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Rehearsing with Imagined Interactions Theory: Exploring Imagined Interactions as Framework for Ensemble and Solo Performance Rehearsals

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How should I practice is a common question that comes up while teaching performance and public speaking classes, when directing and performing in productions, and when coaching and competing for forensics squads. This essay provides a rationale for fusing Honeycutt's imagined interactions theory (2003) with performance rehearsal processes, employing research guiding retroactive and proactive imagined interactions as a template to frame rehearsals that have the purpose of future actor ↔ spectator engagement. I use my experiences applying imagined interactions to an ensemble performance rehearsal and during a solo performance rehearsal to show the usefulness, limitations, and potentials of this methodological hybridization.

Keywords: Imagined Interactions, Rehearsal, Performance, Forensics, Public Speaking

“Coach, *how* should I practice my performance?”

I am asked this question from a novice speech student working on their dramatic interpretation performance. As an educator and director involved with coaching forensics speaking and producing performing arts productions for two decades, I have been asked versions of this question by students and performers many times. As a performance artist and practitioner touring and devising performances, I tackle this question, too. *How should I practice* arises while teaching performance and public speaking classes, as well as directing shows and forensics squads, and when *intrapersonally* preparing for future *interpersonal* communications. These queries surface because purposes and people and contexts contained within performing for/to/with others necessitate rehearsal. Rehearsal strategies are useful, practical, and build confidence; although, as my student's question infers, rehearsal strategies are not always accessible.

“There are many ways to practice. We need to figure out what styles or methods are best for you based on the goals of your performance and—”

1. An early version of this manuscript was presented on a competitive paper panel of the Performance Studies Division at the 2019 meeting of the National Communication Association in Baltimore, MD. Correspondence concerning this manuscript should be addressed to first author Joshua Hamzehee, Communication Studies Department, Santa Rosa Junior College, Garcia Hall #123, Santa Rosa, CA 95407. E-mail: joshuahamzehee@gmail.com.

“But, like, how do I practice personally connecting with something I’ve never experienced? How do I perform this dude’s struggle, you know, without actually doing John Wayne Gacy stuff? Like, should I go be a clown? Should I go watch the movie, *IT*?”

Strategies for *how* to rehearse future actor ⇔ spectator interpersonal interactions provide maps to desired communication outcomes. As a performance studies scholar ⇔ practitioner housed in communication studies alongside interpersonal scholars, I speculate about methodological opportunities to assist actors, directors, students, coaches, speakers, and performers in reducing apprehension and uncertainty, rehearsing presentations and goals, and making performances effective with limited resources beyond one’s self. During my PhD, I took a course about imagined interactions theory, and Dr. James Honeycutt’s seminar showed me researchers define proactive and retroactive hypothetical conversations as imagined interactions (2003). We rehearse the everyday with ourselves in a way similar to how we might a stageplay in private.

“So, *how should I practice*, coach? Should I go find a serial killer?”

“No, you should not. Maybe we can use our imaginations to make that unfamiliar situational interaction more familiar for you.”

“Imaginations?”

“We use imagined interactions every day to help make the unfamiliar familiar, to understand the past, and rehearse the future. So, maybe we can use that concept to help motivate your aesthetic choices and add depth to your decisions?”

We use imagined interactions to plan for, measure, and generalize *interpersonal* social action(s) through *intrapersonal* self-dialogue. Characteristics of our imagined interactions include dialoguing with ourselves in first or third person (Porter, 2010), incorporating perspectives beyond ourselves (Crisp & Turner, 2009), increasing our empathy (Mapp, 2013), working through struggles (Wallenfelsz & Hample, 2010), developing skills in coping and mitigating anxiety (Honeycutt, Choi, & Deberry, 2009), and managing relational uncertainty (Van Kelegom & Wright, 2013). Think of anticipated conversations before an upcoming job interview; think of critical reflections after teaching a class about serious subject matter; think of preparing *before* and processing *after* going on a date! Imagine rehearsing for the stage.

This essay provides a rationale for fusing Honeycutt’s imagined interactions theory with performance rehearsal processes, employing research guiding retroactive and proactive imagined interactions as a template for framing ensemble and solo performance rehearsal processes. Gotcher and Honeycutt (1989) find focusing on “mental imagery” can enable performers “to produce or reproduce successful communication behaviors” (p. 1). In this essay, I first, outline a rationale for deploying imagined interactions as a tool to reframe performance rehearsals. Then, I use my experiences applying imagined interactions to an ensemble performance rehearsal (from a directing and performance coaching perspective with *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*) and

during a solo performance rehearsal (from the perspective of performer and practitioner with *Burnt City: A Dystopian Bilingual One-Persian Show!*) to show the usefulness, limitations, and potentials of this methodological hybridization for forensics performance and beyond.

