility in Maeterlinck's *The Interior*. One exclaims, "Oh! How peaceful they seem! I feel as though I were seeing them in a dream" (49). While another responds with, "There they sit, separated from the enemy by a few poor panes of glass" (51). An old friend, depressed from the tragedy of the neighboring farmer and his wife in Glaspell's *Trifles*, observes the sadness of their stark kitchen stating, "It never seemed a very cheerful place...But I don't think a place'd be any cheerfuller for John Wright's being in it" (982). While the realities of the plays differ from each other, the domesticity of the texts, their connection to death in the home, and the influences of non-present characters allow for tremendous harmonizing opportunities. All scenic and props



choices, from the color of the walls, to the cleanliness of the space, to the type of glasses used will build this collected world, and allow the set to exist as an ever present, but silent character, through simple changes to highlight individuality in each domestic space.

Director: Also, the costumes will reflect the social strata and occupations of the characters. Their detail will help identify a theatrical shift from one play to the next. Plus, the lighting will transform the space, adding time of day and atmosphere, helping the audience understand transitions to a new location and a new play.

Designer: Rearranging the period furniture will alter the feel of the scenes. The same table can serve all four families, but we can have a cupboard used with or without its top to give more variety. A jar of wildflowers on a table can reinforce the dreamy nature of the woodcutter's daughter. The quilting squares of a childless farmer's wife can be pastel but not pink or blue, to imply a wish, not a reality. I think that, when combined, all the elements together will tell the stories and the set will feel less generic and more like a thread that unites the collection.

Director: Conceptually, I want to explore the importance of the table, both in its functionality and simplicity. It can tie the space together, but slight alterations will help individualize each show, keeping us connected to an internal domestic reality.



In true Symbolist fashion, the kitchen table, present in each of the four plays, becomes a symbol of the common qualities of domestic life. In Maeterlinck's *The Intruder*, the family keeps vigil for a sick woman.  
Photo by Kelly Tunney

Designer: In my opinion, domestic life often centers around the table, and Arnold Aronson, in his essay, "New Homes for New Theatre," addresses an idea of replicated individuality. Aronson states: the home of our society is, in fact, the home, that is, the house. Never before in history has the private home been such a dominant force in architectural aesthetics...Each home is a miniature, segmented universe...each of these microcosms essentially replicates that of its neighbors and its counterparts around the world. (41)

He goes on to discuss Bachelard's theory that home is so compelling because it is where we dream. However, I would argue that many dreams come from the conversation and interactions around domestic tables. I think the pieces work so

well together because home isn't necessarily dependent on specific architecture, but the use of space and how individuals gather in that space.

Director: I think that is a good point to expound upon. Each one of these plays could be done with relative simplicity, using few simple props. Discussing the importance and simplicity of the table as a marker of domesticity prompts me to think of the simplicity Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski called for with his ideas of Poor Theater. Grotowski valued the work of the actor without the needs of a "synthetic theatre" (19), with lavish costumes, sets, or technically rich enhancements. Grotowski believed in the "personal and scenic technique of the actor as the core of theatre art" (15), and the unique actor-spectator relationship that is developed within a space. Beyond a heightened approach to actor training, Grotowski valued Imagination and physical practice without excessive plastic design elements. Simplicity isn't the goal, but this collection could be done in a minimalistic approach.



Again, the table is central to the action. A mother rocks her child to sleep as her daughters work on their embroidery in Maeterlinck's *The Interior*. Photo by Kelly Tunney.



In Glaspell's *Trifles*, two women gossip around the kitchen table. Here a symbol of "women's work," it separates them from the men who trivialize their efforts. Photo by Kelly Tunney.

Designer: If you're focusing on simplicity for scenic needs, then will the resources and time spent on creating the exterior of the house be worth the potential impact on the audience?

Director: I think so. The investment in our working replica of a house is unnecessary and excessive in the sense that many of the design elements are not imperative for any of the shows. However, we want to immerse our audience from the second they cross into the theatre. They are entering unknown territory, being placed on the stage in the house that we create.

Designer: I love the idea of inverting the theater and your description of the audience's first view when entering the space. Having the audience come through the theatre, cross the apron to enter the front door of our house, and sit in chairs on the stage is bold. Realizing that anyone not able to climb stairs would have to go around and miss this experience will challenge us, but we can adapt to accommodate any special needs. We can build a thirty-foot ramp to the stage and dress it with cattails and other greenery to heighten the immersive experience for everyone. It will make the transition between the theatre and the front door more natural.

As we load the house into the space, the students will realize that they are creating an incredibly detailed exterior that the audience will only view as they enter the theater. I will forever be explaining the immersive aesthetic we want for the audience. The students will ask, "Why go to all the trouble? The time? The expense?" These moments will bring theory into the practice. I

will rely on Robert Edmund Jones, who stresses in his seminal work, *The Dramatic Imagination*, “A stage setting is not a background; it is an environment” (23). I will explain that we could have created a traditional box set with the audience in the actual theatre seats; something we have done before and will again in this space. However, with the immersive design of *Unexpected*, as the audience steps off the theatre carpet and walks down the wooden ramp, past cattails and farm implements, through the front door and into the world of the show, they break the fourth wall. By coming into the house, walking through the kitchen and around the table, they are no longer just spectators, but guests.



