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How I Screwed Up My Thesis Production and Forgot Everything I Knew About Directing

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How I Screwed Up My Thesis Production And Forgot Everything I Knew About Directing

a paper about it by Brian Balcom

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INTRODUCTION

This is the story of how I fucked up my thesis production. In every step of the process, I did something wrong that had a serious affect on the quality of the production. No aspect of this show was safe from my general ineptitude and inability to understand what the play needed. I will take you from pitch to performance detailing all the major mistakes I made along the way. As a result, I was unhappy and unsatisfied with both the process and the product.

This was supposed to be my best work; a complete display of not only three years of graduate instruction, but a life's worth of education and experience. It was supposed to be my introduction to the city of Chicago: a calling card, a conversation starter, a means of validation that would get my foot in the door of any storefront I chose.

Instead, it was possibly the most disappointing production I've ever directed.

One of the things that drove me to grad school was mediocrity. I felt surrounded by it in Minneapolis, that woefully average shows were being praised in the press and received standing ovations every night. I wanted to elevate the craft and the audience's expectation of what theater can be. I failed to do that with my production of THE MISANTHROPE.

Despite all the effort and regardless of how it was received, my countless mistakes left an incredible amount of potential on the table. As a result, I found the product to be mediocre and rather forgettable: the absolute worst outcome for any kind of art. I was responsible for a show that ended up being what I was trying to avoid. I failed to show I learned anything from all the time and money spent here.

A motif of my time here has been lack of preparation. Most of those times I have been acutely aware of that going in. But on this show, there were many times then I felt confident that I was, in fact, prepared for that day's meeting or rehearsal. But time and time again this play surprised me and showed that I had no idea what I was doing. I thought I was prepared when I was actually unaware of how much I wasn't.

When I arrived at DePaul three years ago, my path was clear. I knew who I was, what I was good at, and what I needed to do. But now, as a result of this show (and the one immediately prior, AFTER MISS JULIE) I don't know who I am anymore. I don't know what I'm good at.

In this paper, I will examine many of the mistakes I made throughout this production process. I will investigate why things went wrong and what I could have done to anticipate or better correct those mistakes. Hindsight can be fickle, but we often learn the most from failure.

Here's how it all happened.

(I want to be clear that if and when I name students, professors, or the school it is not intended to place blame on them for what is described herein. I am merely explaining the events that unfolded and may use proper nouns for detail and specificity.)

THE PITCH

I did not set myself up for success.

In October of my second year, I compiled a list of five potential thesis plays for Damon Kiely:

- SAMUEL J&K by Mat Smart
- JOHNNY BASEBALL by Dresser and Reale
- GALLILEO by Bertolt Brecht
- THE MISANTHROPE by Moliere
- PYGMALION by George Bernard Shaw

Of these five plays, I previously knew all of them. I had enough plays to pitch that I would be happy to direct and, therefore, hardly did any reading over summer break. This was a mistake.

Of these five plays, my favorite was a non-starter due to the opportunities for student actors being too limited. I was betting hard that the pitch would be successful and it was a mistake to put all my eggs in one basket.

Of these five plays, two were types of plays that were completely new to me: a musical and a true classic in rhyming verse. The showcase-level thesis is a risky time to try something new. Looking back, I should have pitched these in an ESP-type slot where limited resources and exposure provide a safer environment for failure. I believe it was a mistake to step outside my comfort zone for this important production slot.

Of these five plays, three were canonical works by dead authors. My strength is contemporary and new plays by living writers. I wanted my thesis production to be a calling card, an introduction to professional contacts in Chicago. As my strength is with contemporary, realistic plays and new works, it was a mistake to pitch these classic plays.

Of these five plays, two had significant financial challenges. One required live musicians and the other would put a significant strain on the costume designer and shop. I knew both obstacles to these plays going in and it was a mistake to pitch them anyway.

When putting together this list of plays to pitch for my thesis slot, I only considered plays I liked. I did not regard my identity as a director, my skillset, or the financial and logistical considerations of the school. Not a single one of these plays were without some issue in that regard. That was a mistake.

SAMUEL J&K was immediately nixed by Dean John Culbert because showcase-level plays need more opportunities for student actors. I wasn't acutely aware of this requirement but should have asked well in advance. Sadly, because the play was so important to me and the casting was perfect for the student pool I was saving it for this thesis slot and purposefully did not pitch it earlier when it was a more viable option.

JOHNNY BASEBALL was the musical that would bring logistical and financial challenges. It had also gone through a massive rewrite that resulted in a different play than the one I fell in love with. The recent reviews were not very strong and I was also having difficulty sourcing the script and soundtrack. For those reasons, JOHNNY BASEBALL did not make it to the final three.

And so I was left with the three canonical pieces that I pitched to the school: GALILEO, MISANTHROPE, and PYGMALION.

