A Horse Named Shabrang:

Synthesizing Theory and Practice to Develop a Methodology for a Ritualistic Performance

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Acknowledgments

I would like to begin by acknowledging that this work was completed at the University of Alberta, Canada, on Treaty 6 territory, a traditional and ancestral territory of the Cree, Saulteaux, Blackfoot, Métis, Nakota Sioux, and Dene peoples. I am grateful to be able to study, create, and share knowledge on these lands.

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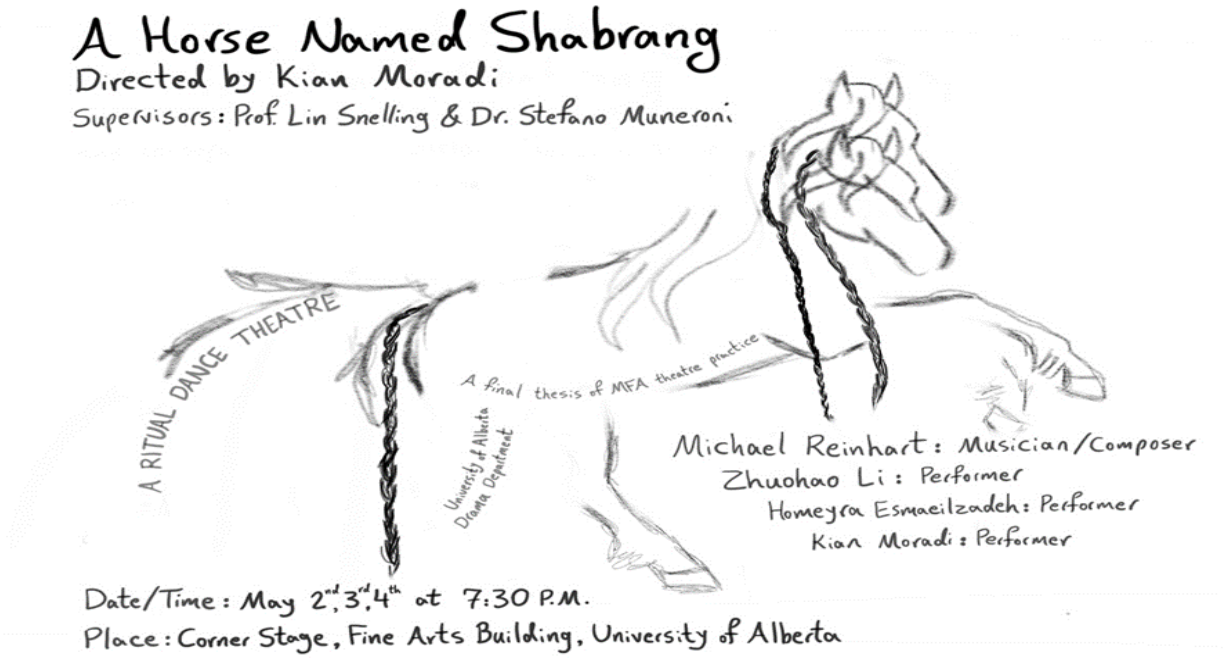
1. Introduction



A Horse Named Shabrang was my project-based final thesis for the MFA in Theatre Practice (see: https://ualberta.aviaryplatform.com/r/599z030m4d). Staged in the style of a live dance-theatre, this project synthesized theory and practice to develop a methodology for creating ritualistic performances. By critically engaging with ritual studies, performance studies, and related disciplines, the thesis explored and responded to these fields by offering a creative approach to ritualistic performance. Through this exploration, the project sought to bridge academic inquiry and artistic expression, contributing to contemporary theatre practice.

I directed and performed in the piece under the supervision of Prof. Lin Snelling and Dr. Stefano Muneroni, faculty members of the Drama Department at the University of Alberta. The performance took place in the Corner Stage located in the Fine Arts Building of the university, May 2-4, 2024, from 7:30 pm to 8:30 pm. The committee members who viewed the piece were Dr. Piet Defraeye from the Drama Department and Dr. Michael Frishkopf from the Music

Department. Homeyra Esmaeilzadeh and Zhuohao Li were the other two performers, and Michael Reinhart was the composer/musician of the piece.

This thesis, which is a companion to the performance, consists of seven chapters and an appendix. The first chapter is the introduction of the piece which provides the basic information of the performance, including its score and a brief description of my academic journey. The second chapter reviews the critical literature about rituals and ritualistic practices and posits the methodology which I used to stage the piece. The third chapter focuses on some dramaturgical subjects related to the performance, including score making, adaptation, interculturality, curation and audience engagement. The fourth chapter sheds light on the decisions I had to make as the director of the piece. The fifth and sixth chapters focus on specific subjects of the piece which were essential to me and that I intend to explore further in my future artistic practice, specifically the notion of character development and transformation in the piece. The seventh chapter provides some final thoughts and reflections on the whole process of creating my thesis show. The appendix is a description of the workshops which I held to examine crucial aspects of the project before the rehearsals.

1.1. Score of *A Horse Named Shabrang*

(When talking about the performers, M stands for Michael, K for Kian, Z for Zhuohao and H for Homeyra.) The playhouse is empty. Lights are dimmed and focused on the playing areas of the Corner Stage: the stage, corridors, balconies and stairs. Music begins. The mysterious and ponderous music played by M echoes in space. Z is lying on the floor, absorbed in her own world. H keeps on walking back and forth on the opposite corner, mumbling to herself. K is standing right by the door. Music builds up with tension. It is time. It is 7:30 pm. K frightenedly rushes out the door. He repeatedly yells “Come in,” “Everyone, hurry and go in,” “The world is in flames, only

the Corner Stage is safe." Audience members whisper. Their heartbeats are rising. K leads them through the corridor, and they get inside the theatre. Music continues to build. There is tension, maybe even fear. People get inside, and the doors are shut. The space is safe from the fire outside, though charged with anxiety. Almost everyone sits down quickly. Z and H are now talking, concernedly mentioning a "fire." They run, with heavy breaths, through space. The percussion of the music is alarming. K bangs on the exit door. Others call for him. They call each other's names. "Is everybody here?" Performers run past each other. Sometimes they stop and take one another to a different spot. Someone rushes upstairs, behind the audience. One performer runs to the balcony, while the other runs through the narrow hallways and stairways by the audience and the stage. The performers eventually lead each other center stage. They look at each other for answers. Z asks what to do in Chinese, K and H respond in English, or Persian, or just with a nod. There is a table, flipped over. A white table which K drags and places in the middle of the stage. The others look. They agree that they need the table, without saying it. H drags the table further back. One by one they quickly find shelter under it. They huddle together. Everything stops. The performers stop moving and panicking. They just breathe. M pauses the music. Everything is in suspension. Seconds go by. Gradually the performers glance at each other under the table. There is more peace now. The place is now ready for a ritual.

They slowly stand up. K starts talking about an old story. The others join shortly after. It's a story about a king. "A king who doubts his own son. Maybe the son has slept with his own mother, the queen." Performers whisper. Each uses a different language to reveal breadcrumbs of the story. "The king makes a huge fire to test whether his son has betrayed him. The horse Shabrang comes in and helps the son go through the flames. The son is innocent." The performers found Shabrang from the depth of history. They start converting their words to physicality. K, Z, H and

M make a horse sound by stumping, clapping and using percussion instruments. The horse sounds transform into horse choreography. It seems like a horse gets conjured in the performers' bodies, in solos, duets, trios, and vocalizations.

The playhouse goes quiet. Only K is on stage. Z and H retreated on the balcony while M prepares himself for a new part. K is carrying a long, thick rope. He begins. "Where we are is my question." He continues going through a journey of real-time location. He unravels the rope while unraveling the location of the "Milky-Way Galaxy." M accompanies K by sounds and percussion by producing cosmic sounds. The performer unties more of the rope and gathers it into a ball, "Earth." He unties more and gets to "Alberta," then "Edmonton" and shortly after, "University of Alberta." What is the time? It rings in his head. There is no time left. "We have to rush." The tick-tock sound is now echoing in the music. H and Z enter the seating area, surprising the spectators. "What is the time?" People look at their watches. Some look at their phones. They answer 7:55pm. There is no time. Shabrang is not here yet. The performers communicate a sense of hurry. They have to summon Shabrang.

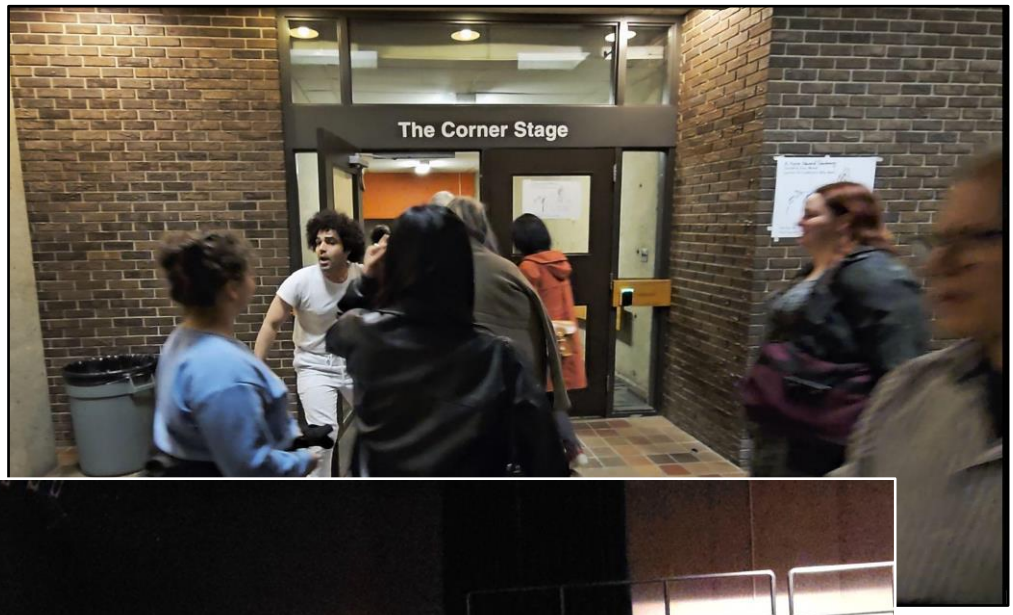
K, Z and H are on stage now. They all sit down in the shape of a triangle, rolling balls to each other on the floor while traveling in time through their memories. Memories of being a horse as a kid. Once again, multilingualism keeps the audience's attention. They keep passing the balls as they strategize and reminisce. Who will be the horse? H has dreamt of being a horse before. All the balls are gradually making their way to her. She is the one. She will become a horse. All the balls are in her hands now. Silence dominates the room again. It is time to prepare for the initiation ceremony. K runs upstairs to the balcony. He ties and hangs a rope. H and Z are still on stage. A white wedding dress is worn by H with the help of Z. They walk and sit on the edge of the stage. They are in front of M who is now echoing nothing but silence through the theatre. K is on the

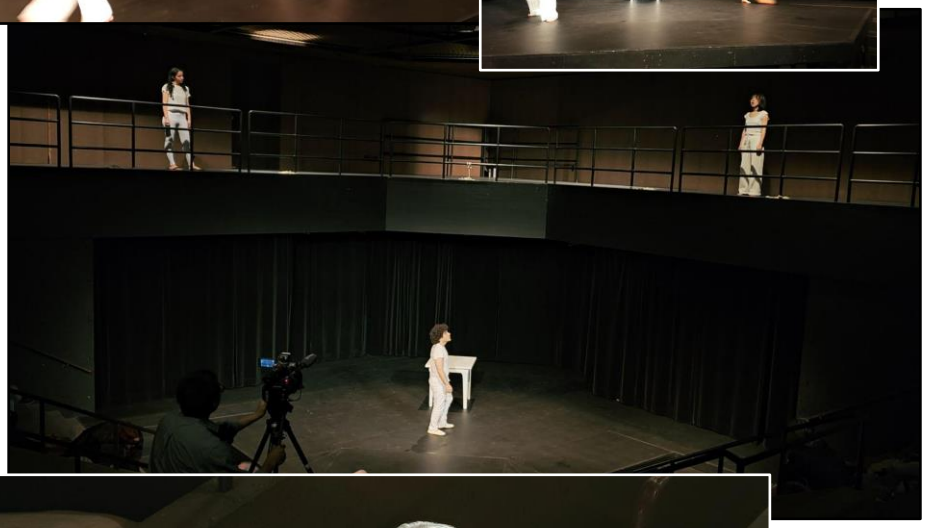
balcony hanging another rope, while Z and H are on the edge of the stage talking. English and Chinese sentences are heard. The chosen girl, H, asks Z to stay with her. “I will do it if everyone will be safe.” Z prepares the other for her wedding. She puts makeup on her face. The round mirror in their hands is reflecting the light. She ties ropes to her hair and makes a veil. The third, forth, and fifth ropes are now hung by K upstairs. Ropes are ready. H is ready. Everything is ready for the ceremony.

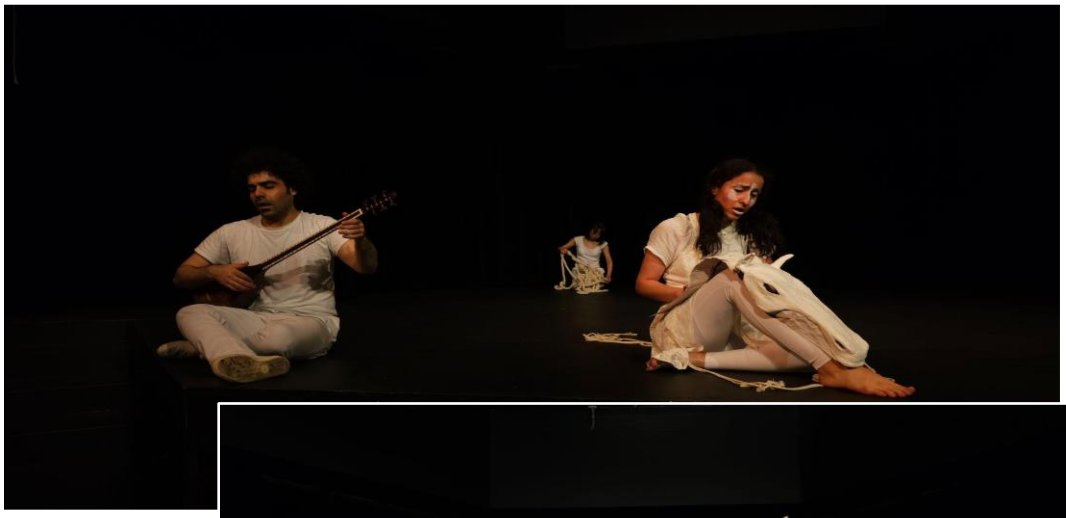
The wedding begins. The girl and the boy, H and K, meet on stage. K plays his instrument, the Shourangiz. H dances with passion through the space. The two chase each other around laughing happily. They run upstairs to the balcony where they dance a duet. K touches the veil and something starts changing. A sense of cruelty takes over. K pulls the veil harsher and harsher. H gasps. She has a worried look on her face. It is time for her to transform. K and H proceed downstairs from the balcony onto the stage while the veil is controlled by K. On the stage, Z grabs the veil. K makes his way to the table. He is constructing a horse head. Z now ties H to the ropes hanging by her veil. One by one, until all five are tied and the transformation begins. H tries to move as she looks around for help. Finally, she gives in. She is still in the middle of the stage. The horse head is now ready on the table. K comes forward. He holds his knife. The sound of cutting ropes is presented by M. All five ropes are cut. The horse is here. Shabrang has a long mane.

The horse is reckless now. She runs far and back. K still holds the mane. He is the lover who sacrificed his love. Shabrang goes round and round on the stage while K is standing on the table. H sees the horse head on the table. It belongs to her. She grabs the horse's head, and she is unstoppable. As Shabrang, H runs freely on the stage. Music seems to give her even more energy and rage. Everything is at a high tempo. Shabrang/H finds herself settled in her new body. As she holds the horse's head, she gets on the floor. Z has gone back to her own world and ties ropes on

the corner of the stage. K brings back the Shourangiz to play some music. Unlike what happened during the wedding ceremony, this time the music is sorrowful. K plays and Shabrang sings. The song is an old Persian and Turkish song about pursuing love and failing to find it. After the song, Shabrang/H gets up. She holds the horse's head right in front of her. As she walks all around the stage, she shows her horse head to the audience. She communicates to them a sense of safety. Shabrang is there and everyone is safe. The other two performers shadow her last movement. Shabrang gradually slows down and gets closer and closer to the table. She gradually lays on the table diagonally and rests the horse head on her head, with her mane hanging from the table's edge onto the stage floor. K and Z move towards the spectators and whisper that it is safe for them to leave. Everyone slowly gets up, as they keep glancing back at the horse on the table. Everyone eventually leaves, except Shabrang who is sacrificed on the table and M who performs a peaceful melody. Everyone left safely. The ritual worked.


