GUIDEBOOK

for teachers attending a performance with their students

THE NONEXISTENT
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Why create a guidebook and how to use it

The guidebook introduces audiences to *The Nonexistent*, a play you are about to discover with your group. Its basic objectives are the following:

- **Preparing** audiences for their visit to the venue and providing information to **enhance** their appreciation of the play
- **Educating** audiences about population displacement
- **Fostering** discussion and exchanges about the play’s issues
- **Arousing** the audience’s curiosity and critical thinking while stimulating creativity
- **Giving** imagination its rightful place in the educational process
- **Moving** towards a more inclusive society.

Although the guidebook is designed for all audiences, the teachers are the ones it is specifically geared for since they are the ones who usually act as guides. Whether your students are going to see a play for the first time or are familiar with this type of outing, you can read the texts in the guide in class or distribute them to students so they can read them on their own.

As for the activities around the play, we encourage you to guide your students through them. The guidebook will tell you if the activity is to be shared with your students prior to or after the performance. In addition it specifies the age group for which each activity is designed as well as its objectives.

If you decide to use just a few elements in the guidebook, we strongly recommend that you include the play summary. It has basic information that all spectators should be given in order to better appreciate the unique moment that you will be sharing with the audience.

Attending a performance

Attending a theatre performance is an opportunity to share and create a genuine meeting between the audience and the performers. It is important to remind young audiences that the performers on stage can hear what happens in the audience and feel what the audience is experiencing. Accordingly it is important not to distract the performers and respect the rest of the audience. Still it is normal for audiences to react to what is happening on stage. Their attention is essential to the quality of the performance.

DynamO Théâtre

Based in Montreal, DynamO Théâtre is an internationally renowned theatre company whose work focuses on developing, producing and performing *Theatre-of-Acrobatic-Movement and Clowning* productions for families and young audiences. Since it began in 1981, DynamO Théâtre produced 23 Canadian plays and gave over 4,500 performances in 29 countries on 5 continents for 1.5 million spectators. It has won 10 prizes and was nominated 9 times. Its tours have spanned Quebec and Canada, over 40 American states and 15 European countries. The company was invited to 33 festivals worldwide. Over the years, it has also toured extensively in Asia, namely in Japan, China, Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea.

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The company staff

Chloé Besner | General Manager
Jackie Gosselin and Yves Simard | Coartistic Directors
Nicole Lemire | Administrative assistant
Kasia Malinowska | Head of marketing and development
Marie-Chantal Bonin | Technical Coordinator and Stage Manager
Maurice Roy | Copywriting and translation

The creative team of The Nonexistent

Ideator and Director | Yves Simard
Text | Pascal Brullemans
Set and Costume Designer | Pierre-Étienne Locas
Lighting Designer | Martin Sirois
Composer | Claude Lamothe
Creative Team | Andréanne Joubert, Xavier Malo, Frédéric Nadeau and Hugues Sarra-Bournet
Performers | Andréanne Joubert, Xavier Malo and Hugues Sarra-Bournet
Makeup and Hairstyle | Suzanne Trépanier
Assistant Director and Stage Manager | Élianne Désilets-Dubé
Musician | Claude Lamothe
Choir | The students of Mrs. Catherine Dumont’s welcome class at François-de-Laval school
Voice Editor | Élianne Désilets-Dubé
Illustration | Sébastien Thibault

The production team after the premiere at Notre-Dame-de-Grâce Cultural Centre, November 2018
Photo: DynamO Théâtre
Play summary

A young girl tells her story to the walls locking her away. With words she drives a hole into prejudices and forges a path to dignity. Intertwining epic accounts and acrobatic feats, the production powerfully and boldly recounts a modern-day tragedy, that of migrant children fighting to carve out a place for themselves in the sun.

DynamO Théâtre is again exploring the complex issue of exile. In this instance the project examines population displacement and the horrible conditions that force humans to flee and leave everything to survive. The Nonexistent is an oratorio that pays tribute to those who are trying hard to exist on the edges of our world. The journey uses Theatre of Acrobatic Movement to tell the story. Music is also a major player in this production geared for audiences 10 years and up. Based on the terrifying ordeal of those who take to the seas to cross borders, who scale the walls that scar countries and separate families, this production is designed as a space to speak out, to consider international political changes affecting our lives and to challenge on our own limits and borders.

The themes at the heart of the production

*The Nonexistent* revolves around the following themes: migration, population displacement, integration, borders, international political changes. To introduce you to the various themes, ask your students to examine the following questions. You could then reconsider the topics in light of the definitions you can find together in a dictionary.

- What is a migration?
- What is it to be welcoming?
- What is integration?
- What are borders?
- What are policies?

