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THE WESTERN STATES **Theatre** VOLUME 16 • 2010 **R E V I E W**

Horace Robinson 1909–2009

JOSEPH GILG and ALEXANDRA BONDS • 1

Transcending How I Learned to Drive

JUDY FORT BRENNEMAN • 3

The Memory of Land

ROBERT VRTIS • 10

The Hybrid Rehearsal Schedule: Opening Time for Artistic Exploration through Increased Collaboration

RICH BROWN • 20

Support for Actors

KEN WOMBLE • 34

“Living from Moment to Moment”:

Kermit Sheets, Theatre and the Fine Arts at Waldport, 1942–1946

ANDREW RYDER • 40

The Art of Theatre vs. Religion and Science

WILLIAM MISSOURI DOWNS and LOU ANNE WRIGHT • 55

THE WESTERN STATES THEATRE REVIEW

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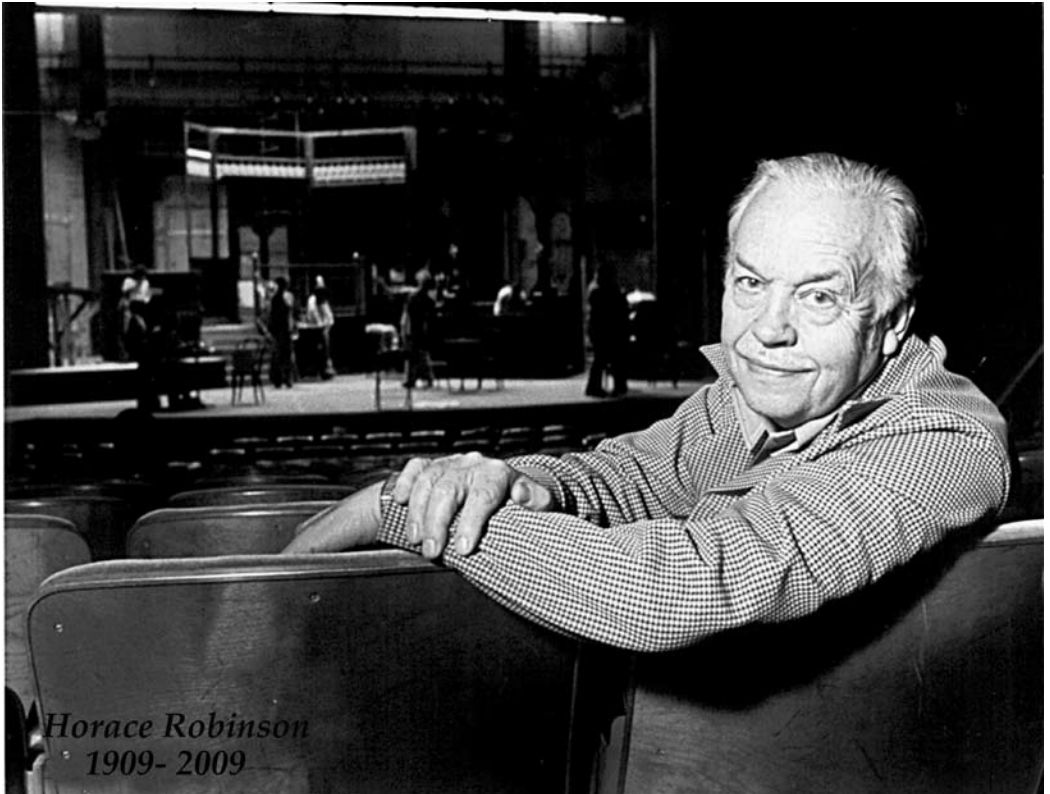
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This issue of *The Western States Theatre Review*
is dedicated to the memory of Horace Robinson.

Horace Robinson 1909–2009

JOSEPH GILG and ALEXANDRA BONDS

Horace Robinson, Professor Emeritus at the University of Oregon and theatre education pioneer, died October 13th, 2009 in Eugene, Oregon. Mr. Robinson joined the University faculty as technical director and scene designer in 1933 and served as the director of the University Theatre between 1946 and 1970. In 1949 he designed a new, innovative theatre building for the campus. It was named for him when he retired in 1975, after forty-two years of teaching and directing over one hundred productions.

It was in 1946 that Mr. Robinson started hosting the Northwest Drama Conference on the UO campus in Eugene. In those initial years he *was* the drama conference, and he invited productions, scholars, workshop leaders and keynote speakers to convene in Eugene during the winter to share their work and expertise with one another and with the colleges and universities in the Northwest. From that beginning he slowly built an organization that supported and carried on those ideals and later joined with the original American College Theatre Festival (now KCACTF) to present the conference at different campuses in the region in much the same way that we have today.

During four decades at the University of Oregon Mr. Robinson always taught a full class load, took students on USO tours to entertain troops, directed most major university productions, ran the speech department, helped in civic organizations, served on numerous theater boards and associations and even published a book on theater architecture. He once passed up an offer to head the theater department at UCLA, but he never was tempted to chase a career in professional theater.

Horace Robinson told Eugene's *Register-Guard* in 1998:

I love to teach. I have no regrets that my career, by decision or by accident, has been academic as opposed to professional. No regrets that I'm not a profes-

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sional director, a movie director or movie actor, something like that. I found working in an academic situation — particularly working with enthusiastic young people, who are highly absorbent — as very gratifying, in part because a great deal of the sense of achievement is not necessarily in the product but in the people, because you've touched, and hopefully influenced in one way or another, thousands and thousands of young people.

Joel Rubin, USITT Co-Founder and Past President remembered Horace clearly:

He had always seemed to me to be a giant in educational theatre. He was already President of AETA when I met him and unlike most of his predecessors, took great interest in the theatre architecture and technical development committees. I also remember Horace in Board Meetings of AETA. He had a stentorian voice that commanded attention, and he was normally brief and always very logical. Horace was a great mentor to those seeking to make theatre our profession, and particularly helpful to those of us who wanted to work in the more technical areas.

USITT recognized Mr. Robinson's contributions to the field in 2008 with a Special Citation for his, "...pioneering and enduring contribution to the establishment of educational theatre in America and prodigious efforts advocating for design excellence in the theatre architecture for these programs, ... and an extraordinary lifetime of leadership and inspiration for generations of theatre students and faculty."

In 1991, after sixteen years of retirement, Mr. Robinson started The Reader's Theatre Group that gave performances in hospitals, retirement homes and other places where residents had limited access to getting out to see theatre. Over the next fifteen years the group gave over 2,500 performances in Eugene and Lane County, Oregon, culminating in a final performance in 2006 at the retirement home where Mr. Robinson was living. He had booked, organized, directed and acted in each of those performances but decided, at the age of ninety-six that it was getting to be too much for him. Yet, Mr. Robinson remained vital until his final days, passing on just short of his one hundredth birthday.

Transcending *How I Learned to Drive*

JUDY FORT BRENNEMAN

The first time I saw Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, I left the theatre disappointed, a little frustrated and vaguely irritated. Where was the powerful story that "got it," the story that leading local psychiatrist Chris Hageseth said was excellent but extremely risky for any incest survivor to view? The play could trigger flashbacks or re-open old wounds, he explained to the reporter from the town newspaper. The play was emotionally intense and emotionally accurate. Women who had experienced sexual abuse in childhood might have to leave the theatre in mid-performance if they weren't forewarned, far enough along in their own healing, or sufficiently self-aware. I think he even recommended that mental healthcare specialists be standing by in case of severe adverse reactions.

I'd already had plenty of therapy and besides, I've never been the shrinking violet victim type, so I decided to go. Honestly, I think I was hoping for something intensely wrenching, something that would resonate with my own experience. I'd been writing about incest for several years by then, creative nonfiction, memoir and essays mostly, and although my work had seen some success and audiences responded well at readings, none of it seemed to connect the way Vogel's play was said to connect with her audiences.

I didn't have the experience years ago to analyze an actor's performance, to consider how the portrayal of a character could vary significantly depending on the player. I had even less awareness of the director's impact.

To me, a story was a story; readers (and by extension, audience members) might draw different meanings from the story, but the story itself didn't change. And if the meanings and interpretations by the readers

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were radically different from each other and from the author's intent, then the author probably hadn't done a good job to begin with. That a director or acting company could emphasize some elements over others, inadvertently or deliberately shifting the core meaning of the story, had never occurred to me.

Although I've seen enough performances of other plays since then to develop an awareness of how different interpretations of a given work can manifest as significantly different stories on stage, nowhere has that experience been so profound as with the recent performance of *How I Learned to Drive* at the Curious Theatre Company in Denver, Colorado, presented in honor of the company's tenth season anniversary and using almost all of the cast members from its original award-winning 1999 production.

I didn't see the play at Curious Theatre in 1999, but I suspect that the 2007 production is every bit its equal. The 2007 production also presents an interpretation of the work that is superior to the one I attended about the same time as Curious Theatre's 1999 show, produced by another young independent theatre company.

The basic story of *How I Learned to Drive* is of a young girl who is sexually molested by her uncle beginning when she is eleven years old. The story begins when she's grown and works its way backwards through time, using driving lessons as a metaphor and unifying device.

There are at least two ways to interpret the story of L'il Bit: she can be viewed as a trampy, seductive girl who is almost equally (if not fully equally or entirely) at fault for the sexual relationship that develops between her and her uncle; or, she can be viewed as a normal, every-day girl trapped and victimized by family and circumstance. In either interpretation, she must find her way to adulthood.

The performance I saw years ago slanted strongly toward the former interpretation. This blame-the-victim view is simply wrong—not just morally wrong (which a generous reviewer might excuse in the name of art), but factually wrong. In the context of the play, such an interpretation seems to imply that incest and other forms of sexual abuse are not so bad. Richard Hoffman (author of *Half the House*, a memoir of sexual abuse that resulted in the conviction of Hoffman's childhood baseball coach) in his essay/review "What's Love Got to Do With It?" questions whether the play might actually encourage abuse and makes a good case that it could. Writers who explore the ambivalent feelings children experience (for example, Martin Moran in *The Tricky Part*) and researchers (Judith Lewis Herman, author of *Father-Daughter Incest*, and others) point out that the complexity of the family relationship never leads to the conclusion

that the child has seduced the adult or is in any way responsible for the adult's bad behavior.

After sitting through a performance that not only didn't "get it" but got it almost entirely wrong, despite news reports of the time that implied the play was partially autobiographical, I concluded that at best, Vogel's experience was significantly different from mine, and at worst, she was clueless and guilty of writing a bad play. The decision-making process of the Pulitzer committee has always been a mystery to me; the only reason I could see for awarding the prize to Vogel for this play was because of its subject matter. Staging a play about incest in contemporary society, with fewer stereotypes than such stories usually carried (though it is still set in rural southern culture), without the protective veil of antiquity and myth (e.g., Oedipus), and not intended for titillation or raw shock was new, at least to theatre. The play was also a product of its time, following on the heels of several excellent memoirs, celebrity disclosures, and a general increase in public awareness about the prevalence of abuse. It was becoming more acceptable to discuss incest and other forms of sexual abuse in public, much the same way awareness and discussions about physical abuse had broken through to the public consciousness ten years earlier.

The 2007 Curious Theatre production did more than reveal the play the way the Pulitzer committee must have seen it. This performance improves on Vogel's script without changing a line.

The performers imbue their characters with an uncommon depth and dimension. The flirtatiousness and rebelliousness of C. Kelly Leo's L'il Bit are solidly placed within the context of normal adolescent development. Family relationships and interpersonal dynamics coil and tangle around her like a braid of snakes and barbed wire, with tiny patches of love or hope or concern tucked in, nearly invisible.

This makes for a much more believable story. It rings true, or truer, as story, and it resonates more closely with my own experience of incest and its aftermath. There is no "wink-wink nod-nod" in the Curious Theatre production; there is no suggestion that L'il Bit brings any of this on herself. There is a sense of inevitability, that the family structure is set up like a sluice or funnel with no way for L'il Bit to escape even if she knew she would have to (or was allowed to or entitled to). This is often how the family system looks in retrospect, especially to those outside the family, and is appropriate, considering the structure of the play.

Uncle Peck, played by Marcus Waterman (new to this casting), effectively portrayed one of the most chilling traits of a predator and one often overlooked: the ability to manipulate without being obvious. Vogel

describes this character as one that should be played by an actor who “might be cast in the role of Atticus in *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” which seems usually to be interpreted to mean a *sympathetic* character. The appropriate element of this requirement is that Peck should not be a two-dimensional bogeyman; he must be a fully developed character both to be believable and to be the horrific person he is. That is, because everything nice or kind that he does is directly tied to his ultimate purpose of accosting L’il Bit, we see him as all the more evil, because of the contrast as well as the duplicity.

The play as performed by Curious Theatre Company revolves tightly around L’il Bit and Uncle Peck, with the three-person “Greek Chorus” filling in the details that enrich the story. These characters, played by Melanie Owen Padilla, Denise Perry-Olson, and Michael Morgan, are rich and full, too. Perry-Olson in particular did a stunning and hilarious job as the Mother explaining proper social drinking. Her blend of verbal delivery and physical comedy portrayed in short order an entire story in itself, without succumbing to cardboard cutout drunkard conventions.

The timing of the performers and crew was superb. One fine example is when L’il Bit has been pestering her mother to let her go with Uncle Peck to the beach, and her mother (Female Greek Chorus played by Perry-Olson) finally relents, saying, “But I’m warning you—if anything happens, I hold you responsible.” At the precise instant Mother says “if anything,” the stage lighting reveals the Teen Greek Chorus as Grandmother (Padilla) standing upstage of and slightly offset from Mother, and Mother and Grandmother say the line “if anything happens, I hold you responsible” in unison. The result is both a realization of the multigenerational message and a recognition of the potential impact of a phrase that parents say without thinking to their children every day.

The effect is chilling—almost as chilling as the closing scene—when we see Uncle Peck forever “reflected” in L’il Bit’s rear view mirror. This lighting effect is powerful and, if certain weaknesses in the script are ignored, does a good job of illustrating the long-term impact of incest.

In examining why the Curious Theatre production felt more truthful—accurate, emotionally engaging, realistic—compared to the earlier performance, I believe the difference flows from directorial choices and a better understanding by the actors of their characters, not from other production elements.

For example, the earlier staging used two straight-backed chairs to represent the car (as suggested by Vogel in her script) and a small table with chairs for family scenes. The stage was relatively bare; there were probably a few traffic signs posted, but I don’t remember much else

about the scenery or props. Lighting, as I remember it, wasn't a big part of the production.

