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THE RIGHT WAY TO DIRECT A PLAY:

Discoveries in Process

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MFA Directing Thesis

The Theatre School at DePaul University

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Introduction

“If inspiration is all you have it will abandon you when you need it most.”

-David Ball, *Backwards and Forwards*

I vividly remember the moment I decided to come to grad school.

It was March of 2013 and I was watching the designer run-through of *Smudge*, a play I was ostensibly directing at Washington Ensemble Theatre (WET). Actors wandered through the half-built set—a design I could now see was entirely too literal—and whole scenes went by in a vanilla puddle. Our work sucked. I’d felt rudderless the entire process, which is a catastrophe when you’re the one who is supposed to be steering. As I sat in that dark Seattle theatre, I asked myself: How had I gone so wrong?

Eight months before, on the sunny July steps of Lincoln Center Theatre, it seemed like this was the year my directing career would finally take off. Every time I surfaced from the Director’s Lab to check my messages, I was offered a job! Two of the world premieres I’d been shepherding found homes and WET suddenly wanted to produce *Smudge*, a play I’d pitched them almost a year before. I said yes to everything and began carefully planning how I would direct three plays in a row.

But between sunny July and dark March, not everything went as planned. My boyfriend proposed in August, so I added wedding planning to my bursting to-do list. In September, my boss at the Seattle Repertory Theatre asked me to produce a gargantuan new play festival. Then, in November, my brother Tim died.

Over Christmas, on a break from world premiere two, I finally had a chance to prepare for my upcoming *Smudge* design meetings. *Smudge* was a grotesque little play about a couple who gives birth to an unhealthy blur of a baby and is forced to

rethink their dreams for the future. It very delicately balances hope, humor, and horror.

I'd been directing exclusively new play for years. It felt nice to grab a bound book, and go through the penciled notes I'd made in the margins of a fixed script. But as I read the play and the thoughts I'd started writing two years before, I realized that even though the script hadn't changed, I had.

All of my notes had been written before my brother died—most before he was even diagnosed with cancer. And re-reading the play and my scribbled thoughts, I could see how strongly my lens on *Smudge's* question was shaped by Tim's life-long struggle with neurological problems and his highly medical-ized, unpredictable existence. That lens looked very different than it had 5 weeks before. So I decided I needed to start my work over. And I erased everything.

That turned out to be a horrible mistake. As I re-read the play the next day, I didn't know how to begin again. I had never been formally trained in directing, so all of my work was guided by instinct. But now I was blocked. And exhausted. And grieving. To my horror, it felt like I'd suddenly forgotten how to direct, because I had no idea how to prep a play on a deadline.

It took the most intense year of my life to realize I had no process for directing plays.

I came back to school to develop my own process, after years of getting by on instinct or marrying my method to a playwright's. I thought grad school would teach THE RIGHT WAY TO DIRECT PLAYS. Three years later, I know there is no such thing.

This paper is an attempt to catalogue the skills, challenges, and revelations that emerged from my The Theatre School coursework and productions that shaped my investigation into the art and craft of directing.

CHAPTER ONE: FIRST YEAR

Directing One

The first week of class Lisa Portes, Head of MFA Directing, asserted, “Our job as directors is to provide the vision and enough structure for other artists to organize and develop their work.”

As I scribbled this description in my pristine binder full of empty notebook paper, I fretted to myself, “But how much structure and what kind? And what about my vision is mine?” I feared needing to suddenly invent all sorts of amazing things to say about a play out of thin air.

Instead, our classwork began by giving me tools to see how much information a script already provides a director. We read Elinor Fuchs’s essay *A Visit to a Small Planet* and used her prompts to examine the rules that governed the world of a play. We learned a dramatic structure for Aristotelian plays that helped us identify how the protagonist’s action was ignited, changed, complicated and resolved. And by answering The Six Questions Lisa assigns us (What is the play about? What kind of play is it? What is the Dramatic Question? What is the spine? What do you want to do to an audience? What is the cry of the play?), I could see a basic outline of my hypothetical production forming.

I took these tools as gospel, and was deeply relieved to have learned THE RIGHT WAY TO DIRECT PLAYS within a month of coming to school.

We always presented our analysis in class, and I loved seeing how differently my classmate Nathan and I viewed scripts. Whenever we read a play, Nathan would confidently declare it was about social mask and trauma, while I would argue it was about the search for beauty in a petty world. We kept repeating ourselves, and through that repetition, I became aware of artistic interests that I’d previously been

unable to articulate. By asking the same questions on many different plays, I began to see how I was obsessed with the search for beauty in life, the desire to write your own story, and framing conflict in terms of a community. Those patterns let me step back and see the unique pieces of my own directorial lens. And by considering my lens in contrast to Nathan's very different lens, I began to define the particular value and perspective I offer as a director.

Directing One helped me see that every artist has a vision—I just needed someone's contrasting lens in order to see my own unique POV more clearly. It also taught me that the first step to structuring the work is structuring your own thoughts so that you can clearly and consistently frame your exploration with your collaborators.

The Middle of the Night

At 5:30 AM, I heard my mother's footsteps padding out of my parents' narrow bedroom, through the kitchen, and into the bathroom. A few minutes later, she came padding back through the living room and peeked into my tiny bedroom. Still half asleep, she asked, "How long have you been up? The coffee pot was on when I went into the bathroom, and now it's off."

My mom knew perfectly well the coffee pot turns off automatically after two hours. I'd been up doing homework since 3. This pre-dawn exchange quickly became one of our first year rituals. It usually ended with her saying something like, "I think med school would have been less work," and wandering back to bed.

Watching me go to sleep at 8 o'clock every night drove my mom crazy. I'd been a night owl my whole life. She was living with a stranger. But the first thing I learned about my own process in grad school was that I saw the details of a script most clearly with a calm, just-woken brain. So, despite a lifetime of late sleeping, I made a quiet space for myself to work and see.

Directing Theories

Every week in Directing Theories, we examined the biography, historical context, practices, and poetics of a different seminal director. We were meant to test our own beliefs about theatre against the work of these artists.

When we began discussing post-dramatic theatre, I struggled mightily. I came to TTS to learn the RIGHT WAY to direct, and everything we were learning felt WRONG. I believe that fiction is useful, interactions between compelling characters are the best part of theatre, and people need meaning to live. I come to the theatre because I want something to *believe* in. Post-dramatic theatre values none of those things.

I did the work that quarter, but the whole time I thought, “We have major philosophical disagreements and I’m never going to make a post-dramatic work.”

Circle Mirror Transformation

I wanted my Spring Studio to be as difficult as possible.

First year directors are challenged to use the vocabulary from their acting classes to work with actors on a realistic, relationship-driven play. Nathan was nervous as hell, because this was completely outside his wheelhouse. I was looking for a challenge, because this was exactly the type of play I felt most confident directing.

Lisa and I settled on *Circle Mirror Transformation* by Annie Baker, a tricky ensemble play full of subtle, layered action. I’d loved the script for years. It gave me hope—that time healed, that performance can be a path to truth, and that theatre can change people’s lives. I was captivated by Baker’s interest in depicting even the

smallest details of people's interactions. Most importantly, I could explore my burgeoning fascination with the power and danger of people in community.

As we began rehearsals, I was determined to experiment with my rehearsal process. It would be crazy to go to grad school and work the same way I always did. Throughout winter quarter Directing Seminar, our professor Damon Kiely and Brian (a second-year director) discussed rehearsing plays without blocking them. This seemed like the craziest fucking idea I'd ever heard. They explained that this approach focused on shaping the actor's scenic action, rather than perfectly controlling stage pictures, and was meant to make the actor's work more generative and truthfully responsive. It sounded foreign, difficult, and potentially very exciting.

