

## ABSTRACT

A Director's Approach to *A Monster Calls*, Devised by the Company Led by Sally Cookson with Adam Peck as Writer in the Room, Adapted from the Novel by Patrick Dowd, Based on an Idea from Siobhan Dowd

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This thesis documents and analyzes the directorial approach to the process and product of *A Monster Calls*, produced at Baylor University at the beginning of December 2022. This piece charts the conception of the adaptation of *A Monster Calls* from idea to novel to stage production and engages ecocritical theory as a lens through which to analyze the script and develop a directorial concept for the Baylor production. The thesis also charts the development, design, and rehearsal process of staging the Baylor production, emphasizing the director's effort to facilitate a communal and collaborative artistic process. The thesis ends with an analysis of the reception of the process and product of the work and an autoethnographic reflection of the director's role in bringing the piece to life.

A Director's Approach to *A Monster Calls*

by

Chelsea Curto

A Thesis

Approved by the Department of Theatre Arts

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I am incredibly grateful to three fabulous directors who have deeply influenced how I view theatre direction: Jerry MacLauchlin, who taught me to reframe worries as challenges and problems as opportunities, Ed Sylvanus Iskandar, who revolutionized how I approach working with actors, and Cassie Nordgren, who paired her artistic mentorship with late-night writing, study support, and lifelong friendship.

## DEDICATION

To Eliza. Words aren't enough.

## CHAPTER ONE

### History and Structure

#### *Introduction*

The role of a director is to collaboratively guide a group of artists toward a cohesive, collective artistic vision. Like the rhizomatic root system of a tree or the branching neurons of the central nervous system, the creative process is a network of interconnected pieces requiring group effort and a guiding impulse for growth. This thesis traces my role as director in the collaborative staging of the play *A Monster Calls* at Baylor University in December 2022. The first chapter focuses on the structure and biographical information of the script itself; the second outlines the theoretical approach I took to analyze the script and prepare to direct the piece. The third chapter details the design process and my role in the pre-production and technical decision-making process. The fourth chapter relates the artistic decisions I made as the director in the room during rehearsals. The fifth and last chapter is my reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of my work in the product and process of *A Monster Calls*.

This first chapter begins with an in-depth look at the story of *A Monster Calls*. It starts with a detailed synopsis of the play itself, then traces the history of the play's conception. The themes of collaboration and complexity that characterize my experience directing this play are clear from the beginning.



## *Synopsis*

*A Monster Calls* is an episodic play divided into thirty-two scenes across two acts. In Act One, the playwright indicates that Conor enters the stage, followed by an Ensemble who "sit down on chairs along the edges of the performance space."<sup>1</sup> The following thirty-two scenes are chronological, with a numerical value and a brief description of the scene to follow.

Scene 1 is titled "Past/Present." Conor watches as a younger version of his mother enters carrying a baby. The mother, Mum, gives a short monologue that clarifies that the baby in her arms is Conor as she looks through a window and tells him about the giant yew tree in their backyard. Younger Mum transforms into Present-Day Mum, with "just over thirteen years" passing in the blink of an eye.<sup>2</sup> The stage directions also indicate that the events to come occurred approximately eighteen months ago. Mum and Conor say good night to each other; Conor must attend school in the morning.

Scene Two, "The Nightmare," begins as the Ensemble creates "a collage of abstract aural and physical elements from the full nightmare," which takes place in full later in the play.<sup>3</sup> Conor tells the nightmare to go away, which wakes up Mum. Conor reassures Mum that he was only dreaming, then looks at his alarm clock. The Ensemble speaks together the time: 12:07. At the end of Scene 2, Conor hears the voice of the

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Peck, Patrick Ness, and Siobhan Dowd, *A Monster Calls: The Play* (London: Walker Books, 2018), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 20.

Monster for the first time. It calls his name and says, "I'm coming to get you, Conor O'Malley."<sup>4</sup>

The location of Scene 3, "Breakfast," shifts seamlessly from Conor's bedroom, where he gets ready for school, to the kitchen. Mum tells Conor that Grandma is coming to stay with them for a few days; Conor is not pleased with the news, saying, "she treats me like I'm her employee or something."<sup>5</sup> As Conor leaves for school, Mum ruminates on the yew tree in the backyard.

Scene 4 is titled "School" and occurs on the playground at lunchtime. A bully named Harry and two sidekicks, Sully and Anton, begin harassing Conor. It becomes clear that Anton is the odd one out among the group of bullies; initially, Anton does not laugh at Harry's jokes about Conor. Harry shoves Conor to the ground; another student, Lily, appears and tries to defend Conor. Harry uses his control over Sully to manipulate Anton into telling Conor that Conor "should get his bald mother to kiss it better for him!"<sup>6</sup> Lily punches Anton in retaliation, just as the teacher, Miss Godfrey, appears. Miss Godfrey sends the bullies away and tells Lily to report to her office. When Miss Godfrey asks Conor about the veracity of Lily's excuse, Conor does not back her up. Once Lily and the other children are gone, Miss Godfrey asks Conor, "How are things at home?" and Conor replies that everything is fine.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 22.

<sup>6</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 25.

<sup>7</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 26.

In "Life Writing," Scene 5, the students are in Mr. Marl's English class. Lily enters late. Mr. Marl talks the students through an upcoming life writing assignment. As the other students give mundane or silly examples of what they will write about, Conor sees a vision of Mum. The school bell rings, and the students move to biology class as we hear "the sounds begin to distort and become sounds from Conor's past."<sup>8</sup> Conor sees another vision of Mum; she strokes Conor's hair before disappearing.

Whereas many scenes transition to a new time and location, Scene 6, "Lily," continues immediately after Scene 5. Lily confronts Conor, asking why he did not stick up for her with Miss Godfrey when she was trying to help him. Conor yells at Lily, "it's your fault! It's all your fault!"<sup>9</sup> Lily tries again to connect with Conor, but he runs away.

Scene 7 has the same title as the play, "A Monster Calls." The Ensemble announces the time of 12:07, and the Monster speaks to Conor. At first, Conor tells himself that it must be his imagination; monsters are not real. The Monster implies that Conor should be afraid, stating that the Monster is "the ancient yew tree...the wild earth" come to get Conor.<sup>10</sup> The Monster tells Conor that it will return on subsequent nights to tell Conor three stories. After the Monster tells the three stories, Conor will tell the Monster a fourth story, "and it will be the truth."<sup>11</sup>

The title of Scene 8 is "Grandma," but the first part of the scene is a direct continuation of Scene 7 – Conor looks out his window, then finds a bunch of yew berries

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<sup>8</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 27.

<sup>9</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 28.

<sup>10</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 31.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

in his shoe. Later, Grandma brings wigs for Mum to try on, implying again that Mum has a severe illness, perhaps cancer (though the script does not explicitly state this). The antagonistic relationship between Grandma and Conor is established to be reciprocal – the stage directions state that Grandma pinches Conor's cheek and then slaps him "playfully but hard."<sup>12</sup> Conor prepares tea for the adults at Grandma's request. Grandma tries to converse with Conor, stating, "you need to talk to her about this. (*to herself*) She needs to talk to you about this."<sup>13</sup> Conor questions what they need to talk about, and Grandma sidesteps the issue of Mum's illness to say that they need to talk about Conor coming to stay with Grandma.

In Scene 9, "The Wildness of Stories," the Monster returns to Conor's bedroom at night, then leads into Scene 10, "The First Tale." The Monster narrates that long ago, before the place they stand was a modern town, it was a green place – a kingdom. As the Monster tells the tale and the Ensemble acts it out, Conor interjects with snide commentary. The tale is a complication of a traditional fairy tale. An Evil Queen appears to murder the new bride of a young Prince – but it turns out that the Prince murdered the young woman and framed the Queen. The Monster implies that the story is true and that the Monster was present for the story's events, saving the Queen from being burned at the stake by angry villagers. Conor questions the moral of the Monster's story, and the Monster tells him, "many things that are true feel like a cheat. Kingdoms get the princes they deserve, farmers' daughters die, and sometimes witches merit saving."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 33.

<sup>13</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 36.

<sup>14</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 44.

Scene 11 is titled "Understanding" and occurs on the school playground again. Lily approaches Conor to tell him that she forgives him. Conor insists he is not sorry for throwing Lily under the bus. The bullies arrive, and Lily leaves without intervening. Harry pretends to hit Conor and makes fun of Conor when he flinches. A fight is imminent, but Miss Godfrey enters and forces the children to disperse. Miss Godfrey tries to get Conor to open up about the bullying, but when he declines her support, she tells him that although the others have been given the consequence of a first warning, Conor's will not count.

On Friday afternoon at Conor's house, Scene 12 – "Little Talk" – takes place. Grandma tells Conor that Mum is getting worse, Grandma will take Mum to the hospital, and Conor will stay at Grandma's house for a few days. Grandma also tells Conor that Conor's Dad is flying in from America. Mum tells Conor that the medicine is not working but not to worry; that is normal. Then she points out the old Yew tree in the backyard and asks Conor to watch it. Conor says he will.

Scene 13, "Grandma's House," takes place in Grandma's house. Grandma winds the grandfather clock that dominates the space and warns Conor not to touch anything in the sitting room. Grandma leaves, and Conor's Dad rings the doorbell, leading into "Champ," Scene 14. Conor and Dad eat French fries and talk. Dad tries to bring up Mum's illness but backs away from telling Conor the truth about the gravity of Mum's health situation. Conor spills information about the yew tree to Dad. Conor animatedly tells Dad about the berries and the dreams before asking flat out, "why can't I come and live with you?"<sup>15</sup> Dad gives reasons – the flat is too small, Grandma has more space and

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<sup>15</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 54.

money for Conor – but ultimately, Conor asks if they can end the conversation without resolution. Scene 15, "Americans Don't Get Much Holiday," continues from scene 14, but the time has jumped to later that evening. Dad drops Conor off at Grandma's house, and Dad reveals that he came because Mum asked him to. Dad asks if Conor wants Dad to wait with him until Grandma gets home, but Conor tells him, "I'm fine on my own."<sup>16</sup> Inside, Conor breaks the pendulum off the grandfather clock. Even though it is only 10:00 pm, Conor moves the hands of the grandfather clock, and the Ensemble announces the new time: 12:07. The Monster arrives, commenting that as an act of destruction, breaking the clock is "remarkably pitiful."<sup>17</sup> The Monster tells Conor it is time for the second tale, "about a man who thought only of himself. And he gets punished very badly indeed."<sup>18</sup>

Scene 16 is the final scene of Act One, and it has a double title separated with a forward slash: "The Second Tale/Destruction." The Monster describes the setting of the new story: one hundred and fifty years ago, in the 1870s, amid the industrial revolution. The Monster says that in this village where his tree has lived for millennia, there lived a greedy Apothecary and a pious Parson. The Apothecary wanted the Parson's tree, but the Parson refused to let the Apothecary cut it down. As the Monster tells the story to Conor, who again interjects with sarcastic comments, the Ensemble acts out the scene, and the Apothecary sings his lament in a song called "Please Give Me." When the Parson's daughters fall ill, the Parson changes his mind and tells the Apothecary he can cut down

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<sup>16</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 56.

<sup>17</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 56.

<sup>18</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 56.

the tree, but the Apothecary refuses. The Monster tells Conor he levied punishment – against the Parson, not the Apothecary, by destroying the Parson's home for his lack of faith. Then the Monster asks Conor if Conor wants to join in. Conor begins destroying the parsonage but is actually wrecking the sitting room of Grandma's house, which he was not meant to touch. Conor realizes what has happened and yells after the Monster, "What have you done!?"<sup>19</sup> Grandma enters and sees the destruction. At first, it looks like Grandma will hurt Conor, but then she picks up "the only unbroken item left in the room" and smashes it. Then she leaves Conor alone in the wreckage, and Act One ends.

Act Two begins with Scene 17, "The Nightmare (2)," consisting of three simple stage directions: the Ensemble enters, "The Nightmare," and then the Ensemble sits down.<sup>20</sup> Scene 18 is appropriately titled "The Morning After." Dad and Conor are eating breakfast at Grandma's house. Dad explains that Mum is much worse and Grandma is at the hospital. Conor directly references the destruction he caused, saying, "I didn't mean to, I don't know what happened," and Dad absolves Conor of responsibility, saying, "it's OK."<sup>21</sup> Conor is shocked, asking shouldn't he be punished? Dad says, "what would be the point, Con? What could possibly be the point?"<sup>22</sup>

Scene 19, "What Do You Want?," is a short interlude on the school playground, as in Scenes 4 and 11. Sully and Anton approach Conor, dumping his bag on the ground. Harry arrives and watches as Conor picks up his things.

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<sup>19</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 62.

<sup>20</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 63.

<sup>21</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 64.

<sup>22</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 65.

Scene 20, titled "Yew Trees," takes place at the hospital – the first time this location is in the play. Mum is hooked up to an IV, but she assures Conor that she is fine – that it is never too late. She says there is one more medicine they are going to try, and it is a drug made from yew trees. The end of Scene 20 features an exchange that is truly representative of the work as a whole:

MUM: The green things of this world are just wondrous, aren't they? We work so hard to get rid of them...And sometimes they are the very thing that saves us.

CONOR: Is it going to save you?

MUM: I believe so.

*(CONOR daydreams.)*

*(The MONSTER takes MUM and dances with her.)*

*(CONOR drifts into the air, euphoric.)*

CONOR: Belief is half of all healing.<sup>23</sup>

Scene 21, "Could It Be?," occurs at the hospital later that evening. Dad and Grandma argue, not realizing that Conor can hear them. When they notice Conor, Dad tells Conor he must return to America. When Conor insists that the new medicine will heal Mum, Dad says, "This is too much," and stops arguing.<sup>24</sup> The scene ends with Conor standing alone.

Scene 22 is titled "No Tale." Conor calls the Monster at 12:07. Conor asks the Monster flat out if the yew tree will heal Mum. The Monster says, "if your mother can be healed, then the yew tree will do it."<sup>25</sup> Then the Monster tells Conor that Conor still does not know why Conor called the Monster and that Conor is not yet ready for the third tale. Conor accuses the Monster of not following through on its promise – if the Monster is a

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<sup>23</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 68.

<sup>24</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 71.

<sup>25</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 72.



tree of healing, it should heal. The Monster replies, "And so I shall."<sup>26</sup> Once again, Conor is left alone at the end of a scene.

Scene 23, "When Is She Going to Come Home?," Grandma drives Conor to school in her car. The two of them awkwardly converse, avoiding the important issue between them. At the end of the scene, Conor is left alone – again.

Scene 24 is called "The Third Tale." Unlike the scenes for tales one and two, it occurs in the school canteen. Sully and Anton enter and bully Conor, then Harry arrives and tells Conor, "I no longer see you."<sup>27</sup> The clock turns 12:07, and this time Conor, not the Ensemble, voices the time. The Monster enters and tells Conor it is time for the third tale. The tale's protagonist is "an invisible man who had grown tired of being unseen."<sup>28</sup> As the Monster narrates the tale, Conor confronts Harry. Harry reiterates that he does not see Conor; when he looks at Conor, he sees nothing. Conor asks the Monster what the Monster did to help the invisible man, and the Monster replies, "I made them see."<sup>29</sup> Conor and the Monster chant together, "Never invisible again! Never invisible again!" as Harry is thrown around the space like a ragdoll until Harry lies motionless on the floor.<sup>30</sup>

Scene 25, "Punishment," occurs in Miss Godfrey's office as she confronts Conor about what he has done to Harry. She tells him that the entire school saw him beating Harry, breaking his arm, and smashing his face into the floor. Conor tells Miss Godfrey

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<sup>26</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 72.

<sup>27</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 74.

<sup>28</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 75.

<sup>29</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 75.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

that it was not Conor; it was the Monster. Miss Godfrey's rage dissipates when Conor tells her about his family situation – Mum in the hospital, Dad back in America, and Grandma ferrying him from school to the hospital to Grandma's house. Miss Godfrey tells Conor they *will* speak on this in the future, but now is not the time. When Conor asks Miss Godfrey, "You're not punishing me?" her response echoes Dad's in Scene 18: "What purpose could that possibly serve?"<sup>31</sup> The second half of Scene 25 features a series of dissociated images. Conor walks forward slowly as scenes from Conor's life over the next four days appear and disappear. The Ensemble designates the time: 12:07. The Ensemble look for the Monster, but it does not appear.

Scene 26, "A Note," takes place in Mr. Marl's classroom, as in Scene 5. The students talk to Mr. Marl about their life writing assignments, but Lily passes Conor a folded-up note that says, "I see you."<sup>32</sup> Conor is about to connect with Lily when Miss Godfrey enters the classroom saying that Grandma is here to get Conor; she leads him away.

Scene 27, "100 Years," is an analog to Scene 20, "The Yew Tree." Once again, Mum is in the hospital, and this time she tells Conor that the yew tree treatment has not worked and that there are no more treatments to try. Conor accuses Mum of lying the whole time; Mum suggests that Conor has known all along, deep in his heart. When Conor does not answer, Mum gives Conor an important message: do not feel bad for being angry. She tells Conor, "I know everything you need to tell me without you having

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<sup>31</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 78.

<sup>32</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 78.

to say it out loud." <sup>33</sup> She ends by saying she wishes she had a hundred years to give to Conor.

Scene 28, "What's the Use of You?," takes place outside Conor's home, by the yew tree. He wakes up the Monster, demanding that the Monster heal Mum. The Monster tells Conor, "I did not come to heal her. I came to heal you."<sup>34</sup> Finally, Conor asks the Monster for help, and the Monster tells Conor it is time for the fourth tale. The Monster carries Conor into the nightmare.

In Scene 29, "The Fourth Tale," a cliff edge appears. When Conor tells the Monster this is not a story, this is just his nightmare, the Monster corrects Conor: "This is your truth."<sup>35</sup> Mum appears on the cliff's edge, then falls off, dangling feet first. Mum begs Conor to hold on to her, not to let go, and Conor promises – then turns to the Monster for help. The Monster does not help. Instead, the Monster says, "Here is the fourth tale...the truth of Conor O'Malley."<sup>36</sup> Mum is slipping, Conor is refusing the Monster, and the Monster is not helping Mum. Finally, Mum slips from Conor's grasp and "falls into the abyss."<sup>37</sup> Conor yells, "No!" The Monster announces that the fourth tale is unfinished. The Monster tells Conor he must tell the truth or be trapped in the nightmare forever. The Monster goads Conor, applying more and more pressure, willing him to speak his truth. Why did Conor let Mum go? Finally, Conor answers the Monster's

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<sup>33</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 83.

<sup>34</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 85.

<sup>35</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 87.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

question: "I can't stand it anymore! I can't stand knowing that she'll go! I just want it to be over! I want it to be finished!"<sup>38</sup>

Scene 30, "Life After Death," begins a heartbeat later. The Monster holds Conor and talks through Conor's feelings about Mum, the nightmare, and his truth. The Monster and Conor unpack Conor's complicated feelings around Mum's death. The Monster teaches Conor about complexity: two seemingly incompatible ideas can be true simultaneously. The Monster points to the stories the Monster has told Conor: the Queen is both good and bad, the Prince both murderer and savior; the Apothecary is bad-tempered but right-thinking, and the Parson "wrong-thinking but good-hearted;" the invisible man makes himself more lonely through being seen.<sup>39</sup> The Monster points out that Conor's mind will contradict itself and punish Conor for believing two opposing things simultaneously. The only way to fight the difficult stuff is to put words to truth. Thoughts cannot be wrong; only actions can be wrong. Just before he falls asleep, Conor asks the Monster, "Why do you always come at 12:07?" but the Monster does not answer.<sup>40</sup>

In Scene 31, "Something in Common," Grandma finds Conor asleep at the foot of the yew tree and takes him in the car back to the hospital. In the car, Conor apologizes to Grandma, who says that she and Conor are not the most natural fit, but they have something in common: Mum.

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<sup>38</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 89.

<sup>39</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 91.

<sup>40</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 92.

Scene 32, "The Truth," is designated as the first time in the play that the set appears close to naturalistic. Mum is in the hospital, hooked up to machines. As Grandma and Conor approach, the Monster appears. The Monster tells Conor he simply has to tell the truth. Conor tells Mum, "I don't want you to go."<sup>41</sup> He climbs onto the hospital bed next to her, and the Monster narrates the story's final moments: "And so the story ends with the boy holding tightly onto his mother. And by doing so, he could finally let her go."<sup>42</sup> In the final moments before the blackout, the clock ticks over to 12:07.

### *Playwright Biography*

*A Monster Calls* is a devised piece by Sally Cookson and the Old Vic company based on a book by Patrick Ness that was adapted from an original idea by an established children's author, Siobhan Dowd, who passed away. Because the creation process of this particular theatre piece is so complex, it is not easy to know who should be considered the primary architect of the story. Instead of selecting the first or last contributor to the multi-layered creation process, looking at each individual who brought the story to the stage is essential.

Siobhan Dowd was an Irish children's author and activist who died of breast cancer at 47 in 2007.<sup>43</sup> Dowd began writing children's novels late in life. She studied classics at Oxford, worked briefly in publishing, then spent most of her career as a researcher for the writer's organization English PEN, one of the oldest human rights

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<sup>41</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 95.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Jonathan Fryer, "Siobhan Dowd," *The Guardian*, August 23, 2007, sec. Law, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2007/aug/24/guardianobituaries.humanrights>.

organizations in the world.<sup>44</sup> She edited an anthology of writing by authors and journalists imprisoned for their work and spent seven years working with the American arm of the same organization, American PEN.<sup>45</sup> She supported writers, was reportedly part of the International PEN team who defended Salman Rushdie in 1989, and traveled to Indonesia and Guatemala to investigate the ill-treatment of writers in those countries.<sup>46</sup> During this period, she worked as an editor and wrote book reviews and encyclopedia entries but did not publish her first work of children's fiction until 2004.

Her first publication was a short story in an anthology about racism called *Skin Deep*.<sup>47</sup> In 2006, she published her first children's novel *A Swift, Pure Cry*, about a teenager named Shell Tart who lived in Ireland in the 1980s.<sup>48</sup> The novel immediately won two awards: the Branford Boase Award and the Eilís Dillon Award, both in 2007.<sup>49</sup> It was also awarded the Sheffield Children's Book Award in 2006 and was shortlisted for five other awards (according to the Siobhan Dowd Trust).<sup>50</sup> Soon after, Dowd published her second novel, *The London Eye Mystery*, about a boy with Asperger's Syndrome. She reportedly began working on *The London Eye Mystery* in 2003. However, after the

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<sup>44</sup> "About," English Pen (blog), accessed February 23, 2023, <https://www.englishpen.org/about/>.

<sup>45</sup> Fryer, "Siobhan Dowd."

<sup>46</sup> Calvin Reid, "Hope for Rushdie? Backers Scrutinize Iran Statement," *Publishers Weekly*, April 3, 1995, Gale Academic OneFile.

<sup>47</sup> Daniel Hahn, "DOWD, Siobhan" (Oxford University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780199695140.013.0961>.

<sup>48</sup> Siobhan Dowd, "A SWIFT PURE CRY.," *Kirkus Reviews* 75, no. 3 (2/1/2007 2007): 143–143.

<sup>49</sup> Daniel Hahn, "Swift Pure Cry, A" (Oxford University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780199695140.013.0961>.

<sup>50</sup> "The Siobhan Dowd Trust A Swift Pure Cry (2006)," accessed February 23, 2023, <http://siobhandowdtrust.com/a-swift-pure-cry/>.

success of *The Curious Incident of the Boy in the Night-time*, which had similar themes, Dowd set the work aside and wrote *A Swift, Pure Cry* instead.<sup>51</sup> *The London Eye Mystery* also received many awards, including the Bisto Irish Book of the Year Award, the *School Library Journal* Best Book of 2008, and the Rotherham Children's Book Award of 2009.<sup>52</sup> Neither book was awarded the Carnegie Medal, but Dowd's first novel was shortlisted. Her second was longlisted for the award.