The Corner Stage





1.2. From Iran to the Corner stage: Contextualizing my Research Interest in Theatre Creation

In order to contextualize the performance of *A Horse Named Shabrang*, I would like to present a brief chronology of my academic experiences in Iran and link it to my course of study in the Drama Department at the University of Alberta. Although this section starts with my background, it does not aim to offer an exhaustive representation of my artistic activities. While my artistic background as a theatre professional in Iran goes back to the 2000s, I will only focus on the academic trajectories and research interests that led to the creation of *A Horse Named Shabrang*.

In 2013, I entered the MFA program in Theatre Directing in the Art & Architecture Department of the University of Tehran (Central Tehran Branch). Since the beginning of my studies, I have focused on non-conventional approaches to performance. Under the supervision of Dr. Ghotbeddin Sadeghi and Dr. Ferdos Hajian, I completed my degree with a final performance and an accompanying theoretical thesis. Unlike my degree in the Drama Department at the University of Alberta, where I had to stage a project-based performance and write a thesis, in Iran I wrote a theoretical final thesis and then applied the results to a stage work. Drawing on a comparative methodology, I utilized the Bakhtinian theory of Carnival and Carnivalesque to approach Iranian traditional comedies. Then I developed a dramaturgy based on my results that I applied to an Iranian style of comedy known as *Takht-e Hozi*. The performance revolved around an encounter between a western clown and an Iranian clown and the Bakhtinian carnivalesque discourse that it generated. In addition to the final thesis, there were course projects which I used to investigate different aspects of the performing arts and develop my aesthetics. The following paragraphs, briefly explains the academic projects which I did in the years between 2013 and 2016.

The Cherry Orchard by Anton Chekhov was my attempt to challenge the conventional way of using language in the theatre. The original play script is among the longest of modern drama. I shortened the long dialogues by decentralizing and downplaying the role of language. I drew on minimalism to compress the storyline into a twenty-minute piece. This adaptation was important in my academic journey because it allowed me to learn how to translate language to visual elements and movement.

Since I was investigating Iranian traditional comedies, I was curious about traditional comedies among other cultures. This is why, during two different semesters, I improved my knowledge of Commedia dell'arte, the traditional Italian comedy, and of Karagöz, the Turkish traditional comedy. Since each of them is very complex and requires a wide culture-specific knowledge of performance, I tried to focus only on one element. I was interested in Commedia dell'arte's use of masks, so I tried to regenerate Iranian traditional comedies through Commedia's characters and masks. Drawing on Karagöz's techniques, I did the same, and tried to translate an Iranian comedy in this Turkish style. Karagöz is an outdoor play which uses shadows in tents at night to narrate Turkish fables. Both experiences were significant for me because they allowed me to explore interculturalism to stage Iranian cultural forms.

Directing *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles gave me the opportunity to examine Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty manifesto in practice. Drawing on Artaud's "first manifesto," (*Theatre*), I focused on the element of sacrifice, as a cruel theme, in both the passion of Christ in the *Bible* and the demise of Oedipus in Greek mythology. Engendering emotional tension among audience members is a fundamental element of the Artaudian theatre. I heightened the tension among the audience by allowing the actor to express an abstract physicality, including panting and shouting. The scenography had hard lines, red flashlights, and recorded random noises without melody. The

importance of this academic experience for me was to familiarize myself with Antonin Artaud's theatre which is very crucial in the twentieth century avant-garde theatre and ritualistic practices.

I also staged a section of Goethe's *Faust*, specifically the fight between Faust and Valentin, using fingers on a table. What I did with language in *The Cherry Orchard*, I tried to do with spectacle in *Faust.* Since the original text is full of spectacular moments, my goal in this project was to compact such spectacles in a small setting. The whole *mise-en-scène* of what I performed was a one-meter square table occupied with miniature replicas of a church, houses and streets of the 18th century in Germany, and ten fingers. To examine and perform theatrical minimalism was my concern in this project.

There is an annual nationwide theatre festival in Iran called IIUTF where the best university productions gather to compete. Shortly after my graduation, when I was still eligible to participate as an alumnus, I entered this festival with a play titled *Parvin* by Atabak Mahrad and directed by me. I drew on my previous academic experiences to create *Parvin* (2016). This piece explored the hardships of Iranian women through history through an episodic style. This piece is one of the most formative experiences in my background as a director because it gave me the chance to work with a cast and crew of twenty during a two-month rehearsal.

After these projects, I produced *The Underwear Stripe* (2020) which approached Michel Foucault's ideas of sexuality and power, in the context of school age girls in Iran. This piece used spontaneous and simultaneous paintings and improvisation and it received positive responses at the nationwide festival of Maan, which in 2020 was dedicated to explore the theme of power. This production was the last one that I performed in Iran as a director and actor, and it was important because it allowed me to probe how to turn philosophical and theoretical ideas performative. Since

I have always been concerned with philosophy, to embody philosophical views in my performance aesthetics is quite important.

Ultimately, I arrived at the University of Alberta in the fall of 2022. Although I was supposed to attend my program in the fall of 2021, I started my studies in the fall of 2022 because of some visa issues. I still felt lucky since the Drama Department kindly deferred my acceptance so that I could apply for a Canadian visa a second time, which worked. I entered a new world and a new educational system. Two of the big differences between the education that I received in Iran and my experience here in Alberta were: 1. My education in Iran was more practical. At the end of each course, we had to stage at a minimum a 20-minute piece. 2. The educational system at the UofA is more current than the one in Iran. As a whole, I feel that I received an excellent education both in Iran and Canada.

Prof. Lin Snelling and Dr. Stefano Muneroni agreed to supervise my project and I started my initial conversations with them about my interests during my first term. In the first semester of my program, I had the opportunity to study contemporary theories of theatre and performance in the DR 609 course taught by Dr. Piet Defraeye. Since he formerly made us familiar with research methods in the course DR 601, I focused on methodologies which could relate to my final thesis subject, specifically ritualistic performances. Psychoanalysis, interculturality and postmodernism were the topics which I focused on during the course. The results came in a final critical essay where I explored the element of imagination in Gaston Bachelard's psychoanalysis and Konstantin Stanislavski's acting training. In Dr. Defraeye's DR 608, I had the chance to focus on pre-modern theatre theories. Likewise, I tried to link the course to my research interest. This is why I worked on Nietzsche and Antonin Artaud in particular. The outcome of the course was a final essay that explored discourses of space and time in the performing arts, and rituals in particular. In Dr.

Stefano Muneroni's DR 617, I became familiar with a wide range of dramaturgical approaches, and I had the chance to work on a production of *Rhinoceros,* a play written by Eugène Ionesco and directed by Jake Planinc in the winter term of 2023. My final essay for the seminar led me to research dramaturgy in devised and provocation theatre. DR 605, titled "Ritual in Performance," was a directed-study course in which I worked with Prof. Lin Snelling, my supervisor. As a part of this course, I also was granted permission to attend movement and choreography classes of third and fourth-year BFA Acting students. This course was very practical and helped me unpack the critical relevance of physicality in rituals. I explored the works of experienced choreographers like Meg Stuart and familiarized myself with the anatomy of the body. It helped me develop improvisation skills and body sensitivity. In this course, I organized five workshops over the course of a month, which will be discussed in the appendix. In DR 606, taught by Prof. Lin Snelling, I focused on choreography and movement. I had the chance to attend a movement class of third-year acting students, two times per week for a semester. This course focused on reading and presenting on critical materials, responding to scholarly articles, attending and participating in class activities, and performing a solo piece at the end of the semester. This experience helped me find my performative body and positively affected my performance in my final thesis. Another course which was very beneficial was DR 622, "Body on Stage," taught by Prof. Snelling and Dr. Defraeye. I had never thought that the body could be seen through multiple lenses, and this course showed me it could. EDSE 612, taught by Dr. Diane Conrad, was a course I took from the Education Department titled "Art Based Research." It was a studio course where we explored the process of art making as a way to understand phenomena. Intermediality, which I studied in Dr. Mounsef's DR 622, was a new subject for me. Although I did not use Intermediality in my thesis, it helped broaden my horizon and see theatre as a medium. In DR 686 with Prof. Kennedy, I

practiced and studied devising style of directing, which was instrumental in the creation of my final thesis.

Besides my coursework, I booked rooms for personal practice in the Department of Drama. This was beneficial for me because in Iran there was a shortage of space which limited my ability to work independently. Such issues were not a barrier at the UofA. Thanks to my supervisors and professors, I could build upon my education in Iran and ultimately construct my final thesis.

2. Critical Literature and Methodology

2.1. Ritual Studies

In his 1983 article "Ritual in Recent Criticism" about the status of ritual studies, Richard Hardin claims that "a reader of modern criticism learns to live with uncertainty when encountering some of the most ordinary terms […] (like) rituals" (846). Ritual studies have evolved from the late 19th century to our days through different theoretical approaches that illustrate the vitality, longevity, and heterogeneity of this field of studies. This chapter does not aim to cover the entirety of ritual studies or to offer a unified understanding of rituals; it rather aspires to explain the critical literature and methodologies I have employed to create *A Horse Named Shabrang*.

Looking at ancient texts concerning rituals, Plato is one of the first thinkers who pays attention to the role of rituals as a social practice. In *Laws,* he argues that celebrating "normative practices" must happen in every sphere of society, under the supervision of relevant officers, in order to boost a sense of community among citizens (Recco and Sanday 23-30). Normative practices, in his eyes, are collective activities grounded in society and important for enhancing communal spirit. Victor Turner in *The Forest of Symbols* (1969) uses the notion of "prescribed formal behaviors" to explain that such practices stem from shared beliefs (19). For him, a ritual could occur only if it centralized the shared beliefs of the community. Edmound Leach, a British anthropologist, also understands rituals as a normative practice and argues that rituals include "any non-instinctive predictable action or series of action that cannot be justified by a rational means-to-end type of explanation" (Hardin 850). One of the assumptions behind these definitions is that rituals do not stem from logical expectations, but rather from a communal need. Byung-Chul Han, in *The Disappearance of Rituals* (2020), explicates non-rational encounters in rituals as practices

which are free of any thinking, logic and psychology because rituals are places of communal emotions, not involving personal psyche and ego (68). Rituals are means through which members of a community leave their own personal interests behind, following instead the collectivity and listening to their shared needs. In praising communal ties in rituals, Han continues: "the art of life opposes the terror of psychology. We are today held captive by our psychology. The narcissistic retreat into the ego, into psychology, destroys the spaces of play, the fantasy of play. The art of life means escaping oneself in the search for as yet unnamed forms of life and play" (54). Therefore, rituals privilege a bodily involvement which carries its own epistemology and ways of knowing.

Turner qualifies symbols as the units of rituals (*Forest* 19). While drama uses personal characteristics like psychological features of a human role, rituals, in contrast, focus on symbols which are inherently communal. In fact, rituals cannot exist in an isolated, aesthetical, and formalistic context. Rituals need a communal ground to grow (Hardin 847-848). Prior to such studies in symbols and rituals, James Frazer, in his book *The Golden Bough* (1890), (quoted by Hardin) emphasizes the character of symbols and rituals and says that the inherent symbolism of individual communities appears in the ritual they hold. Frazer's opinion about rituals and symbols also appears in Margaret Mead's *Twentieth Century Faith* (1972), when she says that rituals are the repetition of primordial events, which embody repetition of symbols and symbolic acts. This form of representations of historical events are fully capable of going beyond time and space (850-851). Accordingly, Han starts his book by saying that "rituals are symbolic acts. They represent, and pass on, the values and orders on which a community is based. They bring forth a community without communication; today, however, communication without community prevails. Rituals are constituted by symbolic perception" (1).

The importance and direct correlation between rituals and symbols led me to study further the semiotics and mythology of rituals, which played an important role in the dramaturgical methodology of *A Horse Named Shabrang.* This dramaturgy aimed at evoking collective emotions for both performers and audience.

Arnold Van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage* (1909) popularizes the phrase "rite of passage" to address the transitional feature of rituals (vii-viii). Later, Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process: Structure and anti-Structure* (1969) probes how rituals forge the unique experience of going beyond the ordinary perception of everyday life and popularizes the term "communitas" (94). Both Van Gennep and Turner believe that rituals are liminal spaces in between ordinary life, and that they have different phenomenal perceptions of time and space. Turner also posits that in rituals everybody is equal and there is not any superiority of one over another. In Turner's eyes, liminal spaces are "anti-structures" against the "structure" of ordinary life (*Ritual Process* 128).

Different scholars have had different views to what is the function of such liminalities in society. For V. Turner, liminal spaces are inherently anti-structural, a fact that contributes to the equality and redressing of social ruptures. He also introduces a sort of "reversal rituals" which tend to switch temporarily the social roles (*Ritual Process* 166). In general, Turner believes that rites are a kind of remedy to redress and rebound social ruptures, whether occasionally as it happens during wartime or periodically like it occurs during recurring feasts. Similarly, Mikhail Bakhtin in his book *Rabelais and His World* (1940) focuses on power-relations and describes such public feasts as grotesque resilience from lower class in response to upper class's suppression. He introduces such feasts as temporary utopias, bringing about different perceptions of time and space, wherein all individuals are the same (10). He says that such liminal spaces are popular among lower class people so they can be on the same level as the upper-class people, at least for a short

time. Among other opinions around the liminality of the rituals, René Girard believes that rituals follow a monomyth called "scapegoat." Scapegoat is a symbolic victim who carries the whole guilt of a society. By sacrificing the scapegoat, a society could protect itself from a (probable) catastrophe. Therefore, Girard believes that the liminality of rituals is to change the vectors of violence, rather than solving it (Hardin 857). Additionally, in ritual studies, there are different views regarding the temporal and spatial features of rituals. Jackson Cope (quoted by Hardin) looks at the thresholds of rituals from the perspective of temporal continuity. He says that rituals are the reenactments of established patterns to present the past and link it to the future for the purpose of predetermining it (852). Han also focuses on the essential elements of time and space in rituals but in a different way. He says that today's space and time lack solid structures and do not have any sense of slowness. This causes people to not settle in space and in time because they must constantly work to make a living due to the pressure of the economic system. The lack of a solid structure of time and space makes people not feel at home in the world. He sees rituals as a remedy because rituals cause us to linger in time and space, to feel at home in the universe. The sense of feeling at home stems from the repetition of symbols which have been carrying temporal and spatial values throughout history (1-3).

Since the matter of time and space is fundamental in holding rituals, I would like to mention the names of three thinkers who have had a decisive influence on my understanding of time and space: Albert Einstein, Gaston Bachelard and Henri Bergson. Einstein's "general relativity" (1915) proves that time and space are organically tied. They are an entangled entity generated by gravity, which determines the human perception of time-space. Einstein's theory helped me understand the interdependency between time and space. I used this idea in *A Horse Named Shabrang* where I played with space-time as a fluid entity. Bachelard is also crucial in my understanding of space

since he links the matter of space to our perception. In his book, *The Poetics of Space* (1955), he defines the term cosmos which is discursive in different situations. For small children, the cosmos may be limited to their home, but then it slowly becomes bigger to include the roads to school, the playground, etc. (26-27). And this could apply to the cosmology of human beings from primitive humans' caves to twenty-first century humans who can appreciate the limitlessness of the universe. Time for Bergson has a similar ontology. In *Time and Free Will* (1889), he argues that the human perception of time could be heterogeneous and phenomenal if grasped through sensory input (11-18). It is important to combine these three fundamental ideas of space and time because 'where' and 'when' we are now are not independent questions; they are rather entangled within each other and they are fluid, which makes them a variable matrix. It has been very helpful to play with space-time as a discourse in *A Horse Named Shabrang.*

The alchemy of rituals, as thresholds and liminal spaces, tends to heal and remedy crises. One of the main themes in *A Horse Named Shabrang* is what Richard Schechner calls "transformance" (*Performance Theory* 117). He understands the act of transformance in rituals as a change which switches vectors of existing streams toward a desirable track. Transformation could occur for a situation or for a celebrant. It functions as a healer to avoid catastrophe. Schechner maintains that rituals could help people get through hard situations (*Performance Studies* 52). Depending on the context and the culture of a ritual, the forms of these transformations vary; it could be an elevation, a sacrifice, or a degradation. Turner knows this kind of ritual as non-cyclical or occasional (*Ritual Process* 167). As Erika Fischer-Lichte argues in *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual,* sacrifice is one of the oldest rituals by which humans violently transform or elevate their current situation to a higher level, or a means to escape a hardship (31). By combining Schechner's and Fischer-Lichte's views, we can conclude that sacrifice is a form of transformance to redress a

crisis. Girard also discusses sacrificial rituals that follow the scapegoat pattern: someone who is chosen to be sacrificed and undergoes the communal wrath to rescue and save the community from adversity (*Violence* 83). Similarly, Han says that:

> Archaic societies do not make a sharp distinction between life and death. Death is an aspect of life, and life is only possible in symbolic exchange with death. Rituals of initiation and sacrifice are symbolic acts which regulate numerous transitions from life to death. Initiation is a second birth, following upon death, that is, the end of a phase of life. The relationship between life and death is characterized by reciprocity. (51)

Today, sacrifice conjures up a vision of bloody violence which stands against twenty-first century values. Humans no longer hold literal sacrificial rituals, but symbolic sacrifices are still metaphorically used. Schechner, for instance, links transformation to trance in well-known social rituals. Trance is, as he says, the bodily demonstration of transformation (*Performance Studies* 72). Therefore, falling into a trance and leaving the self behind is a bodily metaphor for sacrificing the self for the sake of community. Drawing on such a transformation in ritualistic performances, Schechner believes that there should be a change in conditions and among performers. He maintains that this transformation passes through three conditions: should happen here and now, should entail "irrevocable acts and exchanges," and it should involve some sacrifice on the part of both the performers and spectators. Then there will be a new dimension (*Performance Theory* 58). The matter of transformation was a main idea in *A Horse Named Shabrang* and this subject will be explained later in chapter six.

