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## Thought to thesis: A look at the collaborative process and its value to the student playwright

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**THOUGHT TO THESIS: A LOOK AT THE COLLABORATIVE  
PROCESS AND ITS VALUE TO THE  
STUDENT PLAYWRIGHT**

by

**Bryant Jonathan Turnage**

**Bachelor of Arts  
Benedictine College  
1992**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the**

**Master of Arts Degree  
Department of Theatre  
College of Fine Arts**

**Graduate College  
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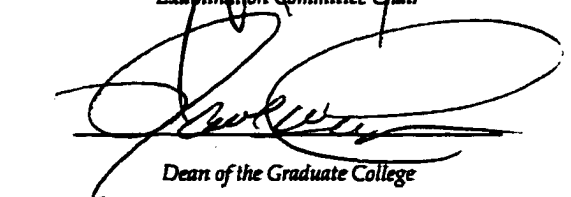
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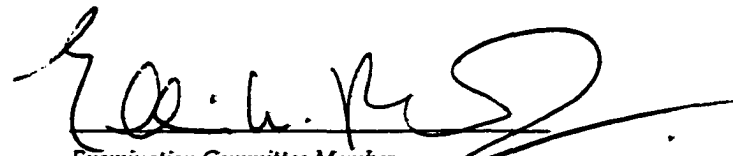
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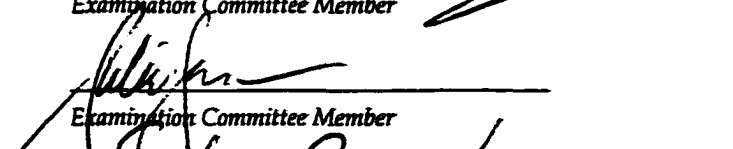
is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of


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## ABSTRACT

### **Thought To Thesis: A Look at the Collaborative Process and Its Value to the Student Playwright**

by

Bryant Jonathan Turnage

Davey Marlin-Jones, Examination Committee Chair  
Professor of Theatre Arts  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Thought To Thesis is an examination of the individual facets of the theatrical collaborative process and their use to a student playwright in creating, writing, editing, and staging a graduate thesis production. Components taken into consideration are the following: the M.F.A. program itself, the required laboratory class, and the thesis director.

The research was gathered through a series of interviews and observations coupled with relevant writing from established theatre professionals. The body of the thesis is organized into chapters, each discussing a particular aspect of the collaborative process.



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## PREFACE

Describing the collaborative process of theatre can be likened to describing the color blue to a person born blind – it can be done, but without direct experience it has limited significance. Throughout the course of my research I have found books that tell me what it was like to work on this play or that play – and true, while I may have worked on his play or her play, I was not there for working on that play. We become like our sightless friend, the example only means so much.

And yet, here I am – doing the same thing. Now it is my turn to work on this play and that play – while you work on those plays. I apologize in advance for my hypocrisy. However, I believe that I have found a way not only to thematically tie my thesis together but to provide a unique and easily identifiable basis of reference that can be used to assist in the understanding of the concepts discussed within. By using allusions to World War II to help define each chapter, this thesis does not become a tale about how we put up this play or that play but of what we learned during life-defining moments in time.

Finally, it is with the utmost truth that I say this paper could not have been completed without the gracious help of my friends. In thanks I would like to bestow upon them some obscure form of literary immortality by mentioning them here – of course, I know in my heart that their own individual talents will quickly move them from the realm of obscurity where I have placed them, to the pantheon of celebrity where they belong.

And so it begins: Nate Bynum, Anthony DeValle, Jeanette Farr, Evelyn Gajowski, Jullianne Homokay, Phil Hubbard, Julie Jensen, Eric Kaiser, Mark Kenneally, Robert Knight, Dean Lundquist, Chris Mann, Davey Marlin-Jones, Jason Martin, Kim Moore, Wolfgang Muchow, Ellis Pryce-Jones, Georgia Richardson, Nick Zagone, Dave and Loretta Thrush, Kelly Ann and Susan Jean Thrush (for their own special little-kid kind of help), Adam and Jen Duckro, Kelly Segovia, Mike Pittman, Hannah Starks, and my parents – whom I never thank enough.

## CHAPTER 1

### VICHY FRANCE AND THE FRENCH RESISTANCE

#### An Introduction Into the Fine Art of Collaboration

In the spring of 1940, while German troops tightened their grip on the northern section of France an elderly hero of the Great War, recently made premier, was allowed to move the seat of the French government south to the city of Vichy in unoccupied France. There Marshal Henri Philippe Pétain and his prime minister Pierre Laval established a fascist regime of such ruthlessness that the symbolic crossed axes of Vichy France became almost as hated as the German swastika.

Through it all, in a fitting tribute to the human spirit, isolated pockets of resistance did what they could to exorcise the demon that had seduced a third of their nation. Hope and patience paid off when in 1944 the Allies landed in France and forced Pétain to flee to Germany.

You may be wondering what a pro-German government in 1940s France has to do with the collaborative process in the theatre. It has to do with “collaboration.”

“Collaboration,” as term to describe the working together of theatre artists to produce a play, was put into use by Yale professor Robert Brustein. His view of the theatre itself, with the artists as a cohesive group, and using the aesthetic of the theatre to act as

inspiration to the student helped to define what it meant to be a collaborator in the world of professional theatre. (Brustein, 1981)

While it is Brustein's definition that is now the model for a successful theatre program, it was professor Davey Marlin-Jones that told me in a class on the collaborative process that to some "collaborator still means traitor." I had never thought of that before. This concept can be rather difficult to understand in the intimate world of theatre where everyone, to some degree, relies on everyone else not only for moral support – but for survival. When writing and producing a new play it is accepted fact that if the creative process is interrupted by the omission of a single person – actor, designer, director, playwright – there can be no play. A playwright's very existence relies on the input of a group of people that will dissect, analyze, and interpret a piece of the playwright's soul, all the while leaving open the possibility that what is finally committed to paper will be nothing like what was originally intended. Director and producer Arthur Hopkins puts it another way:

When the throbbing torso of a play is laid on the table, the dissecting instruments are not content with exploration. They go in for organic reconstruction. In the reassembling, the heart may be left on the table, the intestines may be left to wither, the torso may be distended with convenient undertaker's padding. The cheeks may be rouged and lips lifted into a beatific smile, but disintegration has set in.

(Hopkins, 1931)

Therein lies the crux of my thesis – is the painful process of collaboration, the sharing of ideas with other theatre artists concerning a specific work, that must be undertaken by the

writer during the development of a new play really worth it? Such a question can only be answered by exploring the need versus the reason for collaboration, the various facets of collaboration, and how these facets are ultimately received and realized by the individual participants. Overall, it should be discovered as to how the final melding of the collaborative process – from its “component parts” – makes a person not only a better collaborator but a better theatrical artist, be they playwright, designer, director, or otherwise. To this end a further focusing of ideas is needed; to answer the above question three more must be postulated: What defines the “collaborative process”? How does exposure to the art of collaboration potentially strengthen or change a particular writer’s style much less their current play? And finally, what benefit can be gained from collaboration once a student has moved beyond the university setting?

In an attempt to answer these questions I sought out the M.F.A. playwrighting students to ask their opinion on the matter and to discuss their experiences, using their current developing works as a springboard. I paid particular attention to Mark Kenneally and his thesis play Angels Fight Dirty, Jeanette Farr and her thesis production IceSPEAK, and Nick Zagone graduate project David and Goliath In America. I chose those plays for a number of reasons, most of them personal in nature, but the simplest reason for the choice (in relation to the first two plays) was that I was privy in some way to each play’s inception and was able to trace its evolution through the collaborative process. Likewise I interviewed a number of the graduate design students and many of the theatre department’s faculty, adding their knowledge and insight to the collected data. Finally, I utilized my own familiarity of the collaborative process, as both a director and a fledgling playwright, to formulate my own conclusions based on past observations.

Relevant literature and outside professional insight were helpful to a degree – primarily providing a look at the collaborative process from the viewpoint of an established playwright and/or director and dealing specifically with existing theatres. While it may be encouraging to the student playwright to know that a support system exists beyond the classroom setting, that world is radically different from the somewhat isolated and protective world of a university theatre department. I look upon the information gathered from outside sources (published works and professional interviews) as valuable when distilled ever so slightly through the filter of limited experience (in relation to professionals) most graduate theatre students possess.

While compiling this thesis it was not difficult to see how many playwrights – student and professional – could look upon those with whom they were about to collaborate as potential traitors to the cause, capable of mutating a fine piece of work into...something else. This is human nature, our sense of self-preservation taking full effect. Yet, while it was a professor that reminded me of the *other* definition of “collaborator” and all that could possibly entail, it was a four-year old boy who told me it takes two people to read a story: one to read it, another to sit on the reader’s lap. Deep down I believe there is four-year old in every theatre artist – we may be jaded by our adult outlook but it is that sense of wonder and trust that makes Theatre a community art-form, without which there can be no creation. *Vive la Résistance.*

## CHAPTER 2

### A DATE WHICH WILL

### LIVE IN INFAMY

#### The Dramatic Imperative

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt moved a nation to action when in a speech before Congress he said: “yesterday, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941 – a date which will live in infamy – the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.” War was declared against the Empire of Japan and her ally the German Third Reich shortly thereafter. So for the United States began a campaign against the Axis that would last four years and cost 293,000 American lives.