After her death, two of Dowd's completed books were published posthumously and similarly decorated: *Bog Child* and *Solace of the Road*. *Bog Child* was awarded the Carnegie Medal in 2009 and several other awards. Like *A Swift, Pure Cry*, it is set in Ireland during The Troubles and features a teenage protagonist. Fergus finds the body of a young, murdered girl in a bog, and as he navigates the complexities of growing up and participating in a supposedly IRA-backed adventure, the girl's voice comes to him in his dreams.<sup>53</sup>

*Solace of the Road* was not as complete as *Bog Child* at the time of Dowd's death. However, Dowd's publisher David Fickling "did a final tidy up and edit on Siobhan's behalf" before publishing the novel.<sup>54</sup> *Solace of the Road* is the least-awarded Dowd novel. It was longlisted for the Carnegie Award in 2010 and shortlisted for Costa Book of the Year and the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize in 2009. However, it only garnered

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<sup>51</sup> Fryer, "Siobhan Dowd."

<sup>52</sup> See <http://siobhandowdtrust.com/the-london-eye-mystery/> for a full list of awards.

<sup>53</sup> Betsy Hearne, "Siobhan Dowd: *Bog Child* (Book Review)," *The Horn Book Magazine* 84, no. 5 (2008): 581.

<sup>54</sup> John Cohen, "Siobhan Dowd," *Reading Time* 53, no. 2 (May 2009): 8.

the CBI Bisto Honour Award in 2010.<sup>55</sup> Like Dowd's other books, *Solace of the Road* features a teenage protagonist with ties to Ireland. Shy Holly Hogan dons a wig that transforms her into her daring alter-ego, Solace, and leaves her foster family to travel across England to find her mother in Ireland.<sup>56</sup>

At the time of her death, Dowd had been contracted to write another novel about a young child coming to terms with his mother's terminal illness. Dowd's editor, Denise Johnstone-Burt, contracted another successful British writer in her portfolio, Patrick Ness, to finish the novel.<sup>57</sup> Dowd and Ness never met in life.<sup>58</sup>

In 2011, Ness published the novel *A Monster Calls*, based on material left behind by Dowd. When asked how much material Dowd left behind for Ness to work with, Ness responded, "she had Conor, his mother, and the monster, a starting premise, and a kind of forward momentum of where things could possibly go."<sup>59</sup> Ness was able to take that forward momentum and craft a book that, as one reviewer put it, "is neither typical of a Siobhan Dowd book nor a Patrick Ness title but a unique hybrid of [the] two."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> "The Siobhan Dowd Trust Solace of the Road," accessed February 23, 2023, <http://siobhandowdtrust.com/solace-of-the-road/>.

<sup>56</sup> Tracy Weiskind, "Dowd, Siobhan. Solace of the Road," *School Library Journal* 55, no. 10 (2009): 124.

<sup>57</sup> Frank Cottrell Boyce, "Review: Children's Fiction: A Good Death," *The Guardian* (London, England), May 7, 2011, Gale Academic OneFile.

<sup>58</sup> Patrick Ness and Jim Kay, "Interview: How We Made A Monster Calls," *The Guardian*, June 14, 2012.

<sup>59</sup> Patrick Ness. "The Booklist Top of the List Interview: Patrick Ness." *Booklist* 108, no. 9/10 (January 2012): 111.

<sup>60</sup> "The Siobhan Dowd Trust A Monster Calls," accessed February 23, 2023, <http://siobhandowdtrust.com/a-monster-calls-2011/>



It makes sense that reviewers would feel Dowd's presence on the book's pages. The cancer-driven storyline mirrors Siobhan's journey, and the adolescent main character with Irish roots is classic Dowd. But while several of Dowd's novels flirted with the fantastic (Fergus's dreams of the *Bog Child* come to mind), none of Siobhan Dowd's novels contain anything as magical as an actual walking, talking ancient Yew tree. On the other hand, Patrick Ness is well-known for his forays into fantasy.

Patrick Ness was born in 1971. He is a gay British-American author of fantasy novels for young adults.<sup>61</sup> Ness is the successful author of a trilogy of young adult science fiction novels called the *Chaos Walking* series, the third volume of which won the Carnegie Medal in 2011.<sup>62</sup> The *Chaos Walking* trilogy was a slight departure from the only things Ness had published up to that point: a collection of eleven short stories called *Topics About Which I Know Nothing* (2004), a novel for adults titled *The Crash of Hennington* (2008), and a short story called "Different for Boys" in *Losing It* (2010), an anthology about sexual awakening. Contrary to the novel for adults and short stories Ness had written to that point, he wrote *Chaos Walking* in the fantasy tradition of Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*. Set in a dystopian world where men have been affected by a virus that causes them to perceive all of one another's thoughts and that has killed off all the women, the trilogy follows an adolescent, Todd, and his talking dog, Manchee, as they navigate their complicated world. Early in the trilogy, Todd encounters the first woman he has ever seen, another teenager named Viola, and realizes that he cannot hear

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<sup>61</sup> Anna Walker, "Patrick Ness: 'I Write My Best When I'm Frightened,'" Reader's Digest, accessed February 27, 2023, <https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/culture/books/meet-the-author/patrick-ness-i-write-my-best-when-im-frightened>.

<sup>62</sup> "Carnegie Greenaway." Accessed September 17, 2022, <https://carnegiegreenaway.org.uk/archive/carnegie-medal-winners/>.

her thoughts. This inciting incident leads the two protagonists on a three-book adventure that spans a civil war and a colonizing invasion.<sup>63</sup>

Ness planned the trilogy as a three-book venture from the start.<sup>64</sup> The first book in the series, *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, met with critical acclaim. It was shortlisted for the Carnegie Award, longlisted for the Manchester Book Award, and won the Booktrust Teenage Prize, the Guardian Award, and James Tiptree, Jr Award in 2008. The second book in the *Chaos Walking* trilogy, *The Ask and the Answer*, was not as critically successful as its predecessor, but the third book surpassed the first in critical acclaim. *Monsters of Men* won the Carnegie Medal in 2010 and was shortlisted for the Arthur C. Clarke Award, which honors achievement in the science fiction genre.<sup>65</sup> Ness's novel was only the second young adult novel in the award's 25-year history to be shortlisted; the award is typically reserved for adult science fiction novels.<sup>66</sup>

Following his success in the young adult sphere, Ness's editor approached him about taking on the plans left by Dowd for what would become *A Monster Calls*. When *A Monster Calls* won the Carnegie Award in 2011, Ness became the second author in history to win the award twice, consecutively.<sup>67</sup> *A Monster Calls* was illustrated by Kay

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<sup>63</sup> Michael Cart, "Making Noise about Chaos," *Booklist* 107, no. 6 (November 15, 2010): 42–42.

<sup>64</sup> MonstersofMen. "In conversation with Patrick Ness." YouTube Video, 5:16. October 6, 2010.

<sup>65</sup> "Carnegie Greenaway." Accessed September 17, 2022, <https://carnegiegreenaway.org.uk/archive/carnegie-medal-winners/>.

<sup>66</sup> Michelle Pauli, "Patrick Ness's *Monster of Men* Shortlisted for Award," *The Guardian*, March 4, 2011. Children's books, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/childrens-books/2011/mar/04/patrick-ness-clarke-award>.

<sup>67</sup> Daniel Hahn, "NESS, Patrick." (Oxford University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780199695140.013.0961>.

Ness, who was awarded the accompanying Kate Greenaway Medal for the illustrations - the first time in the 75-year history of the two awards that such a thing had occurred.<sup>68</sup>

Since the success of *A Monster Calls*, Ness has written five more young adult novels and one additional novel for adults, *The Crane Wife*. His fourth novel for young adults, *More Than This*, was shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal in 2015.<sup>69</sup> His most recent novel, *Burn*, came out in 2020. In addition to writing the screenplay for *A Monster Calls* Ness wrote a Doctor Who spinoff called *Class* that ran on BBC Three for one season in 2016.<sup>70</sup> Ness also served as Booktrust's first-ever Writer-in-Residence in 2009, a post that required him to blog extensively about books and his writing process.<sup>71</sup>

Patrick Ness said in an interview that while he had never met Siobhan Dowd, he did see emails between Dowd and their shared editor. Ness stated, "what I hope we have in common is a kind of wanting the emotional truth for our readers, of wanting teenagers to be taken seriously, as complex beings."<sup>72</sup> In fact, while the idea was Dowd's and Ness had been careful to preserve her connection to the project, Ness stated in the same interview that he "wouldn't have taken it on if [he] didn't have complete freedom to go

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<sup>68</sup> "The CILIP Carnegie & Kate Greenaway Children's Book Awards - Press Desk," The Wayback Machine, March 3, 2016, [https://web.archive.org/web/20160303231007/http://www.carnegiegreenaway.org.uk/pressdesk/press.php?release=pres\\_2012\\_winner\\_carn.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20160303231007/http://www.carnegiegreenaway.org.uk/pressdesk/press.php?release=pres_2012_winner_carn.html).

<sup>69</sup> Emily Drabble, "Carnegie Medal and Kate Greenaway 2015 Shortlists Announced," The Guardian, March 17, 2015. Children's books, <https://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2015/mar/17/carnegie-medal-and-kate-greenaway-2015-shortlists-announced>.

<sup>70</sup> "How We Made Class: Team behind Doctor Who Spin-off Reflect on Cancellation and Series 2 Plans," Radio Times, accessed February 27, 2023, <https://www.radiotimes.com/tv/sci-fi/doctor-who-class-rt-rewind/>.

<sup>71</sup> "Writer in Residence Patrick Ness," June 28, 2009, <https://www.booktrust.org.uk/news-and-features/writer-in-residence/previous-writers-in-residence/patrick-ness/>.

<sup>72</sup> Patrick Ness and Jim Kay, "Interview: How We Made A Monster Calls," The Guardian, June 14, 2012.

wherever [he] needed to go with it." Ness distinguishes between writing what Dowd would have written and following the same process she would have followed. The result is a novel that is very much Ness's, sprouted from the germ of an idea planted by Dowd.

This spirit of collaboration continued in the next iteration of the story. Ness wrote a 2016 screenplay of the book, which was turned into a film directed by J. A. Bayona (of *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* and *The Orphanage* fame) that featured the vocal stylings of Liam Neeson in the titular Monster role. Domestically, the film received tepid reviews, but in Bayona's home of Spain, the project was nominated for multiple Goya Awards - including best direction and best screenplay.<sup>73</sup>

In 2017, Ness announced on his website that the book would be adapted into a theatrical production.<sup>74</sup> Ness would not be the writer of this play; instead, Adam Peck, who served as dramaturg on the project, had the distinction of being the 'writer in the room' with director Sally Cookson as the company devised the piece. For eighteen months before rehearsals started, Peck and Cookson did R&D for the project. They developed a story structure for the devised piece, distilling chapters of the book into snippets of text and images that the company of actors would ultimately flesh out.<sup>75</sup>

Associate Director for the Old Vic production, Miranda Cromwell, writes in the production's published audience guide that Patrick Ness attended the production's first rehearsal to give the cast and creative team a rundown of the story's history but was not

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<sup>73</sup> Elisabet Cabeza, "'A Monster Calls' Tops Goya Nominations in Spain," Screen, December 14, 2016, <https://www.screendaily.com/news/a-monster-calls-tops-goya-nominations-in-spain/5112250.article>.

<sup>74</sup> Patrick Ness, "A Monster Calls on the West End Stage!," *Patrick Ness* (blog), 8 November, 2017, <https://patrickness.com/2017/11/a-monster-calls-on-the-west-end-stage/>.

<sup>75</sup> Susie Ferguson. "A Monster Calls teaching resources." The Old Vic, Old Vic Education Resources, 2017, 14.

very involved in the six-week devising process. Only in the last two days of the rehearsal process, six weeks later, Ness saw what had taken shape onstage from the story he had written.<sup>76</sup>

### *Production History*

From the beginning of development, the stage production of *A Monster Calls* was a joint venture between the Bristol Old Vic in Bristol and the Old Vic in London. In 2017, the Old Vic was reeling over the prior year's investigations into allegations of sexual misconduct by former Old Vic Artistic Director Kevin Spacey.<sup>77</sup> The AD hired to take over for Spacey, Matthew Warchus, elected to design a season of productions that would show "triumph over adversity."<sup>78</sup> Warchus contacted Sally Cookson, a frequent collaborator at the Bristol Old Vic who had been introduced to the novel *A Monster Calls* by her friend Sarah Goddard, and mentioned that The Old Vic had been awarded the rights to the story. Cookson recalls that she pulled the book out of her rucksack and said, "Yes, let me...please."<sup>79</sup>

Sally Cookson was an established theatre director in London when she was asked to helm the collaborative venture bringing *A Monster Calls* to the stage. Initially working as a LAMDA-graduate actor, after ten years, she began freelance directing.<sup>80</sup> Her early

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<sup>76</sup> Susie Ferguson, 16.

<sup>77</sup> Georgia Snow, "Exclusive Study Reveals Extent of Abuse in Theatre." *The Stage*, Jan 25, 2018.

<sup>78</sup> "Matthew Warchus and Kate Varah." *The Stage*, Jan 03, 2019.

<sup>79</sup> Andrzej Lukowski, 'I don't Think Anything is Impossible to Put on Stage': Sally Cookson on the Enormous Challenge of Adapting *A Monster Calls*. London: Independent Digital News & Media, 2018.

<sup>80</sup> "Sally Cookson - Curtis Brown," accessed February 27, 2023, <https://www.curtisbrown.co.uk/client/sally-cookson>.

directing work appeared at fringe festivals. Cookson quickly found a home at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre, where she met and collaborated with Andrew Peck, who would become writer-in-the-room on *A Monster Calls*.<sup>81</sup> By 2010, she was an acknowledged "children's theatre specialist."<sup>82</sup> In 2012, she directed *Peter Pan* at the Bristol Old Vic.<sup>83</sup> In 2013, she created a devised version of *Jane Eyre* (also at the Bristol Old Vic), and the National Theatre invited the production to transfer to London. It then went on a national tour in 2017.<sup>84</sup> At the end of 2015, she devised a completely non-verbal *Sleeping Beauty* at the Bristol Old Vic, collaborating with dramaturg Adam Peck.<sup>85</sup> In 2016, the National Theatre brought Cookson's 2012 staging of *Peter Pan* to the West End. She received critical acclaim for her devised work, the press applauding her trademarks of "physical inventiveness and ensemble cohesion."<sup>86</sup>

That devising inventiveness certainly showed in Cookson's production of *A Monster Calls*. The production played from 31 May 2018 until 16 June 2018 at the Bristol Old Vic before the planned transition to West End's Old Vic London, which lasted

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<sup>81</sup> Eleanor Turney, "Review: The Boy Who Cried Wolf," A Younger Theatre (blog), July 19, 2013, <https://www.ayoungertheatre.com/review-the-boy-who-cried-wolf/>.

<sup>82</sup> Maddy Costa, "Boing! – Review," The Guardian, December 19, 2010, sec. Stage, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2010/dec/19/boing-review>.

<sup>83</sup> "An Interview with Sally Cookson, Director of Peter Pan," Bristol Old Vic (Bristol Old Vic, October 23, 2012), <https://bristololdvic.org.uk/>, <https://bristololdvic.org.uk/blog/2012-10-23-an-interview-with-sally-cookson-director-of-p>.

<sup>84</sup> "Sally Cookson Talks about Her Adaptation of Jane Eyre," Fairy Powered Productions, May 2, 2017, <http://fairypoweredproductions.com/sally-cookson-talks-adaptation-jane-eyre/>.

<sup>85</sup> Kate Wyver, "Feature: Sally Cookson's Gender Reversed Sleeping Beauty," A Younger Theatre (blog), November 30, 2015, <https://www.ayoungertheatre.com/feature-sally-cooksons-gender-reversed-sleeping-beauty/>.

<sup>86</sup> Michael Billington, "A Monster Calls Review – Adolescent Reality Meets Fairytale Fantasy with Wit and Charm," The Guardian, July 17, 2018, sec. Stage, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/jul/17/a-monster-calls-review-old-vic-london>.

from 7 July 2018 until 25 August 2018.<sup>87</sup> In 2020, the production began what was supposed to be a 17-venue tour of the UK from 6 February 2020 until 6 June 2020.<sup>88</sup> Unfortunately, the tour was cut short by the COVID-19 pandemic. On 6 April 2020, the production announced on Twitter that all remaining performances were canceled.<sup>89</sup> During the pandemic, the Old Vic selected a recording of *A Monster Calls* as one of the productions they screened as part of the "The Shows Must Go Online" initiative.<sup>90</sup> A recording of the production was viewable from 5 June to 11 June 2020. News outlets reported that as many as one in five adults who screened a theatre performance during the pandemic accessed digital arts content for the very first time.<sup>91</sup> On 3 February 2022, Jonathan Church Productions and Global Theatres announced a limited tour of *A Monster Calls* scheduled from 24 March to 12 June 2022.<sup>92</sup> The production ran for 2-3 weeks each at three different theatres: Rose Theatre Kingston, Bristol Old Vic, and Kennedy Centre Washington in the United States.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> "A Monster Calls Tickets | The Old Vic Theatre | WestendTheatre.Com," accessed February 27, 2023, <https://www.westendtheatre.com/56733/shows/a-monster-calls/>.

<sup>88</sup> Nathan Skethway, "Check Out Production Photos From the U.K. Tour of A Monster Calls," Playbill, February 11, 2020, <https://playbill.com/article/check-out-production-photos-from-the-uk-tour-of-a-monster-calls>.

<sup>89</sup> A Monster Calls Play, Twitter post, April 6, 2020, 3:54 a.m. <https://twitter.com/AMonsterPlay/status/1247115369153736705/photo/1>.

<sup>90</sup> "A Monster Calls - Old Vic Theatre," The Shows Must Go Online, accessed February 27, 2023, <https://theshowsmustgo.online/a-monster-calls--old-vic-theatre/>.

<sup>91</sup> Georgia Snow, "Coronavirus: Online Theatre Audiences Booming during Lockdown," The Stage, May 7, 2020, <https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/coronavirus-online-theatre-audiences-booming-during-lockdown>.

<sup>92</sup> "A Monster Calls Tour 2022 - A Monster Calls UK Tickets," British Theatre (blog), February 3, 2022, <https://britishtheatre.com/a-monster-calls-tour/>.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

### *Critical Reception*

The initial production of *A Monster Calls* arrived with little fanfare. Most of the newspaper articles in summer 2018 reference Bayona's blockbuster film version of the tale; when *The Sunday Telegraph* announced that "the redoubtably creative Sally Cookson" was helming a theatrical version of Ness's novel, it noted for would-be attendees that the production was "as seen on the big screen."<sup>94</sup> When *The Post* announced the list of theatre productions opening within the week on 8 June 2018, *A Monster Calls* was listed twelfth out of fifteen.<sup>95</sup> A few days later, however, the critics' reviews catapulted the production into the nation's consciousness. "From the first word, the first note, the first light, *A Monster Calls* is nothing short of astonishing."<sup>96</sup> These words, penned by Sophie Prideaux of the *Bristol Post*, became a mantra for every subsequent production review. Prideaux's review complimented the innovative staging, acrobatic movement, simple but effective scenic design, and many actors' performances. She insisted that "there [would] not be a dry eye in the room, and the performance [would] stay with [the audience] long after [they] leave the theatre."<sup>97</sup> The sentiment resonated with other reviewers, especially once it made its way to London in July. The

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<sup>94</sup> "Book Now The Hottest Tickets," *The Sunday Telegraph*, April 15, 2018, 2024922931, International Newsstream.

<sup>95</sup> "Theatre Starting This Week," *The Post*, June 8, 2018, 2051474882, International Newsstream.

<sup>96</sup> Sophie Prideaux, "Five Stars: *A Monster Calls* at Bristol Old Vic Is 'Nothing Short of Astonishing,'" *BristolLive*, June 8, 2018, <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/whats-on/whats-on-news/five-stars-monster-calls-bristol-1655493>.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*



subtitle of Maxwell Dominic's review for *The Times* seems to sum up how critics felt about the production: "sad but not sappy, this should be a monster hit."<sup>98</sup>

The multivalence of the production is apparent from the reviews. As each reviewer acknowledged and complimented central elements of the production, each focused on a different performance theme. *Variety's* Matt Trueman applauded the production's portrayal of time.<sup>99</sup> Fiona Mountford for *The Evening Standard* appreciated the quietness of the domestic scenes between Conor and his family members.<sup>100</sup> Paul Taylor at *The Independent* was most taken with the paradox of the Monster itself.<sup>101</sup> Regardless of which element a reviewer chose to highlight, the themes and truths of the production shone through. Emma Gradwell summarized the underlying ethos of the play for the *Rewrite This Story* blog: "[*A Monster Calls*] is a brutal tale that focuses on the harsh realities of mortality, and our helplessness in grief and the emotional complexities of its process."<sup>102</sup> This central idea, the complexity of being human, drew me to the script and is the point of view from which I approached the direction of the play.

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<sup>98</sup> Dominic Maxwell, "Sad but Not Sappy, This Should Be a Monster Hit: Theatre," *The Times*, July 18, 2018, 2071109175, International Newsstream.

<sup>99</sup> Matt Trueman, "London Theater Review: 'A Monster Calls,'" *Variety* (blog), July 18, 2018, <https://variety.com/2018/legit/reviews/monster-calls-review-play-1202876885/>.

<sup>100</sup> Fiona Mountford, "A Monster Calls Packs an Enormous Emotional Punch," *Evening Standard*, July 18, 2018, <https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/theatre/a-monster-calls-review-packs-an-enormous-emotional-punch-in-its-quietest-scenes-a3890011.html>.

<sup>101</sup> Paul Taylor, "A Monster Calls, Old Vic, Review: Patrick Ness's Novel Is Magnificently Brought to Life," *The Independent*, July 23, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/a-monster-calls-review-old-vic-theatre-patrick-ness-novel-sally-cookson-matthew-tennyson-a8452696.html>.

<sup>102</sup> Emma Gradwell, "A Monster Calls, Old Vic | Review," *Rewrite This Story* (blog), accessed February 27, 2023, <https://www.rewritethisstory.com/2018/07/a-monster-calls-old-vic-review.html>.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Theoretical Approach

#### *Introduction*

A thorough analysis of *A Monster Calls* begins with selecting a critical lens through which to view the piece. Although *A Monster Calls* is not explicitly an ecological play, the many references to nature and my commitment to sustainable theatre practices suggested that digging into the text from an ecocritical perspective would be a productive exercise. This chapter starts with a literature review of texts from the canon of ecocriticism that I found particularly relevant to the themes of *A Monster Calls*, then applies those texts to an ecocritical reading of the play. The chapter ends with an outline of the process by which I analyzed the episodic structure of the script and prepared to direct the piece.

#### *Ecocritical Theory*

One of the ways to understand *A Monster Calls* is through the lens of ecocriticism. The ecocritical literary theory emerged in the late 1980s to analyze texts that juxtaposed the Romantic notion of the natural world in opposition to the world of constructed/industrial culture. Ursula K. Heise writes in “A Hitchhiker’s Guide to Ecocriticism” that the scope of the field is difficult to summarize because scholars are divided in their views of how ecocritical theory - and the activism it informs - should manifest. As Heise puts it, “ecocriticism coheres more by virtue of a common political

project than on the basis of shared theoretical and methodological assumptions.”<sup>1</sup> That political project examines classic and contemporary literature through the frame of ecology; these questions produce new and deeper understandings of the human relationship to nature, and more specifically, what we can *do* with these understandings.

The application of ecocriticism is rife with dissent. Since the one thing eco-critics seem to agree on is that the field itself is important, the result is a complex, rhizomatic body of ecocritical literature that evades cohesion.<sup>2</sup> In this project, I will build my analysis of ecocritical themes in *A Monster Calls* on the connections between ecocritical theory and memory popularized by the folklorist Simon Schama, the theory of dark ecology set out by Timothy Morton, and the application of ecocritical theory to performance theorized by Una Chaudhuri and Theresa J. May.

