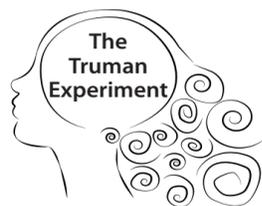


# The GRE Choice: Fear of stereotypes hurts performance



BY ELIZABETH NECKA  
Columnist

Last week's "WTF: Woah! The Future" Career Center program adeptly summarized my expletive of choice when I think of my own future.

I have a lot of tasks on my to-do list before Dec. 1 (the application deadline for graduate schools), and sleep is not one of them. Currently leading the list is to study for (and take) the GRE. That's right: After four years of variegated experiences that have sculpted me into the multidimensional person I'm marketing in my personal statement, the Educational Testing Services are forcing me right back into the same 200 to 800 point range I faced with the SAT my junior year of high school. I'm pretty good at test-taking, so I didn't think the GRE would be a big deal. But for some reason, this test has me stumped.

My study habits put the typical Truman nerd to shame. For example, at the salon for a pedicure this summer, my friends flipped through Cosmopolitan while I attempted in frustration to learn vocabulary words from my flashcards as my massage seat tried to coax me into relaxation. In high school, I raised my ACT score four points just by working my way through my Princeton Review book. But hours upon hours of studying and four practice tests later, my GRE score obstinately refuses to improve.

I'm choking — psychologically, of course — although the stress of it all feels like it's choking me a bit physically, as well. In "Choke," a book published in September, psychologist Sian Beilock at the University of Chicago terms choking as an atypical lapse in performance, usually when they're under pres-

sure to perform exceptionally. In high-pressure situations, people who choke perform worse than expected as compared to their level of skill. Beilock thinks that when we choke under pressure, we are dividing our attentional resources between the task at hand and the process by which we are attempting to achieve the task at hand, meticulously monitoring our problem-solving decisions so we don't make a mistake.

Beilock also points to the inhibiting effect of stereotype threat on performance. In a 1999 study in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, female subjects were primed to consider the stereotype that "women are bad at math" before taking a simple math test. This led to worse performance than that of women who were not reminded of this stereotype before taking the test. Beilock

concludes that when the stereotypes are activated, part of our working memory is temporarily displaced in mental ruminations and fear of confirming the stereotype, thereby impairing performance.

These stereotypes are not necessarily negative, but they can be just as detrimental to our ability to focus on the task at hand and perform proficiently. Beilock points to amateur mistakes made by professional golfers who crack under the pressure of having a reputation to uphold. So intent on successfully performing a putt or a swing, they may overanalyze the procedure and the steps to check for any errors, miscalculating and destroying their performance for even a well-rehearsed procedural task. It's well established that multitasking is detrimental to our performance. In high-stakes situations, we may believe that the task we're

trying to complete is our sole focus, but our brains are effectively multitasking between completing the task, analyzing the way we're completing it and worrying whether we will reinforce a positive stereotype or successfully avoid reinforcing a negative one. That is demanding too much from our mental capacities.

I can do nothing but attest to the truth in Beilock's theory. Faced with the daunting task of scoring well enough to get into my "reach" graduate schools and confronted with the pressure of well-intended compliments ("You're a smart woman" and "You're a good student — you'll do fine!"), I simply choke when I sit down at the computer with the little timer ticking away at the bottom of the screen. What if I'm not as smart as I think I am, or as smart as everyone else seems to believe? Somehow, this one number creates a value by which I am to be judged.

What it boils down to is that, basically, I need to chill out. I've always known I have a touch of neuroticism in my personality, but a malevolent case of it has flared up this week. In a classic study of arousal level on performance, psychologist Donald Hebb suggested that we have an optimum level of arousal for which our performance is best, and that being aroused too much or too little in comparison to this point is only detrimental. My level of arousal is off the charts — and I'm giving a lot of undue attention to something that will be just a score on one portion of the entire school application. I'm glad I've studied, but at some point, you just accept choking.

So, while "WTF" succinctly captured my sentiments last week, as my exam date approaches, I've changed my acronym of choice to "G2G": Going to Graduate. I think that's a realistic goal on which to set my sights — what the rest of my future holds will play out as it will. Hopefully, grad school is in the mix. But there's really no use wasting working memory power on it.



Photo courtesy of rottentomatoes.com  
"Ajami" features Jews, Arabs and Christians forced to coexist within a small Israeli suburb. It received a nomination for Best Foreign Film at the Academy Awards in March.

## Plot structure confuses viewers, vital message lost



BY KEN DUSOLD  
Staff Reviewer

It is difficult to think of any Israeli film in which the escalating tensions between regional sects are not central to the plot. "Ajami" is no different.

As a film, "Ajami" suffers from a very rough nonlinear structure — in which chronology is replaced by hurried confusion. However, it is a significant film, written and directed by an Israeli and a Palestinian, together.

These two men, Yaron Shani and Scandar Copti respectively, spent seven years laboring over this film. This film was not made for money or accolades but is a powerful argument in favor of exchanging today's unofficial policy of coexistence for the policy of solidarity. This idea, supported by a minority, is bold considering the fiercely segregated environment.

The 2009 film was released in the United States in February 2010 and received a nomination for Best Foreign Film at the Academy Awards in March. It was the fourth entry of the 2010 Truman State University International Film Festival on Sept. 29.

"Ajami" is set in Jaffa, a neighborhood just outside

Tel Aviv. Jaffa is a suburb where Jews, Arabs and Christians attempt to live amongst one another. Unfortunately, Jaffa has high crime rates and high unemployment rates, leaving residents in fear and praying for safety they cannot afford.