In the Curious Theatre Company set, the front half of a car dominated the stage; a large sign against the upstage wall proclaimed "Starlight Drive In" in brightly lit letters; a porch swing down left, a card table and chairs just right of center, and risers anchored other scene locales. As we filed into our seats, wisps of mist drifted across the stage and a few minutes before the play began, the amount of mist increased as the song, "Darling, Stand By Me" began. Lighting established and emphasized mood, focused attention, and reinforced the action.

This more elaborate staging probably had an effect on audience expectations and may have made us more amenable to believing the story, but it would not have solved the problems of the earlier production. Costuming doesn't account for it either; in both companies, the costumes were appropriate for the characters, effective and supportive, not distracting.

The strength of Chip Walton's direction and the power and empathy of the actors are almost—but not quite—enough to overcome three significant weaknesses in the script.

In "Idling in the Neutral Gear," the scene where "Peck teaches Cousin Bobby How to Fish," the implication is that Peck is setting Bobby up for abuse. This scene, while emotionally powerful, is unrealistic; most predators are consistent in their sexual orientation. Peck clearly has a known history of molesting girls, and it is unlikely that he would pursue boys the same way. More importantly, the scene exists for the sole purpose of establishing what might have happened to Peck when he was a boy, leading to the second weakness.

The second weakness is revealed in "Shifting Forward from Third to Fourth Gear," as L'il Bit segues from finally telling Uncle Peck "no" to stating the facts of his death, when she asks, "Who did it to you, Uncle Peck? How old were you? Were you eleven?"

Underlying these questions (no matter how heartfelt the delivery) is the assumption that the reason Peck is a sexual predator is because he himself was sexually abused as a child. Whether this is an assumption or a false hope, it is not and has never been supported by research or crime statistics. It is one of the lies we tell ourselves as a reason—an excuse—for Peck's behavior, so that we can dodge our own responsibility in failing to protect our children. "It's not his fault because the poor man was abused" is blame-shifting of the worst sort. If Peck's behavior is not Peck's responsibility, then our failure to protect his victims isn't our fault, either. The blame goes to that nameless, faceless someone further up the

line, who must also be blameless since, according to this belief, the only reason someone becomes an abuser is because they were abused. There's nothing to be done, and the predator is never really at fault.

For the victim of a sexual predator, this is a nasty double-bind. The victim can't blame the perpetrator, because after all, it really isn't the perpetrator's fault. Who then is responsible for the victim's injuries? And what power can the victim have in defending and reclaiming herself? The victim is and continues to be powerless; there is nothing for her to fight against or to triumph over. There is no acknowledgement that she has survived something truly evil. And there is a demand that the victim feel empathy for and, worse, forgive the perpetrator (because, after all, it wasn't his fault that he did what he did). The victim even becomes guilty of further "damage" to the perpetrator, as in this scene, which implies that Peck's "drinking himself to death" is L'il Bit's fault, caused by her refusal to see him again.

How much stronger a story this would be if we do not, if we cannot, know why Peck is a predator. He is still fully human, horribly flawed, but now the responsibility for his action is where it belongs: with Peck, not shuffled off to some blame-shifted anonymity. In this context, L'il Bit's survival and eventual triumph become far more profound—which leads to the third weakness.

In this same scene, Peck tries to convince L'il Bit that they can finally have sexual intercourse. L'il Bit finds in herself the ability to say no, and she says it firmly and permanently.

This is the moment of truth, of power—and Vogel wastes it, because she is so intent on excusing Peck and insisting that L'il Bit must forgive Peck and forgive herself in order to "move on" in her life. This is another false assumption; it is not necessary nor required for one who has been a victim of a sexual predator to forgive that predator in order to survive or transcend the crime. And I have never met an incest survivor who would ever wish, even metaphorically, for what L'il Bit wishes for Uncle Peck at the end of this scene. No woman among us would ever sacrifice another young girl to her predator in hopes that it would "release him." We know better.

The Curious Theatre production manages to rescue the play from itself in the final scene, when the voices of L'il Bit's past coalesce around her as she gets ready to drive. As she adjusts her rear view mirror, Uncle Peck's face appears in the middle of the back seat, like a grinning ghost. In Vogel's script notes, she says that L'il Bit "smiles at him, and he nods at her. They are happy to be going for a long drive together. L'il Bit slips the car into first gear" and says to the audience, "And then—I floor it."

The way Leo and Waterman play this, the two are not happy to be going for a long drive together. Waterman's expression is more ghoulish than charming; Li'l Bit is more determined than happy. She realizes that part of surviving is knowing that you're stuck with your past: she's stuck with Peck; he's always going to be in the car with her, no matter what. Nothing, not therapy, forgiveness, or driving as fast as the wheels will take her will ever change that. In this final moment, there are hints of despair, and of strength, awareness, and acceptance—and these are the emotions of survivors.

Resources

Herman, Judith Lewis, with Lisa Hirschman, *Father-Daughter Incest*, Harvard University Press, 2000.

Hoffman, Richard, "What's Love Got to Do With It?" *FlashPoint*, <http://www.flashpointmag.com/hoffman.htm>

Hoffman, Richard, *Half the House: A Memoir*, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995; and New River Press, 2005.

Moran, Martin, *The Tricky Part: One Boy's Fall from Trespass into Grace*, Beacon Press, 2005.

The Memory of Land

ROBERT VRTIS

Sahmatah, both the play as a text that can be read or performed by various theatre companies and as a specific event performed in the ruined village of the same name, opens up the possibility for theatre to use *landscape* as a site (metaphorical and specific) for memory and healing after wartime. Following the brutalities visited upon several hundred Palestinian villages during the Arab/ Israeli War of 1948, the country began to reorganize in a way that attempted to empty the land of the Palestinian aspect of its historical identity. The war ousted great masses of Palestinians from their historic homes and made them into refugees cut off from the land and any sense of home. *Sahmatah* proposes that the land itself bears the markings of this war and explores how the land communicates its memory. Learning how to listen to a place, as is done in the play itself, may lead to an eventual reconciliation, as opposed to a reconstruction, of the landscape.

With their collection of essays, *Land/Scape/Theater*, Elinor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri seek to stimulate interest in reading theatrical texts and performances for more than just their human-centered elements. Observing the growing scholarship investigating landscapes in cultural and artistic studies, Fuchs and Chaudhuri propose that theatre scholars begin to acknowledge and explore the use of space in theatre. Chaudhuri writes that within explorations of cultural geography there is, "...a notion that landscapes are communicative devices that encode and transmit information, and... a skilled interpreter can learn to decode both their conventions and the specific messages they encode" (14), and Fuchs states that over the last century and a half it has become apparent that landscapes have begun to function within plays beyond a role of simple backdrop and "support to human action" (30). In a sense, certain plays

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allow the land to speak and act as a character in its own right; it can have a story and an action all its own that mingles with or diverges from the human characters. The land speaks in a way that can highly impact the human characters.

Generally speaking, the human element is impossible to remove from theatre; nearly all of theatre is built on exploring human issues, human relationships and human stories. However, an exclusive focus on the human aspects of a story inadvertently denies a story of the land that is just as rich and ripe for investigation. In plays that deal with wars and their after effects this generalization nearly invariably holds true. After all, humans make war and most obviously feel its effects, but throughout history land is intricately knitted to war and wars can devastate the landscape just as easily as a human body, leaving deep scars that resonate in the land and in its people.

Hanna Eady and Edward Mast's play, *Sahmatah*, acknowledges an intimate link between the land and the people who once inhabited it and explores how this link allows the land to communicate the memory of violence. Rather than simply letting the ruined town of Sahmatah act as a backdrop for the an entirely human story, *Sahmatah* gives the place a voice and an action of its own, one that affects the characters greatly. The play subtly asks whether post-traumatic stress is an exclusively human condition, or whether the landscape carries the echoes of historic violence in it.

Sahmatah also asks the audience how a divided land can be reintegrated into a state of peace after a war fifty years in the past has severed a historical link between people and the land that they lived on for millennia. In an article describing the process of creating *Sahmatah*, "*Sahmatah: Awakening History*," Mast describes the plight of Sahmatah and similar villages that had been emptied and destroyed in the Arab/ Israeli War of 1948. In so doing, he acknowledges that some of the four hundred eighteen Palestinian villages could trace histories back for at least seven thousand years and in the span of decades has nearly erased those millennia from the cultural consciousness (115). These towns had sustained many changes over time, often incorporating different ethnicities as they were encountered, but the War of 1948 (and the ensuing governmental cover-ups of wartime atrocities in Palestinian villages) inflicted such a wound on the land itself and its people, that in the span of two generations their history was very nearly obliterated.

Mast and Eady's play proposes that such a reintegration may be possible, but it cannot be built on an aggressive acculturation and forgetfulness. Rather, the wound of the War of 1948 can only mend when the past is

confronted, accepted and shared. This action of remembering lays the foundation for an incorporated and peaceful Israel/ Palestine, and this action comes from the land itself speaking to and awakening people.

“He will always be from Sahmatah”

Connection to Place and the Schisms of War

In *Staging Place* Chaudhuri coins the term geopathy, meaning a “problem of place—and place *as problem*,” (55) in *Staging Place* in order to analyze modern realist dramas. In her discussion she establishes that much of American geopathology manifests itself in the form of a tension that occurs between the desire to move from a place (home), especially as the move seemingly connotes progress, and the “magnetic power of place” that prevents the individual from moving on (56). As such, Chaudhuri sees a large percentage of American dramas as marked by a tension between progress and a fixedness that is anchored to a specific home space. The individual either struggles to overcome the gravity of place or resigns to stagnation.

Sahmatah presents the Palestinian problem of place as a nearly complete inverse to Chaudhuri’s American geopathology. The characters feel a magnetic draw to a place that the Israeli army has forcibly separated them from, but until the young Habeeb, the play’s protagonist, acknowledges his connection to the place, Sahmatah, he will be unable to progress. The initial obstacle to rediscovering this link to place arises from the fact that Habeeb cannot sense this connection in the first place. The Israeli government had emptied Sahmatah and erased it from the map before Habeeb was born. The village seemingly exists only in the shadows that his grandfather can recall. Habeeb has been taught to feel a connection to the state of Israel, not to the ancient village he never knew. As such, the village remains abstract and intangible, something he cannot connect to.

In *Black Body*, Radhika Mohanram asserts that body and nation share a link that cannot be severed, and she illustrates her point with Rupert Brooke’s “The Soldier,” in which an English soldier facing war and likely death on foreign soil muses:

If I should die, think only this of me:

That there’s some corner of a foreign field

That is for ever England. There shall be

In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;

A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware.

Mohanram states that, in this and similar treatments of the body that recur in various cultures, the dichotomy of body and nation collapse into a single entity (4). Habeeb's grandfather (and in time Habeeb himself) similarly merges his identity with place in *Sahmatah*, but in lieu of a national identity Grandfather connects his body and his identity to the ruined village of Sahmatah. Grandfather insists that, like him, Habeeb is from Sahmatah even though the younger insists he was born elsewhere and "never even saw Sahmatah" (5). His Grandfather dismisses his assertion, beginning Habeeb's propulsion into the history of the ruined village.

Part of Habeeb's trouble is that he has no sense of presence in this place; he sees nothing but stones, overgrowth and holes. To Habeeb, Sahmatah has no current residents, and it may as well have never been occupied at all, since he cannot feel the history that permeates the landscape as his grandfather does. On the other hand, Grandfather speaks with, and soon speaks for, his former neighbors; he still sees the village as it was before the attacks and still sees its residents. From the beginning he slips between past and present tense as he makes his way through the covered-over ruins.

Not all the residents died in this place; many died in other countries or towns, and some still live but are not permitted to return to the area that calls for them. However, they have all left their mark on the land, and the land remembers them. This places the residents of Sahmatah outside of a material presence, and because they do not exist in an embodied form, Habeeb can easily ignore the residents. However, their immateriality allows them to occupy the space in a way that, as we shall see, once they are listened to, they are difficult to deny. Their presence can be ignored, but because of their fusion with the landscape, they cannot be completely silenced.

Since Habeeb is bodily connected to the village too, though he doesn't initially acknowledge it, the history of Sahmatah lies in wait for him to discover by reconnecting his body to the land. Unfortunately, he has been indoctrinated by Israeli versions of history. These highly skewed and selective retellings of the past have instilled in Habeeb a feeling of shame for his heritage, because they paint Arabs as historically warlike, ignorant, backward and poor. Habeeb contemptuously snarls, "That's your Arab history. Am I supposed to be proud of that?" (9). In pursuit of a better life for the family he is beginning to create with his new fiancé, Habeeb allows an Israeli dominated society to erase any connection he has to his people, and since Habeeb as a Palestinian seemingly has a natural lack of culture, Israeli social structures, chiefly his schools, have rewritten his identity. In order to reconnect with the past, Habeeb must push (or be pushed) through these obfuscations of his heritage.

"We never had pine trees"

Uncovering the Past

Sahmatah asks the audience whether the Palestinian people can have a lasting peace with the Israelis in which they are not simply walked all over by the Israelis, treated no better than slaves and dispossessed of their homes. Indeed, Grandfather uses the imagery of Palestinians as dirt when he argues with Habeeb over whether or not Israel/ Palestine is currently in a state of peace. Grandfather denies Habeeb's assertion that the war is over saying, "When we're not the dirt under their feet, maybe then we'll have peace" (9). This metaphor for the status of the Palestinian people encapsulates a great deal more than the simplicity of the phrase lets on.

Grandfather's assessment of the Palestinian and Israeli relationship after the War of 1948, where the Palestinian is the dirt Israelis walk on top of, recalls the impact of the war on the land and its people. The Israeli army completely emptied villages like Sahmatah, killing its residents or forcing them to leave their homes to join the masses of refugees, and, as the play tells us, the villages were subsequently pillaged for resources like the stones of the Sahmatah homes that Grandfather and his brother are hired to build Israeli homes with. These villages are then erased in the process of a cultural forgetting. In this process the Israelis transform the landscape, emptying it not only of its residents but also of its historical worth. People and land alike lose any worth beyond that of resources (labor and natural resources) for building the Israeli nation. Those refugees who are allowed to remain in Israel find little work is available to them beyond labor; workers must remove the stones of their homes and repurpose them as the walls of Israeli immigrant homes. This process reduces the Palestinians and their land to the status of raw materials which must be refined for the sake Israeli progress.

