

Name: Nelson Niu '20  
Area of Study: Mathematics

Prior to the start of rehearsal, I waited patiently on a seat in the second row as various strangers filed past. Some waved and said “hi” to me; I waved shyly back. Each made their way to the green room backstage—getting coffee, I think. “There’s no almond milk, is there?”

I watched them make small talk as they settled into their seats around an intimate square table. Two of them excitedly discussed a show they had recently seen in which old women had to swim in a pool onstage. One brought up a story of an actor who didn’t know how to swim and was forced to learn to do so in two weeks for a production. An actor chimed in about his own experience of once having to dive underwater and remain submerged beneath some ice. “The key,” he says, “is to relax.”

One of the women chatting had a voice that was calming and clear, a voice I associated with friendly teachers of my past; it was no surprise to me, then, when it transpired that she was the director. Naturally the woman with thick-rimmed glasses surrounded with papers and Post-It pads was the dramaturg.

The rehearsal began with notes. The director explained how one moment could be more playful, flirtier, sexier. “I think it wants to be.” Another note was one I’d heard many a director give: cut pauses. “Tighten it up,” she said, “so that you have a place to release.”

The actors dived right in. The table work process was fascinating—the actors were at ease, frequently repeating lines that they wanted to try to deliver differently. Although they were seated, they were in motion; the professor gesticulated with her hands, the college student squirmed in his chair.

If ever an actor stumbled, they did not apologize; they simply started over. The director often stopped them for a note or a clarifying question; this was not unusual to me, but the actors, too, would often interrupt their own lines to ask a question about their motivation, about what they could be thinking, why they were saying a certain line. The director would listen and try to explore a possible answer with them: “It’s like your brain is moving faster than your words.” She spoke of “tracking” a character’s thought process through the lines. Once, she simply said, “I don’t think right now Ken has settled on it yet.”

When the playwright himself arrived, he had new pages for the group. An actor asked a clarifying question—a “technical” question, she calls it—about how a certain facet of college administration works. Here Ken is the expert; moreover he reassures her, “it’s explained in the new draft.” Another actor had an issue with a single line; he didn’t think it made sense given his understanding of his character’s circumstance. I realized that this, in a way, was feedback for the playwright, feedback very similar to the sort we practice in class, and perfect for an actor embodying one of the roles to give. The director expanded on the actor’s comment, narrowing it down to the specifics, tying it back to an earlier point that had been discussed on that character’s motives.

All the while Dr. Urban nodded, his hand over his mouth, deep in thought. “Keep it as is,” he said, when the director asked him if he wanted to change the line, and he offered an alternative

explanation. When the same actor reached that moment again, he was still struggling; they discussed it some more. The director and dramaturg offered some other alternatives for the line—more specificity. Ken didn't seem to like how it flowed, though, and ultimately the line was kept intact.