STAGING ANXIETY THROUGH MAGICAL REALISM: A PRACTICE-BASED EXPLORATION IN TWO THEATRICAL PRODUCTIONS

Grisana Punpeng

Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Thammasat University, Thailand

ABSTRACT

Corresponding author:
Grisana Punpeng
g.punpeng@gmail.com

Anxiety disorders are prevalent in everyday life, yet theatrical realism often struggles to capture and convey the lived experiences from the points of view of those affected. This practice-based research explores how magical realism can serve as an alternative mode of representation to depict the internal experiences of characters with anxiety disorders on stage. The study began with a literature review on magical realism and anxiety disorders, identifying key characteristics that informed the development of performances. Through a devising process, the research culminated in two distinct productions: "The Practice," a devised piece created with a group of seven actors and showcased at the Bangkok Theatre Festival in November 2022, and "As Fa As Farida," a solo performance developed collaboratively by the researcher-director and an actor, staged in May and June 2023 at the Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University. Despite differences in scale and presentation, both performances were able to portray the inner worlds of characters with anxiety disorders through the essence of magical realism, characterized by four main themes identified through thematic analysis: the interplay of reality and fantasy, the disruption of space and time, metatheatrical reflections on society and identity, and voices from the margins. The insights from this study can guide future theatrical experiments and be applied across various media, including literature, film, and other art forms.

Keywords: Magical realism; anxiety disorder; practice-based research; mental health

1. INTRODUCTION

This research project began with a question: How can the inner worlds of a person with anxiety be captured and represented on stage as a theatrical performance? This inquiry led the researcher on a journey to explore magical realism as a style characterized by the incorporation of mythical or fantastical elements into seemingly realistic fiction. The process of this practice-led research culminated in two performances. The first, entitled "The Practice, or the Intriguing Snapshots of the Alternative Worlds of a Person Who is Thinking of Ending Things," is a 50-minute play featuring a cast of seven actors. It was performed on November 12–13 and 19–20, 2022, at the Bangkok Theatre Festival, held at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC). The second performance, "As Fa As Farida," is a 35-minute solo piece that was staged at the Dr. Tiam Chokwadhana Auditorium, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University. This paper serves as an exegesis that

critically examines the use of magical realism as a theatrical representational mode for portraying a character with anxiety disorders.

1.1 Anxiety disorders

The World Health Organization (WHO) reported that the proportion of the global population with anxiety disorders in 2019 was estimated to be 4 percent, which is approximately 301 million people worldwide. Anxiety disorders, which refer to a group of mental disorders characterized by feelings of constant and overwhelming anxiety and fear, are the most common mental disorders globally (World Health Organization, 2023).

There are several types of anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), social anxiety disorder (SAD), panic disorder, phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The specific characteristic of anxiety is worry and physiological hyperarousal (or emotionality), which includes tension, nervousness, shakiness, and panic symptoms. These symptoms can range from mild to severe and are chronic rather than episodic (Marques et al., 2011; Renner et al., 2018).

Everyone has feelings of anxiety at some point in their life. It is a normal reaction to many different kinds of events and situations. Anxiety serves as an internal warning system that alerts us to danger or other threats and prepares our bodies to either fight back or flee from a dangerous situation. However, for many people with an anxiety disorder, the symptoms can arise unexpectedly, become overwhelming or unmanageable, and significantly impact daily life. Two of the most common anxiety disorders, which are typically underdiagnosed and dismissed as merely feeling anxious or being shy, are generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and social anxiety disorder (SAD).

GAD is characterized by long-lasting anxiety that is not focused on any one object or situation. Those with generalized anxiety disorder experience non-specific persistent fear and worry that is extreme or unrealistic and difficult to control, leading them to become overly concerned with everyday matters. SAD, also known as social phobia, is a debilitating illness that frequently goes undiagnosed. A defining feature of SAD is an excessive fear of humiliating or embarrassing oneself while being exposed to public scrutiny or unfamiliar people, resulting in intense anxiety upon exposure to social or performance situations. Individuals with SAD often avoid feared situations as much as possible, leading to impairments in social and work functioning, or significant distress (Hunt & Singh, 1991; Kaminer & Stein, 2003).

Two primary reasons GAD and SAD are under-diagnosed and under-treated are the misconceptions and stigma surrounding them, but also mental disorders in general. Because anxiety is a common experience, it is often considered a transient feeling; thus, symptoms associated with anxiety disorders may be perceived as temporary by society or even family members. Consequently, those affected by GAD or SAD may feel isolated and try to conceal their symptoms, avoiding exposure to feared situations that would trigger their anxiety, which can worsen symptoms over time. The sense of overwhelming shame can lead to secrecy and eventually prevent them from seeking personal and community support. Byrne (2000) describes this as the experience of stigma, characterized by shame, blame, secrecy, isolation, social exclusion, stereotypes, and discrimination. For people with GAD and SAD, the social stigma and discrimination they endure can exacerbate their problems and hinder recovery. It may cause individuals to avoid seeking the help and support they need for fear of being stigmatized.

To support individuals with GAD or SAD, it is essential to actively reduce the negative perception associated with these conditions. Sextou and Patterson (2014) argue that a lack of understanding and awareness of the experiences of individuals with mental disorders and their families is associated with increased stigma and discrimination. Based on their study, devised theatre can effectively raise public awareness about mental illness, as it allows audiences to engage with the complexities of mental health issues, benefiting both afflicted individuals and their families.

1.2 Magical realism

Theatre originated in various communities and societies around the world, evolving from rituals, storytelling, imitation, and imagination. This includes ancient Greek theatre, medieval religious plays, Renaissance theatre, psychological realism in Western theatre, and the traditional performances of Chinese, Japanese, and Indian civilizations. "Realism" is what playwrights throughout the ages have aimed to present, although the understanding and perspectives of realism are very diverse. It could be the realism of depicting the lives of characters, the realism in the story of the relationships between characters, emotional realism, behavioral realism, or the realism in the fate of humans (Herrmann, 2019; Shepherd-Barr, 2016). However, the popularity of realistic plays and performances, which began in the late 19th century, has limited the concept of realism in performance to only images and stories that are close to everyday life.