Simon Schama’s *Landscape & Memory* reads more like a memoir than a theoretical text. Schama begins his introductions with recollections of his time growing up as a boy in the English outdoors, weaving into them the touchstones of human culture -- Schama imagined himself as Robin Hood, Puck, and Mowgli. This start underpins the central thesis of the book, that “landscapes are memory before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, Schama argues that landscapes are the human organization of nature, a product of culture rather than independent of it. While future theorists will take this argument as a sad fact of the

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<sup>1</sup> Ursula K. Heise “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Ecocriticism.” PMLA 121, no. 2 (2006): 503–16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25486328>. 506.

<sup>2</sup> Although not explicitly mentioned or cited in this paper, *Ecocriticism: An Essential Reader* (Routledge, 2014) and *The ISLE Reader* (UGA Press, 2003) are useful resources for further reading on the history of ecocriticism and other tangential theories and concepts proposed by ecocritical theorists not mentioned here.

<sup>3</sup> Schama, Simon. *Landscape & Memory*. London: HarperCollins, 1995. 61.

human exploitation of nature, Schama says that we should celebrate the fact that humans make sense of the world around them. While other theorists call for new models of interpreting the human relationship to nature, new stories that heal and repair the damage done by environmental desecration, Schama thinks that the old stories have never gone away. Schama believes that by reclaiming the myth and memory that simmer beneath the surface of commodified nature, we can “reveal the richness, antiquity, and complexity of our landscape tradition, to show just how much we have to lose.”<sup>4</sup> Schama’s excavation of the myths, memories, and obsessions that underlie the relationship to nature focuses separately on the three broad categories of wood, water, and rock. In each section, Schama explores how myths and legends that loosely correlate to each type of nature have shaped the Western canon of cultural history. The book ends with a rumination on how Romantic poets like Henry David Thoreau seemed to understand Schama’s thesis without explicitly articulating it. The final lines of *Landscape & Memory* borrow from Thoreau himself: “It is in vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves. There is none such.”<sup>5</sup>

As I prepared to stage *A Monster Calls* and spent time with the text, I noticed that while he does not cite him as an influence directly, many of Schama’s ideas were expanded on by Timothy Morton and his newer theory of dark ecology.

Like Schama, Morton proposes in *Ecology Without Nature* that ecocriticism creates a false dichotomy between man and nature. He argues that the very word environmentalism is problematic: “in a society that fully acknowledged that we were

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<sup>4</sup> Schama, Simon. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Schama, Simon. 578.

already involved in our world, there would be no need to point it out.”<sup>6</sup> Morton criticizes conventional ecology, built on Romantic notions of nature that are not removed from capitalist ideology. Michael Löwy identifies the primary characteristic of anti-capitalist Romantic thought as “*a thorough critique of modern industrial (bourgeois) civilization (including the process of production and work) in the name of certain pre-capitalist social and cultural values.*”<sup>7</sup> Morton argues that poets are only able to romanticize nature because it exists in opposition to capitalist modernity.<sup>8</sup> The anthropomorphizing of nature common in the Romantic ideal is, therefore, an extension of the capitalist impulse. By giving the world around us human characteristics - imbuing our sense of place with our human concepts of life and intention – we treat plants and animals as ends rather than means. Morton argues that maintaining this view is a paradox that denatures nature itself because the concept of nature is necessarily separate from the concept of place and self in ecological thought.<sup>9</sup>

Morton terms his queered approach to ecocriticism, which embraces the paradoxes he outlines, “dark ecology.” It is a theoretical action: implicating ourselves in the ecological equation, removing the idea of “Nature,” and dealing philosophically with the distance that removal creates. Embracing that distance, in Morton’s words, “may be

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<sup>6</sup> Timothy Morton. *Ecology Without Nature*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). 141.

<sup>7</sup> Löwy, Michael. “The Romantic and the Marxist Critique of Modern Civilization.” *Theory and Society* 16, no. 6 (1987): 891–904. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/657542>. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Morton. “Morton, "'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star' as an Ambient Poem.” *Romantic Circles*, University of Colorado at Boulder, 1 Nov. 2001, <https://romantic-circles.org/praxis/ecology/morton/morton.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Morton (2007), 180.

the surest way of relating to the nonhuman.”<sup>10</sup> This seems similar to Schama’s idea that nature is a construct of human memory; like Schama, Morton implicates us in the action of the creation of nature. But where Schama is content to revel in the excavation of cultural touchpoints in our conception of nature, Morton insists that we have created a false idea of “Nature” that we must overcome to proceed with repairing the damage we have done to the world around us. Schama embraces and excavates Romantic ideals; Morton rejects them in favor of something more holistic and productive.

Underscoring Morton’s idea of dark ecology is the idea of “ecological thought.” Morton states in his 2010 book of the same title that ecology is more than environmentalism; it encompasses art, literature, and ontology. Morton believes that ecological thinking is a way of looking at the world that recognizes and embraces the interconnectedness of everything. As he puts it, “ecology includes all the ways we imagine how we live together.”<sup>11</sup> He also argues that contemporary ecocriticism is overly concerned with art that explicitly deals with nature (or the problems of returning to nature) and has overlooked the fact that ecology permeates all forms. Morton gives the example of a poem but to extrapolate his ideas and apply them to theatre: a piece of theatre can exist as ecological art if it is *about* something of nature, but it also *is* and *does* something – it is “made of materials and exists in the world...but there is more to its ecological quality than that” because it organizes space.<sup>12</sup> Watching a piece of theatre makes you aware of yourself and your place in the universe and your connection to the

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<sup>10</sup> Timothy Morton (2007), 205.

<sup>11</sup> Timothy Morton. *The Ecological Thought*. (UK: Harvard University Press, 2010), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Timothy Morton (2010), 11.

people around you; ecological thought underscores all art regardless of whether that piece of art deals directly with wood or water or animals. At first glance, Morton may seem to reject Schama's reliance on Romantic notions. However, I think both theorists ultimately do similar work: they acknowledge that nature is a construct and ecological thought is a way of knowing, organizing, and interpreting how we exist in collaboration with everything around us.

Una Chaudhuri applies the concepts of ecocriticism to performance theory. In an article titled "There Must Be a Lot of Fish in that Lake: Toward an Ecological Theatre," Chaudhuri uses the scene from Chekhov's *The Seagull* where Trigorin makes the titular statement to Nina after watching Treplev's play to theorize that an ecocritical theatre would become a place of political activism, where ecocritical theatre artists would rebel against the use of nature as metaphor. Chaudhuri cites Trigorin's disrupted non-sequiturs that reduce Treplev's play to simple scenery as a metonymic example of how theatre articulates the nuances of the culture/nature debate in the liminal space where theatre resides. In the same article, Chaudhuri argues that "to use ecology as metaphor is to block the theater's approach to the deeply vexed problem of classification that lies at the heart of ecological philosophy: are we human beings - and our activities, such as theater - an integral part of nature, or are we somehow radically separate from it?"<sup>13</sup> Chaudhuri identifies the paradox Morton will voice years later but goes a different route to address it.

Ten years before Morton, Chaudhuri published *Staging Place*, which posits that realist drama elucidates a myriad of ecological issues that all stem from a central

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<sup>13</sup> Una Chaudhuri. "There Must Be a Lot of Fish in that Lake: Toward an Ecological Theatre." 1994. *Theater* 25 (1): 27.

preoccupation with the “problem of place.”<sup>14</sup> Chaudhuri’s concept of *geopathology* articulates the dialogue between belonging and not. This, she argues, characterizes modern drama – with the most modern of modern playwrights finding a “muted celebration of placelessness,” as in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* or Suzan Lori-Parks’s *The America Play*.<sup>15</sup> Five years later, Chaudhuri joined forces with Elinor Fuchs (of “Visit to a Small Planet” fame) to edit *Land/Scape/Theatre*, which brought together a diverse collection of authors to theorize further how theatre can enter the ecocritical discourse through the frame of landscape – a discussion of “place, space, ground, geography, and mapping.”<sup>16</sup> The essays of *Land/Scape/Theatre* align with Schama’s idea that landscape is a lens through which to understand human culture. Ana Vujanović defines *landscape dramaturgy* as “a metaphor...grounded in rethinking the position of the human mind and human agency in the world.”<sup>17</sup> Applied to theatre, Chaudhuri and Fuchs edit a volume that maps a landscape dramaturgy specifically relating ecocritical ideas to the field of performance studies. Chaudhuri and Fuchs attempt to manifest the ecological thought of Morton’s dark ecology, but the result is still a largely theoretical approach.

Theresa J. May has done much to move theatre practice toward an ecocritical ideal. Like Morton, May calls for action; unlike Morton, May believes that the medium

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<sup>14</sup> Una Chaudhuri. *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Una Chaudhuri, (1997).

<sup>16</sup> Fuchs, Elinor and Una Chaudhuri. *Land/Scape/Theater*. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002). 7.

<sup>17</sup> Vujanović, Ana. “Landscape Dramaturgy: Space after Perspective (2018).” *Thinking Alongside*, Ingri Midgard Fiksdal (Ed.), Oslo: The Oslo National Academy of the Arts, 2018.



of theatre performance can put the political act of ecocritical interpretation into practice. In her article “Beyond Bambi: Toward a Dangerous Ecocriticism,” Theresa J. May, perhaps in homage to Elinor Fuchs, poses a series of “Green Questions to Ask a Play.”<sup>18</sup> I will reference these further in Chapter Three.

In 2021, Tanja Beer published *Ecoscenography: An Introduction to Ecological Design in Performance*. Building on the work of Chaudhuri and May, Beer argues that “we need a new philosophy for theatre production that promotes ecological, holistic, interconnected and symbiotic practices.”<sup>19</sup> Beer’s work seems to be underscored by the ecological thought proposed by Morton and, in many ways, seems to engage in Morton’s practice of dark ecology. She calls for theatre practitioners to “explore what it might mean to embrace an ecological ethic in performance design, not as a limitation but as an opportunity.”<sup>20</sup> Beer’s reframing of thought around ecocritical theatre helps practitioners escape from the tyranny of content. Instead of considering only plays that deal directly with climate change issues as green theatre, Beer opens new avenues of approaching theatre from an ecocritical perspective. Through May and Beer, theory becomes praxis. Instead of focusing on the text of a play, these new ecocritical performance theorists frame their thinking around the product and process of performance.

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<sup>18</sup> Tanja Beer. *Ecoscenography: An Introduction to Ecological Design in Performance*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021), 2.

<sup>19</sup> Beer (2021), 2.

<sup>20</sup> Beer (2021), 3

## *Ecocriticism and A Monster Calls*

In theorizing my approach to *A Monster Calls*, I first analyzed the text with Schama's Romantic cultural lens. Schama devotes an entire section of *Landscape & Memory* to 'Green Men,' the exact way the Monster introduces himself to Conor.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, *A Monster Calls* fits seamlessly into Schama's argument. It is a play about myth – about stories – and the shadows of Schama's memory landscape are, in many ways, the building blocks of the play itself.

Take, for example, the character of the Monster in the play. It could be the personification of cultural memory that Schama outlines in his text. Conor calls the ferocious entity to him at 12:07 every night, but the first time the Monster arrives in Conor's bedroom, Conor questions the Monster's presence. "What are you?" Conor asks, and the Monster indignantly replies, "I am not a 'what'! I'm a 'who'!"<sup>22</sup> This seems to mimic Schama's idea that capital-N Nature is a construct. The Monster is not a static object but the subject of millennia of cultural history made manifest in Conor's bedroom.

When the exchange goes on, the Monster expands on the cultural memory that make it up:

Conor: Who are you, then?

Monster: Who am I? Who am I?! I am the ancient yew tree! And I have as many names as there are years to time itself! (Beat) I am Herne the Hunter! I am the eternal Green Man! (Beat) I am the spine on which mountains hang! I am the tears that rivers cry! I am the wolf that kills the stag, the spider that kills the fly! I am the snake of the world devouring its own tail! I am everything untamed and untameable! I am this wild earth, come for you, Conor O'Malley.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd. *A Monster Calls*, 31.

<sup>22</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd. *A Monster Calls*, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd. *A Monster Calls*, 31.

The Monster's monologue illustrates an amalgamation of conflicting origin stories. The Monster states that they are both ancient yew tree and Herne the Hunter, often associated with an oak tree. Schama does not cover the myth of Herne the Hunter in *Landscape & Memory*, but he points to other myths of nature popularized by Shakespeare. Herne the Hunter falls into this category. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Mistress Page relates the tale of the ghost of the keeper of Windsor Forest and tells the company that Falstaff will meet them at 'Herne's Oak.'<sup>24</sup> In addition to claiming two different types of trees, the Monster contraries Schama's thesis by declaring themselves a combination of all three categories of cultural myth: wood (Green Man, Herne's Oak), water (the tears that rivers cry), and rock (the spine on which mountains hang). Schama divides stories around these three categories, positing that human memory has created the cultural association that wood represents mysticism, water cultural baggage, and rock the resiliency and integration of nature and human achievement. The Monster, however, erases these divisions in a single monologue, drawing on mythic allusions to make it clear that the character itself is an amalgamation of all the cultural myths that make up the construct of Nature – this “wild earth.”<sup>25</sup>

The Monster also refers to themselves with animal metaphors, an element of nature myth that Schama omits in *Landscape & Memory*, likely because it goes outside the bounds of the central topographical conceit. However, we can extend Schama's argument about the stories we tell centering around nature to include animal tales. Unlike the allusions in the passage, the Monster's metaphor comparing themselves to a wolf and then a

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<sup>24</sup> Shakespeare, William. *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Act IV Scene IV.

<sup>25</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd. *A Monster Calls*, 31.

spider appears to be literal rather than rooted in mythology. In this case, the Monster's comparison appears more literal than allegorical: the Monster communicates to Conor that the Monster is a dangerous hunter, a being that kills weaker beasts. It is interesting to note that the animal references the Monster uses are examples of subsistence hunting. The Monster uses metaphors to communicate not only the dangerous, carnivorous properties of their being but also to reinforce the naturalness of it. Using those examples reinforces Schama's argument for the cultural construct of nature.

One animal reference in the passage is clearly mythic in nature. "The snake of the world devouring its own tail" is a particularly arresting image. Ouroboros, the Greek word for the ancient cyclical symbol of a serpent or dragon swallowing its tail is popular in origin stories worldwide. The Norse myth of Jörmungandr, Egyptian funerary texts, and Gnostic alchemy all feature the image to communicate the cultural construct of cyclic renewal. The fact that the Monster begins their introduction with the adjective "ancient" and culminates their series of allusions in their introduction with this one underscores the allegory's temporal nature. The Monster explicitly references collective memory, a living landscape come to life.

The idea of a communal landscape and the terror it might invoke tracks with the anecdote Schama relates at the end of his section on wood, when his children encountered the great redwoods of California: "these seemed more like monsters than marvels."<sup>26</sup> Schama goes on to relate about the incident:

"only when I looked at my six-year-old daughter beside the immense, wrinkled girth of a burl did I realize that she could barely apprehend it as a tree at all...what the children felt was what was closest to them: the urgent life of the forest floor, primordially squishy-soft, packed with fungus and seething with the

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<sup>26</sup> Schama, Simon. 242.

vast traffic of countless beetles, earwigs, and ants commuting this way and that, a ceaseless commotion of eating warring, colonizing, populating.”<sup>27</sup>

To Conor, the 12-year-old protagonist of *A Monster Calls*, the epic introduction that to an adult might ring with rich allegory and cultural history is terrifying. The Monster claims they are a tree, and at first Conor, seems to believe them, relating to Dad that “there’s a tree that’s been visiting me.”<sup>28</sup> But after the Monster tells Conor the third tale and the dream world and the world of reality collide with the brutal treatment of Harry, Conor tells Miss Godfrey, “It wasn’t me. It was the monster who did it.”<sup>29</sup> From a child’s perspective, the mythic memory that coalesces to form a shared, historic culture is monstrous. As in Schama’s anecdote, it is the phenomenological truth of the landscape that children feel rather than the romanticized understanding of it. To Conor, the Monster is more what than who.

Schama’s theories come to the fore when breaking down more than just the character of the Monster. The stories the Monster tells Conor are eerily similar to the myths Schama relates as a way of interpreting and analyzing the constructed culture that is “Nature.” The Monster arriving to tell Conor three stories and for Conor to tell him a fourth seems to be a reification of Schama’s ideas. Together, Conor and the Monster use stories, cultural memory made manifest and personal, to articulate Conor’s place in the world.

*A Monster Calls* reads like one of the Brothers Grimm fairy tales that Schama breaks down in the part of *Landscape & Memory* about wood. Structurally, *A Monster*

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<sup>27</sup> Schama, Simon. 242.

<sup>28</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd. *A Monster Calls*, 53.

<sup>29</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd. *A Monster Calls*, 77.

*Calls* follows the classic quest narrative of these mythic fairy tales. A magical being selects the special main character to perform a series of tasks that result in the main character learning a moral or lesson. In crucial ways, however, *A Monster Calls* complicates that narrative. First, in the classic quest tale, the main character is summoned or chosen. In this story, Conor is the one that calls the Monster to him. Secondly, Conor's quest adventure occurs in the liminal space between dreams and waking. The Monster comes to him at 12:07 a.m. when he is in bed; Conor believes that the Monster might be a dream. Only when evidence of the Monster crosses that barrier – such as when the yew berries appear in Conor's shoe – does Conor begin to believe that the Monster is real. Interspersed with nightmarish interactions with the Monster are vignettes from Conor's day-to-day experience. Scenes take place in Conor's school or at his home. In a true mythic fairy tale, the journey would take precedence, and the magic moments would supersede Conor's perceived reality.

The tales the Monster tells are also microcosms of the Brothers Grimm fairy tales, which Schama outlines in *Landscape & Memory*. However, unlike the hyper-local Grimm fairy tales that are, Schama argues, inextricably tied to the geopositioned German forests, the tales the Monster tells Conor are universal and placeless – except positioned where the ancient Monster was present. As we have already discussed, the Monster's monologue sets them up to be anywhere and everywhere. The result is that the tales the Monster tells, especially the first two, are environmental without being tied to place. I adapt Chaudhuri's landscape dramaturgy and use Morton's rhizomatic definition of ecology to describe the curated worlds the Monster creates for Conor. I use “storyscape”

to describe the liminal space between worlds where the Monster teaches Conor to acknowledge the hard truths that scare him.

The first tale is pastoral. The Monster paints a verbal picture, and the Ensemble brings to life “a green place” where “trees covered every hill, shaded every stream and protected every house.”<sup>30</sup> The Monster narrates the storyscape into existence, creating a necessarily mythic space – it is a kingdom where “the king and his sons fought dragons and giants, ogres and wizards.”<sup>31</sup> The Monster situates the place as magical, even though the characters in the tale are all too human. After setting the scene in an ancient pastoral setting, the story is positively pedestrian. The lesson to Conor is concerned with the absolute humanity of the characters: murder, betrayal, and deception move the tale along instead of magic and magical creatures

In the Second Tale, the Monster paints a portrait of the same location many years later, once industrialization and the commodification of the earth have taken hold in earnest. In this instance, the Monster does reference specific contemporary border demarcation. “One hundred and fifty years ago this country had become a place of industry.”<sup>32</sup> The demonstrative pronoun in the sentence is interesting. The Monster says “this” country, not “England.” Presumably, “this” refers to the place where Conor and the Monster currently stand – though it is a vague enough descriptor that it keeps the play placeless. If nothing else, “this” can refer to the location of the storyscape the Monster

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<sup>30</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd. *A Monster Calls*, 38-39.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd. *A Monster Calls*, 57.

has created for Conor – the future of the pastoral fairy tale world the Ensemble constructed in Tale One.

In our timeline, one hundred and fifty years ago was the height of the industrial revolution, a reality the Monster certainly plays into with his descriptor of the setting of Tale Two. “Trees fell, fields were upended, rivers blackened. The sky choked on smoke and ash, and so did the people. But there was still green, if you knew where to look.”<sup>33</sup> In Tale One and Tale Two, the Monster uses “green” in the ecocritical metonymy. “Green” represents not only literal greenery or growing things but also the life force and magic that allows the characters in the stories to call the Monster to come walking. In this way, “green” is another term for “the wild earth” itself. The simplistic description of the problems that plague the earth with the advent of industrialization simplifies the conditions of the story the Monster will tell Conor. Tale Two is still a pastoral tale, but it is a pastoral tale set in the complicating circumstance of the exploitation of nature. The trees have been cut down, presumably for industry. The rivers and sky are blackened with pollution and refuse – symptoms of the sickness of material ‘progress.’ Yet, these environmental settings are again only a backdrop for the complicated tale the Monster tells, a tale that, like the first one, teaches Conor a valuable lesson about the human condition.

Tales Three and Four see Conor slip further into the liminal dreamscape that the Monster creates. In Tale Three, Conor beats up Harry as the Monster narrates the story of the invisible man. This tale does not appear to have an environmental factor to it, but the

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<sup>33</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd. *A Monster Calls*, 57.



stage directions still instruct the Ensemble to “transform the space.”<sup>34</sup> This suggests that the place of the stories the Monster tells Conor is indeed in an othered space, not a geographically specific one. The Fourth Tale represents Conor’s nightmare – the pastoral land the Monster created in the first tale has completely disintegrated. However, if we read the Monster as “the wild earth” they say they are, we might also be able to read this tale in environmental terms. Perhaps the Monster is the forest floor, alive and eternal, rising to smother Conor as he pleads with the Monster to “don’t make [him] say” his truth.<sup>35</sup> In the classic fairy tale myth, as Schama points out, “ordeal precedes resurrection.”<sup>36</sup> In Tale Four, Conor experiences his nightmare in its totality. Once he speaks his truth, he is reborn.

There is undoubtedly an ecocritical way to read the truth that Conor ultimately speaks. The very act of speaking truth into existence embodies the myth-making Schama discusses. Nature does not exist without our communally speaking it into existence; the Monster prompts Conor to build his own landscape of truth.

This revelation dovetails nicely with Una Chaudhuri’s theory of geopathology. Conor ‘calls’ – literally, constructs – the Monster as a coping method to deal with his grief and guilt about his mother’s impending death. Through this construction, the Monster is both place and person. Conor’s calling of the Monster represents the placelessness that Chaudhuri articulates in *Staging Place*. Like the example of Godot, the nightmare-scape that Conor constructs is a facsimile of the ‘home’ he will necessarily

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<sup>34</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd. *A Monster Calls*, 76.

<sup>35</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd. *A Monster Calls*, 88.

<sup>36</sup> Schama, Simon. 107.

lose if Mum dies. Of course, the non-naturalistic staging indicated by the stage directions of the play already complicates a geopathologic reading of the play – in some ways, *A Monster Calls* is a clear example of post-geopathologic theatre that Chaudhuri states is outside the bounds of her study – but because of the clear connections to cultural memory, I still think it is productive to consider the ramifications of the Monster as a representative of placelessness, especially in light of the multivalent amalgamation of cultural memory through which the Monster defines himself.

The setting of *A Monster Calls* is England. The arresting image of the yew tree is particularly relevant to the environment within England – although yew trees exist the world over, the yew trees in the English countryside have survived for literally thousands of years and were once revered by druids for their so-called magic properties.<sup>37</sup> While the text never explicitly states that the play is set in England, the background of the authors of the piece combined with the language and references in the text strongly suggest England. However, *must* the play be set there? As Schama suggests, cultural myths may be geographically specific, but they are universally human. *A Monster Calls* is set in England by virtue of the Britishness of its writers, but the events that take place could happen anywhere – and one could argue that with its constantly shifting settings and the devised nature of the Ensemble, the authors of the piece intend for anyone putting on the play to lean into placelessness rather than a specific locale. The play is theatrical; the children are not meant to be played by child actors. Who is to say that the play's setting

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<sup>37</sup> M. R. Lee, "The Yew Tree (*Taxus Baccata*) in Mythology and Medicine," *Journal of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh* 28, no. 4 (December 1, 1998): 569–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/147827159802800414>.

must be explicitly English? What would it mean to stage the play as recognizably taking place in England – British accents? A hyper-realistic scenic design?