In a sad twist of fate those in Washington knew in advance of the coming attack but were unable (or unwilling as some would have it) to convey the information in time. This begs an interesting question: when did World War II begin for America? Was it the moment Congress signed the declaration on December the eighth, or early the previous morning when Japanese bombs slammed into the base? Or perhaps it truly began the moment the Japanese declaration of war was received and held in Washington. What a difference a day makes.

Some would say the most difficult part of writing a play is trying to discover what it is you want to write about. This quest is the most interesting, and often the most



overlooked, aspect of the collaborative process; for while the playwright is not dealing with a director, actor or any other theatre artist on a professional level they are dealing with people in general, regardless of occupation, on a *personal* level. These unique experiences shape a playwright's outlook and leave an indelible mark on their psyche, which, unconsciously or not, filters its way into their work. This is the *Dramatic Imperative*. Were I more of a philosopher I might try to clarify that statement by agreeing with Aristotle when he explains that art imitates action – and as an action is a response to the changing circumstances around a person – art indirectly imitates life as well (Butcher, 1961). But I don't have my degree in philosophy, so I won't.

By way of example, let us look again at the Pearl Harbor analogy. Though the event is unique in time the accounts of it and the personal responses to it would differ greatly from say an officer on the deck of the U.S.S. Arizona to a radio operator frantically trying to contact Hawaii. Same event, different outlook and impact, therefore different story. What is most important here is the individual response and the change in viewpoint resulting from such a revelation. "You can never go home again" is the credo of the *Dramatic Imperative*

In his book, The Playwright's Process, author and educator Buzz McLaughlin explains an exercise that utilizes free association to assist the playwright in coming to terms with the *Dramatic Imperatives* that have shaped their view of the world. In effect it comes down to listing the eight most significant moments of your life – the eight moments, McLaughlin theorizes, that will forever be embedded in a playwright's work: "Be sure to ignore that voice telling you that no one else could possibly be interested in your life experiences, which are completely unimportant in contrast to the world at large.

If you're ever to become a playwright, you have to accept that this list you're holding in your hands is really what counts. It's your own composite emotional, spiritual, experiential makeup that will be the touchstone for everything you write. Your plays may end up disguised and camouflaged, but the bare bones or, rather, the guts of them will be uniquely a part of you and what's shaped you." (McLaughlin, 1997).

Augusto Centeno meanwhile puts it another way: "The work of art is not meant to be a corroboration of our actual sense of experience, but an expansion of it, and also a liberation, a sudden disclosure of new perspectives in human existence." (Centeno, 1941)

These truisms can be seen in the work of the current M.F.A. playwrighting students. Chris Mann explained the epiphany he had after looking at his historical epic Forgetting the Alamo and seeing not only himself there, but his wife as well. With a slight smile Nick Zagone will nod his head if you wonder aloud about the autobiographical nature of Gong Show Judge Billy Zee. And Mark Kenneally will jump up and down with a hearty "duh!" should you, after seeing Angels Fight Dirty, ask him: "So I take it you grew up Catholic?" Each play – whether about love and honor in Texas, a young boy growing up in the seventies, or...angels fighting dirty – has a distinct anchor in the playwright's past. Again McLaughlin reminds us: "...the ideas *will* come, whether directly from the life experiences which have shaped you or from stories you hear that you recognize and respond to because of your own uniqueness." (McLaughlin, 1997).

Recognizing the Dramatic Imperatives that work their way from the subconscious mind to the tangible page may be the most important aspect of the entire collaborative process – for they (the Dramatic Imperatives) affect not only a person's written work, but their life choices as well. Ironically, this discovery must be made alone – as it is the

*creation* of those moments in time that are dependent on others and not the semi-cathartic art of writing a play's first draft. A person's religious upbringing may have involved a few hundred in the local parish, while someone's initial sexual encounter was more than likely an intimate exchange with another person – nonetheless, when a playwright goes to work, though they may relate plot elements to past experiences, they do so by themselves.

In my eyes the art of playwrighting, and therefore the collaborative process, begins not when pen hits paper but when someone asks a question like: "What would have happened if we knew about Pearl Harbor a day earlier?" Someone did know. Nothing happened. Now tell me, knowing that, will your pen hit the paper the same way it would have two seconds ago?

## CHAPTER 3

### CONVERSATIONAL GERMAN FOR THE AMERICAN SOLDIER

#### Joining an M.F.A. Playwrighting Program

Ihre Papiere bitte.

Your papers please.

Verzeihung, aber sie haben iher Granate vergessen.

Excuse me but you forgot your grenade.

Der Amerikaner hat Hundekuchen in der Tasche.

The American has dog biscuits in his pocket.

Rennt um euer Leben – er hat ‘ne Panzerhaust!

Run for your lives, he has a bazooka!

(Dreamworks Interactive, 1999)

Well, you’ve made it to the trenches – not quite the front line – but far enough in the direction of the fighting that you have to learn the language (just in case).

Apart from personal experience, being part of an M.F.A. playwrighting program is the most important aspect of the collaborative process for the student playwright. The university setting and student atmosphere provide invaluable allies, contacts, and resources for future projects undertaken as a professional, while immediately being able to provide a pool of talent from which to draw when the creative well runs dry.

These social applications also serve another purpose, as successful programs concentrate not only on form, style, and structure but also on development through presentation. The physical manifestation of a work is without question the most precise way to identify problems with a script and to help develop a playwright's "voice."

For artist-educator Julie Jensen the "voice" is that unidentifiable *thing* that gives power to a work, with the specific type of power varying from playwright to playwright. One's "voice" may be comedic, another tragic – some may find they are lucky enough to speak in both, or they may have a different one altogether. To better understand the esoteric nature of the "voice," find something that moves you – really moves you – then ask yourself why – there it is. Professional theatre relies on the power of the "voice." If a playwright has one – they will be successful. It is no accident that what is often referred to in educational circles as the "Playwright's Workshop Class" is nearly identical in form to the process professional playwrights use when working on, and producing, a new play.

In his book, Working On a New Play, Edward M. Cohen explores the professional process of play development and breaks it into segments: "The Living Room Stage" (meaning "phase" rather than "acting space"), "The Closed Reading", and "The Open Reading" are the first he mentions. While Cohen's book is meant to illustrate the method by which established playwrights hone their work (a method, it is pointed out, that is somewhat unique to America), it is easy to see how the inherent raw nature and accepted informality of the initial stages are the perfect compliment to the atmosphere of the university setting.

### The “Living Room Stage”

As defined by Cohen “the Living Room Stage” is a meeting of the minds between playwright and director. No actors are needed, no rehearsal space is required, no pressure need be applied. It is a time not necessarily set aside for the play, but more likely for the people. It is here that both artists discover truths about the other and come to a decision as to whether or not working together is beneficial for the play’s development. Professor and director Davey Marlin-Jones calls this step the “Coffee Theory,” and if I may paraphrase: “How many cups of coffee are needed before the two of you [director and playwright] come to some sort of agreement?”

For the student playwright, exposure to the “living room stage” occurs almost constantly, though many immersed in the process do not realize it. The playwrighting classes themselves, like THA 714: Full-Length and THA 713: One-Act, take the place of a smoke and jazz-filled coffeehouse, while fellow playwrights assume the roles of interested directors. And over it all, the professor patiently watches, interjecting bits of wisdom and insight, and sometimes commenting on the feasibility and marketability of a piece – like a producer.

The evaluation each student must give of another’s work illustrates well Cohen’s point that the “living room stage” is designed to foster a sense of companionship and trust – provided playwright and director mesh in personality. In the intimate setting that is a classroom, students take it in turn to present their work to their peers for evaluation. As in the professional aspect that the classroom mimics, there is no need for actors and rehearsal space, and no pressure. It is an informal sharing of talent, not an “inquisition”;

works presented are expected to be rough drafts in need of repair and rewriting. Each playwright realizes that they too are in a similar situation and treats their colleague with the respect and dignity they hope to receive as well. In their capacity as “director” each playwrights offer suggestions pertaining to the aspects of a play that were good “as is” and those sections of a play that need work.

Cohen stresses the importance of a playwright establishing a good working relationship with their director. In the classroom this goes a step further; those that share the class with you are not just ordinary people or strangers that happened to need the same amount of credits to graduate – they are your friends. Good friends, like good soldiers, are willing to put their own safety to the side for the benefit of a comrade. This obscure metaphor is given validity when you think about the competitive nature of theatre – and of playwrighting specifically. In order to survive as a playwright a person must be “better” than everyone else, what they put forth must spark an interest that someone else was unable to ignite. By voluntarily critiquing another’s work for the purpose of making it better – and therefore more marketable – playwrights are, in essence, throwing themselves on a live hand grenade. Though competitive, the university setting is hardly “lethal.” It allows for each of its members to shine in turn – hence the thesis play – and recognizes the “sacrifice” of fellow playwrights in an effort of create a finely-crafted piece of theatre.

My own experiences illustrate this point well. As an M.A. student I will admit that I initially felt...outclassed by those able and willing to set aside the time and devote their lives to the artistic side of theatre. I speak of the actors, designers, and playwrights. While my own talents were just as valuable they were not as immediately apparent – I

could not be seen on stage, my costume designs were not made, and I had no plays to put up. For me to take a playwriting course made no sense – other than it was another facet of theatre I could explore. And explore I did.