Connecting the Process of Imagined Interactions to the Practice of Performance Rehearsal

Honeycutt (2003) coined the term imagined interactions as a social cognition process where we imagine and indirectly experience ourselves “in anticipated and/or past communicative encounters with others” (p. 2). Imagined interactions are self-dialogue, mindful dialogue—not self-monologue. We communicate *to* someone/thing else, but with ourselves. These interactions are dialogic because of the invocation of another within an *intrapersonal* engagement, allowing reflection on previous and future moments. We experience representations of conversation with “verbal, nonverbal, visual and mixed imagery features” (p. 2). Edwards, Honeycutt, and Zagacki (1988) write an individual consciously takes on roles of others, imagining how they could respond within specific contexts (p. 24). Rehearsal within performance realms often use these dialogic features to explicate and motivate emotions and actions. We take on roles of others, imagining how we/they did/could respond. We test and act upon consequences of messages prior-to and following communication, crafting scripts to reduce apprehension and provide performers potentials to live and embody in-the-moment.

Even if actors perform to themselves, another party—an anticipated audience—remains present. In performance, theatrical, and forensics pedagogy, imagined interaction-related techniques such as Hagen’s “substitution” (1973), Stanislavski’s “system” (1946), Strasburg’s “method” (1987), Adler’s use of imagination (2000), Meisner’s “mindful dialogue” (1987), Goffman’s social situation scripting (1959)—among countless other perspectives—are utilized in rehearsal and as rehearsal to help make scenes and actions more present for both performer and witness, and to process contextual objectives. As Hagen writes in *Respect for Acting* (1973), we “make this transference, this finding of character within ourselves through” employing “imaginative extension of realities, and put them in the place of the fiction” (p. 34). To focus this essay, I privilege Hagen’s substitution technique as an example. Substitution, in a basic sense, is the transference of one’s ideas, memories, and experiences to those of the character, role, or text one is performing. This act is a way performers access their emotional and physical backgrounds to complete scene objectives and connect to motivations. This substitution of real-life interactions with realistic fictional interactions is similar to quantitative categorizations of attributes and functions of self-this self-communication phenomena.

Honeycutt (2003) measures eight distinct attributes of imagined interactions: proactivity, retroactivity, frequency, variety, discrepancy, self-dominance, valence, and specificity. As a starting point to develop a performance rehearsal framework, these eight attributes allow for eight ways of conceptualizing this style of self-talk. In the application section of this essay, I focus on proactive and retroactive imagined interactions in ensemble and solo rehearsals as a way of processing past experiences, planning future actions, and motivating performance choices. Honeycutt (2003) notes each attribute

features six functions: Relational maintenance, conflict-linkage, self-understanding, catharsis, compensation, and rehearsal. For example, I might use a retroactive imagined conversation with a parent as relational maintenance, as a way to prepare for future interactions with them. In rehearsal, might use an imagined interaction with a moment in a character's past to motivate a choice I make on stage. These six functions fall in line with scene objectives, too. For example, a question arising from relational maintenance: *What does an actor think of another character and what do they think that person thinks of them?* Conflict-linkage: *What is the conflict and who does the performer believe is at fault?* Self-understanding: *What is a performer's role in the action and how honest are they with themselves?* Catharsis: *What does an actor want? Need? How do they try to accomplish objectives?* Compensation: *How do imagined conversations compare to in-person?* Rehearsal: *How confident do directors and performers feel? How can a performer use their imagination as a tool?* How we rehearse and the methods we use are critical to what we gain and how we grow from that rehearsal, in much the same manner as how we process life's obstacles and conversations influence our future interactions.