There is a reading of *A Monster Calls* that specifically asks a director to neutralize references to a specific time and place. The Monster may make nature references that are more British than not – they reference yew and oak trees, not palm trees or cactuses – but as has been discussed, the Monster also makes universal references to worldwide myths: the ouroboros, the wild earth.

At first reading, ecocriticism is a surface-level analysis of *A Monster Calls*. The Monster as yew tree, the stories with their environmental elements, and perhaps a slightly more complex argument that the storyscape the Monster builds for Conor ties into Chaudhuri's theory of geopathology and placelessness in theatre performance – these appear to be the most productive ecocritical reading of the text. However, I believe that when we read *A Monster Calls* through the lens of Morton's "dark ecology," we see the project of the play itself crystallize. The Monster positions itself as the natural constant in a changing, commodified world – a condition of Morton's dark ecology. Morton writes, "Environment as theory, as wonder, as doubt, does not achieve escape velocity from [sic] the earth, but in fact, sinks down into it further than any wishful thinking, any naïve concept of interconnectedness could push us...dark ecology tells us that we can't escape our minds."<sup>38</sup> Schama insists that we should celebrate the human conception of the construct of nature; Morton challenges us to dig deeper into the myths that make up our constructed "Nature" and question the moments of uncomfortableness. Morton points to literature that blurs the lines of self and otherness. Is this not ultimately what the Monster

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<sup>38</sup> Timothy Morton (2007), 200-201.

teaches Conor? For all their mythic stories of a constructed, pastoral nature, the environment the Monster ultimately curates for Conor is within Conor's own mind. The Monster explicitly spells out Conor's lesson in the Monster's penultimate scene: "your mind will contradict itself a hundred times each day...your mind will believe comforting lies while also knowing the painful truths that make those lies necessary. And your mind will punish you for believing both."<sup>39</sup> But it is the final scene of the play where Conor puts the lesson into practice when he tells his Mum, "I don't want you to go."<sup>40</sup> Conor makes explicit the interconnectedness, the ecological thought that underpins every piece of art, theatre performance included.

### *Script Analysis*

Before beginning pre-production work on *A Monster Calls*, I engaged in a deep and lengthy exchange with the script. I created a spreadsheet with detailed information gleaned from a close reading of the play modeled after David Ball's *Backwards & Forwards* play reading technique, which traces the dramatic action of a play through cause and effect.<sup>41</sup> Because this play is episodic and not a straight narrative, I adapted Ball's analysis strategy to suit my needs. For every scene in the play, I identified the location and day/time, what happens plot-wise, the important event or change, and the number one representative item absolutely required. I also listed the named characters,

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<sup>39</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd. *A Monster Calls*, 91.

<sup>40</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd. *A Monster Calls*, 91.

<sup>41</sup> Ball, David. *Backwards & Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays*. Chicago, Southern Illinois University, 1983. 9.

indicated which characters appeared in which scenes, and identified the overall “vibe” of each scene.

For example, in my spreadsheet, I listed Scene 20, “Yew Trees,” as taking place in the hospital on Tuesday evening. For the “what happens” category, I wrote, “Conor visits Mum in the hospital,” and for the important events/changes category I wrote, “Monster dances with Mum as Conor daydreams.”<sup>42</sup> The necessary item for the scene was an IV drip and the vibe category read, “hopeful with creepy undertones.” The final design and performance choices clearly reflected that initial identification of important moments and items. This intensive analysis work made my interactions with designers and performers more specific and productive and kept the overall storytelling cohesive and tightly controlled.

To understand Conor’s relationship with the various people in his life and how the situation with his mother is affecting those relationships – to map the ecological thought that underpins the piece – I found it helpful to group the episodes of *A Monster Calls* into several categories. Scenes 4, 6, 11, 19, and 26 take place at school and focus on Conor’s relationship with his peers and teachers. Scenes 1, 3, 5, 20, 27, and 32 focus on Conor and Mum. Scenes 8, 12, 13, 23, and 31 focus on Conor and Grandma. Scenes 14, 15, 18, and 21 are between Conor and Dad. Collectively, these scenes make up 62.5% of the play, and they are the scenes that take place in Conor’s subjective reality – ostensibly what is happening in Conor’s life at school and home. Scenes 10, 16, 24, and 29 occur in the storyscape the Monster builds for Conor. These scenes are as far from Conor’s subjective reality as it is possible to get – they take place in a landscape where he has no

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<sup>42</sup> See Appendix A for an excerpt of the Play Analysis spreadsheet.

authority, no control – but in many ways, these scenes feel more *real* than any other, the environment more clearly articulated and curated than others in the play. These tales make up 12.5% of the scenes in the play, but they are where the bulk of the action happens, where Conor grows the most. Scenes 2 and 17 are the Nightmare, and scenes 7, 9, 22, 25, 28, and 30 feature the Monster prominently – I view these scenes as the liminal scenes between two worlds, where the Monster begins to impinge on Conor’s reality. These scenes make up 25% of the scenes in the play.

The inciting incident of the play is when Conor enters the stage and looks through a window to the past when his Mum first told him about the yew tree when he was a mere baby. This Conor already knows that his Mum has an illness, presumably cancer, and this Conor already knows his Mum is dying but will not admit it to himself. When Conor has the first nightmare in Scene 2, it is the first nightmare this audience sees, but it is not the first nightmare Conor has experienced. However, when Mum’s health is clearly getting worse in Scene 2, this triggers the next stage of Conor’s nightmare: when he calls the Monster to his bedroom.

The Monster provides a specific structure for the rest of the play. The audience learns that we will hear three stories, and then Conor will tell a fourth. The first act ends with the telling of the second story. This story ends in an act of destruction – and it is essential that the audience feels, viscerally, how destructive that act is.

The play changes pace after the act break, accelerating rapidly. Many scenes in Act II end with Conor alone onstage, a clear departure from the beginning of the play where the Ensemble constantly surrounded Conor. The Third Tale also provides a welcome change in structure – the harsh dividing line between the storyscape the

Monster builds for Conor and the world of Conor's subjective reality begins to blur.

While the First Tale was entirely confined to the world of dreams and the Second Tale only broke through at the end, the Third Tale begins and ends in the reality of Conor's time at school.

The climax of the play is in Scene 29, the Fourth Tale. The Fourth Tale is where Conor experiences the Nightmare in its totality and where he confesses that he wishes his Mum would die and the awful not-knowing would be over. This heartbreaking confession needs to happen for Conor to begin the healing process; he finally begins to process the grief he feels around his Mum's illness.

The play's final moments feature a repetition that results in discovery for the audience. Throughout the play, every time we enter the liminal world of the Monster, the Ensemble announces the time: 12:07 a.m. The play's final moments reveal that this is the moment of Mum's death – a premonition that Conor instinctively knew and feared. The act of the clock ticking over to 12:07 a.m. functions as a visceral moment of connectivity for the audience. They subconsciously recognize that the Monster must have visited Conor each day at the same time because that time has significance. It is only in the play's final moments that the reason for the significance is revealed: Mum's death.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Concept and Design

#### *Introduction*

In approaching *A Monster Calls* conceptually, I wanted to invite the audience into Conor's mind. The play is Conor's subjective experience of reality, his perception of the events leading up to his mother's death. Conor is an adolescent boy experiencing the trauma of losing a loved one. He feels lost and alone, unsure of how to process his grief. The Monster is a construct, an anthropomorphizing of the world around Conor (the yew tree in his backyard) coupled with the personification of the network of complicated emotions he feels. I wanted the audience to see what Conor sees. By exploring the interior landscape of Conor's brain on grief and approaching that landscape from the perspective of sustainability, I propose that *A Monster Calls* engages in dark ecology. The play itself is a rumination on ecological thought. Taking an ecocritical approach to the design and rehearsal process allowed us to present a dramaturgical landscape highlighting the interconnectedness of overlapping ecologies.

#### *Conceptual Approach*

The concept underscoring my direction of *A Monster Calls* was the biological neural networks in a human brain. This concept reifies the play's central themes of grief, connection, and complexity, and resolves a conceptual challenge I encountered in my first reading of the script: who is the Ensemble? By conceptualizing the Ensemble as



neurons in Conor's brain, I was able to build a world that reflected the grief-stricken subjective reality of a pre-teen dealing with his mother's impending death.

At first glance, this concept may not seem informed by an ecocritical reading of the play. However, ecology, especially deep ecology, is about the interconnectedness of people to their environment. Visually, the biological neural networks in the human brain resemble organic network structures found elsewhere in nature. I researched images of biological neural networks and was struck by how similar they looked to rhizomatic patterns occurring in nature: the root system of a tree, for example, or the fractal pattern created when lighting strikes a piece of wood, or the shadow cast by sunlight to the ground through a network of tree branches. Aerial photographs of winding river tributaries, the blood vessels in a human body, tunnels created by ants or termites – each naturally-occurring system mapped in three dimensions mimics the structure of axons and dendrites in the human brain.

I used an ecocritical perspective to conceptualize the manifestation of fear created by Conor's biological neural network: the Monster. Using Schama's phenomenological associations with wood as my guide, I thought it productive to envision the Monster as a decaying forest floor. Rather than a singular yew tree, I wanted my Monster to have the timeless, oppressive, and ever-presence of decay. The Monster manifests as Conor's deepest fear. Decay is a physicalizing of what Conor truly fears: the death of his mother. With this conceptualization of the Monster, I realized that a collective unit rather than a single actor must play the role of the Monster. I will expand on this decision and its challenges in the next chapter.

Finally, I informed my conceptual framework for the play with ecocriticism by prioritizing a sustainable approach to design and performance. I foregrounded my conversations with designers in brainstorming ways we could decrease waste in design and production and increase care and connection by respecting the resources of time and energy put in by our company.

### *Design Approach*

Tanja Beer quotes Adele Cattenazzi in the first chapter of *Ecoscenography*: “One designer trying to be sustainable won’t work if the director is not on the same page, or if the rest of the team doesn’t understand why. Directors...can become great leaders in this area.”<sup>1</sup> I believe that a director’s primary job is facilitation, guiding individual artists to share their talents to collectively create something greater than the sum of its parts. I took inspiration from Cattenazzi’s statement. I tried to facilitate a design process grounded in sustainability where every team member was on the same page and working toward a collectively-realized goal.

*A Monster Calls* was tentatively confirmed by the Baylor Theatre faculty as my thesis production in December 2021, pending the granting of rights by Concord Theatricals UK. In June 2022, I learned that Baylor Theatre acquired the rights for a November-December 2022 production as part of the 2022-2023 mainstage season. In July 2022, I met with the Scenographer of the production, a faculty member who would be designing the set and costumes with the support of two student assistant designers. At this preliminary meeting, the Scenographer and I discussed the themes and attributes of the play, as well as my desire to approach the play through an ecocritical lens. The

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<sup>1</sup> Tanja Beer (2021), 9.

Scenographer has a personal artistic practice grounded in sustainability, and our partnership proved productive from the first meeting. We discussed Theresa J. May's "Questions to Ask a Green Play" and questioned whether or not *A Monster Calls* was a green play. While it does deal with aspects of nature and ecological thought underscores the text, the play is not primarily concerned with changing the minds of the public about climate or other problems plaguing humanity – what most people consider "green plays."<sup>2</sup>

However, although *A Monster Calls* is not necessarily an example of a green play, it is possible to think about the play ecologically and create a production grounded in sustainable practice. From May's list of twelve questions, I found that one offered a particularly productive interrogation for an ecocritical reading of *A Monster Calls*: how does the play challenge our definitions of self, community, and our relationship to the natural world?<sup>3</sup> This question is at the heart of the content of *A Monster Calls*, as Conor navigates his changing relationship with Mum, the authority figures in his life, and with himself. I wanted the design process for *A Monster Calls* to mirror the collaborative complexity that the Monster teaches Conor. To that end, I structured the pre-production process to be collaborative.

### *Design Process*

The design process at Baylor University Theatre is often in flux. For this iteration of a mainstage production, the faculty Scenographer, rather than the production manager,

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<sup>2</sup> Theresa J. May, "Greening the Theater: Taking Ecocriticism from Page to Stage." *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 7, no. 1 (2005): 84–103. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41209932>.

<sup>3</sup> Theresa J. May, "Beyond Bambi: Toward a Dangerous Ecocriticism in Theatre Studies." *Theatre Topics* 17, no. 2 (2007): 95-110. doi:10.1353/tt.2008.0001.

informed me of my design team on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022. I also learned that my stage manager would not begin her duties until the first production meeting, scheduled for week one of the build, or one week before beginning rehearsals – October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022. Instead of a stage manager facilitating pre-production meetings with designers, I was responsible for arranging meetings and ensuring that designers met their deadlines.

I approached this challenge with relish. Our first pre-production meeting was done virtually on August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2022, the week before students returned to campus for the start of the Fall semester. Before introducing my ideas for the play, I invited the designers to share their thoughts and first impressions. I wanted to generate designs for the project collaboratively – I did not want to impose a hierarchical structure on the design process. After the designers shared their impressions, I showed them images that informed my concept for the production. I asked the designers what they needed from me to proceed, considering that the final designs were due in eight weeks. The designers indicated that having weekly check-ins with concrete goals would help them stay on track as they developed their designs. We set a date for our next meeting, and I asked each designer to state what they intended to complete by that next meeting, recording each answer in our meeting minutes. We followed this structure throughout the pre-production process: the designers articulated their individual goals, and I documented those goals and checked in with each designer at each pre-production meeting. At the first production meeting, the Stage Manager took over my duties of scheduling and support. My concentration shifted to rehearsal mode, outlined in more detail in Chapter Four.

## *Design Challenges*

The play's text exhibited four significant challenges we needed to solve with design elements. My concept for the play yielded a fifth challenge that we partially resolved with design elements.

The first challenge required by the script was Mum's fall in Scene 29. The play necessitated that the actor playing Mum would need to "suddenly [fall] from the cliff edge" and then "[dangle] feet first from the cliff edge."<sup>4</sup> We needed to ascertain a way for the actor playing Mum to fall safely – or as safe as we can make the conditions for the actor to perform an inherently unsafe act. As the Technical Director for *A Monster Calls* repeatedly stated – "there is no such thing as safe."<sup>5</sup> The challenge was to create a condition where the actor could perform a fall from height in a way that would arouse the audience's sympathies, but not pull them out of the experience of the play due to perceived danger.

The end of Act I provided the second challenge. In the climactic moment of the first half of the play, Conor destroys Grandma's house. Scenically, we needed a 'Grandma's house' construct the actors could destroy each night. Adding to that challenge were additional requirements of the scene: we see Grandma's house introduced in Scene 13, but Conor goes off with Dad in Scenes 14 and 15 before returning to Grandma's house at the end of Scene 15. Then, the Ensemble must transform Grandma's house into the Monster's storyscape, only for Grandma's house to be re-revealed at the end of Scene 16. This transformational space also had to be imbued with stakes – if the

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<sup>4</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 86.

<sup>5</sup> Technical Director, in communication with the author, September 2022.

audience did not feel connected to Grandma's house, the destruction at the end of Scene 16 would not have the intensity needed for the dramatic arc of the play.

Phenomenologically, we had to build Grandma's house and make the audience feel they were being ripped apart along with Grandma's sitting room.

The final scene of the play revealed the third major challenge. In my conception of the play, scenes 1-35 take place in the subjective reality of Conor's mind – we see the world as Conor sees it, not necessarily as it is. We see Conor's perception of Mum, Grandma, and Miss Godfrey – not necessarily those characters as they exist in Conor's world. Conversely, in the play's final scene, the audience finally sees Mum as she truly is. The harsh reality should be emphasized with a naturalistic setting – as the script dictates, “this is the first time we see anything approaching a naturalistic set – a real hospital bed, monitors, drips, etc.”<sup>6</sup> We needed a space that could be flexible and abstract until the final scene of the play.

The fourth challenge – and the broadest – in designing the production had to do with the multiple locations required by the script. Conor needs to seamlessly transition from his bedroom to the kitchen to the playground to the classroom within the first seven scenes of the play. Additionally, the performers need to be able to “transform the space” for the Monster's stories, then immediately transition out of that story world. Finally, the Nightmare itself must build on what we have seen before.

The fifth and final challenge for the designers arose later in the design process and was not entirely a design challenge. After I had finalized the concept for the production, it became clear that the Monster should not be played by one actor, as the script indicates,

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<sup>6</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 94.

but that the Monster should be a collective entity. As written, the Ensemble serves a limited storytelling function. In my reading of the script, it seemed a stronger choice for the Ensemble to play the Monster – that is, for the Monster to be an amalgamation of the neurons in Conor’s brain, a truly constructed reality he creates to help him process the grief over Mum’s impending demise. Because this is contrary to the original conception of the play, the choice presented several challenges. How could we distinguish between when the Ensemble were Conor’s brain and when they were Conor’s construction of the Monster? I posed this challenge to the design team. In addition to working with the actors to create a collective Monster sculpture with their bodies (a solution discussed in more detail in Chapter Four), the design team developed several strategies to address the challenge.

### *Scenic Design*

Early in the design process, the Scenographer and I discussed the idea of a net: a flexible, organic structure that resembled the biological neural network of the concept and reified the ideas of community, support, and connection that underpin the text. At our second meeting, the Scenographer shared images of kinetic textile sculptures, three-dimensional art made of woven fabric. Some of these sculptures were created using cargo netting and rigged so that they can be climbed and explored tactilely by art patrons. I found this concept fascinating and asked if it would be possible to design a set incorporating climbable structures.

I recognized that the design for this production needed to be abstract enough that we could physicalize the different locations required by the text. It also needed to accomplish the single most dramatic moment required by the script: Mum falling from

the “cliff.” While the Scenographer was considering kinetic sculptures, we met with the Technical Director to troubleshoot how a college theatre could effectively orchestrate a fall from height that would achieve the play’s objectives without endangering the lives of the performers. At that meeting, we tossed out ideas: a harness, a masked fall into a cushion, a trapdoor in the stage floor. I asked if it would be possible for a performer to roll down a net? The technical director paused and said, “if that would work for you, that sounds like the most elegant solution.”<sup>7</sup>

The Scenographer brought three maquettes to the third design meeting that physicalized three different ideas for utilizing climbable netting in our scenic design. The simplest of these maquettes included a single giant net. That became the basis of the rest of the scenic design.

At first, we considered adding additional netting and drapery as projection surfaces on the set. Ultimately, we simplified the design to four main elements: one large, climbable cargo net rigged at a more or less 45-degree angle from upstage to downstage, a 12-foot-tall platform made of iron, a staircase behind the net leading to the platform, and an additional cargo net covering the stage left vom. At first, we wanted the performers to be able to climb and stand on the stage left vom net. However, we wanted to prioritize reuse and sustainability where possible. The two nets we had access to in the department were the Jones Theatre pit net (which became the main focus of the scenic design) and a cargo net leftover from the past year’s production of *Treasure Island*. The cargo net was not as suitable for climbing due to the size of the holes and material of the

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<sup>7</sup> Technical Director, in communication with the author, September 2022.



rope, but the rigging team did figure out a way to make a swing-like structure at the bottom of the net so the performers could lean against it and it could bear some weight.

The Scenographer and I collaborated to resolve another of the script's significant challenges: Grandma's house. When I told the Scenographer my concerns about creating a scenic element that would read as Grandma's house, be able to stay in position for scenes that did not take place in that location, then be destroyed by Conor at the end of Act I, the Scenographer suggested creating Grandma's house out of paper. The Assistant Scenic Designer brought images of filigreed paper – almost doily-like representations of furniture – to place on the set. These seemed perfect. They communicated the fragility and frilliness of a Grandma's house, and Conor could transgressively tear them to pieces at the end of Scene 16. We found that the Ensemble imbued additional stakes into Grandma's house with how they interacted with the paper. A corollary to the challenge around Grandma's house was the challenge of creating the Monster's storyscapes. The script indicates that the Ensemble “transforms the space” at the beginning of each of the four tales.

I wanted the tales to have a saturated, vivid, colorful component inspired by the 2004 Tarsem film *The Fall*. The Scenographer came up with a tangible solution for transforming the stage for the first two tales: large swaths of vibrant, colorful fabric that could be draped on the net and floor to create the pastoral landscape required by Tale One, and black netting to put over those colorful fabric swaths to create the industrial landscape required in Tale Two. In each tale, the Ensemble would bring out and place a river across the downstage area from vom to vom (blackened with the tulle in the second tale), a garland of greenery to represent the tree attached to the net, and a fabric edifice

attached to the face of the platform with magnets to represent the castle in the first tale and the parsonage in the second. The best part of these elements was their layer-ability – the second set of fabric pieces was placed on top of the paper cutouts representing Grandma’s house, so the destruction at the end of Act I would be twofold.

The Scenographer resolved the challenge of the final scene with a hospital bed and IV pole that could be wheeled onstage by the Ensemble. It was the only time in the entire play we used furniture. For all other moments when actors needed to be seated, they used their bodies, the net, or another actor to make it happen. The IV pole wheeled in at the final scene was similar to one used earlier in the play, but whereas the IV pole used in Scenes 20 and 27 was bare and the IV lines made of fiber optics, the hyper-realistic IV pole in the final scene held an actual prop saline drip bag. The highly realistic hospital elements and the way they appeared so seamlessly helped to differentiate the reality and finality of Mum’s death scene from the rest of the play.

The Scenographer decided to use recycled paint for the floor. Luckily, the department had leftover yellow and blue paint, creating a lovely gradient green color. The Scenic Charge Artist spent several weeks layering different paint treatments on the floor; the result was a rich and multi-layer green canvas that looked like a decaying forest floor. The Scenographer and Scenic Artist added threads of glossy top-coat that mimicked the neuron-like texture of the Lighting Designer’s proscenium wall treatment. These gloss lines caught the light and made the floor look even more textured and dimensional. The artist included lighter value spots on the rigging points in the floor, so caution tape was not required – this helped the overall look of the set to feel cohesive.

The primary feature of the set was the 18'x10' pit net. It was rigged to the downstage center position of the floor and extended at an angle to the upstage left rails of the fly system in the Mabee Theatre. The rigging team collaborated with the movement team to ensure safe rigging and climbability of the net. "Under the care of the net" became a mantra that informed the production's design and rehearsal process. The collaboration continued in other areas of design – the scenic, props, and costume designs also worked together to create a cohesive design story.

### *Props Design*

Baylor University Theatre does not typically engage a designer for props. Instead, a Props Supervisor oversees a group of student artisans who pull, adapt, or build out required props. If significant design of a prop is required, the plans for that stem from the director's description or the scenic designer's requests. For *A Monster Calls*, properties played an important role in establishing the subjective reality called for by the concept. I also wanted to empower every team member – including the Props Supervisor – to feel invested in making artistic choices for the play. Early in the design process, the Scenographer and I met with the Props Supervisor to identify the best working method. The Props Supervisor did not feel comfortable taking on a significant designer role but did want to stretch herself in crafting bespoke props. The three of us identified a style for the props that illustrated the play's themes of brokenness, connection, and subjective reality. The idea was to create items in the style of reconstructed kinetic sculpture that included the netting motif. We also prioritized which props we needed for the production. Instead of the 300 props requested in the play's text, we narrowed that down to the 35 most significant items. The Props Supervisor and her team built us a custom tea kettle,

laundry basket, teacups, and backpacks that lived in the world of Conor's subjective reality.

The most critical prop the Props Supervisor designed and built for the production was a solution to the challenge of identifying when the Ensemble was collectively being the Monster: the tree branch scepter. The Props Supervisor submitted two different designs for the prop, and I selected the one that best fit the metaphor of the Monster as a decaying forest floor. The tree branch scepter was purpose-built and included an embedded microphone which the sound design team used to great effect.