Within the Cambridge School of Anthropology, J. G. Frazer, J. E. Harrison, G. Murry, and F. M. Cornford believed that there is an interdependence between myth, dramatic narratives and

rituals (Hardin 846). In fact, they looked at rituals as the origin of drama. Although this view got refuted later by scholars like Gerald Else in his influential book titled *Origins and Early Form of Greek Tragedy* (1957), the connections between mythology, literature, drama, and rituals have always been abundant.

One of the most famous discussions around rituals and theatre is the philosophical investigations by Nietzsche into the definition of Tragedy. He establishes a correspondence between rituals, nature, and the Dionysian spirit. Not only does he believe that drama is not stemming from rituals; he maintains that it is its antithesis. For him tragedy comes from the chorus and its worship of Dionysus. He says that tragedy is not the story of the hero on the *skene*, but rather the original singing and dancing of the chorus to honor the god of revelry. The story of the hero, in contrast, comes from the Apollonian rationality of civilization which "dreams" about the future and fights for idealism. For Nietzsche there is a sort of being-in-the-moment in the most ritualistic part of tragedies, because the members of the chorus do not project or plan for any triumphant and idealistic future. They worship Dionysus, the god of revelry, love and passion, and warn the hero to stop being ideal and rejoin the principle of nature and community. The notion of the present time and being-in-the-moment expressed by the chorus reminds us that the time in rituals unfolds in the here-and-now (*Birth* 76-86). The past and the future follow the rules of being-in-the-moment. That is why every sense of social distinction gets discarded through the anti-structural communitas of rituals or the carnivalesque utopias. While praising the communal and ritualistic element of tragedy, available through the chorus, Nietzsche sees humans as a part of the whole existence and the dithyrambic chorus as an invitation to join in the ecstatic dance and singing with satyrs. He knows rapture and ecstasy in direct correlation with nature and Dionysus (22).

Sondra Fraleigh's *Back to the Dance Itself* (2018) helped me to link performing arts to rituals. It also shaped my conception of the holistic body and its correspondence with its surroundings. While she does not explicitly talk about rituals and community-based dances, she does focus on the way the body reintegrates and establishes a rapport with its surroundings. She criticizes the way modernity once defined the body and reduced it into mind and limbs. She employs phenomenology and applies the term "lifeworld," coined by E. Husserl, to embody the inspirations deriving from the surrounding world, cosmos, and ecology. She employs Husserl's term "lived body" to define the body holistically and to link it to its world (22-23). Accordingly, I applied such a view to rituals, and I made a ritual formula: "I celebrate rituals, therefore I am." This was inspiring for me to lead the performers in *A Horse Named Shabrang*. By using this formula, I tried to develop characters of the piece which will be explained in the fifth chapter.

Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) did play an important role in my understanding of collective perception, specifically how community perception is different from individual perception. Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly celebrate rituals or communal ceremonies, however, he addresses co-existence to define being in relation to others and surroundings. He says that memory starts recalling when the body is exposed to others or to the past. In other words, the body starts actively feeling co-existence or a communal way of perception in relation to others, and that allows it to go beyond itself (307). He establishes a distinction between existence, which is attributed to individuals in isolation, and co-existence, which defines individuals on a collective ground. Symbols, shared beliefs, and collective historical memories are active characters in rituals and they resonate with the term co-existence in the phenomenological philosophy of Merleau-Ponty.

The philosophy of ethics has also led me to focus on the ritualistic aspects of performing arts. One of the important thinkers who has shaped my understanding of ethics and morality has been Emanuel Levinas (1906-1995). Levinas has not directly focused on the role of rituals in bounding and rebounding ethics in societies, however, his definition of ethics resembles the social role of rituals. William Large claims that Levinas saw humans' relation to one another as the final point of their life: "It is this responsibility that makes me 'me' and not just one item amongst many" (79). He maintains that the vector of individuality is being-toward-others, not "being-towards-death." Levinas prioritizes the relationship between people and says that people's responsibility to each other is fundamental. For him, it is the social correspondence, reciprocity and responsibility to each other that mark the journey of the self from birth to death.

To locate social relationships above individual desires resonates in Han's words when he sets an example to show that respect to community goes beyond life and death. Han says that members of a ritualistic society are ready to devote themselves to their community. Opponents in a battle, even in the bloodiest wars and duels, prioritize rituals of war rather than merely try to eliminate the enemy. For example, in traditional duels, opponents oblige their responsibilities in holding an honorable fight, and never cheat to save their lives (69-75).

I come from a culture which is still more or less ritualistic. There are lots of rites, rituals, ceremonies and social dramas in Iran which have been influencing me as a theatre practitioner since childhood. My immediate experience of being in such liminal spaces, sacrifices, trance and ecstatic dances fuel my enthusiasm and knowledge about rituals. If I were to simply categorize Iranian rituals, I would say there are two types of rituals: 1. Public ceremonies and feasts; 2. Religious rituals. However, sometimes it is hard to make a clear distinction between the two. In the realm of religious rituals, it is even harder to determine what faith is driving a specific ritual.

Iran has been a fertile ground for Abrahamic religions as well as non-Abrahamic religions like Zurvanism, Mithraism, Zarathustrianism, and Messianism. Here is a list of major changes in the faith and culture of Iran, each of which has had a major influence on what rituals Iranians are holding today:

1. The culture of the primitive residents of an unnamed plateau which would later be called Iran

2. Aryans' residing around 1500 BCE and naming the plateau as Iran

3. Greek conquest by Alexander in 334 BCE for almost two centuries

4. Arabian's conquest in 633 CE and the beginning of the dominance of Islam in Iran

5. Mongolian conquest in 1219 CE by Genghis Khan and their dominance for more than one century.

Therefore, the remediation of past rituals accounts for numerous contemporary religious rituals. According to my personal experience there are three types of religious rituals in Iran. I borrow Han's terms (47) and call them:

1. Strong rituals in which celebrants play with their life and death

2. Weak rituals in which celebrants are involved through communal expressions and collective emotions, as it happens during communal mourning

3. Pilgrimages in which pilgrims attempt to adhere to prescriptive formalities.

Bahram Beyzai is an influential Iranian theorist and practitioner of Iranian traditional performances. In his 1965 book نمایش در ایران (Plays in Iran), he introduces types of Iranian traditional carnivals, rituals, comedies, and all sorts of public feasts from pre-Islamic era to the present. He says that Iranians have been celebrating their archetypes through rituals for millennia. One of them, which has been remediated into different forms from pagan cultures and pre-

Zarathustra's era, is the archetype of oppressed people. Before the emergence of Islamic faiths, Iranians used to hold *Siavoshan* (*Savushun or Souvashan),* a ritual in which Siavash, the Iranian archetype of truth and oppressed people, used to be praised (I will explain the story of Siavash in chapter three since he is the rider of Shabrang). This ritual is no longer performed in Iran, but there are extant documents from people who witnessed it, and it features in Beyzai's book in a similar form as in *Ta'zieh*, also called *Tazia.* Beyzai says that *Tazia* is probably the remediated form of *Siavoshan. Tazia* is the Islamic form of a ritual mourning for the murder of Hussain, the grandson of Mohammad the prophet. In general, in both *Tazia* and *Siavoshan* all three forms of Iranian religious rituals exist. I have witnessed it many times.

Now, I will address the ontology of ritual which I used to create *A Horse Named Shabrang* (In this thesis, I will refer to the following topics under the title of six-part ontology):

- Rituals are, ethically and structurally, communal necessities. They are to rebound collective ties among members of a community or society, and they are to remedy (or avoid) communal ruptures.
- Rituals raise collective emotions. Collective emotions are the opposite side of the individual psyche in isolation. They regenerate the feeling of being at home, even in public sites. Unlike individual psyche and psychological feelings, they connect interiority and exteriority.
- Rituals are systematic repetitions of primordial acts which could be interpreted as symbolic acts. They revolve around, and evolve from, shared beliefs among members of the same community. While society's power relations bring about different social classes and hierarchies, rituals tend to unify and redefine the society as a whole.

- Rituals do not happen in a vacuum. Celebrants and witnesses are not detached from their ethnography. Rituals are primarily bound to the cosmos or the nature that the members have been inhabiting and growing in. In other words, members of a community praise the principle of their nature through symbols and symbolic acts. Symbols are objectifications of the cosmos (habitat) around us.
- The topography of rituals locates them above ordinary time and space. This being-beyond resembles bodily raptures, trance dances and ecstasy.
- Celebrants and witnesses cross the boundaries of individuality during the liminality of rituals. Each member holistically co-exists in a community that transcends individual existence.

2.2. Ritualization in Theatre

Through my investigations in rituals, my main problem was, still is, and probably will be how to ritualize a performance. *A Horse Named Shabrang* was a serious step toward finding a solution through my own practice. The avant-garde theatre of the twentieth century fueled my interest in ritualizing performing arts and it was a great resource on how to make ritualistic performances. The main ideas and suggestions that influenced my process of theatrical ritualization were Antonin Artaud's cruel theatre, Jerzy Grotowski's relationship between performers and audience, Richard Schechner's performance theory, Allan Kaprow's happenings, Pina Bausch's dance-theatre, Living Theatre's style of spontaneity, and Jerome Savary's theatre of provocation.

Something that switched my interest from conventional theatre to ritualistic performances is undoubtedly Antonin Artaud's rhetorical question regarding dramatic theatre:

> I am well aware that a language of gestures and postures, dance and music is less able to define a character, to narrate man's thoughts, to explain conscious states clearly and exactly, than spoken language. But whoever said theatre was made to define a character, to resolve conflicts of a human, emotional order, of a present-day, psychological nature such as those which monopolise current theatre? (*Theatre* 30)

Antonin Artaud believes that theatre should be ritualistic. "Theatre is first ritualistic and magical, in other words bound to powers, based on religion, on actual beliefs, and whose effectiveness is the very practice and the expression of a hunger for magical and spiritual manifestation" (*Artaud* 138). In his first manifesto, he says that "we are aiming at nothing less than a return to the human or inhuman sources of the theatre, thereby to resuscitate it completely" (*Theatre* 34). He believes that theatre and its double, life itself, must surround the audience and that the performers should render the most hidden secrets in their unconscious (*Performance Theory* 75). Artaud believes that encountering life is inherently a violent act, therefore theatre should show the naked cruelty of this encounter, which to him is like the encounter of humans with the plague. "Like the plague, theatre is a crisis resolved either by death or cure" (*Artaud* 131). He maintains that theatre is inherently cruel:

> This cruelty is not sadistic or bloody [...] I do not systematically cultivate horror. The word cruelty must be taken in its broadest sense, not in the physical predatory sense usually ascribed to it [...] I use the term cruelty in the sense of hungering after life, cosmic strictness, relentless necessity, in the Gnostic sense of a living vortex engulfing darkness, in the sense of the inescapably necessary pain without which life could not continue. (*Theatre* 79-80)

The cruelty of life must be carried by the ritualistic spirit of theatre. Artaudian cruelty has been inspiring for me to respond to cosmic violences through *A Horse Named Shabrang.*

Jerzi Grotowski (1933-1999) focuses on the relationship between performers and audience. Through his Poor Theatre, he is a master of redesigning theatre again and again for different productions. For example, the audience knows that they would watch *The Constant Prince* being performed over a wall or become guests of *Dr. Faustus* (*Poor Theatre* 97 and 79). Through the notion of paratheatre, he has the ambition of merging performers and audience into one united being. He wants his projects to build communitas. He does this in *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* (1973), where he crafts a paratheatrical form that blurred any distinction between performers and audience (145). Drawing on his acting approach, Grotowski claims that he teaches nothing to his actors, instead he leads them to weaken their body resistance and eliminate the gap between their inner and outer impulses (*Poor Theatre* 16). This approach is also evident in his audience engagement because he believes that theatre is "what takes place between spectator and actor" (32). He eliminates all obstacles to reach the essence of theatre. Schechner explains that rituals for Grotowski are meant to achieve the purest being of the self in a communal stream, which he defines as confrontation (*Performance Theory* 49). Grotowski's view towards character creation and audience interaction inspired my ritualistic performance, which I will be discussing in the fifth chapter.

Richard Schechner's *Performance Theory* (1988) was helpful to me as I focused my research interest in performance. I have encountered various forms of historical and cultural performances and experienced how they often merge in an intercultural performance context. Schechner's book helped me to connect these heterogeneous experiences and interests. Through his models of performance, I found that ritualistic performance is a place to satisfy my interests.

He defines a spectrum, what he calls the model of "the Fan" (*Performance Theory*, 2005, XVI), to locate all forms of performance in a system. This spectrum starts from Rites and Ceremonies and continues to Shamanism, Eruption and Resolution of crisis, Performance in everyday life, Sports, Entertainments, Play, Art making process, and it ends with Ritualization. Schechner says that the tendency toward bringing rituals in performing arts arises in the 1960s. Practitioners tend to bring the element of "efficacy" of rituals into performances, as seen in the ritual dances by Anna Halprin. Therefore, the goal of ritualistic performances is being efficacious rather than entertaining (*Performance Theory* 122-123).

Allen Kaprow changes the disciplinary field of performance by bringing forth non-human performers, like the ice in *Fluids* (1967). In her article "Happeners…Don't Merely Dig the Scene, They Make It," Laura Routledge argues that Kaprow challenges the arts' dominant aesthetics and their lack of social impacts. Routledge quotes Peter Bürger saying that the movement of the avant-garde in the twentieth century is a critique of the distance that conventional aesthetics had kept from daily life (97). Routledge maintains that Kaprow intertwines aesthetics with everyday life. Kaprow's happenings pioneers avant-gardist forms and non-narrative performances in public sites. *Fluids* is a happening that centers around huge ice structures that are installed in different places in Los Angeles and that take three days to melt. The duration of the performance is the time it takes for the ice to dissolve. The performance starts with ice that turns into water and finally into vapor (Schechner and Kaprow 154). Kaprow is a visual artist and engages the non-human character of ice to show the heterogeneity of time and space. For me, this piece connects to rituals because the efficacy of this performance, rooted in heterogeneous perceptions of temporality and spatiality, transforms everyday life in a city. It is capable of transforming the discourse of a city for people who are used to experiencing the routine of urban life. Moreover, it poses a fundamental question:

what is the difference between organic and non-organic, human and non-human/other-than-human? I think this basic question has a lot to do with rituals and allows us to consider objects and symbols as characters.

There are three key points in Pina Bausch's *TanzTheater* that could be instrumental in ritualizing performing arts: her collaborative process of production; her notions of physicality and the holistic body; and the alogical structure of her pieces. At the beginning of her career, she used to choreograph each movement ahead of rehearsal, but she eventually realized that she was not interested in following set plans. Instead, she began creating performances with no predefined plan or idea, following what the whole group was simultaneously creating. Gradually, she shaped whatever her company needed for their dance on a collective basis (Climenhaga 48-49). For Bausch the body itself is a material to narrate. The body is a dynamic organism in flux, constantly traversing between subjectivity and objectivity (Bausch 219). She knows dance beyond techniques and is more fascinated with where the movements come from than the movements themselves. For her, movements have roots in our real life and our being, not in techniques (Climenhaga 54). Bausch's actors show themselves with no pretense. They do not take on a role, but rather express their own social roles and memories through their bodies. She believes that in dance-theatre the point of the narrative is not that of representing a story with logical causality, which is with an opening, middle and end. For example, in *Palermo Palermo* (1989), she develops the physicality and *mise-en-scène* deriving from the performers' personal experiences of the city of Palermo (Bausch 223).