The main characters

**Paloma, a young migrant** | She has to leave everything behind  
**The chorus** | Those who echo Paloma’s thoughts  
**The musician** | He makes people feel welcome  
**The brothers** | They want to escape  
**The smuggler** | He takes advantage of the situation  
**The civil servants** | They enforce the rules
Why did you want to write a play on migration? And why for young audiences?

I feel it is important to discuss current events with young audiences. I like to provide them with an opportunity to reflect on and challenge themes larger than just themselves. Migration and population displacement are and remain major social issues. The migrant issue directly affects our lives. Current events are filled with stories of migration that sometimes end tragically. Such events deeply move me. We need to tackle this issue even if it seems far from our own lives. Students do experience immigration. In *The Nonexistent*, we wanted to share with them the epic story of a young girl who leaves her home country alone to escape war. Her hopeful mother sends her off on a migratory route to a safer place. By having a young girl as the main character, the production should inspire young audiences.

On what do you want audiences to focus?

I hope they focus on all the elements making up a production, i.e. the lighting, the set and props, the music, the physical acting and the words. I would like audiences to uncover the elements of the production: Paloma’s narrative, which is fiction, the voice of the chorus, which represents the involvement of the spectators in the storyline and the projected words, which depict reality.

On what inspirations and intuitions did you base your creative work?

With each new production, we begin with an idea for a set and a theme. I wanted to work with a light, free and moving structure. That is how we came up with a panel that the performers handle. The initial intuition for the set is significant in the creative process. It needs to set off sparks, provide an impetus and be compelling for acrobatic movement. I read a report in Manière de voir* magazine whose title was *Faut-il abolir les frontières* (Do we need to do away with borders)? Thanks to this series of articles, I was introduced to the issue of population displacement. In English, you could look at David Charles take on the topic “davidcharles.info/2014/08/do-we-need-borders/”.

The team of designers and I read and shared a whole series of articles, novels and migration stories. We came up with the story of a migratory route and all the hardships that come with it. The panel could become a wall separating people, a wall on which one climbs to reach others or a border you cross illegally. With writer Pascal Brullemans who followed the research work, we imagined the story of Paloma based on different migrant stories.

How important is the set in developing the production? And how important is music?

The idea for the set came early on in the creative stages. We began working on a prototype designed to test our set intuitions. For *The Nonexistent*, we worked with various structures of different sizes. The testing helped determine that only one panel was needed. Handled by the performers, the panel becomes the locations where the story develops. It helps script it and move the events forward. Music is crucial. It is the emotional framework of the production. It creates the ambiance, provides rhythm and inspiration for the play. The musician’s presence on stage adds to the performance.

How does DynamO Théâtre come up with a Theatre-of-Acrobatic-Movement production?

The image we use to illustrate the scripting process for a production of Theatre of Acrobatic Movement is the following: the space is akin to a blank piece of paper. It is through the movement of bodies in space that we develop our storyline. In this special process, words come after movements. We never begin with a written text. The scripting occurs in the rehearsal space, i.e. a process that uses and takes advantage of the lights, the set, movements, words and music. All the elements are used to develop a Theatre-of-Acrobatic-Movement production at DynamO Théâtre.
Migrations are probably as ancient as humankind

This overview of a number of migratory movements should enhance and broaden your knowledge. Do not hesitate to research the subject more in depth in an encyclopedia or on the web.

Human migration is the movement by people from one place to another.

Two events taken from history
- In 895, an ethnic group, the Magyars, invaded and settled in a region that was not yet considered as Europe at the time. The Magyars came from the Ural mountains in today’s Russia. They had been driven out and settled in Pannonia, a region of central Europe encompassing present-day Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia and Austria.
- Up to the 19th century, mass migrations had always been forced as slavery still existed. Need we detail the numerous forced migrations of Africans because of the slave trade?*

Four Quebec and Canadian examples
- During the 19th century, many Irish settle in Eastern Canada. In Quebec City in 1860, the Irish are the 2nd largest group after the French. Their arrival takes a dramatic turn in 1845 with the great famine.
- April 30, 1975, marks the end of the Vietnam war. Just before and after the fall of Saigon (Hô-Chi-Minh-City), over 2 million Vietnamese take to the sea to escape the victorious communist regime. Many of them will eventually settle in Quebec.
- Between November 2015 and February 2016, Canada welcomed 40,000 Syrian refugees.

* Slave trade: the buying and selling of slaves, especially of people in West, Central and Southern Africa. The trade lasted many centuries.
Migrations today are different in nature

Migrations can take on various forms and have various causes. Generally speaking, they can fit in 2 subcategories: economic migrations that involve people looking for employment and political migrations that involve refugees. There is also a 3rd migration category: illegal emigration** that concerns between 25 and 40 million people in the world every year.

Natural disasters and climate change are also a growing concern. Since 2009, it is estimated that one individual per second is displaced because of a natural disaster, with an average of 22.5 million people displaced because of climate events since 2008. So a 4th migration subcategory could be added: climate migrations.