THE MISANTHROPE ended up presenting challenges I hadn't even conceived of. I'll get into much more detail in the ensuing pages, but despite feeling most confident about it, it was the play I likely knew how to direct the least. It wasn't until early design meetings that I discovered how little I knew about what it was asking of me. And things just got worse going forward.

GALILEO eventually ran into issues also due to the acting opportunities it offered, but in a different manner than J&K. GALILEO breaks down into one central role and over one hundred minor, tertiary roles. Every actor who wasn't in the title role would have little arc or journey. The number of characters also caused concern within the costume shop. I knew both of these challenges from previously pitching it in the Healy slot and I still tried to move it forward.

PYGMALION was a late addition to the list and I did not have as strong of a personal attachment to it as I did the other two. This, I'm sure, showed in my pitches to the school.

Ironically, despite my order of preference going MISANTHROPE, GALILEO, then PYGMALION, I likely would have had more success had the order been reversed. PYGMALION is the style of play that is closest to what I knew and MISANTHROPE the farthest.

I did have a few moments of realization/panic but at stages that were way too late to make worthwhile changes. By the time I realized I was going to pitch three canonical plays that didn't speak to my contemporary aesthetic, I was waist-deep in classes and rehearsal and didn't have the time to do the reading required to find more options. By

the time that I realized that THE MISANTHROPE was foreign to me in ways I did not anticipate, it had already been selected and announced.

It is clear that for this particular thesis slot, I should have been much more aware of the limitations of the school and made sure that the plays I pitched were in closer conversation with my identity and skillset as a director. I should have used this opportunity to discover new plays and writers instead of pitching ideas that I had been already carrying around.

THE CONCEPT

I was too close to this play.

Back in the late '90s I did the opening scene from THE MISANTHROPE in undergraduate acting class. I played Alceste, of course. It was probably the first time I truly understood the circumstance and needs of a character. I was fighting for something as true for Brian as it was for Alceste. At that moment, the play was all about Alceste and his truthful, realistic fight for right.

When I first began to talk about the play for my thesis slot, my conversation focused on Alceste being persecuted for who he is and what he says and believes. I talked about his fear of conforming, selling out, and thus losing his identity. It was an extremely focused take as I had a personal connection to the character of Alceste in a way that did not exist with the others.

In an early analysis assignment I wrote about how the play affected me upon first read: *Oh, man: I saw myself. I think I cheered inside. More than a little bit. Then I got upset and sad. I feel like this play champions my suffering, journey, and voice.*

It seemed like a perfect fit. I had left Minneapolis for graduate school in part because I was sick of seeing mediocre shows embraced so warmly. I had gotten into trouble both at DePaul and at my corporate jobs for speaking in a manner too direct and honest (in my opinion). And my relationship with the status quo at school was challenging. All of these elements concretized my deep and personal perspective on the play. I had a realistic and personally specific context in which I placed Alceste and his journey.

But that's not what the play is.

It is not the story of one man's persecution; it is a story about compromise in a relationship. It is not a realistic drama; it is a heightened character comedy. Having such a strong, personal attachment blinded me to the real story of the play and the larger ideas therein.

Going into pre-production, I believed the main arc of the play was about the friendship between Alceste and Philinte. I believed this as late as the third production meeting. It wasn't until I did the eventing exercise that I began to uncover the love story as central.

In the prior school year, Lavina Jadhvani (MFA '15) repeatedly asked me in Directing Seminar class about Celimene and why she's important to the play, why the love story is important to the play. I was never able to provide an adequate response before she graduated and even just before design meetings began I still struggled to understand how that plot line fit with my story of Alceste.

The love story is the main plot and arc of the play. My inability to reconcile that major plot point should have been a big red flag. I had a very narrow, Alcestian view of the play and was unable to gain a broader perspective. It should have been then, months before the first design meeting, that I employed the many tools I learned here. I possessed a bizarre false confidence

My re-investigation moved at a glacial pace throughout pre-production and rehearsal. Even though things needed to change, it was difficult to let go of the old ideas. The new discoveries always came too late and I was always playing catch-up.

And Because of how strongly I identified with Alceste, I didn't want him portrayed as an asshole who simply hates everything because I didn't see myself that way. It was important that his fight and frustration with the world come from a place of hope: that he wants to make the world better, he wants to save his friends, he wants to be loved by Celimene. I wanted him, and the play as a whole, to have a big heart. I fell into the clichéd and dreaded actor trap of wanting him to be likeable. I wanted us to cheer for him.

But that idea of heart fights the style and text to a large extent. Alceste is a contrarian, he is jealous and controlling, he ruins parties to make a point, he is not a nice guy. We're not supposed to like him. Much of the humor comes from the absurdity of his convictions. We are supposed to laugh at him. And so I spent a large part of the rehearsal process with a fundamental misunderstanding of what the play was asking of us. I was constantly playing catch-up on what the play was about.