Philosophers and artists from various fields in the early 20th century began to question the depiction of reality in realist representations in theatre. Their goal was to transcend superficial realism to explore inner

realities that are abstract or not perceivable through sight. This philosophical shift gave birth to "magical realism," a concept first used to describe a type of literature that emerged in post-colonial Latin America, especially the works of Gabriel García Márquez from Colombia, Jorge Amado from Brazil, Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar from Argentina, and Isabel Allende from Chile. Another group of scholars believes that this concept originated in Europe during the political oppression of 1930–1950, in the writings of Johan Daisne from Belgium and Ernst Jünger from Germany, whose literary works incorporate supernatural elements into realistic stories and situations (Asayesh & Arargüç, 2017; D'haen, 2020).

This phenomenon, often seen as a response to the trauma of colonialism and political upheaval, is defined by its integration of fantastical elements within historical and everyday contexts. This narrative style critiques colonial histories and their enduring impacts by embedding the fantastical into the real. It serves both as a form of escapism and a medium for political critique. By situating characters' actions in real-world settings, magical realism conveys the lived realities of those affected by colonial dispossession. At the same time, the juxtaposition of fantastical elements captures experiences, such as the violence and dislocation caused by colonial rule, that resist logical explanation and conventional representation. This dual function allows magical realism to challenge and reimagine historical narratives, offering alternative perspectives on cultural and personal identities, and sometimes transforming these narratives into empowered futures (Hart & Ouyang, 2005; Perez & Chevalier, 2020).

As the concept of magical realism evolved over the years, it expanded to encompass a broad range of narratives and art forms, including literature, film, television, theatre, visual arts, music, video games, and even fashion. This expansion was fueled by increased cultural interactions and migrations, which contributed to its global spread. Magical realism is now recognized as a global phenomenon and contemporary magical realist artists use realistic settings combined with bizarre, surreal phenomena to explore philosophical concepts such as identity and social structures, representing a rebellion against traditional cultural norms that once marginalized diverse human experiences (Adams, 2008; Bowers, 2004; Hart & Ouyang, 2005; Perez & Chevalier, 2020).

In the field of theatre, plays and performances in the style of magical realism are becoming increasingly popular in the contemporary world. For example, in the plays "Angels in America" by Tony Kushner, "Marisol" by José Rivera, and "The Clean House" by Sarah Ruhl, supernatural events and miracles occur in realistic settings, and the characters in the story accept them as ordinary. In addition to this, magical realist plays often include elements like non-human characters, a sense of timelessness, characters with extraordinary abilities, the existence of parallel worlds, unsolved mysteries, unsettling atmospheres, inexplicable events, references to myths and fairy tales, and moments where the impossible becomes tangible (Cash, 2023).

1.3 Purpose of the study

As a person with anxiety disorders, the researcher-director in this study wanted to use theatre to communicate his experiences and struggles in ways that words cannot describe. Beyond his personal goal, this exploration may help develop a deeper understanding of mental health issues among those affected and reveal the possibilities of using theatre as a means of learning about mental health and well-being, and to help audiences develop their social awareness and contribute to combating stigma.

As a theatrical production, the performance was anticipated to be both enjoyable and engaging. The researcher-director intentionally avoided making the performance didactic, meaning that no resolution to the protagonist's challenges related to anxiety disorders would be presented. The objective was to present an accurate depiction of reality to establish a strong emotional connection between the story being portrayed on stage and the audience, yet, as Robert Scholes (in Simpkins, 1988, p. 149) argues, "reality is too subtle for realism to catch it… It cannot be transcribed directly. But by invention, fabulation, we may open a way towards reality that will come as close to it as human ingenuity can come." Consequently, the main objective of this study is to explore magical realism as a mode of representation to communicate the nuanced experience of anxiety disorders, transcending verbal limitations, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of mental health and enhancing social awareness. The findings of this study will offer guidelines and recommendations for subsequent research and theatrical experiments aimed at capturing the inner experiences of individuals living with mental illnesses.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Magical realism and theatre

While magical realism is often associated with literature, spanning eight decades and developing across Germany (1920s), Central America (1940s), and Latin America (from 1955), studies have also explored its presence in theatre. Ricci-Jane Evangeline Adams' PhD thesis (2008) examined magical realism in Australian theatre, using plays by Ben Ellis, Lally Katz, and Kit Lazaroo. Adams demonstrated how magical realism can powerfully convey political debates, particularly around decolonization. Similarly, Swiss playwright Max Frisch

employed magical realism to address serious political, social, and psychological issues (Ahmed, 2018). In Asia, Taiwan's Assignment Theatre has used magical realist techniques to confront inequalities of class, gender, and ethnicity (Smith, 2005). Furthermore, Gordon McDougall (2003) likens theatre to dreaming, highlighting its ability to alter perceptions and tap into the unconscious. He suggests that the disorientation and paradoxes in theatre reveal deeper truths, using dream-like experiences to reflect reality and transform audiences. This approach leverages metaphor, imagery, and audience engagement to convey complex layers of consciousness.

2.2 Portrayals of mental illness

Historical portrayals of mental illness often depicted characters as simply "mad." Davis (1992) analyzes characters like Blanche DuBois and Shakespeare's Portia, contextualizing their madness within their lives and relationships, offering insights valuable to mental health professionals. More recent studies criticize negative media portrayals of mental illness and advocate for theatre as a tool to combat stigma. Hoffman (2016) highlights plays like "Blue/Orange" and "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time" for their empathetic and complex representations, arguing that theatre can raise awareness and prompt societal change. Johnston (2009) examines Workman Arts, a Toronto-based theatre company that redefines perceptions of mental illness through nuanced portrayals. Similarly, Sextou and Patterson (2014) describe collaborations between artists and psychiatrists to depict the impact of bipolar disorder on relationships through dramatic monologues, aiming to challenge stigma. In addition, two quantitative studies have also explored theatre's impact on mental health. Michalak et al. (2014) found that a one-woman play about bipolar disorder improved attitudes among healthcare providers and individuals with the disorder, while Blignault et al. (2010) demonstrated that performances based on the experiences of people with mental illness led to more positive attitudes toward mental illness and increased willingness to seek help.

Although numerous studies have examined the impact of theatre in diminishing stigma, there is a lack of research into how magical realism might portray the psychological experiences of those with anxiety disorders. Employing magical realism as a device for exploration has the potential to foster a deeper understanding and wider awareness of complex and varied experiences that are less frequently represented in society.