Now I will discuss improvisation and review the sources which contributed to my understanding of improvisation as an essential technique for ritualizing performances. Schechner makes a distinction between rehearsal and preparation as he discusses Peter Brook's ritualistic

experiences in Africa. Schechner explains that preparation leaves freedom to improvise while rehearsals are about rigidly fitting into the agenda of a show. Rituals do not need rehearsals to minutely arrange the setting, they only need preparation so that the performers can partake in the event by their ability of improvisation. Therefore, rituals and ritualistic performances need preparation more than rehearsals, and these preparations are important to activate physicality in a collective work (*Performance Theory* 151). Since rituals are about bodily involvement in a collective experience, it is important for a ritualistic performer to embody improvisation. The importance of improvisation in ritualistic performances led me to explore it further.

I familiarized myself with improvisation through Viola Spolin's book, *Improvisation for the Theater* (1963) and Charna Halper's *Truth in Comedy* (1994), and I also had the chance to engage with improvisation in a practical way. Working with Prof. Snelling exposed me to improvisation in every possible way. For example, Michael Reinhart and Lin Snelling are constantly prepared and ready to improvise; it seems they have found the key to improvise in a devising context because of the long years of working together. An important point in Prof. Snelling's classes that influenced my approach in creation was taking support from existing sources in the room.

Julian Beck and Judith Malina, founders of Living Theatre, are among the avant-garde practitioners who use improvisation to establish a relationship with their audiences. In *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces* (1947), they create collective and improvisational pieces to inspire their audience politically and socially (*Living Theater* 00:03:03- 00:03:22). "The dramatic talent of Living Theatre is not in histrionics, but in the ability to provoke, to engender, to agitate, to disturb" (00:01:53 - 00:02:04). With regard to improvisation, their spontaneous creation and immediate interaction with the audience are significant because they raise the sense of efficacy. The subject

of efficacy in their work could be interpreted as a deep engagement with their audiences to expose them to political and social issues.

Speaking of being efficacious in performance, many avant-garde creators are not interested in conveying any message, generating any Aristotelian catharsis, or changing any society. This line of avant-garde theatre sparks by Artaud aimed at the audience's unconscious (Roose-Evans 74-90). Jérôme Savary in theatre and Anna Halprin in dance are among avant-garde practitioners who explicitly try to engender a sense of ecstasy among their performers and spectators. Savary is a French-Argentinean director of avant-garde theatre who tries to thrill the audience, making them frantic and forcing them to lose any social guise they carry with them every day (Knapp 92-96). Anna Halprin is a practitioner who believes that dance must be efficacious and disseminate ecstasy among participants. She describes it as an ecstatic rhythm which blows into a community of dancers with shared purposes (*Performance Studies* 83-84).

A few years ago, I was looking for a methodology involving inclusive instructions for ritualizing performances, but I could not find it. After a while, I noticed that I had to create a dramaturgical methodology that would allow me to make ritualistic performances. This was one of the motivations that contributed to the creation of *A Horse Named Shabrang*. Here is the list I have extracted from rituals studies, thoughts, and practitioners' works who have been, directly or indirectly, concerned with rituals and ritualizing performances. I will refer to these methods with the title of Fifteen-part Methodology:

- The process of making ritualistic performances is collective. A ritualistic performance is not limited to the show itself. It is a process of preparation, rehearsal, devising and establishing a good rapport among the creative team, which could extend even to future

creations. In theatre, the closest approach to creating a ritualistic performance could be devised-theatre.

- The audience is an inseparable part of ritualistic performances. Unlike what happens in conventional theatre, the audience is not a passive presence who merely watches. Each spectator needs to partake in the show and connect to the performers and the other spectators.
- To make a unified community, a ritualistic performance should evolve from, and revolve around, shared concerns. The shared concerns could be shared beliefs, emotions or any other value which could engage the audience from the very beginning of the show.
- There is also a need for establishing commonalities particularly in an intercultural ritualistic performance. A ritualistic performance could draw on cultural commonalities that appeal to a wide range of people. For example, a commonality could be criticizing violence, a shared belief that goes beyond cultural concerns and that most people would agree to uphold. Commonalities could be represented through universal symbols, familiar myths and narratives, and shared emotions.
- A ritualistic performance needs to heal a crisis. This crisis is either a real existing crisis, or an artificial crisis which is created and escalated throughout the show.
- Ritualistic performances are generally tragic. Rituals used to deal with cosmic cruelties, therefore it seems fair to inject a controlled violence into the piece to raise the tension in the room.
- Transformation is fundamental in ritualistic performances. As rituals stand on singularities, momentums and thresholds, there is always an initiation ceremony in ritualistic

performances in which a thing or situation transforms into another. In fact, to complete a transformation means to fully realize a ritualistic performance.

- The matter of organic and non-organic is different in ritualistic performances. There is a blurred distinction between what is alive and what is not in such shows. Objects are not merely decorative. They are narrative themselves. For example, symbols are organic images of our surroundings with powerful backgrounds and souls which are essential in ritualistic performances. They could function like characters as well as humans do.
- In a ritualistic performance, space-time should be an extension of the people's perception of their cosmos. Space-time is an understanding of where and when we are. It must not disconnect itself from the outer world during a ritualistic performance. It needs to build upon the people's perception of temporality and spatiality.
- Playing with space-time, in ritualistic performances helps establish different layers of rhythms and tempos. Tension, slowness and repetition are three features of playing with space-time. As rituals deal with crisis, space-time in rituals could resemble rush and tension. As rituals bring up primordial events, space-time finds a sense of repetition. Since rituals tend to linger in space-time, they contribute to slowness. Therefore, in ritualistic performances, playing with the matrix of space-time contributes to different layers of tempos and rhythm which is fundamental to hold the spectators' attention for the duration of the ritualistic performance.
- To lead performers in a ritualistic performance requires a comprehension of the holistic body. A body which is not merely created of mind plus limbs. A body which is unified, not only in itself, but also in its coexistence with other elements. The body in rituals and ritualistic performances is a fluid entity easily diffusing in space-time. Lines, words,

sounds, gestures, movements should be the production of a unified and homogenized being, which is the holistic body. Such a diffusion tends to be tangible and visible in trance dances, ecstatic presences, and raptures.

- In ancient cultural traditions, like the Iranian minstrelsy, poems and music are two sides of the same coin; they define each other. Such a relationship exists in rituals between physicality and music. In a ritualistic performance, movement and dance, in the form of solos, duets, trios and so on, go hand in hand with music.
- While there is a dramaturgy in ritualistic performances, the score must leave room for improvisation since spontaneity is fundamental in the creation of ritualistic performances.
- Unlike conventional theatre, rituals have no message. They are a pure form of embodiment which is not dedicated to any pedagogy, ideology or propaganda. Instead, a ritualistic performance seeks to have an efficacy that prioritizes unity and homogeneity in a community of performers and witnesses.
- The matter of character, in the sense of Stanislavski's system and method acting, is invalid in rituals and, accordingly, in ritualistic performances. There is no role to play. There is no pretense. Of course, performers could symbolize other beings, but no one plays a character like it happens in a drama. Performers' memory, body archives, and improvisations are the main sources of what they perform.

These instructions will be exemplified by *A Horse Named Shabrang*, in the following chapters, and conclusion.

3. Dramaturgy

Dramaturgy exists in every single part of this production by all members of the creative team and is imbricated with its directing, score making, performers' creativity and methodology. *A Horse Named Shabrang* was based on devising, collective improvisation, and workshops. It never used a dramaturg in the process of the creation, but every discussion about the piece happened through a dramaturgical point of view. This chapter aims to discuss score making, interculturality and adaptation, curation, and audience engagement.

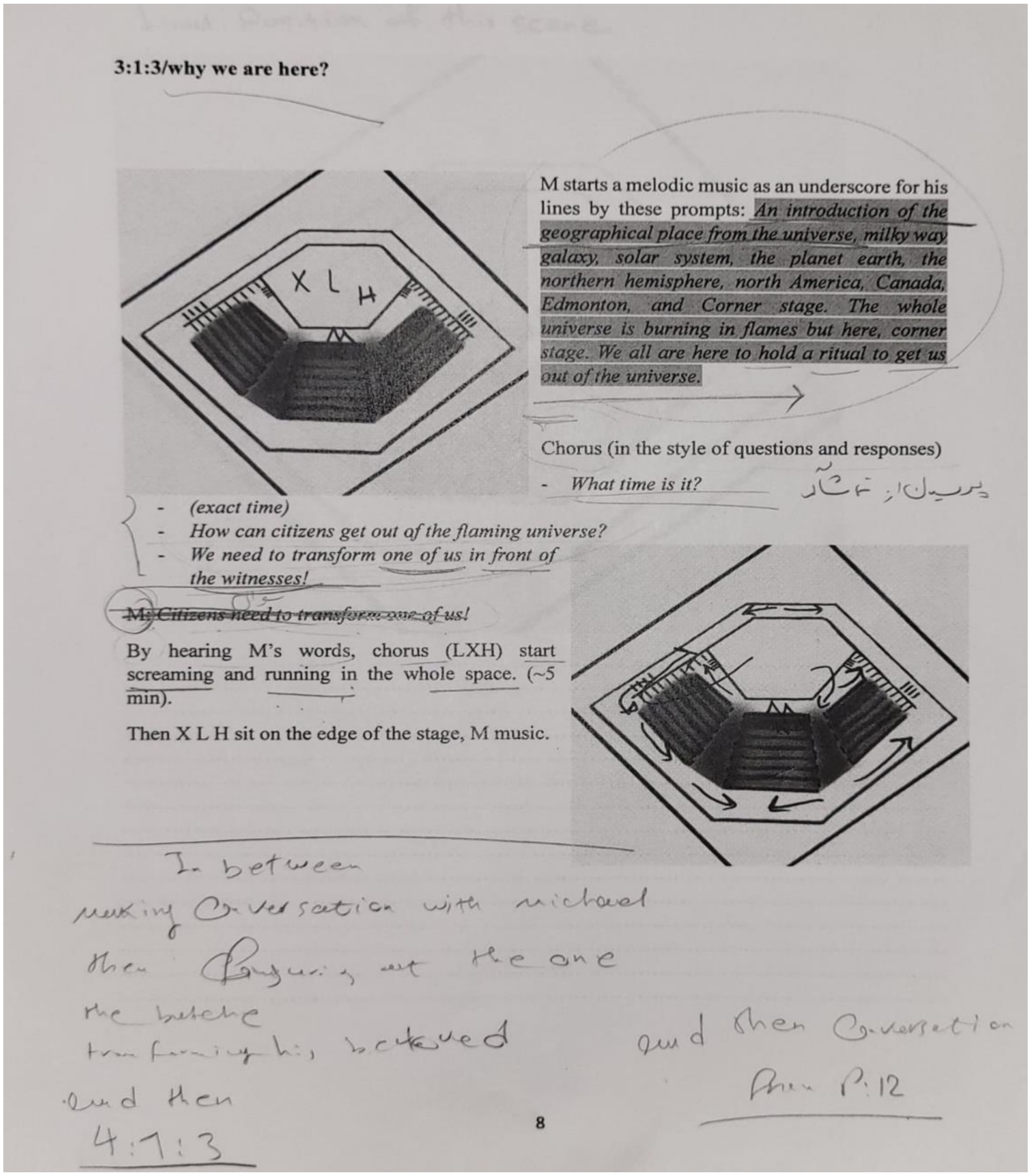
Here is a summary of the myth of Shabrang and Siavash, extracted from *Shahnameh* by Ferdowsi: One night during a royal banquet, queen Sudabeh looked at Siavash the prince with awe and admiration, praising his beauty and stature in her heart. (Whether Soudabeh is Siavash's real mother is not mentioned in the original text. There are disagreements between commentators; some say that Sudabeh is Siavash's mother, some say that she is his stepmother.) She then said to Siyavash, "I feel you have something hidden in your heart that you want to share with me. Feel free to share your secrets with me." Upon hearing this, he was confused and stood silent. Sudabeh then continued and said that "Anyone who sees you from afar would faint from your beauty." Siyavash understood Sudabeh's intention and did not respond, lowering his head because his pure nature did not allow him to have any special feelings toward her mother/stepmother. However, Sudabeh continued, saying to Siyavash, "If you obey my command, I will give you whatever which satisfies you. I now stand before you with my beauty, offering myself to you." Siyavash blushed with shame and prayed to God to protect him from temptation. He then replied to Sudabeh, "I will not betray my father, Kavous the great, and will not share a bed with you. You are a mother to me, and I cannot love you." Sudabeh warned Siavash, "If you disobey my command and do not share a bed with me, I will disgrace you before your father, the king." Angered, Siavash declared, "I will

never betray my father and will not share a bed with you." When Sudabeh realized that Siavash would never share a bed with her, she tore her clothes, scratched her face with her nails, screamed, and pulled out her hair, crying out that she was in love only with Siavash and had no feelings for his father. As the palace gathered around them due to Sudabeh's screams, she found herself humiliated and exposed, so she decided to lie to everyone, claiming that Siavash had intended to rape her. When the king heard this news, he preferred to believe the words of his wife, Queen Sudabeh, and ordered that Siavash be executed. Eventually, the king, who was also known for his madness and inconsiderate decisions, decided to listen to his wise ministers and ordered his son to be tested. The ministers then suggested to the king that a fire be kindled, and that Siavash be asked to pass through it. If he survived, it would mean that Siavash was innocent, and if he burned, he would have received the punishment for his actions. One night, Kavus carried out this plan, and the innocent Siavash, with his horse Shabrang, sped through the flames like lightning and emerged unharmed from the fire, proving that truth had triumphed over falsehood. The king then punished Sudabeh for her actions. (*شاهنامه فردوسی*، گذر کردن سیاوش از آتش)

3.1. Score Making

"In the performing arts, we identify a score as a set of instructions, guidelines or tasks related to the creation of a performance that serves as the starting point for improvisation or as a communication tool for generating movement and action. It can assume multiple forms, from oral to written, from drawn to painted, and from analogue to digital" (Franco and Clotilde). I gave performers the outline of the physicality, scripts and sounds so they could improvise freely within the dramaturgical framework I had created. I used numerous copies of a geometrical map of the venue to craft the initial score (a sample of them has been attached below). I drew vectors on the

maps for each scene, showing performers' trajectories, language prompts and aural vibrations for each scene.


3:1:3/why we are here?

M starts a melodic music as an underscore for his lines by these prompts: *An introduction of the geographical place from the universe, milky way galaxy, solar system, the planet earth, the northern hemisphere, north America, Canada, Edmonton, and Corner stage. The whole universe is burning in flames but here, corner stage. We all are here to hold a ritual to get us out of the universe.*

Chorus (in the style of questions and responses)

- *What time is it?*
- *(exact time)*
- *How can citizens get out of the flaming universe?*
- *We need to transform one of us in front of the witnesses!*

~~*M: Citizens need to transform one of us!*~~

By hearing M's words, chorus (LXH) start screaming and running in the whole space. (~5 min).

Then X L H sit on the edge of the stage, M music.

8

I used the myth of Shabrang the same way that Ralph Lemon used Aeschylus' *The Oresteia* to make *Geography* (1997). Ralph Lemon performed a dance-theatre project, focusing on race and exile in a context of Afro-Americans' enslavement and diaspora. He says that: "I used the whole Oresteia as an invisible narrative element, not for the eyes of an audience, but to guide and give a

Western epic score to my more important concerns with African and African American unity and disunity in art and physical performance politics" (42). Similarly, the original story of Shabrang was a hidden narrative within our preparations and rehearsals, intended to infuse a resonance of Persian myths and construct the choreography upon that foundation. For Ralph Lemon, the main concern was a modern socio-political issue. For me, the main concern was performing a contemporary ritualistic performance.

Rehearsals provided a collective dramaturgy, and the collective dramaturgy generated the final score. In the final score, we developed elements like spontaneity in performance, interactions among performers, and audience engagement in order to shape the ritualism of the piece. In the second period of rehearsals, we kept working on the collective score that we had crafted in the first period of rehearsals. This version provided enough room for improvisation, and we knew that we had reached the essence of our piece.

3.2. Intercultural Adaptation of an Iranian Myth

Being ritualistic in *A Horse Named Shabrang* has no relation to choosing a mythological feature. As discussed in the second chapter, the most recent ritual studies downplay the connection between rituals and other forms of expressions like myths, narratives, drama and literature. The reason I decided to choose an Iranian myth is firstly to show respect to my culture, land, and people; secondly, to use it as an invisible narrative to craft the score; thirdly to explore how to reactivate myths.

Most of our audience members were not Persian/Iranian, and I did not attempt to educate them about the origins of the Shabrang myth. The main narrative of the work was that 'the universe is burning, and we can survive by means of a sacred horse.' Shabrang was, as Patrice Pavis in *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* argues, "an integrating model of all experience." Pavis

believes that avant-garde performances used myths, rituals and anthropology to perform interculturally in the most diverse cultures, beyond historical, cultural and literary forms (2). There are many fables around horses in different cultures and Shabrang could be an appropriate universal symbol. Pavis maintains that such an approach to anthropological materials exists in the works of avant-garde practitioners like Eugenio Barba, Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, and Richard Schechner. I wanted to use the myth in the same way.