We slayed tablework. I felt confident in my analysis, and was completely delighted when actors began adopting my language around the piece. They bounced their thoughts and questions off of the ideas I offered in my opening remarks. I immediately saw how a director's analysis could ignite exploration for actors and serve as a practical guide throughout rehearsals.

I had a rockier time the first few weeks on our feet. I wanted to test this more organic, actor-generated process, so I worked to only note actors based on the effectiveness of their actions and truth of their moment-to-moment work. *Were the actors informed by the given circumstances? Were they pursuing their goals? Were they taking their victories and re-strategizing after failures? Were they falling into patterns, or were they alive to listening and responding to their partners?* It was exhausting. At first, I felt like I was trying to speak fluent Spanish after only taking two classes. My work was halting, and I found myself slipping back into old habits, aiming to set how something looked and sounded instead of testing different actions, asking actors about obstacles, or recommitting to the given circumstances.

I itched this whole process. As rehearsals went on, I only grew itchier. I was so excited to try this new RIGHT WAY TO DIRECT PLAYS, but it just felt WRONG.

Then, I had a realization. I had been fooled by the play's seeming naturalism, and initially misunderstood the mechanics of the play. The script itself is exactly structured. Re-reading a paragraph in the playwright's note tipped me off to the play's rigid orchestration:

A "pause" should be approximately two seconds long ("one Mississippi, two Mississippi"), a "long pause" should be approximately four seconds long, a "short pause" should be approximately one second long, a "silence" should be approximately five seconds long, and a "long silence" should be at least seven seconds long.

I'd previously thought I was struggling with this process because of its unfamiliarity and my desire to control more. Those assumptions were probably partly true. But they weren't the real problem. I itched because the work I was observing in rehearsal was completely shapeless.

Baker's structure clearly required a far more disciplined attack than we were giving it. As I was finishing my manifesto for *Directing Theories*, I looked back at Anne Bogart's *The Director Prepares*, looking for some inspiration. I saw an underlined paragraph that perfectly encapsulated my dilemma:

"Many American actors are obsessed with the freedom to do whatever occurs to them in the moment...But everyone knows that in rehearsal, you have to set something; you can either set what you are going to do or you can set how you will do it. To predetermine both the how and what is tyranny and allows the actor no freedom. To fix neither makes it nearly impossible to intensify moments onstage through repetition. In other words, if you set too much, the results are lifeless. If you set too little, the results are unfocused."

So, I went back in rehearsal, determined to start setting more.

Ten days before opening, the actor playing Schultz had to withdraw from the production for personal reasons. I worked hard not to panic. I'd never replaced an actor before. How would my cast react? How the hell would we get this thing up? Luckily, Chris Rickett, the replacement actor TTS hired, was skilled, generous, and no bullshit. In our first meeting, I told him everything I'd learned in seven weeks of rehearsal about the play and the character. He learned quickly, and re-articulating my analysis and discoveries so late in the process re-sharpened my directorial lens for the final push.

Most of the scene work came easily. But we were unexpectedly foiled by the counting exercises scattered throughout the play. The characters repeatedly attempt to count to ten without overlapping, and the actors needed to engineer their failure by speaking at the same time. You couldn't muscle your way through these scenes. You either knew how to listen to your fellow actors or you didn't. I expected there might be some trouble inserting Chris into these scenes, but suddenly the cast couldn't figure out how to overlap with *anyone*. Our community had broken, and it took time to grow a new one.

There are so many things you can't control as a director. Faced with so much uncertainty, blocking important moments no longer seemed too controlling. It felt decisive and clear. And that's what they needed me to be.

Directing One with Kimberly Senior

Kimberly Senior was the anti-Lisa. Where Lisa offered systems and clarity, Kimberly offered ambiguity.

When Nathan and I first turned in our meticulous Small Planet analyses to her, she seemed sad for us—like we were humorless dullards forced to do the assignment at knifepoint. Kimberly (very kindly) responded, “Sure, these are *accurate*, but where’s the sensation? How does this help you shape a world for actors and an audience to inhabit?” She sent along a sample of how she used Fuchs’ essay to start a conversation with designers. It was very sexy. There were pictures. It burst with big ideas and only the most important details. She actually answered that “theatrical mirrors” chunk Lisa always let us skip over.

This really fucked with my head. Two directors I admired so much, using the same tool in such different ways? But which way was RIGHT? I wanted Elinor Fuch’s phone number so I could sort this whole thing out once and for all.

Kimberly was fond of saying, “Playwrights give you all of the information you need not to fuck up their play. If the answer to your question isn’t in the play, it’s because the playwright is open to many different interpretations. Or, that there is no answer to the question they are asking.”

That’s not to say Kimberly wasn’t incredibly specific. She treasured *Backwards and Forwards* by David Ball and taught us that character is revealed through action. It was our job to look for *bones* in the script—actions a character must perform in every night, no matter who is playing them. Different actors can disagree about *why* their character takes the actions that they do, but they can’t disagree about what the character does. Each of these actions works as a domino. If you miss one, the next can’t fall, and the play can’t move forward truthfully.

When I stressed about not understanding a puzzling moment, Kimberly would ask, “Why diagnose or solve mysteries the playwright has intentionally left mysterious? Instead of looking for answers, look for questions.”

Was she trying to make me hyperventilate? I was not ready to take this advice.

As she described her rehearsal methods for *Inana* at Timeline Theatre, Kimberly never talked about making progress. She called her work ‘orbiting’—doing many run-throughs, focusing on a new element or question each time. She didn’t think about moving the work *forward* through repetition—she was trying to move the work *deeper* through constant new exploration. The question she was examining through *Inana*—What do our objects mean to us?—was too big to answer.

Kimberly felt comfortable not *knowing*.

CHAPTER TWO: SECOND YEAR

The Lady From the Sea

Choosing *The Lady from the Sea* for my Healy production was aspirational. It was an Ibsen deep-cut, and I'd never directed a play written before 1997.

I was hooked on the idea of using school to tackle plays I loved but didn't know how to direct. When I pitched in October of my first year, I was seriously struggling with the questions at heart of the play—Do we need each other, or are we always compromising a part ourselves to be with other people? How do we know where we belong? I'd just left a very satisfying life on the water to finally grow up, go to grad school, and settle down in the land-locked Midwest to build a life closer to my parents. And, like the play's protagonist Ellida, I was scared I'd made the wrong choice.

The play spoke to my heart, but I didn't know how to make its poetic logic speak to other people. I pitched *Lady* hoping I'd learn how to activate the expressive part of Ellida's conflict for the actors and audience. Coming to school, I knew I struggled with work that didn't obey realistic logic. I needed to work on style and abstraction or resign myself to a very limited career. "Sure," I thought, "I don't know how to direct it *now*, but surely I'll be a whole new person after a year of training."

I was right. A year later, I was a whole new person. By the time my husband Jason moved to Chicago the summer after first year, Seattle stopped pulling me and I'd made peace with my decision. I reached the conclusion that Ellida does at the end of the play: "...We're land creatures. We've left the sea. No going back." And, all at once, the questions at the heart of the play seemed less vital. My pilot light for the project went out.

Sadly, I wasn't a whole new director yet. So when I woke up one July morning and looked at analysis that suddenly seemed foreign to me, I didn't know what to do. Should I start over? The whole play was designed. And look what happened when I threw out my work on *Smudge*—I never found my compass for that show again.

