PERFORMING GENDER IN THE THEATRE
AN ANLYSIS OF GENDER PERFORMANCE IN AN ORIGINAL PLAY

by

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Presented to the
Department of English and Communications
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

American University of Armenia
Yerevan, Armenia

May 5, 2017

Introduction

People perform gender like actors perform on stage. Men and women have their assigned roles with their costumes, props, and lines. The concept of gender, as something separate from sex, is relatively new. In sociology, gender refers to "social or cultural distinctions associated with being male or female". Nowadays, there is also the idea of "gender identity", which is "the extent to which one identifies as being either masculine or feminine". One's gender identity does not always correspond with their biological sex. The concept of gender as a spectrum instead of a binary system is becoming more widely accepted, especially among the younger generations. What happens when we put this on stage, which has its own set of signs?

Everything on stage, whether it be a person or a chair, is perceived differently from the real world, however, an audience goes into the theatre with their preconceptions of gender in mind, even if they are not aware of it. What if there are no signifiers of gender on stage other than the biological sex of the actor who is performing a "genderless" character? To explore this idea, I written an absurdist play, in which the character does not have a specified gender.

The play consists of two identical acts that are performed consecutively. The first time the protagonist is performed by a female actor and the second time by a male. The actors are expected to work together closely in order to give identical performances. In this research paper, I have analyzed how an audience's preconceptions about how gender affects their perception of the two acts.

Literature Review

It is fairly common nowadays to acknowledge that sex is separate from gender, but it was not always so. In her book, "The Second Sex", French philosopher, political activist and social theorist, Simone de Beauvoir famously asserted that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir, 1949). A woman - and by the same logic, a man - is not an inherent truth, but a social construct. Her book focuses on the role of women in mythology, history, literature and society, which has always been that of the Other. In a patriarchal society, men posit themselves as the Subject and the women as the Object. According to the myth of Creation, Man came first. He was complete on his own, whereas Woman was formed from his rib. Her existence is dependent on his. What separates women from other Others, is their necessity to men. Without women, the human race cannot exist. Thus, a dilemma occurs. Unlike other minorities, they cannot be separated from the population. They require a different method of control. This is the "eternal feminine". "Woman" becomes a mother and an idol: someone to adore, cherish, worship and protect. In the nursery rhyme, "girls are made of sugar and spice and everything nice". In Armenia, they are "the beautiful sex". By being placed on a pedestal, she is stripped of her humanity. She is denied the right of being flawed, visceral, earthly, qualities. If she possesses these qualities, she is not "a real woman". Beauvoir argues, that if there are right and wrong ways to behave like a woman, then "woman" is not intrinsic to the female sex. As a work of feminist literature, "The Second Sex" focuses on the construction of the role of the woman, however, her ideas can equally be applied to the other sex: the myth of the Man. There are right and wrong ways to be a man, which are equally policed by the patriarchy.

The differences between genders, or the myths, as de Beauvoir would call them, is attributed to the biological differences between males and females. For centuries doctors, scientists, and ordinary people have believed that men and women are naturally profoundly different. Men are considered to be more logical, while women are more emotional. The social construct of gender was based on biological determinism. In their 1984 book, *Not in Our Genes: Biology, Ideology and Human Nature* evolutionary geneticist Richard Lewontin, psychologist Leon Karmin and neurobiologist Steven Rose criticize theories of biological determinism and sociobiology, particularly ones that justify different forms of inequality in society. In the chapter, entitled "The Determined Patriarchy", they explain where our notions of gender as a direct result of biology come from, studies that have been performed that support those theories, and point out their flaws. The arguments for the gender division in society include tests that were conducted on men and women, the animal kingdom, evolution, differences in the reproductive systems, etc. For example, the studies that tested how well men and women performed in certain tasks failed to take into account "the social and cultural pressures driving sexes in different directions" (Lewontin et al., 1984). In order to get more accurate results, studies began to focus on children who were younger and younger; however these studies also failed to take into account the different ways in which baby boys and baby girls are treated by their parents. They conclude that it is not possible to truly know what influences someone's choices in life. According to their findings, it appears that Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that one becomes a woman (and consequently, a man), is quite true.

Building on this notion, feminist theorist, Judith Butler (1988) refers to gender as a performative act: an identity which an individual constantly constructs throughout their

life with their words, actions and choices. In other words, being born male or female does not automatically make one a man or a woman because the latter are socially constructed identities. Individuals *become* men and women through their actions, which conform to the established gender binary. People become aware of the gender binary from early on and police their behavior, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, in order to conform to it. They also actively police the behavior of others. Those who do not conform, especially in more conservative societies, are ridiculed, ostracized, and even punished. Thus the gender binary, though indeterminate, as is argued in *Not in Our Genes*, is able to function.

Butler's argument about the policing of gender is similar to French theorist, Michel Foucault's idea of Panopticism. In his book, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1979), Michel Foucault discusses Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon: a prison in which the wardens can see the prisoners at all time, but the prisoners cannot see the wardens. The mere knowledge that one is constantly being watched and therefore might be caught controls an individual's behavior more effectively than former methods of punishment, such as public executions. Panopticism can be detected in many aspects of contemporary society, from surveillance cameras in buildings to friends and neighbors ("What will the neighbors think?"), to gender. The refusal to adhere to one's assigned gender role seems almost as offensive and threatening to some as an actual crime. People get bullied, hazed, attacked and murdered for it. The uncertainty of what will happen if someone sees one not conforming, and the stories of what happen to those who do not are enough to censor an individual's self-expression and prevent them from exploring their gender identity and expression. This theory can also be applied to the

theatre, where actors are aware that they are being watched by an audience, whom they cannot necessarily see.

Throughout her essay, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, Butler compares performing gender to performing on the stage. "The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again" (Butler, 1988). An interesting point she makes differentiating between the real world and the world on stage, is that gender-bending is allowed and accepted in the former. "Indeed, the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence" (Butler, 1988). This goes back to the fact that since the beginning of theatre in Ancient Greece, women were not allowed to be performers. Art was for men, and the stage was an inappropriate place for a woman. According to Butler, seeing a man dressed as a woman or vice versa on stage is not the same as seeing one on the street because the former is not real, it is just a play, and the actor portraying that role does not actually feel that way. Audiences become more tolerant and accepting of deviations when there is the distinct border of the stage that separates fiction from reality.

In his book, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, Keir Elam (2002) discusses the process of signification in the theatre, by applying the linguistic theories of semiotics to the actions that take place on stage. Semiotics is the study of meaning-making through signs and sign processes. It is a field of study that is used in

linguistics. The basic elements of semiotics are the *signifier,* the *signified* and the *sign*. The signifier is the actual word or sound, made up of the combination of letters. The signified is the concept or meaning behind the signifier. The sign is the combination of the two. In the theatre, everything that is on the stage - people and objects - are signs that try to communicate a signified, through a process called *semiotization*, a concept that was proposed by The Prague School. Elam identifies two worlds that simultaneously coexist on stage: the world of the play, or the story that is being performed, and the world of the actor, who is portraying the story. By distinguishing itself from the real world, the stage gives meanings, qualities, and attributes to the objects that they would not have otherwise. For example, if an actor has scars on her body, the audience will assume that they are relevant to the character's life. Elam also mentions how costumes, props, speech, movements also acquire act as signifiers of a character's personality, social status, etc. Thus, a chair on the stage is no longer a chair, but a symbol of the world of the play. *Desemiotization,* as defined by Patrice Pavis (2002), occurs when the sense of reality in the world of the play is disrupted by the world of the actor, such as someone forgetting their lines, or an interest in the actor's person as opposed to the character, as is often the case with celebrities. Elam goes on to explain in detail how different elements of semiotics, such as connotation, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and ostension function on stage and how information is communicated. French linguist and semiotician, Georges Mounin proposed that communication in the theatre could only be unidirectional, from the stage to the audience, because proper communication requires the senders and receivers to be able to "exchange and employ the same code (e.g. the French language), so that 'the sender can become receiver in turn; and the receiver the sender'' (Elam, 2002). Elam

challenges this assertion. " Not only are the audience's signals, in any vital form of theatre, an essential contribution to the formation and reception of the performance text—and indeed various post-war performers and directors such as the Becks and Richard Schechner have extended the bounds of the performance to include the audience explicitly—but the spectator, by virtue of his very patronage of the performance, can be said to initiate the communicative circuit (his arrival and readiness being, as it were, the preliminary signals which provoke the performers proper into action" (Elam, 2002).

Western theatre began in ancient Greece as one of the many cultural practices that were an important part of Greek citizenship. One of the first theoreticians of theatre was Aristotle. His *Poetics* is one of the oldest surviving texts about dramatic theory in which he discusses poetry, both lyrical and epic, and drama, which entails comedy and tragedy. According to Aristotle (Halliwell & Aristotle, 1998), tragedy is the most refined and sophisticated version of poetry because it deals with serious topics and has the potential to teach the audience moral values, whereas comedy is mere a form of entertainment. He introduces the six components of tragedy in order of their importance: plot, character, thought, diction, melody, and spectacle. He also lists seven characteristics of tragedy: it is mimetic, serious, tells a complete story, contains rhythm and harmony, which occur in different combinations in different parts, is acted out, and arouses pity and fear in the audience then cleanses them through catharsis. The plot must have a beginning, middle, which logically follows the beginning and an end, which logically follows the middle and offers a resolution. Every element of the plot must serve a purpose and be relevant to the whole. A good plot can have surprises, in the form of either a reversal of fortune (*peripeteia*) or a new discovery (*anagnorisis*).

However, the surprises must also logically fit into the events of the story. In order to arouse fear and pity from the audience, a tragedy must have a fairly noble hero, whose one mistake causes his life to go from happy to miserable. According to Aristotle, it is far more emotional to see family members rather than enemies killing each other, thus in a good tragedy, one of the characters must come very close to murdering a family member, but stop or be stopped. He also says that actors must portray the characters realistically and logically.

In the mid-twentieth century, a new style of theatre emerged in post-war Europe, which English-Hungarian scholar, dramatist, producer, translator and journalist, Martin Esslin termed "the theatre of the absurd". Plays of this genre, such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, completely disregard Aristotle's rules. They are existential in their nature and usually lack any structure, coherence, and logic, which Aristotle deemed the most important element of a refined work of drama. They often satirically poke fun at the absurd meaninglessness of human existence and the limitations of language. In his essay, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin (2004) discusses the genre in depth by focusing on the works of its three biggest contributors: Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Arthur Adamov. He also traces its roots back to written works and theatrical performances in various cultures including the works of French Renaissance writer, Francois Rabelais, and the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*. Art is a reflection of its time. By the end of the nineteenth century, the pace of life had quickened. The growth of industry, urbanization and technological advancements such as electricity, were changing the world at a faster rate than people could keep up with. Therefore, movements in art, which had lasted centuries in the past were changing and developing every few years. In a period of history where the world

had witnessed two of its biggest man-made atrocities, logic and coherence were not a part of reality. It seemed natural, yet absurd to return to an ordinary, structured existence as if nothing had happened. The theatre, along with the other arts, reflected that illogical, unstructured and meaningless reality. Refined, elegant and idealized art could not exist in that time.

Not only the style of theatre changed in the twentieth century, but also the approach to acting due to the influence of Russian actor and theatre practitioner, Konstantin Stanislavsky. Previously, it had been very stylized and overdone. Stanislavsky often, referred to it as "mechanical acting" because actors would go through the motions of showing certain emotions without fully understanding them. Stanislavsky could not stand this kind of acting because it was fake. In 1898, he founded the Moscow Art Theatre, where he performed and directed. Throughout his life, he developed an approach to the craft that would allow actors to give truthful performances on stage. He encouraged actors to use their imagination in order to fully understand the given circumstances of the play and the inner objectives that motivate the actions of their character. He introduced the concept of emotional memory, in which actors can draw on their own life experiences in order to connect with their character, however, he rejected the idea at the end of his life. In his book *An Actor Prepares* (1936), which is the first in a series of three books, he discusses his methods in detail and provides actors with exercises they can perform. The book is written from the point of view of a fictional character, Kostya, an aspiring actor who is taking classes with a fictional instructor, Tortsov, who is based on Stanislavsky himself. To this day, it is one of the most influential texts on acting. Contrary to popular belief, the Stanislavsky system is not the same as "method acting". The Method was developed by

Lee Strasberg, an American actor, director, and theatre practitioner, who was a student of Stanislavsky's. It is based on Stanislavsky's idea of emotional memory. Method acting requires an actor to use their own emotions in a performance. In other words, if a scene requires them to cry, they must think of something in their own lives that makes them cry and attempt to relive it in order to give a truthful performance. Stanislavsky, and some of his other students who went on to become influential acting teachers, like Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner, later rejected this approach because they believed it took an actor out of the moment and disconnected them from the reality of the play. Stanislavsky's revolutionary approach to acting shows how art develops and changes to suit the times. Styles that were admired in one period of history become unbearable in another, therefore it can be said that art changes because people change.

Statement of Central Research Question

　　　How do the sex and gender of an actor on stage influence the audience's perception of the character in a play? According to Keir Elam, everything about an actor's physical appearance, from hair color to scars and birthmarks, helps the audience formulate ideas about the character's life and personality on stage, and according to Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, gender is a social construct - a pre-written role - that comes with behavioral expectations. These expectations have made their way onto the stage, where male and female characters tend to fall into character archetypes, i.e. the girl next door, the romantic interest, the hero, the villain, the anti-hero, the motherly figure, the harlot, etc. Generally, there are more male roles in the theatre and they are more diverse. It is easier to find stock characters (stereotypical characters who recur in many plays) among women. How will swapping a female actor for a male one in an

absurd play affect the audience's perception of the story, when nothing else in the script or performance changes? Does the audience expect the other character(s) to treat him/her differently, thereby changing the events of the play? How does language reflect and serve these gender roles? Does the absurd nature of the play make the audience more willing to accept the gender-swap by dissociating the world of the play from the one in which they live?

Methodology

I have put my findings from the research I have done about semiotics, gender, theatre and acting theory to the test, by writing an absurdist play called *Syzygy*, which consist of two identical acts performed as one continuous play. Once I hade a complete working draft, I organized several read-throughs of the play with a diverse group of people, which included AUA and non-AUA students who were local Armenians, diasporans, and foreigners from different backgrounds who knew nothing about this project. No questions were allowed about the characters or the plot during the read-through. Afterwards I held a discussion about the play, especially the character Alex. After the discussion, I asked them to read the play again, this time picturing the character as a female in the first act and a male in the second. I then asked them if the protagonist's behavior, personality, and relationships with the other characters differed for them in each act. If it did, how and why? This allowed me to see how different people perceive masculinity and femininity, which helped in bringing the character to life onstage. The play could only work well if the character was believable as a man and a woman, without seeming unusual.

After the read-throughs, I revised the script as I saw fit, and began directing a workshop production of an abridged version *Syzygy* because of time constraints with a group of actors. The purpose of the workshop was to see what worked in the play and what did not and make changes accordingly because that which looks good on the page does not necessarily look good on the stage.

We then performed the abridged version in front of a small audience consisting of students from the American University of Armenia. Afterwards, we held a discussion about the performance with them, and asked for their written feedback, which I used in the research component of the capstone.

The Script

The first component of this capstone is the script. I have written a play called *Syzygy*, the purpose of which is to explore how an actor's gender influences a spectator's perception of a play.

There exist countless plays and sketches that depict two similar scenarios highlighting how differently men and women are treated in society. In these plays, the audience often identifies with what the characters are going through. People know that men and women are treated very differently and they expect to see that on stage, therefore there is nothing particularly unsettling about this type of play. Another popular type of story is one in which the roles are reverse Dante: the minority becomes the majority, the oppressor - the oppressed. *Zanna, Don't!* is a 2003 Off-Broadway comedy musical set in a parallel universe in which homosexuality is the norm and heterosexuality is unacceptable. It tells the story of Kate and Steve, two students at Heartsville High who fall in love and deal with the stigma that comes with

heterosexuality. The idea is far-fetched, but not jarring because it depicts a slightly different version of our own society with its rules and prejudices. It simply asks the audience to put themselves in someone else's shoes in order to create empathy for a minority group.

I was interested in exploring a situation where a man and woman would act and be treated in the exact same way. In order to achieve this, gender roles would have to be completely taken out of the picture. Thus, came the idea of performing the same scene twice, first with a female actor playing the protagonist, then with a male actor. A situation cannot be identical if the two actors are free in their interpretation of the role, so they have to work closely together in order to create one character that they can play as similarly as possible. Therefore, the protagonist had to be someone who was neither too masculine nor too feminine in their appearance, mannerisms and personality in order to be believable as a both a man and a woman. S/he would also have to have a unisex name. From this point on, I will use the pronouns "s/he" and "him/her" to refer to this character.

In order to emphasize just how much gender colors our perception of a person and a play, I chose to take it out of the story completely. Nothing related to gender ever comes up in the interactions between Alex and Dante. I also decided to take it a step further placing them in an extremely unlikely situation and making them both eccentric in their own ways.. The most fitting genre for the kind of story I wanted to tell was the Theatre of the Absurd. I was inspired by the works of playwrights like Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Tom Stoppard and Morris Panych, which are mostly comprised of repetitive banter between two characters.

In order to really understand what the theatre of the absurd is, one must first understand what it is not. Thus, we must go back to the birthplace of theatre. Although many cultures had elements of performance in their rituals, it was in ancient Greece that it became an autonomous form of art, separate from rituals.

Performance was an important cultural practice in ancient Greece, particularly in Athens, which included festivals, athletics, music, poetry, oratory, and theatre. Participation in performances as both an actor and a spectator were a part of Greek citizenship. Theatre existed in three forms: comedy, tragedy and satyr play. One of the prominent theoreticians of theatre at the time was Aristotle, and for him, the highest and most sophisticated form of poetry was the tragedy (Halliwell & Aristotle, 1998). In a typical tragic play, the one mistake of an otherwise noble hero brings about his downfall. Famous Greek tragedies include Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, Eurpides' Medea and Aeschylus's Agamemnon. According to Aristotle a good tragedy has six components: plot, character, thought, diction, melody, and spectacle. He also lists the seven characteristics of a tragedy: it is mimetic, serious, tells a complete story, contains rhythm and harmony, is acted out, and arouses pity and fear in the audience then cleanses them through catharsis. The plot must have a beginning, middle, which logically follows the beginning, and an end, which logically follows the middle and offers a resolution. Every element of the plot must serve a purpose and be relevant to the whole. A good plot can have surprises, in the form of either a reversal of fortune (*peripeteia*) or a new discovery (*anagnorisis*). However, the surprises must also logically fit into the events of the story.