In my original pitch to the Dean and faculty, the world of the play was very different. I placed act one in Oz Park where Alceste and Philinte debated amongst dog walkers and the sounds of morning rush hour. Act two took place in an immaculate penthouse atop Trump Tower with sweeping views of the Chicago skyline. Act three was in a luxury suite at the Bulls game. I put this classical text into a contemporary, realistic setting because that's what I know.

But as the analysis went on the more I discovered that concept fought the text. Eventually I was forced into a decision: adhere to and honor the unities of time and space that the text asks for or break those and do the production the way I wanted.

There are people who are experts at taking classic plays out of context and placing them in foreign worlds. I am not one of those people. This was my first classical play and I had serious reservations and fears about legitimizing such a contextual shift. I did not have the facility to answer the multitude of conflicts between the text and the world that would arise. I had no concept of how to bring those two disparate things together and in doing so, what I needed to pay attention to and which dots needed to connect. It was

this inexperience that drove the decision to ditch the original concept and honor the unities and translate the historical anchors of the text.

If you re-contextualize Shakespeare you can simply cut anything that doesn't fit into your new world of the play. No such luck with THE MISANTHROPE. Even though this is a classic text, its translation is not in the public domain and the rights holder refused any cutting. This was another significant challenge to my original, uber-realistic world.

If cutting were allowed I think it would have changed the game and I likely would have held to my original ideas. But there were certain parts of the text that I viewed as millstones forcing the production to honor the unities. I could not find a way to justify abandoning them and was terrified of my ability to answer to all the incongruities that would arise.

During this process, I failed to realize I was too close to this play to properly read and understand what it asked of me. I failed to detach decades of personal narrative and attachment. I failed to objectively analyze the text and properly tell the story. When I came to realize these obstacles, but very late in the process when it was impossible to fully and properly correct them. Those ideas that I held on to for over a decade turned out to not serve the play. It took too long to discover that was the problem and even longer for that to get corrected.

PRE-PRODUCTION

I didn't know how to talk about the world.

But I did know how to talk about the play, which I mistook for the same thing. I was never shy about discussing what it meant to me and was very open about how my own faults and failures connected me to *Alceste*. I don't think there was ever a question of why the play was important to me. I understood its themes, its character's needs, its engine, the message behind it, and how it worked.

I thought that was enough to begin meeting with designers.

As mentioned above, my original vision for the world of the play had a kitchen sink in every act. Each location was a real, tangible place with a common and digestible groundplan (a park with benches, a living room with sofas, etc.). I shoehorned the play into my comfort zone. But as I moved away from that old concept I didn't have any strong ideas about what I was moving to. I was embarking into the unknown.

Up until then, I had been accustomed to facts in the text informing me about the world of the play. *AFTER MISS JULIE* was in the servants' kitchen of an estate in rural London in 1945. *HOOKMAN* was in a car and a dorm room. *SOME GIRLS* took place in hotel rooms. *AMERICAN SEXY* was at the Grand Canyon. And these scripts didn't just provide location, they also indicated the rules of their world.

If I had set *MISANTHROPE* in period, the world would have been much simpler to put together. The context of the time it was written provides many facts about costume and architecture and etiquette and class that could have easily been taken straight from historical research.

But it was important for me that this production be set in present day Chicago. And so those anchors of the period turned into questions I struggled to answer. What does a king mean in present day Chicago? Or a coach, or poetry, or a handwritten letter? Who is the aristocracy today?

As it turned out, *Misanthrope* was unlike any play I previously directed. There is little to nothing about the world in the script itself as many of the historical rules mentioned above come from original context, not text. Aside from the occasional mention of a coach and a king, the text is wide open. And that's a big part of how I got lost.

This was the first time in my life that I was responsible for creating the world of the play and all the rules within. And, unfortunately, I not only didn't know how to do this, but didn't realize I needed to until way too late in the process. This inexperience and uncertainty led to a lot of indecision. I didn't know what to do.

Because I completely left my original concept, there were only four things I was sure of going into design and production meetings: It was to be set in a city that resembled present day Chicago, the aristocracy was the 1%, it takes place in one location, and it is a social satire (an idea which I immediately forgot once in rehearsal). That's it – I had no ideas beyond that. I struggled to have opinions about the world and make decisions about its rules. And it showed.

I did not hide my difficulty in comprehending the play. I freely communicated to my design team that I was struggling to talk about the world. I had never known so little about a play before and I didn't handle it well. I felt an immense pressure to be the authority and lacked the tools and experience to do so.

Adding to this were issues with my concurrently rehearsing production of AFTER MISS JULIE. I had completely lost control of a rehearsal and design process at the same time.

Instead of publically admitting ignorance about the world of the play and communicating my shortcomings, I could have engaged my team more to investigate it and build it together. I could have taken a more active approach and empowered them to contribute earlier and more often. I could have been more active and asked them to specifically react to the little that I did know. I could have presented it as an opportunity to collaborate rather than a failing on my part.

That's a serviceable solution if I'm ever caught in a similar situation, but I don't ever want to be in that situation again. I don't want to be at a loss for words about the world of the play.