The interactions we imagine influence our everyday life rituals, our future scripts, our embodied desires, and shape our realities. Similarly, Hagen (1973) writes *substitution* is used "to 'make believe' in its literal sense—to make *me* believe [...] to send me into the moment-to-moment spontaneous action of my newly selected self" (p. 32). This idea of "always rehearsing becoming" links interpersonal and performance scholarship. Imagined interactions have been studied in areas like communication apprehension (Honeycutt, Choi, & Deberry, 2009), interpersonal relationships (Honeycutt, Zagacki, & Edwards, 1990), nightmares and daydreaming (Eldredge, Honeycutt, White, & Standige, 2015), personality traits (Honeycutt, Pence, & Gearhart, 2013), pedagogy and instruction (Goodboy, Bolkan, & Goldman, 2015), narcissism (Honeycutt, Pence, & Gearhart, 2013), listening objectives (Vickery, Keaton, & Bodie, 2015), and prayer (Honeycutt, 2009). Performance-specific applications of imagined interactions theory, though, are rarely explored. Meaning, the chiasmic benefits of fusing imagined interactions as preparation for actor ↔ spectator events are unmined.

Regarding imagined interactions research in performance realms, studies have occurred in both forensics speaking competitions and public speaking classrooms. Through studying effects of imagined interactions and rehearsal on speaking performance, Choi, Honeycutt and Bodie (2015) argue preparation sessions where as many forms of imagery as possible are present are "most effective in reducing disfluencies" and mitigating anxiety (p. 34). Through active engagement and awareness of imagined interactions, performers employ their senses to make sense, to make sure communication tactics are legible to future audiences. The more sensoria a performer is exposed to, the more developed the understanding of their performance can become and the more intentional on-stage actions can be for both performer and spectator. In forensics, Gotcher and Honeycutt (1989) write competitors experience imagined interactions to "compensate for lack of experience" (p. 13), but they differ as a result of task, such as participating in debate or in individual events like oral interpretation (p. 12). Speech competitors tended to have more retroactive imagined interactions, while debaters were proactively oriented. Debate's immediate argumentative nature also produced more imagined situations in debaters than those in individual events. Across both, imagined interactions were used by competitors "to rehearse behaviors" and implement "in

subsequent rounds” (p. 14). Regarding public speaking performance, Choi, Honeycutt, and Bodie (2015) point out imagined interactions can mitigate anxiety, and rehearsal consisting of imagined interactions training and multimodal imagery resulted in higher speech fluency and “self-reported speech evaluations” (p. 25). Research demonstrates if a performer’s imagined interactions are vivid in rehearsal, then upcoming performances benefit from this exposure, and this benefit has been quantified through greater performer confidence and self-reported anxiety reduction.

Developing an Imagined Interactions Framework in Ensemble and Solo Rehearsals

As discussed, imagining previous or future interactions to strengthen performance is not novel to theatrical, speaking, and performance worlds. I have been asked *how should I practice* as a forensics speaking coach, performance practitioner, and public speaking instructor, and I have found operationalized strategies for how to rehearse are not always intuitive or accessible to those asking. Choi, Honeycutt, and Bodie (2015) argue using imagined interactions theory as a rehearsal frame addresses nervousness “from an anticipated communicative encounter, to manage and plan for the specific content of a message, and to ensure” efficient performance outcomes (p. 26). Here, I explore how I employed the vocabulary of imagined interactions during an ensemble performance rehearsal. Then, I show how that experience inspired me to develop a rehearsal framework that I applied to an hour-long solo performance workshop.

First, use imagined interactions to guide and direct an ensemble rehearsal. A challenge for stage directors and forensics coaches is helping folks perform in roles unlike themselves. Judgment from pre-conceived notions, expectations, and personal scripts cloud attempts at grasping unfamiliar contexts. Honeycutt (2009) states imagined interactions allow us to distinguish our reality from what we wish it would be (p. 194), removing judgment, giving actors awareness to separate monologue from dialogue. This separation, Buber (1947) writes, allows us to more fully turn “towards the other” (p. 22). One way for performers to honestly portray perspective and achieve goals different than their own is to separate their views from those of the text or character they will perform.

During fall 2017 I directed an ensemble performance, *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* (Hamzehee, 2021). This show was a critical ethnography of a slam poetry community coping with tragic events on personal, political, and infrastructural levels, so ethical community representation was a paramount concern for myself and the cast. The five actors were tasked with performing words of community members who were slam poets. We interrogated how to position ourselves within these roles while simultaneously remaining at a critically ethical distance. During one rehearsal in the second week of our six-week process, I discussed the concept of imagined interactions, and I asked my cast to have a five-minute imagined conversation with the community member whose words they were tasked to embody. Sitting toward different walls in our black box theatre, each cast member had unique hypothetical conversations exploring what we knew, what we still had to learn, what we could relate to, and what we have not experienced. A few cast members had this conversation entirely in their brain, a couple had their eyes closed, one person talked out loud then trailed off a minute into the activity. Then, we spent ten minutes discussing our experiences. Not everyone in the cast had met their assigned poet in person yet, causing one cast member to note how the voice