The source from which I learned about the character of Shabrang is *Shahnameh* (Kings' letters), by Ferdowsi (940-1025). Ferdowsi poetized Iranian myths derived from oral cultures, historical documents, and folk narratives. His role is significant in maintaining Persian myths alive in the cultural imaginary of Iran. In fact, lots of myths like that of Siavash and Shabrang have had a considerable presence in oral storytelling, rituals, and performances due to the work of Ferdowsi. Bahram Beyzai in نمایش در ایران (Plays in Iran) mentions documents that illustrate how such myths are current in the folklore of Persian speaking people.

Joseph Campbell (1904-1987), in his book *The Power of Myth* (1988), discusses the importance of reactivating myths in our era. He believes that the mind/body divide is a product of modernity, and that ancient myths used to synchronize thoughts with the body (87). He and Stanly Keleman argue that mythological narratives are the somatic experiences of human life. Humans' bodies and myths have been evolving through millennia alongside each other. Mythological stories have been revolving around the human body's changes. Therefore, mythological narratives are resources elaborating human conditions in the cosmos (*Myth* 82-83). I think that humans today need to re-establish a connection with their habitats by using their primordial archives, their mythological narratives. In my opinion, today's media and multimedia offer us a fertile terrain to remediate and reactivate old narratives.

A Horse Named Shabrang borrows a mythical horse from Persian narratives and asks him to complete another mission. This piece recalls/conjures the horse to take us out of a cosmic fire. Linda Hutcheon, in *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) says that in the process of adaptation "characters, too, can obviously be transported from one text to another" (11). She defines a spectrum from "fidelity" to "expansions" and says that within the space of expansions an element of a text could enter another text and find new contexts (171). *A Horse Named Shabrang*'s adaptation aimed to expand a mythological horse in a new socio-cultural and artistic context.

Hutcheon argues that adaptation is like a palimpsest which brings forth a dialogue and oscillation between past and present (116 and 122). A palimpsest is a written text on which traces of the previous document are still visible. *A Horse Named Shabrang* is a rewrite on a material which has already existed, a mythological horse. Audiences who were already familiar with Shabrang started a dialogue between their understanding of the horse and *A Horse Named Shabrang*. It made them travel between past and present. Hutcheon maintains that "adaptation is a kind of extended palimpsest and, at the same time, often a transcoding into a different set of conventions. [...] this transcoding entails a change of medium" (33-34). My piece changed the conventions, transposed the horse and decoded its medium into another medium.

The adaptation in *A Horse Named Shabrang* was interpretive. Hutcheon says that adaptation is "an interpretive act of appropriation" (8). My interpretation of the myth turned the focal point from Siavash to Shabrang, the horse of the hero. My interpretation posited that it was Shabrang who took Siavash out through the flames in the fire examination. Persian people believe that it was Siavash's good nature and innocence that helped him prove that he had not slept with his mother. My interpretation says that fire is cruel enough to burn the guilty and the innocent alike. It is the nature of Shabrang that saved Siavash's life and took him out of the flames, fast

enough like wind (I will discuss the four fundamental elements as characters in the fifth chapter). Through my interpretive adaptation I activated a marginal and non-human character existing in Persian myths, Shabrang, and elevated him to the stage of an archetype, a life savior.

Since mythological narratives among Persian people are a source of learning, it is safe to call narratives a medium in Iran. Weekly and daily mosque speeches, café narrations, mentorship and religious schools, and fable recitation are all phenomenological instances of such dynamic culture in Iran. In brief, staging mythical stories is a remediation from oral culture to performance. Quoted in Philip Ausländer's *Liveness,* Marshall McLuhan says that a new medium does not entail adding to or continuing with a previous one. There is always a dialectic between the previous medium and the newer one until the new medium stabilizes itself. And, as Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin say, older media are present in newer media and this interdependency is a remediation (7). *A Horse Named Shabrang* was a performance that remediated a mythical character from ancient literary narratives.

Pavis' *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* talks about "language-body" as a translation of mythic narratives into physicality by intergestural (intercultural gestures) equivalences. His technique, which brings cultural materials into intercultural performances, inherently describes my own approach toward the Shabrang myth. Pavis maintains that this intercultural and intergestural translation should happen along two axes: one looking for the common essence of humanity in the myth, and the other acknowledging its current plurality (149). He discusses a workshop led by Eugenio Barba about the myth of *Faust* where Barba used eastern dancers to embody the western myth of Dr. Faust in an intercultural context (155-173).

> In his re-elaboration of Faust, Barba [...] advised the 'scenario writers' not to enslave themselves to the letter of Goethe's text, but rather to suggest global

> [actantial] narrative situations, broad frames in which action and situation would be clearly readable. Once Barba had selected and defined the general narrative framework, the dancers could concentrate on inventing and fixing the details of plot and text. Due to this synthetic procedure, in the adaptation as in the performance options, the dancers and then the spectators normally and easily identify the overall situations and the unfolding of the narrative, as the dancers inscribe the detail of their improvisation within the broad and firm framework of the narrative macrosequences. Barba's narratological appropriation thus involves restructuring the analytical, gestural codification into a narrative macrostructure with large units, and dissociating, in the *mise en scène* as well as in the spectator's mind, the analytic and coded reading of word and gesture from the global reading of the story. (169)

Barba and his collaborators conclude that re-elaborating Dr. Faust's myth in an intercultural style was feasible through two actions: first, dividing the whole myth of Dr. Faust into some macro units which are universal and not concerning solely with Christianity, as it happens in the original texts by Goethe and Marlow; second, bringing the dance style of the performers to an intergestural mode of movement arising from an intercultural perspective toward language-body (169-170). The first step of my adaptation was to translate the Iranian myth from a micro sequencing story to one macro unit. The macro unit of Shabrang's story was 'this is a horse who could pass through flames.' This macro unit was the starting point to make the score and develop intergestural narratives. It drew on physicality, short scripts, sounds, music, and a part of the horse body (at that time I did not know the part would be a head).

To sum up, the matter of adaptation in the piece has two main ideas: one is the interpretation and modernization of Shabrang; the other is an intercultural adaptation of the character through physicality and intercultural strategies.

3.3. Curation

During the first semester of my program, as I was gathering primary resources for my thesis, I was sure I wanted to work on a ritualistic performance that would incorporate movement, dance, and a Persian subject. Dance and movement were my weak points due to numerous reasons like limited dance opportunities in Iran and my background which was mostly theatrical. So, my supervisors and professors suggested I enroll in movement classes and participate in workshops. The movement and choreography classes that I took, along with other practical courses, made me familiar with contemporary dance and intercultural performance. I started learning about contemporary dance right away and this armed me with a foundational knowledge of physicality.

The workshops I held were one of the main sources from which I extracted and examined many intercultural choreographies and gestures. The central idea was bodily improvisation inspired by four fundamental elements and improvised music. Through the workshops, I learnt other performers' vocabularies of dance and music and I was able to make a collection of gestures and expressions that served my needs. I also got the chance to participate in collective improvisation which helped me lead performers in the rehearsals.

The creative team itself was intercultural, with performers from China, Ukraine, Canada and Iran. Michael is a Canadian musician and composer who had a long experience of improvisation for dance. Lyudmyla is a Ukrainian student and Zhuohao is a Chinese student, and they are both in the PhD program in Performance Studies in the Drama Department at the University of Alberta. Homeyra had not attended the workshops, but she joined the ensemble for

the first rehearsal. She is an Iranian performer with experience in contemporary dance and intercultural performance. Our troupe came from different cultures and countries, just like our audience. This saved me a lot of time because I didn't need to adapt culturally specific vocabularies into an intercultural context. The group itself already had an intercultural background, and we could understand each other right away.

After finalizing the cast, I chose the Corner Stage as my venue. Everything was ready for me to craft a preliminary copy of the score. I just needed to articulate the story and the scenario of the piece *vis a vis* the proxemics of the playing space and the performers' physical vocabularies. The result was: The universe is burning in flames and the five of us, Michael, Kian, Homeyra, Lyudmyla, and Zhuohao, are sheltering in the Corner Stage to perform a ritual to conjure Shabrang who could take us out of the flames. Michael carried the musical rhythm, tempo, and melody of the ritual; Kian prepared an initiation ceremony to summon the horse; Homeyra, as the subject of this initiation ceremony, transformed into the horse; Zhuohao and Lyudmyla facilitated the ceremony. The only thing which was concerning for me was the matter of audience engagement, so I left it unsolved till the rehearsals to find clarity on the issue.

We were supposed to rehearse in two periods, February 20th-27th 2024 and April 29th-May 1st, 2024. We also planned some meetings in between rehearsals to focus on specific sections. During the first period of rehearsals, I invited my supervisors to attend one session and advise me on the piece. Even though I initially thought my score had enough room for improvisation, my supervisors noticed that there was room for more interactivity between the performers. For example, they advised me to be present on stage for the duration of the piece. That is how the second and final score was created. Through those revisions I also found the answer to my question about audiences' engagement, which I will explain later.

By the end of the first period of rehearsals, we formed a thirty-minute piece which was the structure of the work. This piece did have all the building blocks that I was looking for. My supervisors agreed that it had the outline of the work, but it was still too rough, not mature enough. For example, some of the scenes like the marriage ceremony were being performed but not really cohesively linked to the scenes before or after. Some scenes had confusing transitions and didn't allow enough time for the audience to form an opinion before moving on to the next scene. Another problem was that we had lost one of our performers, Lyudmyla, in March. We had to part ways with her due to scheduling issues. I decided to adjust the structure so that it would work as a four-performer piece. I was still performing the one who executes the ritual, Michael was still composing music, Homeyra was still playing the girl who undergoes the initiation ceremony to become a horse, and Zhuohao's performance merged with Lyudmyla's, and she became the only one responsible to prepare the ritual. I rewrote the score with the changes. I scheduled five short rehearsals for building up specific scenes. As I was to play live music twice in the show, I scheduled one rehearsal just with Michael for the purpose of synchronizing our compositions. Similarly, Homeyra and I were to dance a duet, therefore I met with her separately twice. I also scheduled a rehearsal with no music between Homeyra, Zhuohao, and me. Then in the three rehearsals before the show, we curated all scenes to make a one-hour piece.

While I had planned the sequence of the actions, the movement trajectories and the general blocking, the choreography of each part was based on the improvisation of the performers. For the dance pieces, I only gave the performers one instruction regarding the vibration of the dance and my expectation of it. The performers built their dances accordingly from there, and I just refined their improvisations. For example, in the beginning I chose Zhuohao to lead us. I asked her to resemble a horse galloping in a desert, which she improvised based on a Chinese song. Next,

Homeyra and I followed Zhuohao in her style of dancing as a trio. Then we replaced the Chinese song with Michael's composition and adjusted the trio's performance with Michael's song. On another occasion, I asked Michael to lead us through a rhythmical piece he had composed. He asked us to keep his rhythm by gestures like tapping the palms of our hands on our body. Gradually, we transformed the sounds produced by our bodies into vocalizations. Almost all choreographies in the piece were composed this way. Another example is when Homeyra was dancing in the style of a Persian dance, in the marriage ceremony which was a part of her initiation ceremony to transform into the horse. I asked her to start dancing, and I joined her by improvising music with my Shourangiz. We kept playing and dancing till we found our final form.

Composing music in the piece followed a process similar to that of the choreography. The music of the piece was performed by Michael sitting in the auditorium of the Corner Stage, in the first row closest to the stage. I was super lucky to have the company of Michael. Since he has been improvising for dance for decades, all he needs to compose music is to watch a dance. We had many constructive discussions after or during the rehearsals which informed my development of the piece.

3.4. Audience Engagement

Finalizing how to engage the audience was a decisive stage in my dramaturgy since I wanted to impact the spectators. Referring to the six-part ontology discussed in chapter two, I explained that unlike what happens in conventional theatre, audience members in ritualistic performances are not passive attendees who merely watch. Not only do they need to partake in the show, but they should also bond with the performers and other spectators as witnesses sharing a common purpose. I did not engage the spectators merely by physical participation in the piece. The best expression of the audience engagement that occurred in *A Horse Named Shabrang* comes

from Grotowski's definition of theatre: theatre takes place between performer and spectator (*Poor Theatre* 32). The vector of the performance did not start on stage and end in the auditorium. It was rather a bidirectional move remarking the reciprocity between performers and spectators.

Dr. Stefano Muneroni shared his experience as an audience member attending my rehearsal and said that the very beginning, with its screams in different languages and high-tension music, conveyed a sense of danger and the urgence of bringing people from the danger of fire to a sheltering place. He added that the Corner Stage served the piece perfectly because it resembles a cave and a shelter. And since we were each speaking different languages (English, Persian, Chinese, Turkish), we were never fully communicating to all spectators at once. Audience members who did not have access to all the languages spoken on stage needed one another to have a full picture of what was going on. They would only understand some part of the story that was spoken in their own language and needed someone else to understand the rest. That feeling of uncertainty, according to Dr. Muneroni, created a bond between the audience members and ultimately formed an ideal community that needed all of its members to survive. In order to escape the danger of the fire, one had to feel part of a larger group.

As I explained in the six-part ontology, rituals are embodiments with no direct message. They are devoid of pedagogical, ideological or propagandistic objectives. Their function is not to teach or convey messages. Similarly, a ritualistic performance seeks to prioritize unity among members of its community. For that reason, I did not want language to be a means for progression and resolution as it happens in conventional drama. I wanted language to be a means of clarification, alongside physicality, to illustrate the situation of the ritualistic performance. Employing different languages on stage paved the way for a richer experience. Based on the performers' backgrounds we were able to keep conversations in English, Persian, Chinese,

German, French, and Turkish. Later on, when Michael's role changed to solely composing music, we stopped using German and French as these were the languages he spoke.

We had five sections in the piece wherein language, alongside the physicality, served to clarify the situation of the ritualistic performance: 1. The opening, where we brought the audience from the hallways of the building to the corridors of the Corner Stage, and finally inside the theatre, conveying that the outside was not safe. This communication occurred in the style of vehement clamors, consisting of the four languages; 2. This part included brief conversations about the Shabrang's narrative. We drew on four languages to provide some basic background about Shabrang being a character in a fable. The lexicon in this section consisted of Once-upon-a-time, King, Queen, Prince, Guilty, Innocent, Huge Fire, Horse, and finally Shabrang; 3. My monologue, which traced the audience's place from the universe to the Milky Way Galaxy, to planet Earth, Canada, Edmonton, University of Alberta, and Corner Stage, was a form of *mise en abyme*. As I explained earlier, rituals and ritualistic performances are the extension of their habitat. They are not latched onto their environment; they are a continuum and extension of it. I tried to keep this connection and extension through the language as well as through the way I addressed space and time. The performers dispersed into the audience and posed the question 'What Time is it?' The spectators looked at their devices and let us know the exact time of that moment, which most nights was 7:55 pm. After becoming aware of the exact time, we started to clamor that there was no time left and we needed to transform one of us into a horse who could take the community out of the flames. In fact, we aimed to link the actual time to the temporality of the performance 4. Once Homeyra accepted to become Shabrang, she communicated in short sentences creating an ambivalent feeling of sadness and happiness at the prospect of becoming a sacrificial offering. She indicated that she had played with horses as a kid and even dreamt about becoming a horse. She

asked Zhuohao to not leave her alone in the process and to assure her that by sacrificing herself everyone would be okay. And lastly, 5. Towards the end of the performance, Homeyra, now fully transformed into Shabrang, sang an old song well-known in Turkish and Persian.

Arthur Schopenhauer understands music as the purest form of art for its capacity to present the reality of the world rather than merely representing it. He argues that music reaches the essence of humanity and engages everybody from different points of views (Janaway 303). In *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche maintains that dance is in direct relation to human nature. He even goes further saying "I should only believe in a God that would know how to dance" (*Zarathustra* 40). Nietzsche's opinion on dance resonates with Schopenhauer's thoughts on music, meaning dance is the art of presenting nature immediately. I drew on both Schopenhauer's notion of music and Nietzsche's notion of dance as immediate presentations of natural harmony, as means to generate a vibration that engaged people beyond their cultural differences. As discussed, rituals can produce collective emotions, and these collective emotions are the polar opposite of the individual psyche in isolation. From the beginning of the show, our audience were confronted by Michael's high-tension music and the performers' high-tension movements, which were both captivating enough to engage intercultural audiences. The matrix of music-dance in our work kept such engagement till the end with different layers of rhythm and tempos.