3. METHODS

3.1 Practice-based research

This research is conducted using practice-based research, which is "creation through experimentation [...] designed to answer research questions about art and the creation of works that cannot be explored by other means [... it is] experimenting through art to break the mold, to question, to learn more about art and our role within it" (Skains, 2018, p. 86). This research approach is informed by the performative paradigm proposed by Haseman (2006). He differentiates this paradigm from quantitative and qualitative paradigms in terms of the presentation of findings. In performative research, the output is "expressed in non-numeric data, but in forms of symbolic data other than words in discursive text. These include material forms of practice, of still and moving images, of music and sound, of live action and digital code" (p. 103). Furthermore, the practice is primary, meaning that it is "the necessary precondition of engagement in performative research [...] the material outcomes of practice [are considered] as all-important representations of research findings in their own right" (Haseman, 2006, p. 103).

The researcher-director chose to produce two distinct shows to thoroughly investigate the potential applications of magical realism. A group of seven actors would perform "The Practice", while a single actor would perform "As Fa As Farida". The two shows differed in several ways, as shown in Table 1: "The Practice" was set in the 1980s, whereas "As Fa As Farida" was set in an unspecified time. The former show's presentation focused on its physical stage, lighting, sound, and performers; in the latter, an LED screen was used, and the actor interacted with it throughout the performance, as well as breaking the fourth wall and interacting with the audience. In "The Practice", the story and all of the characters were fictional, but in "As Fa As Farida," at the beginning and end of the show, actual interview footage of the actor discussing anxiety was utilized.

Table 1: Presentation differences between "The Practice" and "As Fa As Farida"

	The Practice	As Fa As Farida
Setting	1980s	Unspecified time
Presentation style	Minimalist, one actor, and an LED screen	Physical stage, lighting, sound, performers
Audience interaction	Actor breaks the fourth wall and interacts with the audience	No direct interaction with the audience
Character focus	Actual interview footage of the actor discussing anxiety	Fictional characters and story
Performance type	Performed by a single actor	Performed by a group of seven actors

3.2 Devising

Devising was employed to develop the script and performance for both productions. In "The Practice," devising occurred over nine weeks leading up to the performance, while in "As Fa As Farida," it was utilized during the first six exploratory sessions with the actor. Devising is rooted in collaborative experimentation with forms and ideas, used by artists who seek to create original theatre rather than stage an existing play. As Sextou and Patterson (2014, p. 1) note, "devised scripts and theatrical productions can be effective in raising public awareness about mental illness and provide safe public venues for discussing sensitive experiences and emotional responses."

The actor in "As Fa As Farida" was chosen based on her extensive acting background, especially in devising, and her personal experience with anxiety disorders. As for "The Practice", the two principal performers were selected for the role based on their background in acting, acting style, and emotional realism. The open-call audition process was used to choose the supporting actors, who were selected based on their flexibility as actors. "Anxiety disorder" was not applied as a criterion for selection because the play's characters do not always exhibit anxiety disorder symptoms; rather, the symptoms are only apparent when the characters come together at specific moments. Additionally, the play was not intended as therapy, and casting only actors with anxiety disorders carried the risk of harm, given the anxiety-provoking scenarios.

The devising process for the theatre productions began with physical and verbal improvisations, utilizing keywords and prompts related to symptoms and conditions of GAD and SAD. These prompts were informed by the real experiences of the researcher-director and, in the case of "As Fa As Farida," the actor involved. The script gradually took shape through these improvisation sessions, with the actors actively contributing to its development. During the scripting process, elements of magical realism were incorporated, which required delicate handling to avoid perpetuating stigmatization. The aim was to ensure that the protagonist in both shows remained relatable to the audience, despite the fantastical depictions of their mental processes. This balance was crucial for accurately portraying the complexities of living with mental illness while promoting empathy and understanding.

In the final structure of the productions, "The Practice" consists of eight scenes, while "As Fa As Farida" is composed of five scenes. The collaborative and improvisational nature of the devising process, coupled with the inclusion of magical realism, ensured that the productions provided a sensitive and authentic representation of mental illness. This method allowed the characters to be relatable and the storyline (of "The Practice") and vignettes (of "As Fa As Farida") to resonate with audiences, encouraging empathy and challenging stigmatization.

3.3 Thematic analysis

This study employed thematic analysis to analyze and present the research findings. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative research method in the social sciences and psychology to identify, analyze, and report patterns, themes, and meaningful insights within textual or qualitative data. It involves a systematic process of coding and categorizing data, enabling researchers to uncover recurring themes and patterns that provide a deeper understanding of the research topic. Thematic analysis does not rely on predefined theories or frameworks, making it flexible and adaptable to various research contexts. It aims to distill the essence of participants' experiences or perspectives, contributing to a rich and nuanced interpretation of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2020; Braun et al., 2019).

Thematic analysis is a multi-step process. This study began with data collection, where the researcher gathered relevant data from two domains: magical realist representations in theatre and other art forms and anxiety disorder experiences. For the first domain, data were drawn from various literature and studies on magical realism in contemporary society (Adams, 2008; Ahmed, 2018; Dariva, 2022; Floss, 2017; Gee, 2021; Lang, 2020; Mariboho, 2016), while data for the second domain were drawn from readings on anxiety disorders, personal reflections, rehearsal notes (including scripts, stage directions, observations, self-reflection, and other notes from the development process), video recordings, and verbal and written feedback from audiences. The data collection phase extended from pre-production until all the performances had ended. In the second phase, the researcher-director began with a process of initial coding; segmenting the data into meaningful units or codes. In this case, codes such as "reality and fantasy," "identity," "existential exploration," "myths," "temporal fluidity," and "liminal spaces" were created. These codes were then grouped into overarching themes that captured the essence of the data from both domains. The researcher-director then reviewed and refined these themes, defining and naming them for clarity. The themes will be discussed in the next section. Finally, the results are reported in a manuscript, which is this paper, quoting examples from the data to effectively communicate the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2020; Braun et al., 2019).

4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The thematic analysis conducted in this study resulted in four key themes: 1) The interplay of reality and fantasy, 2) The disruption of space and time, 3) Metatheatrical reflections on society and identity, and 4) Voices from the margins. These themes were only generated after the productions had ended. During the development of "The Practice" and "As Fa As Farida," the focus was on exploring various key characteristics of magical realism concerning portraying anxiety disorder symptoms. Devising these theatrical pieces involved a process of constant evolution. Ideas that initially seemed promising were sometimes found to not integrate well with the rest of the production or proved too challenging for the actors to perform. The process was far from straightforward, as it involved more than simply presenting anxiety disorder symptoms through magical realist elements. Other considerations included budget constraints, spatial capabilities, and the effects on the audience, such as how easily the narrative could be followed and understood, the emotions and thoughts that were evoked, and whether the offering would be considered fresh and original compared to what the audience had previously experienced.