I decided that starting over would be insane. I just had to make myself fall in love with the play and my analysis again. And in the meantime, I'd jump on the back of all of my new skills and let them carry me until I found my inspiration once more.

In auditions, the play didn't sound the way I thought it would. It was so earnest and melodramatic. Yuck. How could I get people to stop acting it like that?

If possible, the script sounded even worse during our first read-through. As I listened to the stilted exposition and wooden metaphors, I grew increasingly nervous about the task ahead of me. This wasn't right. They didn't get it. I needed to generate an ingenious global note to fix it.

Damon stopped me right before he left our first rehearsal to tell me he'd sent along some notes about my director's presentation. Over and over, he correctly noted that my language about the style of the play was confusing. *Was it Poetic? Symbolist? Expressive? Mythic? And what did any of those terms mean to me?* He'd hit the nail on the head. I still didn't know how to define how I saw the world, rules, or style of this play in a consistent way for the team. The analytical tools that filled me with confidence on *Circle Mirror* felt shakier as I tried to use them on a play further from our realistic, contemporary reality.

At this point, I should have dug in. I should have run screaming into Damon's office yelling, "Help me! Help me! I feel this world in pictures and sounds but I do not know how to describe its logic or aesthetic to other people." I should have *only*

talked about style until I figured out how to articulate my vision. Instead, I became scared of not making sense. And I stopped talking about style altogether.

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if rehearsals started a month later. Would it have made a difference if I'd had a chance to do some practical work in my scene study classes before leaping into this challenging play?

I certainly would have read Katie Mitchell's advice on genre: "A decision about genre should not remain as an intellectual cloud floating vaguely above the production or just hovering in your head; it must be translated into concrete action for the audience to watch." I would have seen her suggestion to draw up a list of specific guidelines to help the actors understand how causality or behavior worked in that genre. Would I have known how to take this advice to heart?

A few pages later, I'd have seen her chapter on Events. And we would have talked about them in Chekhov class, and I'd have understood that it wasn't a strange and sophisticated system I'd never used before. Instead of worrying about imposing some sort of external structure on the actors, I would have just read the script and asked myself, "What changes? Which changes affect everyone onstage?" over and over again until I had a play.

And I couldn't have missed her advice at the beginning of the book: "If an exercise doesn't make sense to you, it might be better not to take it into the rehearsal room. If you use an exercise that is only half digested, there is a real chance it could end up confusing or frustrating the actors."

I confused and frustrated a lot of actors in *The Lady from the Sea* rehearsals. I couldn't blame them for being agitated. I was trying to learn how to structure the action of the play, and thought I needed to force that structure to obey OUR

quotidian logic. I explained away the mysteries of the play instead of activating them. I killed the poetry and left us with melodrama. The actors knew it felt wrong. I tried to keep morale high for the last push, but I never found what I wanted to push toward.

I didn't have the tools to make what I imagined in my head—and over time, as I saw something else in daily rehearsals, that original vision became fuzzier and fuzzier. Eventually, I could no longer see it at all.

Lady gave me many sleepless nights, a lot of regrets, and a work list for the rest of grad school.

Chekhov Scene Study Class

If getting my MFA depended on being able to list basic facts about a play on the first attempt, I would have flunked out in autumn of my second year.

Damon poured over my most recent homework assignment for *Three Sisters*. We were supposed to list facts about PLACE and PAST EVENTS. From the look on his face, I had clearly fucked the whole thing up.

“What about Moscow?” he asked.

“What *about* Moscow?” I echoed, bewildered.

“You haven't listed anything about Moscow,” he replied.

I furrowed my brow. What could he possibly mean? I'd talked all about Moscow and Old Bassmany Street in my section on PAST EVENTS.

Damon continued, “Here, in PLACE FACTS, you’ve recorded all of these things about the house, and train station, and river. But you don’t say that Moscow exists.”

“Well,” I retorted, “*obviously* Moscow exists.”

Damon’s spine elongated as he inflated with his trademark fervor. “NO, NOT *obviously*. Moscow only exists in *Three Sisters* because it’s *mentioned*. Does America exist in this play?”

I was about to say yes, so luckily Damon was too excited to wait for an answer. “NO. If you’re using these place facts properly, they tell you everywhere that exists. There’s nothing else. If you start taking Moscow for granted, you’re collapsing the world of the play with our world.”

Oh.

I almost heard the pieces click together in my brain. Listing facts or answering questions for a Small Planet doesn’t just help you see what’s *present* in a play. You must also recognize all of the things that are *absent*. Otherwise, the world of the play isn’t actually the world of the play. It’s just our non-fictional world, with Hamlet’s castle or the Prozorov home sitting on top of it.

Had Lisa and Kimberly warned me of this before? Probably. But this was the first time I heard it. This realization changed everything about how I thought about design, rules, and causality in plays.

After working on Events in class, I felt 100 percent clearer on how to use them. I liked that they weren’t *fussy*. You could identify them with actors quickly. I appreciated that Katie Mitchell focused on how characters’ goals change because of

events, instead of focusing on the tactic changes I felt bogged down by in my Framing class. This tool felt more concrete, more fleet, and more open to actor exploration.

Damon encouraged Nathan and I to find our own language for talking about the sections between events. I decided to call them “chunks,” because I imagined no else in the history of theatre had ever used that word. I find jargon like “unpack that” deeply ridiculous, and I wanted to avoid the horrible confusion that always comes when artists have conflicting definitions of a word like “beat.” Plus, it’s such an un-rarefied word. There’s no *secret pretentious art mystery* to “chunks.” I enjoyed it so much that I started examining all of my rehearsal language—was it clear? Accessible? And, most importantly, did it sound like me?

A week before our final performance, my scene from Act Three of *Three Sisters* crept along like a recalcitrant teenager. I liked so much *about* the work, but struggled to get it to *move*.

Damon sent me notes after he observed rehearsal and one of them knocked me upside the head. He remarked that the scene seemed to resolve halfway through, after Olga tells Irina she should marry the baron. I was aghast. I thought, “No! That’s terrible. I cannot allow people to experience the scene that way!”

I spent the weekend all riled up, because I knew this wasn’t an isolated issue. Simply telling people to stop pausing struck me as a Band-Aid on top of a deeper structural problem. Our work was full of stoppages, and I needed to figure out what was I doing wrong. I re-read the scene and Damon’s note. I looked back at *A Director’s Craft*. I still felt stuck.

On Monday, I polished up a scene from *Love and Information* for my class on Framing. One of the actors was having particular difficulty getting on action. So I reviewed the idea of ignition—something happens that *compels* you into action. And as I talked it through with him, I realized what was wrong with my Chekhov scene! I had been thinking of Events as *endings*. I defined them as resolutions, interruptions, revelations, or occurrences that mean the scene cannot continue as it had before. I'd forgotten the lesson from David Ball that every ending is also a beginning. And *beginnings* are what force us *forward*.

As soon as class ended, I pulled out my *Three Sisters* script and made a plan. Tomorrow, we would lead a revolution against resolution, and get to work on ignition and acceleration!

Our scene took flight because of this adjustment. And I learned how to fix the most commonly re-occurring problem in my work.

In my final paper for Chekhov, I began to articulate my directing ethics. I realized that the particulars of my process may change, but my collaborative values remain the same:

Treat every actor differently. Different people work differently, have different tools at their disposal, and have different skill levels. By responding to each actor as they are, you are best able to maximize their potential.