As explained in the fifteen part-methodology, playing with space-time is fundamental in rituals. I call the matrix of space-time cosmos, which is our discursive understanding of where and when we are. I used space-time to symbolize the human condition and to engage the audience with the question 'when it is' and 'where they are.' As rituals are intrinsically connected to their environment, celebrants and witnesses are not detached from their social and historical circumstances. At 7:30 pm, we opened the doors of a shelter to keep people inside. We warned them

that the universe was in flames, and they needed to come into the Corner Stage to stay safe. The flames referred to the terrors of our age. For anyone it could mean different global phenomena like wars, inequalities, injustice, etc. The Corner Stage at 7:30 pm symbolized the outside. It extended the actual space-time of the outside world in order to engage the audience. The piece built upon people's perception of the outside world by extending the cosmos to the theatre.

Different layers of rhythms and tempos appeared in the space-time of the piece to engage the audience. Playing with space-time in ritualistic performances helps establish different layers of rhythm and tempos like tension, repetition and slowness. The piece dealt with a crisis, so space-time resembled rush and tension. The piece brought forth primordial events and normative practices like sacrifice, initiations, trance dances, ecstatic moments and symbols so the space-time tended to repeat itself. As it described stages of a transformation, specifically that of Homeyra to a bride and a bride to a horse, *A Horse Named Shabrang* lingered in space-time and contributed to a feeling of slowness.

The piece engaged the audience's emotions. As discussed in chapter two, rituals are inherently tragic since they are meant to deal with crises. Likewise, ritualistic performances need to build on cosmos' cruelty and rigor to come up with solutions. The piece came up with self-sacrifice as a solution to prevent a disaster. A bride went through self-immolation, accepted to die and be transformed into a horse to save everyone else. Her sacrifice was intended to emotionally engage the audience.

4. Directing

In order to stage *A Horse Named Shabrang*, I developed my directing skills and familiarized myself with different approaches to ritualization. As a director who needed to devise and collaborate with an ensemble, I gave myself the following tasks:

- To determine my approach of performance
- To know my materials
- To formulate the outline of the project, based on my approach and materials
- To set up preparations and workshops
- To finalize the cast
- To choose an appropriate performing space and to schedule rehearsals and show dates
- To design the *mise-en-scène*
- To lead performers
- To manage rehearsals
- To promote the show
- To perform in the show

In the Fall of 2022, I learned the resources at my disposal through discussions with my supervisors. I knew I would have space for preparations (the opportunity of running workshops and booking rooms as needed); a venue for rehearsing and performing; and a budget for the expenses of the piece. The only thing that initially seemed challenging was finding actors who would volunteer to perform. However, I encountered fairly soon enough people to help with my final thesis. At that point, I had everything I needed to stage my final project.

During the Fall and Winter of 2022, I took some time to reread Iranian myths. Through my readings I noticed that there are some little-known Persian myths with lots of potential to be

staged. One was the role of Shabrang in taking his rider, Siavash, out of the fire. I noticed that the original text and its commentaries focused solely on Siavash, without paying enough attention to the role of Shabrang. I decided then to build a performance on Shabrang.

One of the most challenging tasks was formulating the methodology of the work. I chose the style of ritualistic performances knowing that it would satisfy my background and research interests. I read and reread, viewed and reviewed two kinds of sources to formulate my approach: 1. works of scholars who study rituals and ritualistic performances; 2. works of practitioners who directly or indirectly are concerned with ritualistic performances. Ultimately, through these research inquiries, I managed to design my approach and produce my dramaturgical methodology in one and half years.

When I arrived in the Department of Drama, Dr. Stefano Muneroni showed me the different theatre venues and I remember loving the Corner Stage at first glance because of its different levels and heights, its hallways and balconies, and the Greek style auditorium. Its structure could foster the sort of audience engagement necessary for a ritualistic performance. Later its structure became a character of the show, which has been discussed in the fifth chapter.

The framework of the performance, until rehearsals kicked off, was established in DR 605, a one-on-one course, taught by my supervisor, Prof. Lin Snelling. This course required me to run the workshops (discussed in the Appendix). Through this course, I learnt how to critically respond to rituals to create a ritualistic performance. I proceeded to craft the preliminary score for five performers in the style of a ritualistic dance-theatre based on a collective process.

To create the *mise-en-scène*, I adjusted my research based on the structure of the venue and the skills and number of performers. I designed the scenography and selected the props I would use. Then I finalized the first version of the score illustrating the spots and trajectories of

movements in the venue wherein performers could improvise. Having the score in hand was essential for me to unify different aspects of the *mise-en-scène,* which I completed during the first three days of rehearsals. After my supervisors viewed the piece on the fourth day of rehearsals, the work went through changes. I was grateful for their thorough feedback, which indeed elevated the quality of the work.

The scenography and props were functional. Everything that existed on stage aided the progression of the story, and nothing was just decorative. Different sorts of white ropes, a white table, and the structure of the venue with its pathways, corridors, stairways, balconies and railings, built the scenography of the piece. The white props signified the purity of a sacrificed bride against the black background of the venue. Likewise, the costumes were all white. Other props consisted of a horse head, several random instruments like kitchen tools and a wall clock, along with some accessories for the marriage ceremony like a mirror, wedding dress, and cosmetics, that were all painted in white. Initially Shabrang's head was supposed to be made in front of the audience, but later I realized that I did not have enough time and resources to do so. I lowered my ambitions and utilized a prefabricated horse head made by Michael Reinhart. The pictures of the performance shown in the first chapter illustrate the scenography, props and costumes.

Improvisation was my way of leading the actors in the piece and giving them enough freedom to perform. From a certain point of view, improvisation could be defined in two ways: firstly, as a methodology that does not rely on rehearsal in order to prioritize spontaneity; secondly, and this is the one I adopted, as a strategy that is supported by attentive preparation and rehearsals. This second approach is to elevate performers' ability to create their performance in an ensemble context, and it usually occurs in contemporary dance and devising theatre. I used improvisation to craft the score in a collective process. I led the performers to rehearse the score

by their own expressions and physical vocabularies. Finally, as the director of the piece, I selected and curated their creative contributions.

In the first period of rehearsals, during Reading Week, we rehearsed every day from 1:00 pm until around 5:30 pm. In the first 3 days, I finalized the structure of the piece based on the initial score. Then I invited my supervisors to watch a rehearsal. They suggested some changes which I accepted. Throughout the remaining rehearsals, we mastered the finalized version of the score. In March and April, we had a few specific and short rehearsals, followed by the general rehearsals that we had during the week of performance. Three nights before opening, we went through the whole piece. Our rehearsals started with a collective warm-up, and in each rehearsal we covered the entire piece twice.

To promote the performance, I asked Trish Agrell-Smith to distribute the poster and the description of the piece via all possible platforms available to the Drama Department and the university. I also hung some posters up at different locations throughout the department. I personally sent individual invitations to almost all faculty members, and other people who might be interested. I can't say exactly how many people came each night, but on opening night we had a full house.

Our public performances were all scheduled after the end of term, so the department doors needed One-card access to be opened, especially on weekends and after work hours. I contacted Emily Pole, and she extended the accessibility of the doors of the Fine Arts Building for the performance days to ensure easy entrance for all guests, including non-students. Hamed, Homeyra's brother, volunteered to organize the audience at the entrance of the Corner Stage. These arrangements were successful on all three nights of performance.

5. Character Development

In “Anthropology of Acting as an Exploration of Personal Experience,” Amra Latifić defines the acting’s spectrum as moving from mimesis to expression. Latifić believes that acting as mimesis, as shown in the Stanislavski’s system, mostly belongs to the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, while the experimental theatres of the second half of the twentieth century seek to eliminate the element of imitation from acting. Latifić addresses the latter as an expression rather than an imitation. In this style, there is no outer text needing to be imitated, and the performance is made by the performer. The theatre of Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski, The Living Theatre, Richard Schechner and the Performance Group, Peter Brook, Eugenio Barba, and others operated this way (417- 420). I argue that this is also the way that rituals are performed.

The starting point of this spectrum is Stanislavski’s acting system, which looks at characters as fictional beings played by actors who embody them through the process of characterization (*Building* 167). Stanislavski probes the actors’ potentialities to portray such characters, including how they might draw on their imagination to conjure up believable portrayals (*Actor* 244). Regarding the end of this spectrum, the second half of the century saw a new wave of practitioners who kept their distance from mimesis while still focusing on attaining organic performances. The definition of body by such practitioners differed from Stanislavski’s as they engaged the body as a single cohesive entity which included the mind.

A similar spectrum is also mentioned by Schechner when he claims that acting styles move between the two poles of “trance” and “ecstasy.” He believes that practitioners like Stanislavski belong to the tradition of trance since they believe that there is always something else which must be embodied by the actors. He understands trance dances as the genes of Stanislavski’s system of acting because these dances tend to mimic somebody’s soul. Such conjuration of another being,

whether a soul or a fictional character, is different from ecstasy (*Performance Theory* 175). Schechner's ecstatic embodiment and expressive acting eliminate the element of imitation and conceive performance as a presentation rather than a representation. Grotowski's "holy actor" is an example of ecstatic acting because he does not embody a character, but rather sacrifices himself to transform in front of his audiences (Roose-Evans 147).

In my thesis project, I made sure that characters stemmed out of the performers. There were no external or pre-existing characters for imitation. We, as the performers of *A Horse Named Shabrang*, crafted characters from our own expressions, emotions and vocabularies.

5.1. Human Characters

Character development was one of the main goals in the piece. As performers, we developed our characters through our discoveries in our inner life, including our memories, cultural gestures, and physical vocabularies. For that reason, we even used our own names. Character development ensued from our own spontaneous reactions to the crisis that we forged. From the characters' point of view, *A Horse Named Shabrang* presented an artificial crisis wherein the universe is burning and somebody must do something. I manufactured a crisis and asked Michael, Homeyra, Zhuohao, and myself as performers to act and embody ourselves in it because we wanted to take a ritualistic and symbolic action to protect us.

In the beginning of *Theatre and its Double*, Antonin Artaud says that once an external destructive agent, like the plague, attacks a city, people discard all social expectations and stop concealing their natural being, which causes them to act based on their pure nature (22). He wanted theatre to do the same. Similarly, we surrendered ourselves to the crisis brought about by the flames to reveal our unconsciousness through our spontaneous reactions and improvisation. I wanted the performers to distill their own characters from their inner life. I drew and adapted the Cartesian

cogito ergo sum, I think therefore I am, into "I celebrate rituals, so I am." By using this formula, I proceeded to eliminate the gap between performers and their characters. We all played ourselves in the given circumstances of *A Horse Named Shabrang*.

Michael's vocabularies were sounds, melodies and rhythm. Michael was communicating with us and with our audience through musical instruments, percussions, and sound effects. He took the performers and the spectators on a journey from chaos to resolution. The sounds, music, rhythms were all Michael's spontaneous reactions to a live event. He improvised every part of the piece organically. It is true that the outline and the nature of his improvisation were expected each night, but we also knew that we should not expect the exact sounds that he had made the night before. The same also occurred among us performers as we encountered different forms of embodiment every night within the paradigm of the piece. And I think it was fundamental for us to be present in the 'here and now' of every moment of the show.

In the first period of rehearsals, I noticed that Zhuohao and Lyudmyla leaned toward facilitating the process of sacrifice alongside me through their improvisations. I was the one who sparked the initiation ceremony to transform Homeyra into Shabrang, and Zhuohao and Lyudmyla helped. Later, when Lyudmyla left the production, Zhuohao brought a wide range of rich Chinese expressions in her physicality, gestures and language. Since fire and dragons are popular symbols in her culture, I noticed that she could easily resemble a dancing dragon in flames. To develop Zhuohao's character, I asked her to refine her own vocabulary and formalize her dance by drawing on her culture and vocabulary. In the beginning of the show, she is tense and worried about the fire, then she gradually recognizes that we need to take action and begins the ceremony to transform Homeyra. In the end, she and I lead people to safety.

When I came up with the idea of transforming a character into Shabrang, Homeyra was the first person who came to my mind. When I shared the idea with her, she accepted without a second thought and moved from Winnipeg to Edmonton to perform in my piece. Her passion and excitement to perform was a source of energy from the very beginning. She came, she rehearsed with us, she practiced indefatigably and worked alongside me as an assistant director. Homeyra' s style of performing reminded me of Jerzy Grotowski's holy actors. Grotowski argues that there is a secular holiness in acting. A holy actor burns his everyday mask in front of the spectator and by doing so he makes his spectator start a self-exploration. A holy actor does not sell his body, but rather sacrifices it. He starts a self-penetration through the performance of his role, dissecting and baring himself (*Poor Theatre* 34 and 37). Homeyra was indeed a holy performer in *A Horse Named Shabrang*. She went through a self-exploration through Shabrang and exhibited her findings. She spoke mostly in English, then Persian and Turkish. She also brought a wide range of Iranian and Persian styles of dancing to embody her transformation into a horse.

Initially, I intended to play the role of a butcher who transforms a human into a horse. As the transformation of a human to a horse is dealing with meat and flesh, I felt that being a butcher in the piece would help me realize my character in the show. Gradually, that idea disappeared. Through my conversations with Prof. Snelling, I realized that I did not need to follow my initial ideas because my vision for the show had changed. The idea of butchering was helpful to launch my directorial vision, but sometimes, as Prof. Snelling says, you need to "kill your darlings." I realized that I did not need to be a butcher, so I turned to myself and tried to approach my role as Kian. Later, I also felt that I needed my voice and music playing. In the scene where Homeyra and I were supposed to hold our marriage ceremony, which is also the initiation of Homeyra's transformation, I played the Shourangiz, as she danced in the style of Persian dancing. In that

scene, Homeyra transformed into Shabrang, Michael and I played together, and Homeyra and I sang a Persian-Turkish song. The latter was a mourning for such a sacrifice.

5.2. Non-human Characters

Meg Stuart in *Are we here yet?* explains how her personal objects play an important role in her creations. She says that personal archives and belongings are trustworthy and reliable resources from which every performer can create moments in their performances (12 and 133). Objects are not prefabricated tools or decorative commodities, but something she transforms in front of her audience. For example, in her piece *Blessed,* she built her set with cardboards which disintegrated in the water during the show (90). Stuart considers objects as organic beings which can take part in a narrative like humans do. I used such a view toward objects in *A Horse Named Shabrang*.

In chapter one, I explained how rituals revolve around symbols carrying historical backgrounds and unifying the community during a time of crisis. As explained in the fifteen-part methodology, I also concluded that the matter of organic and non-organic is different in ritualistic performances. There is a blurred distinction between what is alive and what is not in such phenomena. Objects are not simply non-organic figures; they are narrative themselves. For example, symbols are organic images of our surroundings with powerful backgrounds and energies that are essential in ritualistic performances. They function like characters as well as humans do. I am going to review the objects in the piece which were narrative themselves and functioned as characters.

A few of our audience members mentioned that the music in the piece was indeed a character. One of the most important characteristics of music was its momentous nature which totally changed the vibration in the room, especially during the transitions. Michael Reinhart could

perfectly and smoothly transition from one theme to the next, offering an organic narrative progression. The music and sounds in our work were a character because they signaled to the audience that something new was happening. For example, when Homeyra was transforming into the horse, music exemplified Homeyra's interiority as a girl who was sacrificing the old self and seeking a new self as Shabrang. This characteristic of music existed in every single section of the show. In addition to its narrative feature, music and sounds in the piece produced a soundscape of different vibrations. For example, during my *mise en abyme* monologue, sounds and music built ambiguous waves which were aural symbols of the cosmos. By percussion, in another moment, sounds symbolized horse galloping. By less-common percussion instruments, sounds symbolized the construction of Shabrang's head. If our audience had closed their eyes, they could have grasped the vibration of the stage action.

The Corner Stage at 7:30 was a spatial-temporal character in the piece. At 7:30 pm the whole universe was burning, and people took refuge in the venue. The doors were closed to keep the audience inside; the shelter had stairs so they could take a seat. Some found their positions immediately; some were assisted to sit on the stairs. We started, but after a while we felt that we did not have enough time, so we asked the spectators to let us know what time it was. It was 7:55 pm. We turned to the ritual process which we completed at 8:29 pm. Then the spectators were led out and returned to their normal life. The Corner Stage became a character, changing its function of playhouse into a discursive site activated by the ritualistic *mise en scène* it hosted.

The rope could be a symbol of bounding and chaining. These two meanings existed in the piece. I delivered a monologue which situated our position in the universe while unknotting a long and thick rope. This act symbolized our intertwined existence in the world. The unknotting of an inextricable rope represented what Sadi, an Iranian poet, describes as the interconnection between

all human beings who are limbs of an enormous body created of one essence. If one limb hurts, other limbs will feel the pain too. A philosophical theory of this continuity among all elements of the universe, derived from Leibnizian monadology, is discussed in *the Fold* by Gilles Deleuze who says that the entire universe is an organic and continuous existence, constantly enfolding and unfolding (123-124). At one point, Zhuohao took the rope from me and started knotting and unknotting it herself, continuing to do so up until the moment people left the Corner Stage. Our use of ropes was not limited to this. Ropes also symbolized taming the horse. Rope was a character in the piece because it was expressive itself. When I tied ropes to Homeyra's hair during our marriage ceremony, it was like I was extending her hair to make a marriage veil for her. I was touching the ropes smoothly, until all of a sudden, I started pulling the ropes tightly and the organic and symbolic use of rope showed that she was going to be tamed as a horse.

