Performing Memory in Complicite’s Mnemonic

by

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Abstract

*Mnemonic*, devised by Complicite, is a play that consciously asks questions about the nature of memory, of home, of our interconnectedness, yet it does not presume to provide complete answers. Instead, it requires the audience to actively engage in the creation of memory, to use our imaginations as we commit to the act of remembering. As an investigation of Memory, *Mnemonic* offers us fragments of story in an effort to shine a light on our own path towards finding meaning within the world we perceive of being created in the present moment before us. Then how we remember it and what we do with that memory, is up to us.

In this essay, I briefly investigate the composition of the play, as presented in the script, and examine the ways in which the concepts of Memory, Mnemonic, and Home are performed and explored in the play’s narrative. Each one of these subjects had great influence on my process, informing every step of my directing this play. My hope is that this essay will prove useful to anyone interested in studying these elements, Complicite, or *Mnemonic*. 
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Introduction

I first encountered *Mnemonic*, by the British theater company Complicite, in the lobby of a small hotel on 42nd Street in Manhattan while searching the internet for the list of productions nominated for the Drama Desk Award for Unique Theatrical Experience. As I was reading the list on Wikipedia and googling each title in a new tab, I was presented with the following definition:

\[
\text{mne·mon·ic} \\
/ˈnəʊmənɪk/
\]

*noun*
1. a device such as a pattern of letters, ideas, or associations that assists in remembering something.

*adjective*
1. aiding or designed to aid the memory.

In my academic career studying theater at Wesleyan, I was first introduced to the idea of memory as something to cultivate and a muscle to be developed in my Acting I class. It was here where we were encouraged and guided through exercises that required us to remember the past. This was in complete contradiction to how I spent most of my life, working to actively forget and erase memories. In this class I began to discover the potential for memory to be used as a theatrical device. A deep-seated fascination with the need to understand more about how memories are created, remembered, held on to, and forgotten grew in me. So when I came upon the title *Mnemonic* and learned of its definition, I knew I must read it.

In my first reading of *Mnemonic*, something strange happened: I couldn't visually imagine the world of the play. Instead, my mind became a blank canvas, a
void that left me irritated, confused, defeated, and furious. To fill this void, I decided to trace back to the root of the issue. What I discovered was that prior to reading *Mnemonic*, I had been thinking of memory and imagination as mutually exclusive. Upon deeper investigation, I learned that when these two elements, memory and imagination, were permitted to join forces in guiding me, I was suddenly able to view them as interdependent complements rather than individual substitutes for one another. Once I understood this, my mind opened to a flood of images and concepts, an unrelenting cascade, persuading me to embark on a three-semester journey of investigation, directing and scenic design of this play.

In this essay, I briefly investigate the composition of the play, as presented in the script, and examine the ways in which the concepts of Memory, Mnemonic, and Home are performed and explored in the play’s narrative. Each one of these subjects had great influence on my process, informing every step of my directing this play. My hope is that this essay will prove useful to anyone interested in studying these elements, Complicite, or *Mnemonic*. 
Memory

I remember that was one of the ways in which we made the show in the first place, going on our own memory journeys.

(McBurney 53)

*Mnemonic* was originally conceived and directed by Simon McBurney and devised by Complicite, a London-based international touring theatre company founded in 1983 by Annabel Arden, Fiona Gordon, Marcello Magni and Simon McBurney. The two main storylines of *Mnemonic* are presented in parallel: Virgil is desperately longing for Alice, who abruptly disappeared in search of her thought-to-be-dead father. A mummified corpse, dating back to more than 5000 years ago, is discovered in the mountains. As Virgil and Alice move backwards and forwards, separately remembering the events of their past, connections appear between the two narratives – threads creating a complex web of memory.

*Mnemonic* can be described as a performance of memory with respect to memory’s fragmented, instable, and abstract nature. It is a play that consciously asks questions about the nature of memory, as Scholar Helen Freshwater wrote:

[*Mnemonic*] addresses the problematic question of how we depict the action of memory. The work represents an attempt to find a way of presenting memory that is equal to its complexity and instability, and asks us how we can move beyond individual reminiscence to explore the conflicted region of our collective past. (Freshwater 212)
In scene one, the Director greets the audience with: “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Before we begin I’d like to say a few words about memory.” (Complicite 131) What follows is a talk revolving around the concept of memory, including the motivation behind making *Mnemonic*, humankind’s evolving understanding of the biochemistry of memory, the role of creativity and imagination in the act of memory, and the inevitability of memory’s degeneration over time.

