

Adapting Science Fiction for Theater

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This summer, I had the opportunity to write a play based on a science fiction novella. I began with a fairly open-ended search for science fiction (SF) stories by women and nonbinary people, from which I planned to choose a story to adapt. As I read short stories and researched science fiction theater, I realized that SF theater provides a unique opportunity to center questions about the body. Theater at its most basic is about watching a body onstage, and SF allows us to explore the boundaries between human and non-human bodies, see how the body reacts when interfacing with new technology, and examine how social interactions and relationships could change in the future. Presenting science fiction ideas through the embodied medium of theater defamiliarizes the body, implicates the audience in the action onstage, and leads audiences to confront their relationships with their own bodies.

I spent the first three weeks of the summer reading science fiction by women and non-binary people. I read stories from anthologies, short story collections, and science fiction magazines such as *Clarkesworld*, *Lightspeed*, and *Uncanny*. I read over 80 stories and narrowed them down to a list of five candidates for adaptation, written by Charlie Jane Anders, Octavia Butler, Nino Cipri, An Owomoyela, and Sarah Pinsker. I narrowed down my list by treating each story as if I was about to adapt it: rereading to make detailed notes, making a list of key events and planning how I would stage them, and writing short scenes. This process helped me select the novella *Defekt* by Nino Cipri.

I chose to adapt *Defekt* because of its themes of empathy and identity and because of its unique interpretation of clones, which I was excited to explore in my adaptation. *Defekt* takes place in a store that has a lot in common with IKEA and tells the story of Derek, a dedicated employee who feels lonely and unable to connect with his coworkers. After taking his first ever sick day, he's placed on a special inventory shift and is surprised to find that he is working with his doppelgangers. He discovers that he was manufactured by the company, and, with his doppelgangers, he is sent to hunt down and neutralize mutant furniture in the store. But Derek's radical empathy towards the furniture reveals a defect in his programming, and he teams up with his doppelgangers to challenge their corporate conditioning and learn to extend his radical empathy to the living furniture and to himself.

I began adapting *Defekt* by transcribing all of the dialogue that appears in the story. From there, I created a structure of scenes and started filling in plot details to make a coherent script. Once I had completed this direct translation of novella to script, I started refining the adaptation. I added a theatrical device of an employee handbook, whose excerpts play during scene transitions. I mapped out the structure of the story and expanded on certain moments to help the play build towards a climax. I also cut some science fiction elements that distracted from the story I was trying to tell and added sections to develop the world outside of the store where the play takes place. My writing process was helped by weekly meetings with my faculty mentors, who read drafts of the script and gave me feedback and new questions to explore. I also interviewed two SF playwrights, Walt McGough and Edward Einhorn, about how they write science fiction elements in their own scripts.

Throughout the project, I also researched adaptation theory and science fiction theater. One foundational text was Jennifer Parker-Starbuck's *Cyborg Theatre*, which was especially helpful for understanding the many ways that theater can incorporate technology onstage, from puppets to projection screens to automatons. My research also included reading books on adaptation, watching streamed productions of science fiction plays, and reading both original and adapted science fiction plays.

As I conclude this fellowship, I have a broad background in SF theater and adaptation from my research and a rough draft of a full-length play adaptation. I am excited to continue this project as I revise, workshop, and direct my script as a part of the Studio class for the Theater major this year.

Faculty Mentors: Lindsay Livingston and Arielle Saiber

Funded by the Nellie C. Watterson Summer Fellowship in the Creative and Performing Arts