This section presents the final results of both productions. The differences between the performances, particularly in storytelling and production scale, demonstrate that while both shows can be categorized as magical realism, there are many ways to represent the experiences of individuals with anxiety disorders.

4.1 The devising process of "The Practice"

Although devising is considered a tool for this practice-based research, the process itself is part of the findings. During development and rehearsals, real experiences and symptoms of GAD and SAD were collected from both the researcher-director and the actors and documented in a notebook. The initial lists of codes related to both magical realism and anxiety disorders were used to develop short situations and scenes for improvisation, bringing the stories and experiences collected to life. Not all of the works produced during development made it to the final performance, however. The researcher-director selected moments, characters, actions, and visuals and incorporated them into a script, which was completed two weeks before the first show.

"The Practice," or "The Intriguing Snapshots of the Alternative Worlds of a Person Who Is Thinking of Ending Things," was performed at the Bangkok Theatre Festival 2022 at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC) on November 12–13 and 19–20, 2022 (Figure 1). This dark comedy was described in the program as: "A human being finds themselves struggling with life, on the edge of a midlife crisis. They embark on an adventure into 'The Practice,' a lucid quasi-dream world where they befriend a group of therapists (maybe, but probably not) who help them navigate through painful territories and face multiple realities." The 50-minute play comprised eight scenes set in a therapy room, blending with images from the mind of the main character, "Eve," who was grappling with the loss of loved ones, gripping anxiety, and looping thoughts. The performance featured an ensemble of seven actors, with two actors alternating in the roles of the protagonist and the therapist.
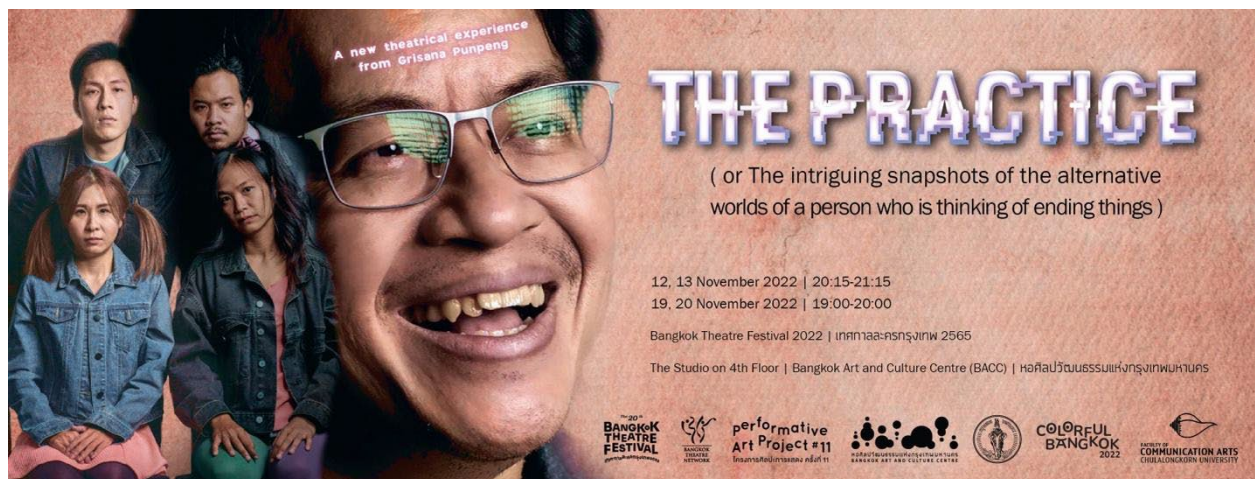

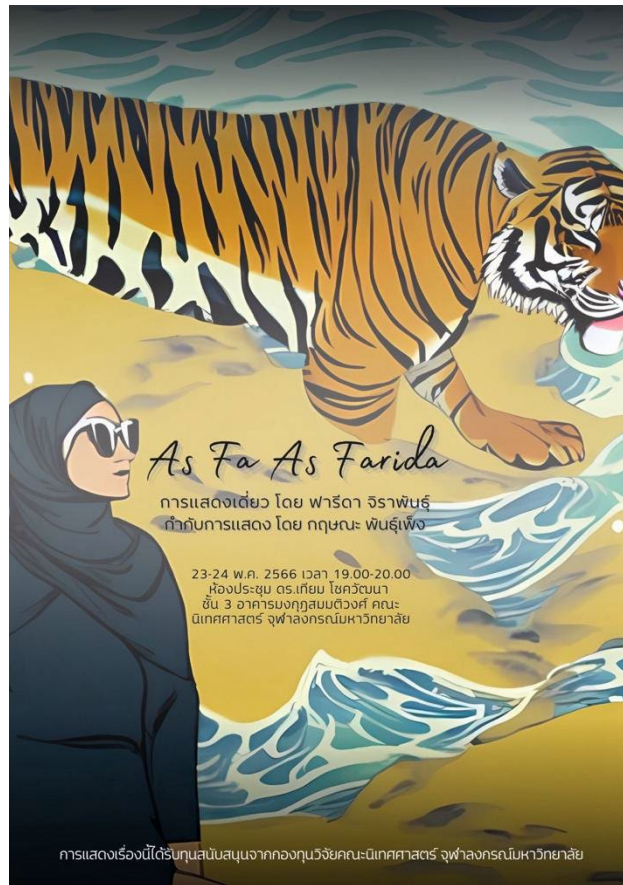**Figure 1:** Poster of the performance "The Practice"

Figure 2: Poster of the performance "As Fa As Farida"

4.2 The devising process of "As Fa As Farida"

Following the production of "The Practice," the researcher-director aimed to explore the use of magical realism in a performance that contrasted in style and approach. The devising process for this new work, titled "As Fa As Farida" (Figure 2), unfolded over nine sessions, each lasting between one and two hours. Scenes presented in the final performance emerged from improvisations and collaborative explorations between the researcher-director and the actor. These explorations drew upon real-life experiences and physiological sensations associated with moments of anxiety. Unlike the ensemble cast of seven in "The Practice," this 35-minute performance featured a single actor, who conveyed her journey with anxiety disorders through stages represented by five scenes, ranging from catastrophizing to acceptance. The scenes are seemingly disconnected, presenting moments in her life both in her daily activities and in her professional life as an actor. At the end of the show, a recorded interview features the actor sharing her story of anxiety from a young age, something she had never revealed publicly before. The inner worlds of the main character, previously conveyed through movement, actions, and lighting in "The Practice," were now visualized as images projected on an LED screen at the back of the stage. Additionally, the performance incorporated an interaction between the main character and a voiceless, masked figure.