Treat every actor the same. They are all your collaborators and deserve your respect and attention.

Be honest. Act on what you know. Admit what you don't know. Tackle deficiencies in the scene head on.

The Merchant of Venice

Lady was such a disaster that I lost faith in the system I had learned. When I was stranded out on a metaphorical rock, with high tide and a tempest approaching, my faithfully interpreted Six Questions did not arrive in a boat to save me. So, for *Merchant*, I rebelled. I allowed myself be a “bad director” who does things THE WRONG WAY.

When my cutting didn’t mesh with the Aristotelian Dramatic Structure, did I decide there was a problem with the mechanics of Shakespeare’s play? No. I decided the Aristotelian dramatic structure we were taught was too reductive. It didn’t allow for the sprawling inter-connectedness of a play that followed so many factions of a community. I decided to embrace how the play really worked, instead of trying to shove it into an ill-fitting external arc.

When my actor-centered Six Questions didn’t feed my designers, did I stick to my guns and insist they figure it out? No. I changed the language of my ideas to be more image-centric. It became *A Fairytale Made Out of Trash* alongside *A Coming of Age Story with Consequences*. It was a play about *All That Glitters is Not Gold* instead of a play about *What We Value and What We Owe*.

When I realized I needed more insight than my assigned advisor could give me, did I quietly accept my fate? NO. I told Lisa about the problem and that I needed help. I could sense that this play was coming at a crucial moment in my development, and I wasn’t going to invite another obstacle into the room. I needed eyes I could trust.

My preparation wasn’t as rigidly organized as it had been for *Lady* or *Circle Mirror*, but walking into first rehearsal, I felt ready and empowered in a way I hadn’t felt since before coming to school. I decided to do what worked for me and seemed to make sense for the play. I did not care whether or not it was RIGHT.

As soon as I opened the floor for discussion on our first day of rehearsal, an actor raised his hand. With no warm up of any kind, Danny launched into the questions that surround any production of *Merchant*: “Isn’t this play anti-Semitic? Why are we doing it?”

I knew this inquiry was coming, but hearing it still caught my breath. All of the eyes in the room zoomed in on me, waiting. Waiting to see whether or not I “got it.” Whether or not they could trust me. This was the moment where I unified the company around a sense of mission or seeded 100 tiny mutinies.

I started with: “There are characters in this play who are undeniably racist and anti-Semitic. But whether or not this production is anti-Semitic is up to us. When you’re dealing with hate onstage, I think you can be doing one of three things: condoning it, depicting it, or challenging it. There’s a lot of ways we can challenge the violence in this play, but as long as we’re not condoning this way of thinking and behaving, I also think there’s value in just depicting problems for the audience to deal with.”

The conversation didn’t end there, but my answer seemed to help people position themselves in relationship to the prejudice in our production. I realized actors need an explicit sense of mission, especially on complicated material. Next time, I wouldn’t wait for the question to elucidate my politics.

I learned from *Lady* that worlds don’t create themselves. Throughout *Merchant*’s design process, I kept saying “this world has a contemporary feeling, but isn’t *our* world. We share the extended adolescence, the capitalism, the privileged shallowness, and the prejudice. But *Merchant* also lives by fairytale rules that are not ours.”

We devoted a significant portion of our first week to defining the world of our production. We constructed an elaborate pastiche of social rules around status, wealth, marriage and dating, women's rights, Jews, and homosexuality. We read about the reality of these issues in 16th Century Venice and in Shakespeare's England. We talked about modern equivalents and the circumstances that my cutting of the text suggested. We also played a running game throughout rehearsal—inventing rules of the world that had nothing to do with the text, but embodied the spirit of our production. The first, and my forever favorite: Portia has a hot tub.

Nothing was assumed. And, by having fun questioning everything, we built a complete world that was definitely not our own.

The actor playing Shylock and I wrestled with questions of anti-Semitism extensively throughout rehearsal. Mike was uncomfortable with the villainous Jew he saw depicted on the page. He rarely admitted to trying to make a kinder gentler character, but in the first draft of every scene we staged, Mike would smile, laugh, and try to work in a hug.

A warm and fuzzy Shylock didn't make sense to me. Shylock doesn't extend Antonio the pound of flesh deal as a peace offering to help a potential friend save on interest. He wants to humiliate him, as he has been humiliated. Shylock has been violently discriminated against and is deeply isolated. Antonio recently spit on him, kicked him, and called him a dog. Now, he has the temerity to ask for help. Shylock is justifiably angry, and less-justifiably out for vengeance.

I kept reminding Mike of the extreme givens presented and actions required in the text. I also tried to give us permission to not solve 400 years of problematic

representation with one production. If we presented the forces that shaped Shylock clearly enough, the audience would empathize for as long as they could. We'd be doing the play a disservice by trying to make Shylock an unsullied hero. He's a flawed character, and much more interesting for it.

Right before tech, Lisa scared the shit out of me. At the end of a list of notes she took a deep breath and asked, "Are all the anti-Semitic and racial slurs really necessary? I find the sheer quantity of them so upsetting. Can't you cut some?"

These verbal attacks—some of them terrifyingly casual—felt incredibly important to my production. But cultural sensitivities were running high this particular quarter at school, and I was worried that I'd lost perspective on how the hate in the play would be received. I agonized about her question over the weekend, and decided to ask my religiously and ethnically diverse cast at the top of notes what purpose, if any, those moments of verbal violence served in our production. If they couldn't answer or raised their own questions, I would know I'd failed to make the hate speech essential to our story and would consider cutting it.

They replied quickly and decisively. Prejudice is the pollution that infects our world of light and fun. Portia's casual racism, Antonio and Shylock's bigotry, Jessica's internalized anti-Semitism and Gratiano's bro-y xenophobia make it impossible to identify heroes and villains, or accept the seemingly clean and romantic ending of the text at face value. Their defense of the play's ugliness reminded me that people are supposed to be upset when they see this play, and reassured me that even when I doubted it myself, I'd given my cast a clear mission around the work.

I kept every word.

“Pssst! Erin!”

I was standing onstage, running through some experiments with Elise, the actress playing Portia, when I heard Lisa calling me from the dark of the audience. We’d just hit on the variation of our opening dumb-show that we wanted to test next, so I scampered over to talk to my advisor.

“Erin, you are great at building a language of conspiracy with your actors.” When I looked puzzled, Lisa expanded, “Every solution you just proposed to Elise began with ‘What if we...?’ Your language with the actors is always shared, so you’re putting yourself on the same team.”

Compliments? How lovely.

But she continued, “You aren’t doing that with the designers. I know we’re only a few minutes in, but you haven’t used the word ‘we’ once. All of your design notes have begun with ‘I think...’ or ‘Could you...?’ and over time that language will tell them you aren’t on the same team, sharing a vision. Can you talk to the designers like you talk to the actors?”

It was like a light bulb went off in my head. I had little experience working with designers, and I’d always been uncomfortable giving notes during tech. I could absolutely see how my chosen pronouns were keeping us on opposite sides of a fence. But I have a strong sense of how a director and actor collaborate. To get that sense of creation conspiracy, I needed to treat the designers like I treat my casts.

The Middle of the Night, Again

It was 5:30 AM, and this time, I padded out of the narrow bedroom, through the kitchen, and towards the bathroom. My parents had moved out months before, so

my husband Jason and I switched into the larger room. When I left the bathroom, I bypassed the coffee pot and headed back to my old room to think.