Aristotle places a great deal of importance on logic in the theatre. For him, a good play must make sense. This doctrine was challenged by the European playwrights of

the 1950s. With the rapid advancement of technology, the Great Depression, and two devastating world wars, artists and philosophers lost faith in the logic and coherence of the world. Movements in philosophy, such as Existentialism, Nihilism and Absurdism spoke of the absence of religious deities and fate. There was no "Meaning" to life other than that which the individual created through his or her actions. These ideas made their way into the works of art that were created in the twentieth century. Artists began to experiment in their respective fields, parting with the established conventions. Visual art became abstract, music atonal, and poetry unstructured. Theatre was no exception. In the 1950s, a new genre emerged, which challenged Aristotle's rules of what constituted a refined work of drama. The English-Hungarian scholar, Martin Esslin (2004) called it "The Theatre of the Absurd" . Plays of this genre, such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, and Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, are existential in their nature, and for the most part lack structure, coherence and logic. They satirically point out the meaninglessness of human existence and the limitations of language. Some absurdist plays have some kind of plot, while others do not. The dialogue in absurdist plays relies heavily on wordplay and repetition, resulting in witty and sometimes completely meaningless banter.

The title of my play is *Syzygy*. It is derived from the Greek word *syzygos* (yoked together) and means "a pair of connected and corresponding things" (OED, 2002). It is also a term used for the alignment of three celestial bodies, such as the Sun, the Earth and the Moon. Carl Jung used *Syzygy* to describe a "union of opposites", such as the pairing of a male with a female. "The syzygy consists of three elements: the femininity pertaining to the man and the masculinity pertaining to the woman; the experience man has of woman and vice versa; and, finally, the masculine and feminine archetypal

image" (Jung, 1957). It is an appropriate term to describe the character of Alex, who in the individual acts exists separately as a man and a woman, but in the play as a whole is a union of the masculine and the feminine, and of the male and the female. S/he is one person comprised of two.

The play is set in the future, on a train which is circling the Earth seven times a second, close to the speed of light. The laws of physics prevent anything from reaching light speed. According to physicist and cosmologist, Stephen Hawking, at such a high speed, time would slow down on board the train in order to prevent anything from reaching the speed of light. Otherwise, the forward speed of the passengers would add to the speed of the train. Time will always slow down in order to maintain the cosmic speed limit. This means that 100 years on Earth would only feel like seven days to the passengers aboard the train, making one-way time travel to the future probable.

Alex and Dante have been chosen to be the first test subjects of this train. They must spend seven days in a small compartment where there are no windows. All they have are a couple of newspapers, an ugly painting, a mirror, and a radio that only plays "One Way Ticket" by Boney M. They have little to do, but talk to each other in order to combat their boredom and anxiety. The play begins on their second day aboard the train after a jolt causes a minor power fluctuation. In the opening scene, Alex and Dante are on the floor because they fell over and are trying to turn off the radio. They are not sure what happened and Dante insists that they reintroduce themselves, much to Alex's confusion. When the scene is performed the second time around, Dante's statement that he is a completely different person since the previous days, while Alex maintains that s/he is still Alex makes more sense. *Syzygy* has a circular narrative. The two "acts" are

not separate or complete.   One picks up where the other leaves off, and so the same thing keeps happening over and over again, though it is only intended to be performed twice. There is only one script for both acts which ends with "*Repeat from the top identically. Alex is replaced by and actor of the opposite sex"*.

The act does not have a traditional plot. It consists of several attempts at conversation, most of which turn into heated arguments. There is some build-up, revelation and a hint of a resolution with Alex's closing words, however Dante stands up to say something and is cut off by the jolt that causes a power fluctuation and takes them back to the beginning.

It is never made clear how much time passes during the act. Whether is is several days or thirty minutes is up to the reader/spectator to decide. In the performance, the director could suggest a longer amount of time passing in between Alex and Dante's interactions through the fading in and out of lights.

The most prominent themes in the play are fear, anxiety and time. Syzygy as a union of opposites also applies to Alex and Dante, who have very different personalities. They are both very anxious about the trip, however Dante is optimistic, while Alex is skeptical. Dante sees it as an opportunity to start his life anew, whereas Alex is distressed about the fact that his/her life is meaningless enough to make him/her a suitable candidate for a potentially fatal experiment. Furthermore, Dante tries to face his fears (at least on the surface), while Alex avoids them and projects his/her negative feelings onto the objects in the compartment, such as the painting and the song. Dante is very sure of himself in the beginning and enjoys any opportunity to lecture Alex, even when he is wrong. Alex is more unsure of him/herself. This comes across in the way s/he speaks. For example, s/he does not use absolute statements, opting instead to

soften them with words like, "probably", "maybe", and "in theory". Near the middle of the play, their personalities begin to converge from spending so much time cooped up in a compartment together. The change occurs when Dante realizes that he *does* think, and Alex realizes that s/he won an argument. After that Dante becomes more doubtful and Alex becomes more sure of him/herself.

Time is a prevalent theme because neither the characters nor the audience nor the writer knows how long Alex and Dante have been on the train. The stage directions simply say "Time passes. Neither knows how long". We do not find out where they came from or if they ever make it to their destination. There is neither a future nor a past in *Syzygy*. The characters are stuck in the perpetual and inescapable present.

As a project, *Syzygy* is a study in the perception of gender in the theatre, by examining how spectators interpret a character's personality, attitude, relationships with other characters, and role in the story solely based on their sex. In order to achieve this, I kept the dialogue free of topics that would stereotypically be considered masculine or feminine. I also did not use gender pronouns when referring to Alex in the stage directions. For Dante, however, I alternated between "he" and his name. In this way, I was able to explore some of the limitations of language. The fact that English does not have grammatical gender made the writing of the script possible. It was not difficult to avoid using the pronouns he and she, and no creative sacrifices were made. There is only one instance of Dante using a third person personal pronoun: "You know, you're awfully judgmental for someone who keeps staring at a painting they hate". Replacing "he" or "she" with "they" did not make a big difference. *Syzygy* would not work as well in Russian or French, where nouns and adjectives have a gender. I would have to omit all of the lines pertaining to Alex that contain adjectives and past tense

verbs. For example, the line, "You're too kind", would be "Tu es trop gent<u>il</u>" for a man, and "Tu es trop gent<u>ile</u>" for a woman. In Russian, Alex's line, "I wanted to", would translate to, "Я хот<u>ел</u>" (*Ya khot<u>el</u>)* for a man, and "Я хот<u>ела</u>" (*Ya khot<u>ela</u>*) for a woman. Therefore, this play could not be performed in many languages if the gender ambiguity were to be maintained. Armenian, however, would allow for more freedom than English with the text because it does not have any grammatical gender. The third person singular pronoun is "նա" (*na*) for both sexes.

A unisex name was deliberately chosen for the gender-neutral character. Alex is short for both Alexander and Alexandra, however, this particular Alex's full name is Alex. In the first scene, Dante assumes that Alex's full name is "Alexand-", but is cut off by Alex. Because my objective was to keep gender out of the script, I had limited options for where I could cut off the name. Depending on its pronunciation, "Alexa-" could be taken as a feminine name, while "Alexandr-" and "Alexande-", would give the character's sex away. During the discussions of the script, most people automatically assumed that Alex was a man, just by seeing the name. Perhaps, the name is more common among men than women, but I think there is more to it than that. Most unisex names, with the exception of Riley, Marion and Avery, are masculine sounding: Alex, Sam, Andy, Adrian, Francis, etc. This is because in a patriarchal society, it is more tolerable for the feminine to become masculine. Unisex is closer to masculine than to feminine. Being male has been and in some places still is considered to be superior, so it is understandable for women to strive to be more like men, than the other way around. For example, women wear pants, but men rarely wear skirts. It is better for a girl to be a "tomboy" as a child, than for a boy to be a "sissy". Girls can be referred to as "dude" and "man", but men are seldom "girl". A mixed group of actors, are "actors", never

"actresses"; a group of people is always "guys" not "girls", and, of course, "Man" applies to all of humankind. Referring to a group of men as "girls" or "ladies" is considered to be insulting, so is the expression, "You hit like a girl". In the French language, the masculine pronoun "ils" is used to denote a group of men. The feminine "elles" is used for a group of women. There is no neutral pronoun like the English "they" and Russian они (oni), so a mixed group, even if it consists of one hundred women and one man, is still referred to as "ils". It would be considered emasculating to refer to that one man with a feminine pronoun.

Therefore, in order to abide by society's expectations of the accepted gender-neutrality, Alex had to lean more towards masculinity than femininity.

In the theatre, there are more male characters in plays than female ones. It is not strange for an audience to see a play that consists predominantly or entirely of men, such as Reginald Rose's *Twelve Angry Men.* It supposedly would appeal to male and female audiences alike. A play that consists of mostly or entirely female characters, however, such as Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues,* would be considered a "feminist" play, that would not appeal to most men.

<u>The Read-Throughs</u>

The second component of this project are the read-throughs. I organized four meetings with four to five people at a time, in which I asked them to read the script to themselves. I refrained from giving them any information about the project, the story or the characters. The version of the script that they had did not contain the stage direction

"*Alex is replaced by and actor of the opposite sex*" at the end. The purpose of this was to see if they saw Alex as a man or a woman. After they had read it, we began to discuss the play as if it were any other play. I asked them about the writing, the setting, the themes and the relationship between Alex and Dante. I was looking to see which pronouns they use to refer to Alex. At the end of the discussion, I asked them to summarize their ideas in a short paragraph (See Appendices: Syzygy Focus Group Questionnaire).

No one asked about Alex's sex. After several minutes of discussion, I would ask if Alex was a man or a woman. To my surprise, every single participant said that they pictured a man. Even people outside of the read-thoughs, who knew about this project and read the play for fun said that they pictured a man. Participant, Arianna Khachatiran insisted that "Alex's way of speaking is *MANLY!*" According to her, the emotional breakdown made the character seem fragile, but the response was understandable due to the extraordinary situation in which "he" had found himself.

While writing the script, I saw Alex as a woman in my mind because I knew that the first time around, s/he would be played by a female actor. Part of my writing process also involved speaking the words out loud, so I was hearing my own voice. Perhaps because of my own preconceptions about gender, I was concerned that at times that the character sounded too feminine, especially when it came to his/her reactions. I was concerned that perhaps a man would not have the kind of emotional breakdown that s/he does in the last scene, so I was pleased that readers found Alex believable as a man.

After explaining the purpose of my project to the group, I asked them to re-read the script, while picturing Alex as a woman. The general consensus was that it worked both ways since there was nothing gender-specific about Alex and Dante's conversations.

When asked why they pictured a man if that was the case, readers agreed that Alex is a more common name for males than for females. Some said that they even pictured their friend, Alex. They also agreed that their perception of Alex's gender had more to do with their own preconceptions than the way the character was written. One male participant said, "I think I perceived Alex as a boy first because a lot of my personal interactions are one on one with other boys, like my roommate, so I perceive two guys talking by default".

There were some interesting, but expected differences in their perception of Alex and his/her relationship with Dante when they pictured a woman. Anna Ter-Gabrielyan said that when she tried to picture Alex as a girl, "she" came off as more "hysterical" than her male counterpart. Two others said that as a woman, Alex seemed dumber. "When you see two men speaking absurd dialogue, you think they are philosophizing, but when one is a girl, for some reason, she comes off as ditsy," said Araksia Melikian.

That is a fascinating point. Indeed, in some of the most famous absurdist plays, the protagonists are two or more men: Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Peter and Jerry from Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* and Jean and Berenger from Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*. Female characters are less common or are usually in supporting roles, such as "the love interest". Absurdist plays where the male and female leads are equals or where the two leads are women are uncommon. It is therefore understandable why it would be unusual to hear a woman speak in that manner, especially for those who are unfamiliar with the theatre of the absurd.

In her book, *The Second Sex,* philosopher Simone de Beauvoir states that in patriarchal societies men see themselves the Subject and the women as the Object.

According to the myth of Creation, God created Man first, as a complete being. Woman, who was formed from his rib, depended on him for her existence. In this world, "Woman" is the Other, yet she is not a minority, and the human race cannot exist without her. This separates her from other oppressed groups. Separation from the majority is not an option because of Man's dependency on her. The dilemma is addressed by a different means of control, which de Beauvoir calls the "eternal feminine". "Woman" becomes a mother and an idol: someone to adore, cherish, worship and protect. In Armenia, they are called "the beautiful sex" (գեղեցիկ սեռը). By being placed on a pedestal as an idol, "Woman" is denied her humanity. She does not have the right to be flawed, visceral, and earthly. If she possesses these qualities, she is not "a real woman". She becomes impure. Beauvoir argues, that if there are right and wrong ways to behave like a woman, then "woman" is not intrinsic to the female sex. Therefore, de Beauvoir asserts that "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one" (Beauvoir, 1949). By this definition, female Alex is not "a woman" because she is human. She does not live up to the expectations of the eternal feminine. She is the Subject and is as real and earthly as her male counterpart.

Another interesting point that came up was that the change in the play that occurred with the change in Alex's sex, had less to do with Alex and more with Dante and his attitude toward Alex. When male Alex and Dante bickered, they were thought of as two bored men who had nothing do, but talk to each other. When female Alex and Dante bickered, their boredom was accompanied by sexual tension. "When Alex is a girl, you think that they will end up falling in love because that is what we are used to seeing in plays and movies", said Sona Poghosyan. The characters who start off hating each other then fall in love are not new to literature and the theatre. Notable examples are Beatirce

and Benedick from Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* and Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice.* As opposed to the lovers who fall in love at first sight whose relationship is challenged by external factors, such as social status, distance, and war, the struggles of these lovers are internal. In order to be together they must first overcome their own fears and preconceptions about each other. It is exciting for audiences to watch their relationship unfold and grow and the hatred slowly turn into love, especially if it is accompanied by an entertaining "battle of the wits". Alex and Dante, however, do not fall in love. They dislike each other, attempt to get along and understand each other, but fail. The more they get to know each other, the further they grow apart, until Alex, who up until the end of the play had indulged Dante's most ridiculous ideas finally accepts that s/he does not understand him . Since *Syzygy* does not follow the traditional structure of a play and abruptly ends mid-scene, a reader or audience member who had been perceiving their bickering as flirtation and sexual tension, while expecting them to get together at the end might be left unsatisfied.

It is interesting to note that the participants thought that the flirtation was one-sided. They did not think that Alex was sexually or romantically interested with Dante, regardless of his/her sex, but Dante would be interested in female Alex. In most heteronormative societies, it is traditionally the man who initiates a courtship and proposes marriage to the woman. Even same-sex couples are approached with the question, "Who is the man in the relationship?", meaning, "Who is the dominant one; who is the initiator; who proposes?"

Dante is much more gregarious and extroverted than Alex, so it makes sense that he would initiate the conversations. Most of the time he has to drag the words out of Alex's mouth in order to keep the conversation going "We almost had a real

conversation going. Don't end it with a "hm". Respond!". In the performance, Dante would be very exuberant and theatrical, while Alex would be more monotone and dry. "I am on this train with only you for company and I wish I was alone", s/he says when asked if s/he likes people. S/he sometimes gives in to boredom and curiosity and tries to keep the conversations going, but for the most part, finds Dante intolerable and ends their arguments with, "And you talk too much". With two men, the juxtaposition of personalities is obvious: Dante wants to talk; Alex doesn't. The same would happen with two women. With a man and woman, readers and audiences - perhaps unconsciously - add more layers to the relationship that are not intrinsically there because they are constantly exposed to heterosexual relationships.

Garbis Vizoyan agreed that there was more sexual tension between female Alex and Dante, but raised a point about the nature of male Alex and Dante's relationship. "…the first time through was a much more aggressive experience than the second. In the sense that, the relationship between Dante and Alex turned to competitiveness right after a chapter or two of introductions, despite the fact that the dialogue had no implications of any such competitiveness, the male nature of both characters had them both one-upping one another in an act of supremacy".

The read-throughs provided a thought-provoking insight into how different people perceive gender on the page, showing that, in theory, a gender-neutral character that could be portrayed by both a man and woman could work. The next step was to bring this character to life.

Gender in the Theatre

Gender- bending on stage is as old as theatre itself. Up until 1660, after the downfall of Oliver Cromwell's puritanical government, acting was a man's craft. In England, the first recorded woman on stage was Margaret Hughes in the role of Desdemona from William Shakespeare's *Othello* (Millings et. al. 2015). Medea, Electra, Juliet, Lady Macbeth and every other iconic female roles before that time were originated by men. Viola from *Twelfth Night* was a particularly interesting case because it required a man to portray a woman portraying a man. Similarly, in opera there is the concept of a "breeches role" or a "trouser role" (Pullen, 2005), which is typically a young male character written to be performed by female performer: either a mezzo-soprano or a contralto, in order to add a youthful tone to the voice of the character. Notable "breeches roles" are Orpheus from *Orpheus and Euridice*, Cherubino from *The Marriage of Figaro* and Hansel from *Hansel and Gretel* (Senelick, 2000).

The role of Alex in *Syzygy* is not a cross-dressing one, though it is written for both male and female actors. Simply put, the character exists separately as a man and a woman at different points in the play. There are two ways of interpreting Alex's sex: either s/he is neither male nor female, or s/he is both male and female. I am inclined to believe the latter. When s/he is portrayed by a woman, Alex is a woman. When s/he is portrayed by a man, s/he is a man. His/her personality, however, is not affected by the change. The actor's body merely becomes a vessel for the character to live through without the actor's personal gender expression getting in the way. So how can the female Alex be a woman on stage without being affected by being a woman? First, one must understand what is to be a woman. By stating that a person becomes a woman instead of being born one, Simone de Beauvoir introduced the idea that gender exists

separately from sex. Sex refers to one's reproductive functions. Gender refers to the state of being male or female, which includes one's identity, expression through clothing and behavior, and especially, one's role in society. Gender roles are the functions and behaviors which are ascribed to males and females from birth.

It is imperative to pay attention to the words that are used to speak about gender: role, perform, and act. These are words that are derived from the theatre. People perform gender in real life like actors perform on stage. Gender is a partially scripted, ongoing performance in front of a very tough crowd. In some countries, a bad performance can even result in death. In her essay, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,* Judith Butler (1988)(describes gender as a performative act: an identity which is continuously constructed by an individual throughout their life with their words, actions and choices. As soon as individuals become aware of the gender binary, they consciously and unconsciously police their own behavior - along with the behavior of others - in order to abide by the established norms. Thus, the gender binary is able to function in society. The intolerance toward those who refuse to conform in society is not as prevalent in the theatre as in real life. "Indeed, the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence" (Butler, 1988).