At the end of 2018, the number of refugees reached 22.5 million. They were uprooted because of war and persecution worldwide, with more than half of them being children.

Refugee or migrant?

Refugees are individuals who are outside their country of origin for reasons of feared persecution, conflict, generalized violence or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order and, as a result, require international protection.

There is no legally recognized definition of the term “migrant”. However according to the United Nations, the term designates “someone who changes his or her country of usual residence, irrespective of the reason for migration or legal status. Generally, a distinction is made between short-term or temporary migration, covering movements with a duration between 3 and 12 months, and long-term or permanent migration, referring to a change of country of residence for a duration of one year or more”.

** Emigration : the process of leaving a country in order to settle in another country.
Sources:  refugeesmigrants.un.org
Statistics: UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Theatre trades

Goal

Understanding the director’s work and the way in which he relies on other designers throughout the creative process.

Instructions

Ask students to answer the following question:
In your mind, what are the essential elements in the staging of a play, i.e. ensuring that the original storyline moves to a staged production?

Answers

The text and the script
The directing
The acting and the performers’ movements
The set and props
The music
The lighting
The costumes and makeup

- **The text or script** is also called ideation. It can be developed by a playwright or a group of designers and performers working together in the space before developing it and writing it down.

- **The directing** gives meaning to a script by deepening understanding and providing guidance and rhythm. During the rehearsals, the director guides the performers, gives them cues that help build up the characters and the play.

- **The acting and the movements** carry the storyline. Through their movements, the performers help audiences understand the story being told, as well as what the characters are going through, experiencing and feeling.

- **The set and props** are crucial in the development of the storyline at DynamO Théâtre. In fact, the designer gives a specific meaning to these elements while providing a backdrop so the characters can tell the story through the movements.

- **Music** helps create a mood, suggest rhythms, highlight the text or the movements or suggest feelings and create tension etc. To that end the composer can come up with a piece of music, choose an existing one or alter it.

- **Lighting** helps create an ambience or a mood. The lighting designer works with areas of shadow and light to give information on a locale or a time period, or even focus on a character etc. The designer can also create more poetic moments by playing with colours and composition.

- **Costumes and makeup** provide additional information on the characters by depicting a time period, a social status, a predisposition, etc. Such elements are clues and help make the story understandable.
ACTIVITY 2

Making movement eloquent

Goal

Calling on one's imagination to create a sequence of movements based on a picture.

Instructions

Make up teams of 3 to 5 and pick one of the pictures below. Imagine 3 movements describing what could have happened before and 3 movements describing what could have happened after what is pictured.

Then present your movement sequence to the class and ask the audience what they took away from it.

*It is important to tell the students that all interpretations are valid. Each spectator can interpret the story depending on what he/she sees and feels.*

Border

Migration

Welcoming
Making words move

Goal

Calling on one’s imagination to develop a character’s life story and embody it.

Instructions

Make up teams of 5 participants. Each team chooses one character among the following: the young migrant girl, the musician or the smugler (refer to the main characters on page 5). Four students sit side by side and face the class. All of them will play the character who is interviewed. The 5th participant will be playing the interviewer. The interviewer asks questions to the 4 others who will be answering in turn. Every time the interviewer snaps his/her fingers, the one next in line will be completing the answer. It is stimulating and surprising not to let the individual taking the question finish the answer. Take advantage of the “and”, “so” or the “At that point...” to snap and let the one next in line complete the answer.

Suggested questions

- What is your name?
- How old are you?
- Where were you born?
- Where do you live?
- Describe your house, your neighborhood and your neighbors.
- What is your best friend’s name? Describe him/her to us and explain why he/she is your best friend.
- What is your favourite dish?
- What is your favourite activity or sport and why?
- What is your favourite colour and what does it mean for you?
- Tell us about your first love.
- What do you hate most and why?
- What is your most wonderful dream and why?
- What is your favourite word and why?
- When is your birthday?
- Describe your last birthday from the time you got up until the time you went to bed.

One member in each of the five teams will act as a storyteller and recount the interview. A 2nd member will take on the role of the protagonist while the others act out the elements of the story (if need be) as told by the storyteller and played out. In addition everybody will answer the following question in front of the class: describe your last birthday from the time you got up until the time you went to bed.
ACTIVITY 4  AFTER THE PERFORMANCE

- **Reviewing the performance**

  **Goal**

  Reviewing the emotional aspect of the performance.

  **Instructions**

  Ask your students to recall and single out the most significant moment in the performance, one that they related to. Ask them to try and explain why. What feeling did that moment bring forth?

ACTIVITY 5  AFTER THE PERFORMANCE

- **Examining an event leading to a migration**

  **Goal**

  Thinking about a life-changing situation.

