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### Before a Play Is Made: Observation of *The Immortals*' Rehearsal

What does it feel like to watch a rehearsal of a play? This Wednesday afternoon, I was sitting in the same room with a director, a cast of four actors, a dramaturg, and the playwright when they were working on a comedy, *The Immortals*, at the MIT Theater building.

It was at the early stage of rehearsal—the people at the table were just trying to understand the meaning of the lines, before any acting work took place. The discussion was heated with participation from everyone, and in some ways it was strange. The playwright conceived of and wrote the play, but he seemed to be the quietest at the table—when everyone else was voicing their opinions, asking their questions, proposing their interpretations, and casting their doubts, most of the time he was just taking notes. He spoke up occasionally—when he felt his initial intention needed to be clarified and supported—but at other times, he was an observer like me.

The meaning of a play, at least a good one, in a large part should not be written along the lines, but between the lines—beneath the lines—and this meaning, which may be ambiguous even after the play is performed, is even more so at the beginning of the rehearsal. The director and the cast need to know this meaning—their own version of it—but they will have to learn it with their own empathy, debate, and creation, in the presence of an often quiet playwright.

One example I can share is the group's discussion about "That's a nice hand"—a line in the play draft. How would they interpret the sexual intention behind it, if any? Would it be a more comfortable thing to say if the speaker is of another race and culture? What does the character want at that moment? I think the discussion lasted for 10 minutes just for this single line. Details matter. A character needs countless details to be made alive. These details may not be understood, or even shown, but they are crucial to the process when the artists are trying to get under the characters' skins.

Though the playwright was quiet sometimes, the director was not—she was the leader of the discussion. She sat next to the playwright, often immediately pointed out the parts she had questions about, and talked to him directly. Those moments were almost like a therapy session—the director verbalizing her feelings and thoughts, and the playwright listening and trying to understand.

Throughout the discussion, I realized that those same words in the script might mean different things to everyone in the room. The play was heavily examined and debated, filtered through everyone's perspectives—the racially and age-diverse cast helped to check the play's reality—so it would *make sense*, but I also think each person would still walk away from the rehearsal with different meanings in mind. In the end, a play is a *recipe*, but the

performance—the *real meal*—will be different every time it's cooked, and will taste differently to everyone.