The next part examines each magical realist theme, generated from the analysis, in both productions, examining how it is delivered on stage and how it relates to the protagonist's symptoms of GAD and SAD. To completely comprehend this study, readers should view the entire performance recordings (Punpeng, 2024a, 2024b) while reading.

4.3 The interplay of reality and fantasy

The first element of magical realism explored in this performance is the juxtaposition of the real world and the fantasy in the presentation. This allows the researcher-director to portray both the external world, as perceived through the senses, and the internal psychological world of the protagonist. The resulting representation aims to depict the symptoms of GAD and SAD in a way that is both accessible and understandable to a general audience. By weaving together realistic, concrete elements, such as physical actions and dialogue, with abstract, fantastical elements, such as symbolic imagery and internal monologues, the performance creates a multi-layered experience that reflects the complex interplay of external reality and

internal anxieties, fostering a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by individuals with GAD and SAD. Specific instances in the performances that reflect this theme and their relation to GAD/SAD symptoms are detailed in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: The interplay of reality and fantasy in "The Practice"

Scene description	GAD/SAD symptoms
Prelude: In the dark, an '80s pop song plays as the lights in the therapist's office slowly come on. The setting is realistic. The protagonist, Eve, is seated on a sofa center stage. Other actors are scattered around the set. They begin dancing repetitively to the music, then mime picking up a weapon and gradually move closer to attack Eve. Throughout this, Eve remains motionless on the sofa (Figure 3).	- Persistent fear and worry that are extreme or unrealistic (GAD) - Excessive fear of humiliating or embarrassing oneself while being exposed to public scrutiny or to unfamiliar people (SAD)
Scene 3: As Eve talks to the therapist, who is acting as Eve's partner, a man appears onstage being chased by another man. The second man appears to be trying to rip the first man's shirt, which is covered in plush toys. Finally, the second man manages to rip a large plush toy off the first man's shirt. This scene represents images inside Eve's mind evoked during the conversation with the therapist. Eve is reminded of a time when they were bullied by a classmate (Figure 4).	Having difficulty concentrating, perceiving situations as more threatening than they are, difficulty in letting go of worries (GAD)

Figure 3: The Practice: Prelude

Figure 4: The Practice: Scene 3

Table 3: The interplay of reality and fantasy in "As Fa As Farida"

| Scene description	GAD/SAD symptoms
Scene 1: Towards the end of scene 1, after Farida has acted out all the situations given by the unseen casting director, her anxiety, particularly regarding cleanliness, worsens. It culminates in an image of feces on the screen, positioned directly on her head. The feces is a black-and-white sketch. The audience can clearly see it is not realistic. No attempts were made to make the feces appear real – in its size, color, shape, etc. However, it is evident that Farida perceives it as very real at that moment. She screams, "Farida has poop on her head!" and falls to the ground (Figure 5).	Persistent fear and worry that are extreme or unrealistic (GAD)
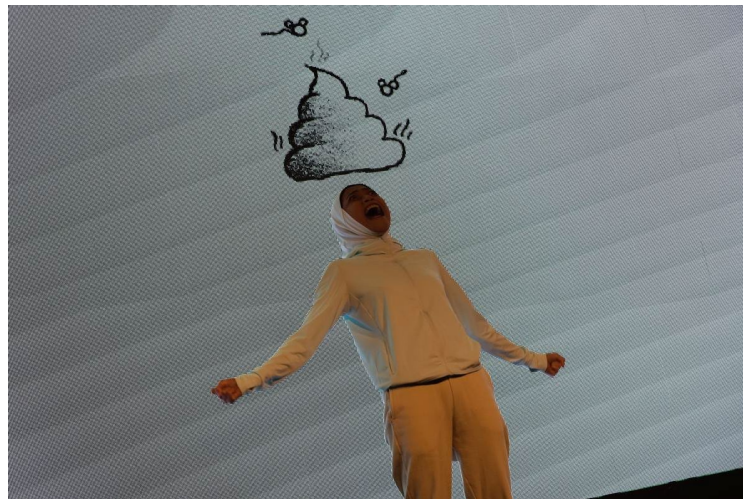
Figure 5: As Fa As Farida: Scene 1

4.4 The disruption of space and time

Magical realist theatre, as exemplified in the works "The Practice" and "As Fa As Farida," profoundly engages with the concepts of space and time, magnifying and transforming them to challenge our understanding of empirical reality. This disruption manifests through the manipulation of physical stage settings and the creation of fantastical, dreamlike environments that defy the laws of physics and logic, allowing deeper explorations of memory, identity, and psychological turmoil. In "The Practice," the therapy room is reimagined as a fluid space that shifts from reality to a quasi-dream world where the protagonist navigates various psychological landscapes. In "As Fa As Farida," the inner worlds of the main character are visualized through images projected on an LED screen at the back of the stage, enhancing the surreal atmosphere. The performance space acts not merely as a backdrop but as a dynamic element that deepens the thematic exploration and amplifies the magical aspects of the narratives. Stage design and lighting are crucial in both productions, creating illusions of impossible spaces and distorting familiar environments to evoke a sense of disorientation. Table 4 and Table 5 illustrate specific moments in the performances that highlight this theme and their connection to GAD/SAD symptoms.