The film follows a series of interlocking stories, beginning with the image of a young boy being gunned down near the side of a street in broad daylight. What has this boy done? He is guilty of having been mistaken for someone else, someone whose "wrongdoing" was simply his family affiliation.

The targeted young man is the nephew of a café owner who shot a member of a deadly and well-organized gang, out of self-defense. In an effort to protect themselves from retribution, the family members of the café owner agree to a financial settlement with the gang's patriarch. Unfortunately, they do not have the money readily available. In a fit of desperation, the family's

eldest son tries entering the world of drug-dealing to make a large profit quickly. Meanwhile, a cop assigned to Jaffa tries to balance his incredibly dangerous job with his own

family, which is devastated by the disappearance of his brother. He is notably tolerant and understanding of the many religions and ethnicities he must encounter on a daily basis. However, he is also frantically determined either to find his brother alive or seek

vengeance for his brother's death. The film continues to weave unevenly between these two general story lines and the supporting characters, whose lives and actions are necessary for the movie's climax to make sense.

For all of the central actors in the film, "Ajami" is their debut, which makes their professional performance all the more remarkable. Then again, assuming most of the actors are from Jaffa or its surrounding neighborhoods, the tremendous fear reflected in their eyes might be more real than the audience realizes.

The filmmakers made a bold choice to shoot most scenes in hand-held form and divide the film into six chapters. The relentless shaking and rough images successfully complemented the instability of the location and the discomfiting plot, thus creating a truly suspenseful product. Unfortunately, the decision to jump from one story to another, disregarding any respect for chronological sequencing, cost the film its clarity. The audience is forced to spend too much time trying to understand exactly where the film has dropped us off in time. Because of this, "Ajami" might not be fully appreciated by some viewers.

For those who do remain fully aware throughout the entirety of the film, it will be very difficult to forget. This is not because it is a great film, but because its aim seems unnervingly beyond reach, despite international calls for peace in a region that many fear is too scarred to properly heal. With yet another ongoing round of peace negotiations underway between Israel and Palestine, one sincerely hopes those parties directly involved saw "Ajami" and were not distracted from the film's intentions by its broken plot.

For those who do remain fully aware throughout the entirety of the film, it will be very difficult to forget. ... because its aim seems unnervingly beyond reach.

# Curtain Call produces second-rate play

Inconsistencies impair local theatre's rendition of an English play

BY JOHN O'BRIEN  
Staff Reviewer

Murder, mystery and demented nursery rhymes hit the Willard School stage this past Thursday through Sunday as Curtain Call Theatre Company presented Agatha Christie's "The Mousetrap."

First debuting at the Ambassadors Theatre in London on November 25, 1952, "The Mousetrap" is the longest-running play in the history of London's West End. The play is set in Monkswell Manor, a country bed-and-breakfast that relatively newlywed couple Mollie and Giles Ralston, recently opened for business. One by one, interesting guests arrive at the guesthouse and settle in. Soon after, Detective Sergeant Trotter arrives and reveals that a murderer might be loose in the house. As bodies drop and accusations fly, tensions rise among those in

the house.

A large number of distracting technical and character choices made the show rather dry and isolated the audience from the story. The cast worked well together at times, creating believable connections between characters and bringing a moderate amount of humor to the production. However, a number of cast members seemed to lack sincerity and a fully developed character, causing a great deal of humor and energy to be lost. Accents and over-projection were problems for several members of the cast, while others boasted impressive characterization. From goofy, flaky and flamboyant Christopher Wren to stern, butch Miss Casewell, the cast successfully created a wide

spectrum of personalities using voice, mannerisms and physicality to their advantage.

Playing the Ralstons, Alison Schmidt as Mollie and Phil McIntosh as Giles shared good chemistry on stage. Schmidt's over-the-top, insincere emotions and over-projection were major distractions from an otherwise satisfactory performance. McIntosh presented a very strong character with solid contrast in emotion, proving himself as one of the more believable characters in the production. Although believability occasionally waned in his portrayal, Kevin O'Reilly's light-hearted and goofy demeanor as Mr. Paravicini elicited laughs, while Mark Willis as Major Metclaff presented a solid, consistent character. Like

several other cast members' performances, a lack of sincerity plagued John Taylor's performance as Detective Trotter throughout a portion of the show, but the final scene brought new life to Taylor's character and he ended on a strong note. Despite occasional dryness, Rebecca Charles brought power and presence to the stage with her humorous performance as Miss Casewell.

Providing a majority of the production's humor and strength, Juli Taylor as Mrs. Boyle and Eric Patterson as Christopher Wren stole the show. Both presented highly developed characters and pulled the audience into the production with their sincerity and humor.

With a strong accent, animated facial expressions and strong characterization, Taylor brought a significant presence to the stage and left the audience asking for more and wishing her character had not fallen victim to the mysterious killer in the first act. Patterson's skillful performance left the audience in stitches. Presenting the strongest

developed character of the show, Patterson's impeccable timing and strong emotional spectrum truly pulled the audience in. The technical aspect of the production also had a number of setbacks, which plagued the show. Kevin Martin's set design was effective and simple, but the placement of entrances and furniture made it difficult to see a number of character interactions. Costumes by Alison Schmidt and Denise Clark were accurate and timely for a number of characters, but the costumes worn by characters such as Mollie Ralston made the play's time period questionable due to their modern look.

Make-up by Juli Taylor and Alison Schmidt was a distraction, as the make-up of Mrs. Boyle and Mr. Paravicini was blatantly overdone and too overpowering for such an intimate theater. Lagging cues were the only major flaws of the lighting and sound design by Randy Bame.

Curtain Call left the audiences with the mystery solved, but also unresolved believability, due to flaws in the production.

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