### *Costume Design*

The Scenographer took inspiration from the concept of biological neural networks to design the costumes, which were abstract for most of the cast. The Ensemble had base costumes in a neutral, natural color palette (which the designer painted using dyes made from tree bark and berries). Each Ensemble member had a slightly different design, but typically the costumes consisted of a neutral shirt and pants with two unnatural additions: fins and sleeves. These fin and sleeve additions elongated the proportions of the actors' bodies, obscuring their bipedal human forms and suggesting a more neuron-like assemblage. Belts affixed the fins and the actors could tuck and untuck long fabric sheaths, stretching them out to form different shapes onstage. Similarly, the sleeves were removable boleros that extended the actors' arms well beyond their fingertips. The idea behind the design was for the actors to be able to connect their sleeves and fins to each other or the set to create an interconnected web, physicalizing the ecological concept of interconnected neural pathways.

When the Ensemble members transitioned from being Ensemble to becoming named characters, the Scenographer gave each named character a signifying costume item: a flowery headscarf for Mum, a floral blazer for Grandma, a Hawaiian shirt for Dad, a flowered jean jacket for Lily. The naturalistic flower motif carried across the costume items for the people in Conor's life who cared for him, but other characters received discrete costume elements – the bullies each had a jacket and a headpiece; Mr. Marl wore a vest and Miss Godfrey, a cardigan. The actors could put these items over their base costumes as needed and take them off when portraying Ensemble members only.

The Scenographer conceptualized the costumes with sustainability as an opportunity in mind. She knew the Costume Shop had abundant scrap fabric, donated clothing, and old sewing projects. The design of the Ensemble costume pieces considered that each set of fins and sleeves was constructed entirely out of recycled material quilted together to create a collage of sewn-in memories. The actors could see and touch the pieces that made up their costumes, pointing to where and when they had experienced that fabric before – an old pair of pajama pants, a father's day tie, a scrap of fabric from a costume elements class. This sustainable practice created an additional layer of community in the piece's production, emphasizing the ecocritical ideal that everything is interconnected.

The only naturalistic costumes in the play were Conor's blue polo, khaki pants, and white Vans shoes, which he wore throughout the play, and the hospital gown and quilt Mum put on for the final scene to differentiate the reality of the final scene. The Vans shoes and Mum's quilt were two specific costume items that truly embraced the

dark ecology of this production of *A Monster Calls*. The costume designer had each member of the cast write and draw on Conor's shoes – in Scene 4, when Harry and Sully make fun of Conor's shoes, what might have otherwise been a throwaway line (“Where did you get them shoes?!”) had particular resonance for the actors due to the method of production of the costume item.<sup>8</sup> The red quilt that Mum holds in her lap in the final hospital bed scene functioned similarly in the performance. Not only was it an actual quilt, which mirrored the quilting technique of the designed costumes and called to mind the same emotional resonance, but it also mirrored the small piece of quilted fabric that Conor held in his hand and kept in his pocket during the performance, using it as a prop.

#### *Hair and Makeup Design*

The Scenographer carefully considered the hair and makeup design for the Ensemble, and it illustrates another example of collaboration in the design process. The Scenographer met with each actor individually to consider with care what they wanted to achieve with their hair and makeup looks and what would enhance their individual hair qualities. Instead of setting a blanket design for all Ensemble members, each performer received a customized hair and makeup plot that showed them how to achieve the elongated, abstract, hollowed-eye Ensemble look and piecemeal hair design with their unique combination of skin color and hair type.

#### *Lighting Design*

At the beginning of the pre-production process, I met with the Lighting Designer and told them I wanted the lighting to separate the four different “worlds” of the play.

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<sup>8</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 23.

The scenes that took place in Conor's subjective reality – the house scenes, the school scenes, and the scenes with Dad – should be muted and colorless. Conor feels grief in this reality. The Lighting Designer suggested adding harsh shadows with gobos to reinforce that almost prison-like, desaturated setting. The next world of the play was the tales. I wanted them to be in high contrast to the dullness of Conor's every day. They needed to be vibrant, saturated, and full of color; even though the Monster's tales are complex and scary, I wanted them to feel like fairy tales. The third world of the play was the in-between world between waking and dreams, where Conor meets the Monster. This storyscape world is where the Lighting Designer had the most fun. They decided to include a star curtain upstage; the changing lights of the star curtain reinforced the liminal space when Conor was not quite in the first or second world. Finally, the last world of the play is the hyper-realistic final scene when Conor is at the hospital with Mum. Initially, I thought this scene would be in a different lighting style than the rest of the play to reinforce the dissonance between Conor's subjective reality and the objective reality of the hospital room. In practice, however, a completely different lighting look separated the final scene too completely – it no longer felt like it was part of the same play. While the scenic design for the final scene changed from the more abstract scenic design in the rest of the play with realistic elements, the lighting was similar to what the designer used in Conor's subjective reality, with slightly more warmth. The similar lighting to previous scenes gave the audience a point of reference to connect to; the warmer tones mirrored the healing relationship between Conor and his mother as Conor finally spoke his truth to her.

From the beginning of the pre-production process, the Lighting Designer wanted the performers to interact with a physical light source onstage. At first, we considered a concrete light element within the tree branch scepter but ultimately moved away from that idea as it might have been a little “too much.” Instead, the Lighting Designer collaborated with the Scenographer to conceptualize Mum’s IV backpack.

I knew that I wanted Scene 20 to be a ballet of sorts – in the script, it is the scene where the stage directions indicate that “the Monster takes Mum and dances with her.”<sup>9</sup> I initially conceptualized this as an undulating forest floor lifting Mum into the air and spiriting her away, but then I saw a striking photo of a Japanese kabuki performance that used lengths of white rope to lift a performer.<sup>10</sup> The lengths of rope looked like IV lines – pathways from the Monster, delivering yew tree medicine to Mum. In collaboration with the Scenographer and Lighting Designer, we constructed the IV lines out of side-emitting fiber optic lines feeding out of a backpack that the performer could wear as Mum. The ends of the lines were each held by one of the actors playing the Monster, mirroring the inspiration image as part of the choreography in the performance.

The IV backpack was not the only place the Lighting Designer used side-emitting fiber optics. Early in the process, we talked about ways that we could make the audience feel like they were part of the story. Although we rejected initial scenic design elements extending into the audience, I still liked the idea of adding something to extend beyond the proscenium arch. The Lighting Designer designed an extension of the rhizomatic neuron motif out of fiber optics and mounted them on either side of the proscenium.

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<sup>9</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 68.

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix B for the reference image.



These visually extended the net out into the audience. Thematically, the fiber optics flashed to life and changed color in coordination with the star curtain.

While the costume and scenic design did much of the heavy lifting in transforming the space for Tales One and Two, the lighting design was the most important tool in transforming the space for Tale Three and the final Nightmare. In Tale Three, the lighting designer used intensely saturated reds and flashing lights to bring the mob fight against Harry to life. In Tale Four, she utilized the star curtain and fiber optic proscenium wall lights as in other nightmare interactions but also included fog machine effects. The thick fog rolling out under the net, obscuring the ground, intensified Mum's fall.

### *Scent Design*

Early in the process, the Scenographer and I spoke about including scent in the show's designs. We researched companies that provide scent for theatrical applications and ascertained the most reputable source. We obtained four sample scents, all of them nature-themed. Only one felt like it would achieve the aim of our idea: giving the audience the subtle olfactory experience of being deep in the woods instead of in a theatre space. The scent was called "Forest." It contained earthy, mulchy notes with top notes of pine and cedar. We knew we had allergies in the cast, so we checked the ingredient list with the manufacturer and found that it did not contain any of the allergens listed by our cast as potential issues.

We performed a test on some fabric, draping it at the foot of the audience space. It did a great job of permeating the space with a subtle scent. Guests in the space who did not know about the test commented that it smelled like the outdoors in the Mabee. One of

the actors was absent from rehearsal on the first two days of the test. When she returned, she thought the smell reminded her of one of her severe allergens. Although the scent did not contain the allergen, the scare upset the actor, and she had to leave rehearsal for the day. Out of care and concern for the actor, we decided to halt testing and do without the scent distribution for the production. Scent design is something I would like to consider further in the future because it did add a compelling dimension to the production.

### *Sound Design*

The sound designer and I worked closely throughout the production process and sound design is integral to a piece with devised movement. My initial plan was to work with the sound designer to craft a soundtrack for the performance ahead of rehearsals, then work with the actors to synchronize their movements to the created music tracks. I quickly learned that this was nearly impossible and not the best way to work for my sound designer and actors. Instead, the Sound Designer and I curated several playlists of music tracks that achieved the different sound objectives we wanted for the performance. We also invited all company members to add music to the playlists.

The first playlist we curated and the one with the most songs was a Spotify playlist titled “AMC Playlist.” Here we prioritized music that fit the overall vibe of the production that the sound designer and I were going for: dark synth music with EDM elements. I was fascinated by the connection of EDM with brain wave function and wanted to incorporate music that mirrored the neural activity that was my concept for the production. From there, we also added tracks that included “tones and drones” to layer into the production.

Other playlists we curated were character specific. We identified that each scene in the play seemed to focus on Conor's relationship with a different character. The initial idea was to have a theme or motif associated with each of the main characters in Conor's life: Mum, Grandma, Lily, and Dad. The music we selected for Mum was lyrical, with soft and warm tones. Most of the tracks for Mum were relatively slow but with a hopeful cadence. Grandma's playlist also had warmth, but the beats were more severe to mirror Grandma's strident nature and complicated relationship with Conor. Lily's music options were buoyant and bubbly, quicker paced than others. Dad's music choices were quirky, with odd changing tempos and an underscoring of anxiety to hint at the uneasiness between Conor and Dad.

The Sound Designer and I initially wanted music to underscore the entire production with key moments of silence when Conor feels particularly alone. We thought that as the play progressed, there would be more and more silence until the final scene became unbearably quiet. This idea did not work in practice because the performers did not have microphones. We could not hear them over constant underscoring. Instead, the Sound Designer created transition soundscapes with the character motifs. Between scenes, we heard the different tracks that indicated the relationship status between Conor and the people around him. Near the end of the play, we brought in more concrete sound effects – car horns, beeping heart monitors – to indicate that Conor was leaving his subjective reality and things were becoming more concrete around him.

There were two pieces of music that I specifically created for the production. The first was an edit of Lorn's "Feed the Dogs for Me." The Sound Designer added the track to the Spotify playlist, and I realized that it was the perfect backing for the Scene 20

ballet between Mum and the Monster. The second piece of music I created for the production was a composition of the song that the script indicates that the Apothecary sings in Scene 16, “Please Give Me.” The script includes lyrics to the song but no melody or accompaniment. I composed the melody, wrote sheet music for it using Final Note software, and worked with a composition mentor and accompanist to create accompanying chord progressions.<sup>11</sup> The accompanist and I recorded a piano backing track, which the performers used to rehearse. Our Sound Designer took the track and added additional effects, tones, and drones, ensuring that it would not be jarring to transition from synthetic, electronic music to piano accompaniment.

Finally, the Sound Designer also worked on the microphone hidden inside the Monster’s tree branch scepter. The Sound Designer added echo effects to the microphone playback, so whenever someone standing near the scepter spoke, it transformed their voice monstrously. It became a challenge to ensure that the microphone only picked up the voices of the Ensemble playing the Monster and not Conor, but the idea of the voice modification was effective.

### *Projection Design*

In my initial proposal to Baylor faculty, I indicated that I was unsure if I wanted or needed a projection designer – my initial vision for the production did not include any projections. However, when I was assigned a student Projection Designer, she expressed excitement about creating abstract imagery through projection that would support the performance. Unfortunately, the Projection Designer’s schedule did not allow her to attend pre-production meetings. This lack of face-to-face time with the rest of the

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<sup>11</sup> See Appendix C for a sample of the “Please Give Me” composition sheet music.

production team led to the Projection Design plans becoming more siloed than I would have preferred. The Projection Designer offered no opinions or feedback when the Scenographer asked about including projection surfaces in the scenic design. Ultimately, the Projection/Sound Mentor and I decided to use two projectors: one above the stage angled down and one front-facing projector. This setup would allow the Projection Designer to create imagery on the stage floor, on the net, on the star curtain, and on anything hung on the face of the platform. Because the department's pit net and star curtain are made of black textiles, we knew any imagery provided through projections would have to be abstract and supplemental. The Scenographer worked with the Charge Artist to ensure a lighter value on the floor paint so that projection would appear.

In our pre-production conversation, the Projection Designer and I discussed ways to create a moving shadow effect, where it would look like the performers' shadows ran away from them to create haunting imagery on the floor. We also discussed creating a sequence of abstract imagery that would represent the different relationships and memories in Conor's life. These would play during the moments he dissociates from the present in Scenes 5 and 25. These ideas did not manifest in the production. When we got to Tech Week, the Projection Designer mainly focused on providing tree imagery projected on the star curtain and supplemental imagery onto the fabric scenic pieces for the tales.

### *Technical Rehearsals*

Technical rehearsals began with a crew view of the show on the Sunday of tech week. On the next day's Monday rehearsal, I passed the metaphorical baton to our Stage Manager to begin the cue-to-cue process. It took three days to get through every cue in

the production instead of the target two. However, we had anticipated that a show as tech-heavy as *A Monster Calls* would require extra technical time, and the cast and crew accommodated the extra day.

My role in the first three days of tech was to give feedback to the crew and design team about specific looks. It took some time for the Stage Manager and me to find a communication rhythm – when should I ask her to call a hold to address a look in the moment, and when should I make a note and discuss it with the designers in our post-rehearsal debrief? After four or five scenes, the Stage Manager and I found a good communication balance. I rarely called for the Stage Manager to hold the rehearsal, preferring to make notes and address them with designers during breaks. At my Directing Mentor’s recommendation, I also used the times when the Stage Manager called for a hold to give specific notes to the actors.

Because the designers and I collaborated so closely in the pre-production process, technical rehearsals ran relatively smoothly with few design surprises. I can directly trace the issues we did have to a lack of communication prior to tech. One example of this was the lighting design for Scene 11. The Assistant Lighting Designer was responsible for designing the lights for Scenes 10-14. However, the Assistant Lighting Designer and I never met in a one-on-one to discuss their vision for that section of the show. During technical rehearsals, the lighting design for Scene 11 – which took place in the schoolyard – looked very different from what had been established by the Lighting Designer for the schoolyard earlier in the play. I gave the Lighting Design team the note several times that I wanted the lighting to be identical in all the schoolyard scenes. Because the scenic and costume designs were so abstract, I relied heavily on lighting to

cue the audience that the characters were in a place they had seen before. The Assistant Lighting Designer was reluctant to change their design, stating they did not want to “copy” what the Lighting Designer had done in the previous scene. If I had been part of the conversation with the Assistant Lighting Designer earlier in the process, we could have mitigated some of the confusion and concerns.

The last two technical rehearsals before the company left for Thanksgiving Break were dress rehearsals. These ran incredibly smoothly, with no significant hiccups and only a few technical notes to address afterward. Some of these technical notes were mine about the speed of the cues. In retrospect, my anxiety about needing cues to be called more quickly impeded the team from finding their rhythm during those technical rehearsals. I now believe I should have been less heavy-handed in giving technical notes about cue speed, as my input undermined the team’s confidence and did more harm than good.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Rehearsals

#### *Introduction*

This chapter outlines the casting and rehearsal process of staging *A Monster Calls*. First, I will describe the decisions I made before and during casting that impacted the show's final product. I will share the details of two key rehearsal collaborations: my relationship with our Artistic Mental Health Practitioner (AMHP) and our Fight Director, who headed the Movement Team for the show. I will address decisions about and repercussions of the rehearsal schedule and communication and procedures I implemented before the first rehearsal to foster an efficient rehearsal process. Finally, I will describe the aesthetic and administrative choices I made in the rehearsal room with the actors, from first rehearsals to blocking to workthroughs and final rehearsals.

#### *Casting*

I did co-auditions with the director of *Twelve Angry Jurors*, which shared the same pool of eligible actors due to overlapping production schedules. That director wanted actors to memorize and perform monologues from that script; I also needed to see how they worked collaboratively to create devised movement. We decided to have the actors audition in groups of six. Each actor performed their *Jurors* monologue individually, then the group of six worked together to perform a physical task: move a cardboard box from one side of the room to the other.



The auditionees did not know what the task would be ahead of time. In the audition call, I stated that they would work in groups of six to perform a physical task.<sup>1</sup>

On the audition day, I sent them a set of rules they would follow to complete the task:

You will work as a group to create a machine that moves an object.  
Your hands may not touch the object.  
Every member of your group must be involved in making the machine 'work.'  
Your machine's 'work' should be aesthetically pleasing.  
Use only your bodies and the provided materials to create your machine.  
Work for specificity over speed.  
Communicate your boundaries regarding physical touch to your group and don't assume others' boundaries.<sup>2</sup>

When the students entered the room to audition, I presented them with various objects to work with (primarily different lengths and types of fabrics). I was interested to see how the different actors approached the physical task. I was specifically looking at how each performer communicated with their group to complete the task, the facility each performer demonstrated with physical movement, and the innovation of each performer.

The students demonstrated surprisingly varied approaches to the devising process. Some groups relied on the props to engineer a machine that would complete the task. Other groups recognized that they could touch the box with other parts of their bodies, not just their hands.

I gave each group 1-2 minutes to plan or discuss, and if they were still discussing after two minutes, I prompted them to try something out. I let each group practice a few times, then informed them it was time to 'perform.' While the auditionees performed their solution to the task, I took notes about their contributions to the group. I noted who

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix E for a copy of the audition call sent to performers ahead of auditions.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix E for the "rules" graphic that was sent to performers and posted in the audition room.

was particularly innovative with ideas, who communicated with decisiveness and who prompted others in the group to speak up, who moved with groundedness and grace, and who responded to the music rather than letting it be background noise.

After watching 110 students audition and taking into consideration the information on their audition forms, I narrowed a callback list of 40 students and sent them sides they would use in the callback.<sup>3</sup> At callbacks, I divided the forty students into three different groups. Each group came into the audition hall separately to do a collective read of the Monster's monologue from Scene 7. I provided each group with a 2-story stair unit; after a safety briefing from the Stage Manager, the groups were allowed to climb on it. I watched the three groups decide how to divide the Monster's lines and do what was essentially a collective cold read. I took notes on their processes and performances. I was particularly interested to see who climbed up the stair unit without hesitation, who transformed their body to take on the role of Monster, and how each actor contributed to the group dynamic as they decided how to approach the collective, scripted storytelling. Based on their performances, I designated each actor as a Leader, Innovator, or Follower in my notes. Based on the devising we would have to do for the production, I knew I would need a balance of these three contributor types in the final cast.

After all three groups had done the collective Monster cold read, I divided them into two groups: child-types and adult-types. I am typically not a proponent of typecasting. However, I did not have a particular type in mind in this case. I used the strategy of type to categorize the actors I had into two groups that would be able to play several different characters successfully. The child-type actors were in consideration for

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix E for a sample of the callback sides, excerpted from the playscript.

the named character child roles. The adult-type actors were in consideration for the named character adult roles. I paired one actor from each group and gave them sides for one of the Mum/Conor scenes. I quickly realized one of the dangers of that kind of type-casting – some of my initial reads were inaccurate. I originally had the actor who played Lily read for an adult-type character, and the actor eventually cast as Mum read for a child-type character.

To get more specific with which actors were in consideration with which roles, I also divided them into pairs to read a Miss Godfrey/Conor scene. I chose the Miss Godfrey/Conor scene because it demonstrated a power dynamic like other relationships in the play. This one scene would allow me to consider who would be best for many roles. All the actors brought strong choices to their performances and took direction well when I gave them objective shifts. I realized narrowing the audition pool to a final cast would be challenging.

I let fourteen of the actors go and told the remaining six actors that this final segment of the callbacks was for the role of Harry. I asked them to pair up and perform a super slow-motion improvised fight scene on mats. I was looking for controlled movement and physical agility, as the role of Harry requires significant physical exertion. Initially, I suspected I would cast a woman actor as Harry; of the six actors in consideration for the role, only two were men. However, the two men demonstrated considerably more control and innovation in their super slow-motion fight scene; one of them went on to play Harry and the other played Mr. Marl.

After dismissing all the actors, I worked with my Directing Mentor to consider the best combination of twelve company members based on the notes I had taken. In addition

to initially suspecting that a woman would play Harry, I also thought I would cast a woman in the role of Conor. However, the actor who played Conor blew everyone else out of the water. After he read the Mum/Conor scene for the first time, I wrote in my notes: “THAT IS CONOR!!!!”<sup>4</sup> His vulnerability and honesty in the cold read scene were phenomenal, and he gave variety in the levels of the acting choices he made. He also physically connected to the part, his body language changing and adapting during the read. There was one other actor I considered for the role, the actor who went on to play Anton. That actor also had a fantastic audition. However, the actor's physical and vocal choices during the collective Monster cold read stuck in my head. She was so innovative and intense. Ultimately, I decided to cast the two actors as Conor and Anton with the plan to have the actor playing Anton lead the Monster in the play's penultimate scene. I really liked the image of the two actors who most beautifully captured Conor's vulnerability and innocence having a quiet heart-to-heart in Scene 30.

Because I did not plan to cast a single actor as the Monster and was instead looking for a cohesive group of 10-11 actors who could collectively and dynamically create that character, I approached my final casting decision by first choosing my Conor, then selecting the group of actors who I thought would work together the best based on their performance in auditions. I had two minor concerns at the end of the audition process. I was unsure about casting eleven ensemble members, bringing the cast to twelve actors. I worried that so many performers might overwhelm the Mabee stage. The second was that several of the actors in my ideal ensemble had just closed a physically draining production of the musical *Amelie*. Instead of listening to my gut about these two

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<sup>4</sup> Chelsea Curto, Personal journal, 9 September 2022.

concerns, I convinced myself that I needed that many ensemble members and that I would prioritize the mental health of my performers so that they would succeed in being in back-to-back shows. This decision was a failure on my part, which I will address further in Chapter Five.

Callbacks lasted two and a half hours, but it only took me thirty minutes to deliberate and decide on a final cast. When I posted the cast list, I made a point to list everyone as Ensemble with their named role in parentheses to reinforce my central concept that the Ensemble are the neurons in Conor's brain.<sup>5</sup> In retrospect, I wish I had taken this one step further by only listing Conor and Ensemble on the cast list, then separately emailing the individual actors with their named role assignments.

#### *Artistic Mental Health Practitioner*

From the beginning of the process, I knew that my approach to this production would need to prioritize the mental health needs of the company. The subject matter of the text is heavy. The production asks a lot of the actors, physically and emotionally. I knew from training I have done with Theatrical Intimacy Education (TIE) that there is a movement in the United States aiming to prioritize mental health and wellness within the theatre industry. One of the professors at Baylor, who also happened to be our Scenographer, was selected from 300 applicants to complete a several years-long Artistic Mental Health Practitioner (AMHP) training. She was halfway through the program at the beginning of the *A Monster Calls* process. I asked her if she could support the production as an AMHP. At first, she worried that her Scenographer role might compromise her ability to serve the production as an AMHP. At the beginning of the

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix F for the cast list released to the department after auditions.

design process, she submitted an AMHP Scope of Practice outlining what she could and could not contribute to the production.<sup>6</sup>

In the proposal, she identified the potential conflicts of interest and how she could resolve them, primarily consisting of frontloading tools the team could use so she would not have to wear too many hats during the process. She would work as an AMHP under the supervision of Bridget McCarthy, who is a Certified Trauma Support Specialist (CTSS) and Trauma and Resilience Trainer (CTRTR), as well as a co-founder of the Association of Mental Health Coordinators, which works to advocate for supporting the wellness of all involved in creative projects.<sup>7</sup> McCarthy works at the intersection of the mental health and artistic fields, advocating for increased support and resources in theatre programs around the world to support the mental health of artists. In addition to other pre-work services (such as auditing the script for specific potential problem moments and auditing the Baylor University Theatre Concern Reporting Pathway to strengthen structures already in place), our Scenographer indicated that as the AMHP for *A Monster Calls*, she could provide salutogenic support. Salutogenesis is an approach to health and wellness that centers mental well-being and particularly emphasizes coping mechanisms that preserve health in stressful conditions.<sup>8</sup> The AMHP pledged to provide a framework of salutogenic practices to implement in the rehearsal room as well as grief dramaturgy to share with the actors that would help them gain a deeper understanding of the science behind grief that underpins the play.