The Director summarizes the motivation behind making *Mnemonic* in a few questions and statements: “Why are you doing a show about memory? ... why we remember, what we remember, and how we remember. How does memory actually work? Is consciousness possible without memory?” (Complicite 131) In addition, the Director evokes a more personal reason for working on *Mnemonic*: “Maybe it is simply because they say that your memory starts to degenerate when you’re twenty-eight and as I am now over forty the matter is becoming a little pressing.” (Complicite 131) As one ages, the fear of losing one’s memory is to be expected and the issue can be perceived as even more critical to a person whose profession relies on memorizing lines and blocking. This pressing matter expands the narrative of *Mnemonic* from exploring the concept of memory into exploring the concept of oblivion. In the words of Tomasz Wiśniewski: “The juxtaposition of the mechanisms of oblivion with those of memory functions not only as the prevailing theme of *Mnemonic* but also as the device which is decisive for the communicative processes.” (Wiśniewski, Complicite, Theatre and Aesthetics: From Scraps of Leather 192)
In continuing to talk about memory, fragmentation becomes the Director’s focal point in explaining the biochemistry of memory to the audience, which is also the thread that connects the variously discussed topics in the scene. The synapses are described to be the connections between fragments of memory, continuously being made and remade. By likening memory to a weather map, the Director explains why the details of a memory change every time it is actively being remembered:

…these connections [the synapses] join up the fragments of memory, so if you like we can think of memory as a kind of map. But not a neat map like a map of a town. It’s an unstable map like a weather map with highs and lows and wind and rain and so on, it is constantly changing. And each time we return to the map we find it has changed because of the new connections that we have made in the interim.

(Complicite 132)

As a result, a new memory is created each time we remember. The Director uses this chain of events to introduce the idea of creativity as necessary to the process of memory: “…creativity is essential in the act of memory. In other words, the process of memory is almost exactly the same as the process of the imagination, it is an imaginative act.” (Complicite 132) The Director then continues with an example of the connections between memory fragments, creating a chain of remembrances for himself:

For example, as I stand here trying to remember my text all sorts of other thoughts are coming into my head…for example, for some reason I’m thinking of my father. Why am I thinking about my father?
I’ll just follow that bit of the map. Probably it’s to do with origins, this show being about origins, (Complicite 132)

Among some of the memories he shares are references to characters that have yet to be introduced to the audience. For example, the Director states that his father was an archaeologist like the character of Spindler, the archeologist who examines the Iceman’s body, and the Director’s mother is part Irish like Alice. We also learn about a conversation the Director had with a minicab driver whose description matches with the character of Simonides, the taxi driver who drives Alice to the Waterloo station. All these examples lead to the statement: “So we experience memory through familiarity.” (Complicite 133) While the examples above serve to help the audience in understanding the connections between memory fragments, they can, as the play progresses, trigger an audience member’s memory, through familiarity, to connect the Director with the characters that these examples refer to.

In *Mnemonic*, familiarity is not the only means for making memories. Emotional shock is introduced as another catalyst, explaining why we remember certain memories more than others. According to the Director, a strong example of this kind of emotional shock would be the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 which caused and continue to cause many people to have a vivid memory of that date, compared to the memory of a day when no noticeable event took place.

Familiarity and emotional shock can be used to explain the fragmented structure of *Mnemonic* in presenting a selected number of events rather than a continuous linear narrative in a precise interval of time, and using familiarity to
interconnect its characters and storylines in exploring the concepts of memory and oblivion.

After presenting his crash course on memory, the Director turns to the audience and asks them to participate in an exercise, during which the audience covers their eyes with a blindfold, holds a leaf in their hands, and is asked to remember their past at specific points in their lives. As Wiśniewski wrote: “In general, theatre communication is subject to the varied experience of all those who participate in this collective act.” (Wiśniewski, Complicite, Theatre and Aesthetics: From Scraps of Leather 192) By having the audience collectively participate in this memory exercise, Mnemonic inserts a variable in its narrative that makes the experience vastly different from one audience member to another, based on each individual’s own memories.

Not only does this exercise make Mnemonic a personalized experience for each audience member, but the location of the performance venue plays a significant role in the results of this exercise by influencing the collective memory of its audience members through history. Complicite worked on three productions of Mnemonic (1999, 2001 Revival, and 2002-3 Revival) and staged it in ten different countries including England, Austria, Spain, France, The United States of America, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, Germany, Poland, and Finland. Each country carries a history that shapes the collective memory of its residents, which can be activated during this memory exercise. In one of his essays, titled “You must remember this,” Simon McBurney recalls the first evening of Complicite’s European Tour of Mnemonic in Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The city of Zenica holds the
memories of the Bosnian War, as McBurney wrote: “Where the first refugees arrived from Srebrenica.” (McBurney 49) For McBurney, this collective memory was significant, impacting the performance and distinguishing it from performances in other locations:

I fumble across the stage in the darkness. Shadowy figures cram into every open space. I can just make out they are standing shoulder to shoulder. The steps are packed three or four across. The audience listens to my voice, which has been pre-recorded, but which they imagine to be live. I have just asked them the question: "Where were you ten years ago? Can you remember?" Out of the darkness there is a hoarse shout. "In a cellar with my fucking family!" As the packed audience laugh and murmur, I put out a hand to find my chair. I can see nothing on stage at all. I break into a cold sweat. In London, when I ask the same question, few remember. Here, memories of ten years ago are all too clear. (McBurney 49)