When Grandfather claims that the Israelis treat him like dirt, it refers to this process that the War of 1948 began: the victors lay claim to the land; they subsequently remove the Palestinian people from that land and thereby disconnect both from their respective historical validity, and the Israeli government attempts to squelch the memory of the brutal removal by both justifying their cause and dampening the voice of the land. Both land and people turn into "just dirt." That is, they have both been emptied of meanings that they held before the war. Through Grandfather, *Sahmatah* proposes that only when their validity beyond natural resource is restored to the Palestinian land and people can the Israel/Palestine truly progress toward a state of sustained, equal peace.

Before the Palestinian land and the people can heal, the wound that the war inflicted on them must first be acknowledged. With such a complex injury a simple bandage will not suffice. Unfortunately, the Israeli government has gone to great lengths to cover over brutal incidents like those at Sahmatah. As such, the wound that the war inflicted on both the people and the land has deepened and festered over time.

A frustrated Habeeb comes across his grandfather wandering around what looks to him like empty ruins. A student of the Israeli educational system, he has learned his lessons all too well and now has no real sense for what he sees. When Grandfather tells Habeeb that he is in his home village of Sahmatah, Habeeb declares:

Habeeb: I never saw Sahmatah.

Grandfather: You're seeing it now.

Habeeb: All I see is a hill covered with pine trees.

Grandfather: We never had pine trees. They planted pine to hide the village. (5)

We learn from Grandfather that the villagers of Sahmatah sustained themselves largely through the cultivation of olive trees. The olive tree represented a quite literal link to place. They tended the trees (the landscape) and it yielded a multiplicity of benefits to the villagers not the least of which was food. The trees and the villagers created a mutually beneficial cycle, a symbiotic relationship contained in a very specific (for them) space.

The olive tree acts as an ally for the Palestinian village both in this peaceful life of cultivation and in the sudden conflict with the Israeli army. Significantly, Habeeb sees the story of Abu Ayeman play out. Ayeman burns all his possessions, his home and his food with the aid of olive oil, so that the Israelis will not steal it when he must leave it behind. The olive trees bring the community together; they sustain them, allow them to set down roots of their own, and, in a time of need, help the villagers win the only victory that they can in the face of a vastly superior military threat.

Finally, the olive branch carries the symbolic meaning of peace and hope for the future. Sahmatah lives nestled in and sheltered by these potent symbols of peace. Both in the play and in the actual aftermath of the War of 1948 these signs of peace and Palestinian connection to the land fall victim to the Israelis as they are uprooted, while the villages are bulldozed and plundered for stones. The war literally creates blight in the land; it uproots peace and people, and it scars the land.

Immediately following the trauma of war, the process of cultural forgetting begins. Habeeb inadvertently provides a great deal of material that shows how this cultural forgetting is socially performed. Meanwhile, his grandfather intimates that this forgetting happens in the land as well. Grandfather 's remark about never having pine trees grow in Sahmatah before the arrival of the Israeli army echoes a larger process of reforming the landscape to fit a narrative that is more beneficial to the victors of the war. This narrative physically obscures the Palestinian connection to the lands that they historically occupied by reshaping it with non-indigenous pine trees, which usurp the trees that stood for Palestinian connection to place, the olive trees.

In addition to the obfuscation of the land, the Israeli government reconstructs the landscape of Israel/ Palestine to reflect its new narrative of a Jewish homeland. Years after the war Grandfather, in need of a job, works with his brother, Adnan, in this restructuring of the Israeli/ Palestinian landscape. He builds homes in a new settlement for Jewish immigrants only to discover that the very stones that he builds with have come from his demolished village, Sahmatah (29).

For a time, Grandfather can continue the work even though he knows the origin of the building project's materials. To cope, he works through the day, "staring at every stone and asking its forgiveness" (30). Importantly, Grandfather does not directly seek forgiveness of the people of Sahmatah but of this element from the scarred landscape itself. In this act, he acknowledges that the landscape is as much a victim of the war as his friends, his family and himself.

Meanwhile, his brother could not handle being part of this reshaping of landscape once he knew the cost. Rather than allow himself to be complacent, he shatters his own foot with a Sahmatah stone in order to cripple himself, so that he can no longer labor for the Israelis. Adnan later tells his family that, "he'd been punished by the stones of his house" (30). Through his connection to it, Adnan exacts a toll on himself that the land seems to demand of him in penance for what he seems to consider a war crime. He has participated in a cultural erasure following the war and helped to reconstitute his home into the master narrative of the war's winning side.

Grandpa remarks to Habeeb, who is all too willing to accept his reconstructed heritage, "Sure, they've taken everything else. Why not our past? Why not our history? Why not our children?" (9). As a result of this cultural amnesia, the Israelis manage to claim a great deal more than territory. As part of the spoils of war the Israeli's have won the Palestinian identity to reshape in anyway that they see fit, just as they reshape the land to their own sociopolitical purposes.

“The Ground Remembers”

The Path Towards Reconciliation

Both as a play and as an event *Sahmatah* works against this rewritten landscape. Performed amid the actual ruins of Sahmatah and subsequently touring throughout Israel/ Palestine, *Sahmatah* asks the audience to (re) see their postwar landscape. The playwrights attempt to achieve this end by giving the audience an image of themselves in the forgetful Habeeb and a guide in their journey of rediscovery in the character of Grandfather.

Just as must be done for the audience, Grandfather must teach Habeeb to listen to the landscape of Sahmatah, so that he can hear and eventually see its past, his past. At first this happens by accident; Habeeb becomes so involved in his grandfather’s story about Abu Mysa harvesting olives and suddenly seeing bombers overhead that he hears distant explosions.

Gradually, Habeeb grows more willing and more adept at connecting to the land and the stories it holds. His grandfather begins by prompting him, telling him where in the landscape to stand if he wants to experience a story or urging him to *really* listen and see. Soon, the two begin to channel history from the very earth. Together, they embody memory and enact it—taking on different characters in order to play out their stories in the landscape. Edward Mast describes the performance of this act of remembering, telling the reader that the actors played on top of the actual site of the village with many of its displaced villagers who, “...were within arms reach when the young man stood with eyes closed and felt the memories of disaster surge up from the ground through his feet, into his body” (128). The actor playing Habeeb seems to draw memory from this place and send it out into the audience through his body. In so doing, he awakens the history of the place for the audience, so that they can acknowledge it as a presence, a supporting character that works in the world of the play beyond the common functional use of landscape as backdrop.

“They’re your stories now”

Moving On, Holding On

From the beginning of the play, Habeeb’s engagement to an Israeli woman looms over the Habeeb and Grandfather’s journey. While Habeeb insists that he will marry her no matter what Grandfather says, he would prefer the old man’s blessing. As the action of the play approaches its climax Habeeb rejoices at having his eyes opened and sees an opportunity to win favor for his fiancé from his grandfather, if he brings her to hear Grandfather’s stories, but Grandfather remains reticent. He feels that he must guide his grandson just a little further through the landscape. Habeeb must stand on a very important stone for his grandfather, one

that holds a memory older than the Israeli invasion of Sahmatah, Grandfather's own wedding.

Grandfather's wedding is a vision of unity among people of different backgrounds, especially religious backgrounds, who lived in peace and mutual respect before the war. They dance and feast together. Habeeb wonders at the sight, remarking:

Habeeb: All these people. The whole village, Christians and Muslims, friends and family... And there's platters of food. Huge platters... Where did it all come from?

Grandfather: Enough for everybody in the village. That's how we did it. Fed everybody.

Habeeb: How did you afford it?

Grandfather: Afford it. Hm. I don't know. There was plenty. We might starve for a month afterwards, but for a wedding there was always enough. (33-34)

In this, Grandpa has shown Habeeb both an echo of the past and an image of the work that must still be done in Israel/ Palestine.

The wedding celebration brought together an entire community, one that does not have a homogenous background but shares a landscape that houses and sustains them all. There is room enough for all at the table, and the village as a whole has brought food, perhaps more than they can afford to give away, to ensure that all are fed in this celebration. This act cements their bonds, reflects their ability to share the landscape. It also points to the fact that unification in the community and on the land is more important even than the lives of any individual, family unit or ethnicity.

Habeeb's inevitable wedding reflects the state of Israel/ Palestine, and it is currently in a doubtful place. The wedding will happen whether Grandfather approves or not, just as Israel and Palestine are now sharing an existence that can no longer be reversed. The play leads the audience to ask what the quality of this marriage/ shared existence be: will the Israeli aspect of this country subsume the Palestinian? Will the land truly be healed if this occurs? Can there be progress when so many have lost a connection to the land?

The image of Grandfather's wedding suggests that cohabitation in a landscape has always been possible for people of seemingly opposed ethnicities. Therefore, the memory shows that it is not the marriage of his grandson to an Israeli that upsets Grandfather. Rather, it is the quality of that wedding, which as it stands could lead to a marriage in which Habeeb's cultural identity is enveloped by the dominant cultural identity of his wife. If this happens, it is one more battle lost by the Palestinians,

one more move toward complete removal from the land. Grandfather doesn't ask the Israelis to leave the land; all he asks is that he be permitted to live on it with them. There could be plenty of food at the banquet for all to share if all are invited to the table, but everyone must give of themselves because the creation of community on the land is even more pressing than the next meal.

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The Hybrid Rehearsal Schedule: Opening Time for Artistic Exploration Through Increased Collaboration

RICH BROWN

“ . . . a theatre where a play for economic reasons rehearses for no more than three weeks is crippled at the onset” (Brook, 17).

When I recently reread Peter Brook’s *The Empty Space*, his words “...crippled at the onset” rang in my head. He goes on to describe Russian theatre companies taking years to rehearse plays and the Berliner Ensemble spending twelve months to create each new work. This generous length of time spent in production made me think of similar rehearsal models used by contemporary devising companies¹—now decades later. Even though we are not ruled by the same economic drives as professional theatre, I started to think about how our self-imposed time limitations for rehearsing scripted plays in the academy may be reducing artistic exploration or even limiting holistic learning for our students by reducing collaboration amongst all the artists.

I began considering how one might combine a traditional, scripted play rehearsal process of four to six weeks (the usual academic model) with a devising creation-rehearsal process, as I prepared to direct the scripted play

1 Devising is still a relatively new term to many. Although difficult to define, devising consists of collaboratively creating new work that is performed by the majority of the creators.

Dog Sees God: Confessions of a Teenage Blockhead in the winter of 2007. How might one embrace the ever-present time and space restraints that exist in *academia* while increasing opportunities for artistic experimentation for our students? How might we expand direct collaboration between actors and designers in order to give everyone a more holistic experience in theatre making? And how might a rehearsal schedule better accommodate the numerous conferences, breaks and exams already scheduled into our academic lives?

This article aims to begin a discourse about how we have traditionally rehearsed plays and how we might imagine different rehearsal processes, while also examining some of the motivating factors behind the dominant rehearsal process. I discovered that by simply extending the length of the rehearsal model by inserting four weeks of breaks, which allow our subconscious to continue to enrich the work as we indirectly develop the production, we can gain deeper artistic quality within the same amount of rehearsal time. Therefore, I propose the following hybrid rehearsal schedule consisting of alternating two-week blocks of on-time and off-time, concluding with two weeks on (including all technical rehearsals). In short, the time in the rehearsal space remains the same, but the duration of the rehearsal process extends by four weeks. Time off means the artists do not meet collectively to rehearse, but individually each artist continues to work directly on the play (self-rehearsing, designing, meeting with the director, etc.) and indirectly as their subconscious continues to investigate the play.

In addition, I will analyze the specific advantages and disadvantages of the current dominant process and compare them to this proposed hybrid process, which is currently in the experimental phase and is not intended to become a replacement, but an alternative to investigate. As Anne Bogart states in *A Director Prepares*, “When in doubt, I look for the courage, in that moment to take a leap; articulate a thing, even if I’m not sure it is right or even appropriate” (48). I share this exploration before it is complete in order to invite the reader to contribute to this dialogue. The precise structure of the method in terms of how much time on and time off is most effective remains in question and needs to be explored over a wide range of production styles and types of plays.

The Problem

The traditional rehearsal process contains numerous obstacles to collaboration. First, as mentioned, collaboration is limited by time and space. Second, production meetings and design deadlines normally occur before rehearsals begin in order to give shops the necessary lead time to construct sets and costumes. Due to this time restraint, designers rely

heavily on their research skills (artworks, novels, consulting specialists, online image banks, etc.) in order to respond to the text but do not have an opportunity to react to live bodies moving and speaking in space². Third, actors lack time for character physicality to settle deep into their bodies and can fall into the trap of sticking with early choices as a result of opening night anxiety. Finally, in the current rehearsal process, the two relatively separate worlds of acting and design rarely meet in the same space, except for perhaps a presentation of models and renderings at the first read-through as designers illustrate the physical world of the play which the actors will inhabit. Although the director and stage manager act as a bridge between these worlds, our current process engenders very little direct actor-designer collaboration and limits opportunity for designer-designer collaboration, as the majority of time in production meetings deals with scheduling and problem-solving.

The traditional model has dominated our professional and academic rehearsal spaces for years, because it works by focusing artistic energy on efficiently generating a product. Scenic and costume shops embrace its clear scheduling benefits. With designs due by the first day of table work, the shops usually have six full weeks for building. In addition, presenting models and renderings of the physical world at the beginning of the rehearsal process forms a strong foundation for all of the members of the production. Most importantly, theatre artists know and understand this system as it has been taught to generations of theatre practitioners in colleges across the United States.

The traditional model, however, also contains disadvantages. I believe theatre suffers from this gap in direct actor-designer collaboration. What if our designers also had an opportunity to try choices in a three-dimensional, tangible setting—a rehearsal space—like our actors do? For example, rather than holding fittings in the costume shop outside of rehearsal, what if the costumer explored his or her choices with the actors while working on the play in rehearsal? How might we encourage designers to play with different choices during the early stages of rehearsal? Might a direct involvement in the design process enable actors to live in their costumes more effectively?

Another disadvantage of the traditional model results in the actors having less time for their subconscious to work on a role as they make discoveries in each rehearsal. Most actors (and directors) have experienced

2 The addition of responding to the live rehearsal is not intended to replace the designers' traditional research, rather it simply supplies one more source of stimulus for designers to respond to in their designs; it adds another layer to their process.

the gut twisting moment when a deeper, more interesting choice floats up to their consciousness—two weeks after the production has closed. Finally, the traditional model privileges the hierarchal power of the director. While many will argue for the value of the director's powerful position, I posit that the director can maintain a leadership role while also inviting more collaboration between designers and actors.