I no longer needed to be up so early to work. Classes didn't start until after noon, so I had plenty of quiet time to work after Jason left in the morning. But rising before dawn was a part of my process that worked, so I kept it. Plus, I was pregnant. I woke at odd times no matter what.

I walked into artistic unknowns so many times during my second year of grad school, it was comforting to walk back to my old twin bed, jockey with the cat for position, and read with a clear mind and quiet belly.

Tender

By third quarter, I was miserably, painfully pregnant. Pushing myself to progress in the increasingly unfamiliar terrain of my coursework while dealing with the unknowns of pregnancy took a serious emotional toll. I felt too tired to be inspired. I had little patience for other people, and even tasks I usually loved felt like a chore. I was obviously struggling with prenatal depression and, at times, probably shouldn't have been leaving the house, much less directing a play. No wonder it took me so long to choose my spring studio.

Damon challenged me to find something poetic, but I struggled to find a play I connected with that fit the casting requirements. Luckily, I remembered reading *Tender*, an unreliable memory play, five years earlier. I can be very concrete, and have a hard time accepting the fact that there are problems that can't be solved or questions that can never fully be answered. We agreed that *Tender's* mysteries would pose a useful test for me.

Choosing the play so late, I had little time for analysis. But I had a bunch of very compelling scribbles from my first read long ago. The cast and I assembled Facts and Questions, came up with a timeline for non-linear scenes, and made first guesses about the reality (or unreality) of each scene as a group during tablework. Most importantly, after we saw how few facts the play provided, we agreed that our job was not to come to a unified solution to the play's mystery as a group. Each character would have their own (sometimes changing) perspective and the audience would draw their own conclusions.

As soon as the more concrete work began, I could see this would be a long haul.

My advisor Meghan Beals approached me after the first day of staging, concerned about the unwillingness of one of my actors to experiment. He and I just finished another play together, and though our relationship wasn't perfect, I thought he was too perfect for the role to pass up when he landed in the second round casting pool. I'd underestimated the baggage he'd bring into rehearsal and over-estimated my own ability to manage his frustrations about being left off the main stage once again. My other lead, while totally game, was as literal as I was trying not to be. And the whole cast struggled to connect with characters they knew so little about.

I read to them from David Ball:

Play characters are not real. You cannot discover everything about them from the script. The playwright cannot give much, because the more that is given, the harder it is to cast the part. The playwright must leave most of the character blank to accommodate for the actor...Scripts contain bones, not people. Good playwrights limit their choice of bones to those which make the character unique. Onto that uniqueness the actor hangs the rest of the human

being. The bones—the carefully selected character traits included in the script—are revealed via action.

We identified the characters bones, and then I channeled Kimberly Senior to assure them that playwrights give you all of the information you need not to fuck up their play. We did tons of Viewpoints source work to fill out their picture of these people. I *re-read* David Ball to them, this time emphasizing, “...Even the best characterizations remain, at core, mysteries...a character laid out clearly, rationally, and fully explained is not only impossible, but dull and implausible.”

But the problem didn’t go away.

After about ten days of staging, an undeniable malaise infected the company. Nearly every day there was a conflict to manage and we were making little progress. We were defensive or exasperated with each other (or trying desperately not to be), and I could see that the actors were retaining almost none of the work we’d already done.

My typical methods of rehearsing weren’t working. So, I tried new ways to crack the work using Viewpoints—source work, exercises, and tableaux. I tried giving scene partners space to work alone on specific moments. I tried using almost exclusively “secret directing” to fuel the investigations within the scenes. These new ideas and methods would jumpstart us for a day, but we never retained that momentum. We’d make strides, only to see that work evaporate the next rehearsal.

It was no coincidence that most of my new rehearsal methods involved me talking less with the cast. I was tired of arguing. I was tired of them not doing the work. I was also just plain tired.

Faced with unwatchable scene work and a contentious process, I retreated and focused my flagging energy on the physical environment. The action of the play might be total bullshit, but it would be beautiful bullshit! I set out to make our set as alive as possible. Literally. I bought plants.

Unsurprisingly, the plants did not fix the play. And three days later, with a beautifully turned-out set, I still hated everything I saw. The company needed a come-to-Jesus meeting. I'd known it for weeks, but avoided it, because I simply could not imagine what I would say that didn't feel like a complete lie. My analysis felt stale and foreign to me, based off of ideas from when I'd first read the play 5 years before. But now, I was a different person—married and pregnant—and afraid to admit (even to myself) why I felt so drawn to the questions of this story at this moment in my life.

I read the play over and over again, hoping a coherent new idea would emerge. At 5:45, I was still stuck. Rehearsal was about to begin, and I didn't have a new argument for the play. So I bit the bullet and made my old argument. I needed to fill the vacuum and give the cast something to hold onto, even if it didn't feel right to me. Though I felt like a liar the whole meeting, their work afterwards was better than it had ever been, and I began to see the cast believe that the play could work.

As I slept that night, I dreamt about *Tender* for the first time. And whether it was the actors' work that inspired me, or breaking through the internal blockage caused by my silence, I started to understand what I was actually exploring in the play. I was having a full on pregnancy-induced identity crisis. I felt deeply out of control. I did things and felt things in one moment that were inexplicable to me in the next. Like the protagonist of the play, I didn't know what I was capable of or who I was. And what would happen after the baby came? *Tender* attracted me because I identified so strongly with the horror of the unknown. We are all mysteries, even to ourselves.

I revised my analysis. And I got to work trying to save the show.

The Director and New Play Development

“Nathan!” I called as I walked into our office. “Guess what? I DON’T HATE DIRECTING!!! I just left my first rehearsal for *Creep* and I REMEMBERED WHO I AM. I am a BOSS, and I LOVE making plays, and I’m supposed to spend the rest of my life doing world premiere after world premiere, because playwrights are amazing, and new plays make me feel alive, and I’m *never* going to direct another Greek play again, and all is right and good in the world.”

“Great!” he replied. “Do you want to go to Starbucks?”

CHAPTER THREE: THESIS

Pitching

I was almost late to my thesis pitch meeting because I couldn't stop throwing up. I was eight weeks pregnant, and desperate to keep that fact a secret for another month. At 9:56, I willed the nausea to end and waited outside the skylight lounge to make the case for my top three choices: *Three Sisters*, *Love and Information*, and my favorite: *We Are Proud to Present a Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as South West Africa, From the German Sudwestafrika, Between the Years 1884-1915*.

I barely remember the pitches themselves, but I remember leaving 509 terrified they wouldn't choose *We Are Proud...* for the season. There were only six actors in the cast and the faculty had obvious concerns about my vision for how it would fit in the Fullerton.

The next six weeks tortured me.

I'd instantly fallen in love with the play when I read it curled up in our Seattle sublet over Christmas break of my first year. Meghan, one of my good friends and temporary roommates, kept coming in to check on me as I read. She claims I was reacting to the play so loudly that she could hear me in her home office and got worried. She reenacted my distress for our partners that night at dinner, alternating between hysterical laughter and yelling "What?!? No. No. Holy shit. Oh. My. God. NO!"

After a month, I texted Lisa, distraught. I couldn't bear the idea I'd end up directing *Three Sisters*—a play I love, but didn't feel was immediately necessary for our audience. As soon as I read *We Are Proud...*, I recognized it. I pushed to direct this play at TTS because the status quo was so similar to our own—young artists from

different backgrounds trying to change the world through important work. It asked artistic questions that the student body was constantly debating: *How do we responsibly tell other people's stories? How do we include a broad range of voices in our work when history has silenced so many? And how do we communicate about conflicts that are deeply personal to us?* The conflicts in the ensemble start small—ego disagreements, micro-aggressions, and cultural blind spots—and we laugh with them because we've all seen these conflicts in action while making art. I wanted to unthread the conclusions the audience had personally developed around race by making them identify with the characters at early points in the conflict, so they'd be unable to escape the violence that's revealed to be underneath these divisions. We needed this play now!