Homeyra's hair, as representative of Shabrang's mane, was a character in the piece. Hair often appears in ancient texts as a metaphor for the human body. Growing long hair, cutting hair, covering, shaving, and dying hair have been signifying different implications in rituals. James Frazer in his book, *The Golden Bough,* explains how brides used to offer tresses of their hair to sacrifice an element of the body in preliminaries of wedding ceremonies (17-18). I used this element of the body as a part of Homeyra's transformation. Her hair was initially free, then it was extended by ropes tied to it in the wedding scene. Gradually, her hair was attached to longer ropes that were tied to the balcony's railing to tether her. After I cut the ropes, I started taming her with bridles which were symbolized by her hair. Therefore, hair was a character that signified a progression in the piece: from a girl to a bride and then to a horse.

The horse head was a crucial object to suggest Homeyra's transformation, and I thought of it as a mask. Michael Reinhard made the horse head for us. Since I was not interested in having a

conventional mask, Michael made the horse head so that Homeyra could carry it with her in different positions, in her hands, on her legs, on her chest, and on her head. Homeyra's dance beside the horse head made a spectacle of a ritualistic dance. Schechner describes and analyzes his experience of seeing the *Hevehe* ritual in New Guinea. He says that the masks worn by celebrants are alive. In fact, Schechner maintains that it is the mask that makes the celebrants dance because it welcomes the spirits which transform the celebrants' physicality (*Performance Theory* 45-48). Mircea Eliade also reaches the conclusion that masks are essential tools to call ancestors during rituals (83). This character function of masks existed in a *Horse Named Shabrang*. The horse head was a prompt for Homeyra to receive the soul of Shabrang, a non-human ancestor of ours.

5.3. Four Fundamental Elements in Character Development

The centrality of the four elements and their connections to characters developed during the workshops that I held before the rehearsal process. The theme of the five-session workshops were the four fundamental elements, mostly derived from Gaston Bachelard's discussion on the four elements. The workshops were a sort of critical backbone for me when I started the rehearsals. This idea of reading the universe through the four elements appears in Presocratic philosophers like Empedocles (Sallis 50). Knowing the world through four different sorts of energy, earth, air, fire and water, influenced the character development of the piece. David Macauley, in his book *Elemental Philosophy* (2010), argues that to read the world through these elements requires us to see past the elements' basic features. Each of them has its own nature with different embodiments (2). Gaston Bachelard analyzes the human psyche from these four elements through a series of psychoanalytic studies. The books *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (1938); *Water and Dreams* (1942); *Air and Dreams* (1943); *Earth and Reverie of Will* (1948) are the results of his long studies on

humans' psyche in connection with the four fundamental elements. Many ideas in my piece, implicitly or explicitly, have a lot to do with fire, water, air and earth.

Bachelard in *Psychoanalysis of Fire* popularizes "the Empedocles complex," (16) which addresses two opposite faces of fire: danger and protection. As characters, Homeyra and I went through the ritual for the sake of the universe, the community. We endured death to maintain life. We celebrated birth and death at the same time, which resembled the double face of fire as represented by the Empedocles complex. We killed in order to live. Bachelard maintains that "fire suggests the desire to change, to speed up the passage of time, to bring all of life to its conclusion, to its hereafter" (16). We wasted no time bringing the chaos to an end by an irreversible act of transformation.

In chapter three, I explained my fascination with Shabrang as the non-human character who could get out of the fire alive in the original myth. For me Shabrang is the wind, even further, he is a storm who could pass through the flames without getting burned. Bachelard in *Air and Dreams* says that air in the form of wind could be a furious storm which is the most dynamic element and travels wherever it wants (225). Shabrang is wind because he is an embodiment of air.

Stones, rocks and earth carry an idea of beauty, silence and patience (Macauley 13). These features of earth resonated in the character of Zhuohao. She was stable, solid and hard to change like earth. "Earth is more resistant to the force of light and thus more opposed to displaying protean qualities than the remaining triumvirate of canonical elements" (18). Earth's desire is strong and steady. From the very beginning, by facing a huge fire in the universe, Zhuohao was less tense than Homeyra and I were. She prepared Homeyra for her marriage ceremony and also for her self-

sacrifice. Zhuohao's response to emotional impulses like rage, compassion and empathy followed the law of mother earth, a heroine of patience.

In *Water and Dreams*, Bachelard looks at Ophelias' hair in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as water. He describes her corpse floating on a river while her hair spread on the water. For him, hair resembles the imagination of death. Death, which flows and is ready, like Charon, to take us to another world (71-81). In the previous paragraphs, I illustrated how hair was a character in the piece. Homeyra's hair was fluid, moving, and water-like, so that it could resemble a horse' manes, a bride's veil and a horse's bridle. Hair showed purity, which was ready to reshape itself in different situations, shapeless like water.

6. Transformation

This thesis, particularly in chapter two, has introduced some key concepts in rituals like transformation, trance dances, transformance, and communitas. The common idea of these concepts suggests a change from one thing to another, a transformation. Rituals happen around singularities, momentum, and thresholds which drive transformations. I used the concept of transformation in my dramaturgical methodology: from bride to horse; audience to community; lover to sacrificer; danger to safety; playhouse to shelter.

Deleuze says that people's demands and necessities throughout history have been changing and that philosophy's function is to provide a model of people's demands of the present (*What is Philosophy?* 59). Since being armed with the philosophy of the present can help understand contemporary phenomena, in this chapter I would like to discuss a philosophical concept which informs my understanding of transformation.

Postmodernism emphasizes the fluidity, multiplicity and heterogeneity of phenomena. It often perceives the body in flux, constantly becoming and subject to change. I believe that there is an analogy between such a fluidity and the matter of transformation in communitas and Turner's anti-structure. In the introduction to *Anti-Oedipus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari declare that it is not a fixed essence that determines what territory an individual belongs to as their norms, but rather it is the multiplicity of society that defines individuals' territories and makes them subject to change. They see individuals like living machines who desire and change their norms. Desire in their eyes does not come from something missed or missing, but it is instead a productive force. Humans, as desiring machines, keep changing through social and individual flows of desires that contribute to new identities, different norms, and fresh territories (XV-XXIV). Such a constant process of remaking and rebuilding puts humans in the position of becoming and transforming.

In *A Thousand Plateaus,* Gill Deleuze and Félix Guattari build their theory of humans as desiring machines in constant flux. They argue that individuals, as desiring machines who are not suppressed by power, may also function like living "war-machines" set on transforming existing structures. They popularize the term "nomadology" to address such human particularity (352). A nomadic body escapes from solid identity and resonates with nomadic life who deterritorializes previous concepts and reterritorializes new ideas in society. They define the nomadic body as lacking origin, middle, or destination. The nomad is different from the migrant in that he is always on the move. For the nomad, being in accord with space is the basic principle; that is why he continues to move and never stops. He does not care if he reaches a destination or not; he keeps going and treats each arriving point as a relay. The nomad does not tolerate striated spaces because partitions in spaces are barriers for him to change, become, and adapt with the space. That is why the nomad prefers smooth spaces. The nomad is constantly in the process of transformation (*Plateau* 380-381). The nomad deterritorializes and reterritorializes by being alive and maintaining life, like animals do. Deleuze and Guattari argue that the nomad celebrates "becoming-animal" (239):

> What we are saying is that every animal is fundamentally a band, a pack. That it has pack modes, rather than characteristics [...] It is at this point that the human being encounters the animal. We do not become animals without a fascination for the pack, for multiplicity. A fascination for the outside? Or is the multiplicity that fascinates us already related to a multiplicity dwelling within us? (239-240)

Deleuze and Guattari argue that once the body refuses to be the focal point of power structure, it keeps transforming through the multiplicity of its habitat. Such a transformation is not a stage to reach. It is a process of becoming that works both on an individual and collective scale. They say

that “there is no individual statement, there never are. Every statement is the production of a machinic assemblage, in other words, of collective agents of enunciation (take “collective agents” to mean not people or societies but multiplicities)” (37). According to them, exploring individuality independently from collective agents is impossible. In other words, collective multiplicity passes through individuality, and individuality echoes this multiplicity through ongoing transformations. And this inherent process of transformation goes on:

In *A Horse Named Shabrang*, things went through changes,

It was the art of becoming, becoming an animal, becoming Shabrang, with no hesitation

A Horse Named Shabrang sacrifices a bride,

The sacrificer makes his beloved a horse, with no hesitation

Her beloved, previously a bride, now ready for Shabrang’s soul

goes through such sacrifice, with no hesitation

A Horse Named Shabrang makes strangers a community, unified

with a common aim, all in one place, with no hesitation

An Orpheus-like lover dances with her bride,

But lovers are sacrificers here, with no hesitation

No fear of having her beloved stinged by snakes,

Just to live, just to maintain life, with no hesitation

All and all for danger to become safety and peace

Let’s change playhouses into shelters, with no hesitation

7. Conclusion: How *A Horse Named Shabrang* Responds to Rituals

I would like to briefly review the journey of this thesis chapter by chapter. In chapter one, I mentioned general information about the piece and its score. Chapter two had four main objectives: to review the critical background of the piece, to offer a six-part ontology of rituals as the critical paradigm of the piece, to illustrate the dramaturgical processes of key practitioners who responded to rituals, and to address the fifteen-part methodology of the piece. In chapter three, I discussed dramaturgical matters such as score making, intercultural adaptation, curation and audience engagement. Chapter four focused on the direction of the piece. In chapter five, I focused on character development. In chapter six, I explained my understanding of transformation. In my conclusion, chapter seven, I am gathering the essence of the above-mentioned chapters and applying them to the piece. There is also an appendix attached to this thesis which presents the five workshops that I held as a preparation for creating the piece.

My methodology for the piece differentiates rituals from ritualistic performances. I proposed rituals as resources, as cultural phenomena performed by communities, nations, and societies. Behind every ritual there is a powerful cultural background rooted in the collective beliefs of the community and leaders who enact them. An individual can merely respond to rituals, the same way that an artist can respond to myths, fables, stories, historical events, political news and so forth. Artists cannot be actual masters, or even celebrants, of rituals; therefore, their productions cannot be counted as rituals. Let us ignore rare cases in which someone is a tribal master, an esoteric or a cult priest, as well as an artist, like in George Gurdjieff's case[1].

[1] For more information about George Gurdjieff read "Esoteric Dance Practices of the Early Twentieth Century" by Makhabbad Maltabarova.

Considering rituals as ways of knowing the world can help interested artists, like me, probe new dramaturgies and new aesthetics to look at myths and oral narratives. My conclusion illustrates how *A Horse Named Shabrang* was informed by rituals and how it responded to them.

Making *A Horse Named Shabrang* entailed a layered and collective process. The piece started with workshops and preliminary research, and it was crafted based on the performers' creativity, spontaneity and improvisations. It involved a process of preparation, rehearsals, devising, and establishing meaningful rapports among members of the creative team, which could potentially extend to future creations.

The audience was imbricated in our ritualistic performance. Spectators were not passive attendees who merely watched. From the beginning, it was established that they were an essential part of the show. They were people who needed shelter from the danger of fire and their given circumstances never changed throughout the performance. The performers interacted with them as characters to characters. Finally, after our ritualistic trajectory reached its end, the spectators were led outside as the ritual had averted the initial crisis and reestablished the order.

To make a unified community consisting of performers and spectators, the show evolved from, and revolved around, a shared concern: "the world is burning, somebody should do something." This shared concern led to a collective effort to rescue the world. This message was conveyed from the very beginning of the show.

A Horse Named Shabrang was meant to heal a crisis. Although the crisis was not a real one, its symbolic features could speak to different issues for different people. I used the metaphor of fire to address many existing problems and concerns existing in the world, like wars, climate change, forest fires, genocide, etc. The piece acted like a healing force, offering a suggestion, or at least, positing a question: 'should we lose something to gain something else?'

To boost a sense of community among the performers and audience, the piece did not just settle for a shared concern, it highlighted other kinds of commonalities. I tried to embed universal symbols and familiar narratives like a horse, sacrifice, and lifesaver. The idea that ‘a horse could save our lives’ could be counted as a familiar fable to everybody. ‘To sacrifice a bride right after her marriage ceremony’ could provoke intercultural audiences’ empathy and reactions.

The piece was inherently tragic. Like classic tragedies, it dealt with a universal cruelty that led to a sacrifice. The piece deliberately stepped into violence by asking this question: might we need to sacrifice or self-sacrifice, if we want to maintain life? The piece challenged our emotional attachments and affections. By exposing cruelty, the piece tried to respond to the cosmos rigors and the cruel nature of many rituals concerning sacrifice.

Transformation, discussed in chapter six, was fundamental in the piece. In rituals there is always an initiation ceremony wherein a situation, a body, or a place undergoes transformation. Accordingly, the piece tried to respond to rituals; it revolved around five transformations which have been discussed in chapter six: bride to a horse, audience to community, lover to scarificer, danger to safety and, playhouse to shelter.

Character development, discussed in chapter five, responded to symbolism in rituals: first, the matter of organic and non-organic was blurred in the piece. Objects kept their dynamism and were never mere decorations. They were narrative themselves. Second, human characters stemmed from performers’ inner lives and were not based on mimesis.

Space-time is fundamental in rituals so ritualistic performances must not be irrelevant to the space-time existing in the world. By building upon our audiences’ perception of space-time, the piece tried to unify the spectators as witnesses of a ritualistic performance. The piece built upon the actual temporality and spatiality and linked the space-time matrix to the performance. In

chapter five, I introduced the spatiality and temporality of the piece as characters and called the entanglement of spatiality and temporality cosmos. Both performers and audiences of the piece were led to link the actual cosmos to the cosmos that existed in the piece. People entered a shelter at 7:30 pm, held a ritualistic performance, and left the shelter one hour later after the sacrifice. Space-time also had a sense of tempo and rhythm in the piece. For example, tension, slowness, and repetition were three features of playing with space-time. As the piece dealt with a crisis, space-time resembled rush and tension. As it brought up primordial events to work on, space-time found a sense of repetition. Since the piece tended to linger in space-time, it also contributed to slowness. Therefore, *A Horse Named Shabrang* played with different layers of tempos and rhythms that were fundamental to hold people's attention for the duration of the ritualistic performance. While the piece went through different conceptions of space-time, the *mise-en-scène* happened in the here and now.

I encouraged the performers to acknowledge their holistic body. They needed to explore their body in its totality; to be a ritualistic performer. The holistic body is an interconnected whole, rather than a mere collection of separate parts. It is a unified being, not only in itself, but also in its coexistence with other elements. The bodies in the piece were fluid beings easily diffusing in space-time, and in accord with other elements. Words, sounds, gestures, and movements were the embodiments of a holistic body. The result appeared in trance dances, ecstatic presence, and rapture. In both preparations and rehearsals, it was emphasized that we, as the performers, needed to explore our ritualistic world through our total body and were to embody our inner life through the body itself. Music and physicality were instrumental in shaping our total bodies, and they worked together to lead us as an ensemble toward new discoveries.

Like rituals, *A Horse Named Shabrang* did not try to convey messages. It tried to be a pure form of embodiment which is not dedicated to any pedagogy, ideology, or artistic goal. Instead, the piece tried to have efficacy that prioritizes unity and inspiration in a community consisting of performers and witnesses. The piece tried to portray a crisis which needed to be redressed. In the creation of the initial copy of the score, I tried not to develop an idea and build the performance upon it. While I did not intend to convey any message, I was open to pose questions, like how to deal with a crisis in a ritualistic fashion.

Finally, the notion of role, as understood in Stanislavski's acting training, did not exist in the piece. There was not an external character that actors needed to imitate. Although there were many moments in which performers symbolized other beings, no one played a character like dramatic actors do. Performers' memories and spontaneity were the main resources for their performances. For example, Homeyra played herself and symbolized a horse through her self-sacrifice, but she was still herself who made the horse through preparations and rehearsals.

As I prepare to transition out of academia and into the world, I look back at my project as a springboard to imagine other artistic endeavors I might encounter in the future. My experience directing *A Horse Named Shabrang* provided me with essential critical tools to look at performance of myths, legends, and folk stories in new ways. I believe it is essential to continue to reimagine theatre and performances' potentialities for new audiences and to deploy new aesthetics to allow the past to dialogue with the present. Ritualistic performances probe how performance's liveness might bridge individual and collective ways of being in the world, and thus can provide us with a way out of the all-consuming 'fires' of our times.

