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A day in the life of a Witness Theater actor  

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I walked to Arellano Theater at 9 p.m. on Friday. In my left hand was a can of warm Diet Pepsi that was keeping my fingers from freezing. My right hand was shoved in my coat pocket, and I gripped with it the handle of my squirt gun.  

When I arrived at the theater below the Glass Pavilion, I was a few minutes late, but I was the first one there. More time passed, and more people showed at last. Witness Theater is pretty relaxed. Besides, we're college students, it was Friday night, and sometimes college students have other things to do on Friday nights.  

After half an hour, most everyone had shown up who was going to show up. Christen Cromwell, the tall, statuesque, Pam Grier-esque beauty, who is Witness Theater's president, announced the rules. There would be four teams of writers, one script per team, two actors per script (so the scripts had to have two characters) and one director per pair of actors.  

We formed a pool of props on stage, to which I contributed my bright green and yellow squirt gun and an empty soda can. Others contributed a jukebox piñata, a luggage roller, a stuffed turtle, a fly-swatter, a pimp cane, an old man's cane, a half-empty soy sauce bottle and a smattering of other items.  

Not all of the actors were there, but all the writers were, and most of the directors. Christen let the writers come up, team by team, to pick out two props for their play, and then we non-writers broke into four groups, one per writing team, to brainstorm ideas with the writers.  

Senior Raphael Krut-Landau, who let me know that he would not at all mind if he were described as being bold, heroic and handsome in this article, and I joined the writing team of junior Eric Levitz and Kathleen Hancock. All four of us had previous theater experience, and we knew one another. Our props were the old man's cane and my squirt gun.  

"If you're going to have a gun in the play, I think someone should get shot," I helpfully contributed. "We can have someone get squirted," Eric said. Kathleen began sketching the characters in her notebook. Raffi suggested that maybe the two characters could be separated brothers, or some other relations, who were divided by war. A Great War, suggested Eric. I added, perhaps less helpfully, that the whole play could be a wordless martial arts battle between a gunfighter and a swordsman.  

The writers had enough ideas to start with, and it was getting late, so we took off. They would have until 7 a.m. to finish their plays, and the directors would meet at 8 a.m. The actors would arrive to audition at 9 a.m. Imagine, if you can, waking up before 9 a.m. on a Saturday. That's the kind of sacrifice we were willing to make.  

I went back, and like a good Hopkins student, spent the night studying. I'm not in the habit of sleeping much on Friday nights and was awake until 2 or 3 a.m.  

The next morning, sunlight through my window woke me before my alarm could. I got up, got dressed and headed to Einstein's for a breakfast wrap.  

Food in my hands and hunger in my stomach, I trudged back to Arellano, where Christen was waiting with doughnuts and orange juice for all. I tried several times to steal from her the finished scripts so I could alter my audition performances according to how much I liked each play, but Christen is pretty sharp and has good reflexes, so I gave up after a while and enjoyed my breakfast.  

The directors hid away in Conference Room B, where they decided who would direct each play. When they emerged, casting began. We filed into the theater, got up on stage and read aloud selected lines from the scripts.  

I tried sucking up to director Ryan Harrison, whose play (about intimate relations and the feeling you get when you are transformed into a turtle) intrigued me. It didn't work, and I got cast in Eric's play, with Raffi directing. I was cast as Grandpa, and Rob Powers would be Timmy, my grandson.  

We spent the day memorizing. Raffi gave us good direction and feedback after each of our readings, letting us know when we were capturing the spirit he wanted and correcting us when we messed up. This period was the longest for the actors, but it is also the one with
the fewest distinct memories, because so much of that time was just spent memorizing our lines.

It was like time had been scrunched up into a ball for those several hours before the performance, and it only un-scrunched at around 6 p.m., when it became frighteningly apparent to us all how soon the performance would be. There was a lot of rushing then, a lot of last minute memorizing and, probably, some silent prayers.

Christen ordered pizza. Some of us ate, and some of us couldn't eat.

It seemed only a minute later that the house opened. The audience came and we all went backstage, nervously pacing, whispering our lines and setting our props, hoping not to screw up.

Then the lights went down on the crowd and up on stage, and the first pair of players stepped out. We all listened from behind and heard laughter.

Ten minutes later, the next play started. More laughter; a good audience. Perhaps the low expectations inherent with 24-hour theater helped, but I think we were doing well.

Ten more minutes. It was time for Rob and I to come out. My thoughts stopped when the lights came on. Rob said his line, and I said mine and the audience laughed. That's when I knew we would be OK. From then on, it felt right. We knew our lines, and the audience even seemed to like us.

After we left the stage, we went around to the audience and watched the last play. It was the one that Ryan directed. When it was done, we rushed back on and took our bows. The 24-Hour Theater Experiment had ended.