Table 4: The disruption of space and time in "The Practice"

Scene description	GAD/SAD symptoms
In scene 5, Eve is arguing with a therapist who is now performing as Eve's partner. Uncomfortable with the confrontation, Eve requests that the ensuing conversation be conducted through "assistants." Two assistants appear one by one, each voicing the thoughts of one of the characters (Figure 6). The scene's setting is deliberately ambiguous. It could be the therapist's office, a living room from the past, or entirely within Eve's mind.	Rigid body posture or speaking with an overly soft voice, difficulty making eye contact, feelings of self-consciousness or fear that people will judge them negatively (SAD)

Table 4: The disruption of space and time in "The Practice" (continued)

Scene description	GAD/SAD symptoms
In scene 6, Eve lies on the floor. Other characters attempt to help Eve back to the sofa, but each time Eve reaches the sofa, they return to their original position on the floor. This pattern repeats several times. Throughout the scene, the assisting characters offer Eve words of intended support, but their comments have the opposite effect (Figure 7).	Feeling restless, wound up, or on edge, feelings of being out of control (GAD)

Figure 6: The Practice: Scene 5

Figure 7: The Practice: Scene 6

Table 5: The disruption of space and time in "As Fa As Farida"

Scene description	GAD/SAD symptoms
In scene 2, Farida dances to a song by her favorite band, Queen. The setting is deliberately unspecified. Black figures appear on screen, performing various mundane chores and tasks like mopping and yoga. The images accelerate, revealing Farida's growing fatigue and worry. A spot appears on the screen, irritating her. As she tries to remove it, more spots appear. The focus is on Farida's movements and emotions, not the specific time or place. The mundane tasks suggest this is a recurring experience for her (Figure 8).	Non-specific persistent fear and worry that are extreme or unrealistic and hard to control, and become overly concerned with everyday matters (GAD)
Scene 3 opens with Farida walking to the back of the stage. She waves her hand over the LED screen, revealing a painting. Again, the time and place are unimportant. Farida appears calm and relaxed as she performs this action (Figure 9).	Rather than exhibiting signs of anxiety, the reverse is shown. This is because the scene describes Farida's use of painting as a coping mechanism for her anxiety.

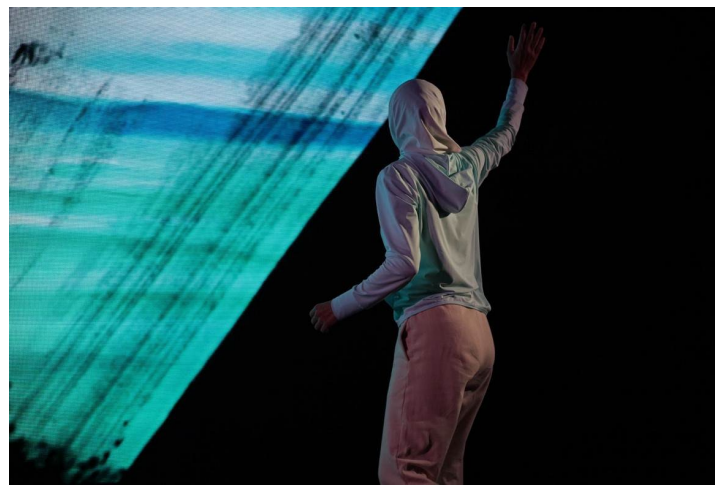**Figure 8:** As Fa As Farida: Scene 2

Figure 9: As Fa As Farida: Scene 3

4.5 Metatheatrical reflections on society and identity

Magical realist theatre often employs metatheatrical strategies to challenge the dominance of dramatic realism (Adams, 2008). Metatheatricality in these two productions involves techniques that blur the line between the fictional world of the play and the real world of the audience, such as plays within plays ("The Practice"), characters breaking the fourth wall to address the audience, and self-referential commentary ("As Fa As Farida"). These methods serve various purposes, from creating comedic effects to prompting philosophical reflections on identity, society, and the nature of reality (Dustagheer & Newman, 2018; Hornby, 2003). Additionally, these performances challenge the boundaries of language by visually enacting metaphors. Words are not merely spoken; they are made tangible, coming to life on stage. This is evident in characters physically embodying abstract concepts in "Practice" and the visual representations of language that interact with the actor in "As Fa As Farida." This technique enhances the audience's connection with the themes and ideas of the performances (Adams, 2008). These two productions utilize metatheatricality and the visual portrayal of language to extend the boundaries of theatrical expression, presenting detailed and layered reflections on perceived reality. By challenging traditional modes of representation, these productions offer new possibilities for examining the human condition and societal views toward mental illnesses. Tables 6 and 7 present examples from the performances that demonstrate this theme and their relevance to GAD/SAD symptoms.

Table 6: Metatheatrical reflections on society and identity in "The Practice"

Scene description	GAD/SAD symptoms
In scene 4, Eve attempts to get into bed but is unable to due to overwhelming thoughts and worries. Images of TV show hosts appear, voicing her anxieties, particularly her concerns about others' opinions. She becomes further distracted by both her thoughts and the images on the TV and media platforms. The scene culminates with a drag queen emerging from the back of the stage, inviting Eve to dance, and then leaving (Figure 10).	- Non-specific persistent fear and worry that are extreme or unrealistic and hard to control, becoming overly concerned with everyday matters (GAD) - An excessive fear of humiliating or embarrassing oneself while being exposed to public scrutiny or to unfamiliar people (SAD)

Figure 10: The Practice: End of Scene 4

Table 7: Metatheatrical reflections on society and identity in "As Fa As Farida"

| Scene description	GAD/SAD symptoms
In scene 4, Farida appears to transform into various animals and insects, striking poses as short phrases—representing past anxious thoughts—flash behind her on the screen. These phrases are imagined words from friends and herself, not verbatim recollections. Rather than depicting those moments in her mind, the actual words are displayed, bouncing, spinning, growing, shrinking, and even disappearing. The emphasis here is not on the meaning of the words but on their persistence, entanglement, and the way they occupy space in Farida's mind (Figure 11).	- Non-specific persistent fear and worry that is extreme or unrealistic and hard to control, becoming overly concerned with everyday matters (GAD) - An excessive fear of humiliating or embarrassing oneself while being exposed to public scrutiny or to unfamiliar people (SAD)
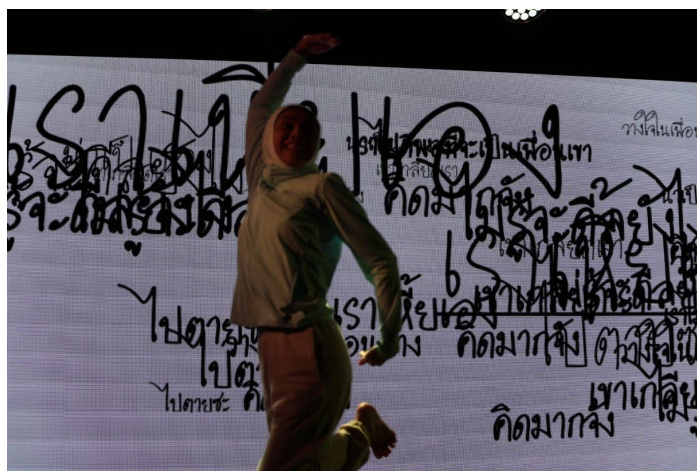
Figure 11: As Fa As Farida: Scene 4