**As the audience enters the house they are greeted by the accused murderer, who is discussed in *Trifles*, but never appears onstage. This interaction solidifies the audience as guests in the house, intensifying the immersive experience. Photo by Kelly Tunney.**

Director: Sitting inside the realities of the characters makes the content more intimate. We aren't staging a show; we are creating an experience. In her essay, "Critical Performative Pedagogy: Fleshing out the Politics of Liberatory Education," Elyse Pineau discusses the reflective value students have when analyzing their own embodied experiences through the lens of performance. Pineau advocates for the value of using performance as a critical methodology. For Pineau, performance focuses on the act of doing and the embodied experience created through these acts. However, in our case, the learning comes through the act of actively witnessing and being subjected to experiences in our immersive world. For Pineau, the body holds value, and as a metaphor, the *body connotes* "all the social factors that might influence physical modes of experience and expression" (44). We will blur the boundaries between the traditional stage and performance concepts, and how audiences will actively experience it as part of everyday life. Students' experiences with the content of these shows, how it evolved over multiple semesters in the classroom, the various stages of production and what they will actively witness in our immersive world heightens their learning through various stages of "sensory awareness and kinesthetic engagement" (Pineau 44).

Our staging choices for *The Interior* will challenge their understanding of witness-vs.-active observer. As a crowd slowly gathers behind the audience, both groups will be separated from the vignette before them by a simple window frame. This allows the audience to watch the interior family enjoy their tranquil night, essentially placing them as part of the exterior crowd

about to break that tranquility. The audience will be intentionally voyeuristic and become othered the moment the window separates them from our domestic setting, spying on the unsuspecting family. Our design allows us the opportunity to challenge the audience's viewing experience. From that standpoint alone, the resources and time spent on creating the inclusive design is worth the impact. The immersive details that could be viewed as lavish are justified.



The window creates the suggestion of voyeurism for the audience and the actors in the walkway.  
Photo by Kelly Tunney.

*The Interior* may be my favorite piece. By adding the window and using the design of the walkway between the seating banks as a playing space, the audience becomes completely immersed. They will be forced to choose where to look, watching either the silent family inside the house through the window directly in



front of them, or shifting their bodies to focus on the actors performing in the walkways next to them. The content of the piece is uncomfortable, and forcing a choice heightens the viewership. If they choose to focus on the family directly in front of them, they will be less focused on the dialogue and content of the actual play. If they focus on the exterior actors, they will be less focused on the tranquility of the interior setting.



The turmoil between the characters in the walkway contrasts the peace in the scene just on the other side of the window. Photo by Kelly Tunney.

I think the choices that the design and staging create provide a confusing challenge. I imagine many people will ask, “What and where do I watch?” While *The Interior* may not be my favorite play, based on content, how we plan to create the

interior/exterior space and explore how a performance should be viewed makes it my favorite.

Designer: I agree *The Interior* will impact the audience. However, I have to say that *Trifles* is a more compelling story, based on the content. We think we see the whole picture, but we never quite know for sure what happened. *Trifles* makes me think of the discussions often shared on social media discussing mental load. The idea is that while men are now “helping” their spouses complete the work needed to keep a household running, the knowledge and planning still falls to the wife, who may or may not have a job outside the home. This overlooked, managerial aspect of housework is “real and measurable,” according to a recent Bright Horizons Modern Family Index survey (Kelly). If this type of work were done outside of the house, say in a corporation, it would merit a higher title and pay rate, but somehow doesn’t count when done at home. A similar discussion is present in *Trifles*, when the two women discuss value in the work the accused wife does that is completely overlooked by the men. For example, how hot it must have been the day she put up her preserves, while the men mock the suggestion stating, “Well, women are used to worrying over trifles” (Glaspell 1016). This trivial treatment of essential day-to-day activities of a home has not changed in the last one hundred years, except superficially.

Director: I just love the ideas we are considering. For me, one of the biggest benefits this collection has is staging significant works that are part of our Modern Drama, World Drama, and Theatre History curriculum, and that we will reinforce them to our

students for more than an academic year. As a theatre department in a small liberal arts university, I think we always struggle with how to keep our season fresh and exciting to attract an audience and potential students while keeping critical value connected to our core curriculum.

However, this collection of domestically-centered plays connects our history, design and performance curriculum, provides us the opportunity to reinforce the content and historical context from a design perspective, and gives our audience a new experience with immersive theatre. Together, through course content and practical experience, we will provide our students the opportunity to conceptualize, implement, and embody modern classics while both educating and exciting our audience.

Designer: *(Pointing to her watch)* I agree we are onto something here, but to be continued later. I'm late for a meeting. *(Gathering her materials and rushing toward the door)* I think this is a great opportunity to create a domestic space and allow our imagination to challenge perceptions of theatre. Don't second guess the idea . . .

*Their conversation continues to echo down the hall as the lights from the Designer's office fade.*

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