and perspective they gave the other in their interaction was clouded, so they mainly asked questions during their wall-time. Without going into too many details due to the privacy of the rehearsal and the sensitivity of the show's subject matter, our follow-up to this collective/solo role-playing noted a collectively heightened inspiration for our texts and the people whose lives we were representing on stage. Our rehearsal immediately following this exercise was notably more energized than our previous rehearsals, and we carried that momentum to future rehearsals. Two weeks later, the cast met their slam poetry doppelgangers at the local poetry slam. Our imagined interactions exercise was a literal rehearsal for both our aesthetic performance goal and an everyday experience! Although brief, taking one rehearsal to reflect in this manner was productive because it allowed us to engage with our lack of localized experience, and also prepare for future interpersonal engagements. While we did not do this activity again as a cast, I suspect the cast's hypothetical conversations would have become more specific after engaging directly with the poets.

Admittedly, this brief application was unstructured in its implementation, so the evidence to justify its efficacy is anecdotal. Gotcher and Honeycutt (1989) remind, if we rehearse events "without cognitively evaluating the effects of the performance," then "the cognitive imagery will not fulfill its potential" (p. 16). For a more nuanced analysis, future applications of this exercise can incorporate questionnaires, scales, and measures that correlate from performance subject matter to imagined interaction research. I can also include brief Likert-scale surveys before and after the rehearsal to quantitatively examine rehearsal efficacy and how empathy and other variables may influence the process. Additionally, a structured framework would have been beneficial for this process. Based on my initial exploration, I created the Imagined Interactions (II) table (see Table 1) to help practitioners guide an hour-long ensemble or solo rehearsal.

Table 1: Imagined Interactions (II) Table

	<u>Retroactive IIs</u>	<u>Proactive IIs</u>
Relational maintenance		
Conflict-linkage		
Self-understanding		
Catharsis		
Compensation		
Rehearsal		

Since cast members had both proactive and retroactive imagined interactions without being prompted, I placed those attributes as columns. As rows, I pulled from the six functions found to be associated with each attribute. The different functions provide conversational objectives while also remaining creatively flexible and dependent on the performer and their text(s). Two columns and six rows provide both performers and coaches twelve possibilities for imagined interactions, and many more opportunities for application. For example, in a group setting, forensics coaches can dedicate part of a team meeting to have all their interpretation and platform speakers face a wall and apply this exercise to their texts and topics (we are familiar with talking to walls, after all). In individual coaching sessions, exploring these functions provides a menu of motivations to navigate. Performers are then left with connecting their experiences to the motivations they associate with their text, as well as the decision of how to aesthetically communicate internal justifications with vocal and embodied actions that feel truest to their performance objectives.

Second, use imagined interactions to frame a solo rehearsal. Rehearsing solo can be difficult because it often happens in isolation, so preparation frameworks become important in helping a solo “performer’s journey become less about surviving and more about thriving” (Hamzehee, Baldwin, Collins, et al., 2021, p. 1). During winter 2017, I presented a ten-minute autoethnographic performance, *Yogurt Drink*, part of *Burnt City: A Dystopian Bilingual One-Persian Show* (Hamzehee, 2021). I used narrative, poetry, humor, video, and Farsi to excavate how domestic abuse at home is congruous to violence inflicted by governments on citizens. After memorizing my selection, I used a one-hour rehearsal to deploy the II table I created after *Baton Rouge SLAM!* I wanted to explore a section of the show tackling my relationship with an estranged family member, and isolate how memories from our estrangement might diverge. To do this, I aimed to spend five minutes on each of twelve hypothetical internal conversations.

Before engaging in this hour-long exercise, I performed *Yogurt Drink*. Fighting through recent memorization, I timed myself at seven minutes and eleven seconds. Then, I spent sixty minutes imagining interactions with my estranged family member. Having a hypothetical conversation with someone who I have a real-life history with is a different sensation than my Baton Rouge slam cast had with local poets they had yet to meet in person. While having history with the family member allowed me to paint a detailed picture of them in my proactive and retroactive conversations, it also forced me to critique how I script and frame my memories and hypothetical dialogue. Below, I provide the II table filled with brief thematic descriptors denoting the topics of the interactions I manifested.