After I pitched it, I felt good about THE MISANTHROPE and my ability to understand and direct it. In later advisor meetings (before pre-production began) I felt similarly confident. It wasn't until I actually began investigating the world and text *with* designers and actors that I discovered how little I actually knew and how ill-prepared I really was.

How could I have been better prepared if I wasn't aware of how unprepared I was? How can I plan for what I can't even comprehend?

At the first production meeting I spoke at length about my history with the play, my personal connection to Alceste, the story I wanted to tell, and why it was important. I, essentially, gave a presentation for about 30 minutes and when I opened the meeting up to a conversation with the group, there was little activity. I wanted to engage the designers more and hear from them about what turns them on about the play and why they found it important, but didn't go about it in a way that enabled them to do so.

I should have made it clearer that I wanted them to contribute. I should have reassured them that they are the authorities in their field and that I need their opinions and

expertise. I could have put more onus on them to bring something to the table. I could have reassured them that there are no stupid questions and created a more comfortable space to speak up. I could have asked them more specific questions rather than the more open-ended, “what do you think?” I could have set up the first meeting as more of a conversation rather than a presentation.

In addition, many of the design faculty commented to my advisors that I did not demonstrate myself as a strong leader in the first few meetings. There was serious concern that I was not inspiring the students and simply didn’t care.

Because of my frustrations in understanding the world as mentioned above combined with simultaneous issues involving AFTER MISS JULIE, I brought those problems into our meetings in non-constructive ways. I did not appear invested in the production and failed to rally the designers around me. I was not the leader that was needed or expected.

I should have been more aware of that and made a stronger effort to separate and compartmentalize my emotions so I wasn’t bringing any unnecessary or unhelpful baggage into meetings. I should have taken a few moments before each to breathe, reset, and enter the room with clarity and optimism regardless of my personal problems and frustrations.

CASTING

I neutered the production.

There were a few things I knew going in to casting:

- It was important that Alceste be older than Celimene
- I preferred Celimene to be not conventionally attractive
- Celimene uses her sexuality to get what she wants

I wanted Alceste's age to help set him apart from the rest of the cast for a number of reasons: there are a few moments in the text that indicates that Alceste is a generation older than Celimene where he speaks to Philinte with reverence about old ways and disdain for the new; Moliere was also eighteen years older than his wife and, knowing that he wrote from a very personal perspective, I wanted to honor that to some degree in the Alceste-Celimene relationship dynamic; and my personal disconnect from social media and the communication methods of a new and younger generation. These reasons, combined with my having always been the second-oldest student at The School, made it important that Alceste be older than Celimene.

I knew this would be no easy task since there were only five graduate men to choose from and there were significant hurdles to three of them. And so I was left with only two viable MFA options. Now, this is the time when I should have convinced myself that pool was too narrow, that I should have given up the idea of age disparity and focused on Alceste's actual personal qualities, needs, and the style of the play.

I did not do that. It didn't even occur to me to do that. I fully convinced myself that either Greg or Adam would be my Alceste. Despite being very careful about character age when pitching all my previous shows here so that no twenty-year-old would play a parent or a retiree in a realistic play, I fell into a different kind of age trap here.

When it came time to make a casting decision for Celimene it came down to two actors: Chloe Baldwin and BFA ACTOR A.

Chloe was really strong on her text work. Hers was the only first-round audition where I heard the text in a clear and honest way. After two days of the same monologues ad nauseum, I heard it for the first time from her. She made it sound natural in a way that none of the other actors could. Chloe also brought more heart to the role, which was something that was important to me at the time. As mentioned previously, this was a gross misreading of the play.

BFA ACTOR A was the lone, pre-audition favorite that made it to callbacks. I was extremely impressed by the status and command she brought to the role. She chose an audition outfit that implied awareness of Celimene's sexuality and wasn't afraid to cut others down to build herself up.

While Chloe was stronger on text, BFA ACTOR A had a stronger sense of authority and sexuality. I was leaning toward BFA ACTOR A but the everyone in the audition room – the assistant director, the audition readers, stage management, and costume designer – fought for Chloe and I let them convince me. The argument that swayed me was that I could teach Margie's intangibles to Chloe more easily than I could teach Chloe's text work to Margie.

But in casting Chloe – as I'll discuss further in a section below – I took the bite out of Celimene. Chloe's portrayal was always of a fun girl - it took a huge effort to convince her dig in her nails when needed and she was never able to truly understand what the play was asking of her. Whereas Margie's audition showed potential for a more aggressive, sexual, and manipulative character.

Hindsight, of course, is twenty/twenty, but this was something I should have seen coming. There were signs and signals I should have read more clearly. I should have trusted my gut about BFA ACTOR A and not been so easily swayed by a room full of undergraduates with fifteen years less experience than me. I should have had a better understanding of what the play was asking of its characters and been more confident about asserting that.