  **Instructions**

  To begin with make sure that the students clearly understand what migration is. Then outline or have one of your students outline what causes population displacement. Describe or ask your students to describe the causes of migration and the transformation experienced by those who went through it. Explain the difference between refugee and migrant.

  Try to associate and establish parallels with the performance of *The Nonexistent*. Have students think about possible solutions to population displacement.
ACTIVITY 6  AFTER THE PERFORMANCE

Creating a dramatic scene

Goal
Raising student awareness about the elements of a dramatic scene.

Instructions
Explain to your students that a dramatic situation generally involves 3 components: a presentation of the situation, an issue or a conflict to be resolved and an outcome or an end. Among the teams of 3 or 4 members, distribute the following themes: migration, welcoming, integrating and borders. By drawing on The Nonexistent, or the discussion prior to this activity, ask them to prepare a 2-minute scene that will include a beginning or presentation of the situation, an issue and an end.

Present your scene to the class and ask audience members to describe what they took away from it.

ACTIVITY 7  AFTER THE PERFORMANCE

Developing critical thinking skills

Goal
Helping students express their feelings and ask questions following the performance.

Instructions
Ask students to comment one of the elements of the play by referring to Activity 1: Theatre trades.
Suggest they write a review of the play by focusing specifically on one element, such as directing, movements, text or script, acting, story, costumes, set, music or lighting.

You could group together the students who made the same choice of element (e.g. text) and begin a discussion.
Let them share why they “liked it or not”, their various answers, viewpoints and preferences.
ACTIVITY 8a  AFTER THE PERFORMANCE

Writing and chronicling an odyssey

Goal
Writing and chronicling an odyssey.

Instructions
Imagine you are in a situation similar to that of the main character in *The Nonexistent*.

Write a letter to those who remained in the home country that you left.
In the letter, describe what you went through since you left and up to your settling. Draw inspiration on *The Nonexistent*.

To you who stayed back there in our homeland...
Inventing a portmanteau word (new 2-word concept)

Goal

Writing a portmanteau word (new 2-word concept).

Instructions

Invent a 2-word concept that you will define. Find the definition and the meaning of your new word. Base yourself on the migration theme to find a word.

Example:

**DRIFTING** and **DESTINY = DRIFTINY**
(concept first developed by Lewis Carroll)

- **DRIFT**: To become carried along subject to no guidance or control.
- **DESTINY**: Something to which a person or thing is destined.

The word “portmanteau” was first used in this sense by Lewis Carroll in the book *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), in which Humpty Dumpty explains to Alice the coinage of the unusual words, where slithy means “slimy and lithe” and mimsy is “miserable and flimsy”.

Lewis Carroll
**ACTIVITY 9**

### Playing a range of emotions

**Goal**

Using movement to convey a feeling.

**Instructions**

Make up groups of 3 or 4. In turn each group goes in front of the classroom and is given a feeling. Players will need to express the particular feeling through movement, sounds or words in a crescendo, beginning with a small expression that grows more intense.

**Feelings related to the performance:**

- Love: Anger
- Hate: Joy
- Freedom: Sadness
- Fear: Jealousy

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**ACTIVITY 10**

### Designing and drawing your own poster

**Goal**

Creating a drawing based on the poster of the production.

**Instructions**

Create your own poster of the production by basing yourself on the official poster of *The Nonexistent*. You can illustrate a moment in the performance that stood out for you. Don’t forget the title of the play.

Illustration: Sébastien Thibault
FAQ

How much time did you need to develop The Nonexistent?

The development lasted over 3 years in several stages. The company’s productions usually take 2 1/2 to 3 years before opening.

What kind of training do the performers have?

The company’s performers have theatre- or circus-school training. Some have also trained as gymnasts when they were younger or have acrobatic-movement skills.

When did the production open?

The Nonexistent opened on November 8, 2018 at Notre-Dame-de-Grâce cultural centre in Montreal.

How much time do you need before the performance and what do you do during that time?

At DynamO Théâtre, performers are always on stage 2 hours prior to the performance. As they come in, they exchange with the crew who have been putting up the set and adjusting the lighting and sound. Then they warm up their bodies and voices. Next they review parts of the play that require additional attention and precision. They do what we call a quick runthrough, i.e. they run through their lines and movements and set up the props they need for the performance. They check all the devices in the set before putting on their make-up and costumes and saying to each other “Break a leg!”
Suggested readings

SPOTTORNO, Carlos and ABRIL Guillermo, *The Crack*, The Eyes Publishing, 2018


BAUER, Wolfgang, *Crossing the sea*, And Other Stories, 2016

Homer, *The Odyssey (pocket book edition)*

Credits

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Questions and comments

If you have questions or comments about the guidebook or if it gave you ideas for some activities we would be thrilled to read about them and share them with others.

You can write to us at one of the following addresses:

Dynamo Théâtre

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