The level of focus and concentration on personal topics was more overwhelming and emotionally draining than I anticipated. My durational goal also required much focus and mental presence. I found myself needing a minute between each interaction to center myself toward who I was hypothetically conversing with as well as my pre-planned topic starter. A performer must possess high self-reflexivity to effectively substitute actual or fictional interactions without causing damage to their psyches, or triggering traumatizing experiences, and all precautions should be taken before engaging in this type of work. While navigating imagined interactions with a key figure from my life was challenging, it was vulnerability I was comfortable with because enough time had passed for me, and risks were minimal to my well-being. I encourage any performer engaging with imagined

interactions about triggering subject matter to only do so if safe, and please reach out if help is needed. Like my experience with the ensemble, this solo undertaking exploded Barnlund's notion of dialogue (1970), as I had to negotiate how I viewed myself, how I viewed the estranged family member, how I believed they viewed me, how they might view themselves, how they do view me, and how they believe I view them (p. 90). This exercise allowed me to flesh out feelings, memories, blind spots, and aesthetic and everyday script constructions.

Table 2: Completed Imagined Interactions (II) Table

	<u>Retroactive IIs</u>	<u>Proactive IIs</u>
Relational maintenance	How we concluded.	Our future meeting.
Conflict-linkage	About domestic abuse.	About responsibility.
Self-understanding	Back to childhood.	Growing older.
Catharsis	Moments of joy.	Future relief.
Compensation	What is lost.	What is gained.
Rehearsal	How we remember.	New habits?

After twelve mini-scenes and a ten-minute break, I again performed *Yogurt Drink*, this time mentally and physically holding on to those interactions I had substituted for the time estranged. I timed this performance at thirteen minutes and twelve seconds. The six-minute time increase itself is not significant—though, the way I visualized and explored the scenario through this methodology directly influenced the depth and connection I felt to the text, which in turn lengthened my performance and made me feel more confident in the direction my negotiated choices had taken my performance. I found that the II table was useful in categorizing and conceptualizing my imagined interactions, although a series of rehearsals with this technique would have allowed me to better develop the usefulness of this method, to play with possible prompts, and adjust the time allotted. Additionally, I invoked this framework during the first weeks of both ensemble and solo performance processes. I am curious as to how my performance motivations might shift if this exercise happens closer to audience engagement? Regarding forensics and coaching, with off-stage focus and talking to audiences being a norm in both interpretation and platform events, the focus on one individual in these imagined interactions is a performance that is transferable to performing for spectators. In my thirteen-minute performance, I was better able to visualize the estranged family member on stage because of engaging this process. The ability to re-imagine on stage and have that visualization be

legible to an audience is a pivotal skill to develop because it supplements an audience's suspension of disbelief, and allows for a message to be communicated through performance more intentionally and, hopefully, impactfully.

Of course, there are limitations to this research hybridization. First, self-reporting is fallible, so further experimentation must be conducted to determine rehearsal and self-efficacies of this type of applied research. Second, as I was reminded during my solo rehearsal, we must be careful to avoid catastrophizing experiences. When using our imaginations practitioners must determine if connections to an unfamiliar situation are successful, effective, ethical, or even healthy? But how, when these experiences are so contextually dependent? This requires directors listening to performers, and performers being honest with our needs and limits with those we trust to guide us. Hagen (1973) warns against going too deep into trauma without a professional present:

There are teachers who actually force actors into dealing with something buried (their response to a death of a parent, or the trauma of a bad accident). What results is hysteria or worse, and is, in my opinion, anti-art. We are not pursuing psychotherapy. (p. 42)

This essay fuses the vocabulary and findings of imagined interactions research as a framework for performance rehearsals. In the future, I will work to better incorporate reflexivity toward imagined interactions attributes of frequency, variety, discrepancy, self-dominance, valence, and specificity. This can be accomplished through adapting rehearsal framework structure, employing a follow-up questionnaire or interview, and through journaling. Reducing uncertainty in unfamiliar, difficult, and conflict-laden situations is critical to invoking motivated connection to actions. I found that focusing on imagined interactions during rehearsal processes can provide directors, performers, practitioners, educators, coaches, and students one more tool to re-conceptualize what rehearsals look and feel like. Future chiasmic paths can examine what else quantitative frameworks offer performance scholars. What can performance scholarship offer interpersonal researchers? And what are other ways we can

“... maybe use that concept to help motivate your aesthetic choices?”

“How?”

“Let's use our imaginations.”

Cool, I guess I don't need the clown make-up then. So, where do we begin?

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