Sex is an important part of this play. As mentioned previously, Celimene uses her sexuality to get what she wants from all of her suitors. I had discussions with dramaturgy about a concern over slut-shaming Celimene if she was too overtly sexual in her tactics. The dramaturgy team assured me it was the right choice and provided research showing that strong sexual themes were not inappropriate for the time it was written.

Despite this, I failed to investigate Celimene's sexuality and sexual tactics during auditions. I was overly-focused on text work and general presence.

The only casting choices I was one-hundred percent pleased with from start to finish were for the roles of Philinte and Arsinoe. That rate of satisfaction is inexcusable for a showcase-level production with priority casting preference.

I made bad choices. I was blind to important factors like sexuality, was influenced by less important ones like age, misread what the play was asking, and I didn't trust my instinct

when it mattered. These are mistakes I might expect from a undergraduate production, but not from me.

REHEARSAL

I started us on the wrong foot.

A rehearsal method I learned here was to run through the show as soon as possible, coined by an actor as the “bumble-through”. This serves two functions: it enables everyone to understand the shape of the thing as a whole, connecting events and understanding arc early; and puts traditional, investigative table work on its feet in a more active way.

I am a big fan of this method and have employed it in every show to various degrees. The process is two-fold:

1. Traditional table work read-through
 - Read briskly only stopping to discuss rules, facts, and circumstance that affects everyone. This lasts about two rehearsals.
2. First-pass staging
 - Immediately on our feet to identify basic needs and actions and begin to realize facts and circumstance. Depending on the density of the text, I try to move through the play at a rate of 10-15 pages per hour. I ask a few questions, run the scene, brief discussion/notes, then move on to the next scene.
3. Bumble-through

Looking back through rehearsal reports, it’s no surprise that the more realistic the play the sooner we bumbled through it (ELEMENO PEA and AFTER MISS JULIE by the fourth day and KILLING GAME and HOOKMAN by the seventh and eighth, respectively).

After the general read-through/discussion, we made another pass through detailing beats and shifts. But all we did in detailing them was identify when they occurred. I made little effort to discuss what motivated each shift and what changed in action. I believe there were two reasons for this mis-management: a previous, intrinsic need to get up on our feet quickly; and the belief that I shouldn’t be too specific too soon – that room should be left to explore as rehearsal progressed.

After this skimming-through of the text we bumbled through the play without any discussion of needs or actions completely skipping part two above.

I expected to fit MISANTHROPE into this rubric and did to a certain extent, but failed to realize that this text-driven play would be best served by other methods. Despite a fair amount of confidence, I again misunderstood what the play asked of me. We spent a

mere six days around the table when, in retrospect, it should have been over twice that. I tried to get such a dense and text-heavy play up on its feet too quickly. And even in the table work we did, I rushed us through it and didn't get into the detail that the play required.

This was all wrong.

I should have been much more detailed in identifying and shaping beats, shifts, and actions right away. I should have gone into just as much detail as I did in Lisa Portes' directing and acting lab classes. I should have not just identified beats, but needs and actions. I should have implemented framing work giving each beat a clear and strong ending and reason to launch into the next one. Doing so would keep us at the table longer, but give us a stronger start once we did get on our feet.

As before with the concept, these mistakes are a result of my not understanding what the play needed. I believed the script to be a realistic relationship drama and directed it at the table as such.

(When Brian Healy (previously Clitandre) stepped into the role of Alceste five days before tech due to an actor illness, we had little time to get him up to speed. He and I scheduled about 12 hours outside of rehearsal for text work. It was then that I started to do the work I should have four weeks prior. We table-worked-through the entire play with incredible detail not only identifying beats and shifts, attaching actions and needs to each, building to events, and framing it all as best we could.

We worked with an efficiency and focus that was entirely new to the process. Sure, I knew the play better at that point, but it was then I realized how useful this level of detail would have been in the first few days. I should not have left so much for us to discover on our feet.)

Another significant misstep in the early stages was in Celimene's character direction. During that first round of table work Chloe seemed resistant to the idea that Celimene uses sex and sexuality to operate within the court and to get what she wants.

She was very opposed to the idea that Celimene used sex as a tool and the idea of sleeping with her other suitors. I don't recall her exact reasoning, but it somehow centered around her true love for Alceste and how she wouldn't betray him. This was partially my fault, too - the result of my early belief that the play was a realistic relationship drama. I may have used language in audition and rehearsal that might have planted these seeds.

In the end, I believe the biggest obstacle to accepting Celimene's sexuality was that Chloe never completely realized the concept of using someone.

I argued my point, I brought up the text, I did everything to convince her that Celimene was sleeping with Acaste, Clitandre, and Oronte, but failed to present enough evidence to convince her. I made a strong as case as I could without being fascist or authoritarian and she always found a way to refuse. So I made a compromise: Chloe could believe what she wanted as long as Celimene was always and actively trying to pull those men in to her.

I'm not sure how I could have been stronger about it without forcing it against her will, but maybe that's what I should have done. By backing off what I believed the character to be and what the play was asking of her, I further neutered the production by removing the last remaining possibilities of sexual tension.