Devising provides a very different model for creating and rehearsing theatrical works, yet aspects of that process can be adapted to scripted plays in order to expand collaboration. A discussion of an established devising rehearsal process is much more complicated, as no singular method exists. However, many devising processes have similarities that can be translated to the hybrid process. Most devising methods consist of four phases: research, creation, development and rehearsal and can last from one day to one year (or longer). While this length of time makes devising new works prohibitive for many institutions, many of its benefits can be applied to scripted works through this proposed hybrid process.

Most devisers value presence, in the belief that the creators of a work should be together in a shared space during creation. In this way many devisers become performance writers who write with all the languages of the stage (costumes, sets, sound, lights, props) rather than only text. In this manner, design occurs at the moment of creation, inextricably linking it to the text, rather than placing design on top of the already existing text. This collaboration allows theatre artists to work as both generalists and specialists; it blurs the boundaries of traditional theatre roles of actor, director, designer and playwright. Often, during the research and creation phase, small groups of devisers collaborate to generate material which is then presented to all the devisers, who react and exchange ideas. But as the process shifts into the development and finally rehearsal phases, the artists often shift back into their specialty area—actors focus on acting, designers on designing and the director on directing. For many ensemble companies, devising stands on one simple premise—a belief in collective intelligence and collaboration.

Devising also presents numerous disadvantages and challenges to making theatre. Of course, the duration of the process tops the list. Collaboration takes time, which is often time and space prohibitive. Devising also obfuscates traditional theatre roles of actor, designer, playwright and designer, which can lead to a lack of clarity in responsibility and power for decision making, which can lead to *transgressions* in the theatre world—designers offering acting ideas or design ideas with other designers, and actors sharing design thoughts with designers. Most devising, however, views this interaction as positive collaboration rather than artistic affront. In short, devising is messy; it strives to keep answers at bay in order to

dig deeper into questions. Devising processes are also less known to theatre artists in the United States, as many are just now hearing about devising for the first time. Few university programs are preparing theatre artists to work in this manner³, so it is new and unknown, which makes it intimidating for some students and academics alike.

The Hybrid Process

This proposed hybrid process aims to combine the benefits from both the traditional rehearsal process and the devising process, as well as address their disadvantages by forming a new approach to rehearsing scripted plays for those numerous theatre artists and educators who want to encourage more collaboration within the artistic team but are not necessarily interested in devising new works. The hybrid process can be adapted to a shorter amount of time in the rehearsal space as determined by the needs of each production, but for this article, I will focus on a six week rehearsal schedule broken up into three blocks of two weeks on separated by two weeks off, making the duration of the entire process ten weeks.

One significant reason for working in this manner resides in an underlying belief in the power of the subconscious in art making. Although the actors, designers and director don't meet collectively during the time off, each artist's subconscious continues to delve deeper into the problems of the play, solving design challenges and digging deeper into layers of subtext. Even while sleeping, the director has additional time to unravel relationships and metaphors in the writing, to see more specificity in stage pictures—in short, to delve deeper into forms and signs to extrapolate content. Through individual studio time, the characters become entrenched in the bodies of the actors and constant repetition of the text creates muscle memory so they own their lines. Designers can combine their research with what they have witnessed in the rehearsal studio and can adjust and modify their initial designs as rehearsals progress.

The second significant reason to work in this manner lies in presence—in the benefit of having everyone together in the room at the beginning of the process. For designers, this convening means that their designs can be based on interacting with the actors, other designers and the director during the first two-week block of rehearsals. In the hybrid process, final designs are not due until the end of the third week. This timing allows the designers to present initial designs to the whole company at the end

3 For more discussion on this issue, see "Preparing to Devise" in *Theatre Topics* 19.2.

of week two after they have collaborated on the script through daily interaction with the actors and director through exploring the play on its feet. Week three allows the director to respond to original design drafts and elicit final drafts by the end of the week. At that point, the shops still have seven weeks to build the designs.

These first two weeks are paramount for the designers, in fact, I give designers priority during the first two weeks; rehearsals become their laboratory for experimentation. I encourage the designers (and actors) to embrace a *sketch approach* to their work—to generate numerous ideas without becoming too married to any one choice.⁴ If they want to see or work a moment or scene again, they are given the right to ask for us to repeat that moment. They are encouraged to play with choices, often reacting in real time to choices the actors or other designers themselves make. For example, if the costume designer sees a moment today, s/he can bring in a fabric piece or costume element for the actor to explore tomorrow (or those options might already be pulled and on a rack in the space so the actor and designer can explore multiple choices during that days' rehearsal). Or a sound designer might observe the tempo-rhythm and mood of an entrance or exit and play multiple sound choices as the actor repeatedly rehearses that entrance or exit. A set designer might have stock elements in the studio to explore different segments of text from different vertical levels or different spatial relationships to objects. Responding to breathing, moving, speaking bodies in space rather than words on a page provides additional stimulus for the designers' intuition.

The designers have already studied the text and done additional research in preparation for this first block of rehearsals, now their sketch pads can be filled with visual responses to three-dimensional space. Or they might sketch with other forms such as real scenic objects, sound effects or songs, costume elements or light looks during the rehearsal. Since most student designers are not usually trained to work in this manner, it can be challenging to encourage them to view these rehearsals as an opportunity to play, to try choices. But when they embrace the idea that the studio presents a laboratory environment, which embraces both exploration and failure through this sketch approach, they often

4 This first rehearsal block encourages designers to explore numerous ideas before the time consuming process of producing renderings, elevations, mixed sound cues and plots begins. Once time is invested, flexibility and collaboration often declines—it is usually quite difficult to make significant adjustments to a final draft. This *sketching on your feet* approach also allows designers to incorporate elements of many different ideas/sketches into their first design drafts.

respond with child-like joy in the adventure and feel more invested in the production as a whole.

All the while, the designers and actors speak to each other, asking “How did that work for you? Did that choice give you any ideas? What do you need from me in this moment?” Of course, the director participates in these conversations and reacts to choices the designers make just as s/he would react to choices the actors make in this early stage of exploratory work. This collaboration yields a number of benefits. Because the design responds to acting choices as well as the written text, it becomes inextricably linked to performance. Characters begin to form from this collaboration in the early weeks of rehearsal; scenic elements evolve out of a scene’s emotional needs; sound design choices inform the duration of a moment; lighting looks can open the director’s and actors’ interpretation to a moment through playing it in two or three different colors, angles or isolations; and, costume elements inform physicality from the very beginning. In short, this process of actors responding to designers, designers reacting to actors, and designers riffing off other designers, increases the stimulus for reactions for all the artists.



**Theory Put into Practice—*Dog Sees God:
Confessions of a Teenage Blockhead***

I first put the hybrid process into action while directing *Dog Sees God: Confessions of a Teenage Blockhead* by Burt Royal at Western Washington University’s Underground Theatre—a blackbox theater with flexible

seating. Royal's play takes inspiration from Charles Shultz's Peanuts gang and imagines them in today's high school reality. Eight characters explore sexuality, identity, homophobia, loss and other issues our young people confront today. The play occurs in numerous locations including a park, Marcy's house-party, a high school cafeteria, music room and hallway, a dog's grave in CB's backyard and others. Like all plays, it presents its share of design, acting and directing challenges, such as quickly transitioning between nineteen scenes in an eighty-minute play. The script bookends with a letter to and from CB's pen pal (C.S.), so the entire play can be viewed as a memory play, which opens the work to theatrical interpretation.

The *Dog Sees God* rehearsals explored the hybrid process through the following schedule. The first two-week block of rehearsals focused on character, design, and movement exploration and experimentation. Actors came to rehearsal on-book, although they had been cast weeks earlier and were expected to be familiar with their lines. Design sketches were due at the end of the first week of rehearsal; preliminary drafts were due at the end of the second week of rehearsal; final designs were due at the end of the third week of the process (after having one week off). The stage management team and I held weekly production meetings with designers outside of rehearsals; actors were invited to design meetings but rarely attended (this presents an academic goal for the future). We were off for the third and fourth weeks, which included our regional KCACTF trip; this removed the issue of missing a week's rehearsal for those students attending KCACTF. Production meetings continued during this time off, and actors held individual character sessions with the director to discuss their research and personal rehearsal time. Byron Yee, the actor playing Van, states, "I liked that the first block was very much a discovery and *play time*. These first two weeks were less about the actors and more about the designers. I had less pressure to *act well*. Time off was utilized fully to do research."

The fifth and sixth week of the process (block two) focused on working rehearsals and preliminary runs with designers present. At this point, the designers were no longer required to attend every rehearsal, only periodic run-throughs, but they were welcome at all rehearsals. This allowed the designers to balance their time between being present at rehearsal or present in the shops helping to realize their designs. Having had two weeks off to complete memorization, I asked the actors to be off-book at the beginning of block two, which meant they were off book for six weeks before the production opened, by which time they certainly owned their lines.

The seventh and eighth weeks off included finals week and spring break, which allowed the students to focus their energies more directly on their studies while still indirectly working on the play. The process concluded with block three, the ninth and tenth weeks, which continued with working rehearsals and run-throughs and included all technical rehearsals, leading up to opening night. Weekly production meetings were held throughout the entire ten-week process.

Process and Production Benefits

The hybrid model strongly benefitted our process and production, specifically through its increased creativity resulting from actor-designer direct collaboration and increased designer to designer collaboration. For example, the scenic designer and I had discussed the idea of the high school setting representing the monolith of the characters' world. We had envisioned a large up-center brick wall with recognizable, institutional front stairs leading up to it. But we had not solved the issue of multiple locations changing fluidly and quickly. Should we use wagons? Multiple settings? Fortunately, the set designer was present during the first week of rehearsals when the actor playing CB raised the question, "What is inside CB that is yearning to get out?" These words sparked an idea for the set designer, and he joined our conversation. We discussed the possibility of CB's transformation being signified through the transformation of the set, so as CB came out sexually, so would locales from his memory, which would all be housed within the institutional high school monolith set. The scenic designer began sketching images as we spoke, illustrating lockers, a cafeteria serving station and table, a piano and characters emerging from the large upstage wall and stair units. The actor playing CB and I responded with other moments when people or objects might roll or pop out of the set. The next day the set designer had preliminary design drafts that drove the remainder of the scenic design work. The costume designer also responded with an image of CB removing layers of clothing as the play progressed as well.

The process also compelled all of the artists to come together and have an opportunity to respond emotionally to the text during these early rehearsals, in order to set the tone for our collaboration. The actors, designers, stage management team and director used elements of Anne Bogart's source work technique during the first week to explore visually and aurally the world of the play. We each brought in lists we had created that answered the question, "When I think about high school I see, I hear, I smell, I taste . . ." This collaborative discussion, which took only part of one rehearsal, influenced many aspects of both the production's design and acting. The discussion about the particular sound of lockers



meant we needed real lockers for CB and Matt to interact with in the high school halls. The smell of cigarette and pot smoke, already called for in the script, encouraged us to go bigger with that choice. The female actors and designers discussed how many women smoked in their high schools, which spurred me to research and discover that teenage women are the fastest growing population of smokers in the United States. So every woman in the production smoked at one time or another. Our discussion of popular bands influenced our sound design; the visual memory images of exposed skin influenced our costume design; and memories of standing around poorly lit parking lots influenced the lighting for the park scene. From a holistic educational point of view, this collaboration inspired me. Designers were thinking like actors and actors were thinking like designers. The students were artists creating one work together, rather than focusing only on their particular role as actor, manager or designer; they were collaborating on a deep level.

Costume exploration in the first two weeks of rehearsal also yielded a wide range of benefits for the production for individual artists. A discussion with the actor playing CB about emotional openness and hiding spurred the costume designer to bring in a hooded sweatshirt for CB at the third rehearsal. This single piece became a driving force in the actor's entire gestural life; it became his armor to apply or remove based on who he interacted with in a scene. This one-on-one collaboration also encouraged more ownership for the production from both the designer and the actors by exploring a collaborative costume design approach. The contemporary nature of the play called for more shopping than

costume construction, so the costume designer scheduled shopping trips with the actors. She presented her final renderings to the actors which were specific and clearly communicated in order to shop for the character and not the actor. The actors were also able to use the shopping trips as character study exercises—going shopping with a friend—as the character and exploring clothing options together.

The fifth week of rehearsal also included a significant collaboration between the lighting designer and the actress playing CB's Sis who is the sole member of the high school's drama club. The ninth scene of the play consists of CB's Sis rehearsing a solo performance-art piece. After much discussion in production meetings, the lighting designer asked for the opportunity to bring a single ETC source-four instrument into the rehearsal and play the scene in a spot light from the grid, as if CB's Sis had asked a friend to run spot for her as she rehearsed. Suddenly, the entire stage space opened up to the actress and the theatricality of the spot light opened her to play larger than life choices, such as personifying the platypus she conjures in the solo. The work in this scene then influenced her entire interpretation of the character. From a design standpoint, the final gain for our production of *Dog Sees God* benefited the shops. Even though students were gone for spring break and KCACTF, the shops had finalized designs to work with from seven weeks before opening.

The expanded time frame also benefited the actors by compelling them to go deeper into more interesting choices. T'ai Hartley, the actor playing Matt states:

In that last block [of rehearsal] I wasn't nearly as worried as I normally am because the text and blocking and such was already so in my bones that all I was doing was finding new things and building on top of the foundation we had laid earlier. Whereas for most shows, I might still be working on the foundation three weeks before opening night.

Few actors want to play the same choices over and over, so they brought new discoveries into each new block of rehearsals. This resulted in highly theatrical choices which I doubt we would have discovered if we only had six weeks to rehearse. For example, instead of standing in the park to talk to CB's Sis, the actor playing Van, a wannabe Buddhist, chose to practice yoga and smoke a joint while doing an earstand as they spoke. When Matt threatened Beethoven in the music room to stay away from CB, the actor jumped on the piano. During the off weeks, the actor had time to train his body to leap onto the piano and then step down to Beethoven's bench for dramatic effect, a physically challenging and complicated stage movement.

Finally, the extended rehearsal process also benefitted me as the director. My most interesting staging ideas came during our blocks

of time off as I rode my bike to work, or in the initial moments after awakening. After the production closed, I read an article in *The New Yorker* by Jonah Lehrer titled “The Eureka Hunt,” which detailed the brain science behind what Lehrer calls the “moments of insight” in our lives. The article explained that our best solutions to problems occur when we are at our most relaxed, and when we are not thinking about the problem, in short, when our subconscious is hard at work. Lehrer writes, “If we’re stuck on a difficult problem, it’s better to set the alarm clock a few minutes early so that we have time to lie in bed and ruminate. We do some of our best thinking when we’re still half asleep” (43). This is why many of our moments of insight come while we are in the shower, out running or lying in bed on a lazy Sunday morning thinking about nothing in particular. The brain is relaxed and, therefore, open to intuitive problem-solving.