As an audience, we often neglect how much our preconceptions color or experience of a play. According to Keir Elam in *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (2002), the audience is the maker of its own meanings. Elam describes the process of signification in the theatre, by applying the linguistic theories of semiotics to the actions that take place on stage. Semiotics is the study of meaning-making through

signs and sign processes. It is a field of study that is used in linguistics. The basic elements of semiotics are the *signifier,* the *signified* and the *sign*. The signifier is the actual word or sound, made up of the combination of letters. The signified is the concept or meaning behind the signifier. The sign is the combination of the two. In the theatre, everything that is on the stage - people and objects - are signs that try to communicate a signified, through a process called *semiotization*, a concept that was proposed by The Prague School. In theatre, everything on stage exists as a sign, and even the most passive member of the audience subconsciously reads the contents of the stage, from the set to the actors, like he would read words on a page. An audience's perception of the "world of the Drama" is influenced by their hopes, beliefs, wishes and fears of the real world. Thus, on stage, it is not only the actions and motivation of the characters in the world of the drama that shape the play, but also the perceptions, projections, expectations and speculations of the spectators. The audience, unbeknownst to itself, enters the theatre with baggage with which they construct *sub-worlds*. The construction of sub-worlds keeps the spectator interested in the play, since they do not know what is going to happen. "It is quite common for the audience to be led to construct a 'false' doxastic or belief world - which for them may appear an epistemic world to the extent that they have no doubts about it - whereby they think a certain state of affairs exists in the drama but later discover, often with a sense of delighted shock, that it is not the case" (Elam, 2002).

On stage, two worlds coexist simultaneously: the world of the drama, in which the events of the play unfold, and the world of the actor, in which the events are being performed. Ideally, the latter will not interfere with the former. When a spectator is watching a play, they, of course, are aware that what they are witnessing is not real, but

they want to become invested in the story, and suspend their disbelief. Thus, the spectator, in his/her mind, is willing to "correct" the unrealistic but necessary elements of a play, such as two actors facing away from each other (in theatre terms, *cheating out* towards the audience), while having a conversation. Sometimes, however, the world of the actor interferes with the world of the play. This usually happens when an actor makes a mistake, such as forgetting a line, or when the actor is a celebrity, making it difficult for the spectator to see them as the character. Elam refers to the disruption of the reality of the world of the play by the world of the actor as *Desemiotization*. If Desemiotization does not occur during a performance, the lines between the two worlds become blurred for the audience. Everything that is on stage   - sets, props, costumes - becomes a signifier for the character's wealth, social status, personality and state of mind. A table on stage, is not just a table, but a symbol of the world of the play.

The actor's body is also read as such, and audiences attribute everything about the body, such as a scar or a mole that the actor is born with, to the character they are portraying. Along with the words and actions of the character, an actor's physical appearance helps the audience to form opinions about the character. That is why an actor's "look" influences a director's choice when casting a role, just as much as (if not more than) their talent. The conclusions drawn by members of the audience are a result of individual preconceptions based on their upbringing and societal norms. In the first act of *Syzygy*, Alex is portrayed by a woman. As soon as s/he is seen on stage in a female body, s/he will be bombarded with silent assumptions and expectations, which s/he will either live up to or disappoint. It becomes the actor's obligation to make sure that she does not do either too severely.

So far, I have mostly discussed the female Alex. *Syzygy* - in terms of its content - is not a play about gender. If we were to look at it as a one-act absurd play, that is not to be repeated twice, there would be little need to discuss gender. It is about two strangers headed for the unknown in an enclosed space for an uncertain amount of time. They dislike each other, though they try to get along. There is no mention of sexual orientation, past lovers, or a physical attraction between them in their conversations, so it is not improbable that both are asexual. Both characters are absurd. Their logic, actions and discussions are existential in nature, but rarely make sense. They discuss family, pets, art, philosophy, math, etc., but they never mention gender because it is not important to them. Their gender does not influence their journey. Since there is only one script that ends with "Repeat from the top", it is safe to assume that according to the script Dante dislikes Alex just as much as a man and a woman, and that Alex feels the same way. Therefore, when the audiences see the first act for the first time, they should not be consciously thinking about gender. Gender comes into play in Act 2, and they will have to analyze female Alex in retrospect.

Desemiotization occurs in *Syzygy* when Alex is replaced by a male actor. If in the first act, the spectators are immersed in the world of the play, willing to go along with its absurdity, and speculating about the course of events and the status of Alex and Dante's relationship, in the second act - once they realize that they are seeing a repetition - their focus shifts towards the world of the actor. Thus, the second actor to play Alex is under more scrutiny than the first. While the spectator will still be interested in the *syuzhet* (plot), wondering if it will end differently, they will actively be monitoring each element of the male actor's performance. The reification of this

process will be covered in more detail in the "Focus Group Performance" section of this capstone.

The Rehearsals

Most of the development of *Syzygy* happened in the rehearsal room. It is easy to speculate about a hypothetical unisex character, but in the rehearsal room we got to test if it was really possible for a male and a female actor to create one character. The actors and I experimented with different interpretations of Alex until we found one that worked for both of them. In this production, Alex is played by Sona Poghosyan and Andranik Davtyan, and Dante is played by Alexander Mikayelyan. All three are English and Communications students at the American University of Armenia, who had participated in the read-throughs.

Realistically, it would take many months of rigorous work for the two actors to create and master a performance that is technically and emotionally identical, as it would require for them to remember every body movement and inflection of the voice, and recreate it each time. Furthermore, they would also have to find a way to make the performance feel authentic to each them, without feeling like they are simply copying someone. Unfortunately, our workshop production with its time constraints does not allow the actors to achieve those results. It does, however, lift the words off the page, and show what works and what does not.   It is easy to *imagine* a man and a woman portraying the same character identically without affecting the story in any way, however *seeing* it happen is completely different. First of all, it is impossible. No two actors, regardless of their sex, can be exactly the same, and also be interpreted in the exact same way. Not even the same actor can do the exact same thing twice. Our goal

was to get as close as possible. In this sense, *Syzygy* requires some suspension of disbelief. It is similar to *Twelfth Night*, in which audiences are asked not to question why the other characters cannot tell Viola and Sebastian apart, when they are not even identical twins. Of course, there will be differences in both scenes, however, it is the goal of the actors to make those differences have as little to do with gender as possible. In some ways, it is a futile effort. Gender is deeply rooted in our collective unconscious to not affect our perception of someone.

One could argue that it would be impossible not just because of societal norms, but because of their biological makeup. The idea is that men and women are completely different *a priori* - i.e. men are logical, women are emotional - which in turn justifies the differences in the treatment of the sexes, and the lack of equality. The social construct of gender was attributed to biological determinism, however in their 1984 book, *Not in Our Genes: Biology, Ideology and Human Nature* evolutionary geneticist Richard Lewontin, psychologist Leon Karmin and neurobiologist Steven Rose criticize theories of biological determinism and sociobiology, particularly ones that justify different forms of inequality in society. In the chapter, titled "The Determined Patriarchy", they explain where our notions of gender as a direct result of biology come from, bring examples of studies that have been performed that support those theories, and point out their flaws. The arguments for the gender division in society include tests that were conducted on men and women, the animal kingdom, evolution, differences in the reproductive systems, etc. For example, the studies that tested how well men and women performed in certain tasks failed to take into account "the social and cultural pressures driving sexes in different directions" (Lewontin et al., 1984). In order to get more accurate results, studies began to focus on children who were younger and

younger, however, such studies are unreliable because it has been shown that the way in which parents hold and speak to newborn boys and girls is different. Therefore, it is impossible to determine what really influences an individual's choices in life. Arguments based on the animal kingdom are problematic and unreliable because a) inaccurate human behaviors and attitudes toward subjects like procreation are attributed to animals, and c) differences in the brain structure of animals and humans.

It is important to note, that the authors try to see both sides of the "nature vs. nurture" argument. In their own words, "Again we should emphasize that as materialists we too would expect to find that differences in behavior between individual humans will prove to be related to differences in the biology of those individuals. Where we differ from biological reductionism is in refusing to accept an argument that says that the biological difference is primary and causative of the "higher level" psychological one; *both* are different aspects of the same unitary phenomenon. Differences in the social environment of an individual during development can result in changes in the biology of brain and body just as much as in behavior" (Lewontin et. al.,1984).

The findings of Lewontin, Karmin and Rose play a crucial part in justifying the existence of Alex as the same person regardless of his/her sex in the context of the play. Realistically speaking, s/he would have very different experiences as a man and a woman, just by the biological functions of his/her body. These experiences would shape his/her personality, however, in *Syzygy* Alex does not exist outside of the train on which s/he is with Dante, who does not care about gender. S/he does not eat, sleep or go to the bathroom. Who Alex is outside of the play is irrelevant. The circular narrative of the play suggests that Alex and Dante have been and will be stuck in that time loop

indefinitely. They do not exist outside of it. Judging by this, and the findings of Lewontin et. al., it is possible for Alex's physical sex not to influence his/her personality.

Alex's gender does not exist in the world of the play; however it is a key factor in the performance. Elam defines drama as the written text of a play, and theatre as the performance. Going by this definition, it can be said that Alex's gender does not exist in the *drama,* but is prevalent in the *theatre.* In the theatre, which in this case comprises both the rehearsals and the performance, Alex and Dante's genders are heavily policed.

The policing of gender manifests itself in three ways during the rehearsals and performance of *Syzygy*: consciously and deliberately during the rehearsals, and unconsciously during the performance. Firstly, the actors police their own gender expression. They become aware of how they naturally sit, stand, move and speak and consciously attempt to make it gender neutral. Secondly, the director polices the gender expression of the actors by telling them if their performance reads as too masculine or feminine. Therefore, creating a play in which there is seemingly no gender requires a lot of deliberation about gender.

Syzygy requires an approach to acting that goes against the developments of the past few decades. Starting with Konstantin Stanislavsky in the early twentieth century, acting has been focused on the actor as an individual who brings realism and spontaneity to a role by drawing on his/her own imagination or experiences. The more naturalistic or "truthful" a performance, the better. Thus, no two performances are ever the same. He introduces this idea in his book *An Actor Prepares,* which was the first of many. In some ways *Syzygy* embraces this approach, in others it completely rejects it.

Because both Alex and Dante have to be the same both times, the actors must go through their blocking mechanically. Spontaneity and getting caught up in the moment during a performance are discouraged unless the other actor can recreate it during their turn. This also applies to Dante. For example, if he sneezes in the first act, he has to sneeze in the same place during the second act. It requires an amount of self-awareness on stage that a modern method actor would like to avoid, preferring instead to get lost in the reality of the play.

In order to achieve maximum similarity in their performances, the two actors would have to come up with similar objectives which motivate Alex's actions and emotions. During the rehearsals, we discussed the character's motivations, fears and desires, focusing on what Stansivlasky termed a character's *superobjective*: the one thing that the characters wants out of life. The superobjective is then broken down into smaller objectives which motivate Alex at specific moments.

In preparation for the focus group performance, we spent more time on finding the the character's physicality, and working out the blocking. At this stage, the performance was treated like choreography, where they had to mechanically go through the agreed - upon movements until they got it down. We tried to find movements, gestures an mannerisms that would be doable for both actors while remaining true to the character. The requirement that they be as similar as possible with our time and schedule constraints limited our options, so we opted for minimalistic movements that could easily be performed by both. They were also more appropriate for the style of the play because they did not distract from the dialogue.

Since Alex is a sensitive character whose anxiety surfaces whenever the conversation shifts to fear and the future, we decided to give him/her a nervous habit of rubbing his/her hands together during those moments.

Surprisingly, it was not very difficult to come up with a gender-neutral physicality for Alex. In the beginning, gender did get in the way. I often told Andranik to spread his legs less while sitting because most women would not sit that way. This is because from an early age, girls are told to sit up straight with their legs together. A woman spreading her legs has negative sexual connotations, and is generally avoided. People are taught to perceive a woman who slouches and spreads her legs as vulgar, unladylike and manly. The position is even colloquially termed "man-sitting" or "man-spreading". Similarly, men generally do not sit with their legs completely together because of the physical discomfort, so it would look strange for male Alex to sit that way, which is why Sona was told to sit with her legs slightly wider apart than she normally would. We tried to avoid making female Alex seem butch, and male Alex seem effeminate because that would mean that would result in two very different people. Since our goal was to create one character, both actors had to make some compromises in order to achieve a seated position in which their legs were not too far apart for a woman, but not too close for a man. Once, the body language was established, gender was not a problem because Alex's thoughts, feelings and objectives are not gender-specific.

The difficulties arose from the different acting styles and physicalities of the actors. Andranik is naturally more relaxed and dynamic and free in his movements, while Sona is more reserved and tense. Thus finding blocking that looked and felt natural for both and getting it right every time was a challenge. Another challenge

was the delivery of lines. Both actors have fairly low-pitched voices for their sex, but they have different accents, so the lines didn't sound the same, despite the similar intonations. Both actors, however, are quite good imitators and so were able to pick up each others mannerisms and incorporate them into their performances.

We experimented with several exercises in order to find the similarity. Sometimes, one actor would perform the part and the other would shadow their movements. Other times, they would be on stage and say alternating lines, like twins. The most interesting and challenging exercise, which they also demonstrated in front of the focus group, was performing the scene simultaneously (See appendix for video clips).

The next phase of rehearsals will include reconciling the differences in acting styles and ensuring that both actors are on the same page when it comes to Alex's objectives and emotions in each scene. Once they understand those, they will have to work on coming up with a near-identical delivery of the lines that is consistent with those objectives and emotions. They will have to agree on how they are going to say each line and, like with the blocking, do it over and over again until it becomes second nature. The same goes for Dante, who will have to say the lines in the exact same way twice in a row. We did begin to work on these, but prioritized the blocking, in order to show the focus group that the two scenes are meant to look identical.

When asked about the most challenging parts about the rehearsals and the performance, Sona said, "Given that Andranik and I had different initial interpretations of the character, we both had different ideas of how Alex would act in different situations. The trickiest part with this play was that Andranik and I had to act as similar as possible". Andranik agreed and added it was also a challenge to come up

with blocking that interesting, but minimal. "We needed to make the blocking simple, but not too simple and boring". About his character Dante, Alex said, "The character himself was not really as challenging to play, as his interaction and relationship with the Alex(s)" (See Appendices: Syzygy Questionnaire for the Actors).

The writing of the script and the rehearsals showed that gender does not have to be a particularly difficult barrier to overcome. It was much easier to take it out of the picture than I had originally anticipated, which leads me to the conclusion that a character could believably exist as a man *and* a woman. How this applies to the external world, in which gender differences play a critical role, however, is a different matter. During the rehearsals, we examined just how and why these roles affect the way people move, sit, speak, stand, and interact, and attempted to eliminate them from the play until we reached a point where gender did not influence our perception of the happenings on stage. Gender was brought right back into the play when it was presented to an audience.

The Performance

The abridged version of *Syzygy,* which had been work-shopped during the rehearsals was presented to a focus group consisting of AUA students from different years and departments. Most of the audience members had something to do with acting and theatre. They had either been in plays themselves or had taken the Intro to Acting Techniques and Filmmaking courses offered at the university. Having a focus group that had first-hand experience in the theatre allowed for more in-depth discussions about the portrayal of the characters. The spectators were split into two

groups: those who were familiar with the play, had participated in the read-throughs, or had been present during the rehearsals, and those who had not. The purpose of this was to see how being previously aware of the gender component affected the audience's experience of the play.

During the read-throughs, it was generally agreed upon that Alex could be the same regardless of his/her sex. Most of the differences that arose in the perception of the script were attributed Dante and his attitude toward Alex. The live performance, on the other hand, generated the exact opposite response. Spectators thought that Dante was more or less the same both times, but Alex's attitude toward Dante was completely different.

In many ways, a theatrical performance is similar to Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, which Michel Foucault discusses in his book, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1979), except that in the theatre, its effect is felt by both parties. In the Panopticon, the guards can see the prisoners, but the prisoners cannot see the guards. The guard might not even be there, but the uncertainty causes the prisoners to keep their behavior in check. In a traditional theatre, the lights that place the actors in full view of the spectators obscure the spectators from the actors. The actors might not see more than their silhouettes, but they know that they are being watched. A show needs an audience in order to be a show. "Of all successive audience signals, the most significant is its simple presence, which constitutes the one invariable condition of the performance"(Elam, 2002)."How can it be a show if there was no one here to see it?" (Saroyan, 1939/1950) says the bartender, Nick, in William Saroyan's play *The Time of Your Life*. The idea of being watched and judged causes actors to commit to their roles more during a performance than during rehearsals. "Spectator-performer

communication will affect, if nothing else, the degree of the actor's commitment to his work"(Elam, 2002).Spectators are also aware that actors can see and hear them even though they ignore them. Knowing that they are being seen by both the actors and the other spectators causes most to observe the proper theatre etiquette. "It is with the spectator, in brief, that theatrical communication begins and ends" (Elam, 2002).

The performance of *Syzygy* took place in a fully lit classroom, therefore the actors and spectators were not only very close to one another, but they were both clearly visible to each other. Furthermore, the actors looked out directly into the audience whenever their characters look at the painting hanging on the fourth wall and criticized it, i.e. "Man, that's an ugly painting". This decision allowed the audience to be more actively involved in the performance.

The audience's response during the performance, for the most part, was what I had anticipated, although there were some interesting surprises. The performances were not identical, however the audience was told beforehand that it was still a work in progress. During rehearsals, we had spent more time on the blocking than the vocal inflections and facial expressions, which also add to our perception of the character. That being said, for the amount of rehearsal time that we had, including those during which both actors were present, worked together and monitored each others performances, from a technical perspective, the acting was quite similar.As predicted, however, the spectators saw two very different scenes.

The general consensus was that female Alex (Sona) seemed more confident and aggressive (at times "bitchy"), while male Alex (Andranik) was shyer and less sure of himself, however some people disagreed.

Anna Ter-Gabrielyan, a spectator who had read the script and was familiar with the project overall said, "While watching them, I could see that the acting was the same, the way they were sitting and their facial expressions were the same - they were both introverted - but I would still catch myself interpreting their introversion differently. When a man is being introverted, we think that he's just not in the mood to socialize, but when a girl is introverted, we think she's being bitchy and stand-offish. For example, people tell women to smile more, but not men" (See Appendices:Additional Comments). She knew the intention of the play before going into it, knew what to look for and pay attention to, and still perceived the two scenes differently, however, it was a conscious process for her. She also didn't see female Alex as bitchy or aggressive. "She wasn't nice, but the character in the script isn't nice. She/he is dry, compared with Dante, and just wants to be left alone, but if a girl isn't immediately sweet and nice, we assume she's a bitch".

The spectators also agreed that male Alex and Dante had better chemistry because they seemed like "two guys talking" or "two friends talking", whereas male and female Alex had more tension and were argumentative. Karotik Galstyan, a spectator who was not familiar with the script or the project said, "There will always be an invisible wall between men and women. That is why the two men seemed more at ease together" (See Appendices: Additional Comments: Karotik Galstyan).

It is important to note that during male Alex's scene, the audience was hearing the dialogue for the second time, so they knew what was going to happen. During female Alex's scene, everything was new and unexpected, which is why she got more laughs. Male Alex got laughs at different parts and notice things in the writing that they had not before. The repetition caused the second scene to be a little less energetic

because the actors had very little time in between scenes to recover. It is quite draining to perform, build up a character and then start over. The blackout during which the switch occurs in the full version of the play Dante to take a moment to adjust and get into the mindset of the beginning of the play again. In the abridged version, the change occurs quickly in front of the audience.