The audience is then asked to imagine themselves when they were six, standing outside in Summer. They are asked to imagine their parents standing behind them, their grandparents standing behind their parents, their great grandparents standing behind their grandparents, and so on. The Director continues:

Now feel the leaf. It has several veins. Imagine that each vein is a line of your ancestry all coming down to you, the stalk. All of these veins are leading to you…So a thousand years ago, if there really were no kinship ties, that line would be longer than nearly all the people who
have ever lived. Which, of course, is not possible but it means that you
must be related to everyone sitting in this theatre. (Complicite 136)

With this exercise, Mnemonic simultaneously provides individually specific
experiences for each of its audience members while creating a connection between all
audience members. It attempts to explore the universal concepts of memory and
oblivion, through fragmented parallel storylines that are interconnected, a format we
have come to understand that closely resembles how we remember.

While the concept of memory is an overarching theme in Mnemonic, it
manifests differently in each character. Although the character of Simonides is never
introduced or called outright by his name in the dialogue, he is given the same name
as the poet Simonides of Ceos, who developed the method of loci (A.K.A. the
memory palace) using mnemonics of places and images. (Yates 2) It is also notable
that when compared to the characters Alice and Daniel, Simonides appears to know
the most about his ancestry and origins. This choice of character name speaks to
Complicite’s attention to details. The name alone gives resonance and significance to
the character.

For Virgil, memory has a close relationship with chaos. After participating in
the memory exercise with the audience, he receives a phone call thinking that Alice is
on the other side of the line. But when his friend Alistair turns out to be the one
calling Virgil, their conversation triggers a chain of memories in Virgil’s mind
leading him to hypothesize a reason for Alice’s sudden departure. As Virgil discovers
patterns that help him connect together pieces of information, he perceives these
interconnections as being unpredictable and chaotic. In his analysis of *Mnemonic*, Attilio Favorini connects memory to chaos:

> the ensuing barrage of cell phone calls, recorded messages repeated and deleted, TV channel surfing, and press conferences convey another idea that is canonical to new memory theory: memory is the constant recategorization that helps us sort the chaos. (Favorini 225)

So, while Virgil is gathering information and getting closer to finding an answer as to why Alice left him, he is processing the chaotic chain of memories set off by triggers such as the voicemail message Alice left for him or a TV program about the weather.

While Virgil is dealing with the chaos of memory, Alice is dealing with the fear of oblivion. When she finds out that her father might be alive, Alice cannot withstand the pain of living without a memory of her father. She actively strives to create memories to make her feel connected to her line of ancestry, as she believes it is only with these memories that she will feel a sense of home and wholeness. In scene thirty-three when we find a crying Alice unable to remember the events after leaving the hospital her father stayed at in Poland, we witness her failure in completing her journey to find her father. When Freshwater found the audience having an ambivalent reaction to Alice’s failure in remembering, she interpreted it symbolically and recognized Alice’s failure as one of the play’s strengths:

> it is also symbolic of the deep sense of disruption and imbalance felt by all those who believe they cannot rely on their memory. To remember that one has forgotten, or to distrust the authenticity of our
recollections, is an unsettling, vertiginous experience. Without the carefully constructed narrative of memory, how can we know what, or who, we are? ... the real strength of the work [Mnemonic] is the way in which it demonstrates our investment in the power of memory, while also faithfully rendering its instability. Mnemonic leaves its shards of recollection and revelation in a confused and confusing heap, half buried by forgetfulness. What Alice’s reticence enacts and confirms is both the hopelessness and the significance of all our journeys into the past. (Freshwater 215, 218)

In performing memory, Mnemonic does not provide definite answers to questions regarding memory’s nature, structure, or behavior. Instead, we are presented with a concept that is always in flux and manifested differently in each character and storyline. Such depiction of memory provides us with a frame that we can use to investigate Memory without undermining its complexities.
Mnemonics

Yes, mnemonics are frequently useless things. A spoon, perhaps, or a mark on a wall, a knot in a handkerchief. Proust tasted a little madeline and he remembered three volumes. A watch to remind us of the time, a ring to remind us that we are married.

(Complicite 134)

In Mnemonic, props are endowed with memory and at times, trigger the characters to remember the memories associated with them. These mnemonics serve a major role in the narrative when they build bridges between the various storylines and connect the seemingly unrelated fragments of memory.