These moments led me to images of stopping the play and cracking it open to expand its theatricality. For example, when CB purposely kisses Beethoven at Marcy’s party to confront the other characters’ homophobia, I worked with the actors and lighting and sound designers to replay the kiss in a variety of styles in order to allow the audience to witness each character’s reaction to the kiss. This action opened the fluidity of time, so suddenly time could be paused, rewound or fast forwarded. In another moment at school as the trombone-sounding teacher asks the characters how they feel about Beethoven’s suicide, we stopped the play again for Beethoven to enter (via CB’s imagination) and dance with CB—a fantasy image of prom that could never exist in the homophobic world of this play.

Teaching and Learning Benefits

A number of additional benefits are inherent within this style of rehearsing—all associated with teaching and learning. Metacognition research tells us that contemplative periods of reflection are key to learning. Time on followed by immediate time off follows the model for assessment and praxis, allowing reflection time to negotiate rehearsal discoveries and

analyze how those discoveries came about and how they can influence the progress of the production; reflection time for how we learn benefits students and professors alike. Time off, indirectly working on the play, naturally lends itself to analyzing how we work collaboratively as artists and what areas need improvement for the next block of rehearsals in the studio together. The process builds in the expectation that adjustments to the objectives for each new rehearsal block will be negotiated by the director. Teaching and learning is about constant revision.

The hybrid process supports the students' need for balance between classroom and rehearsal responsibilities; it is more student friendly. Many of us have witnessed and experienced students' class-work suffering as a production nears technical rehearsals and opening. The off periods allow students to concentrate more energy on classes to catch up on readings or papers or even work ahead in anticipation of each new rehearsal block. Fostering these skills of time management and organization help promote self-reliance and self-assessment from our students. In addition, the expectation that actors will continue to develop their characters physically and verbally through private rehearsal time, accompanied with scheduled meetings with the director, also advances the student-actor's agency. The same is true with student designers who are empowered to balance their time between attending rehearsal run-throughs and overseeing the shops' progress with their designs.

Finally, as a teaching tool, the hybrid process engenders a holistic approach to theatre making. Students are pushed to break out of their specialty areas and gain a broader understanding of the diversity of thinking necessary to mount a full production. Actors learn some of the language of designers and experience through collaboration how a designer's emotional response to a text and rehearsal transforms into line, form, color and texture. Likewise, designers witness the actors' struggles as they delve into failure in order to emerge and embody the character. All artists gain a stronger respect and understanding of one another's creative process either by passively witnessing that process or actively engaging in the process through debate and discussion. In sum, trust takes time. For the designers to truly trust the actors, for the actors to truly trust the designers, and for everyone to trust the director, time is needed to develop the relationships that form the foundation of trust.

Questions Driving Future Explorations

As I stated at the beginning of this article, I have presented this hybrid process in its experimental stage. From our experience with *Dog Sees God*, I will make considerable adjustments to this process for the next production I direct. For example, the time off yielded more advancement than I had

anticipated, so I might consider shortening the final off period from two weeks to one week, which might necessitate moving design due dates ahead (depending on production requirements and shop schedules). If others decide to experiment with this process, I am curious about the effects of lengthening or shortening the time off periods throughout the process. When providing feedback to the process, some actors felt imbalanced by having observers present during the first week (usually when an actor is the most terrified, feeling the most lost). So I wonder if scheduling one or two rehearsals for just the actors and director during the first week would be beneficial, or if I should emphasize the importance of actors and designers alike being uncomfortably vulnerable during that initial sketching block. While most designers actively participated in the first two weeks of rehearsal, when they sat and observed, I often wondered if this was the best use of their time. Finally, I am still searching for ways to entice the actors to attend more production meetings, so they can fully experience and appreciate the design process.

Many questions about the validity of this process for different styles of productions also come to mind. Does this process only work for contemporary, smaller cast plays—for shop-and-pull costume shows only? *Dog Sees God* was scheduled in the spring; how might a similar process work for a show in early fall when students and faculty are away for the summer, or can it? Does this script-centered process transfer into the professional world of rehearsing plays, or is it only suited for *academia*? How does a hybrid process work in a full season when other colleagues choose to rehearse with the traditional six-week straight-through rehearsal process?

I intend to explore and revisit these issues empirically in my next directing process. My hope in writing this article is to entice the reader to question how to rehearse scripted works, why rehearse this way, and what alternatives might work better to experiment with artistic exploration. For the sake of enhanced creativity through increased collaboration, artistic production benefits and deeper teaching and learning, let us not enter into another rehearsal process that is “crippled at the onset” by restricted time when we can liberate ourselves by formulating another approach to rehearsing plays.

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Support for Actors

KEN WOMBLE

Most directors are after the same thing: an amazing show. A show that is astounding at every level. A show that inspires, thrills, educates and illuminates. A show that is simply brilliant.

Inspired by the director's vision, numerous elements go into creating such a production: scenery, lighting, sound, costumes—and great acting. Great acting can transform a production that may not have the budget for a striking set or grand costumes. It is an element of the theatre than can move an audience like no other.

As a professional actor for fifteen years I very much appreciated the value of acting. In fact, I was one of those actors who were “hooked.” I wanted to act—and only act. My interest in directing was slim to none.

Then in the mid 1990's, a friend who taught at the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute asked me to take her place teaching film acting. So, I started teaching and directing for the first time—and very quickly found two new passions.

Soon after leaving Strasberg I landed a job as performing arts director at a California private school and later as a theatre instructor at a community college. I started directing non-stop, from six to twelve plays every year. Eight years later I had directed over fifty plays—quite a transformation for someone who hadn't had much interest in directing!

When I started directing I realized that my perspective as a director was greatly influenced by my experiences as an actor. Naturally, I felt a strong connection with actors, and I began to make some interesting discoveries.

One discovery was how much actors appreciated my listening to their ideas. “Wow!” I thought, “Does that mean most directors don't really

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listen to actors?" Then I remembered some of the directors I had worked with and realized, unfortunately, that this had been my experience more often than not.

By listening to actors' interpretative ideas—what they think about their characters, how they perceive their relationships, their suggestions for blocking—I saw an atmosphere of trust and respect being formed. And, I began to notice that actors not only appreciated being listened to, but they seemed to feel freer to *create*.

I think it's important to remember that actors are at the very center of the creative process. Yet, sometimes during a production their input is diminished.

What are some other ways a director can support actors and help them do their best work?

Make the actors collaborators

For me, collaboration starts in auditions by talking to actors about how they see their roles. At callbacks I'll often have an actor I'm even a little interested in give multiple readings and ask her to make adjustments to her reading. This is also a good way for me to see how malleable she is, and how well she takes direction—providing a preview of how she will be to work with in rehearsals. Although there is often a need on the actor's part to keep her reading similar to what she did before (understandable since that's what got her the callback), I want the actor to show me something different. And my experience is that a good actor will do just that.

After the first readthrough I will ask actors to share their view of the play, its theme and major action and their characters' wants and needs. Sometimes, at this point, actors want to know all the answers to objectives, tactics, obstacles, relationships and on and on. It is as if they think these answers are set in stone and never waiver. From my initial work on the script I'll have some *ideas* about answers, but I don't want to share all these ideas with the actors just yet. I want us to *discover* the answers together through rehearsing the play.

For me the most effective way to explore the play is to get actors on their feet, with book in hand, as soon as possible. Some directors disagree, but I don't think it important for actors to get off book early. I just want them to really talk to, and listen to, each other. The time to do this work is early in the process before repetition has created ingrained line readings and *de facto* choices. I want actors to really take each other in and allow himself to be surprised in early rehearsals.

After this initial stage I'll block the show then go on to moment-to-moment work. This is the second opportunity for the actors and I to explore possibilities and start to find answers, still in the spirit of discovery.

During these rehearsals I'll ask actors to play new objectives and tactics, and we'll use improvisations to discover more possibilities. I encourage actors to let me know what they need during this period. Do they think playing the scene with *opposite* motivations will open a door to some truth? Will playing an "overdo" improv (where actors take each physical and emotional action to an extreme) help?

During this critical period in rehearsals there can be a lure to set things solidly in place, because technical rehearsals are right around the corner and then opening night. However, there is still time for creative inspiration, and because the actors and the director know the play better than they did weeks earlier, there is more *possibility* for inspiration to occur.

Encourage actors and value their talent

I believe it's important for directors to give actors as much encouragement as possible—because acting is hard! Michael Howard, my marvelous former acting teacher in New York, used to say that acting was hard because of the many demands required of actors. An actor's work is both immediate—it happens NOW every time—and direct—the actor faces a live group of people every performance. And if an actor is working creatively onstage and really listening to the other actors, taking logical *actions* (not just "acting") and staying emotionally available to the events of the play, he puts himself in a vulnerable position. As directors we should support actors' emotional risk-taking in rehearsals, so these rich moments show up in performance, too.

As an actor I had always felt the pressure of how difficult acting was. As a director that pressure was lifted, although for a long time I thought this ironic, because I had much more responsibility as a director. Eventually, I realized that I had felt pressure as an actor, because I was, in a sense, ultimately and finally responsible to the audience. The director wasn't up there on stage with me; neither were the designers, the stage manager nor the stage crew. As the only participants in the theatre who have direct contact with the audience, actors are the immediate and final interpreters of a play. That's quite a responsibility!

Actors should also know their individual talent is valued. A director should point out to the actor the unique qualities he brings to the role. I don't mean insincere flattery. I do mean it's helpful and supportive to the actor for the director to actually say those things she may be thinking but never says. For example, in a comedy a director might point out what incredible comic timing an actor has in an effort to get him to trust his instincts. By stressing an actor's strong points, especially when struggling with a scene, the director helps an actor create confidence, and confidence encourages creative risk taking.

Help create a sense of ensemble

This one most of us know. The theatre is all about ensemble; by working as one cohesive unit a group of actors creates something larger than the sum of the individual parts. I know I have experienced this phenomenon many times, and I've found that most casts eventually create an ensemble among themselves.

However, a director should take the lead in creating an ensemble by setting up a sharing, caring atmosphere. This means insisting on mutually respectful behavior among the company. And, it all comes from the top. The company will take the director's cue. If the director has a commanding air and doesn't treat everyone with respect some cast members won't treat each other with respect. Just as in a classroom setting when, in the first few days, students size up the teacher to determine what the etiquette for the class is going to be, actors size up the director and see what the etiquette for the rehearsal process is going to be—and respond in kind. So, it's important from the very beginning for the director to establish the sense that “we're all important—and we're all in this together.”

Ask questions to *motivate*, rather than dictate

Directors should also strive to ask questions of the actors, not just give directions. Asking questions opens up a world of possibilities and makes an actor *justify* everything she says, does and thinks on stage.

In early rehearsals I will ask actors what is going on in the scene (given circumstances), what they want (objective) and what's in the way of getting it (obstacle). As an actor describes his needs for the scene I continue to ask questions: “How are you going to get that? Why do you want it? What will happen if you don't get it?” I will continue to ask relevant questions throughout rehearsals, stopping actors in mid-scene when necessary, until they and I find answers that are rooted in truth and create believable, motivated behavior.

Support actors in using themselves to create characters

I believe it vital that directors support actors in creating fully realized characters with specific physical and vocal qualities. A director should challenge actors to use their own voice and their own body for their characters, not just an “idea” of the character based on descriptions in the script or from watching other actors' performances.

In a production I recently directed at my university one of the actors was playing a middle-aged father. His character was an old fashioned guy who tried (not too successfully) to use some of the hip language his college-aged daughter used—and his attempts at humor would be considered by most to be pretty lame.

I cast an actor in his early twenties to play the role. In his initial work the actor had a good sense of the character's wit and constantly cracked everyone up in rehearsal. However, he was creating more an *idea* of a somewhat silly, middle-aged man than a real person. So, I asked him to use himself more fully; to stop pushing the jokes so hard and to let go of the gruff voice and the self conscious, stiff walk. These were all *ideas* of character. Instead, I asked him to use his own personal traits in creating the role, to imagine how *he* might be walking, talking and reacting in twenty years. After all, I reminded him, I had cast him, because he was very much like his character in spirit, if not in age and appearance.

Although it was uncomfortable for him at first, the actor eventually started to let go of these clichés and ideas of character and began to really use *himself* in the role. He relaxed physically and started to work on an injury the character had, by making it specific and placing it in a particular spot on his leg. This gave him a slight limp and enough physical life to create a believable middle-aged walk and body. I also asked him to stop using an unauthentic character voice. He discovered that his own voice (which was actually quite mature sounding), when fully committed to the truth of the text, was enough. And instead of pushing the comic lines, he let the character's silliness and lack of awareness speak for itself.

He got one of his biggest laughs when his character is trying to be hip with his daughter's friend by describing how delicious an anchovy pizza looks: "Cowabunga, fishalicious!" he exclaims, while his daughter and her friend stare at him, stone faced. In early rehearsals he had played the idea of the character's motivation by pushing the punch line and using a character voice rather than his own. When I asked him to play the character's real intention (thinking that by using "cool" language he could better relate to the kids) the line came across simply and truthfully—and consistently got a great laugh. By not pushing and working with the character's true intention, the actor gave the audience a real moment not just an idea of one.

He went on to give a funny, genuine portrayal of a middle-aged man—quite an accomplishment for an actor in his early twenties.

Be willing to work in the actor's state of being

Another way a director can support actors is by working with them in a creative and emotionally vulnerable state. When I am working effectively as an actor, this is the state I am in. I am physically relaxed; I am emotionally involved with the scene (event), with the other actors (relationship) and with what I want to accomplish (objective). I am seeking connection to all these things *and* to my own emotions. I am necessarily in a very

subjective state of being, and am not “social” the way I would be in most situations.

When I am directing, I tend to be in a very different state: I’m more emotionally detached; I’m looking at the big picture; and I’m seeking *results*. However, because I also want to get the best results possible from the actor, I want to enter her world, too. This means that part of me must stay open and vulnerable and *sensitive* to the actor. If she needs to try a different choice for a moment, I’ll let her; if she needs time to just breathe and become more focused, I’ll give it to her; if she wants to play something radically different from what I’ve given her—just to see if it works; I’ll take the time to see it. And, because I am relaxed and focused on the actor, I’m better able to connect emotionally to, and really *see*, what she is attempting in the scene. When directors are lucky enough to have actors who work this way, I believe they must fully support them.