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix G for the first page of the AMHP Scope of Practice document.

<sup>7</sup> “Mental Health Coordination For The Entertainment Industry,” Association of Mental Health Coordinators, 2023, <https://associationmhc.com/mental-health-coordination/>.

<sup>8</sup> Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “salutogenesis,” accessed February 22, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/salutogenesis>.

Having an AMHP on the project was highly beneficial. The salutogenic practices our AMHP suggested for the rehearsal room included framing the creation of art as an uncomfortable process that would inevitably trigger a flight or fight response in the company members at various times in the process.<sup>9</sup> This certainly resonated with me; there have been many times in past rehearsals when I can feel myself reacting to the stress of creating art. The AMHP proposed that we normalize and neutralize the idea that these reactions will happen. She provided strategies to help every company member cope when experiencing one of these expected somatic drops.<sup>10</sup> These strategies are colloquially referred to as ‘glimmers,’ and they include grounding exercises that bring your body into awareness of itself and out of hyper-aware mode. Suggested glimmers include playing with clay, counting colored objects in the room, or identifying two things you smell and three things your body is touching. The AMHP provided a Glimmer Menu that we implemented from the first day of rehearsal; performers and crew members alike used the menu and provided resources, such as clay and coloring books.

Additionally, the AMHP adapted the Concern Reporting Pathway (CRP), including the election of two peer deputies in the company, modeled after the same roles in an Equity production.<sup>11</sup> The AMHP warned me that we might experience more negative feedback with the addition of the more equitable CRP because when people feel safer voicing their concerns and opinions, that can look like an increase in negative opinions when in reality it is only an increase in the *safe expression* of those negative

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix G for slides from the AMHP’s presentation to the cast on somatic drops.

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix G for slides from the AMHP’s presentation to the cast on using salutogenic practice to regulate somatic drops.

<sup>11</sup> The Redheaded Actress, “How to Be an Actors’ Equity Deputy,” The Green Room (blog), March 19, 2013, <https://greenroomblog.com/2013/03/19/how-to-be-an-actors-equity-deputy/>.

opinions. Because it is important to me to become a director that challenges traditional hierarchical ideals of directing, I was glad to implement the less hierarchical and more care-based CRP with *A Monster Calls*. We did see increased negative feedback, which I will share and explain later in this chapter.

### *Movement Design*

The Fight Director and two Assistant Fight Directors attended production meetings and became honorary design team members due to the intense physical requirements of the climbable net. This Movement Team gave feedback about the net and worked out movement that would and would not be possible with the various costume elements. They recommended leather split-sole jazz shoes to the costume team and gave feedback about the safety of the lengths of the costume extensions, referred to first by the Costume Designer and then by the entire company as fins and sleeves.

One of the Assistant Fight Directors also served as Choreographer for the project. She and I met in the weeks leading up to the first rehearsal to consider movement vocabulary that would complement what I wanted to achieve in each of the scenes of the play.

Early in production meetings, we realized we would need to be flexible about installing the net. At first, the Rigger indicated that we would be able to use the net by the end of the first week of rehearsal. In practice, the rigging team installed the net five calendar days before the start of tech week. This delay limited the pre-work the Movement Team could do with the net.

I met with the Movement Team to talk about our fight needs early on in the process. We discussed the vision for each of the moments of fight contact (Lily's punch



in Scene 4, Grandma's slap in Scene 8, and the Harry fight moment in Scene 24). The Movement Team devised an excellent idea for Tale Three, Conor's fight with Harry. My initial idea was for Harry to initiate almost all movement, but the team suggested having the collective Monster beat Harry up. This idea eventually became the choreography for Scene 24, and it was one of the most exciting of the play (and certainly the most rehearsed due to the intense nature of the choreography).

### *Scheduling*

Crafting the rehearsal schedule for *A Monster Calls* was a "monster" undertaking. The department sets the schedule months in advance, and rehearsals could begin no earlier than Monday, October 17<sup>th</sup>. The show would open on Tuesday, November 29<sup>th</sup>, with a departmental preview. Working in collegiate theatre means accommodating university-wide schedule requirements in addition to departmental ones; the Baylor University Thanksgiving holiday was scheduled from November 19<sup>th</sup> to November 26<sup>th</sup>, and on-campus rehearsals were not allowed during that period. Unfortunately, this necessitated a nine-day break between our scheduled tech week and the opening of our show. The schedule allocated two days for *A Monster Calls* rehearsals after returning from Thanksgiving Break: a Sunday pick-up rehearsal and a Monday night final dress. Tech week would begin on November 13<sup>th</sup> with a crew view run-through. The crew view was on a Sunday with two dark days beforehand – that Friday, November 11<sup>th</sup> was a designated dark day for actors so that theatre technicians could hang the light plot for *A Monster Calls*.

Typically, Baylor Theatre mainstage productions rehearse five days a week: Monday through Friday, for four hours in the evening each day. Due to departmental and

school-wide scheduling conflicts in October, *A Monster Calls* only had one week of uninterrupted Monday-to-Friday rehearsals. The proposed weekly dark days meant the show would have 17 days to block and rehearse. The Stage Manager and I met to discuss the situation and quickly asked permission to add Sundays to the rehearsal calendar, resulting in 20 rehearsal days instead of 17. This proposal was approved and lent us sufficient time to block and rehearse the production to make it show-ready before tech week, but the schedule was brutal.

The compressed rehearsal schedule meant that rehearsals flew by. The biggest schedule-related challenge we faced in the rehearsal process was the rigging of the net. The performers needed to climb and interact with the net. The Technical Director agreed with the Movement Team at the first production meeting that getting the net installed as quickly as possible would be vitally important for the performers' safety and the show's success. They would need time to rehearse with the net to ensure they could perform all blocking safely. The net was installed on Friday, November 4<sup>th</sup>. The first time the performers were allowed on the net was Sunday, November 6<sup>th</sup> – giving the cast just five days of rehearsal with the net before tech week. This delay in receiving the net impacted how I approached blocking the production, outlined in more detail later in this chapter.

### *Before Rehearsals*

Rehearsals began six weeks after auditions. Before rehearsals, I communicated with the cast through the Stage Manager, setting the expectation that the actors would be off-book before the first day of rehearsal and sharing a document with the cast that included the breakdown of which actor would speak which Monster lines. I originally wanted to make these discoveries together in the rehearsal room. However, the

compressed rehearsal schedule required completing this work beforehand. I sent the cast a spreadsheet with their Monster lines and asked them to be as off-book as possible for the first rehearsal.

The biggest challenge I faced before rehearsals was selecting which actor would speak the Monster's line in each scene. Indecision paralyzed me. Even though I had taken a leap of faith by deciding that the Ensemble would play the Monster collectively, I sensed that having the Monster speak in unison throughout the production would not be effective. The audience would need a focal point. I decided to prioritize a different member of the Ensemble for each of the Monster's scenes, allocating most lines to a particular actor in each. I needed to decide who would become the voice of the Monster for each of its scenes in the play. I was speaking casually with our Fight Director and mentioned the conundrum. He suggested approaching the decision from what qualities the actors bring to the Monster rather than what qualities the characters bring. This genius suggestion unlocked the puzzle, and I was able to decide the quality I wanted each Monster to have and which actor would be able to portray that scene's Monster quality.

I also knew I wanted to establish the Monster as a collective before giving the audience a focal point in later scenes. In Scene 7, the first time we see the Monster, I divided the lines equally among the cast but still tried to give the actors lines that would resonate with their unique contributions to the Monster collective. The line about age went to the actor who played Grandma, who effortlessly oozes maturity, and the line that references spiders and flies went to the actor who was physically the smallest. Similarly, in the play's final scene, I divided the Monster's lines so that every Ensemble member

would have a final solo contribution to the Monster's voice. I also included many designated unison moments, most notably the final three words of the play: "let her go."<sup>12</sup>

In the email I had the Stage Manager send to the cast with the Monster line allocations, I requested three things of the performers:

1. Think about leaving space between words in Monster lines. (e.g., "Who/ am / I" instead of "WhoamI")
2. Over-enunciate and over-articulate Monster lines. (we can always smooth it later if we need to)
3. These allocations will necessarily be flexible - we may find in rehearsal that we have to re-designate Monster lines. Please don't be precious about these lines!<sup>13</sup>

The last admonition became the most important; in rehearsals, there were several times we had to re-allocate Monster lines due to blocking limitations.

As the first day of rehearsal drew nearer, I felt disconnected from the cast.

Communicating through the stage manager may be standard practice in collegiate and professional theatre, but having a barrier between me and the cast made me feel like there was a hierarchical separation that did not gel with my director's spirit. I asked my Mentor if it would be possible for me to ask the cast to meet one-on-one before the first day of rehearsal, provided I did not make it a requirement. I asked the Stage Manager to send an email asking the performers to sign up for a 15-minute conversation with me, either in person or over Zoom (whatever worked best for their schedules), and all of the cast elected to meet with me. I found those personal meetings to be hugely beneficial. I had never worked with many of the cast members before. During our meeting, I asked them, "What do you need from me?" "What can I do to facilitate a productive rehearsal experience for you?" and "How do you feel about the process/your character?" I also

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<sup>12</sup> Peck, Ness, and Dowd, *A Monster Calls*, 95.

<sup>13</sup> Curto, personal communication with Stage Manager, 3 October 2022.

asked them about their goals for the production and their favorite snack/candy. Many of the performers indicated that they had never been asked these questions by a director. Every single actor indicated that they liked to receive a lot of notes and feedback during the rehearsal process; most added that they did not mind criticism and preferred blunt feedback and open communication. I used the actors' information throughout the rehearsal process and tried to tailor my direction to their preferences.

### *Rehearsals*

Despite the challenges, rehearsals were productive. The actors came together as a company to overcome adversity and ultimately deliver a dynamic and moving production.

#### *First Rehearsals*

The first day of rehearsals is vital for setting the tone of a new company's work together. On the first day of rehearsal for *A Monster Calls*, I tried to create a culture of collaboration and care. I reinforced the idea that the actors were not the only artists creating the production, simply the most recent additions to a larger team. The first thing we did as a company was sit beneath what would become our scenic net and listen to the production designers talk about their collective vision for the production. Each designer gave a truncated version of their design presentation, starting with images I had shared with the designers on the first day of our pre-production meetings.<sup>14</sup> After introducing every member of the team, from designers to assistants to stage management to actors,

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<sup>14</sup> See Appendix H for the reference images shared with designers at the first pre-production meeting.

we discussed collectively our reactions to the play itself and what we wanted to accomplish through telling this story. I encouraged each member of the company to come up with an individual SMART goal for themselves and to consider what they wanted us to achieve as a group.<sup>15</sup>

In order to facilitate a strong working relationship, it is essential for a new group of people working together to establish how they want that working relationship to look. Instead of dictating rehearsal rules or group norms, I wanted the performers to generate a series of agreements collaboratively. I adapted an activity I used while teaching secondary school and gave each company member a stack of post-it notes. On the walls, I placed large pieces of paper with these headings:

“What are “ideal behaviors” for a productive rehearsal?  
What are “ideal behaviors” for a compassionate rehearsal room?  
How do we want to be in relationship with each other?  
What procedures/structures should we all agree to use?”<sup>16</sup>

The company answered the questions with their ideas. I told them we would spend the first week or two of rehearsal sitting with their ideas, organizing them, and ultimately crafting them into a set of agreements to frame our time together. We needed to take time with this process and be as collaborative as possible. To that end, I posted the papers next to what became known as our Glimmer Table (where we kept the clay and coloring pages provided by our AMHP as glimmer options). I encouraged the company to manipulate the post-its – grouping like ideas, adding additional thoughts, and changing categories of

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<sup>15</sup> SMART is an acronym for objectives that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. Research shows that the SMART framework is vital for successful completion of meaningful progress. For more information see A. Conzemius and J. O’Neill, *The Power of SMART Goals: Using Goals to Improve Student Learning*, Classroom Strategies (Solution Tree Press, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Curto, personal journal, 17 October 2022.

potential agreements. For each day of rehearsal in the first two weeks, we spent some time revisiting the agreements until we had narrowed them down to a list of sixteen specific behaviors everyone in the cast agreed to commit to employing that would guide our interactions as a company.<sup>17</sup>

Next, the Stage Manager introduced the Concern Reporting Pathway (CRP) process document and the company elected two peer deputies to serve as additional nodes in the CRP. The Stage Manager also gave their safety briefing, and I introduced two protocols I like to implement in my rehearsal room: Button and Access Needs Check-in. In my rehearsal room, the word ‘Button’ cues me to step outside of a director mindset and engage with my company on a human level. Other people may use this ‘self-care cue’ slightly differently, but for my team and me, it is a verbal signifier that the person using the word needs something they cannot get while in work mode. They need to step outside of being a theatre practitioner, literally or figuratively, and resolve something they are dealing with that is preventing them from accessing the work.

An Access Needs Check-in is a protocol I first encountered during a session at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) Conference last summer. It is a protocol that has every member of a group state aloud what they need the rest of the group to know about their experience or mindset to engage fully in the work the group is doing. An access need could be something integral to a person’s health that everyone else needs to know – “I am hard of hearing, so I need you to enunciate and be patient if I ask you to repeat yourself” – or something specific to a particular day – “I am a little dehydrated today, so please don’t mind me if I step outside to refill my water bottle.” By

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<sup>17</sup> See Appendix I for the graphics of final company agreements and final company goals that were posted in the rehearsal room.

stating your needs aloud in a group setting, someone with a particular access need can ensure everyone knows what it is and avoid uncomfortable situations where someone misunderstands that a particular behavior is unavoidable on the part of the person with a stated access need. As a group gets to know one another, the Access Needs Check-in gets shorter and shorter. Unless someone is dealing with a situational issue, they can state, “my access needs are met” or “I am taking care of my access needs,” and the group can move on.

We implemented the Access Needs Check-in to start our rehearsals compassionately and collaboratively. We also designated the first five minutes of every rehearsal to be a transition period. Instead of assuming that everyone would be in the room and ready to jump into the work on the dot, the Access Needs Check-in and 5-minute self-care time at the start of each rehearsal allowed us to come together in a more gradual and caring way.

Because there were so many process-related norms to address, including the AMHP’s salutogenic practices and information on grief dramaturgy for the cast, we spread the first-day administration over the first two days of rehearsal. On the second day, we revisited our agreements and goals, and our AMHP introduced the information about somatic drops, self-regulation, and glimmer tools. She also spoke about grief and what it does to our bodies, which was information we revisited later in the rehearsal process.

In addition to administrative matters in the first two days of rehearsal, we also did a slow read-through of the script together as a company. It was the first time we heard the Monster lines divided into different voices and the first time the cast had the opportunity



to ask questions about their characters, the concept, or moments in the script. There was some discussion about Britishisms in the text and what they meant. For example, one actor was unfamiliar with the word “oi,” and another did not know what it meant to “make allowances.” Doing a slow communal read of the script allowed us to stop and talk through the potential trouble spots. It also allowed me to share my vision for specific scenes that I view differently than what is scripted and paint a picture of what a collective Monster might look like in more detail.

In addition to that read-through, I introduced several physical activities that would serve as a basis for later devising a collective, communal Monster. I taught the group a few exercises I learned from a Frantic Assembly workshop I took. These physical exercises could help us craft a movement vocabulary to draw on when choreographing collective Monster moments. First, I had the actors warm their bodies and minds with Frantic Assembly’s Quad Jump, where performers stand in rows and do certain actions on specific beats corresponding to their rows while counting aloud. This exercise also served as a daily warm-up through most of the rehearsal period, and I added more challenging variations as we mastered the easier levels. Next, I wanted the performers to get comfortable being in close contact with each other. I paired them up and asked them to check in with their partner about how they felt with physical touch, indicating where they did not want their partner to touch them. I had to scaffold their partner work. First, I had them perform basic mirroring movement exercises. I wanted the actors to respond to each others’ movement impulses, growing awareness in their bodies about their and others' placement in space. We also built a Monster sculpture out of human bodies, finding different ways to communicate a single collective entity with multiple bodies. We

tried to articulate a collective understanding of different levels of tension and speed. Eventually, we were able to try a modified version of the Logs & Stones exercise, where the actors lay side by side on the floor and roll simultaneously until one of their bodies can ‘hook’ the other and, without concerted effort, they will roll over one another on the floor. I envisioned the Monster as the decaying forest floor writhing and rolling this way.

### *Blocking*

We began blocking on the second day of rehearsal but we did not approach blocking chronologically. Instead, I blocked like scenes on the same day to ensure a measure of physical cohesiveness and narrative shape across the arc of the different locations in the script. The first thing we did on day two was build on our movement work to create the Nightmare (Scenes 2, 17, and 29). I wanted the choreographic movement of the piece to be primarily actor-generated. I identified the stage picture I wanted to create, placed the actors in starting positions, and then let them find specific movement that told the story of that scene.<sup>18</sup> In Scene 17, I wanted to capture the nightmare feeling of being chased – so we played a game of tag that became more and more defined as the rehearsal process went on. My devising approach was largely to give a general framework, thinking that the actors would play and work together to refine specificity of movement as an Ensemble throughout the rehearsal period.

It took seven rehearsals to block the whole play. We started with the Nightmare scenes, then moved on to Tales One, Two, and Four. Tales One and Two follow a straightforward fairytale structure. I divided the cast into groups and asked each group to create four tableaux that told the whole tale. We watched each group present their

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<sup>18</sup> See Appendix J for production photos of final stage pictures.

tableaus, then, as a large group, decided which images were the most dynamic. We then built whole-group versions of those images. The result was a series of tableaus for the first two tales that depicted a streamlined visual story of the Monster's narration.<sup>19</sup> Over time, we added movement to the tableaus to better tell the story in places that seemed static.

On the third day of blocking, we crafted all the school-related scenes. The third day of blocking was also the first time we began working on some character development – and although the school scenes have dialogue, I approached them all from a place of movement and stage picturization first. I wanted the Ensemble to create the environment of a schoolyard. The actors used their bodies to create playground equipment – sleeves and fins became jump ropes, one used his arms as a seesaw, and the actors tried various forms of playground games, from hand clapping to limbo to gossip. For the school scenes in the classroom, I suggested that the students kneel on one knee to create the illusion of sitting at a desk. Kneeling worked surprisingly well and contributed to the fluid, furniture-less world the Scenographer and I envisioned. The school scenes also included one of the moments the Fight Director and I had earmarked for him to choreograph; in that first rehearsal, the students place-marked Lily's punch with a high five.

We blocked the family scenes on the fourth blocking rehearsal, our first Sunday rehearsal. Crafting our human kitchen for Scene 3 was particularly enjoyable. The Ensemble drew on the elements I liked during auditions and created a creative kitchen setting that brought Mum's house to life. In the first rehearsal, we decided which actors would play which household objects – the refrigerator, the washing machine, the table

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<sup>19</sup> See Appendix J for production photographs of Tale One and Tale Two.

and chairs – and it was not until later that we layered on things like sound and a designated objective for the communal kitchen.

On that first Sunday rehearsal, we also blocked the Grandma and the Dad scenes. We knew that Grandma’s house would have delicate paper cutouts to represent furniture, but we did not have them in rehearsal. In rehearsal, the performers imbued the space with that anxiety and fragility we wanted Grandma’s house to have. In my initial blocking, the performers stayed frozen in precarious positions from Scene 13 until Dad leaves in Scene 15; later, it proved unnecessary. The performers got a bit of an onstage break during Dad’s scenes with Conor. I wanted Dad’s scenes with Conor to take place in a separate area of the stage so that they were recognizably outside Grandma’s house. This location moved around quite a bit; it was not until the nets were rigged in the fourth week of rehearsal that Dad and Conor’s scenes found a home on the secondary net at the stage left vom.<sup>20</sup>

In the sixth blocking rehearsal, I wanted to block Mum’s Act II scenes: 20, 27, and 32 – the scene where Mum dies. These were heavy scenes of the play. To keep the rehearsal light, I de-emphasized them in rehearsal and told the actors that this was an opportunity to speak the words in space but not to be too concerned about acting out the words. The actors who played Mum and Conor later thanked me for taking this approach to the scenes. They said it was beneficial to have an opportunity to engage with the material and get it into their bodies in a lower-stakes way than jumping into intense characterization and objectives. That day, we were also supposed to block the Monster scenes: 7, 22, and 25. These were difficult to block without the net, and we created

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<sup>20</sup> See Appendix J for a production photograph of Dad and Conor’s scene placements onstage.

placeholder positioning instead of proper scene blocking. We also brought the Fight Director to block Scene 24, Tale Three.

On the seventh blocking rehearsal, the eighth day of our overall process, we blocked Scenes 11 and 30, and the Choreographer came in to add specificity of movement to some of the scenes we had blocked earlier in the week. She helped us add a lift to the Monster ballet in Scene 20 and affirmed the collective movement choices the actors had made in Scene 22. When I blocked Scene 22, I told the performers I had an image of the Caterpillar from *Alice in Wonderland*. The performers created an enigmatic Monster that glided across the stage as one with the voice of the Monster in the lead. They circled Conor before exiting. The cast had thought the Choreographer would want to embellish this movement, but instead, she helped them refine their speed and focus, honing in on the good choices they had already made. The Choreographer also helped us clean up some of the schoolyard transition scenes.

The next day, the Movement Team came back to choreograph all the fight moments we had discussed before rehearsals began – Lily’s punch in Scene 4 and Grandma’s slap in Scene 8. They also spent considerable time reviewing the intensive blocking of Scene 24. The next day, our final day of Week Two rehearsal, we did a “stumble run” of the entire play. The actors were mostly off-book, even though they were allowed to have their scripts with them for reference. It was the first time running the scenes in order, and we had to stop and start quite a bit to remind everyone where we were in the story. However, that stumble run proved that blocking the scenes out of order did work. At the end of the rehearsal, it was clear that we had strong bones of what would become a great production. We were only missing the net and a lot of specificity.

## *Workthroughs*

We approached the next six rehearsals to solidify lines, strengthen acting objectives, and craft more intentional and specific movement and transitions. We did not have access to the net, so I prioritized scenes that did not require net work. For the first two days, we did runs of Act I and Act II, respectively.

These rehearsals contained exciting discoveries underscored by my insecurities. I wrote in my journal that we discovered the Ensemble is Conor's mind, then becomes the Monster. This discovery was important: it resolved one of the main challenges I faced when casting the Ensemble as the Monster instead of a single actor. Early in my directing process, I asked what are the Ensemble? I had to trust that I would eventually come to a satisfactory answer, and I did. The Ensemble are the neurons in Conor's brain and also the Monster he constructs.