Lisa texted back I was being a crazy pregnant lady who needed to have some faith.

The Design Process

Before I came to grad school, everything about my design process was makeshift. Team meetings were rare—partly because I never had a full complement of designers to begin a process with, but more so because I didn't have the first idea how to use those meetings. Typically, I'd meet with designers individually whenever they happened to be hired, briefly discuss the play, and quickly move to concrete concerns about what things would look like or what I needed them to do.

I truly had no idea how to talk about a play before I began rehearsing it.

Most of what I knew about directing, I'd learned from assisting or acting—gigs that begin at first rehearsal. As an assistant, I observed plenty of late-process production meetings where finer details were hammered out, but was completely ignorant of how the team developed the big picture they were refining. I certainly *asked*, but found that most directors were too busy to go into depth or surprisingly inarticulate

about a process that had become second nature. At work, I'd watch the director and design presentations for every play in Seattle Rep's season, taking notes in a jealous awe, trying to imagine how to reverse engineer the process.

I returned to school in large part because of this gaping hole in my knowledge. The analysis I learned in Directing One and my scene study classes taught me how to structure ideas about a play for a first rehearsal or design meeting. But by the middle of my second year at DePaul, I still felt unsure about how best to work with a team to move from early ideas, to plans, to tech. In fact, during my Plasticene evaluation with Dexter Bullard, who is also the Artistic Director of the Showcase Series, he told me that one of the major hesitations around giving me *We Are Proud...* was the faculty's questions about whether I had the design mind necessary for such a complicated show. I was halfway through grad school, and only marginally closer to solving one of the issues in my work I felt I most needed to address.

I certainly didn't want to repeat my mistakes from *The Lady from the Sea*. I felt uncertain almost the entire process. The images in my head were instinctive, but in some places distant from the text, and I didn't know how to elevate my staging to meet the expressiveness of the design. I was also unable to inspire the team to ask necessary questions about our story, so our vision never coalesced. My second design process, for *The Merchant of Venice*, had a much happier ending. The young designers were talented and our product was unified. But I generated most of the ideas and didn't learn about the play from our collaboration. If I followed either of these models on *We Are Proud...* I knew we would flounder.

We Are Proud... was the most image-rich play I'd ever wanted to direct. The rules of its world were complex and changing. I would be dependent on the design team as co-storytellers like never before. I needed to find an EFFECTIVE WAY to lead and inspire them.

Both of my previous processes at TTS started with semi-traumatic first production meetings. My initial presentations were met with blank stares and no responses. For *The Merchant of Venice*, I ended up explaining the plot of the play, because so few on the team had read it. At *The Lady from the Sea*, the designers shared the images I asked them to bring, but barely mumbled a few words about why their picture felt connected to the play. I asked them question after question, trying a million ways to open a discussion, but they seemed confused and uninspired. That meeting was such a black hole of creativity I left dreading the collaboration ahead. With these failures in mind, I invested a lot of thought into how I would launch our work on *We Are Proud to Present*.

In preparation, I once again asked the team to bring images that illuminated something about the play for them. But, with Damon's prompting, I also sent out discussion questions in advance to signal points of entry to our discussion, prompt imaginations, and eliminate the pop quiz anxiety *The Lady from the Sea* designers probably experienced. I asked: *Who are these characters? Why are they making this presentation? Who is the audience? Is the presentation now? In this theatre? Why does the southern dialect come in? How will we measure success?* With the seeds planted for discussion, I turned to formulating my own presentation.

I learned from *Lady* that it is up to the director to inspire the team. I led with what the play is about, as always, but looking back at my former first day presentations, I saw that my answers to "why here? why now?" were buried at the end. I needed to hook people earlier. So, I flipped my structure. I started with "Why this play at DePaul?" and ended with "'Why this play now?"

When I finished my presentation, they talked!!! I left that meeting with a sense of how each designer came to the work. At the end of our discussion, I was energized and relieved. I wouldn't be in this alone.

I thought the play, and the inherited racial violence it reveals, couldn't get more close to home.

I was wrong.

The day of our first production meeting, Black Lives Matter protestors shut down a Milo Yiannopoulos event at DePaul. Three days after that, students found a noose and racial threats spray-painted across campus. Suddenly, school didn't feel safe.

At the next scheduled design meeting, the whole team was shaken. Nobody knew what to say. So, I started by telling the truth: I was scared of doing or saying the wrong thing in a moment where everyone was feeling exceptionally vulnerable. In interviews I read with the playwright, she often talked about how difficult *We Are Proud...* is to rehearse. There are stories of crying, and yelling, and storming out. I didn't want to hurt anyone, and felt scared about how to handle the explosive content of the show for the first time.

After I broke the ice, Olivia Engobor, the costume designer, commented she thought that this fear of fucking up is why so little progress is made in conversations about race. We stick to our scripts, or poke holes in other people's arguments when they try (possibly imperfectly) to articulate something new. Other people's stories can be hard to hear.

We came to the conclusion that maybe our actual project on *We Are Proud...* was to make a play about race without falling into all of the traps the fictional ensemble is torn apart by. This challenging subject matter would require clear communication, listening, and trust from the start.

The team certainly had disagreements and moments where we lost the big picture. Luckily, the designers were also exceptional dramaturgs. If I was caught in a rabbit hole with someone on the team and we could no longer see the light, another designer always had the presence of mind to ask, “What’s the story we’re trying to tell here?” By asking that question, and “What affect to we want to have on the audience?” the correct solution usually presented itself quickly.

Eventually, I learned to ask myself these questions in moments of uncertainty. Damon gave me another great tool by encouraging me to ask myself, “What are the 5 things I need for this play?” With these additions to my process, I worked to keep my eye on my real priorities and unify the team around our story.

Casting

Jackie Sibblies Drury provides almost no biographical information for the characters in *We Are Proud...* She describes Actors 1-6 in her playwright’s note as being in their 20s. We know their genders and races. We know that Actor 3 is from Pennsylvania, and comes from a long line of coal miners on his father’s side. We know his great-great-grandfather fought for the Union Army in the Civil War, and killed an African American soldier in hopes of being captured instead of killed by the Confederates. *That’s it.*

We spend 141 pages with these people and we don’t even know their names.

In an interview I read with Sibblies Drury, she explains:

I...wanted to have the performers— the real performers performing the actors in the room—remove character from their portrayal. A very traditional approach to creating a character is where you separate from yourself, and you say, ‘Oh, I’m playing this guy named Timmy, for breakfast

he had Wheaties, his backpack has a Led Zeppelin CD in it, and, oh, a comb that's missing some of the teeth.' You create all of these very specific traits and ticks and backstory so that you can embody this thing that is not you. I was much more interested in having the performers working on the play mold the circumstances that were required for the play to function onto themselves, if that makes sense."

In my casting director days, I always privately lamented directors who thought too narrowly about character—so I was excited to have such apparently broad parameters for my casting search. Jackie seemed to say that she believed anybody who fit these demographics could play the roles. But as I looked more closely, I realized—minimal biography aside—the special skills and intangible casting needs for *We Are Proud...* are extremely specific, and therefore, it's a challenging piece to cast in a fixed pool.

