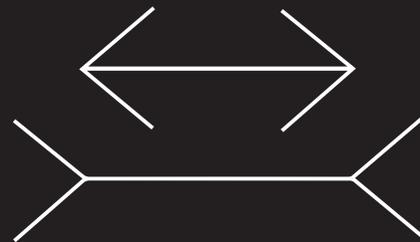


TRUTH IN THE ILLUSION

By Sarah Rose Leonard, DRAMATURG

Take a look at these two images:



Which line do you think is longer?

They are in fact of equal length if you measure, but our mind perceives the second image as longer. According to psychologist Daniel Kahneman, most of us will still perceive the second line as longer even after we know the truth. The Müller-Lyer illusion, as the set of images is called, is a classic cognitive illusion that Kahneman uses in his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* to illustrate how often we are unable to change how we process information, even when we know we are wrong. The only way to battle cognitive illusions are to recognize them and attempt to not believe or act on them...but this is nearly impossible for the human brain to do. As Kahneman says, "Constantly questioning our own thinking would be impossibly tedious...the best we can do is a compromise: learn to recognize situations in which mistakes are likely and try harder to avoid significant mistakes when the stakes are high." (*good luck to us!*)

When playwright Jonathan Spector read Kahneman's book he wondered if he could craft the theatrical equivalent of cognitive illusions. To do so would be to base a play in classic theater magic: now you see something, now you don't. He began to write *This Much I Know* at The Ground Floor, Berkeley Rep's center for the creation and development for new work, where each residency is structured around the needs of each theater maker. Due to the open nature of the program, Jonathan found himself with the mental free time to delightfully stumble down an internet rabbit hole about Svetlana Iosifovna Alliluyeva, Joseph Stalin's daughter. (How he got to Alliluyeva is lost to the magic of cognitive inability

to remember what happens in an internet rabbit hole). He learned that Alliluyeva defected to the U.S. in the middle of the Cold War — using a bit of dramatic illusion herself — which caused a political dust up. By the time the Soviets realized Alliluyeva had defected, it was too late — she was quickly thrust into the public spotlight, giving a press conference shortly after her plane landed in New York.

Svetlana's defection happened suddenly, but her recognition of her own cognitive illusions about her father and her country slowly built over time. When the love of her life died, the remaining belief she had in her country withered away. As she writes, "I could live in Russia—being a hypocrite, hiding my true opinions. More than half of our people live like that. We have no opportunity to criticize, we have no press, no freedoms, and also nobody wants to risk...My husband's death changed my nature. I feel it impossible to be silent and tolerant anymore."

Jonathan didn't even know Stalin had a daughter. He biked over to Moe's book shop on Telegraph, where he bought her biography and read it over the course of the residency.

Svetlana found her way into the play, burrowing into a plot structure inspired by Kahneman's work. A New Yorker article about the psychological aftereffects seen in people who caused accidental deaths caused inspiration for another plotline, as did Derek Black, an heir to a prominent white nationalist legacy who later renounced his beliefs.

Derek attended Jonathan's alma mater: New College, a tiny hotbed of liberal free thinkers in Sarasota, Florida. Derek's own cognitive illusions changed very gradually due to his exposure to, and eventual acceptance of, students who thought differently than him and engaged him in ongoing conversation. Derek was outed on campus while he was

still knee-deep in his transformation. Jonathan watched current students wrestle with how to treat this very particular student on alumni threads in his inbox. Derek's peers ostracized him, but some friends and teachers continued to engage him, and those repeated encounters resulted in real change over the years. Eventually, Derek could no longer participate in his family's belief system. His journey proves Kahneman's point that it's near impossible to align ourselves with how we used to think once we have undergone a shift.

These plotlines weave into each other in *This Much I Know*, finding common themes in the questions, "What are we responsible for?" "How do we change our minds?" "How do we determine what is real and true?" Characters wind their ways through these questions by following their intuition, acting mostly on a subconscious level. Harold, the character influenced by Derek, confides in his mentor and favorite professor, Lukesh, about being publicly outed as coming from a white nationalist family on campus. Lukesh — unlike Harold's peers and other professors — engages in conversation with Harold. The seemingly simple power of listening helps each character on their journey. A bevy of Russians listen to Lukesh's wife Natalya as she tries to uncover a mystery. The audience, cast as Lukesh's students, aid him as he unravels his own trials.

But don't try to think too hard as you listen, your brain will fall into cognitive illusions no matter what you do. We're only human. We follow stories. At the core of this particular story are three characters learning to see each other as they really are, leaving illusions and previous perceptions behind.