4.6 Voices from the margins

In magical realism, marginalized perspectives, ideas, and places are given a platform to connect with the audience. Within the literary context, magical realist authors often "speak from the margin," presenting worldviews that "diverge from the rational-empirical outlook prevalent in the Western world" (Hegerfeldt, 2005, as cited in Adams, 2008, p. 261). This aligns with the researcher-director's goal of representing characters with GAD and SAD, who may often feel unseen and unheard in society. By embracing the non-linear narratives, dreamlike imagery, and symbolic language characteristic of magical realism, the researcher-director creates a theatrical space where the internal struggles of characters with GAD and SAD in both stories are not only acknowledged but also validated. This amplification of marginalized voices through magical realism fosters a deeper understanding and empathy among audiences toward those with mental health issues, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and representative theatrical landscape. Specific instances in the performances that exemplify this theme and their connections to GAD/SAD symptoms are detailed in Tables 8 and 9.

Table 8: Voices from the margins in "The Practice"

Scene description	GAD/SAD symptoms
In scene 7, Eve finally opens up about her feelings and releases the tension she has built up inside. Whether this scene occurs in reality or not is ambiguous, but it reveals a vulnerability and honesty in the character that the audience has not seen before. The movements in the scene are minimal and simple, with no clear indication of space or time. This allows the audience to connect with the character on a fundamental level, as this character could be anyone they know, or even themselves at some point in their lives (Figure 12).	- Non-specific persistent fear and worry that are extreme or unrealistic and hard to control, becoming overly concerned with everyday matters (GAD) - An excessive fear of humiliating or embarrassing oneself while being exposed to public scrutiny or to unfamiliar people (SAD)

Figure 12: The Practice: Scene 7

Table 9: Voices from the margins in "As Fa As Farida"

Scene description	GAD/SAD symptoms
In the show's final moment, Farida sits on stage facing the LED screen, watching a video of herself recounting her experiences with anxiety disorders since childhood. This symbolic scene represents Farida's reflection on and acceptance of her experiences, even though others may not fully understand the seriousness and complexity of her disorders. While this scene aims to present Farida's story to the audience in a pure and simple way, its primary importance lies in its function as a personal reflection. One of the main challenges for those with anxiety disorders is self-stigmatization, and this symbolic scene offers Farida a starting point towards healing and learning to live with anxiety (Figure 13).	Farida shares personal stories that reveal symptoms of both GAD and SAD: persistent, excessive, and difficult-to-control fear and worry which may seem extreme or unrealistic, often centered on everyday matters; and an intense fear of humiliation or embarrassment in social situations or around unfamiliar people.

Figure 13: As Fa As Farida: Epilogue

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This practice-based research demonstrates the potential of magical realism as a tool for representing the inner experiences of individuals with anxiety disorders on stage. Through the development and performances of "The Practice" and "As Fa As Farida," the study focused on the creative process, exploring how the incorporation of magical realist themes into theatrical narratives can offer a nuanced and empathetic portrayal of anxiety disorders. The findings suggest that the symptoms of anxiety disorders and the complex realities of mental illness can be conveyed through the interplay of reality and fantasy, the disruption of space and time, and the use of metatheatrical techniques. This approach offers a platform for individuals whose experiences are often marginalized or misunderstood, allowing their voices to be heard and their stories to resonate with audiences.

The insights from this study can serve as a guideline for future theatrical experiments aimed at capturing the inner experiences of individuals living with mental illnesses beyond anxiety disorders. Although the study was conducted for stage performances, its principles can be applied across various media, as magical realism is already prevalent in literature, film, and other art forms. The research underscores the versatility of magical realism, demonstrating that there is no single formula for representing the stories of those with mental disorders. Instead, the approach can be adapted to suit the specific needs and perspectives of each production, as exemplified by the distinct approaches in "The Practice" and "As Fa As Farida." The former utilized an ensemble cast and intricate stagecraft to create a dreamlike world, while the latter relied on a solo performer and multimedia elements to explore the protagonist's inner world.

This study contributes to a growing body of research exploring theatre's potential to reshape our understanding of mental illness, challenge stigma, and address the complexities of mental health. While the focus was on the development process rather than audience perception, future research could benefit from investigating the impact of magical realist theatre on audiences' understanding and empathy towards individuals with mental illnesses across diverse cultural contexts. Exploring the application of magical realism in theatre and other media to represent a broader range of mental health conditions, such as depression, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia, could also be valuable. Collaboration between theatre practitioners, mental health professionals, and researchers can foster a multidisciplinary understanding of theatre's potential in mental health awareness and stigma reduction. Furthermore, expanding research on cultural variations in the reception and interpretation of magical realist theatre can assess its universal effectiveness in conveying the experiences associated with mental health issues. Pursuing these recommendations will allow the field of theatre to continue evolving as a powerful tool for raising awareness, fostering empathy, and promoting positive change in mental health.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

REFERENCES

Adams, R.-J. E. (2008). *Seeing in unordinary ways: Magical realism in Australian theatre* [Doctoral dissertation, The University of Melbourne]. The University of Melbourne Library Catalogue. http://cat.lib.unimelb. edu.au/record=b3252558

Ahmed, I. H. E. S. (2018). *Magical realism in Max Frisch's works: With special reference to three of his plays: Count Oederland, The Fire Raisers and Biography: A Game* [Doctoral dissertation, Alexandria University]. Academia. https://www.academia.edu/download/63396775/Magical_Realism_in_Max_Frisch2020052 2-29857-1c17h39.pdf

Asayesh, M. E., & Arargüç, M. F. (2017). Magical realism and its European essence. *Journal of History Culture and Art Research*, *6*(2), 25–35. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.7596/taksad.v6i2.847

Blignault, I., Smith, S., Woodland, L., Ponzio, V., Ristevski, D., & Kirov, S. (2010). Fear and shame: Using theatre to destigmatise mental illness in an Australian Macedonian community. *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*, *21*(2), 120–126. https://doi.org/10.1071/he10120

Bowers, M. A. (2004). *Magic(al) realism*. Routledge.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, *11*(4), 589–597. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2020). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *18*(3), 328–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238

Braun, V., Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., & Terry, G. (2019). Thematic analysis. In P. Liamputtong (Ed.), *Handbook of research methods in health social sciences* (pp. 843–860). Springer.