During the discussion, the audience was told that the eventual goal of the play is to achieve maximum similarity between the two Alexes, within reason. They agreed that it could be possible, but even then, 'gender and social norms', as spectator Vartan Panossian said, would still cause us to interpret them differently.

"Within reason" is a key phrase to keep in mind. There are things, such as the shape of an actors face, body composition, facial features, vocal pitch, and muscular tension, that cannot be controlled, therefore the same facial expression or gesture would look different. For example, Andranik has thick eyebrows that slope upward when he furrows them, making him look sad and innocent, whereas Sona has thin, straight eyebrows that make her look a little stern when furrowed. Andranik is also a more physical actor and his muscles are relaxed, making him look casual, while Sona is more vocally dynamic and carries more tension in her muscles, which can make her look uncomfortable at times. As Elam (2002) mentioned, spectators assume that everything about an actor's body has something to do with their character, therefore it is not surprising how these seemingly trivial elements would impact one's interpretation of Alex. Thus, seeing two people on stage as the same person at different times requires some suspension of disbelief, which is particular to the theatre.

An interesting element that I had not anticipated was how the audience's preconceptions of the actor and the art of acting itself would influence their perception of the character. The focus group consisted of AUA students, some of whom knew Sona and Andranik personally, or had seen them perform in Saroyan's "The Time of Your Life". Sona played the villain, Blick, in the play, who was very aggressive, self-assured and mean. "Perhaps, it was because I had seen her play Blick, I already had some ideas about your character that I applied Alex as well," said Roubina Seropian, "I'm not sure, but I don't think actors ever fully dissociate themselves from a role. I think eventually part of you comes out on stage" (See Appendices: Additional Comments). This is an interesting idea, which is neither true nor false. Some actors, particularly those who follow the Stanislavsky system, or more recently, the Lee Strasberg "Method", like to draw on their emotions and real life experiences to give believable performances, thereby putting a lot of themselves into their roles. Others prefer to rely on and imagination and their control over their body and voice to create a believable performance, without the need to rely on their real emotions. If well done, the results would be the same regardless of the actor's technique. However, if someone believes that an actor cannot avoid putting themselves into their character, and they have seen that actor play an aggressive character in one play, then an anxious, introverted and defensive character like Alex, might come across as aggressive to them if they see her played by that same actor. Their preconceptions about Sona, based on previous characters she has played, affect the way they view Alex. This is called "Desemiotization": the world of the actor interferes with the world of the play.

During rehearsals, both Alexes were initially quite aggressive, but eventually toned it down and played up the annoyance, anxiety and curiosity instead. There are times when Alex goes along with Dante's nonsense, genuinely trying to understand what he means, i.e their discussion about philosophers, and there are times when s/he has had enough and wants to be left alone, i.e. twenty questions. At times, especially when she used high-pitched inflections in her voice, female Alex came across as quirky, sweet and somewhat more intellectual than her male counterpart. Male Alex, on the other hand was more intense and, as Alex (Dante) pointed out during rehearsal once, "more of a bum". The energy that he put into his words made him seem more aggressive than female Alex to me, so I was a little surprised at first that the focus group perceived him as the shyer one. Their interpretation, however, is understandable. Generally, we tend to stereotype women as naturally more passive and men as naturally more aggressive. Rose and Lewontin have argued that there is no biological evidence to support this notion. Here, "naturally" is actually a social construct. Within the gender binary, shyness is considered a feminine trait and confidence is considered a masculine trait. In order to create a gender-neutral character in a society where the gender binary is both prevalent, a woman's femininity would need to be toned down and masculinity turned up, and vice versa for a man. A gender neutral performance in this sense *was* achieved in *Syzygy*. The audience, admittingly came to the performance with their stereotypes which are influenced and encouraged by the gender binary. Thus, for them a gender-neutral female seemed aggressive because she exhibited more masculinity than the average stereotypical woman, and a gender-neutral male seemed shy and unsure of himself because he exhibited less masculinity than the average stereotypical man. This, however, does not

mean that he was feminine. It has been established that neutrality leans more towards the masculine then the feminine.

One of the differences between the discussion after the performance and the read-throughs, was the audience's perception of Dante. They agreed that his relationship to Alex was more or less the same because his performance was almost identical. It was Alex who was seen differently. In the read-throughs, however, most of the differences in perception were because of Dante. Dante was flirting, Dante was being patronizing, Dante was being aggressive and annoying, but Alex was more or less the same. Perhaps this has to do with control. A reader is free to imagine a character in any way they please, but a spectator must deal with what they are shown. Thus, more policing of gender occurs when one is in control of their creation of a character.

During the performance, Dante was clearly not flirting with Alex. He was distant, cold and generally unimpressed with both of them, which is what we had worked towards during rehearsal, so, other than those who had participated in the read-throughs and had expressed the idea that he could flirting with female Alex in the past, nobody mentioned that there were any romantic or sexual feelings between the two.

Overall, the performance was successful for the stage in the project during which it was presented. The actors and I still have a lot of work to do in order to achieve the level of similarity that we have decided on. Performing it in front of a live audience showed us which areas work and why, and which ones still need to be developed. The audience's feedback was constructive, however it should also be noted that they provided us with one perspective. An audience consisting of conservative local

Armenians or people who identify as gender non-binary or gender non-conforming, would elicit completely different responses because rules and expectations about gender are not concrete. That which was gender-neutral for the actors and me, was very gender-specific for some spectators. A consensus will never be reached, therefore, as Elam says, " It is the spectator who must make sense of the performance for himself, a fact that is disguised by the apparent passivity of the audience. However judicious or aberrant the spectator's decodification, the final responsibility for the meaning and coherence of what he constructs is his" (Elam, 2002). The most eye-opening part of the entire process, from the writing of the script to the performance, was just how narrow-minded our ideas about gender still are and how much they influence our perception of the world. In the world of the theatre, most popular roles for women are based on limiting stereotypes. The stage needs both male and female characters who challenge these limits, break taboos about gender, and allow for a deeper and more authentic exploration of humanity. The most eye-opening part of the entire process, from the writing of the script to the performance, was just how narrow-minded our ideas about gender still are and how much they influence our perception of the world. In the world of the theatre, most popular roles for women are based on limiting stereotypes. The stage needs both male and female characters who challenge these limits, break taboos about gender, and allow for a deeper and more authentic exploration of humanity. Further experimentation in the theatre should be encouraged because a theatrical performance has the power to hold a mirror up to society in a way that is entertaining, non-threatening and impactful.

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Beauvoir, Simone de. (1989, c1952) *The second sex /*New York, Vintage Books

In *The Second Sex*, French existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir discusses the roles, treatment, and oppression of women in society, in the home and in literature. She questions what it is to be a woman, by asserting that, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman", thereby differentiating between "sex" and "gender". The role of Woman, this "eternal feminine" is nothing more than a social construct, created to identify the woman as the Other, who is inferior to man. Beauvoir states that second-wave feminists do not face the same problems as their predecessors, who fought to be acknowledged as human beings. Instead, their goal is to share their experiences about how being a woman has shaped their lives. In a play that attempts to create a believable cis-gendered character that can be believably played by a man and a woman without affecting the story, one must first understand what it is to be a man and a woman, and how their sex shapes their reality and society's expectations about their attitude, behaviour, and relationships with other people.

Butler, J. (1988). *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, The John Hopkins University Press

Building on Simone de Beauvoir's declaration that one is not born a woman, but becomes one, Judith Butler elaborates on the way gender is constructed and functions in society. She describes gender as a performative act, an identity which is constantly constructed throughout an individual's life by their actions. We do not act like a man or a woman because we are born men and women. We become them through our actions which conform to the established gender binary. This binary is not as determinate as it seems, but is able to function through an individual's policing of their own and others' actions. Throughout the essay, Butler compares performing gender to performing on

stage. Although the script and performances of *Syzygy* are identical (the performance being as close as humanly possible), the sex of the actor influences the way the audience perceives the character based on their preconceived ideas about gender.

Elam, K. (2002). *The semiotics of theatre and drama*. London: Routledge.

Everything on stage exists as a sign. In *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, Keir Elam discusses how semiotization works on stage. The most important points are that 1) there are two worlds that simultaneously exist on stage: the world of the play and the world of the actor who is performing; 2) the audience makes its own meanings about what is happening on stage, beginning with the assumption that everything that is on stage, including elements of the actor's physical appearance (hair colour, moles, scars, etc.) are all part of the world of the play. In *Syzygy*, the role of the audience as "the maker of meanings" is essential, as their preconceptions of gender shape the stories in their minds. In the script, instead of pronouns, every word (the signifier) that is written/said by or about Alex (the signified) creates an idea about her sex in the mind of the reader/audience.

Esslin, M. (2004). *The theatre of the absurd*. New York: Vintage Books

In his essay, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin, who coined the term "theatre of the absurd", discusses this genre, which emerged in Europe in the 1950s, by focusing on the work of its three biggest contributors: Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Arthur Adamov. He also traces its roots back to written works and theatrical performances in various cultures including the writings of the French Renaissance writer, Francois Rabelais, and the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*. Being primarily existential, the theatre of the absurd attempts to show what happens when existence, words, and logic have no meaning. *Syzygy* is an absurd play because of its structure.

Much like "The Song That Never Ends", halfway through the play, it starts over with a different lead actor, instead of reaching a logical conclusion. It can be repeated as many times as one likes. The characters are willingly stuck in a situation the outcome of which they have no way of knowing.

Foucault, M. (1979). *Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage Books.

In the chapter entitled *Panopticism* from his book, *Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison*, Michel Foucault discusses Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon: a prison in which the wardens can see the prisoners at all time, but the prisoners cannot see the wardens. The knowledge that one is constantly being watched controls an individual's behaviour more effectively than former methods of punishment, such as public executions. The same principles apply to the way people police their own and others' genders. In live theatre, the actors are aware that they are being watched by the audience, whom they cannot see clearly, which affects their performance. In *Syzygy*, once the audience understands that they are meant to see the same scene, they will begin to scrutinize the second performance, to make sure that it is identical to the first. This puts a lot of pressure on the second actor who is playing Alex because, in the eyes of the audience, they become the imitator.The audience, on the other hand, is not sure whether or not they are being watched by the actors, but they know that the actors are aware of their presence, which in turn polices their behaviour.

Halliwell, S., & Aristotle. (1998). *Aristotle's Poetics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defines the genre of tragedy as the most refined form of poetry because, unlike comedy, it deals with serious matters. He lists the six components of tragedy in order of importance: plot, character, thought, diction,

melody, and spectacle, and expands on them. He also lists seven characteristics of

tragedy: it is mimetic, serious, tells a complete story, contains rhythm and harmony,

which occur in different combinations in different parts, is acted out, and arouses pity

and fear in the audience then cleanses them through catharsis. The theatre of the absurd,

which can range from comedy to tragedy, does not abide by any of these rules. It

relishes in the illogical, nonsensical and unpredictable. As an absurd play, that has

elements of both tragedy and comedy, *Syzygy* breaks almost all of the conventions of

classical theatre that were established by Aristotle. For example, instead of achieving

catharsis through a satisfactory conclusion, halfway through the play, the audience is

taken back to the beginning and forced to relive the same moment with a new

perspective.

Lewontin, R., & Rose, S. (1984). *Not in Our Genes: Biology, Ideology and Human Nature*. New York: Pantheon Books

In *Not in Our Genes*, Richard Lewontin and Steven Rose criticize genetic

determinism and sociobiology. In the chapter entitled *The Determined Patriarchy*, they

dispute theories and studies that claim that the differences in behaviour between men

and women are caused by biology. They acknowledge that the differences in their

reproductive system may play a part, but there is no concrete evidence to support this.

According to them, an individual's surrounding environment is the key player in the

construction of their gender identity, beginning with differences in the ways in which

parents speak to male and female babies. The theories presented in this text are crucial

to *Syzygy* because they support its main argument: Alex's sex does not inherently

define him/her. Changing it does not affect the story. It is the audience who either

changes   or doesn't change the story based on their own ideas and expectations about gender specific behaviour.

Stanislavsky, K. (1946). *An actor prepares*. New York: Theatre Arts.

      Konstantin Stanislavsky's *An Actor Prepares* is considered to be the most influential texts about acting of the twentieth century. The Stanislavsky System was a revolutionary approach to acting because it focused on teaching actors to be present in the scene and act truthfully according to the circumstances of the play, instead of relying on over-exaggerated mechanical acting. It is the basis of some of the most famous naturalistic acting techniques, including Lee Strasberg's Method Acting and the Sanford Meisner Technique. Although the actors in *Syzygy* can employ any of these techniques in the creation of the character of Alex, their goal is not to give unique, spontaneous, individualistic performances, but very controlled and carefully choreographed and rehearsed performances that are as identical as possible in order for the play to work. They must be very aware not only of their bodies and voices, but also those of their partners. They must observe each other carefully in order to recreate their movements. At the same time, they must be able to give truthful performances. The audience must feel that they are both Alex, and not that one of them is the "real" one.

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Appendices:

Full Script:

Syzygy

By Noemi Akopian

Dramatis Personae:

Alex - has questions

Dante - provides answers

Location:

Aboard a train that circles the planet at almost light-speed. The train is set to travel 100 years into the future in what will only feel like 7 days to its passengers.

Day 2.

Time:

Far enough into the future for it to be possible.

Props.

Two benches

A small mirror on wall

Heavy curtains covering what would have been windows on both walls.

Two newspapers

"A painting"

A photo of a goldfish

A small radio

Act One

The stage is dark. There is the faint whooshing noise of something moving very fast through space. It is present throughout the performance.

There is a loud clang as Alex and Dante fall over in dark and collide with the objects on stage, one of which is the radio. **One Way Ticket** *by Boney M begins to play as they attempt to get up and sort themselves out.*

Alex: For fuck's sake, is the song really necessary?!

Dante: It sets the tone.

Alex: Turn it off!

Dante: I can't see where it is.

Alex: What's this?

Dante: That's my foot.

Alex: The real one?

Dante: Probably.

Alex: Turn it off!

Dante: My foot?

Alex: The song!

Dante: Wait. Got it!

The song stops. The lights come up.

Alex and Dante are on the floor. Dante is dressed as a centipede, holding the radio in his hands. Alex is dressed in simple everyday clothes. They shield their eyes from the sudden light.

Alex: What happened?

Dante: The lights went out.

Alex: Yes, but why?

Dante: The speed probably caused a minor power fluctuation.

Alex: Minor?

Dante: Or major.

He puts the radio on a bench on stage right.

Alex: Danny?

Dante: Please. Dante.

Alex: But yesterday you said I could call you Danny.

Dante: That was yesterday. I've changed since then.

Alex: You have?

Dante: Ohoho in many ways.

Alex: You look the same to me.

Dante: I assure you I am a completely different person. So different, in fact, that we should probably reintroduce ourselves.

Alex: I don't see why that's necessary.

Dante: Oh it is, believe me.

Alex: Danny….

Dante shoots Alex a disapproving look.

Alex: Sorry. Dante?

Dante: Yes. I am Dante. Like the poet.

Alex: Are you a poet?

Dante: Don't be silly. And you are?

Alex: Still Alex. Like…a lot of things.

Dante: Alex. I assume that's short for Alexand -

Alex: No. Just Alex.

Dante: Are you sure? Just "Alex" seems so economical. Were your parents stingy with their breaths?

Alex: No. They just didn't believe in nicknames. "Why name it something if you're gonna call it something else?"

Dante: Really?

Alex: I don't know. I don't have parents.

Dante: Not even one?

Alex: None that I know of.

Dante: Any you don't know of?

Alex: I don't think so.

Dante: Is that why you're so unlovable?

Alex: Unlovable?

Dante: Yes.

Alex: Probably.

Dante: Well, I'm named after Dante Alighieri. The poet.

Dante stares at Alex expectantly.

Alex: Why?

Dante: Finally! I thought you'd never ask.

      You see, my parents are obsessed with Italian culture. When my mother was pregnant, they played *Rigoletto* to her stomach on repeat. Non-stop. It was quite annoying. (*pause*) We even have a goldfish named Pavarotti.

Alex: I don't know how I would have survived the rest of the trip without that information.

Dante: Would you like to see a photograph of Pavarotti?

Alex: Not really.

Dante: I have one here.

He produces a photograph from inside his costume and looks at it admiringly.

Dante: Isn't he lovely?

Alex: Unremarkable.

Dante: Mmm, yes. I wanted to bring him along, but they don't allow pets on the train. The speed might cause their internal organs to implode or something.

Alex: I think that's only in Space.

Dante: There's plenty of space. Oh, I wish I'd brought him with me. I miss that befuddled look in his eyes. You know, I've had him for twenty-one years, and he still doesn't recognize me.

Alex: Twenty-one years?

Dante: Yes. Since I was four.

Alex: I don't think goldfish live that long.

Dante: Oh no. Not if you take good care of them. We take the worst care of poor Pavarotti. My parents barely remember to feed him. And they haven't changed the water in his bowl since the day we got him.

Alex: Why?

Dante: Well, they're very forgetful sadists. I think the miserable conditions forced him to adapt to his environment and evolve into some kind of indestructible *uberfish*. Does that make sense?

Alex: (*pause*) Yeah.

Dante: Good.

They stand in an awkward silence, looking at each other.

Alex: Danny.

Dante: Yes?

Alex: Will you get offended if I point out the obvious?

Dante: Yes, but go ahead.

Alex: You're dressed as a centipede.

Dante: Yes.

Alex: Consciously?

Dante: Yes.

Alex: Deliberately?

Dante: Absolutely.

Alex: Is it a political statement?

Dante: No.

Alex: A social commentary?

Dante: Nothing of the sort.

Alex: Are you a fan of Kafka?

Dante: Who?

Alex: Hm. (*beat*) You just like centipedes?

Dante: Oh god no, I'm terrified of them. Just the sight of my reflection in that mirror

gives me severe heart palpitations.

Alex: Then why -

Dante: (*stands up*) Let me tell you! Yesterday, you and I began a new chapter in our lives by boarding this train. Correct?

Alex: In theory.

Dante: We don't know what's going to happen. Right?

Alex: Most likely.

Dante: Well, I have decided to start this journey by facing two of my biggest fears.

Alex: Okay?

Dante: Change.

Alex: Uh-huh.

Dante: And centipedes. (*pause*) Does that make sense?

Alex: (*thinking this through*) Yeah…. It does.

Dante: Really?

Alex: Yeah. (*pause*) But if you wanted to conquer your fear of centipedes, wouldn't it be more effective to put a live one in a jar and bring it with you, instead?

Dante: Oh no, that's too scary. (*goes to sit*)

Alex is left standing, quite confused. Dante picks up a newspaper and begins to read it. Alex notices a painting on the wall and examines it.

Alex: Man, that's an ugly painting. Why would they hang it in here?

Dante: It's not that bad. Take a closer look.

Alex: I don't want to. It's really bad. Can we take it down?

Dante: I don't think so.

Alex: Why not?

Dante: They went to all this effort to decorate this compartment for us. It wouldn't be nice.