The class consisted of myself, a film major, an “undecided”, three first-year M.F.A. playwrights, and the professor – the head of the playwriting department. Each of us went into the class knowing that one of the requirements was to submit a ten-minute play that we wrote to the Region VIII KC/ACTF board for performance consideration. This meant that the film major, the “undecided”, and I – half of the class, half of the class that were *not* seeking to become professional playwrights – would “compete” against our friends whose life devotion was playwriting.

I discovered that “compete” was a word that was forbidden in our class – as well it should be at this level. In truth, the festival was...not forgotten, merely put aside so as not to cause undue stress. Plays were put forth, read, and critiqued – honestly, with all the joy of knowing that we as a group were helping someone realize their potential and put together a piece of work to be proud of. It was not about “I want this to be accepted by a publisher” it was “I need help with this scene – would you mind?”

Ironically, two of us from that class did go to the festival – a playwright, and I. There were no hard feelings from the other two playwrights, whose work was just as good. In fact, they continued to offer support and ideas – like good friends. Were I not in the Graduate School setting, were I say...a professional entering a national contest, I wonder if the response would have been the same. I’ll worry about that when I get there...to the real world I mean. In the meantime I hope that my friends continue to “play director” because their help has been greatly appreciated.



## The “Closed Reading”

For the playwright the “closed reading” is all about listening. Cohen loosely defines the closed reading as a relaxed atmosphere where actors read the script and the director and playwright sit back and *listen*.

Perhaps for the first time since its inception, the play will be read aloud. Actors will provide voices that may differ from those that echo in the playwright’s head. Lines that flow so easily when repeated to oneself may trip and snag the uninitiated. This step of the development process is extremely important to the professional – but even moreso for the student playwright.

A costume designer friend of mine once told me that “theatre is incestuous – especially in college.” I’m not sure if I completely agree but I will admit I have seen the same actors – the same, talented actors – at a number of workshop readings. It all comes back to whom you know – who your friends are, and which friends will lend a hand knowing you’d do the same.

Outside of the university, in the professional world, directors have access to literally hundreds of willing actors – some of whom may or may not be known personally. While a professor may have that same ability and pool from which to draw, it is often easier to recruit actors for a reading from the Theatre Department itself. Not only does it provide valuable experience, the actors are well known by *all* the participants and oftentimes anxiously await the opportunity to assist in a reading – to help out a friend if nothing else. This emotional investment on the part of the actor leads to a more relaxed and sincere interpretation of a given character, while from a playwright’s point of view the piece is being well served by someone who truly wants to be of assistance.

Such devotion is well documented, readers are frequently called back and oftentimes find themselves on stage, their style and work ethic known by a director that has seen them in a closed reading. Closed readings are also ideal places for new talent to rise to the fore; the stress of a full production is eliminated allowing the new reader time to develop as an interpreter.

During the reading, with the words in capable hands, a playwright can hear the rhythms of a piece and discover where they falter. New voices may give way to new ideas, or a new direction. Choices made may reveal the play to be not “this character’s” but “that character’s.” A question and answer session, followed by a critique, often helps everyone clarify where the play was “supposed” to go. And notes from the professor – the voice of experience – are always helpful.

Though such insights can be revealed in a professional capacity, the close-knit bonds established in the school are much more likely to have an impact. These are not nameless actors only recently met who are reading your play – they are your roommate, your lab partner, your midnight confessor. These are people you can truly relate to and trust – you have spent time with them, you have grown with them as a playwright – their experiences have helped shape your work; it is only right that they be allowed to see where you have gone together.

### **“The Open Reading”**

Theatre is all about budgeting – be it time, actors, or money. After the initial response to a closed reading the clever playwright/director team will budget their way into an open reading (also known as staged reading) complete with minimal costumes, set, lights, and

an audience. This luxury is more common in the professional arena where time, location, and money are not as much of a concern as in collegiate theatre. This is not to say that an established playwright will have an easier time of putting together an open reading than would say a first-year M.F.A. student; but while the veteran playwright has relative freedom, the student is bound by the budgeted limitations of the theatre department. The truth is that most theatre departments do not have the time, capital, or space to give to a student wishing to polish their work through an unscheduled performance. When time is allotted by the school it is usually in the form of THA 716: Playwright's Lab (which will be discussed on its own in the future), which, as a rule, focuses on second-year students and their plays being considered for thesis work. Enterprising students (or students required to do so for a class) will often find ways to circumvent the obstacles before them, budgeting and rearranging schedules as they go, to present a piece for inspection and comment – regardless of playwright and ultimate destination of the play. Once more the symbiotic nature of theatre manifests itself in the most admirable way as students from all disciplines set aside time and energy for the creation of live theatre.

Though the actors are still on book, the addition of other theatrical elements provided by interested designers and willing friends – namely the lighting, costumes, and props – helps to establish the play in a *physical* reality not completely afforded in the simple and unrehearsed closed readings. With the words now coupled with concrete action motivations can be defined, clarified and, if need be – corrected. It is here that a playwright and director can see if the beats are long enough to aid in justifying movement, or if they too lengthy and allow for a vacuum of time wherein the actor do nothing. Such revelations assist playwright and director in determining what *must* be

changed for the betterment of the play; the final result is a miraculous piece of work that is truly a joint effort.

I was honored to be able to film the closed reading of IceSPEAK. I was surprised at how quickly it went up. Actors were assembled, the stage was dressed, blocking was committed to memory, cues were set, and the performance went up – all under five days, and with no more than twenty hours of rehearsal. It was a moment of truth for the playwright, not because it was the first time this particular play would be produced, rather because the playwright was unsure as to whether or not IceSPEAK was ready – in truth, would ever be ready – to be seen by an audience.

Even with doubt clouding the belief in herself, playwright Jeanette Farr believed in her director Robert Knight, and had faith in what he was doing. For a work that Farr thought had slipped away from her, Knight was clever enough to bring it right back – not just to the playwright, but to everyone.

IceSPEAK is a play that focuses on the aspirations of a young woman striving to be a “rock-star” and the tragic accident in the heart of winter that affects not only her life, but the lives of her lover and her manager as well. In a bold directorial choice Knight literally put the audience on-stage and had the action of the play, play through. Never more than ten feet away from the actors, the “safety” of the proscenium was taken away and the audience was confronted directly by the players and the conflicts at hand. Written as a series of flashbacks and soliloquies IceSPEAK speaks directly (and literally) to the audience – especially within the physically intimate setting Knight had so carefully crafted. With no fourth wall for protection the experience became a much more...personal matter. Surrounded on all sides by the icy desolation of the setting and

the chill given off by characters thinking “what might have been;” we as audience members can finally relax when the house lights come up, allowing us to free ourselves from our own snowbound memories. In this regard Knight and Farr’s evening of theatre was not a voyeuristic release but a right of passage.

To say the response was favorable is to do a disservice to the evening. A warm and honest response helped eliminate the apprehensive spectre that had somehow taken up residence in Farr’s psyche. She saw that the play could be done, and was worth continuing to do. This revelation, coupled with the fact that KC/ACTF adjudicators held the play for the regional festival, shattered any insecurities that may have been brewing concerning the future. And her thanks went out to Robert Knight for having been there when he was; of course he’ll just smiled and said: “It’s what classmates do”, which may be true – but such intense work is also what successful professionals in the theatre are willing to do as well.

### “Doing It On Your Own”

Knight is the perfect example of a good friend, found in the M.F.A. program, who has proved his mettle as a valuable collaborator and artist. This is not uncommon when dealing with dedicated students; it is the “student” part that makes such commitment possible. The desire and sheer force of will it takes to decide to become a Graduate Student – and the devotion required to excel – are either enhanced, or the result of, the inherent need of all theatre students to succeed in their chosen craft. To succeed, and therefore survive, as a theatrical artist requires a constancy of purpose unheard of in any other line of work. Designer and theatre historian Ellis Pryce-Jones feels this is due in large part to the fact that theatre is the only profession where the participants actively and

regularly compete against their friends for job opportunities. It is a strange and never-ending ritual of natural selection. To say that true theatre artists work or they die is too strong a word but the sentiment is exact.

“Instead of writers and actors and directors sitting around waiting for the phone to ring, it’s better to try to find some companionable people, and in a house, in a living room, no matter where, to start generating something” (McLaughlin, 1997). These words of screenwriter Horton Foote, are the life preservers of the M.F.A. playwright. While it is the goal of an M.F.A. program to prepare their students for several performances, the time slots for full productions are usually afforded to the graduating thesis candidates and small one-act plays written by the second-year students. It is an unfortunate, but understandable practice. In defense of the program, the first-year students are encouraged – nay, required – to participate in a department ten-minute play festival. Personally, I liken whole experience to a type of apprenticeship program. The first year is spent developing the skills required without putting too much stress on the “new recruit,” the next year is spent on seeing just how much has been learned and applied, and the final year is the culmination of all the hard work. At least, that is how it is here; rather, how *I* see it.