Byrne, P. (2000). Stigma of mental illness and ways of diminishing it. *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, *6*(1), 65–72. https://doi.org/10.1192/apt.6.1.65

Cash, J. (2023, October 3). *Magical realism theatre conventions*. The Drama Teacher. https://thedramateacher. com/magical-realism/

D'haen, T. (2020). Magical realism: The European trajectory. In C. Warnes & K. A. Sasser (Eds.), *Magical realism and literature* (pp. 117–130). Cambridge University Press.

Dariva, B. A. (2022). *Marginal realities: Politics and aesthetics of magical realism in cinema* [Master's thesis, Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul]. University of Rio Grande do Sul Digital Repository. https:// lume.ufrgs.br/bitstream/handle/10183/246550/001144523.pdf

Davis, D. R. (1992). *Scenes of madness*. Routledge.

Dustagheer, S., & Newman, H. (2018). Metatheatre and early modern drama. *Shakespeare Bulletin*, *36*(1), 3–18. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26409980

Floss, J. (2017). *Magical realism and film: A look at midnight's children* [Master's thesis, State University of New York]. Digital Commons at Buffalo State. https://digitalcommons.buffalostate.edu/cgi/viewcontent. cgi?article=1030&context=english_theses

Gee, F. (2021). *Magic realism, world cinema, and the avant-garde*. Routledge.

Hart, S. M., & Ouyang, W.-C. (2005). Introduction: Globalization of magical realism: New politics of aesthetics. In S. M. Hart & W.-C. Ouyang (Eds.), *A companion to magical realism* (pp. 1–22). Tamesis.

Haseman, B. (2006). A manifesto for performative research. *Media International Australia*, *118*(1), 98–106. https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0611800113

Herrmann, E. J. (2019). The evolution of American dramatic realism. In K. Newlin (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of American literary realism* (pp. 506–526). Oxford University Press.

Hoffman, G. (2016). *Mental illness through the lens of theatre* [Supervised Undergraduate Student Research, University of Tennessee, Knoxville]. Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. https://trace.tennes see.edu/utk_chanhonoproj/2033

Hornby, R. (2003). Metatheatre. *The Hudson Review*, *56*(3), 507–513. https://doi.org/10.2307/3852699

Hunt, C., & Singh, M. (1991). Generalized anxiety disorder. *International Review of Psychiatry*, *3*(2), 215–229. https://doi.org/10.3109/09540269109110402

Johnston, K. (2009). New strategies for representing mental illness on Canadian stages. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *13*(7), 755–766. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110903046044

Kaminer, D., & Stein, D. J. (2003). Social anxiety disorder. *The World Journal of Biological Psychiatry*, *4*(3), 103–110. https://doi.org/10.1080/15622970310029902

Lang, C. (2020). *Magical realism in transnational cinema* [Doctoral dissertation, York University]. YorkSpace. https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/ccb52cf2-64ac-4bc2-85b1-155cf06f bc5e/content

Mariboho, R. (2016). *Practical magic: Magical realism and the possibilities of representation in twenty-first century fiction and film* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Texas at Arlington]. MavMatrix. https://mavmatrix.uta.edu/context/english_dissertations/article/1065/type/native/viewcontent

Marques, L., Robinaugh, D. J., LeBlanc, N. J., & Hinton, D. (2011). Cross-cultural variations in the prevalence and presentation of anxiety disorder. *Expert Review of Neurotherapeutics*, *11*(2), 313–322. https://doi.org/10.1586/ern.10.122

McDougall, G. (2003). Theatre and the unconscious. *Studies in Theatre and Performance, 23*(2), 107–116. https://doi.org/10.1386/stap.23.2.107/0

Michalak, E. E., Livingston, J. D., Maxwell, V., Hole, R., Hawke, L. D., & Parikh, S. V. (2014). Using theatre to address mental illness stigma: A knowledge translation study in bipolar disorder. *International Journal of Bipolar Disorders*, *2*(1), Article 1. http://www.journalbipolardisorders.com/content/2/1/1

Perez, R., & Chevalier, V. A. (2020). Introduction: "Proliferations of being: The persistence of magical realism in twenty-first century literature and culture". In R. Perez & V. A. Chevalier (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of magical realism in the twenty-first century* (pp. 1–19). Palgrave Macmillan.

Punpeng, G. (2024a, January 31). *As Fa As Farida.* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/gqqLqRUa-Bs?si=K49QRDmLSsiX55Tu

Punpeng, G. (2024b, January 31). *The Practice.* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/mCbnyliqGpA

Renner, K.-H., Hock, M., Bergner-Köther, R., & Laux, L. (2018). Differentiating anxiety and depression: The state-trait anxiety-depression inventory. *Cognition and Emotion*, *37*(7), 1409–1423. https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2016.1266306

Sextou, P., & Patterson, P. (2014). Theatre, society, and stigma: Mental illness on stage. *The International Journal of Social, Political and Community Agendas in the Arts*, *9*(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.18848/2326-9960/CGP/v09i01/1-10

Shepherd-Barr, K. E. (2016). Realism, naturalism, and symbolism. In K. E. Shepherd-Barr (Ed.), *Modern drama: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199658770.003.0002

Simpkins, S. (1988). Magical strategies: The supplement of realism. *Twentieth Century Literature*, *34*(2), 140–154. https://doi.org/10.2307/441074

Skains, L. R. (2018). Creative practice as research: Discourse on methodology. *Media Practice and Education*, *19*(1), 82–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/14682753.2017.1362175

Smith, R. (2005). Magical realism and theatre of the oppressed in Taiwan: Rectifying unbalanced realities with Chung Chiao's Assignment Theatre. *Asian Theatre Journal*, *22*(1), 107–121. https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/5/article/178226

World Health Organization. (2023, September 27). *Anxiety disorders.* https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/anxiety-disorders#:~:text=Anxiety%20disorders%20are%20the%20world%27s, effective%20treatments%20for%20anxiety%20disorders