There will be times as a director (as there have been for me), when the pragmatist inside says “No, we don’t have time to try that; we’re on a schedule!” However, taking the time to try that new moment or choice may result in something wonderful and unexpected: a delightful surprise that makes the performance, and the show, better.

Along this same line, a director should be aware of maintaining the actor’s line of concentration as much as possible. For example, a director should be conscious of when a rehearsal is flowing, when the actors are focused and concentrated. These are often the moments when inspiration happens, when something is created purely in the moment, unconsciously. A director should be aware of not stopping the scene in these moments. He should let the actors go, even if there are mistakes like missed lines or wrong blocking.

These are the magic moments, a big part of the exploration process of rehearsals, and the director should be there for the actors when they happen.

Closing thoughts

Rehearsing in the actor-centered way I’ve been discussing can sometimes be a challenge for directors. There may be a temptation to skip the things we’re not good at, or don’t think we have time for. However, these are often the very things we *should* be working on with young actors—because they can create wonderful results.

I believe that by serving actors, the central participants in the theatre, we better serve the play. And, by serving the play we ultimately satisfy, entertain and enrich our audience.

“Living from Moment to Moment”: Kermit Sheets, Theatre and the Fine Arts at Waldport, 1942–1946

ANDREW RYDER

*“I know of no greater idealism than that which believes in a better future
although it is surrounded by hopeless circumstances.”*

—Konstantin Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*

Introduction

In February, 1946, six performances of Anton Chekhov’s *Seagull* were given near Cascade Locks, Oregon, a small town on the Columbia River. In itself, this is unremarkable; by that point the Russian playwright was well-known in the United States through tours of the Moscow Art Theatre, English translations and other American productions. One thing was remarkable: the performers and primary audience were internees at a Civilian Public Service (CPS) camp for conscientious objectors (COs). Some of the participants had recently been released but had chosen to remain in order to complete the performances of the play. Several went on to create theatre and other art in their post-war careers. One of them was named Kermit Sheets, a high school teacher of “diction, public speaking, and drama” (Barber et al. 219) who entered CPS with what he described as only an “academic” experience of theatre (Sheets, Interview). He would go on to direct plays, act in films, and work intensely with two theatre companies which were at the heart of the San Francisco arts scene in the 1950s and 60s.

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Kermit Sheets was drafted during the summer of 1941. In defending his beliefs to his local draft board in Exeter, California, Sheets, then 26, wrote,

I believe that war is a complete denial of what Jesus Christ lived and died for; the antithesis of physical, moral, and spiritual growth; disloyalty to the best interests of my country and the democratic ideal; and treason against the human family, which is above all nations. ("Special Form" 1)

Based on his answers, Sheets was classified "IV-E," Selective Service's code for COs unwilling to accept alternative service in the military, and was placed within the new system of CPS camps. Expecting to serve no more than one year, in spite of the recent entrance into the war by the United States, Sheets entered the camp near Cascade Locks, Oregon on January 7, 1942. He transferred in June of 1944 to Camp Waldport, on the Oregon coast, and remained there until late 1945, when it closed and he was transferred back to Cascade Locks. He was officially discharged from there on January 23, 1946, but remained at the camp long enough to perform as Trigorin in the *Seagull* production from February 21-26.

What could have been so compelling that a man who had been more or less incarcerated for four years should delay leaving even when released, particularly when some of his colleagues had already "walked out" over their objections to war, the CPS system, and their treatment? To answer this question, we have to look at the background and experiences Kermit Sheets brought with him into CPS, and the people, ideas, and experiences he encountered there. In this paper, I will focus on the ways in which Kermit Sheets' ideas about the practice and purpose of theatre developed during his time in CPS through a range of experiences and a network of relationships, many of which he maintained for the rest of his life. But first, it is necessary to summarize how and why CPS was established, along with the goals of Waldport's fine arts programs.

Origins of Civilian Public Service

From the opening of the first CPS camp in May 1941, until the last one was closed in March 1947, nearly twelve thousand COs performed "work of national importance" in over one hundred locations across the United States. This program was the brainchild of a collaborative group of the historic peace churches (Mennonites, Quakers, and Brethren) who hoped to provide alternative means of service to their country for their members who had been drafted but were unwilling to serve either in combat or in "noncombatant" roles under the supervision of the US military. The majority (approximately seven thousand) of these draftees did come from one of these three churches which between them ran the majority of the camps. But thousands of COs came from other traditions, and over four hundred did not indicate any religious affiliation.

CPS was jointly administered by a coalition of these peace churches and several other groups, collectively known as the National Service Board for Religious Objectors (NSBRO), under the supervision of Selective Service. The government provided the camps and their basic equipment, and the churches ran the camps, paying the men a small stipend and providing “food, clothing, medical care, recreation and education” (Kosch 2). A “technical agency” of the government (such as the Forest Service or National Park Service, among many others) ran the work program for each camp, providing tools and equipment (and food and shelter at side camps) for men during work hours, which extended from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Saturday. COs also volunteered as smokejumpers, medical test subjects and workers in understaffed mental hospitals, among other service activities. Some of their efforts led to significant medical developments as well as reforms in the care of Americans with mental illness.

Four CPS camps were established in the state of Oregon over the course of the war; the two largest were operated by the Brethren Service Committee (BSC) and the Forest Service and hosted the most visible artistic activities within the CPS system. These camps were located at Cascade Locks on the Columbia River and Waldport on the central Oregon coast. Each camp provided similar kinds of forest work: cutting down snags (dead trees which might cause future problems by falling or fueling fires); painting signs and developing roads and trails for firefighting, logging, and recreation; fighting fires; and planting new trees in areas deforested by logging or fire.

The BSC was particularly known for its educational programs. While regulations clearly stated that CPS was “not for the spreading of pacifist beliefs” or “for the education or the development of assignees for future activities” (Kosch 1), the Brethren church considered it part of their mission to establish a series of “schools” at various camps to focus the attention of the men, to help them to contextualize and accept their situation in CPS, and to prepare them for a future within the church. While Brethren camps included many assignees who did not come from that denomination (one of the compromises the churches made in accepting the responsibility for CPS), the church wanted to advance its own ideals to a certain extent through its programs.

The Fine Arts at Waldport

These programs were also geared to the particular interests and talents of the COs. Kermit Sheets later recalled that a BSC representative asked him and fellow CO Kemper Nomland “what sort of study group [they]

would like to have.” Sheets and Nomland replied, “What about fine arts?” (Barber et al. 219). Through a complicated and lengthy process, work in the arts became part of a project called the “Fine Arts at Waldport,” an assembly of artists within CPS between 1944 and 1946 located at Camp Waldport. COs from across the country came to Oregon at the instigation of a small group of writers and artists, including Nomland and Sheets, who believed that, while they were in CPS in order to do “work of national importance,” they could make a greater and longer-lasting contribution to the national interest and a peaceful future world by creating art, and that their art would be improved and intensified by working together and talking together about their art. Writing in the prospectus distributed to recruit participants, poet and initial director William Everson described the “school” as “a grouping together of the practitioners of various art forms...following not so much schedules and classes, but the line of furthest creative activity” (4).

The project was to include: “the Literary Arts: fiction, poetry, essays and criticism; the Musical Arts: both composition and performance; the Visual Arts: painting and sculpturing; the Speech Arts: dramatics and readings; and the related fine arts crafts” (4). They were not looking for CPS members who wanted to learn to make art for the first time, though they were not willing to turn away anyone who requested a transfer and was approved by Selective Service and BSC. But the goal was to make, rather than to teach, art: “whoever comes to Waldport should come primarily to produce, or to aid in the production, of art. To this end both the serious creator and the serious student are welcome” (4). Kermit Sheets remembered it this way:

The people who got involved [in Fine Arts] were much more interested in following their particular art than in having a study group about theirs and others, so they just turned it into a producing, performing group that would get together and support each other and learn from each other. (Interview)

The participants in fine arts tended to be philosophical rather than religious pacifists, though many of them, including Sheets, had identified a religious affiliation when admitted to CPS. Sheets notes that some pacifists might have “prevaricated” concerning their religious commitments in order to get into CPS instead of prison. But he himself “awoke to a lot that I didn’t know before” as a result of “the experience of the political side of being a pacifist and change with new ideas about art and the theatre” (Barber et al. 222) which he found among Waldport’s artists.

On the whole the mission of these artists was to advance the philosophical ideals of pacifism as opposed to following specific religious guidelines, which often put the fine arts group members at odds with

the more religious campers. Of equal importance to them was their art, as they made clear in an article about the program in the CPS journal *Compass* in Spring, 1944:

We are not propagandists. We have publicly inveighed against the concept of art-as-propaganda within the pacifist movement. Art does not explain, it simply reveals, and it is by the subtle process of disclosure that it speaks so poignantly....In so far as it does that the function of art is the truest application of the pacifist principle. Yet neither art nor pacifism are essentially programs. They are attitudes toward the particular problems that beset human existence. In this context they are both continuous in time, permanent in character; and it is only the tremendous urgency of the situation involving the one, pacifism, that we who are concerned with them both are at such pains to indicate their fundamental affinity. If in so doing we tend to make the one serve the other, that is an error. It is not our intention. And we believe that in practice we respect each of them enough to preserve the essential dignity and worth they both possess. ("Fine Arts" 21-2)

Goals for Waldport Theatre

Modest theatre writing and performance had begun with Kermit Sheets and others at Cascade Locks. But with the arrival of campers recruited specifically to do theatre, and the development of the larger fine arts group at Waldport, beginning in late spring 1944, more serious work was attempted. The theatre group got its formal start with Edna St. Vincent Millay's pacifist one-act, *Aria da Capo* ("Chronology" 9). Three productions of full-length modern plays were given under the auspices of the Fine Arts group: Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*, George Bernard Shaw's *Candida* and Anton Chekhov's *Seagull*. In addition, the group sponsored a variety of play readings from the Greeks to Shakespeare to more recent plays by Shaw, Wilder and their own William Everson.

The theatre group had high ideals to match those of CPS and the larger fine arts group. One outlet through which they shared their goals with the rest of CPS was *Compass*, published from Waldport by CO and former New York actor Martin Ponch. In a piece entitled "Towards a Legitimate Theatre," published in the Spring 1944 edition, he suggested an alternative to what he called the extremes of the "inconstant amateur" and the "mercenary professional." "Why not," he wrote, turn "to the pacifist" who is likely to "...be the first to recognize that the cooperative practise [sic] of the art of the theatre is the ideal, mutually beneficial theatre-way?" (36). Ponch expanded on these ideas in the next issue of *Compass* which included a section on the work of the Fine Arts at Waldport. He also wrote more specifically about the goals of the theatre work going on there:

Visualizing theatre as the most social of the arts, the long-range hope of our drama group is to establish a theatre in the post-war world that will set a pattern to supersede that of the essentially anti-social, profit-mad, unemployment-ridden theatre of the present decade. ("Theatre" 23)

Ponch went on to outline the extensive ambitions of such a future theatre group, which "should have all the best features of a business cooperative," perform both "great classic" and "advanced new plays," and treat everyone equally in work assignments, "as the good of the group might require" (23). Finally, he spoke briefly of the perceived links between pacifism and theatre, citing Jasper Deeter's Hedgerow Theatre in Pennsylvania as a real-world example. Hedgerow actors served in at least fourteen different CPS camps, from North Carolina to New Hampshire, and from New York to California. Among these, David Jackson and Joe Gistirak transferred to be part of the Fine Arts group, where they contributed significantly to its theatre activities.

Ponch did not limit his comments to the idealized potential for theatre in a peaceful post-war world. The Waldport theatre program's more modest goals included "striving to bring to CPS entertainment on the most artistic plane attainable by the men at hand within the spare time available" (23), a description which seems much more likely to produce "inconstant amateur" results than anything else. But they hoped for something higher, and the potential of reaching that goal was increased by the arrival of Jackson and Gistirak.

The most specific list of theatre goals can be found in an undated document from the Kermit Sheets Collection at Lewis and Clark College, which states:

Our purposes in developing a theatre program as part of the fine arts activity at Waldport are:

- 1) To include this art form along with writing, painting, music, as a creative communication which can perform a useful function for the participants and the audience
- 2) To discover and assist the growth of an evolving concept of theatre
- 3) To pursue the possibilities, remote as they may seem, of organizing a theatre group, based on the above, to-be-evolved concept of theatre, which will continue after demobilization. ("Statement" 1)

Arguably, over its roughly two years of existence, all three of these goals were accomplished. Theatre *was* included in the activities of the fine arts; it helped its participants and presumably at least some of its audience members to develop their understanding of what theatre was and could be, and it led to the establishment of more than one theatre group after the war.

Kermit Sheets' Background

Born in 1915, Kermit Sheets grew up in Fresno, California, in a Christian home where “the Bible was read a lot” and he was “taught to accept what [he] read as literally true. So if you were told not to kill people and to love your enemy and all that, that was what you were supposed to do” (Barber et al. 222). Therefore, “what pacifism I had [before CPS] was religious[ly] inspired” (Interview). His family attended a church affiliated with the Disciples of Christ, a mainline protestant denomination.

Sheets spent two years at Fresno State College, where he was extremely active in theatre as a performer and technician. He described his experiences as a college actor under director John Wright at Fresno State this way:

[Wright] put on very finished productions but he read the lines for the actors to copy the way he said them. He moved around the stage to show them what the blocking of it was. Illustrated hand gestures for them and you saw a bunch of this guy's puppets. Well, the comedy worked fine. He had a sense of rhythm and it worked very good [sic] but the actor was certainly only interpretive and nothing that he'd created himself, the actor or actress. That was the way I did it when I'd direct plays in college. When I did with the students in high school before I was drafted. My productions pretty well finished I thought. (Rarey 12)

He transferred for his junior and senior years to Chapman College in Los Angeles, also affiliated with the Disciples of Christ. He graduated from there with his bachelor's degree in English in 1936 and remained in Los Angeles to pursue a Master's in Theatre at Occidental College, completing the degree by 1939 based on a thesis on the drama of Robert Sherwood. For the next two years, he worked as a drama teacher at the high school in Exeter, California, directing productions of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and Kaufman and Hart's *You Can't Take It With You*. In a newspaper clipping from the local Exeter paper, he speaks of having seen the original production of *You Can't Take It With You* on Broadway.