Now this is not to say this method is bad or unfair – quite the contrary, it seems to spur not just the first-year students, but all the playwrights, to action in an attempt to get their work out there and have it seen by a live audience. Student-sponsored theatrical groups then become another facet of the collaborative process. If the Dramatists Sourcebook is the playwright’s bible – then one of the commandments frequently obeyed (and found on

page xi of the Preface in the 1999-2000 edition) is “Produce yourself!” (Sova, Cusick, and Rabetz, 1999).

The Poor Playwright’s Theatre at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas continually provides an outlet for playwrights wishing to get exposure. The “every other month or so” event has become a sort of mini-lab. Three short ten-minute plays, or a longer one-act, are written on a specific theme and produced at a local coffeehouse (yet another variation of Marlin-Jones’ “coffee theory”). Themes are varied and unusual, ranging from the seasonal – Ghosts and Coffee (for Halloween), the topical – Women’s Night (plays written and directed by women), the timely – 70s Night, to the unusual – Subversive Communism Night. The themes are not meant to stifle a playwright’s creativity, but to provide an avenue to explore.

The Poor Playwright’s Theatre has proven itself to not only be a creative success but a profitable one as well. In 2000 a two-night performance of Robert Knight’s Las Vegas @ Large, a musical parody detailing the exploits of two “Vegas Virgins,” brought in just over two hundred dollars. Now this may not seem like much; however, that was pure profit, above and beyond the expenses that had to be paid out. Also, if you take into consideration that each audience member was asked for a donation of three dollars then the total number of people that saw the show was around sixty-five to seventy-five people. While sixty-five people over two days may not seem like a lot, these were people that came to see a student-written, student-acted, student-directed, and student-produced mini-musical – at the height of an ACTF week, in Vegas, with quite a few “Vegas Virgins” from out of town...and the Poor Playwrights *still* made a profit and had a well-received show.

Such initiative is not limited to the playwrights. In 1999, music theatre major Tye Brown established the Rebel Theatre Company and put on a musical montage of his own: American Shorts – a satire on the then topical President Clinton sex scandal, interspersed with short plays by Nick Zagone on a “relationship” theme. Brown too has been successful in his endeavors. Early in 2000 he brought Wrecking the Airline Barrier and The Vagina Monologues to the UNLV campus. In addition, his Janus awards – the school’s version of the Oscar™ (or more precisely, the Tony™) is hoped to become an annual event where the students can recognize each other for the outstanding work they did during the season – wherever that work took place.

Being part of an M.F.A. program is just the beginning. The long hours of work required of a student are immense – but this is a preparation for life, and professional life in the theatre is not always easy. However, life in the theatre is worthwhile with people you can trust, rely on, and work with – that is the true essence of the collaborative process and one that is best created in the classroom. “We few – we happy few – we band of brothers...” Shakespeare’s Henry V understood – no matter how hard you try, you cannot do it alone. It is good to have the support of friends when trying to put up a thesis play.



## CHAPTER 4

### JESSE OWENS AND THE 1936 OLYMPICS

#### Contests, Festivals, and Workshops

It is ironic that a world-wide festival devoted to peace should have taken place in such a diabolic setting – but Fate often makes no sense in its actions until after the lesson is taught.

The summer games held in Berlin that year were meant by Hitler to be the undisputed method by which his “Aryan superiority” would manifest itself. That was not to be the case.

African-American United States track team member Jesse Owens would win four gold medals, tie an Olympic record, set three others, and establish two new world records. Despite this outstanding display of athletic prowess the medals were never given to Owens because of his skin color. Though the runner could not accept the gold he did however bathe in the cheers of the spectators.

Without saying a word the German dictator and host left the stadium and did not return for the remainder of the festival.

The concept of competition is nothing new, while the concept of *truth* in competition seems to have been forgotten. For the ancient Greeks the Olympic games were about a specific truth – the revelation of the god in man, the spark of the divine that would make

itself evident in the overall winner. Crowned in leaves and bathed in oil the victor became the model on which all images of physical perfection (namely, images of the gods) were based – until the next festival.

A lot can be learned from competition, true the primary thing seems to be “who’s better?” but I prefer to look at it as “what can I do to be as good as the winner?” For the playwright this question is rather confusing to answer. First of all, who are the “winners”? Are they classical playwrights? Aeschylus? Molière? Shakespeare? Modern playwrights perhaps: like Brecht, Mamet, and Kushner? The problem here is, these playwrights are not “winners,” they are successful. I do not personally think that in the art of playwrighting a “winner” can ever be found. I do not consider success “winning”; winning denotes the finality of an event – the removal of the immediate need to excel, a cessation of ideas, something fatal to the playwright. And while contests and festivals may grant awards to “winners” what is truly given is an experience and the chance to develop as an artist and better your current project by looking at your work alongside another equally talented group of writers.

Such experiences are readily available in the university setting. The same sense of unity of purpose that binds an individual theatre department together branches out like a spider web, capturing other schools and allowing for artistic festivals that are open only to students. This is a tremendous advantage for M.F.A. students who must normally compete for exposure by sending their plays to theatres or contests, fully accepting the fact that the caliber of the authors will be varied and more than likely contain a professional and well-known playwright. Knowing that such a writer’s work is in

consideration, the novice playwright may feel insecure and at a disadvantage even though theatrical agent Barret H. Clark tries to tell them differently:

I am inclined to think that the exact reverse is true. Naturally, the manager who receives from Eugene O'Neill a new play will probably take it home with him that very night in preference to the manuscript by Nellie Smith from Arkansas, but I am not at all sure that there isn't just as big a thrill in opening the manuscript of a writer whose name is unknown. It is so with me...I am more excited over the possibility of finding something new or extraordinarily fine from the hand of some farmer, shoe clerk, negro preacher, convict, or school teacher, than I am when I open a new manuscript by Martin Flavin or Elmer Rice, Eugene O'Neill or Philip Barry. And I believe that most playreaders and managers feel that way, too.

(Clark, 1928)

Even with such positive affirmation the apprehensiveness is difficult to overcome; dealing with one's direct and immediate peers seems much easier. Therefore we return to the college theatre festival – or more specifically, the American College Theatre Festival, to examine how successfully it deals with those it was created to assist – the students.

Both Mark Kenneally and Jeanette Farr are promising M.F.A. playwrighting students. Both Mark Kenneally and Jeanette Farr have had one-act and ten-minute plays produced at Region VIII ACTF Competitions. Both Mark Kenneally and Jeanette Farr have unique perspectives on the success of the American College Theatre Festival as a viable educational tool.

Mark Kenneally sees the festival format as a simple and beneficial way to provide exposure for new playwrights and an avenue to make contacts with those in the professional world or those soon to be in the professional world. However, he feels the environment is ultimately ineffectual in stimulating and promoting creative thought. As a writer hoping to work on his play, he believes his time could be spent just as well at home.

The essence of Kenneally's feelings in this matter may stem from three things: his personality, his writing style, and his preferred method for judging the success of a particular piece. When taken together, these three facets combine into the singular reason that Mark Kenneally writes plays: he writes to make people laugh.

There was a time where Kenneally's plays sought to "teach" through their humor. The initial version of Angels Fight Dirty (Virgins) utilized a unique, and possibly controversial, series of plot elements to comment on family, modern relationships, and religion. The protagonist in Kenneally's original work had to cope with the socially crippling loss of his parents, taken from him – he believes – by an unjust, unforgiving, and cruel God. At the same time he had to come to terms with his own self-imposed chastity (due in part to the guilt he would experience being "watched" by his parents) even as he played up his "worldliness" to his friends, never realizing the frustration such an arrangement caused for his "eager" fiancé – all the while trying to discover what the "Holy Mary, Mother of God" was trying to teach him by manifesting into the body of a blow-up doll. "It had its humorous moments," Kenneally admits, "but I was trying to say too much." In its own way the audience agreed with this observation during the play's inaugural performance as a lab production in 1999, losing the intended message to

excessive innuendo that reduced the play to a series of comedic bits loosely tied together through a central character. While the play did illicit laughter, “Not all the laughs were where I thought they’d be,” Kenneally muses, illustrating to him that many of his intended barbs and observations were overlooked or mis-heard.

In an attempt to clarify the intended message Kenneally completely re-wrote the play, but after a reading discovered that what he had done was to create a two-act play with one act masquerading as blatant exposition used to get his point across.

After examining the play a second time and fully re-writing it twice more, Kenneally decided to take out the “message” and just “have a little fun.” He did not try to weave intense metaphysical and moral implications into comedic situations but simply placed ordinary people into extraordinary circumstances, revolving around a very humorous and religiously-inspired “what if” that did hearken back in a *subtle* way to his original plot-line concerning the character’s parents. Now Kenneally was better able to pay attention to where the laughs fell or fell silent – he did not need to worry about the audience “getting” his play, their laughter, and silence, were proof enough that they understood it. While directors and respondents are there in a festival setting to provide their own insight and opinion, for Kenneally it all comes down to the audience and whether or not they got the jokes; audiences are used by him as a sort of “test-subject” – quite fitting considering his aspiration to write for television situation comedies. In such a business where one writes specifically to make people laugh, if no one does...something’s wrong, regardless of how well the play or episode was put together.

Ironically enough a play that went to the American College Theatre Festival, was published by them, and was eventually taken to the Edinburgh Theatre Festival is

considered one of Mark Kenneally's best works to date; that play is Slipping Him the Tongue.