Even though there was a disclaimer on our audition sheet that stated actors may need to discuss sex and sexuality, I should have made it part of the audition. From AFTER MISS JULIE, I should have known that mature themes were a potential challenge for young students. With such a compressed audition schedule in this school, I should have shortened the sides and left time for a conversation about the play. I should have made adjustments to my callback plan knowing how squeezed we were during the first round.

These are things I have done professionally on occasion, but need to make it a mandatory part of callbacks and find a way to fit it in no matter the timeframe or situation. The actor needs to be right for the show. That means more than talent or tools or skill or even intangibles. They need to understand what the play and the character and their director is asking of them. And the director needs to communicate those needs in a clear and effective manner. When a casting decision is made, it should include an agreement between actor and director as to the story of the play and the actions of the character.

Additionally, I struggled to help Chloe achieve my vision for the party scene. It requires Celimene to be vicious and gossipy when speaking ill about others. Unlike Celimene's sexuality, I was aware of these necessary qualities well ahead of auditions but was never able to articulate them in a manner that helped her.

This was another character quality that, in retrospect, I believe wasn't inherent in who Chloe was as a person. And it was something I should have been more in tune to during auditions. Despite spending a lot of time on the scene in rehearsal, I struggled in coaching her to fully embody what I and the role was asking of her.

Unlike the sexuality conversations, she and I were always in agreement on the direction Celimene needed to go, but were never able to produce lasting results. I consulted Jordyn, the assistant director, who worked with Chloe on her physical presence, bringing more sultry, seductive qualities to her romantic scenes and more status to the party scene. But we were never able to build on that work and the next time though it began to fade. I should have done more to bolster her awareness of the world of the socialite and the manner in which people need to operate to stay on top.

The idea of socialite as profession was discussed with the dramaturgy team early and was the main anchor on which I was able to bring the classic story into a contemporary world. But I did not extend that conversation much beyond the first day. That should have been in every conversation about circumstance. I should have constantly reminded her what was at risk, instilled the rules of the world Celimene has constructed, and the requirements of existing as part of the court.

To be fair, I didn't have an entirely firm grasp on those things myself – another result of my inexperience re-contextualizing classic works in contemporary settings. I should have worked more closely with the dramaturgy team to build a real, contemporary construct for the court, complete with consequences that cost her something.

This was a major point of frustration for Chloe and it showed. She came to me several times exasperated and fully aware that she wasn't able to understand or achieve what I was looking for. Finally, Jordyn pulled clips from the TV show *Revenge*, which were spot-on in terms of the world, actions, and maneuvers that I was unable to articulate. But by then it was way too late and the result was a Celimene that during the party scene was having way too much fun when it should have been a means of survival.

I should have been more on top of this earlier in rehearsal when the issue first became apparent. I should have immediately asked Jordyn to pull those *Revenge* clips and had clearer language to push her in the right direction from day one. The status conversation should have been introduced much earlier. I should have asked for more help from the excellent dramaturgy team. I should have approached the issue with more explicit richer actions like 'bite' and 'crucify' rather than the general and aggressive examples of 'destroy' and states like meanness.

Because I was unsuccessful in identifying the problem early and hadn't properly prepared for the issue, I set the character off in the wrong direction. Because of my inability to help Chloe find the necessary bite to the party scene, I found yet another way to neuter the production. The stakes were never real for her. Because I did not have the language or research to articulate the needs of the scene I did not start working from the right place.

Another way in which I set us off on the wrong foot was that I mentioned the heightened world and characters early, but did not make any effort to detail what that meant. This stems from my inexperience in operating in such worlds. I was unfamiliar with how to present and articulate ways in which to achieve this, or even what it should look like in final production. And since DePaul's acting curriculum is firmly planted in realism, it was a case of the blind leading the blind.

During spring break and eight rehearsals before tech, the actor originally cast as Alceste was out due to an unexpected illness. That day's schedule completely out the window, I brought the full cast up to the movement room to runway walk. Dominique put on some music and the cast lined up in front of the mirrors. I asked them to walk to the mirror

and back ten times, trying something different each pass. Then each actor combined their favorite bits into one pass in front of everyone. It turned out to be incredibly useful in elevating the status of each character.

This was an exercise that should have occurred in the first week. It would have gone a long way to establishing the kind of world it was and give the actors a clear sense of direction for the size of their characters. It would have given us a physical language for the world and created a sense of play that was desperately needed in the early days.

Unfortunately, I am a director who does not lead from a place of movement and because of my own restrictions has difficulty understanding and articulating it. The runway exercises not only came too late to be wholly useful, but I did not integrate that work as we moved forward. Granted, much of the following week was focused on integrating Brian Healy into Alceste, but I should have found a way to continue that work and make it present in the room.

I didn't know how to shape the play.

