

Sofia Ahmad + Kiran Patel in *The Most Dangerous Highway in the World* at Golden Thread Productions, 2016  
PHOTO David Allen Studio



The O'Neill in the snowstorm  
PHOTO Evren Odcikin



## WHAT I LEARNED...

BY EVREN ODCIKIN

CURATED BY SERET SCOTT

Creative downtime, which I call "staring into space" time, wasn't always a priority for me. It took an intervention from Mother Nature for me to realize its importance. I

was part of the first class of the National Directors Fellowship, a career development program led by the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in partnership with SDC Foundation, National New Play Network, and the Kennedy Center. As the one West Coast participant, I was flown in a day earlier than everyone else for the fellowship's Winter Symposium, a 10-day directing lab that took place on the O'Neill campus in January 2016. Immediately after I arrived, a Category 5 snowstorm hit the East Coast, and all flights, trains, and roads leading to the O'Neill were shut down. As the O'Neill staff scrambled to get everyone else in, I found myself alone with two days on my hands.

My first instinct was to get on my laptop. I was in preproduction for the world premiere of Kevin Artigue's *The Most Dangerous Highway in the World* at Golden Thread Productions in San Francisco. It was a challenging, nonlinear, dreamlike play set in Afghanistan. I had emails to return, a draft of the scenic design to ponder, and one last documentary to watch from the list that our cultural consultant had put together. The Afghan music playlist I had made was playing, including initial soundscapes from my sound designer that I needed to respond to.

I went into full multitasking mode, but the storm had other plans. The Wi-Fi started coming in and out. Frustrated, I picked up my notebook and moved

next to the window. The view was beautiful—part winter wonderland and part *The Shining*. I started sketching to stop my nervous hands and mind.

I came back to almost three hours later. I hadn't been asleep—I had just let my thoughts wander. Some were about the play, yes, but most weren't. The playlist had long run out, and I realized I didn't really feel like starting it again. I had spent a full day staring into space when my first "aha" moment hit about a stream-of-consciousness monologue at the center of the play. The snowball effect (pardon the pun) was overwhelming. Within only two days, themes of the play started to coalesce in a more concrete way than they had over the two years of its development. I could begin to articulate the emotional through-line of this challenging text—that less-tangible but essential tonal aspect of any production.

Directors are artists, after all. In our American theatre processes, deadlines and budgets are always top of mind. We make our work in crowds. Decisiveness and moving the process forward take priority. In such an environment, even research and thinking time can feel regimented and result-oriented. Dreaming without a specific goal is rare.

For *Highway*, I know that the production would have been doomed if Mother Nature hadn't interfered with my packed schedule. Now, I am intentional about making this time. For each production, I force myself to take a few days early in the process to let my mind wander with no timeline or end goal. This has been transformative. From the outside, it might look like staring into space, but creative downtime is key to finding my own voice within each project.



**EVREN ODCIKIN** is a San Francisco-based director and producer. He is the Director of New Plays at Golden Thread Productions, where he leads all new play development activities and helps program and produce the mainstage season. He has directed productions and

workshops at South Coast Rep, InterAct Theatre Company, Cleveland Public Theatre, The Lark, O'Neill Theater Center, TheatreSquared, Kennedy Center, Magic Theatre, Playwrights Foundation, Crowded Fire, and TheatreFirst with such writers as Mona Mansour, Yusef El Guindi, Christopher Chen, Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig, Lauren Gunderson, MJ Kaufman, Hannah Khalil, Jonas Hassen Khemiri, David Jacobi, Michael Lew, Rehana Mirza, Nick Hadikwa Mwaluko, Han Ong, Geetha Reddy, Saïd Sayrafiezadeh, Betty Shamieh, and Lauren Yee, among many others. Born and raised in Turkey, Evren is a graduate of Princeton University. Upcoming productions: Guillermo Calderón's *Kiss at Shotgun Players*, and Mona Mansour's *We Swim, We Talk, We Go to War* at Golden Thread. [odcikin.com](http://odcikin.com)

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