The irony has not escaped Kenneally, though he is quick to point out that the play itself had already gone through final revision before being performed at ACTF. He believes the play's through-line – “what if a good old southern boy who hates Shakespeare wakes up speaking blank verse” – and the well-structured resolution of that through-line are the reasons for its popularity. Grateful for the opportunity to have his work performed it nonetheless made little difference to him in terms of the re-writing and evolution of Slipping Him the Tongue.

In contrast, for Jeanette Farr ACTF has proven to be a worthwhile and enlightening event not only for expanding her contact list but in developing her play IceSPEAK. For her a play is never truly finished; each person who comes in contact with it and provides valuable insight will affect the play in some way. Whether that manifests as a change in the script, a new interpretation of which she had not thought, or a confirmation of the existing script, is ultimately up to Farr – but the fact remains that someone else had a hand in it. Though extremely talented, Farr is often overly self-critical and self-conscious about her work, the responses (positive or negative) from other people are greatly appreciated and often encouraged; she accepts the input of others and regards it as worthwhile life experience – to a point. Farr is quick to shut out those who seek to “better” her plays by re-writing them – there is a fine line between constructive criticism and personal opinion. For just this reason Farr actively seeks out festivals and workshops because the participants are more likely to be interested in improving someone's work than trying to re-write it. Whereas Mark Kenneally has his ideas “all worked out” and

only seeks audience confirmation and approval, Jeanette Farr is constantly seeking to present the perfect play to an audience. A subtle difference but strong enough to matter.

From my own personal, though limited, experience as a playwright – I must agree that I lean towards Farr’s method of play development – ask around and get help. The strongest motivators in my opinion are one’s peers; for a student playwright those are other playwrights and their instructors. I include the teachers for the fact that in an M.F.A. program the professors treat the students as equals, there is no “I’m a professional and you’re not” type mentality, for this reason alone the respect between student and teacher is often immeasurable and the loyalties between the two are quite strong. An audience as a whole does not share this bond, they subconsciously make a distinction between themselves and “the playwright” and therefore cannot be considered an end-all and be-all respondent to a play. Individual play-goers, removed from the gestalt of the audience, are another matter. Both Kenneally and Farr tap into this well of information, though only the former does so with any regularity and acknowledgment.

For that reason Farr will frequently seek out opportunities to workshop her plays out-of-state to get another group’s look at her plays. Her retreat to the Wordbridge Playwright’s Lab in Florida was extremely beneficial. Originally a three-character play IceSPEAK evolved into a four-character play during auditions for Robert Knight’s staged reading of the piece at UNLV. At the time Farr was still faced with the problem of how to tie certain scenes together and provide needed background information to the audience, she felt that by adding a fourth character – the spirit of the young woman seeking to be a rock star – these problems could be addressed without disrupting the integrity of play in its current form. Though contrary to Farr’s original design (she wanted a three character

play reminiscent of Frank Capra's It's a Wonderful Life where the central character was in fact, dead – or more precisely, seeing how life would be if she had lived after a potentially fatal accident) the addition of the spirit did provide a temporary fix and allowed for smoother transitions between scenes and introduced a creative way to deliver exposition. Though the problem seemed solved it was an artificial solution at best and one that appeared to completely disallow Farr's initial concept.

It was at the Wordbridge retreat that extensive work between playwright and dramaturg resurrected Farr's original idea. It was through this artist's assistance that Farr was able to recognize how the addition of the spirit-character ultimately compromised the strength of the piece as a whole by denying a type of power (the power of self awareness perhaps) to the central character of Bee-Bee, the young want-to-be rock star. With her spiritual alter-ego in tow the character of Bee-Bee was not an observer and could never become one (returning to the It's a Wonderful Life parallel) because that role (literally) was fulfilled by someone else; it would have been different had the spirit existed as some sort of "Clarence the Angel", intent on instructing her charge – but she was not.

The more easily corrected exposition problems were dealt with in a simple and straightforward manner, lines previously said by the spirit acting as an informational record were given to a recorded voice. Other lines once spoken by the spirit, deemed necessary for the bridging of scenes, were re-worked into existing characters' dialogue or forced to evolve into a justifiable action. By Farr making such changes – after being called to task by her dramaturg – play reestablishes its original intent and focus; the spirit character is no longer there to tease us (the audience) into wondering whether or not Bee-



bee is actually dead, we discover – when she does – the truth of the entire play which then becomes in its realization, a very strong statement.

Though Farr's time in Florida at the Wordbridge retreat was spent in the company of many other artists, it was the introspection provided by a select few – namely her dramaturg and director – that allowed her the time to personally come to terms with what she wanted to say with IceSPEAK and find a way to do it on her own; for Farr that lesson was perhaps the most valuable thing she learned during the retreat.

Both playwrights, Kenneally and Farr, are exceedingly creative; their particular styles suit them well and perhaps mirror their eventual career field. Though both aspire to be successful playwrights I can see Mark Kenneally readily achieving his ultimate goal of writing for a network sitcom. For me, knowing how he revises his work, it all comes down to who is laughing when – a trait of vital importance in the cut-throat world of prime-time situation comedy. Jeanette Farr, on the other hand, I see working her way into a Pulitzer someday. She seeks out assistance from all avenues and filters it into her work; she is not about the quick laugh – she is about the art of theatre.

If we were to continue with my Olympic analogy – one of the playwrights is running the dash, the other is doing distance – both can win gold.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE HE-178, THE ME-262, AND THE ME-163

#### The Lab Production

On August 27, 1939 – five days before the invasion of Poland and the beginning of World War II – the German Heinkel He-178 became the first purely jet-powered aircraft to fly. Resistance from Luftwaffe officers caused Hitler to re-think their deployment in the field, a decision that irrevocably altered the course of the war for the Germans.

It was not until the fall of 1944 that a jet entered the war in a combat capacity; this was the Messerschmitt Me-262. Thought by many to be the Reich's last-ditch "super-weapon," the jet aircraft proved ultimately ineffective against the superior numbers of the Allies, yielding less than a one percent loss to the Allied forces by the end of the war.

Ever hopeful of turning the tide of battle back in their favor, German engineers developed the world's first rocket-powered aircraft late in 1944. Capable of achieving speeds in excess of 600 miles per hour and armed with two 30mm cannons, it was hoped this Messerschmitt Me-163 "Komet" would be the thing to stop the Allied bombers and act as a harbinger for a new German offensive – it was not.

Too little, too late. Wonderful ideas for the German war effort whose time did not come when they should have. Even so, victorious Allied engineers took the designs left by Heinkel, Messerschmitt, and others and used them for their own purposes – some

righteous, some diabolic. Nonetheless these new inventions ushered in a new age of development. The world would never be the same again.

In a strange way I liken today's student playwrights to those German scientists of the 1940s – each one is trying to create something new that will revolutionize and provide a new insight into the world of theatre. Yet, how many have the opportunity to experiment? True, dedicated playwrights will always find a way to showcase their smaller plays – but what of the Full-Length plays on which they have spent so much time? What good is revising a ninety-plus minute play if you never have a chance to see if it works? This is an unfortunate development when the next Marlowe or Mamet could be hiding in a department, untried and untested. Enter: the lab production.

For the student playwright a lab production is like an airplane field test – the conditions are not perfect, it is not quite ready, not everyone is going to see it, and the ride might be a little shaky – but it will get off the ground. Unlike the “open” or staged student reading mentioned previously, a lab production is a classroom sanctioned, if not department sanctioned, endeavor. What this means is that an M.F.A. program will often require a minimum of three credit hours to be devoted to the production of a full-length play in a laboratory setting in order to graduate. First-year students are encouraged to wait until their third or fourth semester before enrolling in THA 716: Playwright's Lab, this allows them time to adjust to the rigors of scholastic life, improve their skills, and get to know the people in the department.

This last “requirement” is of the utmost importance during the lab production. In the rare student-organized staged reading a play usually falls to a director through necessity

on either the playwright's part or the director's – someone needs this reading to happen. The optimal situation during a lab class is that a group of playwrights and a group of directors work together to form teams that can work well together. The inherent sense of competition in such a process makes the final choices based more on compatibility and an underlying faith in the person's previous work and vision, rather than a "who can I get who isn't busy" attitude.

By circumventing the "who isn't busy" mentality during the selection of a director/playwright team, a higher standard is achieved. For a director there is a passion about the play – an honest desire to see it done well. For a playwright there is a sense of certainty about the project – the play will be done well given a hand-picked director's enthusiasm and experience.

For all this positive energy and bonding of souls between playwright and director Fate often sees fit to remind us that it still comes down to "who isn't busy." Scheduled in the Spring Semester a lab class must contend with numerous activities and commitments that remove capable actors from the casting pool. Spring musical productions often require large numbers of people, thesis plays and their casting always take precedence over any lab production, and graduating M.F.A. actors may not have the time to devote to a new play as they are preparing for upcoming tests and performances. The proverbial "deck" is not completely stacked against those trying to put together a lab performance; instructors often go to great lengths to find times and spaces that would allow for rehearsal and mounting of a show. Juggling an entire season and being able to fit in four unscheduled full-length plays is a talent only a few dedicated people master. If ever there was a doubt as to the ultimate sincerity and dedication of a theatre professor towards the

development of new play, examine just how much time and effort those in the department spend to allow a lab production (or as usually the case, several) to go up. This alone is usually enough to offset any anxiety (at least temporarily) that may develop when faced with the realities that become evident to the student director and playwright.