Alex: Have you looked at it?

Dante: Yes.

Alex: Really looked at it?

Dante: Yes.

Alex: It's really ugly.

There is a short silence as they go about their business.

Dante: (*as he puts down his paper*) I know! Why don't we get to know each other a little better by playing 20 questions.

Alex: I don't really feel like playing games.

Dante: Why not?

Alex: I have a lot on my mind.

Dante: Such as?

Alex: Well, it's been an overwhelming few months, and now this painting…

Dante: There, see. That was two questions. See how easy it is to play? And I feel closer to you already.

Alex: -

Dante: Your turn. Ask me a question. Anything you like. Go ahead.

Alex: I can't think of anything to ask.

Dante: Oh, just say the first thing that pops into your mind.

Alex: -

Dante: But phrase it like a question.

Alex: Um okay. What's your favourite colour?

Dante's expression turns sour.

Dante: That's it? *That's* your question?

Alex: You said to ask the first thing that comes into my mind.

Dante: Yes, but not *that.*

Alex: Why not? It's a perfectly adequate question.

Dante: What could you *possibly* expect to learn about me from my favourite colour?

Alex: I told you, I didn't want to play.

Dante: Ask me about my political views. Ask me about my my religious views! Ask what I had for breakfast yesterday!

Alex: How is *that* more relevant to your personality than your favourite colour?

Dante: Well, if you had asked me, you would learn that I didn't have breakfast yesterday morning. Not because I don't believe in breakfast - I love it. I have it everyday - but because I had been up late the night before, too nervous to fall asleep. I knew that in the morning I would be embarking on the most terrifying journey of my life. When I did fall asleep eventually, I overslept and didn't have time for breakfast.

Alex and Dante stare at each other in silence for a few beats.

Alex: I'm scared too.

Dante: It's chartreuse.

Alex: What?

Dante: My favourite colour is chartreuse.

Alex: Is that like…yellow?

Dante: More of a light green.

Alex: I feel closer to you already.

Dante: Don't be absurd.

Alex: I need some air.

Dante: It's all around you.

Alex: Fresh air.

Dante: We're on a train.

Alex: Can we open a window?

Dante: They're sealed shut. Weren't you listening when they gave us instructions?

Alex: I tried to, but the lady had a big piece of spinach in her teeth, so I couldn't focus on what she was saying.

Dante: You ignored instructions that could potentially save your life because of a piece of spinach?

Alex: It was distracting!

Dante: Unbelievable.

Alex: I mean, I tried to focus on her words, but then I found myself concentrating so hard on trying to concentrate that I still couldn't hear what she was saying. Isn't it weird when that happens?

Dante: That doesn't happen to me.

Alex: Yes it does. It happens to everyone.

Dante: Just because some things that happen to you happen to everyone else, doesn't mean that everything that happens to you happens to everyone else.

Alex: Yes, but this is one of the things that happens to me *and* everyone else.

Dante: Don't generalize your experiences Alex, it's very presumptuous.

Alex: Presumptuous?!

Dante: I'm glad you agree.

Beat.

Alex: How much longer?

Dante: Till what?

Alex: Till we get there.

Dante: 5 and a half days.

Alex: 5 and a half days?

Dante: 132 hours

Alex: Hm.

Dante: How much is that in seconds?

Alex: Too much.

Dante: Not really. If we consider that there are sixty minutes in an hour and sixty seconds in a minute, we would just have to….

Alex: Danny!

Dante: What?

Alex: How about we play some music instead?

Dante: Instead of what?

Alex: That.

Dante: That what?

Alex: Counting.

Dante: You don't want to count?

Alex: No.

Dante: Do you know how to count?

Alex: Of course I know how to count.

Dante: Then why don't you want to?

Alex: Why should I?

Dante: It's fun.

Alex: It's boring.

Dante: It's exciting!

Alex: It's annoying.

Dante: You're very irritable.

Alex: And you're very chatty.

Dante: I'm just trying to be polite.

Alex: Well stop.

Dante: Fine. (*beat*) What's the farthest you've gotten by counting?

Alex: Ugh!

Dante: I've gotten to 3,562,000,000,424. Took me three weeks.

Alex: How about that music?

Dante: Fine. Let's not get to know each other.

Alex: Fine by me.

Dante: Even though we're all we have.

Alex: What are you talking about?

Dante: When we get off this train -

Alex: If we get off this train.

Dante: When and if we get off this train -

Alex: If it doesn't blow up.

Dante: Or derail.

Alex: Or disintegrate.

Dante: Or combust!

Alex: What were you saying?

Dante: If we live -

Alex: Big if.

Dante: Perhaps.

Alex: Unlikely.

Dante: Are you out of adverbs yet?

Alex: I've got a couple more.

Dante: Well, part with them now, so I can finish my thought.

Alex: I'll save them for later.

Dante: As you wish.

Alex: Proceed.

Dante: If the train reaches its destination unharmed -

Alex: With us in it?

Dante: Also unharmed. (*Alex prepares to protest, so Dante finishes the rest in one breath*) In the future, we will only be able to rely on each other because we come from the same past!

There is a long silence.

Alex: The song?

Dante: What song?

Alex: Any song.

*Dante begins to sing **Stayin' Alive** very badly.*

Alex: Not you!

Dante: Then who?

Alex: The radio!

Dante: What about it?

Alex: Play a song on the radio.

Dante: What song?

Alex: ANY SONG.

*Dante turns on the radio. **One Way Ticket** begins to play.*

Alex: Change it.

Dante: Why?

Alex: I don't like it.

Dante: You said "any song".

Alex: Not that song.

Dante: *Any* song.

Alex: Except for that one.

Dante: Alex, any means any. If you had objections to this song, you should have said, "Any song, except for that one".

Alex: Danny.

Dante: What?

Alex: Change the song.

Dante turns the dial, but each station plays the same song.

Alex: You're kidding.

Dante: It's a popular song.

Alex: It's ancient.

Dante: But relevant.

Alex: Change it.

Dante: I'm trying. It's on every station. The speed must be interfering with the signal.

Alex: How do you know that?

Dante: I don't.

Alex: Then why do you assume?

Dante: Well, it caused all of our other problems. Why not this one?

Alex: I don't know. I'm not a scientist.

Dante: And I'm not a philanthropist.

Alex: A what?

Dante: A foot doctor.

Alex: Are you sure?

Dante: Of course I'm sure. I speak English and I dislike feet.

Alex: You're dressed as a centipede.

There is a pause as Alex waits for Dante to get the joke. He doesn't.

Alex: No?

Dante: What?

Alex: Nevermind.

Dante: You're absurd.

*Dante goes back to changing the dials, but every station is still playing **One Way Ticket**.*

Alex: Turn it off!

Dante: Why?

Alex: It's getting on my nerves.

Dante: Why?

Alex: Don't start.

Dante: Start what?

Alex: That.

Dante: That what?

Alex: 20 questions.

Dante: We're not playing 20 questions.

Alex: I know.

Dante: So what's the problem?

Alex: The song.

Dante: What should we do about it?

Alex: Turn it off.

Dante: Good idea!

Dante turns off the song. There is a long silence. They each go about their business. Danny reads his newspaper. Alex stares at the painting. Time passes. Neither knows how long.

Alex: Danny?

Dante: Yes?

Alex: Are you aware that you're dressed as a centipede?

Dante: I think so.

Alex: Don't you want to check?

Dante: Oh no. I'm terrified of centipedes.

Alex: Then why did you dress like one?

Dante: I'm not dressed like one. Centipedes don't wear clothes. I'm dressed as one.

Alex: Why are you dressed *as* one?

Dante: This is a momentous time in my life, Alex.

Alex: And?

Dante: And what?

Alex: How does that justify dressing like a clown?

Dante: I'm not a clown. I'm a centipede.

Alex: No, you're dressed as one.

Dante: Yes.

Alex: Why?

Dante: Why what?

Alex: Are you comfortable?

Dante: Not at all.

Alex: Then why put yourself through the discomfort?

Dante: Out of principle.

Alex: But what's the point?

Dante: You know, you're awfully judgmental for someone who keeps staring at a painting they hate.

Alex: I'm trying to figure it out.

Dante: Well so am I.

Alex: What is there to figure out about a centipede costume?

Dante: What is there to figure out about an ugly painting?

Alex: Who says it's ugly?

Dante: You.

Alex: Well, I'm right.

Dante: Well, so am I.

Alex: That's debatable.

Dante: Would you like to debate it?

Alex: Not anymore.

Dante: You make no sense.

Alex: And you talk too much.

Alex goes back to contemplating the painting. Dante goes back to his newspaper. He has been staring at the same page the entire time and shows no sign of moving forward. More time passes. Perhaps a day, perhaps an hour. Nobody knows. Everybody cares.

Dante: Alex?

Alex: What?

Dante: Do you like people?

Alex: Which people?

Dante: No one in particular. Just people.

Alex: There are a lot of people.

Dante: And how do you feel about them?

Alex: I'm on this train with only you and I wish I was alone. Does that answer your question?

Dante: No. That tells me how you feel about me. Not people.

Alex: Are you not a person?

Dante: That depends.

Alex: On what?

Dante: Circumstances.

Alex: Of course. (*pause*) Do you?

Dante: Do I what?

Alex: Like people?

Dante: I don't know. That's why I'm asking you. I want to know what my options are.

Alex: That doesn't give you many options.

Dante: Do you think there will be more?

Alex: Options?

Dante: People.

Alex: When?

Dante: When we get there.

Alex: If.

Dante: When and if.

Alex: Hmph.

Dante gets up and goes to the place where a window would have been.

Dante: I wonder what it's like out there.

Alex: Where?

Dante: There. So much is happening as we speak, and we're completely cut off from it. We're missing so much.

Alex: I'm glad to skip it. It's the only reason I agreed to this trip.

Dante: How can you say that?

Alex: By moving my lips.

Dante: So you're not sad?

Alex: I'm frequently sad.

Dante: About what?

Alex: I don't know. A lot of things.

Dante: Such as?

Alex: I can't think of anything right now.

Dante: So you're not sad.

Alex tries to answer, but can't think of anything to say.

Dante: Have you tried being something other than sad?

Alex: Like what?

Dante: (*thrilled*) Like thrilled!

Alex: What do I have to be thrilled about?

Dante: You're traveling through time.

Alex: So?

Dante: So?! Doesn't that make you feel anything?

Alex: It makes me sad!

Dante: Why?

Alex: Because I have nothing to lose.

Dante: Except your life!

Beat.

Alex: Maybe we should try the radio again.

*Dante turns on the radio. **One Way Ticket** starts to play.*

Alex: Turn it off!

Dante turns it off.

Dante: You're very fickle, you know.

Alex: And you talk too much.

They go about their business again, frustrated, but frustration soon, or maybe not so soon, gives way to boredom.

Alex: Danny?

Dante: What?

Alex: Are you still afraid of centipedes?

Dante turns and looks at his reflection in the small mirror on the wall. He turns back to Alex.

Dante: Yes.

Alex: Then why not take it off?

Dante: Because I'd be naked.

Alex: Didn't you pack a change of clothes?

Dante: I did.

Alex: Then why not take off the costume and change into your regular clothes?

Dante: I didn't bring them with me.

Alex: Why not?

Dante: Seven days is not that long.

Alex: Do you expect to wear the same thing for seven days without washing it?

Dante: Seven days is not that long. We're already almost halfway through them.

Alex: Doesn't feel that way.

Dante: How long do we have left?

Alex: I don't know. I lost count.

Dante: How could you have lost count so quickly?

Alex: I have nothing by which I can measure the passing of time.

Dante: Have you tried counting?

Alex: No.

Dante: It's an effective method. We could start now if you'd like.

Alex: I wouldn't like.

Dante: Did you bring a watch?

Alex: No.

Dante: A calendar?

Alex: What good is a calender if I don't know what time it is?

Dante: Well you would if you had brought a watch.

Alex: Well I didn't.

Dante: And whose fault is that?

Alex: Mine.

Dante: You shouldn't be so hard on yourself.

Alex: If you're so resourceful, why didn't you bring a watch?

Dante: I have no need to monitor time. I prefer to let it roam free and do as it pleases.

Alex: I didn't know you were a philosopher.

Dante: Oh, I'm not. I can't stand it. I merely speak what I observe.

Alex: Is that not what a philosopher does?

Dante: Good heavens, no. Philosophers observe then think. Then think and think some more, until they completely forget what they had initially observed. And then they speak. I prefer to take a more direct path.

Alex: How pragmatic of you.

Dante: Yes, I'd like to think so.

Alex: Hm.

There is a brief silence in which the two look at each other expectantly.

Dante: Well don't stop.

Alex: Stop what?

Dante: We almost had a real conversation going. Don't end it with "Hm". Respond.

Alex: Is "hm" not a response?

Dante: It's inadequate. Say something more substantial.

Alex: I have nothing substantial to add to what you said. How can I speak if I have nothing to say?

Dante: Argue the point.

Alex: But I agree with it.

Dante: It doesn't matter. Disagree for the sake of the argument!

Alex: What?

Dante: Choose the opposing view and defend it.

Alex: How can I argue for something I don't understand.

Dante: Oh, it's easy. Everybody does it.

Alex: How would I go about it?

Dante: Well, I said that I am not a philosopher because I don't think.

Alex: Aha?

Dante: So, naturally, the opposing view would be to say that I do think.

Alex: You do think.

Dante: No, I don't. I haven't thought about anything in years.

Alex: But you're thinking right now.

Dante notices that he's thinking.

Dante: My God, you're absolutely right! Do you hear it?

Alex: No, but I can see it in your face. You're definitely thinking.

Dante: I can't stop doing it. Oh this is dreadful. I *am* a philosopher.

Alex: (*pleased*) Does this mean that I won the argument?

Dante: I'm sorry did you just say something? I was distracted by my thoughts. They just keep rambling on and on. Though, I must admit, I'm very witty at times.

Alex: I've done it for as long as I can remember.

Dante: Don't you ever get tired of it?

Alex: No, I enjoy my own company.

Dante: I think that's a very conceited thing to say. And I agree with myself.

Alex: Well I disagree with both of you. Ultimately the only thing I have is the thinking voice in my head. I may as well get along with it.

Dante: I should never have taught you how to argue Now you won't stop doing it. This train can't handle two philosophers.

Alex: Do philosophers argue?

Dante: They do, but no one understands them.

Alex: Therefore we can't be philosophers, right? We argue and understand each other.

Dante: You understand me. I don't understand you. Therefore, you're the superior philosopher.

Alex: What is there not to understand?

Dante: Don't start. I must say, I'm not enjoying being a philosopher. It's very depressing, all this thinking. It makes me hungry. Is it lunch time yet?

Alex: How should I know? I don't keep track of time.

Dante: Since when?

Alex: Since I stepped on this train.

Dante: When was that?

Alex: A while ago.

Dante: Have we had lunch since then?

Alex: At least twice.

Dante: And at most?

Alex: More than that.

Dante: A philosopher and a logician. You must be starving.

Alex: I could eat.

They sit down to eat, but don't eat.

Alex: Look at that painting.

Dante looks up at the painting.

Alex: Isn't it ugly?

Dante: It's alright.

Alex: It looks like something out of a hotel room.

Dante: It brightens up the space.

Alex: I don't like it.

Dante: Alright.

Alex: It bothers me.

Dante: Then stop looking at it.

Alex: I can't. It's right there.

Dante: Just ignore it.

Alex: No. I want to look in the direction of that wall, but that hideous painting is on that wall. Therefore, I can't enjoy that wall.

Dante: Can't you enjoy another wall? There are at least three more in this compartment.

Alex: There aren't enough walls in the world to hide that painting from me.

Dante: Then take it down.

Alex: I can't.

Dante: Why not.

Alex: It feels wrong.

Dante: Wrong?

Alex: Inappropriate.

Dante: Why?

Alex: It's been here from the start. It's a part of this train.

Dante: Then cover it.

Alex: With what?

Dante: A coat.

Alex: A coat on that wall would look suspicious. Besides, I'll know that it's still there.

Dante: So what do you propose to do?

Alex stares at the painting intently. Dante looks back and forth between them, confused.

Alex: I don't know. But I don't like it.

Danny goes back to his paper. Alex continues to stare at the painting.

They sit down to eat, but don't eat. Alex picks up the newspaper and stares at it. Dante stares at the painting.

After a while Dante goes to stand in front of the painting.

Dante: You're right. It *is* an ugly painting.

Alex: It's not that bad.

Dante: You hated it.

Alex: I got used to it.

Dante: So it doesn't bother you anymore?

Alex: Oh it bothers me. I just got used to the feeling.

Dante: So, you tolerate it.

Alex: No.

Dante: You've accepted it as an intrinsic part of the train that you don't wish to change?

Alex: (*standing up and slowly moving toward Dante*)No, I'd take it down if I could.

Dante: Then why don't you?

Alex: I can't.

Dante: Would you like me to try?

Alex: You can try, but you probably won't succeed.

Dante moves closer to the painting.

Dante: It's not even a painting.

Alex: What do you mean? It's on the wall.

Dante: Yes, but it's not a painting.

Alex: How is it not a painting?

Dante: It's not made of paint.

Alex: Is that what constitutes a painting?

Dante: Yes. A painting is made of paint. This painting is not made of paint. Therefore it is not a painting.

Alex: Is that a syllogism?

Dante: I think it's more like a collage.

Alex: A collage?

Dante: A three-dimensional collage.

Alex: Which is different from a syllogism?

Dante: Yes.

Alex: Absolutely?

Dante: Indeed.

Alex: I don't mind it as much now that I know it's not a painting.

Dante: It's still is ugly.

Alex: For a painting.

Dante: And for a collage?

Alex: It's not that bad.

Dante: Quite well made, actually.

Alex: A creative piece of work.

Dante: Almost original.

Alex: I don't like the frame though.

Dante: It works with the flowers.

Alex: Ah. So there was thought put into it.

Dante: Therefore it's art.

Alex: Art is thought…

Dante: No. Art is *art*. *Thought* is thought.

Alex: Is *that* a syllogism?

Dante: No, that's a pronoun.

Alex: What's a pronoun?

Dante: Yes, and so is this.

Alex: No, *this* is a collage.

Dante: More or less.

Alex: More? Or less?

Dante: Not now, Alex. It's too early for that.

Alex: How can you know it's early if you don't know the time?

Dante: My stomach is empty. Which means it's either morning, afternoon, or evening. I choose to think it's morning.

Alex: A logician and an optimist.

Dante: Where? Oh, me? (*annoyed*) You're too kind.

Alex: (*equally annoyed*) Not at all.

Dante: (*angrily*)You're too modest!

Alex: (*more angrily*) And you talk too much!

Dante: (*very angrily*) Fine. (*beat during which he cools down*) Let's eat.

They sit down to eat. Neither eats. Dante picks up his newspaper. Alex looks at the floor, but eventually ends up staring at the painting again. Time passes.

Dante: Why are you looking at it again?