When the scenic concept was coming together I was concerned about the open stage. I'd seen the configuration before and I'd seen it used successfully, but I had no experience with it myself. This was not a secret as I expressed my hesitance to the scenic designer several times. I asked for groundplans and took the model home, I played with little figures and furniture, but was still unable to visualize the show in space. I didn't know what else to do so I crossed my fingers that I would see it clearly in rehearsal.

One of my strengths coming into school was staging. I prided myself on organic staging that supported the storytelling of the scene. I was taught if someone watched your show from a soundproof booth they should understand the basic plot and relationship dynamics. And for almost every show I've directed, it's come easily; I've had no problem seeing the show and telling its story in space.

But not this one. I did not see it on the page, I did not see it on the groundplan, I did not see it in the model, and I did not see it in rehearsal. It wasn't until load-in that the play started to take shape. I regularly sat in the theater with the script and staged the show in my head. The floor wasn't done, the walls were half up, saws were buzzing, but it was the first time I could see the play clearly.

But it was too late, at that point, to make a meaningful impact throughout the play. In the end, the staging was fine, but it lacked the dynamic pictures and subtle shifts that could help elevate the story and further complicate its relationships. The physical storytelling was missing the same richness and complexity of the language.

The biggest obstacle was the openness of the text. Its seemingly repetitive and philosophic structure combined with its frequent lack of driving action made it unlike any show I've ever directed. And that openness of the text in addition to the openness of the space left me confused and frustrated. This didn't only affect the staging. My inability to properly digest the structure of the text affected scenework. There were several moments when I felt completely ineffective, but none more than act one, scene one.

The first time we worked on it – this seemingly never-ending and repetitive socio-philosophical rant – I had no idea what to do. Literally. The actors ran the scene once, I admitted I didn't yet know how to approach it, and we moved on. My attempts at later passes was to alter circumstance in ways that would affect relationship and action. But I wasn't able to get inside the scene and direct at a useful level. I always felt I was sitting outside, unable to break through.

I failed to create a safe environment.

After the closing performance I received a call from Karen Tamburro, DePaul's Title IX coordinator about issues that arose during production. There were complaints that my invitations to meet outside the building put members of the cast in an uncomfortable situation, that I initiated unwelcome touch, and that I dismissed input from female students and heeded the same advice when from male voices.

In my discussion with Karen I was made aware that consent does not inherently imply a positive level of comfort. Despite a student's apparent interest and enthusiasm, they may feel pressured to accept the invitation due to the power dynamic inherent in the director/actor, grad/undergrad, and male/female relationship. I was completely unaware of the power I may have exerted in creating an off-site, one-on-one situation with an actor.

Even though I met male designers one-on-one at my home for pizza and bourbon, the all-female dramaturgy team at a bar for dinner and again for appetizers, and Jordyn for lunch several times, this was a different situation. I was ignorant to the potential implications and atmosphere I created when inviting an undergraduate female actor to a one-on-one, offsite meeting.

In any one-on-one meeting, no matter the gender or role of the student, I should have offered an in-the-building alternative. This would give students the option to stay in a safer space and would eliminate any pressure or obligation to put themselves in an environment that might make them uncomfortable.

Despite the knowledge of the school's heightened awareness of touch, I did make contact numerous times with all members of the cast. I held hands with Jalen, Brian, and

Maddie to demonstrate staging. I put a hand on Chloe's back to comfort her in a time of frustration. I hugged and cradled Adam when he fell apart. I touched every actor at some point to confirm or support their ideas.

I should not have done any of that without asking first.

Knowing the conversations in Directing Seminar about the climate of the current undergraduate generation, I should have been much more conscious of touch. In ignoring this and not respecting the students' personal space, I created an atmosphere and presence that made students feel uncomfortable.

At first rehearsal, I tried my best to encourage students to speak up if they felt uncomfortable. I reminded them of the numerous people in the rehearsal room and elsewhere in the building they could go if they had a problem with me or anything else. I reassured them that I work together with the advisors and going to them about a problem would not be seen as 'going behind my back'. I assured them that I wanted to hear about any problems or issues they experienced.

But it was not enough. The students' complaints were voiced after closing night. I failed to create an environment where all actors felt safe. Or, at least, felt safe speaking up when they had concerns. In conversation with Karen, I should have explicitly stated that complaints would not be met with retaliation and that there would be no repercussions if any reports were made. I should have repeatedly reassured them throughout rehearsal that their input was welcome.

I will discuss the gender bias in the next chapter as it pertains to events that occurred in tech.

TECH

I was not a good leader during tech.

Normally, I would completely turn over the reins to the stage manager and let them run tech, continuing a dialogue as necessary. Despite discussing tech methodology several times in Seminar, I sat back and expected the student designers and stage management team to constructively start working through the play. We had a constructive paper tech a few days prior so I expected to only jump in if things were heading off the rails.