Such realities – limited rehearsal time and space, pre-committed actors, unavailable props – are not meant to deter a lab production but in a strange way to strengthen it. Playwrights and directors must overcome such obstacles in their quest to produce as close to a professional production as is possible. Clever ways to solve problems present themselves and stimulate creative thought for director and playwright. As these plays are often being produced for the first time, the Spartan nature of the laboratory setting acts as a filter where unnecessary or extravagant visual elements of the play are eliminated or re-worked and large or unwieldy casts are weeded down to a manageable and necessary few. From a marketing standpoint this “simplification” allows for a better response to the play from potential producers; small, easy to stage productions are more likely to get done than a piece with multiple sets and a large company. For the student playwright seeking work after graduation, knowing and accepting this fact will help them successfully plan for future projects.

The immediate goal of THA 716: Playwright’s Lab is to prepare a work for possible thesis presentation. Often it is the play that has been most developed already that is chosen for lab work. Reason therefore would normally dictate that this advanced play would continue on. I have found from my own experience, however, that this is not always true.

Many times a playwright will have in mind another play that they would like produced as their thesis play – the laboratory class is used then as a type of “guinea pig”, putting another show up to see how it fares against the one the playwright really would like to do. This is not wrong and is actually quite encouraging; if a playwright feels strongly enough about an earlier piece to want to see it produced, but is willing to work on a current play – written after significant development as a writer – then the playwright, consciously or not, recognizes what they have learned and hope to utilize for a play perhaps closer to their heart.

At other times a play that has not yet been written evolves its way out of a lab production and into thesis work. Both Mark Kenneally and Jeanette Farr have experienced this phenomenon. For Kenneally, what became Angels Fight Dirty actually began as You Might Be Better Off Than You Are, a piece radically different from his final choice for thesis work. With the proverbial swing on a star serving as the central scenic and motivational piece of the play it was during a lab class that it was discovered the play seemed a bit difficult to stage while retaining the metaphor intended. A few well placed “What ifs” from director Dean Lundquist lead to the assassination of You Might Be... and the coup that began as Virgins and ended with Angels Fight Dirty.

Farr’s revelation seemed a bit more divine. Her thesis play IceSPEAK evolved not out of a lab production that was a bastard cousin to her current play, but rather, out of the need to shatter her conventional style of writing and to experiment elsewhere. IceSPEAK is unlike any other play Farr has written before that I have been exposed to. She herself says IceSPEAK is a departure from the norm. Her “normal” style of writing usually leads Farr to experiment with unique situations and characters and has ranged from a

house of retired circus “freaks” wanting to escape to a better life, to a gas station attendant/preacher driven mad by radiation exposure that wants to do the right thing for his “family.” IceSPEAK is nothing like this. This type of discovery is, for me, the most validating and important aspect of the laboratory production – unfortunately, it isn’t as common as perhaps it should be.

In her bold decision to try something *completely* new, Farr justified her years of training in the M.F.A. program. She saw a potential as yet untapped and took a chance. In putting IceSPEAK to paper Farr proved the value of the classroom lab production by using it as a window into her own writing – a window she felt needed to be opened.

As a tool for student playwrights the laboratory class is perhaps the only place where a full-length play can be developed with the added benefit of being able to see it on stage. This provides yet another symbolic pair of eyes through which the playwright can view the work. Finally realized, even in this rough form, the play becomes more than words carefully arranged on a few dozen sheets of paper – it becomes what the playwright had hoped for...or not – but it does not really matter, there is still time to tinker. We can win this war yet.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE TEHRAN CONFERENCE AND THE BIG THREE

#### The Many Moods of a Director

November, 1943 – Tehran, Iran. United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin met together for the first time to discuss the upcoming cross-channel attack, code-named: Overlord.

Throughout the meeting Churchill obstinately demanded the invasion take place in Italy or the Balkans. Stalin, openly hostile to this last idea, vetoed it and sided with Roosevelt and his decision to establish a beach-head at Normandy – only after being guaranteed that the new Polish-Soviet border would be the same one that was established after the German-Soviet *blitzkrieg* into Poland in 1939. In reality Stalin had no concrete bargaining position in this matter: he desperately needed Germany to be involved in a two-front war, all the while trying to hide evidence that had come to light in 1943 of Soviet atrocities against Polish and Russian citizens. Churchill and Roosevelt turned a blind eye (after all, Stalin *was* on our side) and finalized a date for early spring 1944.

The “Big Three,” as they collectively became known, would meet again in 1945 at Yalta to discuss the division of Axis territories between the three pending an end to the war. Stalin, ever clever, declared war on Japan at the Conference, allowing his country to claim the southern half of Sakhalin Island, the Kuril Islands, and to receive special



privileges on the Chinese mainland. Such a move would pave the way for another, more subtle, threat to surface in the 1950s – but that’s another story.

There are many directors who will probably take offense at what I am about to say – but it is true: a director is capable of being (in spirit at least) every single member of the Big Three (and a few others besides).

There is nothing wrong in admitting such a fact; it is a director’s flexibility when dealing with a variety of situations that lets them be successful. To arrange the variables of a production in such a way as to approximate the vision a director sees in their mind’s eye may require a little bull-headedness as opposed to a fireside chat; and yes, there are moments when a director must take absolute control. There are some directors though that choose not to shift when necessary and have adopted a particular style – though I believe that now this is the exception and not the rule. A director’s primary approach to their craft will have a great impact on the relationship between playwright and director when faced with the daunting task of staging a graduate thesis; a playwright must feel as if they are still part of the project and not an entity removed from it after their necessity (providing the play) has exhausted itself.

It must be decided early on (in truth, at the initial series of open readings) just how much a director can demand from a playwright. It is the playwright’s responsibility during these crucial formative stages to set acceptable boundaries that do not compromise the integrity of the play by substituting a director’s creative vision.

“...this directorial heavy-handedness should never be allowed. The director’s job should always be to work in close collaboration with the playwright, putting on the stage

as near an approximation of what was originally intended as possible” (McLaughlin, 1997).

What McLaughlin says may seem to be common sense for the writer, but when faced with the awesome undertaking that is a thesis play it is very possible for a student playwright to lose sight of the true objective and meekly step aside, especially in the presence of a charismatic or predisposed director.

A clear example of this phenomenon can be seen in the directorial treatment of Nick Zagone’s thesis production David and Goliath in America, the story of William Kunstler and his defense of the Chicago Seven in the early 1970s. As written by Zagone the play opens at the famous trial with a speech given by Kunstler extolling the virtues of justice, loyalty, and truth – jumping back in time, and beginning proper, with Kunstler’s early career in the South and his representation of the Freedom Riders. However, director Diane Robinson – with Zagone’s permission – deleted the opening courtroom scene and replaced it with one where J. Edgar Hoover is attempting to buy sensitive and personally damning information from Kunstler, before shifting focus to the lawyer’s work in the South.

Such a radical move, agreed to by Zagone not because he was “meek” or “inexperienced”, but because he looked upon the thesis production as “one more lab where we could play around and experiment,” greatly affected the overall perception of the central character. Unchanged, the play immediately presents a man wanting to shake the status quo for the greater good and who is not afraid to use corruption against itself should it be necessary (as evidenced by the J. Edgar Hoover blackmail scene in its original location near the end of the play). Yet shifting the blackmail scene to the front of

the play, and *totally* deleting Kunstler's courtroom plea for justice, the audience is presented with a man we think is willing to succumb to his own type of evil to achieve what he wants – even if doing so results in a moral victory. Establishing a questionable set of scruples so early on removes the character of Kunstler from the moral standpoint on which Zagone had placed him originally. Even so, Zagone said nothing, content in his own way to see the director's vision through – trusting on her experience and learning from her decisions. What he learned will be touched on in the following chapter.

Astute directors have long since recognized the value of the playwright and will actively encourage their involvement, beyond the request for re-writes or permission to alter the script, as McLaughlin points out:

The majority of directors and actors working with new plays do so because they like working with the playwrights and want very much to put on the stage what the writer has envisioned. In fact, most are absolutely dedicated to this goal. And often better solutions are found for expressing something in words or action than those you've come up with. Again, it's wonderful when this happens – for the playwright, almost magical. You fall in love with these artists working with your material because they're bringing your vision more fully to life than you thought possible. They're making your play look good. Yet this will not happen automatically. You always need to make clear the terms of your collaboration. You need to work closely with your director, being constantly watchful as to how your play is taking shape.

(McLaughlin, 1997).

For this reason a thesis director is often chosen from an available pool of faculty members; a professional association can manifest itself that is served well by the already established social convention of Professor and Graduate Student. Such a team does not have the potentially blinding familiarity of the student director/student playwright relationship, and therefore allows for a successful distancing and establishing of “roles.”

In his Graduate Thesis, The Director-Playwright Collaboration On New Play Production, author Brian Haimbach touches on this very subject when he asks the question: “Does it make for a better product if the collaborators are friends, or does that prove to be a hindrance?” (Haimbach, 1996). Haimbach’s conclusion, based on opinions taken from established professional playwrights, is that mutual respect and communication are much more important than a personal relationship – it is still a matter of business after all; though when a director and playwright share a common view some sense of “bonding” is natural.