Alex: I don't know.

Dante: You know it's a collage.

Alex: It's an ugly collage.

Dante: You said you liked it.

Alex: I did.

Dante: So what's the problem?

Alex: It's ugly again.

Dante: Have you figured it out?

Alex: I think so.

Dante: And?

Alex: (*beat*) It's *really* ugly.

Dante rolls his eyes and goes back to his paper.

Alex: My…God!

Dante: Hm?

Alex: I've got it.

Dante: What?

Alex: I'm stupid.

Dante: Well, why do *you* think so?

Alex: Why did I agree to this?

Dante: What?

Alex: This.

Dante: This what?

Alex: This train. The future. It hasn't been tested before. Only an idiot would agree.

Dante: (*indifferently*)Yes, but you said you're stupid. Not an idiot.

Alex: What if it crashes? Or. What if it doesn't? What if we actually get there?

Dante: Alex, you're rambling.

Alex: Have you ever been to the future?

Dante: No, but -

Alex: We don't know what it's like. What if I hate it?

Dante: You won't.

Alex: What if I *like* it?

Dante: You won't.

Alex: I could barely live in my own time, how am I gonna keep up with theirs? I should have just killed myself.

Dante: Did the painting tell you that?

Alex: It's a collage.

Dante: Yes.

Alex: (*abruptly turns to Dante*) Why are *you* here?

Dante: I wanted to be here.

Alex: Why? To bug me?

Dante: That's a bad pun.

Alex: Stop criticizing!

Dante: Alex.

Alex: You smell bad.

Dante: Alex.

Alex: I want to go back.

Dante: Alex.

Alex: Stop the train.

Dante: Alex.

Alex: STOP THE TRAIN!

Dante: Alex.

Alex: What?

Dante: There's no going back. We're too far in. Might as well see it through.

Alex: How long has it been?

Dante: Not long enough. Here. Sit down. Don't look at the painting.

Alex: It's a collage.

Dante: Of course.

They sit down on Dante's bench. Alex picks up the photo of Pavarotti and examines it.

Alex: Danny.

Dante: What?

Alex: Why is Pavarotti floating on his side?

Dante: He's been doing that for years. It's his thing.

Alex: And you don't feed him or change his water?

Dante: That's what I said.

Alex: (*with a slow realization*) He hasn't evolved. He's dead.

Dante: I guess you could say that.

Alex: Pavarotti is dead.

Dante: Yes.

Alex: Pavarotti is dead!

Dante: I heard you the first time.

Alex: PAVAROTTI IS DEAD!

Dante: Pavarotti is dead.

Alex: You didn't take care of him.

Dante: No.

Alex: You didn't take care of him and now he's dead.

Dante: That's right.

Alex: You said he'd evolved, but he's dead.

Dante: Quite dead.

Alex: And you kept him in the bowl.

Dante: He's probably still there.

Alex: And you took a photo of him while he was dead!

Dante: It's a good photo.

Alex: Are you insane?

Dante: Don't be ridiculous.

Alex: HE'S DEAD!

Dante: (*indifferently*) Alex, you're not more sensitive than me. Don't pretend.

Alex: Let me out.

Dante: What?

Alex: Let me *out,* I can't see!

Dante: See what?

Alex starts pounding against the walls of the train.

Alex: LET ME OUT!

Dante: Alex.

Alex: I don't want to go!

Dante: Alex, please. I can't read with you yelling like that.

Alex: Stop the train!

Dante: They won't.

Alex: I want to go back!

Dante: They can't hear you.

Alex: Let me out!!!!

Dante: (*matter of factly*) Alex. He's been dead since we got him.

Alex: Who?

Dante: The fish.

Alex: Pavarotti.

Dante: Yes.

Alex: Why?

Dante: Well, otherwise he would have died.

Alex: You didn't take care of him.

Dante: We didn't have to. And with any luck he'll be waiting for us when we get there.

Alex: You think he's okay.

Dante: Of course. He's as dead as he ever was.

Alex sits down on the far end of the bench, not looking at Dante. Dante looks at Alex with uncertainty.

Dante: Alex? Does that make sense?

Alex looks up at Dante and studies him for a moment.

Alex: (*with a weary, but confident smile*) No, Dante. It doesn't make sense.

Beat. Dante stands up. He opens his mouth to say something, but before he can, the train jolts. The lights go off.

Repeat the play from the top.

The actor portraying Alex is swapped with an actor of the opposite sex.

The play is to be performed as identically as possible both times.

2) <u>Abriged Focus Group Performance Script</u>

Syzygy

(abridged)

By Noemi Akopian

Dramatis Personae:

Alex - has questions

Dante - provides answers

Location:

Aboard a train that circles the planet at almost light-speed. The train is set to travel 100 years into the future in what will only feel like 7 days to its passengers.

Day 2.

Time:

Far enough into the future for it to be possible.

Props.

Two benches

A small mirror on wall

Heavy curtains covering what would have been windows on both walls.

Two newspapers

A painting

A photo of a goldfish

A small radio

Act One

*Dante is seated on a bench R. in a train compartment, staring at a newspaper. He truns on the radio. **One Way Ticket** by Boney M begins to play. Enter Alex, who sits on bench L. and looks at were the windows of the train would have been.*

Alex: For fuck's sake, is the song *really* necessary?

Dante: It sets the tone.

Alex: Turn it off!

*Dante turns off the radio. **One Way Ticket** stops playing.*

Alex: Danny?

Dante: Please. Dante.

Alex: But yesterday you said I could call you Danny.

Dante: That was yesterday. I've changed since then.

Alex: You have?

Dante: Ohoho in many ways.

Alex: You look the same to me.

Dante: I assure you I am a completely different person. So different, in fact, that we should probably reintroduce ourselves.

Alex: I don't see why that's necessary.

Dante: Oh it is, believe me.

Alex: Danny….

Dante shoots Alex a disapproving look.

Alex: Sorry. Dante?

Dante: Yes. I am Dante. Like the poet.

Alex: Are you a poet?

Dante: Don't be silly. And you are?

Alex: Still Alex. Like…a lot of things.

Dante: Alex. I assume that's short for Alexand -

Alex: No. Just Alex.

Dante: Well, I'm named after Dante Alighieri. The poet.

They stand in an awkward silence, looking at each other.

Alex: Danny.

Dante: Yes?

Alex: Will you get offended if I point out the obvious?

Dante: Yes, but go ahead.

Alex: You're dressed as a centipede.

Dante: Yes.

Alex: Consciously?

Dante: Yes.

Alex: Deliberately?

Dante: Absolutely.

Alex: Is it a political statement?

Dante: No.

Alex: A social commentary?

Dante: Nothing of the sort.

Alex: Are you a fan of Kafka?

Dante: Who?

Alex: Hm. (*beat*) You just like centipedes?

Dante: Oh god no, I'm terrified of them. Just the sight of my reflection in that mirror gives me severe heart palpitations.

Alex: Then why -

Dante: (*stands up*) Let me tell you! Yesterday, you and I began a new chapter in our lives by boarding this train. Correct?

Alex: In theory.

Dante: We don't know what's going to happen. Right?

Alex: Most likely.

Dante: Well, I have decided to start this journey by facing two of my biggest fears.

Alex: Okay?

Dante: Change.

Alex: Uh-huh.

Dante: And centipedes. (*pause*) Does that make sense?

Alex: (*thinking this through*) Yeah…. It does.

Dante: Really?

Alex: Yeah. (*pause*) But if you wanted to conquer your fear of centipedes, wouldn't it be more effective to put a live one in a jar and bring it with you, instead?

Dante: Oh no, that's too scary. (*goes to sit*)

Alex is left standing, quite confused. Dante picks up a newspaper and begins to read it. Alex notices a painting on the wall and examines it.

Alex: Man, that's an ugly painting. Why would they hang it in here?

Dante: It's not that bad. Take a closer look.

Alex: I don't want to. It's really bad. Can we take it down?

Dante: I don't think so.

Alex: Why not?

Dante: They went to all this effort to decorate this compartment for us. It wouldn't be nice.

Alex: Have you looked at it?

Dante: Yes.

Alex: Really looked at it?

Dante: Yes.

Alex: It's really ugly.

There is a short silence as they go about their business.

Dante: (*as he puts down his paper*) I know! Why don't we get to know each other a little better by playing 20 questions.

Alex: I don't really feel like playing games.

Dante: Why not?

Alex: I have a lot on my mind.

Dante: Such as?

Alex: Well, it's been an overwhelming few months, and now this painting…

Dante: There, see. That was two questions. See how easy it is to play? And I feel closer to you already.

Alex: -

Dante: Your turn. Ask me a question. Anything you like. Go ahead.

Alex: I can't think of anything to ask.

Dante: Oh, just say the first thing that pops into your mind.

Alex: -

Dante: But phrase it like a question.

Alex: Um okay. What's your favourite colour?

Dante's expression turns sour.

Dante: That's it? *That's* your question?

Alex: You said to ask the first thing that comes into my mind.

Dante: Yes, but not *that.*

Alex: Why not? It's a perfectly adequate question.

Dante: What could you *possibly* expect to learn about me from my favourite colour?

Alex: I told you, I didn't want to play.

Dante: Ask me about my political views. Ask me about my my religious views! Ask what I had for breakfast yesterday!

Alex: How is *that* more relevant to your personality than your favourite colour?

Dante: Well, if you had asked me, you would learn that I didn't have breakfast yesterday morning. Not because I don't believe in breakfast - I love it. I have it everyday - but because I had been up late the night before, too nervous to fall asleep. I knew that in the morning I would be embarking on the most terrifying journey of my life. When I did fall asleep eventually, I overslept and didn't have time for breakfast.

Alex and Dante stare at each other in silence for a few beats.

Alex: I'm scared too.

Dante: It's chartreuse.

Alex: What?

Dante: My favourite colour is chartreuse.

Alex: Is that like…yellow?

Dante: More of a light green.

Alex: I feel closer to you already.

Dante: Don't be absurd.

Alex: I need some air.

Dante: It's all around you.

Alex: Fresh air.

Dante: We're on a train.

Alex: Can we open a window?

Dante: They're sealed shut. Weren't you listening when they gave us instructions?

Alex: I tried to, but the lady had a big piece of spinach in her teeth, so I couldn't focus on what she was saying.

Dante: You ignored instructions that could potentially save your life because of a piece of spinach?

Alex: It was distracting!

Dante: Unbelievable.

Alex: I mean, I tried to focus on her words, but then I found myself concentrating so hard on trying to concentrate that I still couldn't hear what she was saying. Isn't it weird when that happens?

Dante: That doesn't happen to me.

Alex: Yes it does. It happens to everyone.

Dante: Just because some things that happen to you happen to everyone else, doesn't mean that everything that happens to you happens to everyone else.

Alex: Yes, but this is one of the things that happens to me *and* everyone else.

Dante: Don't generalize your experiences Alex, it's very presumptuous.

Alex: Presumptuous?!

Dante: I'm glad you agree.

They go about their business again, frustrated, but frustration soon, or maybe not so soon, gives way to boredom.

Alex: Danny?

Dante: What?

Alex: Are you still afraid of centipedes?

Dante turns and looks at his reflection in the small mirror on the wall. He turns back to Alex.

Dante: Yes.

Alex: Then why not take it off?

Dante: Because I'd be naked.

Alex: Didn't you pack a change of clothes?

Dante: I did.

Alex: Then why not take off the costume and change into your regular clothes?

Dante: I didn't bring them with me.

Alex: Why not?

Dante: Seven days is not that long.

Alex: Do you expect to wear the same thing for seven days without washing it?

Dante: Seven days is not that long. We're already almost halfway through them.

Alex: Doesn't feel that way.

Dante: How long do we have left?

Alex: I don't know. I lost count.

Dante: How could you have lost count so quickly?

Alex: I have nothing by which I can measure the passing of time.

Dante: Have you tried counting?

Alex: No.

Dante: It's an effective method. We could start now if you'd like.

Alex: I wouldn't like.

Dante: Did you bring a watch?

Alex: No.

Dante: A calendar?

Alex: What good is a calender if I don't know what time it is?

Dante: Well you would if you had brought a watch.

Alex: Well I didn't.

Dante: And whose fault is that?

Alex: Mine.

Dante: You shouldn't be so hard on yourself.

Alex: If you're so resourceful, why didn't you bring a watch?

Dante: I have no need to monitor time. I prefer to let it roam free and do as it pleases.

Alex: I didn't know you were a philosopher.

Dante: Oh, I'm not. I can't stand it. I merely speak what I observe.

Alex: Is that not what a philosopher does?

Dante: Good heavens, no. Philosophers observe then think. Then think and think some more, until they completely forget what they had initially observed. And then they speak. I prefer to take a more direct path.

Alex: How pragmatic of you.

Dante: Yes, I'd like to think so.

Alex: Hm.

There is a brief silence in which the two look at each other expectantly.

Dante: Well don't stop.

Alex: Stop what?

Dante: We almost had a real conversation going. Don't end it with "Hm". Respond.

Alex: Is "hm" not a response?

Dante: It's inadequate. Say something more substantial.

Alex: I have nothing substantial to add to what you said. How can I speak if I have nothing to say?

Dante: Argue the point.

Alex: But I agree with it.

Dante: It doesn't matter. Disagree for the sake of the argument!

Alex: What?

Dante: Choose the opposing view and defend it.

Alex: How can I argue for something I don't understand.

Dante: Oh, it's easy. Everybody does it.

Alex: How would I go about it?

Dante: Well, I said that I am not a philosopher because I don't think.

Alex: Aha?

Dante: So, naturally, the opposing view would be to say that I do think.

Alex: You do think.

Dante: No, I don't. I haven't thought about anything in years.

Alex: But you're thinking right now.

Dante notices that he's thinking.

Dante: My God, you're absolutely right! Do you hear it?

Alex: No, but I can see it in your face. You're definitely thinking.

Dante: I can't stop doing it. Oh this is dreadful. I *am* a philosopher.

Alex: (*pleased*) Does this mean that I won the argument?

Dante: I'm sorry did you just say something? I was distracted by my thoughts. They just keep rambling on and on. Though, I must admit, I'm very witty at times.

Alex: I've done it for as long as I can remember.

Dante: Don't you ever get tired of it?

Alex: No, I enjoy my own company.

Dante: I think that's a very conceited thing to say. And I agree with myself.

Alex: Well I disagree with both of you. Ultimately the only thing I have is the thinking voice in my head. I may as well get along with it.

Dante: I should never have taught you how to argue Now you won't stop doing it. This train can't handle two philosophers.

Alex: Do philosophers argue?

Dante: They do, but no one understands them.

Alex: Therefore we can't be philosophers, right? We argue and understand each other.

Dante: You understand me. I don't understand you. Therefore, you're the superior philosopher.

Alex: What is there not to understand?

Dante: Don't start. I must say, I'm not enjoying being a philosopher. It's very depressing, all this thinking. It makes me hungry. Is it lunch time yet?

Alex: How should I know? I don't keep track of time.

Dante: Since when?

Alex: Since I stepped on this train.

Dante: When was that?

Alex: A while ago.

Dante: Have we had lunch since then?

Alex: At least twice.

Dante: And at most?

Alex: More than that.

Dante: A philosopher and a logician. You must be starving.

Alex: I could eat.

They sit down to eat, but don't eat. Alex picks up the newspaper and stares at it. Dante stares at the painting.

After a while Dante goes to stand in front of the painting.

Dante: You're right. It *is* an ugly painting.

Alex: It's not that bad.

Dante: You hated it.

Alex: I got used to it.

Dante: So it doesn't bother you anymore?

Alex: Oh it bothers me. I just got used to the feeling.

Dante: So, you tolerate it.

Alex: No.

Dante: You've accepted it as an intrinsic part of the train that you don't wish to change?

Alex: (*standing up and slowly going toward Dante*) No, I'd take it down if I could.

Dante: Then why don't you?

Alex: I can't.

Dante: Would you like me to try?

Alex: You can try, but you probably won't succeed.

Dante moves closer to the painting.

Dante: It's not even a painting.

Alex: What do you mean? It's on the wall.

Dante: Yes, but it's not a painting.

Alex: How is it not a painting?

Dante: It's not made of paint.

Alex: Is that what constitutes a painting?

Dante: Yes. A painting is made of paint. This painting is not made of paint. Therefore it is not a painting.

Alex: Is that a syllogism?

Dante: I think it's more like a collage.

Alex: A collage?

Dante: A three-dimensional collage.

Alex: Which is different from a syllogism?

Dante: Yes.

Alex: Absolutely?

Dante: Indeed.

Alex: I don't mind it as much now that I know it's not a painting.

Dante: It's still is ugly.

Alex: For a painting.

Dante: And for a collage?

Alex: It's not that bad.

Dante: Quite well made, actually.

Alex: A creative piece of work.

Dante: Almost original.

Alex: I don't like the frame though.

Dante: It works with the flowers.

Alex: Ah. So there was thought put into it.

Dante: Therefore it's art.

Alex: Art is thought?

Dante: No. Art is *art*. *Thought* is thought.

Alex: Is *that* a syllogism?

Dante: No, that's a pronoun.

Alex: What's a pronoun?

Dante: Yes, and so is this.

Alex: No, *this* is a collage.

Dante: More or less.

Alex: More? Or less?

Dante: Not now, Alex. It's too early for that.

Alex: How can you know it's early if you don't know the time?

Dante: My stomach is empty. Which means it's either morning, afternoon, or evening. I choose to think it's morning.

Alex: A logician and an optimist.

Dante: Where? Oh, me? (*annoyed*) You're too kind.

Alex: (*equally annoyed*) Not at all.

Dante: (*angrily*)You're too modest!

Alex: (*more angrily*) And you talk too much!

Dante: (*very angrily*) Fine. (*beat during which he cools down*) Let's eat.

They sit down to eat. Neither eats. Dante picks up his newspaper. Alex stares straight ahead, but eventually ends up staring at the painting again. Time passes.

Dante: Why are you looking at it again?

Alex: I don't know.

Dante: You know it's a collage.

Alex: It's an ugly collage.

Dante: You said you liked it.

Alex: I did.

Dante: So what's the problem?

Alex: It's ugly again.

Dante: Have you figured it out?

Alex: I think so.

Dante: And?

Alex: (*beat*) It's *really* ugly.

Dante rolls his eyes and goes back to his paper. Exit Alex.

Repeat the play from the top.

The actor portraying Alex is swapped with an actor of the opposite sex.

The play is to be performed as identically as possible both times.

3) <u>Syzygy First Draft</u>

Syzygy

By Noemi Akopian

Dramatis Personae:

Alex - has questions

Dante - provides answers

Location:

Aboard a train that circles the planet at almost light-speed. The train is set to travel 100 years into the future in what will only feel like 7 days to its passengers.

Day 2.

Time:

Far enough into the future for it to be possible.

Props.

Two benches

A small mirror on wall R.

Heavy curtains covering what would have been windows on both walls.