To clarify exactly what I needed, I used categories for my working breakdown that I developed as a casting director.

First, I wrote down all of the facts the playwright provides about the characters' demographics and biography.

Then, I described what each character wants, their obstacles, and if/how they change in the play.

On this project, it was also useful to think about the character's stereotype and archetype (for example: The Aryan Ingénue and the Angry Black Man). *More importantly*, I noted the characters' primary function in the group—the critic, the peacemaker, the comic relief, the outsider, the driving force behind the action, or the nearly immovable opposition. This ended up being the most useful category for

arguing in the casting session—I knew how each actor was necessary to make the play *work*.

Then, I recorded the special skills or areas of virtuosity each role required. Actor One needed to be able to rap and hold up the opposition. Actor Two needed to be a political firebrand, romantic lead, and willing to perform the action with the noose at the end of the play. Actor Three needed to be transformational and able to impersonate a black grandmother. Actor 4 needed to be hugely constructive and, ideally, lighter-skinned than Actor 2. Actor 5 needed to be able to sing and play an instrument. Actor 6 needed to be a boss. Ideally, they would all be good singers and movers.

Finally, I knew intangibles were essential on this project. I needed mature team players who understood and valued the politics of the play.

I chose sides based off of the information in this breakdown, and began to think about how I would approach talking to actors about their feelings about the material. How the actors talked about the show would be as important as their audition.

Normally, I feel most confident when I'm casting. I have a knack for seeing actors and characters more specifically than others, and using that unique knowledge that deepen my ability to cast them. But this show was different. This time, I knew I was auditioning, too. Actors were nervous about the content of the show, and my identity as a white student did nothing to put them at ease. I needed to prove to potential cast members that they could trust me.

I remembered listening to Issac Gomez during a panel TTS hosted earlier in the year about collaborating on racially sensitive work. He advocated for radical

transparency in rehearsal: making a space where you could say and hear hard things. A space where people didn't hide problems, but acknowledged and tried to solve them. A space where people took responsibility for their words and actions. I decided to start conjuring that space in auditions.

I began each session by thanking the actors for their bravery and acknowledging that we were tackling complicated material. When I was particularly interested in an actor, I made time to talk to them about the play. *What did they think about the script? About the politics of it? Did anything scare them?* One person at a time, I showed people that I wanted to hear them and understood the delicacy of the journey ahead.

I particularly impressed by Ayanna, a BFA fourth year actress, in the role of Actor 6. We had a good conversation after her audition, but I'd heard from many sources that she did not want to be cast in *We Are Proud*...She had concerns about the play and she was tired of working on racially specific roles with non-African American directors. Despite our positive exchange, I left her near the bottom of my list. This play required total buy-in.

As my callback deliberations loomed, I was distressed. My list of actresses for Actor 6 was small. And I couldn't stop thinking about Ayanna's audition.

As I voiced my concerns to the team, Olivia, the costume designer, spoke up with news. Ayanna sought her out on a break. She'd changed her mind. After our conversation, her concerns dissipated. She realized how vital the message of the play was, and she felt safe working on it with me. She trusted me.

Two days later, I cast her.

Rehearsal

On this project more than ever, I knew I needed strong individual relationships with the actors. I set up forty-minute meetings with each actor to share our ideas, instincts and questions about the play.

Since the script provides little biography, I knew the David Ball bones I learned from Kimberly would be especially important in revealing character. At the close of first rehearsal, I explained that they should prepare for our individual meetings the next day by making a list of all of the actions their character takes. Those meetings inevitably turned to discussing their character's relationships and backstory with the rest of the ensemble. Over and over, every actor (with the exception of Keith, who played Actor 4) claimed, "I don't think I really know Actor 4."

Initially, I was surprised by this perceived void, but then I realized the easiest relationships to spot in the play are defined by conflict. Actor 4 is remarkably accommodating, so has the fewest clashes early in the play. Luckily, in my bones analysis, I wrote down who defended or yes and-ed whom throughout the play. I was able to point out that Actors 3, 4 and 5 were extremely supportive of each other's art and repeatedly defended each other. Out of this information, we decided they were roommates. Anytime we discussed the end of the play, Chloe, Keith and Arie marveled, "How are they going to live together after this?"

Three days into rehearsal my assistant directors came to me crying on lunch break. They felt uncomfortable because of their whiteness (or white-passing-ness, in Daniela's case). They didn't know how to participate, and they didn't feel they had the right to help tell this story.

I repeated that they were always welcome to participate in tablework, as we'd discussed before rehearsal. I reminded them that this was a story about our American history of violence—a history they shared with everyone in the room. I re-outlined their concrete responsibilities for the rest of the process. They continued to cry.

Tania Richard, the cultural consultant on the production, noticed their distress from across the room and joined our conversation. They reiterated their concerns. Tania wisely responded, "Of course you're uncomfortable. You're fighting your instinct to self-protect by denying or diminishing the scope of the problem. But discomfort isn't all bad. Sometimes you have to lean into it, because *discomfort is where the change happens.*"

We weathered crisis after crisis through the process, and there was only one time I was truly worried that I was losing my ensemble.

After a month of personal tragedy and sporadic attendance, the actress playing Actor 5 decided to leave the production. On Sunday morning, I told the cast about her decision. They were surprised and concerned for their fellow actor, but largely seemed to understand that these things happen and you just have to keep working. Unfortunately, unlike my experience on *Circle Mirror*, we hadn't finished staging the play.

Tuesday night, we met Tuckie, the actress taking over the role of Actor 5, for the first time. We needed her to jump into the deep end with us. For weeks, we'd been scheduled to begin staging the last 25 pages, which is full of fight and dance choreography, that night. I knew the cast was nervous about this work.

After introductions, Ayanna spoke up. She said she wanted to re-affirm how strongly she believed in the mission of the end of the play—we go to such extremes to show the audience the depth of the violence in our history. Others joined in with similar affirmations. I felt relieved we still shared an understanding about the last scene, so I wrapped up the conversation quickly. I didn't want to make the choreographer wait.

As the night went on, I could feel the actors getting frustrated by the technical demands of the choreography. Everything else in the piece was generated organically through ensemble work, so this was a very different way of working.

The next day, we came in and I could tell the frustration hadn't dissipated overnight. So, I started the day by asking if people had thoughts or questions about the day's work. Sam immediately asked, "*Why* are we dancing?"

Arie had obviously heard this complaint earlier in the day and jumped in before I could: "Probably because it says in the script, '*They dance.*'"

Ayanna vented back, "But why? I spend this whole play trying to make something *real* and just as we're about to get to the really dangerous, *true* stuff, we start dancing instead."

I realized we hadn't talked nearly enough about the form of the end of the play. And more than that, I surprised myself more than I ever have in rehearsal by defending the post-dramatic. "We go to this heightened, ritual place where we channel the past. We need to dance and sing, because the problem that we are expressing is too big to simply be represented realistically. Racism in America isn't a problem that two people (or six people) have with each other. It is a history that each of us carry inside of us that is centuries old. If we tried to tackle the problem through realistic scene work, we'd be reducing the scope of the problem. It would be an interpersonal

truth, rather than a societal one. The form is bigger than us as individual characters, because so is the problem.”

And for the first time, I really understood why I needed to learn from post-dramatic theatre. I might never make a fully post-dramatic play, but I sure do need to know how to steal from it.

Weathering absent actresses, cast changes, and ten thousand issues with institutional politics, I hopped from one crisis to the next. The directing ethics I named for myself in Chekhov got me through some very difficult patches in this rehearsal process.