We made another hugely valuable discovery at the very next rehearsal. Early in the rehearsal process, I knew that I wanted the Ensemble to signal the time 12:07 physically. I thought that if the actors communally made the same gesture every time they said "12:07," in the play's final moment, the ensemble would not need to say the time, and the audience would still make the connection if Mum were to perform the gesture. On our second workthrough rehearsal, we did a slow Act II run. Early in the rehearsal, I asked the actor who played Mr. Marl to devise the day's "12:07" gesture. He thought for a long time, and I almost interrupted to ask someone else to think of a gesture instead. However, finally, he took his right hand, lifted it up and to the right on "12," then pulled that right hand across his chest to lay on his heart for ":07." The actors all copied the gesture, thinking it was just another option to explore. However, when we got to

Scene 32 that day, the actor playing Mum performed the gesture with Conor hugging her. When she pulled her hand across her heart, it cupped Conor’s head. Every member of the cast gasped aloud. It was a magical moment – I have goosebumps just remembering being in the room the day we discovered the 12:07 gesture. It was a perfect moment of theatre, and I wrote in my notes that night, “we ran Act II and it was a chore but the last moments made it worthwhile.”<sup>21</sup>

Even though I thought we were making timely discoveries and achieving great work in rehearsal, I faced many challenges with actors during the rest of the week of workthroughs. I found it difficult to trust the process, and the cast noticed my insecurities. When running Act I, I began to notice some pushback from a few cast members to my collaborative approach to directing. In my journal that night, I wrote, “[Actor] seems to challenge everything I say – ‘how does that fit w/ what we established?’ ‘do you want X or Y?’ ‘I’ll just ask [professor] to help me.’ It’s hard to regulate [my emotions] when I perceive her questions as lack of respect/trust.”<sup>22</sup> In the same entry, I noted that the day’s rehearsal was “upbeat and giggly” and “very positive overall.” I was uncertain about the discovery process and sensitive to the actors who questioned my methods because I was not confident in the methods. They yielded positive results – we made significant discoveries in the rehearsal room – but I let my insecurities color my perception of the actors’ experience of the process.

In the third week of rehearsal, tensions rose within the cast. While collectively deciding whether we should continue to work the scene we were rehearsing or move on,

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<sup>21</sup> Curto, personal journal, 30 October 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Curto, personal journal, 28 October 2022.

one actor said with a raised voice, “I guess it doesn’t matter what I want,” and exited the stage forcefully. This emotional outburst affected me greatly. I paused rehearsal to discuss a strategy for resolving the tension with the AMHP. I ultimately decided to dismiss most of the cast and do individual scene work on a specific scene. For two days, the vibe in the room was very off. One of the rehearsals was our designer run; it was evident during the rehearsal that the cast had grown a lot in the four rehearsals since our stumble through, but the actors ended the rehearsal with low energy. I overheard some negative comments.

The following day, I began rehearsal with a company meeting. We sat down under the care of the net as we had on the first day of rehearsal, and I told them that I thought they were doing a great job, but the energy in the room seemed off. One of the actors told me that she felt like I was not listening to understand her during the exchange the day before. Another actor said I made her feel like they were doing something wrong or not doing a good job. I sincerely apologized to the first actor for not listening to understand, which was one of our agreements. I thanked her for bringing it to my attention and asked her what I could do to make it right; she said that she accepted the apology and that resolved the issue for her. Then I addressed the actor who felt like I thought they were doing something wrong. I assured her that I did not see it that way at all – in fact, I was impressed with all the discoveries they had made! I shared with the cast my director philosophy: my job is to facilitate the communal crafting of a shared vision, and I wanted the actors to be active participants in building that vision. I did not want them to be automatons, extensions of my choices. I asked them what they needed, and the actor said she needed more explicit instructions about what I wanted to see. I



expressed that this was a difficult task because I thought we were in the rehearsal stage where we were exploring together, and there was not yet a “right” or “final” answer for how to do something. The actor clarified that this was not a satisfactory response, so I pledged to give more explicit feedback about how exactly the actors should move or perform certain scenes, though doing so made me uncomfortable. At the end of the company meeting, I asked our AMHP if she had any suggestions for ensuring the situation did not recur. The AMHP suggested selecting a “Vibe Captain” for the company who could identify when tensions were rising so that we could resolve things then and there.

The rest of the workthrough rehearsals without the net went well. We continued to make discoveries and refined the Monster and Ensemble movement. I also spent designated time working small scenes with specific actors at the end of each rehearsal, letting the larger group leave early to allow the actors to rest. These small-group rehearsals were some of the best of the process. In rehearsing the Dad scenes, we found some tactic shifts that gave the scenes more dimension. With the bullies, we found a vocal characterization for Sully (a bleating laugh) that brought her character to life. I called an intimacy rehearsal specifically for the actors playing Mum and Conor and worked through their physical interactions. The Fight Director also came to several rehearsals to run Tale Three with the actors. Unfortunately, we had many rehearsals where actors were missing due to illness or injury. Health issues plagued this production process.

On our final Sunday rehearsal before crew view, the rigging crew installed the net. The Movement Team came to rehearsal to train the actors to work with and on the

net, creating shapes with their bodies and moving from net to platform and back as safely as possible. In our final four rehearsals before Tech Week, we went back over each of the scenes requiring the actors to interact with the net and crafted stage pictures that successfully told the stories of those scenes with movement on the net. This final week of rehearsal was more exhausting than the weeks that preceded it; the actors required much physical warm-up to be safe on the net, and working on the net took a lot out of them physically. We continued to hone in on movement specificity and layer in additional objective and movement work. We were able to complete two full runs before tech week. I took notes on a spreadsheet, ensuring that I gave every actor in the play 2-3 affirmations and one or more specific things to work on moving forward.

### *Final Rehearsals*

Two days before crew view, the department chair asked me to come to her office to discuss a complaint some company members had made. The Chair related that some actors felt there was negativity during rehearsals. I was shocked to hear this. Our AMHP was in the meeting with me and the Chair and also expressed surprise. The Chair explained that student actors need quite a lot of validation and suggested that I needed to use more positive reinforcement during rehearsals. Perhaps the actors were reading my neutrality as negativity? I thought back to rehearsal and realized I often gave notes from far away, raising my voice to be heard. From my perspective, this was a logistic choice, not an emotional one – I was not yelling at my actors. However, I took the feedback and adjusted my rehearsal behavior accordingly. I changed tactics and walked onto the stage directly beside an actor before speaking to them. I also tried to give significantly more positive reinforcement during and after rehearsals.

The final few runs were successful. By the day of crew view, I felt confident to release the show into the hands of the Stage Manager for tech week to begin.

### *Audience Activity*

I read an *American Theatre* article in the winter break between Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 that proposed deconstructing the hierarchy around “audience talkbacks” following a performance. The article suggests going back to the underlying purpose of a talkback: creating a space for communal reflection following a production. The article suggests a fellowship model inspired by church practice.<sup>23</sup> Shortly after that, I read the play *What to Send Up When it Goes Down* by Aleshea Harris, which bills itself as both theatre and ritual and incorporates elements of communal processing into the script itself. I found both resources inspiring. From the beginning of the *A Monster Calls* process, I knew I wanted to incorporate a communal processing activity into the end of the performance.

I discussed my idea with the Box Office Manager, who okayed having the audience stay back after the show for an activity. However, it was not until tech week that I solidified my thinking on what this audience interaction should be. I proposed the idea of a breathing exercise that would help the audience process the show to the cast. The cast was on board with the idea, and I wrote a script that I sent to our AMHP’s mentor to vet. She gave feedback on some of the wording and commended the activity, saying, “It looks lovely, I especially love the pacing of it, and the welcoming nature of it.”<sup>24</sup> The

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<sup>23</sup> Jenna Clark Embrey, “Everything in Moderation: Rethinking the Talkback,” *American Theatre*, December 13, 2021, <https://www.americantheatre.org/2021/12/13/everything-in-moderation-rethinking-the-talkback/>.

<sup>24</sup> See Appendix D for a screenshot of the AMHP mentor’s email, including the script for the audience activity.

script asked the audience to perform the 12:07 gesture with the cast three times, breathing together with the gesture as they did so. Each time the audience and cast performed the gesture together, the cast member reading the script prompted them to reflect on what they had seen, then come back into their bodies and what they planned to do the rest of the night. I tried to incorporate the salutogenic practices we learned from our AMHP in the script and in order to pass those skills on to our audience.

During Tech Week, the cast practiced performing the script, which became the play's final moments, after the curtain call and before the cast left the stage.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Process Reflection

#### *Introduction*

The final chapter of this thesis analyzes the directing process I constructed and followed while putting up *A Monster Calls*. It relates the significant events that impacted the performances, analyzes the audience reception of the production, and highlights key strengths and weaknesses in my direction of the piece. The focus of the chapter is a reflection of my role in the events outlined in this thesis.

#### *Performances*

*A Monster Calls* opened on November 29<sup>th</sup> at 7:30 p.m. in the 250-seat Mabee Theatre at Baylor University. On Monday, November 28<sup>th</sup>, the cast performed their final dress rehearsal as a preview performance for the Theatre Arts Department. We did not make significant changes between that preview performance and the opening night on Tuesday, November 29<sup>th</sup>; however, “real” performances were markedly more confident than the preview performance. The show ran for five performances, culminating in a Sunday matinee. Although each performance had minor quirks – a dropped line, a neglected prop – only one performance was significantly out of the norm for the run. During the Friday, December 2<sup>nd</sup> performance, the projections stopped working right at the beginning of the show. The Stage Manager called for the actors to leave the stage after Scene 8, then announced that the production was experiencing technical difficulties and would resume after a short intermission. The tech crew tried for twenty minutes to

get the projections working; unfortunately, they could not, and the show resumed without projections. The audience response to the performance was still overwhelmingly positive, and the company handled the interruption professionally and gracefully. The next night, the Projection Mentor reset the projector, and there were no further issues in the rest of the run.

### *Reception*

Despite small house sizes and a lack of advertising, the Baylor Theatre production of *A Monster Calls* was well-received by audiences. Audiences that attended the production gave positive, often emotional, feedback. One community member asked the House Manager to speak with me following the closing Sunday matinee performance. She was an older woman who told me that she had lost her mother and brother in the past year, and while watching the production she internalized the truth that it was okay to let the people around her know she was hurting. She cried and held my hands as she thanked us for creating and sharing such a powerful piece of theatre. Another audience member found me on Facebook and wrote a review of the performance:

“What an astounding and thought-provoking show! [The] unique use of the ensemble carried the show...into [our] imagination. The ensemble becoming the set, the atmosphere...one voice as the monster that felt authentic and natural. One movement that never felt out of place or forced. It always worked and never distracted from the central character’s story.”<sup>1</sup>

I was teaching an Intro to Theatre class during the run of *A Monster Calls* and my students were required to watch the production as a class assignment. Many chose to write about the production in their final performance review. I was surprised at how clearly these non-theatre majors understood the production’s underlying themes and

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<sup>1</sup> Audience Member, personal communication, 7 February 2023.

aesthetic choices. Across the board, the students identified that the Ensemble (and thus the Monster) were Conor’s subconscious; they also recognized the themes of connection and community that are at the heart of my direction of the piece.

While I could recount many personal responses audience members shared with me, my favorite note came from a Baylor faculty member who wrote to me personally after the preview to say that they were “especially moved at the exercise at the end...the kind of thing [they] would normally bristle at...but YA GOT ME!!”<sup>2</sup> I was insecure about my choice to end the play with the audience activity, because the script and idea came from me instead of a playwright or external requirement. I worried that it might feel didactic or inauthentic to an audience. That someone who admittedly does not respond well to audience engagement activities found it worthwhile and meaningful feels validating.

After the production closed, I met individually with most Baylor Theatre faculty members to discuss their reactions and responses to the production. I have aggregated their feedback to address what I (and they) consider to be strengths and weaknesses of the production in the following sections.

### *Strengths*

Across the board, the faculty reported that the production felt cohesive and collaborative. They told me that the stage pictures told a cohesive story and that the direction of the piece enhanced the story – the audience could track what was happening across the arc of the show.<sup>3</sup> One faculty member called the production “fearlessly

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<sup>2</sup> Faculty member, personal communication, 9 December 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Faculty member, personal communication, 5 December 2022.

experimental” and said that it “didn’t look or sound like any show [Baylor has] ever done.”<sup>4</sup> The same faculty member also noted that the production felt collaborative.

The faculty commended my bold choice to have the Ensemble play the Monster as a collective instead of casting a single actor. Many people I spoke to either did not realize or did not remember that this was a choice not indicated in the script and contradicted what the original production chose to do with the role. More than one faculty member said they could not imagine the play being done any other way.

A strength repeatedly pointed out by the faculty was the movement of the Ensemble. Of the ten faculty members surveyed, all referenced the fun of having the actors become the kitchen and the facility and cohesiveness with which the Ensemble moved, both on and off the net. Many faculty members referenced my specific interpretation of Scene 20, “Yew Trees,” and the Monster ballet as particularly poignant storytelling. Similarly, the faculty noted that the 12:07 gesture was a thought-provoking choice and a touching way to end the play.

#### *Problem Areas*

A note I received from more than one faculty member was the need for more editing in the production, particularly around design elements. One place this was evident was with the costume design. A faculty member told me that having the fins and sleeves remain on the actors when they put on their named character costume item was distracting. The faculty member who mentioned this attributed the choice to the Costume Designer. However, I must take credit for this failure – the team designed the fins and sleeves to be removable, but I elected to have the ensemble keep them on when they

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<sup>4</sup> Faculty member, personal communication, 8 December 2022.



became named characters for two reasons: 1.) I wanted the conceptual role of the Ensemble to stay present in the mind of the audience and 2.) taking off the fins and sleeves was time-consuming and disrupted the seamless flow of action that was important to me in staging the production. I thought that having Grandma's Ensemble sleeves stick out of the ends of her floral blazer reminded the audience that this was Conor's subjective impression of Grandma, not the character herself. I thought that taking time to let Harry and the bullies change out of their sleeves and into their child clothes would slow down the pace of the action. In both instances, I did not trust the company as much as I should have. The audience found the trailing sleeves more distracting than grounding – in retrospect, the design and performances were strong enough that the additional signifier of the sleeves was not necessary to reinforce the concept. I also took away an opportunity for the ensemble to solve the timing problem independently. If the bullies had taken more time to put on their bully costumes, I could have highlighted the improvised playground movement we rehearsed and which did not fully land during performance. Plus, the sleeves and fins did look messy in counterpoint to the more “real” clothing items.

Rather than editing at the end, my first major misstep in the production came at the beginning of the process, with casting and scheduling. While I believe that every cast member did a phenomenal job and gave their all to the production, I also put several actors in an impossible situation. They were exhausted from closing a mainstage musical with a two-week run just one week before our rehearsals began. If I had set a rule for myself that actors who had been in *Amélie* were ineligible for casting, I might have minimized many of the issues we faced during the rehearsal process. There were phenomenal performers whom I elected not to cast. In retrospect, it would have been

fairer to all students (the ones I ended up casting and the ones I did not) if I had prioritized the performers' health and chosen fresh actors who had not recently gone through an intensive rehearsal process.

I put the actors in an impossible situation because my vision for the production was not feasible with the amount of allocated time. Because the first and last days of rehearsal were non-negotiable, the additional days I added to the schedule necessarily took away from performer rest days. Had I not added the additional rehearsals, the final performance would have been less polished and the rehearsals themselves more rushed, but the additional rest time might have made a difference to the mental health of the company (including my own). However, by reducing my choices to adding rehearsal days or overworking the company, I set up a false dichotomy that I could have avoided by adjusting my vision for the performance to work with a more limited rehearsal time. Particularly when it came to the scenes with intensive movement choreography, such as Scene 24 and Scene 20, if I had simplified my vision for blocking those scenes, we could have used that time more efficiently. I did not want to compromise my vision, so I compromised my company's health instead – a mistake I do not plan to make again in the future.

Similarly, I feel that not having the net until a week before tech week negatively impacted what we achieved with the production movement-wise. I should have done more to either ensure we got the net on time or mitigate the harm caused by not having the net. One astute audience member observed that the play looked like the net was an obstacle rather than a feature of the set. This was functionally the case; instead of utilizing the net for all scenes of the play as I had initially intended, I distinguished

between “net scenes” and “non-net scenes,” blocking the non-net scenes before the net was installed and focusing only on net scenes in the days leading up to tech week. When I realized that we would not have sufficient time to play and find shapes after the net was installed, I should have amended my blocking plan to explore and find alternatives that could be done off the net entirely. I also should have been more proactive administratively to discover the reason for the net installation delay and support the staff in resolving the problems limiting their progress.

Although the audience praised the ensemble’s movement, the actors gave feedback that they were not confident with my movement direction. I tried to communicate to the performers that I wanted them to generate the Ensemble movement collaboratively, but the performers pushed back on that direction with a request for more movement specificity. If I had more confidence in my ability to choreograph specific movement and give the actors the support they needed, we might have been able to find middle ground. As it was, I felt they were asking more of me than I was qualified to give – and they felt the same way. I can mitigate this deficit by continuing my training in movement practice. However, it would also help in the future for me to collaborate with a choreographer or assistant director who has expertise in movement specificity to lend to the project.

Many people pointed out that they needed clarification about where the characters were in time and space because Conor and Dad reference not being in America in Scene 14, but the actors performed with their own accents. Some faculty members told me that the lack of accents was a misstep on my part. The theatre industry is moving toward a more authentic practice where if a particular demographic is required, an actor of that

demographic will perform. Because my concept was grounded in the ecocritical concept of placelessness, I felt that accents would not effectively signify where we were in space and time. Additionally, my actors are not British. Therefore, I felt accents were neither necessary nor appropriate. Beyond that, it would not have been worth the time it would have taken to train the actors to speak in dialect. I recognize that some audience members were distracted or confused by finding out in Scene 14 that the play does not take place in America, but the audience was able to take it in stride and move on. I could have added a note to the program that the play occurs outside the United States.

Finally, I received feedback from my Directing Mentor that I should have provided more positive reinforcement for the student actors. I agree with this assessment, though I only realized it was a problem once it was too late in the rehearsal process to rectify it effectively. I should have spent more time validating the performers' specific choices and reinforcing that they are valued company members.

### *Conclusion*

A theatre owner and long-time friend from Houston traveled to Waco to see the final dress rehearsal before we opened the show. He is the type of person who does not give praise lightly, and in addition to questions and notes about the process, he said this: “It is a beautiful production: touching and funny, heartbreaking and personal; I hope that everyone is proud of the work that's being done.”<sup>5</sup> I share his sentiment – I leave this production hoping that everyone is proud of all we have accomplished.

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<sup>5</sup> Audience member, personal communication, 29 November 2022.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### Play Analysis Spreadsheet Excerpt

	18	19	20
	The Morning After	What Do You Want?	Yew Trees
Vibe			
Pages	63-65	65-66	66-68
Director's Title			
Location	Grandma's house	school playground	Hospital
Day/Time	Tuesday morning	Tuesday afternoon	Tuesday evening
What happens	Conor learns that Mum's illness is worse but he has to go to school	Harry and Conor have a tense standoff	Conor visits Mum in the hospital
Important events/ changes	Conor doesn't get in trouble for trashing Grandma's house	Tension between Conor and bullies increases.	Monster dances with mum as Conor daydreams
Needed	grandma's kitchen	playground "equipment"	IV drip and chair for mum(?)
Ensemble	<b>x</b>	x	<b>x</b>
Conor	x	x	x
Monster	Ensemble		Ensemble
Mum			x
Dad	x		
Grandma			x
Harry		x	
Sully		x	
Anton		x	
Lily			
Miss Godfrey			
Mr Marl			

Figure A.1 – Excerpt of my script analysis for scenes 18, 19, and 20 of *A Monster Calls*.

## APPENDIX B

### Kabuki Inspiration Image



Figure B.1 – An image from Act III of the *kabuki* performance *In the Bamboo Grove*. Gunji, Masakatsu. *Kabuki*. Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1985. 115.

APPENDIX C

“Please Give Me” Composition Excerpt

Please Give Me

1. The Second Tale

(B minor) <sup>1120</sup> <sup>pull up</sup>

Give me Give me Oh give me your tree.

6

The pow - er to heal lies with in the leaves. The an - cient yew

(B minor) E G B (B minor) A D F# G G B D

12

that stands in your ground I must I must I must cut it down.

(B minor) A D E (B minor) B D F#

CS Scanned with CamScanner

Figure C.1 – A photograph of the first page of the sheet music I composed for Scene 16.



## APPENDIX D

### Audience Activity Script with Feedback

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**From:** [REDACTED]@atlartsrelief.org>  
**Date:** Friday, November 18, 2022 at 12:21 PM  
**To:** [REDACTED]  
**Subject:** Re: A Monster Calls final moment

Beautiful! I am right there with you about taking out the jargon.

It looks lovely, I especially love the pacing of it, and the welcoming nature of it. I offered a couple of notes for feedback. Take what's useful and throw away what isn't!

"Before we leave tonight, we would like to take a moment to connect [back to our normal lives (or something like that, framing that we are transitioning out of a play and back into the real world)] If it fits within your practice, we invite you to stand and inhale through your nose as you raise your right hand, then exhale through your mouth as you bring your right hand across your chest.

Let's practice that now. (do 1x together).

As you inhale, consider...gratitude for the connections we've forged.

As you exhale, think about...

Let's try that now. (do 1x together).

One last time, we invite you to take one more breath to [transition back to your lives, back to something you want to do when you get home tonight, etc. this should be a transition out of the space with thought toward real life]

Thank you, audience [reminding them that they were folks who just saw a play], for being WITH US [cues folks back to their bodies]

Music up, cast exit. "

Figure D.1 – Email from the AMHP's mentor, which includes the script I wrote for the audience activity at the end of the show.

## APPENDIX E

### Audition Artifacts

Audition Instructions for *A Monster Calls*:

#### To Do Before the Audition:

- **Fill out the A Monster Calls Audition Form.**
  - This is a separate audition form. It will take approximately six minutes to complete.
- Read the Casting Disclosure Document.
- Read the script of A Monster Calls.

#### During the Audition:

- If you are auditioning for *12 Angry Jurors*, **\_\_\_\_\_ will view your 60-second Jurors monologue for A Monster Calls casting consideration.**
  - If you are in the cast of *Amélie* and are NOT auditioning for *12 Angry Jurors*, please prepare any 60-second contemporary monologue in your natural accent to perform for *A Monster Calls* casting consideration.
- During the audition, **you will also be asked to perform an improvised physical task with the other five people in your group.**

#### What \_\_\_\_\_ Is Looking For:

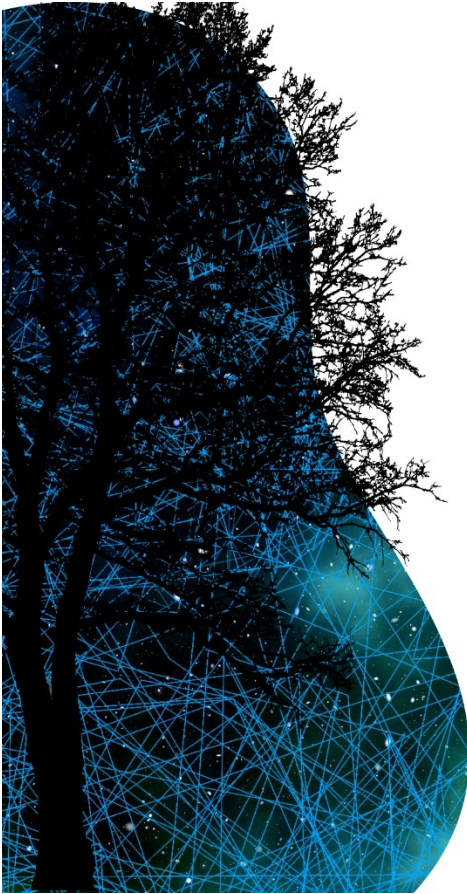
I am looking for giving actors who make bold and innovative physical choices, are sensitive and responsive to other ensemble members, and perform with grounded movement.

#### Callbacks for *A Monster Calls*:

- Callbacks will consist of cold readings from the script and additional improvised physical ensemble movement.
- Callbacks will take place on **Sunday, September 11th in the afternoon.**

Reach out to \_\_\_\_\_ with any questions (\_\_\_\_\_@baylor.edu)

Figure E.1 – Audition call sent to performers ahead of auditions.



# A MONSTER CALLS

## AUDITION INSTRUCTIONS:

YOU WILL WORK AS A GROUP  
TO **CREATE A MACHINE** THAT  
MOVES AN OBJECT.