Kermit Sheets and CPS Theatre

Sheets was pursuing additional teaching opportunities when he was drafted in 1941. Within CPS, Sheets was never put to work out in the woods, but because of varicose veins or some other leg weakness, worked on “overhead” in the camp throughout his career, allowing him more time to work on artistic pursuits. He became a kind of specialist in the kitchen, including planning meals and ordering supplies as well as baking bread. At Cascade Locks, he was the founding library supervisor and initial Education Director. (Barber et al. 219; Kovac 98; Sheets, Interview) Prior to the arrival of the Hedgerow actors, and his transfer to Waldport, Sheets engaged in a variety of artistic pursuits, writing poetry, stories

and two satirical plays. *Stalingrad Stalemate*, written with fellow CO Harry Prochaska, was performed on October 19, 1942, and *Mikado in CPS* was performed at Cascade Locks in February 1944 and revived at Waldport in July 1944. This production was performed in part for visiting women from Portland and Seattle and featured men in all of the parts (Kovac 123). The script begins:

If you want to know who we are,
We are c o s in CPS.
While the rest of the world's at war,
We the pacifist life profess.
We're in love with our fellow man,
Whether yellow or black or tan—
We'll save the world if we can.
Oh

Because printing and publishing became such an important part of the work of the Fine Arts Group, these satirical plays (along with poetry and other kinds of writing) were printed where they could be read by members of other camps, as well as artists and writers beyond CPS. *Stalingrad Stalemate* was printed in 1943, and *Mikado in CPS* was published in February 1945. Sheets reports that the main reason for printing the play, which he describes as “a lark” and “a fun thing to do,” was to make it available to other COs who had read about it and were interested in seeing the whole thing for themselves. He also reports that it was through creating the printed version of *Mikado* that he learned to set type (Interview).

Aria Da Capo

Sheets' first experience with the former Hedgerow actors was acting as Pierrot in a September 1944 production of *Aria da Capo* by Edna St. Vincent Millay. This role might have benefited from the “posing” acting style he had learned from John Wright at Fresno State. This production was directed by David Jackson, who had arrived at Waldport in June. Rehearsals began sometime in July and performances were given at Waldport and its side camps, as well as the Elkton and Cascade Locks camps (“Chronology” 8). In a summary of theatre activity at Waldport, Sheets includes a quotation from



Aria Da Capo (LC Sheets, Box 4, #S70)

the program notes which he attributes to William Eshelman: "When they realize the truth of their actions, the two shepherds are helpless against the momentum of the game they have started, and move automatically in the irreversible machinery of destruction" ("Spoken Word" 11).

In *Aria*, the COs had found a clear and theatrical statement of their pacifist convictions, illustrating the inevitable and senseless waste of human conflict, though without providing a clear alternative other than resistance. The alternative that the arts group as a whole offered to human conflict was art. Living and working together served to strengthen their resolve in these matters, which supported the peace churches' goal of advancing the cause of pacifism and undercut the U.S. government's goal of getting their work done with minimal complications. Theatrical presentations which articulated, debated and elaborated on these pacifist ideals also would have reinforced them, as well as contributing to the ongoing and lively discussions and debates within the camps. As Warren Downs wrote, "We always felt that the CO camps were just one big bull session. There was lots of talk, lots of discussion, lots of probing of philosophies and views, opinions, ideals and so on" (Barber et al. 41).

Ghosts

The first full-length production by the Fine Arts at Waldport was begun at the instigation of Joe Gistirak, Hedgerow Theatre veteran. As producer/director, Gistirak apparently began planning to perform Ibsen's *Ghosts* shortly after his arrival in November 1944, though full preparations had to wait for the arrival of Joyce Harvey, wife of an internee. In a letter dated December 1, 1944, Adrian Wilson writes that according to Kermit Sheets, who visited her during a trip to New York, "Joyce Harvey is coming soon—in time to play Regina in Joe's production of *Ghosts* already in rehearsal" (115). In the meantime, members of the theatre group, along with a chorus made up of some of the more religious campers, had produced Martin Ponch's docudrama, *Tennessee Justice*, about the trial of a group of African-American pacifists. This piece was done at Waldport, Elkton and at a Methodist church in Eugene.

In May of 1945, Joe Gistirak's long-desired production of Ibsen's *Ghosts* was presented. The play had been performed during the seasons of 1939, 1940 and 1941 at Hedgerow, and it is possible Gistirak had been involved with some or all of these. The production at Waldport depended on the arrival of the wife of one of the campers, Joyce Harvey, who would end up performing the role of Mrs. Alving and creating the costumes. Rounding out the cast were Elizabeth "Ibby" Dupre, wife of a CO and regular participant, as Regina, Martin Ponch as Engstrand, David Jackson as Pastor Manders and Kermit Sheets as Oswald. (*Ghosts*)

A production of such a modern, psychologically complicated play as *Ghosts* would have required something new of Sheets as an actor. Unlike his previous experiences where the director made all the decisions, now the emphasis was on the individual performer's contribution. Reflecting on the change, he said actors ought to work in the following way:

In rehearsal let your intuition be active and see where it leads you and [let] the director guide where that's going but let the impulse come from you... You want to see some of the honesty of the actors on stage so what directing I've done since then has been founded on that. There's no question of the change in my work. (Rarey 14)

Sheets found that this approach resonated with his own experience "because theatre had appealed to me because of the characters." He said that as he "began to work...that way...it was a rebirth in the theatre for me" (Interview).

Reflecting on their experiences in a letter to Sheets in March, 1947, Joe Gistirak wrote:

much of what was accomplished then was due simply to the fact that there was time and time enough for the play to soak in entirely. For the material to become so much a part of us, that we could use it as freely as one hums an unconsciously remembered song from childhood...Perhaps one should approach the first reading of a new play or role with the attitude that the first few times don't count, and actively resist any feeling or idea that has a tendency to set rigidly.

In these comments, where Gistirak is looking longingly back on the best of their artistic accomplishments together, it is significant that he highlights the need to continue exploring, and to allow time to fully understand and personalize the play.

The performances of *Ghosts* were delayed because of Sheets' absence attending the funeral of his brother, who was killed when a tree rolled off a truck at a lumber mill where he was working in Redding, California (Wilson 136; Sheets, Interview). Joyce Wilson reports that she and Adrian went boating on the ocean the day of the scheduled opening. Their boat capsized, and though they made it back safely and in time for the performance, director Joe Gistirak was terribly upset that they had taken that risk, and that they had been playing around rather than preparing for the performance. She continues:

Despite our dangerous adventure, the performance went well and the audience was impressed, even the Holy Joes [the most religious campers] who had never seen a live theatre performance in their lives. One of them came up to me afterwards and expressed amazement that I could transform my usual self into the elderly impassioned Mrs. Alving, and experience such intense emotion on the stage every night. (136)

Tom Polk Miller, prompter for the production, reported that the experience “showed me for the first time what the use of sensitively measured silence between lines can do for suspense and dramatic intensity” (18). Miller went on to perform both in *Candida* for Sheets and *Seagull* for David Jackson.

Candida

The summer of 1945 saw increasing chaos in the fine arts program, as several members walked out, were arrested or refused to do their assigned Forest Service work. The end of the war in August did not bring an immediate end to CPS, and the government insisted that all military personnel be demobilized before those in CPS. So, in part inspired by the work he’d been part of so far, Kermit Sheets mounted his own production of Shaw’s *Candida*. This time none of the Hedgerow actors was involved. Gistirak had been released in June 1945, and Jackson did not participate. It’s possible that there just wasn’t the right part for him. Sheets played *Candida*’s father, Burgess, while Ibby Dupre played the title role. It appeared to William Eshelman, who played Marchbanks, *Candida*’s would-be lover, that Sheets had taken to heart what he had learned from Jackson and Gistirak: “Working with director Kermit Sheets was a revelation to the whole cast, as he brought us to an understanding of Shaw’s characters. During rehearsals we dissected every nuance of the play, line by line” (*No Silence!* 31).

The Seagull

The final theatre production of the Fine Arts at Waldport took place back at Cascade Locks. The Waldport camp was closed at the end of 1945, and those campers who had not yet been released were transferred to the Columbia River camp, some of them, including Sheets, for the second time. David Jackson’s production of Chekhov’s *Seagull* began rehearsals at Waldport, but was finally performed February 21-26, 1946 at Cascade Locks, and was apparently well-received. According to the “Chronology” assembled by Sheets and Eshelman, they wanted to perform Williams’ *Glass Menagerie* next, but were unable to get the rights because the Broadway production was still running (19). So they went with a non-royalty play in *Seagull*. Sheets performed as the moody writer and sometime lover to Arcadina,



**Kermit Sheets as Trigorin in
The Seagull. LC Blocher, EY5**

Trigorin. About 20 people were involved onstage and backstage in this production. Tom Polk Miller, who played Trepnev, described his experience acting for Sheets (in *Candida*) and Jackson:

Working with these directors I began to understand a fundamental of the serious pretense that is theater—the actors' experience, different in each performance, of between them creating character and situation before the eyes and in the minds of the audience. (18)

As Sheets told Katrine Barber in an interview, for Chekhov, “the inner area of the characters was the most important part.” He also said, “The favorite part I ever played was Trigorin, ever. I just loved that character and that play. I liked the sort of looseness of Chekhov.” Here is how Sheets reflected on the meaning of Chekhov's work:

Chekhov generally depicts not the strengths and the flaws of epic figures of classic drama. More difficult to stage, his plays observe rather the homely conventions of ordinary lives, and plumb these lives and events to reveal “the eternal longings of man for happiness, his strivings upwards, the true aroma of Russian poetry...”, in the words of Russia's great acting teacher, Stanislavski. (“Spoken Word” 17; quotes Stanislavski's *My Life in Art*.)

These quotations reveal Sheets' exposure to and connection with Stanislavski, someone he couldn't have been unaware of through his college study, but whose work was not a priority in the kind of theatre he was doing before Waldport. Trigorin was even the part in *Seagull* which Stanislavski himself played. Sheets' own affinity to the “inner life” of characters in fiction, poetry, and drama fit both Stanislavski's approach to acting and the style of the Hedgerow actors who worked at Waldport.

Conclusion

The attention to analysis with an emphasis on characters matches the shift to the kind of personal contribution emphasized in Sheets' statements above about his growth at Waldport and Cascade Locks; changes that Sheets incorporated and refined throughout his career in theatre. They match personal interviews with Michael Kahn and Stefani Priest, both actors and technicians at Hedgerow Theatre after the war, about the priorities and acting approach both at Hedgerow and in Sheets' postwar work. These performers described a focus on ensemble and on serving the play before individuals. Priest, who also worked with Sheets in San Francisco from the 1950s to the 1980s, called his productions “a gathering together” which included being sure everyone “understood the script.” As she described the Hedgerow priority for script over concept which she maintained throughout her own career, Priest said, “Give them the script.” Similarly, Michael Kahn reported that one of the goals of an actor at Hedgerow was to “get out of the playwright's way.”

Sheets maintained this emphasis throughout his career, paying close attention to both characters and actors. His approach was “very kind, warm, never cruel or awful” (Priest). Norma Miller described his talent and process this way:

He has a way of looking at a scene and knowing just what to say to make it go right. It's uncanny. I've never seen anyone direct that way. Almost untrained. He led, he saw what I needed, he made room for me to do things I didn't know I could do. (Interview)

Like the other Waldport artists, while Sheets was serious about his art and his pacifism, the priority was always the art. Stefani Priest reported that his pacifist ideals came through in his theatre work, but it seems to have been more in selecting plays which might resonate with those ideals than any kind of heavy-handed political messages. When asked in another interview how the environment of the wartime camp influenced the theatre work, Sheets said:

In my own case I didn't think about it then because I was so involved in doing the theatre of these old modern masters and the ways plays were constructed. As I say these things it sounds like 'for art's sake,' but it certainly was not any attempt of any of us to talk about how this reflected on government or on war. That's strange. *It was all the theatre.* (Rarey 4, *italics mine*)

While it is impossible to take this fully at face value, given the political content of some of the Waldport work, it is significant that the art is what was most important to Sheets, particularly in retrospect.

Kermit Sheets went on to make his career and life in the theatre, primarily based in the San Francisco Bay Area. He says that rather than having a conscious plan for where his life would go, he just “did the next thing” (Interview). That led him from acting onstage to acting in films to design, direction, and management. Among other projects, he founded a theatre group called “The Interplayers” with Adrian and Joyce Wilson and Martin Ponch. Later he worked extensively with “The Playhouse Repertory Theatre,” of which he was the managing director from 1956-65. With the Playhouse, he also directed (14 productions), acted, and designed sets. In the late 1960s, he taught theatre classes at San Francisco State College, also directing three productions there. (“Resume”) His whole approach to theatre, which Norma Miller described as a “magic touch,” was centered on “getting into people's minds”—both actors and characters (Interview). This approach, founded in his own personality and preferences, was both discovered and formed through the work that he did in the arts at Cascade Locks and Waldport, writing, printing, directing, designing, onstage and off.

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List of Abbreviations

LC Blocher The Henry & Mary Blocher Collection, OLPb016BLO, Lewis & Clark College Aubrey Watzek Library Archives & Special Collections, Portland, Oregon.

LC Fine Arts Waldport Camp 56 Fine Arts Publications Collection, Lewis and Clark College Aubrey Watzek Library Archives and Special Collections, Portland, Oregon.

LC Sheets The Kermit Sheets Collections, OLPb006SHE, Lewis and Clark College Aubrey Watzek Library Archives and Special Collections, Portland, Oregon.

RG95, NA-PacNWO-Supervision, Emergency Programs, CPS Camps, Records of the Regional Office, Region 6, Records of the Forest Service, Records Group 95, National Archives, Pacific Northwest Region.

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The Art of Theatre vs. Religion and Science

WILLIAM MISSOURI DOWNS and LOU ANNE WRIGHT

Scientists and religious leaders occasionally attempt to find the missing link between their fields. “We need only to compare the two,” said critic and writer Joseph Wood Krutch, “to realize how irreconcilable they appear.”¹ But there is a link: both are committed to finding and expressing the structure of life. In this search, scientists and religious leaders could learn from theatre artists.

Our need for structure is really the need to simplify. At nearly fifteen hundred pages, *War and Peace* is a condensed version of the French invasion of Russia, *Long Day’s Journey into Night* is an edited version of Eugene O’Neill’s family traumas, $E=MC^2$ is an abbreviated version of Einstein’s insights, while the Ten Commandments are a paraphrased version of morals. Why do we need a simplified structure? Dostoyevsky said humans “...crave miracles, mystery, and authority.” In other words, we crave a well-structured itinerary.