In scene one, before the Director greets the audience and starts his monologue, the stage is described as empty except for a chair and a stone. (Complicite 131) However, rather than being used as an object that serves no purpose other than seating, the chair is transformed into a mnemonic when the Director introduces objects as devices through which we can experience memories: “When we see something we know it sets off a chain of memory. For instance, perhaps I thought about my father because this was his chair. I know it. He sat on it. And so did my grandfather.” (Complicite 133) After this identification, the audience can now view the chair as a personal object that belonged to the Director’s father. This personal association distinguishes the chair from a generic prop and registers itself in the audience’s minds as a memory that can be recalled later in the scene, during which
the Director talks about ancestry. In scene one when the chair collapses (presumably when Virgil sits on it while talking to Alistair on the phone), its destruction takes on a resonance because the audience has personalized the chair in relationship to the Director and in the moment of the collapse they are simultaneously remembering the introduction of the chair when it was a whole object. Later, in scene fourteen, Virgil reaches under his bed and takes out the fragments of the collapsed chair. The stage direction reads: “These suggest the body of the Iceman.” (Complicite 157) In this scene, the broken chair transforms from an object that was first introduced as belonging to the Director’s father to an object in the storyline about the Iceman’s discovery, further adding another layer of memory or connection. In the scenes after, the scientists move around the wooden fragments from the broken chair to form images and shapes such as a black pannier and a bow, which then become mnemonics referring to the objects found on or about the Iceman. In scene twenty-eight, after seeing a lighter that Alice has pulled out of a box, Daniel tells Alice that her father was a smoker, then the scientists move to create a box around Virgil’s cigarette using the fragments of wood. By doing so, they associate a new meaning with the cigarette and transform it into a mnemonic for Alice’s father. A similar fate meets another chair at the end of scene two. After voicemail messages from Virgil to Alice are played consecutively, the stage direction reads: “She [Alice] has gone and only a chair remains… Virgil picks up the chair. It collapses in his arms.” (Complicite 147) Then in scene fifteen, Virgil moves the disintegrating chair like a human puppet and then in scene thirty-five, as Virgil’s voiceover narrates a theory of how the Iceman died, the company use the puppet to show the Iceman’s final living hours. These
memory-endowed chairs, broken into pieces and transformed into various shapes, gauge the memories and imaginations of the audience simultaneously, guiding them towards understanding the role of mnemonics as objects bridging the parallel storylines and connecting memory fragments together.

In addition to the chair on stage at the top of scene one, a stone is located downstage center. This stone, along with the other stones in the play, becomes a mnemonic helping the characters with experiencing memory. At the end of scene eleven, the stone is activated when Virgil puts his foot on it. At the top of scene twelve, the stage direction reads: “The standing on the rock stimulates Virgil’s memory.” (Complicite 153) Virgil then remembers a conversation he had with Alice about funerals. At the end of scene twelve, Virgil lies down on the stone and becomes the Iceman so that in scene thirteen, when the voice-over is narrating the process of recovering the body of the Iceman from the mountains, it is Virgil’s body that gets lifted from the stone. (Complicite 155-156) The other stones in the play take a similar role in provoking the characters’ memories. In scene one, the Director uses three stones as reminders:

I have this stone in my pocket to remind me not to go on for too long.
And a second stone to remind me … ummm … that when … ah, yes, that I have a third stone in this pocket which is there to remind me to tell you to turn off your mobile phones.” (Complicite 134)

In scene fifteen, Virgil remembers the time when he gave Alice a necklace with a 400 million years old stone on it. Midway through Virgil’s memory, the scene shifts to the journalists asking Spindler questions about the Iceman. But when Virgil
picks up a stone, his memory is stimulated again and the scene shifts back to the
conversation between him and Alice. The ancient age of the stone on Alice’s necklace
transforms the object into a mnemonic for origins, which later, in scene twenty-eight,
is associated with Alice’s Jewish ancestry when Daniel brings attention to the stone
as he is talking to Alice about her carrying around thousands of years of history as a
Jew.

Alice uses multiple items to track her father in her journey across Europe. At
first, a wind-up watch is the only object she has from her father. Later, Alice’s sister-
in-law gives her a box that contains multiple objects of her father’s including a pair of
shoes, a lighter, and a tallith, all of which are mnemonics that prompt people to
remember Alice’s father and give her information about his whereabouts. In a
symbolic gesture, however, one by one, the mnemonics from the box are all taken
away from Alice in scene thirty-one. Two scenes later, the next time we see Alice,
she cannot fully remember the events after the hospital. Her loss of memory can be
contributed to the removal of the mnemonics that stimulated her memory and helped
her remember the past events while describing them to Virgil on the phone.

Apart from the props as mnemonics in the play, Virgil’s body is utilized
significantly as a device that holds memory, and forms a bridge between the parallel
stories of the Iceman and Alice. The pseudoscientific idea that the body is capable of
holding memories independent of the brain, has been used in performance art and
theater to signify the long-lasting effects of trauma on the body. In Mnemonic, this
idea is explored both literally and in the abstract. The Iceman’s body was preserved in
ice and snow. Upon its discovery and recovery, the scientists examine the body and
discover various details that would have been impossible to find had the Iceman died in a warm climate elsewhere. These details allow the scientists to theorize a story about the Iceman’s last few living days. In doing so, the scientists approximate the memories of the Iceman not through his brain, but by examining his body. On the other hand, Virgil’s body is abstractly utilized to depict the notion of body memory. In scene seventeen, which marks the beginning of Alice and Virgil’s long phone conversation, the stage directions read: “Alice’s face appears gradually on Virgil’s naked chest.” Triggered by Alice’s first words on the phone, the projection of her face on Virgil’s body adds a visual and resonant element to Alice’s vocal presence.