Professors acting as thesis directors have hopefully already established a bond with their playwright through the classroom; while this relationship may be seen as “friendly” it is still a professional relationship within set parameters. It is not the goal of professor/director to “help a friend put on a play.” It is, rather, to “assist a graduating playwright in mounting a final production.” The already established social dynamic between director and playwright helps to cut back on the “getting to know you time” and lets the rehearsal/re-writing process begin almost immediately.

A distinct advantage to having a faculty member as a director is the fact that they *are* a faculty member. They are less likely to try to turn the play into a personal vision and more likely to use the whole thesis experience as an educational tool for the playwright.

Also, a director's individual specialities and background will play an immense part in the staging and development of a piece. For example, a director with a design background may use the set to establish the focus and "initial feel" of a play, whereas a dancer who dabbles in direction might very well use movement and physical positioning for symbolic effect. Each of these concepts is valid, and though the exact worth a playwright draws from them may vary something of value *will* be gleaned from each director's interpretation.

The degree to which a playwright can affect the director's vision may be limited, but what a playwright is willing to take away from the overall experience is not. The clever playwright will listen to their director, take notes, recognize their particular talents and emphasizes, and focus more of their attention as a writer on that aspect a director feels is important. This is not to say that the playwright must sacrifice character development and plot for scenic environment and blocking, only that the play should be taken as whole. Playwrights must ask themselves: "why did the director put so much effort into <insert focus here> and what does that mean to me?"

Professional actor, teacher, and thesis director of IceSPEAK, Nate Bynum will tell you unashamedly that the play is all about the characters, their relationships with one another, and how they do or do not get what they want. The fact that a significant element of the plot intimately revolves around a frozen lake and the season of winter entered into Bynum's thought processes only as an obstacle to character desires – it was never in his original concept to use those visual elements to assist in telling the story in ways other than they already do. Because Bynum's training is in acting and not set design, the literal

world of the play is secondary to the worlds each character and group of characters create around themselves.

For Farr this is a golden opportunity; because the focus of the play rests on the actors and their motivations it does by default become a play that is centered on the words the playwright wrote. Such an outlook, combined with the play's multiple time signatures and Bynum's establishing a concrete sense of "now and then" in regard to those time signatures, means that an audience must listen as well as see in order to fully understand the moment. The simple set, rendered with simplistic elegance by designer Travis Coyne, used a series of three, low, wooden platforms connected by plank bridges to "hint" at location – further justifying Bynum's concept and again strengthening the importance of the words over the locale.

As a collaborative force a director is unlike any other. The play and its components must wrap themselves around a unified vision that may or may not coincide with the playwright's. Any negotiation, or lack thereof, will be a valuable tool to the playwright and the re-writing process. It is the ultimate goal of the thesis director to instruct and aid the playwright, this objective may be shrouded in compromise but it is this dialogue that stimulates creativity and new thought. The play becomes an amalgam of ideas, guided by the overall concept established by the director. A director becomes a sort of Devil's Advocate – making certain that any choices the playwright has made can be justified. It is their prerogative to request clarification from the playwright on any points that may seem disjointed, and this may take the form of petitioning new scenes or deleting old ones. The director has no control over the playwright's willingness to comply but the fact that such a request was made should prompt the playwright to ask why.

Many playwrights may feel a sense of hesitation when “dealing with the devil,” especially when asked to something that a writer could liken to butchery – but this should be overshadowed by the understanding that the director is seeking to serve the play as faithfully as they are able – barring any gross misinterpretations. A good director, one familiar with the educational process, and one familiar with the student playwright will find a way to ease such trepidation and make the experience as close to heavenly as possible.

Even so, a certain cliché about “the road to hell” springs to mind. Student playwrights must find a way to trust directors – even if they feel their play has been drastically misread or abused. McLaughlin rightly cautions and warns against such directors: “Directors may say they love your play, but the possibility exists that what they’re really excited about is what they hope they’ll be able to turn your play into” (McLaughlin, 1997). Such occurrences, though tragic, are the things that make us stronger. Nick Zagone again springs to mind. Do not confuse my unusual optimism with naiveté. It is my firm belief that all things happen for a reason and what we as a person are able to take away from such situations will prove beneficial in the future. The director-playwright connection is such an example. In the thesis setting a director is assigned to a play, meetings with the playwright are held and some sort of relationship will develop; it cannot be denied that the response of the playwright to the particular set of variables newly set before them is a valid and unique learning environment. For this reason alone working with directors will allow playwrights to explore avenues and resources they may not have been privy to before.

A director may be a Churchill or even a Stalin, but they are doing what they feel they must for the good of the play – it is up to the playwright then to decide exactly how this will affect their current play and their future writings. The Buddhist mantra “When the student is ready, the master will come” has quite a bit of truth in it. Look back at how the Big Three shaped Berlin, Germany, and Europe, much less the world, and you can see how any director can affect a fledgling playwright and the world of theatre.



## CHAPTER 7

### D-DAY

#### The Thesis Production

The largest seaborne invasion in history took place on June 6, 1944 as over 170,000 American, British, and Canadian troops stormed the German-held beaches at Normandy. Convinced this attack was a diversion and the main thrust would come into Calais, Hitler steadfastly refused to release the divisions he had stationed north of the Seine River. German Field Marshall Rommel, dealing with limited resources and facing superior air power, was unable adequately to defend the beaches and by the end of the day the Allies had firmly established themselves on shores of Normandy. By the end of June supreme Allied commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower had 850,000 troops and 150,000 vehicles ashore at Normandy. The march to liberate Paris, and then topple Berlin, had begun.

For the student playwright I can imagine there is no greater joy, and no greater source of anxiety, than the final thesis production. The play is finally realized, the re-writes are complete (for now), everything has been set and is ready to be seen; what then can playwrights learn from a thesis production that they cannot from any other?

In reality a thesis play is like any other – true the necessity for it and allowances made to realize it may be different, but anything that can be learned from a simple ten-minute

play can be learned from a thesis play as well. Many playwrights may choose to view their thesis as the be-all and end-all production of training; such playwrights are quick to see how the design aspect of the play was envisioned. Details such as costume become important, and use of lighting may occupy a playwright's thoughts. I will admit that these luxuries are not often available for a ten-minute play, or any other production really, and so it is understandable that a playwright would like see how these aspects have been interpreted based on the written words. But there is more to it than that.

A playwright has the right to change any aspect of the written work up until the final week (though some playwrights I spoke to said "days") of the rehearsal process. Nothing unusual here; again, it would seem that a thesis play has no greater impact (apart from the departmental requirement) than does any other play.

Playwright Nick Zagone said of his thesis, David and Goliath In America, that it was "just another lab play." Consequently he decided to "play around" with the script and make the radical changes we have examined already, based on suggestions from his director. Zagone's acceptance of something that could be deemed a usurpation of creative thought was met with resistance from faculty and theatre critics alike, but Zagone's reasoning was sound. He recognized the thesis as one more experiment and was willing to do just that, by altering his play to such a great degree Zagone was able to placate his director and see for himself if the play envisioned by that director was capable of telling the story in a better way than Zagone had originally imagined. This was not the case. The play, in a very real sense, was no longer his. Such a crossing of boundaries by a director is not the norm, and a director attempting to re-write a play in such a manner is often met with hostility. True, feelings did become heated between the two, yet in the

“interest of science” Zagone retreated and allowed the changes. In hindsight, what Zagone learned from this experience, though extremely painful, was priceless; not so much in the area of re-writing the play, but in learning how best to cope with a director – especially one that so obviously takes over a work. A playwright must accept that in time a play will be misread or misdirected – not to the extreme to which Zagone was a part (not legally anyway) but it will happen. Such “mistakes” can justify to a playwright the soundness of the chosen words and structure or allow for introspection. On a positive note, Zagone decided to return the blackmail scene to its rightful place and cut the original opening courtroom scene and his speech on justice; Zagone’s reasoning: let the audience decide for themselves (with no prompting from the playwright) exactly how they take to the character of Kunstler by seeing his actions as a consistent whole.

It is imperative that a playwright not look upon a thesis work as the final authority and ultimate writing of a play – and must realize they cannot look upon a Broadway show in that way either. The constantly chaotic nature of theatre may allow for what appears to be a static show that requires no more editing, but even the masters are not finished. Professionally staged shows (and I count a thesis play in this group) find ways to avoid or gloss over inherent problems in the script. The writing of a play is a continual process, and by the time one reaches the thesis or professional state most of the problems that can be worked out usually have been – it is the best it can be for the moment. This moment may last for minutes or near millennia, yet the possibility is very real that someone will examine the play from a previously unsolicited point-of-view and find reasons to question aspects of the play. This does not mean the play is bad or the playwright lacks talent, merely that there are issues that could be touched upon should the playwright so

choose. In this regard it becomes evident that the playwright cannot see a thesis play (or any play of significant importance) as a completed work. There is a reason that a playwright in an M.F.A. program is allowed to make re-writes on a thesis up to and including the final week. The thesis may, however, be the last place where playwrights are free to experiment without having to deal with the any stigma that might be applied in the professional world; they are still students, after all.