After moving at a glacial pace – we didn't get to the first line of text before our second break – Damon suggested I get involved. I normally would not infringe on the stage manager's job, but Julia needed help; not because she's incompetent, but simply because she's inexperienced. After Damon spoke to me and the other advisors touched base with their students, things moved much more efficiently.

These aren't professionals. For some of the designers, this was their first show and for the stage management team, it was their second. I knew this. I should have remembered this. I should have been more hands on from the very beginning, not doing the stage manager's job, but helping and teaching and empowering her and the other designers to make decisions together. I should have led the team more firmly through this process that was still new to them.

I did not communicate well with Eric, the lighting designer. What ended up happening was that I left him alone way too long. I didn't know what he was working on, how far it was from being ready, or if he wanted me to comment on it yet. Additionally, Eric's advisor was very present; I assumed he was getting much better advice from her than I could provide and was afraid of interrupting them.

I should have talked to him ahead of time about how we should work together during tech. We should have discussed his process, what his plans were, and when he wanted my feedback. I should have been more comfortable interjecting myself into conversations between him and his advisor, even just to eavesdrop.

Sound designer Tyler and I disagreed on the curtain call music. I had wanted a mix of Lady GaGa's POKER FACE for several reasons: it shared themes of the play about games of love, it's of a style removed from the world of the play, and it's fun. Early in the process I mentioned what my desires were for the curtain call music and explained my history of using pop songs. I was open to suggestions for the actual song and actively asked for input. But the choice of POKER FACE was a late realization five days into tech.

Tyler argued that the curtain call music should fall within the aesthetic of the play. He prepared a couple options that continued the motif of the transition music used

throughout. I listened to them and found them unhelpful to the tone and energy I desired.

I believe a curtain call is a party to celebrate the show. The actors appear as themselves to thank the audience and the audience applauds the actors as separate from their characters. I have never seen a curtain call written into the text of a play. They live outside the play and should be treated as such.

But Tyler didn't see things that way and our disagreement lurked underneath most of tech – Tyler mentioned it every other day and even Eric pulled me aside once to express his concern. But I stuck with my choice because I liked the song and found it thematically appropriate.

Finally, the issue came to a head. After one of the last dress rehearsals, much of the design/tech team overwhelmingly spoke out against the song choice. Their argument was that POKER FACE wasn't current enough, that it wasn't something that the characters would listen to. Released in 2008, the song wasn't on the charts anymore nor was it old enough to be retro-hip. That was the first solid, world-of-the-play justified reason against POKER FACE. I acquiesced and began to reconsider the song choice.

Later that night, I sent an email to the whole team asking for suggestions (this included advisors and the dramaturgy team). Since everyone felt comfortable speaking out against the song I assumed it was a group discussion and put the question to them. I outlined my requirements for the song choice and included a few examples of what I meant by a song being 'on-theme.' I then sent the same email to the actors with the intention of getting more brains on the issue.

This was a mistake.

By those emails I circumvented not only the relationship I built with Tyler, but his entire role as sound designer. I did not allow him to respond to the discussion. I dismissed him from the process and disrespected him and in doing so I may have lost the trust of the rest of the team. I should have asked Tyler if he had a solution that fit within both my requirements for the song and the team's new concerns. And if it did come to asking the team for a brainstorm, I should have asked him for permission before I sent those emails.

The final Title IX complaint that Karen spoke to me about was gender discrimination. There were reports that I had dismissed ideas from women and accepted those same ideas from men. Though I did not intend to and was unaware that I did that, it is not a new complaint (previously during KILLING GAME).

Once again I made members of the team feel invalid, that their opinions and ideas were worthless simply due to their gender. This is an issue that I am investigating privately.

CONCLUSION

The show may not have been a complete failure, but there's no question that I failed the show completely. I not only comprehensively failed to prepare, but often possessed a dangerous Dunning-Kruger type bias that kept me from doing the necessary work. Whenever I thought I had a handle on the play I soon discovered how far behind I truly was. I made mistakes at every step in the process that severely hindered the final production.

I brought five plays to the table that presented significant challenges. I successfully pitched a show I didn't wholly understand. I struggled to re-contextualize the play in a manner that made sense. I couldn't properly engage and lead designers through pre-production. The audition process was hurried. I rushed us through text and table work. I couldn't properly collaborate with an actor about their character. The physical shape of the play was unspecific. I sat back during tech. I lost the respect of the designers. I discriminated against and sexually harassed women.

These were only the major mistakes. For every failure mentioned herein there were at least two more that I have neither the time nor energy to include. If I read this same paper written by someone else, I would want to never work with them.

What transpired is a complete and abject failure of my duties as a director. The resulting production was mediocre and betrayed the reason I applied to grad school in the first place. I came here to do better, more informed work; to elevate my skillset; to better communicate with actors; and to be capable of taking on any type of play. If I made any progress in the last three years none of it was evidenced by my work on this production.

This was supposed to be my best work; the culmination of not only three years of graduate training but a life's worth of education and professional experience. It is inexcusable that so much of it was clouded by so many mistakes.