However, in the literal and abstract depictions of body memory, there is a common object – the body of the performer playing Virgil. Because the actor shifts between Virgil and the Iceman, his body becomes a living mnemonic that connects the two main storylines together. The significance of body as a mnemonic is in its connection to ancestry and origins, to the past and the present moment. As scholar freshwater wrote:

> The performative paradigm of *Mnemonic* positions itself against the dubious, amoral relativism of historical revisionism by introducing the body as an ethical base. The ethical questions raised by memory’s indeterminacy are set against the conviction that we are bound together by a shared ancestry: we are all related, however distantly. This emphasis on the body as a collective mnemonic, the lowest common denominator, is in tune with Complicite’s foundations in physical
theatre, and also serves as a possible counterbalance to continuing
prejudices which fuel divisive distortions of the past. (Freshwater 218)

By using the body, which encompasses the concepts of memory and origin, as one of the central mnemonics in the play and shared between the two storylines, *Mnemonic* is able to broaden its message to extend to and include the audience, who as individual bodies having memories and who are collectively seated together, in essence are joined in relationship to origin.
Home

I have just moved. But I have rarely felt “home” anywhere.

(McBurney 11)

In *Mnemonic*, the subject of home takes both literal and abstract forms in various characters’ storylines. When we first see Simonides, he is talking about leaving Greece to work for BMW in Germany. (Complicite 154) However, in his next appearance, he is a taxi driver in London. When Alice asks Simonides where he is from, he responds: “I am from Islington.” She responds with “No, no … I mean originally.” (Complicite 174) Alice’s response implies that Simonides does not fit within her definition of a person from Islington, which brings up the notion that Home, which in Simonides’s context is the place he is from, is not in flux, but rather a fixed location where the majority of population look and sound alike. Simonides seems to realize this preconception and responds: “Oh. I see what you mean. I am from Greece.” (Complicite 174) Shortly after, we learn that Simonides’s grandfather was a Greek refugee from Turkey. He then continues by saying that his grandfather speaks Turkish better than Greek, he speaks Greek better than English, and his son speaks English better than Greek. (Complicite 175-176) This generational shift in language is one of the factors in his distancing himself from Greece where Simonides claims to be originally from, the line of ancestry branching out of him. Since according to Simonides he speaks Greek better than English, the possibility of him having an accent can explain why Alice did not consider him as someone who could
be from Islington. It is notable that language proficiency can be a visible marker of the environment a person has grown up in, whereas an identity such as religion is an invisible marker unless accompanied by religious activities, accessories, or items of clothing. According to Alice’s preconception regarding Simonides, her Jewish identity would exclude the possibility of her being from London, since Jews are among the minority in London. (Graham, Schmool and Waterman 29) But as Alice has been unaware of her Jewish identity for most of her life, she can include herself among the people who are from London, providing that there are no visible markers differentiating her from the majority. For Simonides, who is constantly moving from one country to another, home is in flux and detached from his ancestral roots. He shares with Alice a sense of homelessness, but unlike her, Simonides does not search in the past to resolve his homelessness. Instead, he looks forward and sets up a plan for his future: “I’m going to emigrate again. Next year I’m going to Melbourne, Australia … And when I retire I will go to California to get my body frozen so I will wake up stark naked in a better life.” (Complicite 187) Simonides’s plan is similar to the fate of the Iceman whose body was frozen then found thousands of years later resulting in his worldwide fame. No aspects of the Iceman’s identity can be determined with certainty, but a group of scientists have dedicated their time and efforts in finding answers. The Iceman no longer carries the burden of finding home.

For Alice, we can define the concept of home as her genealogy. When Alice embarks on an unexpected journey across Europe to find her thought-to-be-dead father, she has no information about who he might be. With the death of her mother followed by the discovery that her father might be alive, he becomes the sole living connection
to Alice’s ancestry and roots. In other words, her sense of homelessness and the deep need for home are the main reasons for her departure and search for her father.

Throughout Alice’s journey, she traces her father across Europe gathering information about his geographical location. It is when Alice finds out about her father’s Jewish identity that an irrevocable change takes place in her journey. This significant discovery reimagines Alice’s familial history and her perception of identity. It is then that Home in the context of Alice’s journey becomes interconnected with the extensive history of Jewish dislocation and migration. When Alice meets Daniel on a train, she shows him a few items, including a tallith from a box belonging to her father. Alice, not knowing of the tallith’s religious identity, mistakes it for a scarf. But Daniel, a Jew, recognizes the prayer shawl and informs Alice of her father’s Jewish identity. Since Alice’s journey is interrelated with her father’s identity, Judaism introduces a new identity to Alice’s line of ancestry, a history which has been passed down to Alice without her previous knowledge. Daniel tells Alice that she is “carrying five thousand years of history, migration and stories.” (Complicite 183) Shortly after, while looking out the train window, Daniel talks about the mass migration of Jews across Europe:

… across the whole of Europe, thousands of people running for their lives … before the Holocaust, before Hitler's Germany, before the twentieth century has even begun. I always think about it every time I travel on this line. They crossed these fields, passed through these villages. It's a great story if you think about it. My four grandparents, all born in different countries. England, Russia, Poland and the
Ukraine. As children, in the middle of the night, stuffing a dozen things in a duffel bag and fleeing for their lives. And in a new country finding love, hope and security. It's a beautiful story, an epic story. I just don't know the details. You know, I never bothered to ask.