A newspaper

A painting on wall L

A photo of a goldfish

A small radio

Act One

The stage is dark. There is the faint whooshing noise of something moving very fast through space. It is present throughout the performance.

There is a loud crashing noise as Alex and Dante trip over each other in the dark and collide with the objects on stage, one of which is the radio. **One Way Ticket** *by Boney M begins to play as they attempt to get up and sort themselves out.*

Alex: For fuck's sake, is the song really necessary?!

Dante: It sets the tone.

A: Turn it off!

D: I can't see where it is.

A: What's this?

D: That's my foot.

A: The real one?

D: Probably.

A: Turn it off!

D: My foot?

A: The song!

D: Wait. Got it!

The song stops. The lights come up.

Alex and Dante are on the floor. Dante is dressed as a centipede, holding the radio in his hands. Alex is dressed in simple everyday clothes. They shield their eyes from the sudden light.

A: What happened?

D: The lights went out.

A: Yes, but why?

D: The speed probably caused a minor power fluctuation.

A: Minor?

D: Or major.

He puts the radio on a bench on stage right.

A: Danny?

Dante: Please. Dante.

Alex: But yesterday you said I could call you Danny.

Dante: That was yesterday. I've changed since then.

Alex: You have?

Dante: Ohoho in many ways.

Alex: You look the same to me.

Dante: I assure you I am a completely different person. So different, in fact, that we should probably reintroduce ourselves.

Alex: I don't see why that's necessary.

Dante: Oh it is, believe me.

Alex: Danny….

Dante shoots Alex a disapproving look.

Alex: Sorry. Dante?

Dante: Yes. I am Dante. Like the poet.

Alex: Are you a poet?

Dante: Don't be silly. And you are?

Alex: Still Alex. Like…a lot of things.

Dante: Alex. I assume that's short for Alexand -

Alex: No. Just Alex.

Dante: Are you sure? Just "Alex" seems so economical. Were your parents stingy with their breaths?

Alex: No. They just didn't believe in nicknames. "Why name it something if you're gonna call it something else?"

Dante: Really?

Alex: I don't know. I don't have parents.

Dante: Not even one?

Alex: None that I know of.

Dante: Any you don't know of?

Alex: I don't think so.

Dante: Is that why you're so unlovable?

Alex: Unlovable?

Dante: Yes.

Alex: Probably.

Dante: Well, I'm named after Dante Alighieri. The poet.

Dante stares at Alex expectantly.

Alex: Why?

Dante: Finally! I thought you'd never ask.

You see, my parents are obsessed with Italian culture. When my mother was pregnant, they played *Rigoletto* to her stomach on repeat. Non-stop. It was quite annoying. (*pause*) We even have a goldfish named Pavarotti.

Alex: I don't know how I would have survived the rest of the trip without that information.

Dante: Would you like to see a photograph of Pavarotti?

Alex: Not really.

Dante: I have one here.

He produces a photograph from inside his costume and looks at it admiringly.

D: Isn't he lovely?

A: Unremarkable.

D: Mmm, yes. I wanted to bring him along, but they don't allow pets on the train. The speed might cause their internal organs to implode or something.

A: I think that's only in Space.

D: There's plenty of space. Oh, I wish I'd brought him with me. I miss that befuddled look in his eyes. You know, I've had him for twenty-one years, and he still doesn't recognize me.

A: Twenty-one years?

D: Yes. Since I was four.

A: I don't think goldfish live that long.

D: Oh no. Not if you take good care of them. We take the worst care of poor Pavarotti. My parents barely remember to feed him. And they haven't changed the water in his bowl since the day we got him.

A: Why?

D: Well, they're very forgetful sadists. I think the miserable conditions forced him to adapt to his environment and evolve into some kind of indestructible *uberfish*. Does that make sense?

A: (*pause*) Yeah.

D: Good.

They stand in an awkward silence, looking at each other.

A: Danny.

D: Yes?

A: Will you get offended if I point out the obvious?

D: Yes, but go ahead.

A: You're dressed as a centipede.

D: Yes.

A: Consciously?

D: Yes.

A: Deliberately?

D: Absolutely.

A: Is it a political statement?

D: No.

A: A social commentary?

D: Nothing of the sort.

A: You just like centipedes?

Dante: Oh god no, I'm terrified of them. Just the sight of my reflection in that mirror gives me severe heart palpitations.

Alex: Then why -

Dante: (*stands up*) Let me tell you! Yesterday, you and I began a new chapter in our lives by boarding this train. Correct?

Alex: In theory.

Dante: We don't know what's going to happen. Right?

Alex: Most likely.

Dante: Well, I have decided to start this journey by facing two of my biggest fears.

Alex: Okay?

Dante: The Unknown.

Alex: Uh-huh.

Dante: And centipedes. (*pause*) Does that make sense?

Alex: (*thinking this through*) Yeah…. It does.

Dante: Really?

Alex: Yeah. (*pause*) But if you wanted to conquer your fear of centipedes, wouldn't it be more effective to put a live one in a jar and bring it with you, instead?

Dante: Oh no, that's too scary. (*goes to sit*)

Alex is left standing, quite confused. Dante picks up a newspaper and begins to read it. Alex notices a painting on the wall and examines it.

A: Man, that's an ugly painting. Why would they hang it in here?

D: It's not that bad. Take a closer look.

A: I don't want to. It's really bad. Can we take it down?

D: I don't think so.

A: Why not?

D: They went to all this effort to decorate this compartment for us. It wouldn't be nice.

A: Have you looked at it?

D: Yes.

A: Really looked at it?

D: Yes.

A: It's really ugly.

There is a short silence as they go about their business.

D: (*as he puts down his paper*) I know! Why don't we get to know each other a little better by playing 20 questions.

A: I don't really feel like playing games.

D: Why not?

A: I have a lot on my mind.

D: Such as?

A: Well, it's been an overwhelming few months, and now this painting…

D: There, see. That was two questions. See how how easy it is to play? And I feel closer to you already.

A: -

D: Your turn. Ask me a question. Anything you like. Go ahead.

A: I can't think of anything to ask.

D: Oh, just say the first thing that pops into your mind.

A: -

D: But phrase it like a question.

A: Um okay. What's your favourite colour?

Dante's expression turns sour.

D: That's it? *That's* your question?

A: You said to ask the first thing that comes into my mind.

D: Yes, but not *that.*

A: Why not? It's a perfectly adequate question.

D: What could you *possibly* expect to learn about me from my favourite colour?

A: I told you, I didn't want to play.

D: Ask me about my political views. Ask me about my my religious views! Ask what I had for breakfast yesterday!

A: How is *that* more relevant to your personality than your favourite colour?

D: Well, if you had asked me, you would learn that I didn't have breakfast yesterday morning. Not because I don't believe in breakfast - I love it. I have it everyday - but because I had been up late the night before, too nervous to fall asleep. I knew that in the morning I would be embarking on the most terrifying journey of my life. When I did fall asleep eventually, I overslept and didn't have time for breakfast.

Alex and Dante stare at each other in silence for a few beats.

A: I'm scared too.

D: It's chartreuse.

A: What?

D: My favourite colour is chartreuse.

A: Is that like…yellow?

D: More of a light green.

A: I feel closer to you already.

D: Don't be absurd.

A: I need some air.

D: It's all around you.

A: Fresh air.

D: We're on a train.

A: Can we open a window?

D: They're sealed shut. Weren't you listening when they gave us instructions?

A: I tried to, but the lady had a big piece of spinach in her teeth, so I couldn't focus on what she was saying.

D: You ignored instructions that could potentially save your life because of a piece of spinach?

A: It was distracting!

D: Unbelievable.

A: I mean, I tried to focus on her words, but then I found myself concentrating so hard on trying to concentrate that I still couldn't hear what she was saying. Isn't it weird when that happens?

D: That doesn't happen to me.

A: Yes it does. It happens to everyone.

D: Just because some things that happen to you happen to everyone else, doesn't mean that everything happens you happens to everyone else.

A: Yes, but this is one of the things that happens to me *and* everyone else.

D: Don't generalize your experiences Alex, it's very presumptuous.

A: Presumptuous?!

D: I'm glad you agree.

Beat.

A: How much longer?

D: Till what?

A: Till we get there.

D: 5 and a half days.

A: 5 and a half days?

D: 132 hours

A: Hm.

D: How much is that in seconds?

A: Too much.

D: Not really. If we consider that there are sixty minutes in an hour and sixty seconds in a minute, we would just have to….

A: Danny!

D: What?

A: How about we play some music instead?

D: Instead of what?

A: That.

D: That what?

A: Counting.

D: You don't want to count?

A: No.

D: Do you know how to count?

A: Of course I know how to count.

D: Then why don't you want to?

A: Why should I?

D: It's fun.

A: It's boring.

D: It's exciting!

A: It's annoying.

D: You're very irritable.

A: And you're very chatty.

D: I'm just trying to be polite.

A: Well stop.

D: Fine. (*beat*) What's the farthest you've gotten by counting?

A: Ugh!

D: I've gotten to 3,562,000,000,424. Took me three weeks.

A: How about that music?

D: Fine. Let's not get to know each other.

A: Fine by me.

D: Even though we're all we have.

A: What are you talking about?

D: When we get off this train -

A: If we get off this train.

D: When and if we get off this train -

A: If it doesn't blow up.

D: Or derail.

A: Or disintegrate.

D: Or combust!

A: What were you saying?

D: If we live -

A: Big if.

D: Perhaps.

A: Unlikely.

D: Are you out of adverbs yet?

A: I've got a couple more.

D: Well, part with them now, so I can finish my thought.

A: I'll save them for later.

D: As you wish.

A: Proceed.

D: If the train reaches its destination unharmed -

A: With us in it?

D: Also unharmed. (*Alex prepares to protest, so Dante finishes the rest in one breath*) In the future, we will only be able to rely on each other because we come from the same past!

There is a long silence.

A: The song?

D: What song?

A: Any song.

*Dante begins to sing **Stayin' Alive** very badly.*

A: Not you!

D: Then who?

A: The radio!

D: What about it?

A: Play a song on the radio.

D: What song?

A: ANY SONG.

*Dante turns on the radio. **One Way Ticket** begins to play.*

A: Change it.

D: Why?

A: I don't like it.

D: You said "any song".

A: Not that song.

D: *Any* song.

A: Except for that one.

D: Alex, any means any. If you had objections to this song, you should have said, "Any song, except for that one".

A: Danny.

D: What?

A: Change the song.

Dante turns the dial, but each station plays the same song.

A: You're kidding.

D: It's a popular song.

A: It's ancient.

D: But relevant.

A: Change it.

D: I'm trying. It's on every station. The speed must be interfering with the signal.

A: How do you know that?

D: I don't.

A: Then why do you assume?

D: Well, it caused all of our other problems. Why not this one?

A: I don't know. I'm not a scientist.

D: And I'm not a philanthropist.

A: A what?

D: A foot doctor.

A: Are you sure?

D: Of course I'm sure. I speak English and I dislike feet.

A: You're dressed as a centipede.

There is a pause as Alex waits for Dante to get the joke. He doesn't.

A: No?

D: What?

A: Nevermind.

D: You're absurd.

*Dante goes back to changing the dials, but every station is still playing **One Way Ticket**.*

A: Turn it off!

D: Why?

A: It's getting on my nerves.

D: Why?

A: Don't start.

D: Start what?

A: That.

D: That what?

A: 20 questions.

D: We're not playing 20 questions.

A: I know.

D: So what's the problem?

A: The song.

D: What should we do about it?

A: Turn it off.

D: Good idea!

Dante turns off the song. There is a long silence. They each go about their business. Danny reads his newspaper. Alex stares at the painting. Time passes. Neither knows how long.

A: Danny?

D: Yes?

A: Are you aware that you're dressed as a centipede?

D: I think so.

A: Don't you want to check?

D: Oh no. I'm terrified of centipedes.

A: Then why did you dress like one?

D: I'm not dressed like one. Centipedes don't wear clothes. I'm dressed as one.

A: Why are you dressed *as* one?

D: This is a momentous time in my life, Alex.

A: And?

D: And what?

A: How does that justify dressing like a clown?

D: I'm not a clown. I'm a centipede.

A: No, you're dressed as one.

D: Yes.

A: Why?

D: Why what?

A: Are you comfortable?

D: Not at all.

A: Then why put yourself through the discomfort?

D: Out of principle.

A: But what's the point?

D: You know, you're awfully judgemental for someone who keeps staring at a painting they hate.

A: I'm trying to figure it out.

D: Well so am I.

A: What is there to figure out about a centipede costume?

D: What is there to figure out about an ugly painting?

A: Who says it's ugly?

D: You.

A: Well, I'm right.

D: Well, so am I.

A: That's debatable.

D: Would you like to debate it?

A: Not anymore.

D: You make no sense.

A: And you talk too much.

Alex goes back to contemplating the painting. Dante goes back to his newspaper. He has been staring at the same page the entire time and shows no sign of moving forward. More time passes. Perhaps a day, perhaps an hour. Nobody knows. Everybody cares.

D: Alex?

A: What?

D: Do you like people?

A: Which people?

D: No one in particular. Just people.

A: There are a lot of people.

D: And how do you feel about them?

A: I'm on this train with only you and I wish I was alone. Does that answer your question?

D: No. That tells me how you feel about me. Not people.

A: Are you not a person?

D: That depends.

A: On what?

D: Circumstances.

A: Of course. (*pause*) Do you?

D: Do I what?

A: Like people?

D: I don't know. That's why I'm asking you. I want to know what my options are.

A: That doesn't give you many options.

D: Do you think there will be more?

A: Options?

D: People.

A: When?

D: When we get there.

A: If.

D: When and if.

A: Hmph.

Dante gets up and goes to the place where a window would have been.

D: I wonder what it's like out there.

A: Where?

D: There. So much is happening as we speak, and we're completely cut off from it. We're missing so much.

A: I'm glad to skip it. It's the only reason I agreed to this trip.

D: How can you say that?

A: By moving my lips.

D: So you're not sad?

A: I'm frequently sad.

D: About what?

A: I don't know. A lot of things.

D: Such as?

A: I can't think of anything right now.

D: So you're not sad.

Alex tries to answer, but can't think of anything to say.

D: Have you tried being something other than sad?

A: Like what?

D: (*thrilled*) Like thrilled!

A: What do I have to be thrilled about?

D: You're traveling through time.

A: So?

D: So?! Doesn't that make you feel anything?

A: It makes me sad!

D: Why?

A: Because I have nothing to lose.

D: Except your life!

Beat.

A: Maybe we should try the radio again.

*Dante turns on the radio. **One Way Ticket** starts to play.*

A: Turn it off!

Dante turns it off.

D: You're very fickle, you know.

A: And you talk too much.

They go about their business again, frustrated, but frustration soon, or maybe not so soon, gives way to boredom.

A: Danny?

D: What?

A: Are you still afraid of centipedes?

Dante turns and looks at his reflection in the small mirror on the wall. He turns back to Alex.

Dante: Yes.

Alex: Then why not take it off?

Dante: Because I'd be naked.

Alex: Didn't you pack a change of clothes?

Dante: I did.

A: Then why not take off the costume and change into your regular clothes?

D: I didn't bring them with me.

A: Why not?

D: Seven days is not that long.

A: Do you expect to wear the same thing for seven days without washing it?

D: Seven days is not that long. We're already almost halfway through them.

A: Doesn't feel that way.

D: How long do we have left?

A: I don't know. I lost count.

D: How could you have lost count so quickly?

A: I have nothing by which I can measure the passing of time.

D: Have you tried counting?

A: No.

D: It's an effective method. We could start now if you'd like.

A: I wouldn't like.

D: Did you bring a watch?

A: No.

D: A calendar?

A: What good is a calender if I don't know what time it is?

D: Well you would if you had brought a watch.

A: Well I didn't.

D: And whose fault is that?

A: Mine.

D: You shouldn't be so hard on yourself.

A: If you're so resourceful, why didn't you bring a watch?

D: I have no need to monitor time. I prefer to let it roam free and do as it pleases.

A: I didn't know you were a philosopher.

D: Oh, I'm not. I can't stand it. I merely speak what I observe.

A: Is that not what a philosopher does?

D: Good heavens, no. Philosophers observe then think. Then think and think some more, until they completely forget what they had initially observed. And then they speak. I prefer to take a more direct path.

A: How pragmatic of you.

D: Yes, I'd like to think so.

A: Hm.

There is a brief silence in which the two look at each other expectantly.

D: Well don't stop.

A: Stop what?

D: We almost had a real conversation going. Don't end it with "Hm". Respond.

A: Is "hm" not a response?

D: It's inadequate. Say something more substantial.

A: I have nothing substantial to add to what you said. How can I speak if I have nothing to say?

D: Argue the point.

A: But I agree with it.

D: It doesn't matter. Disagree for the sake of the argument!

A: What?

D: Choose the opposing view and defend it.

A: How can I argue for something I don't understand.

D: Oh, it's easy. Everybody does it.

A: How would I go about it?

D: Well, I said that I am not a philosopher because I don't think.

A: Aha?

D: So, naturally, the opposing view would be to say that I do think.

A: You do think.

D: No, I don't. I haven't thought about anything in years.

A: But you're thinking right now.

Dante notices that he's thinking.

D: My God, you're absolutely right! Do you hear it?

A: No, but I can see it in your face. You're definitely thinking.

D: I can't stop doing it. Oh this is dreadful. I *am* a philosopher.

A: Does this mean that I won the argument?

D: I'm sorry did you just say something? I was distracted by my thoughts. They just keep rambling on and on. Though, I must admit, I'm very witty at times.

A: I've done it for as long as I can remember.

D: Don't you ever get tired of it?

A: No, I enjoy my own company.

D: I think that's a very conceited thing to say. And I agree with myself.

A: Well I disagree with both of you. Ultimately the only thing I have is the thinking voice in my head. I may as well get along with it, no?

D: I should never have taught you how to argue Now you won't stop doing it. This train can't handle two philosophers.

A: Do philosophers argue?

D: They do, but no one understands them.

A: Therefore we can't be philosophers, right? We argue and understand each other.

D: You understand me. I don't understand you. Therefore, you're the superior philosopher.

A: What is there not to understand?

D: Don't start. I must say, I'm not enjoying being a philosopher. It's very depressing, all this thinking. It makes me hungry. Is it lunch time yet?

A: How should I know? I don't keep track of time.

D: Since when?

A: Since I stepped on this train.

D: When was that?

A: A while ago.

D: Have we had lunch since then?

A: At least twice.

D: And at most?

A: More than that.

D: A philosopher and a logician. You must be starving.

A: I could eat.

They sit down to eat, but don't eat.

A: Look at that painting.

Dante looks up at the painting.

A: Isn't it ugly?

D: It's alright.

A: It looks like something out of a hotel room.

D: It brightens up the space.

A: I don't like it.

D: Alright.

A: It bothers me.

D: Then stop looking at it.

A: I can't. It's right there.

D: Just ignore it.

A: No. I want to look in the direction of that wall, but that hideous painting is on that wall. Therefore, I can't enjoy that wall.