Appendix: Workshops and Preparation for *A Horse Named Shabrang*

Exploration of Rituals: 5 Sundays in October was a series of workshops which provided the preliminaries and preparations for the creation of *A Horse Named Shabrang*. They took place every Sunday in October 2023 in the Movement Studio of the Fine Arts Building on the UofA campus. The workshops were a part of DR 605 taught by Prof. Lin Snelling: First Sunday, earth; Second Sunday, air; Third Sunday, water; Fourth Sunday, fire; and, on the last Sunday, a combination of the four. The events drew on live music by Michael Reinhart who was also the composer and musician of the piece. Inspired by the four elements, it revolved around different forms of embodiments such as dance, painting, acting, drawing, sculpting, and writing. Each workshop provided actual and symbolic materials of each element for participants to work with. Materials like sand, wind, water, and metaphors of fire were to inspire participants to embody their understandings and imaginations of the elements.

The workshops went beyond the common understandings of the four elements and explored an expansive acknowledgement of their critical and artistic potential. Based on ancient physics and metaphysics, the workshops built upon the four fundamental elements as four forms of energies existing in nature. I focused on each element in each session of the workshops to probe how we can activate our bodily understanding of the elements in our surroundings. I dedicated the last thirty minutes of each workshop to embodying a horse's physicality. This part directly impacted the main part of my final thesis which was the conjuration of Shabrang.

It was essential for the workshops that the performers knew each other’s work. Michael Reinhart composed music live in the workshops, on all Sundays. Except for Homeyra, all other performers began their preparation at the workshops, and that really helped them establish a common language before rehearsal even started.

There were seven steps in each session of the workshops, but the content and activities varied according to the themes: 1. Releasing, Warming up, and Improvisation; 2. Conversation about the topic; 3. Zero-Reflection/Response; 4. Bracketing; 5. Score making and embodiment; 6. Being playful; 7. A Horse Named Shabrang.

While there were a wide range of activities carried out during the workshops, I am going to elaborate only on the seven activities as my methods for developing the workshops and mention a selection of the actual activities in the workshops as examples:

Releasing, Warm-up and Improvisation

People usually carry a lot of tension in their muscles, which is a barrier to being effective performers. I think that relaxing before warming up could help get rid of muscle tensions and prepare for a successful warm up. For me, warming up means awakening the body from the state of stand-by. Once the body is awakened, it is ready for improvisation and open to pure impulses and internal and external stimuli. I used relaxation, warming up and improvisation together at the beginning of every workshop. Likewise, on the second Sunday while dealing with the theme of air, I took the concept of air pressure (which is around 1000 Pa) and asked participants to plunge into a pool of air. I led them to take support from the actual features of the air surrounding us. The participants were free to take any position and released their muscles in the mass of air around us. I reminded them that the pressure under the oceans is relatively 500 times more than the pressure of air in this room and could implode the human body. The pressure out of the planet is almost zero and the human body would explode without spacesuits. But our body is adjusted to the pressure on the planet. A creature from another planet may implode or explode on planet earth, but humans are safe under such a pressure. Therefore, the participants found new concepts about the air around them and a new relationship between their body and air. Then I led them to focus

on their breaths, inhaling and exhaling the air, to warm their body up. We started from breathing, inspired by the sound of our voice, then we made an orchestra out of our panting in response to Michael's music and we started to dance. I provided some seashells as objects which we all used to listen to in order to hear the sound of wind in our childhood. I asked the performers to listen to seashells, then put them aside and start imagining their sounds. Then I asked them to improvise out of this score: no origin, no purpose, no conclusion, only continuation.

Conversation about the Topic

After the relaxation, the warm-up, and the improvisation based on the theme of choice, we started discussion on the topic. I read aloud a text about the subject, then they continued the conversation. By a short conversation we expanded our view on the element of the session. This helped us expand our understanding of the element for our embodiments for the rest of the workshop. On the first Sunday, the theme was earth. The earth is full of abysses, dark abysses, and a sky above it! The earth is full of abysses, going nowhere! And the sky extends to nowhere! The earth from the endless depth of its core to the endless depth of its sky! The skin of the earth, soil, links the abysses to the sky. And our bodies! The body and the earth! The body which is living on the skin of the earth but is aware of the abysses and the sky. The body might not need science to know where it is located. The body which is discovering and exploring itself in its space. All we need is to let it go. For a while, if it is hard, just for a short while. Let's all together forget about all the information provided by science about the earth. Let's study the earth and everything that comes with it through the body itself. Let's establish an idea! For a dancer, for a performer: this is the body studying its place. A place extended from the abysses of the earth to the sky. After a short silence the participants joined in the conversation one by one.

Zero-Reflection/Response

Zero-Reflection/Response was a score which aimed to support our embodiments in relation to the theme. I had extracted this score by imagining a zero state, wherein prehistoric humans were not yet aware of their effects on their surroundings and nature. Once they perceived that nature reflects back to their actions, they started to realize their collision with nature. They stepped on the ground and saw their footmarks. They might have entered a new state wherein they could change the natural order. They responded to the reflection coming from nature with their next action, next response, next reflection and so on. They kept responding and this loophole went on to infinity.

On the first Sunday, there were depots of sand. I wanted us to go back to a zero state and leave marks on the sand; acknowledge the reflection of sand to our action, then respond to this reflection by the following action and stay in the loophole of reflection and response. I asked us to not mind where it goes, to just keep going, we might make another Egyptian pyramid from a simple footprint.

On the third Sunday, in the session on water, we used mirrors for this activity. We went back to a zero state once humans saw themselves reflected in water, the first mirror-like tool. This state made the performers aware of their bodies. We imagined that it was the first time humans received their reflections from nature. As performers, we responded to it and made a loophole in responding to nature's reflections. I asked us to keep going and make more complex choices out of our initial encounter, until we incorporated more complex movements.

Bracketing

I borrowed this term from the phenomenology of Edmond Husserl (*Ideas* 109-110). By bracketing, or disconnecting, we could separate an element from its background and dig into the element itself to be familiar with different aspects of it. By using an object, we tried to disconnect

the element from our background and common understanding of that element. Inspired by the object, we embodied the stimuli coming from the element.

On the second Sunday, we used a Chinese fan to bracket the wind. I needed two participants for each round. One blew wind by shaking the fan and the other exposed themselves to the wind coming from the fan. We tried to move, stimulated by the effect of the fan, wind or breeze.

On the fourth Sunday, the theme of fire, we followed the beams of the sun on the ground and tried to interact with them through our shadows. We aimed to bracket the beams of the sun and move based on them. It was a play of dims and beams, a dance with the sun's footprints on the floor. This game was a stimulus for our bodies to improvise. We were dancing as we continuously changed the order of the sun's beams on the floor.

Score Making and Embodiment

At this moment, I assumed that we had acquired a general understanding of the elements, so I asked the performers to make freestyle scores out of their experience in the workshops and then improvise a choreography based on their score. I have attached some pictures as examples of the scores the participants produced in different sessions:

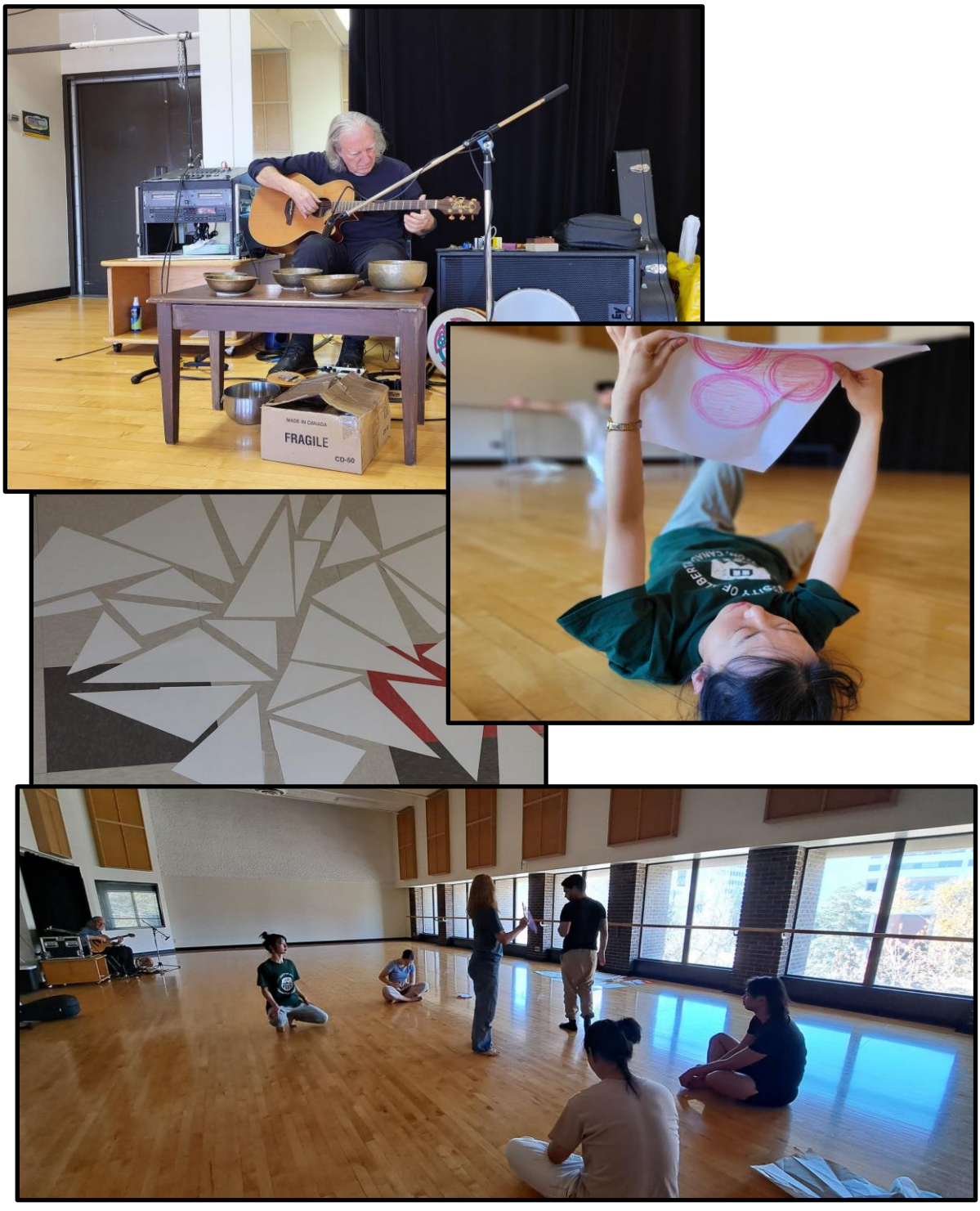
Being Playful

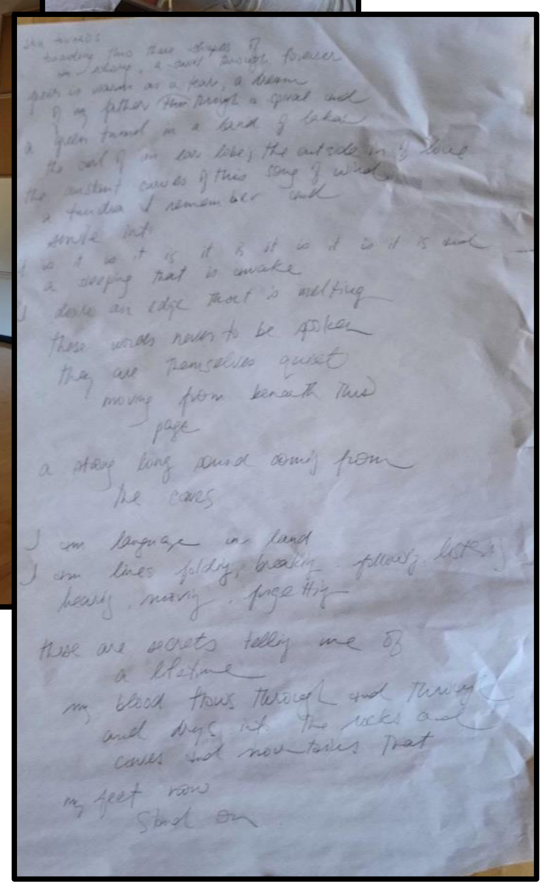
Being playful was the title of an activity aimed at playing with physical laws. For example, I wanted us to reduce the gravity of the earth. Let us change the direction of the light or let us open fire with nothing. Let us move the wall by blowing out. The target was going beyond the potentialities of our body in relation to the fundamental elements.

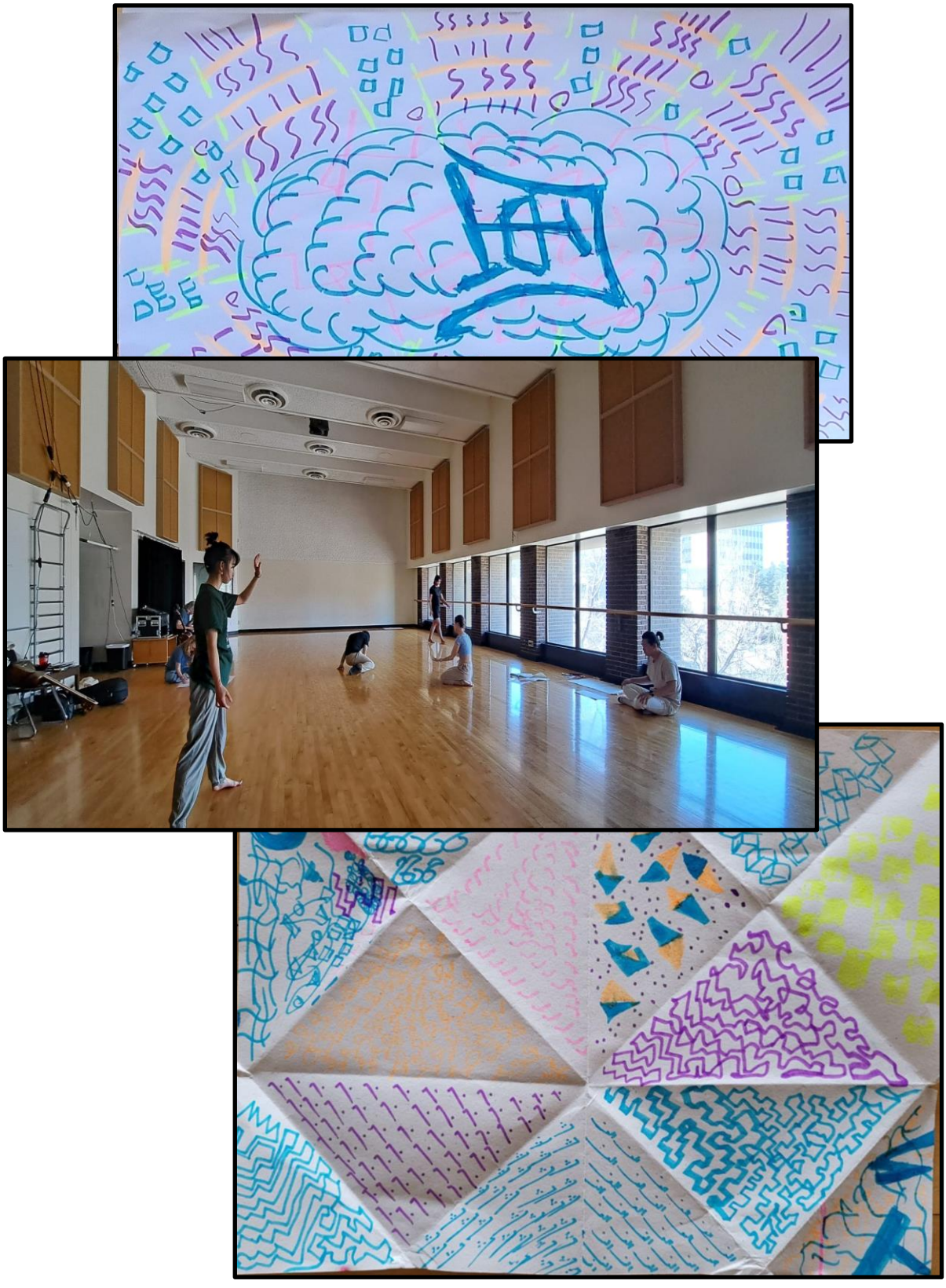
A Horse Named Shabrang

A Horse Named Shabrang was the last activity of the workshops in which participants were asked to embody a horse based on their experience in the workshop and relevant theme. The point

of this activity for me was to discover different views about horses. I tried to capture the participants' physical embodiments and use them for the choreography of the piece.


MADE IN CANADA
FRAGILE
CD-50


a sleeping that is awake
these words never to be spoken
they are themselves quiet
moving from beneath this
page
the caves
I am language in land
these are secrets telling me of
a lifetime
my feet now
stand on




Empedocles

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