(Pause.) It's too late now of course. They're all dead. (Complicite 184)

Through this monologue, a connection is drawn between Alice’s quest for her father and the migration of Jews in the nineteenth century. For the migrating Jews, the search for a new home was comparatively in a more literal context, whereas for Alice the search for a home takes a more abstract form.

Additionally, there exists a similarity between Daniel and Alice in that they both do not know the details about their familial history. For Daniel, this lack of knowledge was intentional as he never asked his grandparents details of their migration. Even if he is now interested in knowing those details he is unable to find the information he is looking for since his grandparents are dead. But it was never Alice’s intention to have no knowledge of her father. In her phone conversation with Virgil, Alice talks about her mother not sharing details about her father: “She told me my father was dead. She always told me my father was dead. The one time I asked her about the card which came for her every Christmas, the one time I asked her about it ... she never said a thing.” (Complicite 166) The ambiguity as to whether or not Alice’s father is alive, heightens Alice’s journey into a race against time with the possibility of death potentially creating a void, much like the fate experienced by Daniel, wherein he is unable to find answers to the questions he seeks.
Despite Alice’s fixation on finding her father, her objective begins to expand to include finding a new home that is interconnected with her roots and identity. In Berlin, Alice has a conversation with a Maid at the hotel where she stays. After Alice tells the Maid that she is looking for her father, the Maid encourages her to stop looking. The Maid says: “In the past we arrive always too late. Don't go back, go home.” (Complicite 176) The Maid suggests that searching for answers in the past has no satisfactory outcome, like Daniel who is unable to find answers because of his grandparents’ death. She then advises Alice to go home instead of going back. In telling Alice not to “go back,” the Maid is referring to Alice searching in the past and tracing her father. The home the Maid tells Alice to return to, is London where Alice had been living with Virgil. This is in opposition to how Alice perceives her search for her father. For Alice, Home is beyond the defined boundaries of her living place in London. The resolution to her homelessness lies in her past. Alice needs to go back to the origins of the trajectory of her family’s migration to London, holding to the hope of not arriving too late and discovering there is no information to be found. In her conversation with Daniel, Alice says: “I just feel that if I can’t trace my past, then I can’t relate to people now... if I can’t relate to people in the present, I certainly can’t fucking imagine a future.” (Complicite 183) Alice’s personal motivation for finding her father, which is the resolution to her homelessness, becomes interdependent of her relationship with other people. This gradual expansion of Alice’s original objective and the motivation of her journey sets up a path leading to the final scene, serving as a milestone and a conclusion for her journey. Though Alice succeeds in finding the
address to her father’s village where he might still be living, she never completes her trip to the village.

Though Alice never physically finds her father, she finds the cure to her homelessness in the form of an answer to the question she poses twice in the script: “What does nakedness remind us of? Dear God, what does nakedness remind us of?” (Complicite 187, 209) This question connects the concept of home, which is explored and examined in Alice’s storyline, to the concept of memory, which is the overarching and structural element of the play, and to the story of the Iceman, who was found naked in the mountains. Body, an every-changing mnemonic of life, expands the concept of home from a constant and stationary element, to a timeless flow of memories carried far beyond death. For Alice, this realization brings her questions an answer, delivered as a voice-over by Alice in the last scene:

Naked, our needs are so clear, our fears so natural ... There is nothing innocent about the naked. Only the newborn are innocent. Seeing a naked body of any age we remember our own, putting ourselves in someone else’s place, in the gully, for example, five thousand years ago... Seeing a naked body of another person we make an inventory of our own... Shoulderblade, ribs, clavicle. We list the sensations we feel in each part, one by one, all of them indescribable, all of them familiar, all of them constituting a home. (Complicite 209)
Composition

A play that originated as a devised piece exploring the concept of memory, *Mnemonic*’s composition relies heavily on creating and juxtaposing visuals on stage that closely resemble the fragmented and nonlinear nature of memory. However, contrary to many plays, the stage directions in *Mnemonic* are not detailed enough in signaling the movements and positions of elements on stage. Consequently, productions of this play can vary drastically in terms of visual composition and interpretation of the text. But while these qualities offer significant freedom in staging distinct and unique permutations, there exists fundamental structures, such as the fragmented narrative with fluid transition between the scenes, bodies as devices of character representation, spoken language as a compositional element, and the juxtaposition of voice-overs with physical movements on stage, all of which maintain the process in which the elements of the play interconnect and develop the story.