### RULES:

- Your hands may not touch the object.
- Every member of your group must be involved in making the machine 'work.'
- Your machine's 'work' should be aesthetically pleasing.
- Your machine can have sound.
- Use only your bodies and the provided materials to create your machine.
- Work for specificity over speed.
- Communicate your boundaries regarding physical touch to your group and don't assume others' boundaries.

Figure E.2 – “Rules” for the audition task, sent to performers on the day of auditions and posted in the audition room.

A Monster Calls  
Callback Sides

Side 1

MONSTER

Who am I? Who am I?! I am the ancient yew tree!  
And I have as many names as there are years to  
time itself! *(Beat)* I am Herne the Hunter! I am the  
eternal Green Man! *(Beat)* I am the spine on which  
mountains hang! I am the tears that rivers cry! I am  
the wolf that kills the stag, the spider that kills the  
fly! I am the snake of the world devouring its own  
tail! I am everything untamed and untameable! I am  
this wild earth, come for you, Conor O'Malley.





MONSTER

I do not often come walking, boy – only for matters  
of life and death. I will be listened to!

Figure E.3 – One of the callback sides sent to performers ahead of callbacks.

APPENDIX F

Cast List

*A Monster Calls* Cast List

Conor	[REDACTED]
Ensemble (Mum)	[REDACTED]
Ensemble (Grandma)	[REDACTED]
Ensemble (Dad)	[REDACTED]
Ensemble (Harry)	[REDACTED]
Ensemble (Sully)	[REDACTED]
Ensemble (Anton)	[REDACTED]
Ensemble (Lily)	[REDACTED]
Ensemble (Miss Godfrey)	[REDACTED]
Ensemble (Mr Marl)	[REDACTED]
Ensemble (Apothecary)	[REDACTED]
Ensemble (Parson)	[REDACTED]

Figure F.1 – Cast list, posted as a physical copy on the Baylor Theatre callboard and released digitally as an attachment to a message sent to the department in Canvas.

## APPENDIX G

### AMHP Resources

#### Scope of Practice

For ██████████ on the production *A Monster Calls* at Baylor University

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#### Role

What I can provide as an Artistic Mental Health Practitioner in training (AMHP)

- An audit of existing Concern Reporting Pathway CRP with recommendations for updating and implementation specific to this production, including facilitating peer deputy installation.
- A script audit to help identify and offer suggestions for salutogenic practices surrounding specific moments or topics.
- Support in establishing a basic structure of salutogenic practices for the rehearsal room, including attendance at rehearsal to support implementation and practice.
- A vetted list of referral options which performers and technicians will have access to.
- In my role as a costume designer, meet with each performer to discuss their access needs for psychosomatic health adjusting base costumes to support performer needs.
- Provide Grief Dramaturgy (ways to hold grief without activating).
- Mental Wellness support for the entire team (Director, Creative team, Performers, Tech team, dramaturgy).

#### Disclaimer

- I am not a licensed mental health professional. Therefore, my scope of practice is limited to support of nonclinical mental wellness, practice, and consultation. Work is limited to current challenges and I am not qualified to treat, diagnose, or offer differential diagnosis on any mental illness or substance use disorder. Psychopathology (including risky behaviors, self-harm and suicidal ideation) are outside of my scope of practice. I may offer referrals or other resources to offer support.
- As an Employee of Baylor University, I am a mandatory reporter for Title IX and must report and disclose any interaction I witness or hear about that involves sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexual abuse, stalking, or other interactions which may fall under this umbrella.
- Privacy vs. Confidentiality. I will uphold your privacy in matters we discuss, and there may be times when I will need to consult with others to provide the best support. I cannot promise confidentiality (telling no-one) but I will be transparent about who I need to include and why when it is necessary.

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#### Environment

- I am working in the same institution where I am employed as a full time, tenure track assistant professor as well as a resident costume designer
- The scenic elements I have designed for the show will be asking performers to work with unfamiliar materials and practices which can cause somatic drops. Care must be taken in how we support the performers and technicians to invite them into the work as opposed to forcing them out of their comfort zones.
- All participants in this production are Baylor Students or Faculty/Staff

1 of 3

9/21/22

Figure G.1 – First page of the AMHP Scope of Practice document, reproduced with permission.

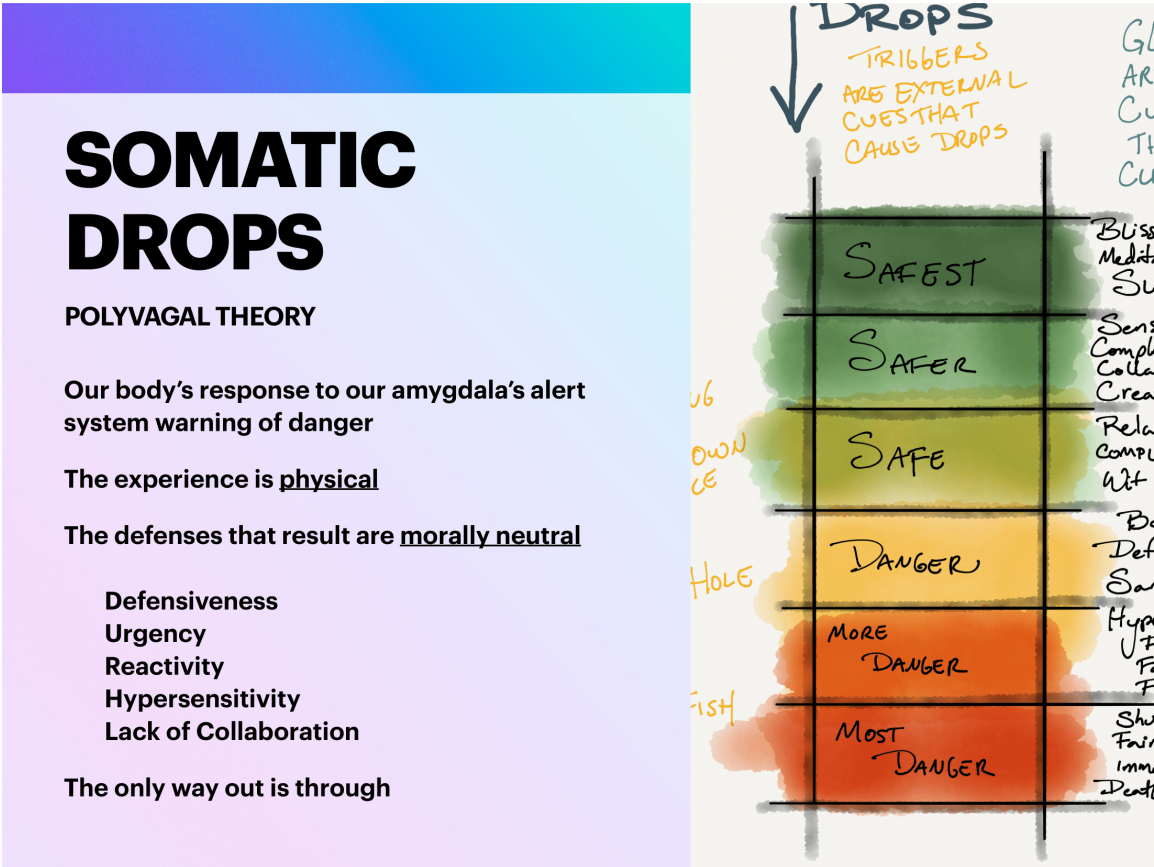


Figure G.2 – Resource produced and provided by AMHP about somatic drops.

# THE DROP CYCLE

ADAPTED FROM DR. AMELIA NAGOSKI AND DR. EMILY NAGOSKI

A drop is a disconnection from Community

**BEGINNING** **NEUROCEPTION** IDENTIFIES THE THREAT AND HOW EMERGENT IT IS  
(HOW FAR DOWN THE LADDER WE ARE DRIPPING)

**MIDDLE** **RESPONSE TO THE THREAT** BODY IS CUED UP TO RESPOND:  
ADRENAL, LIMBIC, COGITATION, DIGESTION, ETC.  
\*BODY USES THIS EXCESS ENERGY\*

**END** **THREAT IS RESOLVED** BODY GETS THE SIGNAL THE THREAT  
IS NOT VABLE, AND THE BODY IS A SAFE PLACE  
TO BE AGAIN. BODY CAN RECONNECT WITH  
COMMUNITY

Figure G.3 – Resource produced and provided by AMHP about the process of experiencing a somatic drop.



# REGULATING THE DROP

## SALUTOGENIC PRACTICES AND REGULATION STRATEGIES

**Salutogenic Practices reduce the likelihood and/or severity of the drop (Hot Pads)**

**These practices are adapted from the Harvard Medical School**

**Consent (in all ways)**

**Coordination of Work (Schedules, expectations)**

**Information and Education (Everyone has the same info)**

**Physical Safety and Comfort (Safe within access limits)**

**Accessibility (Access needs are included throughout)**

**Access to Care (Know where to go for help)**

**Community Attachment (Feel valued and integral)**

**Regulation strategies help you move through the drop cycle and back up to creative potential (Aloe)**

Figure G.4 – Resource produced and provided by AMHP about using salutogenic practice to regulate somatic drops.

## APPENDIX H

### Pre-Production Reference Images



Figure H.1 – First slide of a PowerPoint shared with designers at the first pre-production meeting.

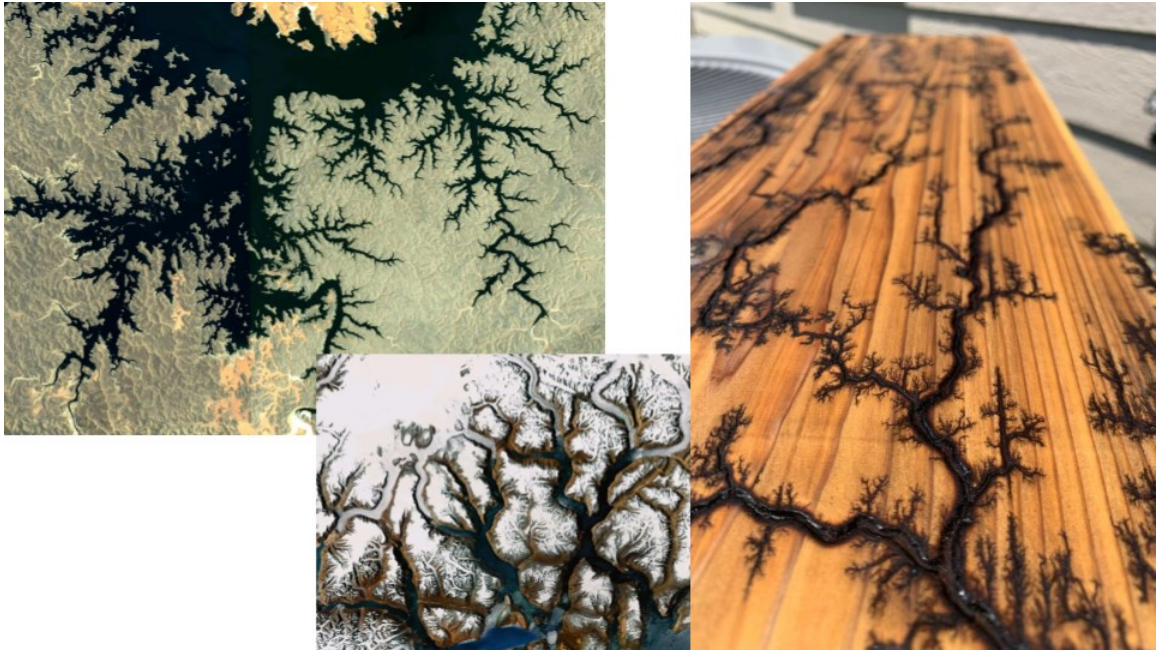


Figure H.2 – Second slide of a PowerPoint shared with designers at the first pre-production meeting.

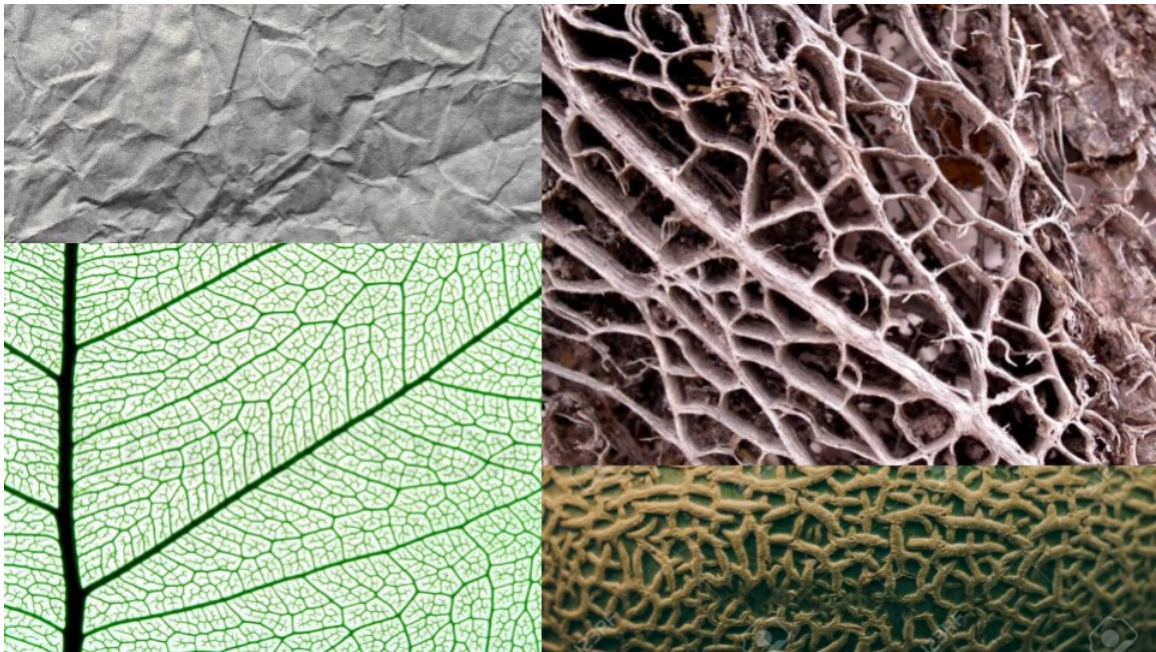


Figure H.3 – Third slide of a PowerPoint shared with designers at the first pre-production meeting.

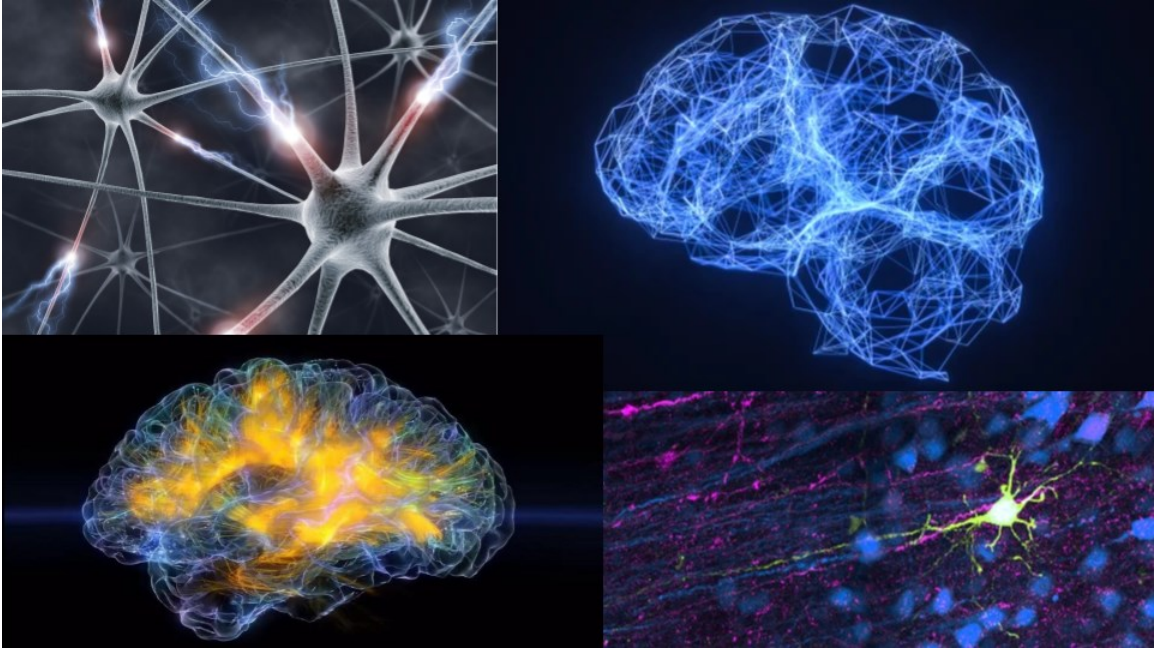


Figure H.4 – Fourth slide of a PowerPoint shared with designers at the first pre-production meeting.

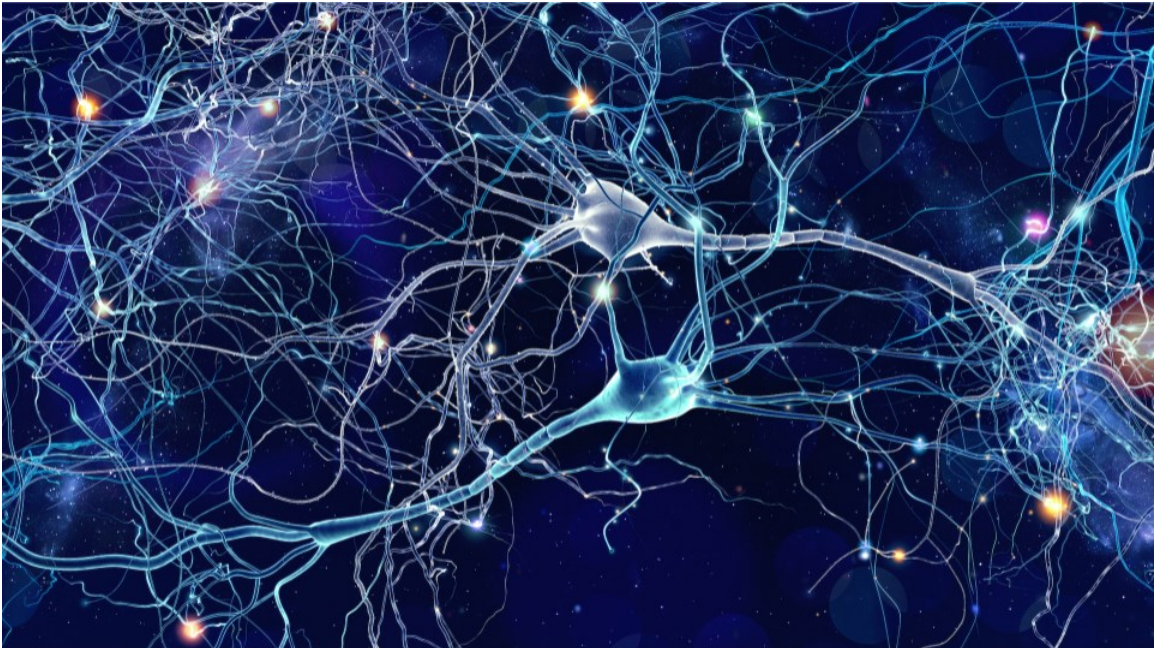
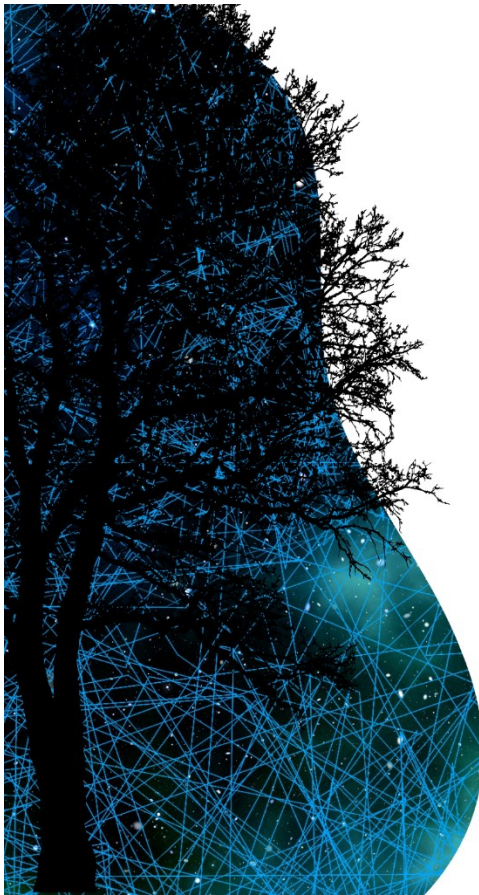


Figure H.5 – Fifth slide of a PowerPoint shared with designers at the first pre-production meeting.

## APPENDIX I

### Company Goals and Agreements



# A MONSTER CALLS

## COMPANY GOALS

BY OPENING NIGHT,  
AS A COMPANY,  
WE WILL:

1. create a brave, trusting space that brings light, life, and energy to the show and process,
2. sharpen the artistic skillset of every individual involved, and
3. craft a production that invites everyone who is part of it (audience or company member) to process their feelings about grief, truth, and the complexity of being human.

Figure I.1 – Graphic of company goals that was posted in the rehearsal room throughout the process.

# A MONSTER CALLS

## COMPANY AGREEMENTS

WE ARE A COMPANY OF ARTISTS ON EQUAL FOOTING  
WITH DIFFERENT BUT COMPLEMENTARY JOBS.

WE AGREE TO:

Support each other physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Encourage, celebrate, and love one another.

Acknowledge and celebrate our differences and boundaries.

Listen with the goal of understanding and giving support.

Give grace to ourselves and others.

Prioritize patience.

Speak from our own experience with "I" statements.

Fail gloriously.

Keep outside drama outside.

Practice "us versus the problem."

Begin and end on time.

Set mini goals and focus on the task at hand.

Regularly check in with our trios.

Use "button" to signal a need.

Figure I.2 – Graphic of final list of company agreements that was posted in the rehearsal room from Week Two of rehearsal until the close of the show.

## APPENDIX J

### Production Photos



Figure J.1 – Production photograph of the first moment of the play (before Scene 1).  
Conor looks through the window into his past.



Figure J.2 – Production photograph of the moment the Monster first makes contact with Conor (Scene 2).



Figure J.3 – Production photograph of the Ensemble creating the human kitchen (Scene 3).





Figure J.4 – Production photograph of the Ensemble kneeling to create Mr. Marl's classroom (Scene 6).



Figure J.5 – Production photograph of Conor and Mum sharing a choreographed moment of intimacy (Scene 6).



Figure J.6 – Production photograph of Conor meeting the Monster for the first time (Scene 7).



Figure J.7 – Production photograph of Tale One (Scene 10).



Figure J.8 – Production photograph of Dad and Conor (Scene 14).



Figure J.9 – Production photograph of the Ensemble imbuing Grandma's house with fragility (Scene 15).



Figure J.10 – Production photograph of Tale Two (Scene 16).



Figure J.11 – Production photograph of the final moments of Act I (Scene 16).



Figure J.12 – Production photograph of the choreography inspired by the *kabuki* photograph (Scene 20).



Figure J.13 – Production photograph of the moment from the Monster ballet (Scene 20).



Figure J.14 – Production photograph of Conor and Grandma in the car created with the bodies of the Ensemble (Scene 23).



Figure J.15 – Production photograph of Tale Three (Scene 24).



Figure J.16 – Production photograph of the Monster moving oppressively in slow motion toward Conor and Mum (Scene 27).



Figure J.17 – Production photograph of Conor's Nightmare, the beginning of Tale Four (Scene 29).



Figure J.18 – Production photograph of Tale Four (Scene 29).



Figure J.19 – Production photograph of the “12:07” moment at the end of the play (Scene 32).



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