Our need for structure shows itself in common phrases like, “Everything happens for a reason,” “What goes around comes around,” or “God helps those who help themselves.” Each statement takes the raw data of nature, edits it, and adds structure. The result is theme. Theme comes when one begins to see patterns in nature and life (whether those patterns are imagined or real). Anthropologist Pascal Boyer called this “hypertrophy of social cognition,” which is our tendency to see purpose, intention and design where only randomness exists.

American poet and Oxford professor W. H. Auden wrote,

The subject and the methods of the scientist and the artist differ, but their impulse is the same, the impulse which is at work in anyone who, having

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taken the same walk several times, finds that the distance seem shorter; what has happened is that, consciously or unconsciously, he has divided the walk into stages, thus making a memorable structure out of what at first was a structureless flux of novelty.²

The first day you walk to your new job, it is novel. Perhaps you pass a house with a red door, a tree shaped like a “Y” and a park bench near a bus stop. At first the door, the tree and bench have no meaning. But as you walk to work the next day and the next, the walk takes on structure. The red door means you are at the beginning of your walk; the tree denotes the midway point, while the bench signifies the end. If you begin to dislike your employment, the door, tree and bench can take on new significance. The red door symbolizes how you hate to leave your house, the tree the missed opportunity to take the “Y” in the road, and the park bench your desire to retire. Your walk now has structure, and, as a result, theme and meaning. Years later, long after you have left the job, when you see a similar door, tree, or bench you will read meaning into it even though no inherent meaning, theme, or structure exists.

Humans need structure and theme because the world in which we find ourselves appears to be disorganized or at least lacking in purposeful design. Nature, says Adam Phillips in his book, *Darwin’s Worms*, does not, “have what we could call a mind of its own, something akin to human intelligence. Nor does nature have a project for us; it cannot tell us what to do; only we can. It doesn’t bear us in mind because it doesn’t have a mind...”³ Some argue that there is a chaos to nature, others that nature has too much structure. Either way we must simplify in order to find meaning.

Clayton Hamilton in *The Theory of the Theatre* states,

It would be difficult to judge decisively whether Art or Nature is the greater teacher. Nature has more to tell us, but Art is better skilled for utterance. Nature has so much to say that she has no patience for articulation. She thrills us with a vague awareness of multitudinous indecipherable messages; but she speaks to us in whispers and in thunders—elusive, indeterminate, and discomfiting.

And so we must find, create or imagine structure in order to tidy nature into something we can recognize. Science, religion and art are the methods humans use to edit nature. Hamilton continues,

Art, with less to say, has more patience for the formulation of her message; she speaks to us in a voice that has been deliberately trained and her utterance is lucid and precise. She does not try, like Nature, to tell us everything at once. She selects, instead, some single definite and little truth to tell us at a time, and exerts herself to speak it clearly. We can never estimate precisely

what it is that we have learned from Nature; but whatever Art has spoken to us, we know exactly what we have been told.⁴

Religion is similar to art because when it speaks we know exactly what we have been told. Its themes are clear because it simplifies a complicated world. And as the world becomes more multifaceted more simplification is needed, so we have the growth of uncomplicated fundamentalist religions, as well as the demand for unsophisticated storytelling—as in most Hollywood blockbusters.

Artistic forms of theatre that do not simplify reality are not as popular, or perhaps we should say, are enjoyed by more sophisticated audiences. In the theatre the ism that attempts to imitate the complexities of nature is not realism or naturalism but absurdism. It could be argued that absurdism goes against human nature. Or perhaps it would be more precise to say it goes against human ways of understanding or human needs. For the majority of the world's populations choose, willfully or instinctively, to live a life steeped in romanticism, and, for simpler souls, melodrama. Perhaps this is why religion is larger than the arts. Because it consistently delivers the ideology of the ism the people want or need. No matter how complicated the rules of religions, seldom do any of the world's faiths rise above the techniques of melodrama.

Human beings not only create simple structures from nature but also humanize it in what is commonly known as anthropomorphism or personification. In his book *Faces in the Clouds*, Stewart Guthrie points out that we see humanlike elements in everything "...from gods, spirits, and demons to gremlins, abominable snowmen, HAL the computer, and Chiquita Banana."⁵ We call the stormy heavens above an "angry sky" or pray to a "jealous" or "loving" god, and in doing so bring nature and god down to our level (for we certainly can empathize with anger, jealousy, and love).

We might even say we know the mind of nature and the motivation of god. And in doing so the world becomes tinged with familiarity, less complicated, more comfortable, and comprehensible—whether that understanding has any basis in reality or not. According to Freud this is only the beginning of our personification, for our motivation is much deeper in that we childishly believe one way to influence events is to establish a personal relationship with nature. Freud wrote, "It is in fact natural to man to personify everything that he wants to understand in order later to control it."⁶

Anthropomorphism has always been part of the theatre. Fragments of a lost play by Aeschylus (c. 525 BCE–c. 456 BCE) state that the earth "is

filled with love” and that it, “...longs for blissful union with the sky.”⁷ The Mystery plays of the Middle Ages personified death, beauty, good deeds, as well as winter, water and wine. Some critics degrade such anthropomorphism as “pathetic fallacy,” but it is at the heart of the theatre, for the theatre is the ultimate personification. We go beyond simple similes and metaphors to present characters, which might be thought of as walking, talking personifications.

The sciences, unlike the art of theatre and religion, are not skilled at anthropomorphism. It would be quite absurd if a cytologist said that a cell keeps its genomic information consistent when it replicates because it’s lonely and wants more of its own kind to keep it company. Perhaps scientists would find greater success in our society (where according to the latest Gallup poll only thirty-nine percent of Americans believe in the theory of evolution) if they did.

Yet the sciences, unlike religion, are unparalleled at discovering new structures. Except perhaps newly created religions, the vast majority of the world’s faiths rely on revealed word, in other words ancient structures and themes. And although it can be argued that religions do change, adapt and even evolve over time, (read Bart E. Ehrman’s book *Misquoting Jesus* to learn how the Bible has been rewritten) their ability to do so is often held in check by the presumptive authority of the past—in other words, assumed structures and themes. These “primitive” structures, according to Milton Rokeach in the *Three Christs of Ypsilanti*, “...are not open to discussion or controversy. Either they do not come up in conversation because everyone shares them or everyone takes them for granted.”⁸

If science leads the way in human discovery of new structures but lacks the ability to humanize its findings, and religion humanizes almost everything but lags behind in the discovery of new structures, where do the arts and particularly the art of theatre stand? Art and theatre are the missing link, for they have both the ability to find new structures and the dexterity to humanize the results. For example, when scientists discover a combination of genes that results in a human being born homosexual, most religions are forced to embrace their fixed beliefs. On the other hand, the arts (if they are uncensored and funded) are free to take the information, give it a humanized structure, and broadcast it to the people. And if it is done well, perhaps change society’s understanding of life.

Yet it must always be understood that the humanized structures, which the arts, including theatre, create, are only illusion. Writer, critic and biographer Joseph Wood Krutch wrote that structures like, “...tragedy and comedy and farce do not represent life as it was ever lived by a group of people but only the various forms towards which various people or

various societies have endeavored *unsuccessfully* to aspire.” (Italics added) He goes on to say, “Tragedy may exist in the pages of Racine and comedy may exist in the pages of Congreve, but neither can exist except upon premises invented by the author for the purpose of constructing a world far more *regular* and *simple* than the real one.”⁹ (Once again, italics added) For most of us existence is a poorly structured story full of sound, fury, and quiet desperation where we seldom defeat our antagonists, rarely achieve self-knowledge, or unearth beauty, happiness, and meaningful endings. We therefore flock to art, entertainment, and religion for another hit of illusion (i.e. structure).

Freud said that religion was not the “...precipitates of experience or end-result of thinking” but an illusion that represents, “...the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind.” He goes on to say, “What is characteristic of illusions is that they are derived from human wishes. In this respect they come near to psychiatric delusions.”¹⁰ It might be argued that theatre, being similar to religion, doesn’t help our understanding of reality but in fact reduces it by presenting us with only dreams and illusions (For more read *Why Literature is Bad for You* by Peter Thorpe, *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* by Rousseau, *Pensées* by Pascal, or *Republic* by Plato). When we humanize, we are only making assumptions. This is what Herbert Marcuse in *One Dimensional Man* might call “linguistic abridgments”; he goes on to say that such abridgements, “indicate an abridgment of thought.”¹¹

Not only is there no empirical evidence that nature or the gods have human qualities, there is less evidence that our humanizing them deepens our understanding of their true nature (or of their existence). The same is true of the structures that are presented in art and theatre. They are illusions. But illusions that are created in the arts differ from religion in one critical way, and that is in the arts the illusions (delusions) come to an end. It is sometimes said that the performing arts are different from other arts because they are limited by time—they have a beginning and end. But this is true of all the arts. The Mona Lisa begins when you look at her and ends when you divert your eyes—what is different about the performing arts is that *when* they begin and end is controlled by the artist.

Directors, artists, actors, playwrights, dancers, musicians and designers are perhaps more honest for they are never so bold (as is religion) to insist that you carry the illusions into the outside world—into reality. What is reality? “Reality,” said science fiction writer Philip K. Dick, “is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.”¹² And the theatre is perhaps the most honest, for we always admit that the “traffic of our stage” is in fact a false impression.

As we leave a performance we know that we are entering a world that is less structured (or too structured), and perhaps, once the rush of a good play wears off, that is the reason a light melancholia comes over us. We know that real life will never measure up. Saint John Chrysostom (c. 347–407) the Archbishop of Constantinople who preached the destruction of the theatre, said, “Returning home from the theatre, your house seems to you to be plain, your wife ceases to be attractive, since she is not as beautiful as the actress whom you applauded, and you take out your ill humor on your immediate family.”¹³

This honesty is perhaps the theatre’s strength. For the illusion ends as the house lights rise and the congregation leaves the place of false impressions and enters the real world. The stark contrast between illusion and reality, between gelled lights and moonlight (or sunlight if it is a matinee), can lead to self-awareness. Unlike religion that demands that one live, believe, or have faith in the illusion, artists ask, often demand, that the audience give up the illusion of what *might be* and face what *is*. In short, all theatre, all art, unlike religion, is to a certain extent, Brechtian.

The shattering of theatrical illusion can only happen if there is dramatic a difference between what is staged and what the people commonly believe. Too often theatres today produce comfortable plays made to reinforce the audience’s values. Driven by box office, or community standards, or the fear of lost patrons, we fill our seasons with *Tuna Christmas* and *Nutcracker* instead of plays that promote criticism, thought, or political discernment. Jerry Mander in his book *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* wrote that without, “alienation” the audience’s “...involvement is at an unconscious level, the theatergoer absorbing rather than reflecting and reacting. Brecht argued that becoming lost or immersed in the words, fantasies and entertainments of theatre was preparation for similar immersion in words and fantasies of theatrical leadership: Hitler.”¹⁴

This is not to say that all theatres should produce Brecht’s plays, but that we need to question what separates the theatre from religion. How can we as artists wake the audience and make them think? Using Brecht’s staging techniques is one method, but we can also choose plays that do not merely mirror the audience’s values—in other words, plays that help make what is familiar to the audience, unfamiliar, and what is unfamiliar, familiar. Today in America many theatres pay their bills by immersing the audience in entertainment rather than making them reflect and react. This compromise is perhaps forgivable and unavoidable in the world of non-profit theatre where funding is inconsistent and fragile, but it is a transgression when it is done, semester after semester, by tenured college professors who have fixed budgets and low production costs.

The audience who is even moderately aware of the juxtaposition between theatrical fantasy and reality is forced to ask questions that have no easy answers. Instead of predetermined answers based on predetermined questions (as so many of our children experience with No Child Left Behind and Sunday School activities) theatre audiences can be exposed to questions that have no fixed answers. This happens because, like scientists, artists have the ability to test their themes, rewrite, restage and rethink as new testable observations about the world are revealed (assuming the arts and the theatre are free of censorship). But the testable nature of art does not end with the artist for once art is presented, not only do scholars, critics and reviewers analyze the results but so do the audience. Art, like science, is always being assembled and disassembled as new ideas are tried, tested and abandoned. Doubt, the keystone of the sciences, is also the keystone of the arts. And only a few structures stand the test of time.

The sciences have advanced human understanding of nature, thousands of different religions have projected a human face on to god (and pursued our need for “miracles, mystery and authority”) but it is the arts that allow us to both find updated structures and humanize the changing world by showing us fleeting illusions and then forcing us to wake up to reality.

The art of theatre, like science, leads to a sense of reality, which can stimulate the rational operation of the intellect and imagination (not illusion). Intellectual imagination can lead to new answers to the problems of life, which in turn lead to ethics—not predetermined morals based on the presumptive authority of ancient people, but new principles that help us deal with our perception of reality, as we perceive it today.

Perhaps the arts are an “abridgment of thought” or a “pathetic fallacy” and nature has no purpose, intention or design. But if we set all of nature to zero, in other words if we assume that nihilism or H. P. Lovecraft’s Cosmicism (A philosophy that states that there are no divine presences, and we humans are completely insignificant in the vast cosmos) as the standard, then art and in particular the art of theatre, shows itself as the missing link which can lead us to understand new, (real or imagined) structures, themes and morals.

Endnotes

- 1 Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Measure of Man* (Peter Smith Publisher Inc, 1970), Pg. 6
- 2 W.H. Auden, *The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays* (Vintage Books, 1989), Pg. 66
- 3 Adam Phillips, *Darwin’s Worms* (Basic Books, 2000), Pg. 16

- 4 Edward Wright & Lenthil Downs, *A Primer for Playgoers* (Prentice Hall, 1969), Pg. 20
- 5 Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 1993) Pg. 4
- 6 Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (Anchor Books, 1964), Pg. 31
- 7 Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 1993), Pg. 123
- 8 Milton Rokeach, *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti* (Alfred A. Knoff, Inc., 1964), Pg 20
- 9 Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Modern Temper* (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1929) Pg. 119 & 120
- 10 Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (Anchor Books, 1964) Pg. 49
- 11 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Beacon Press, 1964) Pg. 98
- 12 Philip K. Dick, *How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later* (Web Essay)
- 13 Zygmunt Hubner, *Theatre & Politics* (Northwestern University Press, 1992), Pg.175
- 14 Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (Morrow Quill, 1978) Pg. 311