Since Complicite’s first production of *Mnemonic* in 1999, the play has been revived twice, in 2001 and 2002-2003. According to the script, the cast of the original production and the 2001 revival both consisted of seven performers, whereas the 2002-2003 revival was comprised of eight performers. (Complicite 128-129) But, the script does not indicate the number of characters and how these roles are to be distributed among the performers. However, at the beginning of the script, the following note appears: “From Scene Three onwards the Company remain on the stage throughout the performance. As the actors are already on stage, many of the characters’ entrances and exits are not signaled in the stage directions. The cuts
between the scenes are fast and fluid.” (Complicite 130) Since the performers remain on stage for most of the play, they continuously assume the identities of different characters, many of which are neither named in the dialogue nor given descriptions in the stage directions. By employing a company of performers switching between characters on stage in view of the audience, Mnemonic uses the performer’s bodies as devices not only to represent multiple characters on stage but to show a collective lineage of humanity. Complicite’s approach allowing for flexible casting supports the play’s presentation of memory as a universal concept. In addition, despite the play’s division into thirty-six scenes, the note describes the transitions between scenes as fast and fluid. Each scene serves as a fragment from either one or both main storylines, and some scenes include multiple fragments within. The quick succession of scenes sustains the flow of the play and persuades the audience to be attentive while the juxtaposition of storylines brings to attention the references and interconnections between the fragments as they are being created, recreated, and developed on stage. The presence of performers on stage and the fluidity between scenes can also be attributed to the complex and chaotic familial ties between all people, as described by the Director in scene one. Similarly, scholar Freshwater wrote about the connection between the storylines dispersed in scenes throughout the play:

The movement between these different stories is fast and fluid. The company of seven are almost continuously on stage, ceaselessly switching identities and contexts. The collision of these different narratives mimics their impossibly complex interrelationship, revealing the difficulty of isolating one event from another, or of
establishing simple links between them. Like the veins on the leaves, like the tributaries of a river, McBurney has his audience examine our interdependent ancestries as they divide and combine in a chaotic pattern.” (Freshwater 213)

To expand upon the complexities of the human condition and the chaotic interconnections between all human ancestries, Mnemonic utilizes spoken language as another compositional element to investigate the dynamics of human communication.

In scene twenty-two, the Maid interrupts Alice’s sleep and aggressively tries to get her out of the room. The stage direction reads: “The Maid explodes into the room and speaking quickly and aggressively attempts to get her out of there.” (Complicite 172)

The conversation starts in German with Alice pleading for more time and the Maid’s refusal. But when the Maid says a sentence in French, Alice notices and asks the Maid if she speaks French. When the Maid replies with yes, Alice says: “…je peux mieux m’expliquer en français.” (Complicite 172) which translates to: “I can explain myself better in French.” The rest of the scene continues as the Maid and Alice talk in French about the foreigners in Berlin and the Maid’s familial history. Their conversation is abruptly cut when the Maid drops Alice’s watch on the floor. Since this scene is the only scene that includes no dialogue in English, each audience member will have a different understanding of the it, depending on their proficiency in German and French. For those who know neither German nor French, their understanding of the scene will depend on the tone and facial expressions of the performers, as well as the various design elements in the scene, such as the costumes, lighting, props, and set. Understandably, the audience’s response could vary greatly
between a performance staged in England and a performance staged in Paris or Berlin, where most audience members are likely to be proficient in French or German, respectively. The conversation between the Maid and Alice continues in scene twenty-four, but this time the conversation switches from French to English when Alice says a sentence in English and the Maid takes notice. The rest of the scene continues in English, except when the Maid uses words, phrases, and sentences in German or French to communicate with Alice. If in these two scenes we split the conversation between the Maid and Alice into three sections – German, French, and English – we can trace the progression in the conversation as it shifts from one language to another. In the beginning of scene twenty-two, when the Maid talks in German, she speaks quickly and her tone is aggressive. Alice does not seem to be proficient in German as she makes pauses multiple times in her short responses. Therefore, the conversation between the Maid and Alice is rather one-sided until they switch into French. Once they do, the exchanges between the two become more personal and detailed while they repeatedly interrupt each other’s sentences. The exchanged information in this section gives us more insight into the Maid’s background when Alice questions her identity as a German, because of her proficiency in French. The Maid’s tone is still tense, but she engages in a conversation with Alice rather than actively trying to get her out of the room. When they switch into English, the conversation further gravitates towards a friendlier tone. It is now the Maid who does not seem to be proficient in English. But, she also uses German and French in conjunction with English to talk to Alice. By the end of the scene, The Maid sympathizes with Alice and gives her advice on her journey to find
her father. Their relationship becomes less hostile since their communication is less obstructed by language barriers.