D: Can't you enjoy another wall? There are at least three more in this compartment.

A: There aren't enough walls in the world to hide that painting from me.

D: Then take it down.

A: I can't.

D: Why not.

A: It feels wrong.

D: Wrong?

A: Inappropriate.

D: Why?

A: It's been here from the start. It's a part of this train.

D: Then cover it.

A: With what?

D: A coat.

A: A coat on that wall would look suspicious. Besides, I'll know that it's still there.

D: So what do you propose to do?

Alex stares at the painting intently. Dante looks back and forth between them, confused.

A: I don't know. But I don't like it.

Danny goes back to his paper. Alex continues to stare at the painting.

After a while Danny goes to stand in front of the painting.

D: You're right. It *is* an ugly painting.

A: It's not that bad.

D: You hated it.

A: I got used to it.

D: So it doesn't bother you anymore?

A: Oh it bothers me. I just got used to the feeling.

D: So, you tolerate it.

A: No.

D: You've accepted it as an intrinsic part of the train that you don't wish to change?

A: No, I'd take it down if I could.

D: Then why don't you?

A: I can't.

D: Would you like me to try?

A: You can try, but you probably won't succeed.

D: I do love it when people underestimate me. (*pause*) Actually, no, I hate it.

A: It *is* ugly isn't it.

D: Quite.

Danny touches the painting.

D: It's not even a painting.

A: What do you mean? It's on the wall.

D: Yes, but it's not a painting.

A: How is it not a painting?

D: It's not made of paint.

A: Is that what constitutes a painting?

D: Yes. A painting is made of paint. This painting is not made of paint. Therefore it is not a painting.
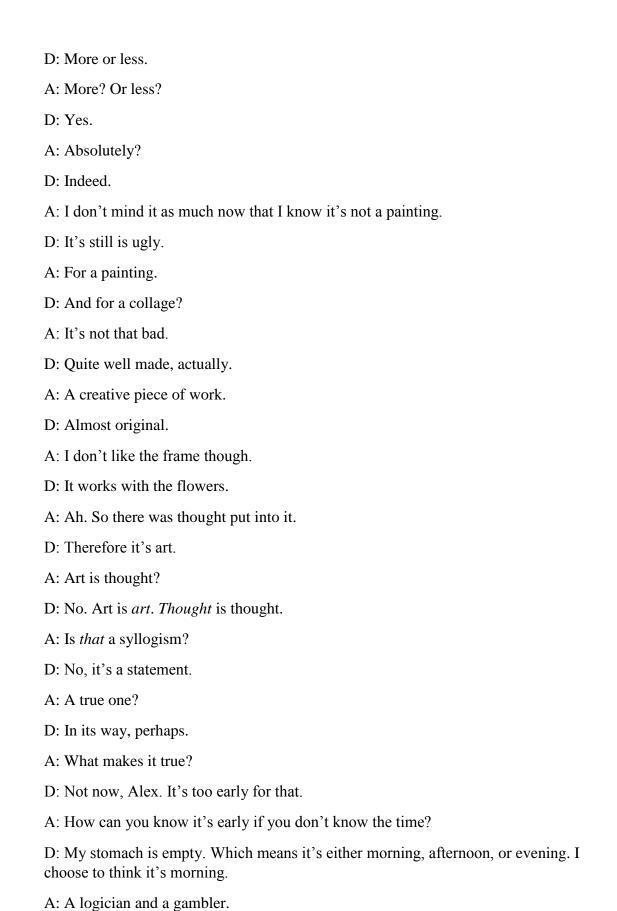
A: Is that a syllogism?

D: I think it's more like a collage.

A: A collage?

D: A three-dimensional collage.

A: Which is different from a syllogism?

D: More or less.

A: More? Or less?

D: Yes.

A: Absolutely?

D: Indeed.

A: I don't mind it as much now that I know it's not a painting.

D: It's still is ugly.

A: For a painting.

D: And for a collage?

A: It's not that bad.

D: Quite well made, actually.

A: A creative piece of work.

D: Almost original.

A: I don't like the frame though.

D: It works with the flowers.

A: Ah. So there was thought put into it.

D: Therefore it's art.

A: Art is thought?

D: No. Art is *art*. *Thought* is thought.

A: Is *that* a syllogism?

D: No, it's a statement.

A: A true one?

D: In its way, perhaps.

A: What makes it true?

D: Not now, Alex. It's too early for that.

A: How can you know it's early if you don't know the time?

D: My stomach is empty. Which means it's either morning, afternoon, or evening. I choose to think it's morning.

A: A logician and a gambler.

D: Where? Oh, me? You're too kind.

A: Not at all.

D: You're too modest!

A: And you talk too much!

D: Fine. Let's eat.

They sit down to eat. Neither eats. Dante picks up his newspaper. Alex stares straight ahead, but eventually ends up staring at the painting again. Time passes.

D: Why are you looking at it again?

A: I don't know.

D: You know it's a collage.

A: It's an ugly collage.

D: You said you liked it.

A: I did.

D: So what's the problem?

A: It's ugly again.

D: Have you figured it out?

A: I think so.

D: And?

A: (*beat*) It's *really* ugly.

Dante rolls his eyes and goes back to his paper.

A: My…God!

D: Hm?

A: I've got it.

D: What?

A: I think I'm stupid.

D: Well, why do *you* think so?

A: Why did I agree to this?

D: What?

A: This.

D: This what?

A: This train. The future. It hasn't been tested before. Only an idiot would agree.

D: (*indifferently*)Yes, but you said you're stupid. Not an idiot.

A: What if it crashes? Or. What if it doesn't? What if we actually get there?

D: Alex, you're rambling.

A: Have you ever been to the future?

D: No, but -

A: We don't know what it's like. What if I hate it?

D: You won't.

A: What if I *like* it?

D: You won't.

A: I could barely live in my own time, how am I gonna keep up with theirs? I should have just killed myself.

D: Did the painting tell you that?

A: It's a collage.

D: Yes.

A: (*abruptly turns to Dante*) Why are *you* here?

D: I wanted to be here.

A: Why? To bug me?

D: That's a bad pun.

A: Stop criticizing!

D: Alex.

A: You smell bad.

D: Alex.

A: I want to go back.

D: Alex.

A: Stop the train.

D: Alex.

A: STOP THE TRAIN!

D: Alex.

A: What?

D: There's no going back. We're too far in. Might as well see it through.

A: How long has it been?

D: Not long enough. Here. Sit down. Don't look at the painting.

A: It's a collage.

D: Of course.

They sit down on Dante's bench. Alex picks up the photo of Pavarotti and examines it.

A: Danny.

D: What?

A: Why is Pavarotti floating on his side?

D: He's been doing that for years. It's his thing.

A: And you don't feed him or change his water?

D: That's what I said.

A: (*with a slow realization*) He hasn't evolved. He's dead.

D: I guess you could say that.

A: Pavarotti is dead.

D: Yes.

A: Pavarotti is dead!

D: I heard you the first time.

A: PAVAROTTI IS DEAD!

D: Pavarotti is dead.

A: You didn't take care of him.

D: No.

A: You didn't take care of him and now he's dead.

D: That's right.

A: You said he'd evolved, but he's dead.

D: Quite dead.

A: And you kept him in the bowl.

D: He's probably still there.

A: And you took a photo of him while he was dead!

D: It's a good photo.

A: Are you insane?

D: Don't be ridiculous.

A: HE'S DEAD!

D: (*indifferently*) Alex, you're not more sensitive than me. Don't pretend.

A: Let me out.

D: What?

A: Let me *out,* I can't see!

D: See what?

Alex starts pounding against the walls of the train.

A: LET ME OUT!

D: Alex.

A: I don't want to go!

D: Alex, please. I can't read with you yelling like that.

A: Stop the train!

D: They won't.

A: I want to go back!

D: They can't hear you.

A: Let me out!!!!

D: (*matter of factly*) Alex. He's been dead since we got him.

A: Who?

D: The fish.

A: Pavarotti.

D: Yes.

A: Why?

D: Well, otherwise he would have died.

A: You didn't take care of him.

D: We didn't have to. And with any luck he'll be waiting for us when we get there.

A: You think he's okay.

D: Of course. He's as dead as he ever was.

Alex stares at Dante with confusion and doubt.

D: Does that make sense?

They look at each other in silence for a moment.

A: (*with a weary smile*) No, Dante. It doesn't make sense.

Beat. Dante stands up. He opens his mouth to say something, but before he can, the train jolts. The lights go off. There is a loud clang.

<div align="center">

Repeat the play from the top.

The actor portraying Alex is swapped with an actor of the opposite sex.

The play is to be performed as identically as possible both times.

</div>

4) Photos and Videos for the Focus Group Performance

https://drive.google.com/open?id=0ByK_WiiVgJ60VWlUT0UtS2ZNUWc

5) Video Clips from Rehearsals

https://drive.google.com/open?id=0ByK_WiiVgJ60LVZSTXkyU3diZkU

6) Syzygy Questionnaires for the Actors

https://drive.google.com/open?id=0ByK_WiiVgJ60Sk9Talg1ak5JWDA

7) Syzygy Questionnaires from Focus Group Performance

https://drive.google.com/open?id=0ByK_WiiVgJ60LUh3NnliNkVuXzQ

8) Additional Comments from Performance Transcribed

Anna Ter-Gabrielyan (Transcribed): Seeing the performance on stage was both similar and different from what I had pictured while reading. Female Alex was not hysterical in this version. It was also really annoying how I could feel my own preconceptions and my awareness of gender roles in society in general, influencing how I interepretted their perfromances. While watching them, I could see that the acting was the same, the way they were sitting and their facial expressions were the same - they were both introverted - but I would still catch myself interpretting their introversian differently. When a man is being introverted, we think that he's just not in the mood to socialize, but when a girl is introverted, we think she's being bitchy and stand-offish. For example, people tell women to smile more, but not men.

Karotik Galstyan: There will always be an invisible wall between men and women. That is why the two men seemed more at ease together.

Roubina Seropian: I'm not sure, but I don't think actors ever fully dissociate themselves from a role. I think eventually part of you comes out on stage.

9) Paragraphs Written After the Read-Throughs and Discussions (Transcribed)

Arianna Khachatrian (Second Year English and Communications Student at AUA): To be honest, knowing your style, I was actually expecting a drag [queen] or LGBT+

related plot, but then there was just these two ridiculous people. I was pretty suspicious why there would be two men, but I still thought of Alex as a man. There is a moment near the end, where Dante says "Alex" for a couple of times repeatedly. That is when I briefly second-guessed my initial ideas about Alex's sex, but I did not hold on to that thought. When you said that you pictured the character mostly as a woman while writing it, I was skeptical because, for me, Alex's way of speaking is MANLY! How he panics at the end might be a bit similar to what a woman would do, but still, I thought he was just an emotionally unstable person. Then I remembered that he is in a strange, unpredictable situation, and that his response to it was normal. I also did not notice that there were no pronouns for Alex until you pointed it out.

Gayane Harutyunyan (Fourth Year Psychology Student at Yerevan State University): I was familiar with the project before the script, so I knew what you wanted to do. I really like it. I was still imagining him [Alex] as a boy. I don't really know why. When I imagine a girl, it is not very different as a whole. Maybe some small details sometimes, but overall the character is the same.

Raffi Berberian (Birthright Armenia Volunteer) Alex could totally work as a girl.I don't think there was anything specifically masculine or feminine about their conversation.I don't think it would change that much. I didn't really see Alex as a really masculine figure and I don't think I would feel any different if Alex was a girl. I think I perceived Alex as a boy first because a lot of my personal interactions is one on one with other boys like Areg, my roommate. So I perceive two guys talking to each other by default.If Alex was a girl, maybe I would perceive Dante's outwards aggregation towards her as flirting, but the sexual tension isn't mutual. Maybe Dante is bothering Alex and she wants nothing to do with him but is being polite, but eventually she has no choice but to talk to him and even start a conversion because there is no escaping the situation. When Alex is a boy, they're more like potential roommates with a stressed relationship. I feel like they are tolerating each other because they have no choice.Their "friendly" conversations are forced. I perceived the emotional breakdown in the same way both times.

Sona Poghosyan (First Year English and Communications Student at AUA): I pictured him as a boy because I was thinking of my male friend Alex. That is the association I have with that name. The character does also work as a girl. I also initially thought Dante was a stereotypically gay character, for some reason, but that didn't affect his relationship with Alex because Alex seemed generally disinterested. When I picture Alex as a girl and Dante as a straight man, I automatically expect them to eventually get together because that is what we always see in the movies. I do think that it could work both ways, and it would be interesting to see the differences, but I

also think if this was performed live, especially in front of a conservative Armenian audience, they might think that the absurd style of dialogue would make boy-Alex would seem witty to them and girl-Alex seem dumb.

Luiza Kirakosyan (Fourth Year English and Communications Student at AUA):   Till the end of the read-through I never questioned Alex's sex. The character was originally one hundred percent male in my mind. It is, I guess, partly because of his casual but at times weird interaction with Dante. When I see the character as male, I feel more open to appreciate his individuality and more eager to understand his weirdness. Otherwise, if Alex was female, I would approach the character and his relationship to Dante with a lot more prejudiced mind considering her as more of a cynic rather than good-humored, and more flirtatious rather than sharp-minded.

Alice Vartevanian (First Year English and Communications Student at AUA): I pictured Alex as a boy because it is a more common name for men than women. Also, the opening line of the play, "For fuck's sake, is the song really necessary?!" is not what we usually hear from women in the theatre. After the discussion, I wished I had pictured her as a girl because I think it would be really cool to see a character who speaks like that on stage. I think, she could easily be a girl because she is a more accurate representation of average girls, instead of being a stereotype.

Alexander Mikayelyan (First Year English and Communications Student at AUA): To me, both characters had their quirks, but Dante stood out more, which is why I thought the project was centered around him. As for Alex, I automatically assumed that he was a male, even though his/her lines were unisex. Though I'm sure that the fact that my name is also Alex had some influence on me thinking this, I believe that Alex's serious attitude (in comparison to Dante's) was also a reason for me thinking this. Their relationship with Dante didn't change for me because Dante is just a very weird character.

Anna Ter-Gabrielyan (Fourth Year English and Communications Student at AUA): I was familiar with the purpose of the project beforehand. I even knew that in the performance, Alex was going to be a girl first, but when I read the script for the first time, I still pictured a boy in my mind. I have read theatre of the absurd plays in the past, and usually there, we see two men. I think that influence on me. Alex's speech is very neutral, but it is more common to see male characters talk about the things that they talk about with Dante. Alex is also an introverted and serious character, especially compared to Dante. In society, when we see a guy being serious and introverted, we assume it is normal, but when we see a girl be the same way, we think she's cold and bitchy. If Alex and Dante were both girls, I think people would think they were being stupid and ridiculous for talking the way they do (especially if they

don't know about theatre of the absurd), but with two men, they would think they are being deep and philosophical. When I picture Alex as a girl, her outburst at the end comes across as more hysterical than it would as a guy, probably because that is how girls are depicted. Finally, Dante's constant questions and remarks got on my nerves a lot more when I pictured Alex as a girl. It reminded me of men in real-life situations who bother girls in bars and on the streets, so I felt protective of her and wanted him to leave her alone.

Eva Hakhverdyan (Yerevan State Academy of Fine Arts Graduate): I can't say that anything really changes when I see a girl or a boy. I imagined a boy first because it is more possible for Alex to be the name of a boy for me. Also because it is more normal for boys who only have known each other for one day to speak to each other without any complexes. But when I read it twice, I feel that anyone can do it. In both cases, Alex reminds me of a nervous person, Dante is more light. It was more difficult to see Alex as a girl after I already had a picture of him as a boy, but I think the gender doesn't matter very much. It's more about character.

Erik Arakelyan (Third Year, Computational Sciences Student at AUA): While breezing through the play, my mind was filled with a rather constant urge to think of both heroes as middle-aged men. Quite honestly, the idea was so natural that I never even mildly thought about the possibly that one of the heroes is a woman. Indeed, after seeing and realizing the transformation of the character in the play, it suddenly opened new ranges of vastly interesting thoughts and reasons that were put behind the play. Akin to Soren Kierkegaard, it started breaking the wall of conventional and conservative truth, giving place to a significantly more interesting reality.

Arman Simonian (First Year Computational Sciences Student at AUA) During the reading I assumed Alex was a male character. I think as any character in theatre, Alex can be played both by men and women. However, considering the character (not the person who is playing him/her), the gender of Alex may change the whole understanding of the character and the way the play is comprehended. Gender, in my opinion, is a a characteristic like a color of the dress or part of temper, and influences the way a character is constructed. Society surely makes us subconsciously have a stereotypical expectations of character's gender. I imagine a female actor being more emotional, and subconsciously expect there to be some kind of romance between them.

Araksia Melikian (First Year Business and Administration Student at AUA): At first, I pictured Alex as a kind of depressive boy. I personally know a few male Alexs, which is why I think I thought he was a boy. He could also be a girl, but in my opinion people's ideas about gender, which are dictated by social norms, would make

her seem different from Alex as a boy. I think people will think Dante is probably flirting with her because that is what they would expect. Two boys could be two friends. I think their conversations would be understood differently, as well. When you see two men speaking absurd dialogue, you think they are philosophizing, but when one is a girl, for some reason, she comes off as ditsy.

Andranik Davtyan (Second Year English and Communications Student): At first I thought Alex is male because of his manners and his array of words and because of how he perceived Dante. Alex's relationship with Dante seemed fishy. By that I mean that all the time they tried to make conversations with each other, become friends, know each other better, but failed miserably. That made them appear awkward, and uncomfortable towards each other. Basically, they didn't have any relationship, they were just there, stuck together and had nothing to do except to look at the painting or read a newspaper. Not many options. So they talked to each other and made the best of it.

Garbis Vizoyan: (Third Year English and Communications Student) Upon first reading Syzygy's script, I thought the relationship between the two characters was quite natural, despite the absurdist dialogue, the link established between the characters was much more grounded. My initial depiction had me imagining Alex as a male, despite the fact that the script claims no such suggestions. As such, the first time through was a much more aggressive experience than the second. In the sense that, the relationship between Dante and Alex turned to competitiveness right after a chapter or two of introductions, despite the fact that the dialogue had no implications of any such competitiveness, the male nature of both characters had them both one-upping one another in an act of supremacy. The much more interesting part was during the second reading, when I depicted Alex as female, despite the unchanged dialogue the sense of competition was gone. Replaced with sexuality. Neither Dante nor Alex had any lines that would suggest any sort of a sexual approach towards either one of them, but their gender difference immediately established a sexual tension that lead me to believe that Dante was attempting to approach Alex, despite the indirectness. Dante despite being the same in both cases, the simple gender difference completely affected Dante's own personality, which I think is the most interesting find in the play. The fact that person A may act, say and behave with person B in an identical manner, twice, and despite said person B's identical reaction in both cases, B's gender can completely changes the way A is perceived.