I also added one to my list: Keep your own fear and any institutional conflict *outside* of the rehearsal room. The actors don't need to be involved in problems it's not their job to solve. JUST KEEP WORKING.

We finished the play and ran it for the first time the night before tech. We were still in rough shape, but we trusted that all of our work would manifest with repetition. We trusted that since we knew where we were headed, we were destined to get there. We trusted that addressing small details in our work would make a big difference. We kept working, even when it looked like we were doomed to fail.

Tech saved us. (Which is a sentence I never thought I'd say.)

The design team and I had laid so much groundwork that we were able to draft the show relatively quickly. The room was positive and collaborative, and the actors reacted like it was Christmas morning anytime a particularly spot-on technical

element was added. In spare seconds, I was onstage re-choreographing, doing scene work, or re-framing a moment. The designers understood how much acting work still needed to be done, and worked to get us that time after DTAD.

Our work list remained extensive heading into previews. But we never allowed ourselves to give in to despair or take our foot off the gas.

I drank two glasses of wine before I came to opening night. This was the most alcohol I'd consumed in over a year. Weeks worth of adrenaline quieted in my veins. I had done all I could. It was time for me to be an audience member.

As the lights went down and I watched our work, I almost started to cry. I'd dreamed about this play for so long, and I was so incredibly proud of what I saw onstage. The rules of the world were consistent. The design was vibrant and cohesive. The events were clear and surprising. There were different modes of performance with different physical lives. It was expressive, truthful, funny, surprising, and deeply upsetting.

The next weekend, TTS applicants flooded the building. Nathan, Michael, Jacob, Jeremy and I assembled in the conference room to meet the directing candidates for dinner. As we ate and mingled, one of the potential directors asked me how I felt now that my thesis was open.

"Hmmm..." I replied, "It's sort of unreal. One of the hardest parts of grad school for me was that it's so intense, it can be difficult to see your own growth. It was scary at times not knowing if all of the blood, sweat and tears are actually paying off in your work. But seeing this play come together was revelatory, because I know I absolutely could not have directed it before I came back to school."

“Really? How do you mean?”

I thought back to the version of myself that had been so stumped by *Smudge* four years before. That Erin Kraft probably wouldn't have been able to lead a healthy process on such complicated material. She never would have been able to articulate how the play's changing and blurring realities worked. She wouldn't have known how to build the more abstract pieces of their performance. She would have been terrified of the technical demands at the end of play.

I explained this to the prospective student and then I said, “I feel like a whole new director. I had a very narrow range before school. I thought I came to DePaul to learn the RIGHT WAY to direct one type of play. But now, I feel like I have so many tools, I can figure out how to do anything I want.”

CHAPTER FOUR: THE END OF THIRD YEAR

The Middle of the Night Again, Again

It's 5:30 AM and I desperately wish I weren't awake. My new baby, Dominic, cries every time I try to put him in his crib. So, even though I worry about creating bad habits, I let him sleep beside me in the bed in our long, narrow room.

I'm too tired to fall back asleep, but opening my laptop to work wakes the baby. Ugh.

Oh well. I adjust my process so that I can accomplish *something*. Instead of obsessively recording thoughts and questions as I read, I just visualize moments onstage. Then, as I eventually drift away, I hope I remember any of the images when I wake up.

The Fairytale Lives of Russian Girls

The last play I directed in grad school was *The Fairytale Lives of Russian Girls* by Meg Miroshnik. It's a fantastical heroine's journey about girls finding agency through any means necessary. In this magical, highly physical world, girls date bears, fight sentient potatoes, and kill wicked witches who are trying to eat them.

As I pitched the play in Directing Seminar, I said that I was drawn to it partly because I had no idea how to direct it.

Lisa rolled her eyes and laughed at me. "You always say that, Erin."

And I realized she was right. I do love certainty, but I love creating puzzles for myself more.

I leaned heavily on my Small Planet analysis to begin building a world as strange and delightful as the script.

A few weeks in, my advisor Will Davis and I were talking about how I could explore manifesting my analysis even further in the staging. He spoke so passionately about Fuchs' essay, I asked if he'd be willing to show me any examples of how he uses the tool. (I'd been obsessed with how other people create Small Planets ever since Kimberly showed me hers in *Directing One*.)

Will just squinted at me. "Oh, I don't write anything down. I see it more as a system of ethics for approaching a play."

"How do you mean?"

"Sometimes you look at a world and you think you see a watermelon, but then the play tells you it's a chair. So like a good guest in anyone's home, you must say, 'Oh. A chair. How lovely.' And from there, you look at the chair. And you look at how people treat the chair. And you wonder if people will sit in it. Eventually, you understand something new about the world of the play works, and you would never dare to call that chair a watermelon or think about eating it ever again."

I'd just found another director who I admired greatly using a tool I loved in a different way. But unlike my experience with Kimberly two years before, I felt no urgent need to call Elinor Fuchs for clarity. Will could do whatever worked for him. And so could I.

I literally looked at my Six Questions every day before *Fairytale Lives* rehearsals. It was such a liquid beast of a play, I needed a constant reminder of what I was trying to make.

Of course, by this point, I'd made adjustments to the questions I'd learned in *Directing One*. I'd discovered my work was clearer when I asked, "What is the compelling question of the play?" instead of worrying about the dramatic question first. Also, I'd given myself permission to think of the audience as individuals. Now, I usually had several answers to "What effect do you want to have on the audience?" in order to speak to different demographics in different ways. As a result of these changes, I'd stopped worrying about whether my analysis was right—I just wanted it to be useful, revealing, and exciting to me.

We'd spent weeks trying to crack some of the more peculiar leaps the characters make. We'd tried crafting dozens of different triggers, but each felt as forced as the last. Finally, during a notes session I proposed, "I think I have a presumption about good acting that isn't helping us on this play. We're crafting scenes so that we can take all of our changes off of our partners. But trying to be so faithfully psychological seems to be flattening those moments out. Our ideas about causality just aren't working. Maybe in this world, following our impulses is more important than being able to explain to the audience where they came from."

Emily, one of the actors, leapt in to second this conclusion. We talked for a while, and the conversation ended with a permission I never thought my hyper-concrete mind could give: "It's okay if sometimes the answer to 'Why?' is 'Because.'"

Conclusion

I thought I was coming to grad school to learn the right way to direct plays. Instead, I learned that there is no one size fits all approach to directing. There are as many ways for me to direct a play as there are plays in the world.

I leave grad school without a singular process. Thank god. My takeaways are far more interesting.

I take away a sharper awareness and articulation of my vision. I create humane, surprising productions filled with complex characters and sharp turns. I think every play is an ensemble play. I'm fascinated by people in community, the search for beauty in a petty world, and storytelling. I'm obsessed with truth and in a never-ending battle with the unknown.

I take away a variety of analytical tools to use and manipulate as I see fit. I can organize my thoughts about a play for a team using The Six Questions. I can see new worlds with *A Visit to a Small Planet*. I can identify structure with Aristotle, Katie Mitchell, David Ball, Joseph Campbell, or any other system I devise.

I take away my directing ethics. I aim to give all actors the same respect and attention, but tailor my process to their specific strengths. I strive to be honest. And decisive. I work to activate egalitarian rooms, because I believe they are the most creative. I try to lead with curiosity. When the going gets tough, I aspire to keep my own fear out of the rehearsal room and just keep working.

Most of all, I take away a far more open mind. I can't wait to see where it leads me.

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