Another instance in which spoken language and translation is utilized as a primary compositional element is in scene thirty-four, in which it is used as a communication barrier to create comedic moments. In this scene, Spindler is the chairman at a conference about the Iceman with delegates from countries including France, The United States of America, Greece, England, and Switzerland. According to the stage direction: “They [delegates] mime ear plugs that give them a simultaneous translation.” (Complicite 200) After a brief introduction, Professor Fitz joins Spindler in talking about the content discovered in the Iceman’s stomach. Towards the end of Fitz’s speech, which is in German, the stage direction reads: “He laughs at his own joke.” (Complicite 201) Meanwhile, Spindler talks over Professor Fitz: “What he is saying is that the Iceman had, in his stomach, a worm … and that it was giving him some discomfort … and he’s just made a joke about it, it’s a bit difficult to translate, it’s a Swiss joke.” (Complicite 201) Later in the scene, the French Delegate says: “Merci, Alors, l’homme gelé possédait sur lui antibiotique naturel, le piptoporus betulinus, ce qui est un fait extraordinaire, c’est un champignon…” (Complicite 202), which translates into: “Thank you, So, the Iceman had a natural antibiotic with him, Piptoporus betulinus, which is an extraordinary fact, it is a mushroom …” However, due to the translation machine’s malfunctioning, the US Delegate interrupts, saying: “We can’t understand you, I’m afraid.” (Complicite 202) To which the French Delegate responds: “Oh, sorry. I say that in English. (Pause.) So, maybe he was a doctor. Thank you.” (Complicite 203) In both these
instances, the absence of English translation precludes the audience members who do not have enough knowledge of German or French, from understanding the joke in Fritz’s speech or the information excluded in translation by the French Delegate. Despite this exclusivity, all audience members are informed that Fritz has made a Swiss joke that is difficult to translate, and they can notice that the French Delegate’s English translation is much shorter that the French version. These subtle comedic moments expand upon the range of effects that language barriers present in human communication.

Another technique that Mnemonic employs in juxtaposing visual elements is combining voice-overs with physical movements on stage. This technique is one of the principal ways in which the play presents the act of memory and its interconnection with imagination. For instance, in scene three, while Virgil is lying on the stone, the stage direction reads: “They [Helmut and Erika Simon] are dressed in mountaineering clothing, standing on the bed and table as if on the mountain top.” (Complicite 147) These movements, which is an abstract representation of mountaineering, is juxtaposed with the voice-overs of Virgil, Helmut, and Erika narrating the process that leads to melting of the glaciers and the discovery of the Iceman. Similarly, in scene thirty-two, while a montage of voice-overs is being played, the stage directions read: “Virgil looks at the stone. He lifts it, the company fall to the floor. As he moves the stone, the company move as if in the ice. He replaces the stone and the company stand up and continue their journey across the space.” (Complicite 197) The juxtaposition of voice-overs and abstract movements, in addition to the movements informed by the voice-overs, closely resembles the
relationship between memory and imagination. Wiśniewski views these juxtapositions as representations of Virgil’s memories and imagantions:

by combining the on-stage “pantomimes” with the recorded voices, 
*Mnemonic* suggests that the episodes are products of Virgil’s psyche; they are a mixture of his memories and figments of his imagination. In other words, in the majority of scenes, the stage presents the internal life of the protagonist, and the theatrical structures can be understood as equivalent to the narrative technique of the stream of consciousness (with all possible reservations as far as this analogy is concerned).

(Wiśniewski, *The Textual Tissue of Mnemonic by Complicite* 135)

Furthermore, through examining Virgil’s movements on stage and their relationship with the voice-overs, we can observe how *Mnemonic* begins with Virgil as the central element of its narrative, then gradually moves towards marginalizing Virgil’s role and using him as a device to perform the act of memory on stage. As Wiśniewski wrote:

Virgil’s on-stage activities are reduced to: thinking, tossing in bed, moving around the room, lying, sitting, standing and, above all, listening to internal voices. His passive existence is enlivened by vivid memories and imagination – they constitute the central part of the theatrical experience and suggest Virgil’s marginal role. (Wiśniewski, *The Textual Tissue of Mnemonic by Complicite* 135-136)

Ultimately, *Mnemonic* does not rely on one single compositional method in communicating abstract ideas in performing memory for the audience but rather, by
using various techniques, it speaks to the complex nature of human condition and human communication.
Conclusion

Complicite has a long-standing reputation in blending styles and pushing the boundaries of what we perceive theatre to be. In words of Cara Gargano:

[Complicite] blurs boundaries between styles and forms, re-integrates dance, music and theatre, explores fluidity and multiplicity in language and questions national and cultural borders; it smuggles languages into other languages and experiences across experiential frontiers.

(Gargano)

_Mnemonic_ is a play that consciously asks questions about the nature of memory, of home, of our interconnectedness, yet it does not presume to provide complete answers. Instead, it requires the audience to actively engage in the creation of memory, to use our imaginations as we commit to the act of remembering. As an investigation of Memory, _Mnemonic_ offers us fragments of story in an effort to shine a light on our own path towards finding meaning within the world we perceive of being created in the present moment before us. Then how we remember it and what we do with that memory, is up to us.
Works Cited