Playwrights unafraid to take chances, like Nick Zagone, allow other playwrights to enter into a thesis production reminded that it is – in a reality – all about them. Directors and designers are not out to ruin a playwright's opus but to facilitate yet another learning environment. How a playwright deals with such an environment provides quite a good indicator to how willing they are to adapt and listen to another set of voices with their own unique experiences.

Congratulations must be given to those students with the courage and talent to make it through the three difficult years in the quest for an M.F.A. degree. The learning process is far from over; however, the thesis allows a playwright to step back and see how well their work will storm the emotions of an audience. Marching on to a professional career and recognition will not be easy, but the metaphorical beach has been taken and it is only a matter of time.

## CHAPTER 8

### OPPENHEIMER'S LITTLE TOY

#### The Critic

“The world will note that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base. We won the race of discovery against the Germans. We have used it in order to shorten the agony of war, in order to save the lives of thousands and thousands of young Americans. We shall continue to use it until we completely destroy Japan’s power to make war.” President Truman made this announcement sixteen hours after the attack on Hiroshima August 6, 1945; three days later a similar bomb was dropped on Nagasaki.

Military historians will stress the importance of such a move by the United States, not only for ending World War II but also for showing the Soviets that we as a nation were not afraid to use atomic weaponry to eradicate a perceived threat. It begs the question: “Was the bombing of Nagasaki necessary to end the war, or was it meant only for the Russians?” Were the years of tension and paranoia following World War II really worth it?

Nonetheless, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki forever changed the world’s outlook and balance of power – at the cost of approximately 110,000 lives. Where are we now?

Comparing a theatre critic to an atomic bomb may seem an unusual, and possibly insulting, metaphor; but my intentions are honorable. It is the potential power of the critic that can be most likened to the force of a nuclear explosion – nothing brings such a combination of dread and awe then knowing that a critic is in the audience with the express purpose of reviewing your show.

For a novice playwright the words of a critic can cut deep and leave festering wounds on their confidence. The same holds true for directors and designers, but for a student playwright the art of learning how to deal with a critic is not something that is taught (directly) in any class and must developed as a skill on one's own. It is a strange form of collaboration – playwright and critic, but confronting and knowing a person on whom many turn for advice (rather than making the decision for themselves) is the best way for a playwright to learn *why* a critic says what is said and how ultimately that can affect the audience's response to a work and the work itself.

Las Vegas theatre critic Anthony DeValle cites his reason for becoming a critic is that when he was an M.F.A. playwrighting student he “hated critics” because they never seemed to do their job correctly. He stresses that most critics (though excluding those in Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York) are not theatre trained and have no clear concept of the theatrical process. “They were recipe writers...or were writing obituaries. They are genuinely nice people but they don't say much...even when they're negative they don't say much.” Recalling a review DeValle received during his time in the program he saw it (though positive) as shallow and lacking professional insight. DeValle took this as his cue to “kick some ass” and “be able to spot why a show is good and to write about it

rather than just give empty compliments.” Former Literary Editor for Samuel French, Barrett H. Clark, can identify with these sentiments:

I wrote a play myself several years ago, and for some time it thought it was pretty good; so did the agent who sold it and the manager who bought it. It was tried out at last – thank heaven, not on Broadway – and when it became my duty to criticize it as a reviewer, I saw that it was a false and sentimental bit of claptrap, and said so.

(Clark, 1928).

Known by local actors and playwrights for his brutally honest reviews, DeValle counters this label by pointing out how, in the smaller venues (among which he places Las Vegas), criticism has become so bogged down in the “positive and nice” that it becomes meaningless and that when a truly good actor or playwright presents themselves they get lost in “the 100<sup>th</sup> good review”. In order to accurately separate the good from the bad you have to do just that – and DeValle is quick to point out that doing so is often seen as “brutal.”

The degree to which a critic’s “brutality” is taken depends on the confidence the playwright has in their own work. By the time a student has reached their thesis production hopefully a thick enough skin has developed to let them take as they will the words of the critic. Nick Zagone and David and Goliath In America were crucified in the local papers by DeValle but the critic made it a point to mention that he believed Zagone was strong enough of character not to be bothered by it. Zagone was not threatened by the review because he realized it was the re-structuring of his play by the director that

caused the play to come off as disjointed and hastily assembled. DeValle's criticism cemented Zagone's belief in the original structure of the play and for that he thanked him.

"The re-structuring of his play by the director ..." This revelation brings up an interesting point: was DeValle criticizing the play or an aspect of direction? The novice playwright must be careful should they choose to examine their reviews that they understand where any "blame" or "praise" should realistically fall. Misinterpretations on the part of the critic will happen – both positively and negatively; developing an eye for the truth is a skill that must be learned.

When examining the play (as opposed to the direction), as an influential force for a new playwright the local critic has tremendous possibility. Overly-complimentary or painfully brutal reviews aside, in a strange way the critic may be the only non-judgmental eye in the theatre. They are removed from the immediate workings of the cast and crew and they are separate from the audience. While an audience member will normally judge a play on how well entertained it kept them, a good critic will seek to point out what it was that kept them entertained and what didn't. For many playwrights the critic is the intelligent audience member who is willing to ask the difficult questions. Novice playwrights faced with a concerned, even if brutal, critic will see the value of the review and hopefully find ways to answer the charges levied against them. DeValle points to modern film directors and actors and how criticisms received early in their careers have been addressed and overcome, making them the legends of Hollywood we know now.

For the playwright it all comes down to a matter of choice when confronting a critic. It should be the goal of the critic to encourage interest in the art and to encourage excellence in the playwright; conversely, a playwright should be interested in getting a



blunt opinion rather than having their ego stroked. A well-developed play can be made better by an outside eye looking for the strengths and weaknesses in the piece in relation to the ultimate purpose and methodology behind the work.

The critic is often overlooked as a collaborator, their reputation and aura having preceded them and caused them to be shut out by the playwright. This is unfortunate. If the playwright is willing to accept harsh criticism from a professor or fellow student, why then is the professional critic so often ostracized? This is a fair question, one that is perhaps best answered in the public forum in which the critic's column is located. It is the fear of public reprisal that causes many a playwright to shudder, but they should not. A critic should be looked upon as one more observer – albeit one of some “celebrity” status – with their own opinions and experiences. A playwright should ignore the community forum that is the critic's column and focus instead on the intent of the writing and how the critic's viewpoint can be justified or rebutted. Either way there is something to explore and be learned. The words of a critic, like nuclear power, have the powerful ability to alter the course of a playwright's career – if we let it.

## CHAPTER 9

### "LEST WE FORGET"

#### Conclusion

The ending of World War II brought many unexpected and world-shattering changes. The balance of power now rested on a different set of shoulders, the atomic and jet ages had begun, Germany was divided in half, Japan was occupied, the existence of the death camps and the gulags was made known, and everywhere people were trying to pick up the pieces and start over.

In time, they did.

Being a student does not end with graduation or begin with admittance to class, nor does the collaborative process. It is an all-encompassing life experience that, for a playwright, can be attached to various moments in time to provide the illusion of separation. Everything we do touches us in some way, finding its way into our lives and our creative endeavors.

The realization that collaboration transcends the project on which the partners are working implies an inherent if not metaphysical worth to the art of collaboration. Examined on a much less esoteric scale the value of the collaborative process can be seen through the development of both playwright and play; this being also in direct relation to the growth of the *student* and the eventual entering into the realm of the professional.

For a playwright to be able to trace the collaborative process back to their set of Dramatic Imperatives implies a self-awareness honed through successful immersion in that process. Success here not being measured by the popularity of the finished piece but by the playwright's reaction to the individual stages of collaboration and how ultimately such reactions affected the *writer*. Contrary to popular thought, in a very real sense the worth of a writer (be they a playwright, novelist, poet, or otherwise) is not so much reliant on *what* is written but that the writer continues to create. While some may argue (truthfully) that it is the value of the written work (both in a monetary and artistic sense) that marks the achievement of a writer, the fact remains that unless a writer continues to do just that their work will stagnate and anything of actual value (again, monetary or otherwise) will be non-existent, lost in the mediocrity of the moment. I believe true artists, of any medium, create just to create in the hopes that someday what has been brought forth will strike a chord in an observer and somehow change their life (in a subtle way) for the better. There is the true worth of an artist – be they sculptor, painter, poet, or playwright.

As to the definition of “collaborative process,” it can be – in simplest terms – defined as a sharing of ideas between a group of people in an attempt to reach a collective vision. Textbook...but true. However, the true definition of the collaborative process in the theatre cannot be adequately defined with a simple dictionary definition – in order to fully understand and appreciate the process by which theatre is created it must be experienced. Live theatre is the only art form in which multiple perceptions exist simultaneously – a painter may be influenced by a master or an author may turn to an editor for clarification but ultimately they alone create their masterpiece. Theatre is a

very real, very living, thing and in order for it to continue to exist the art of collaboration must be perfected and understood.

Were a person to ask the current third-year playwrights, Nick Zagone, Mark Kenneally, and Jeanette Farr to define the collaborative process from their point of view you would get three very different interpretations. Zagone, with all his unfortunate though enlightening experience, would point out how he now knows first-hand what a playwright may demand from a director and what can happen when control over the play itself is given away. Mark Kenneally would comment that he has sharpened his rapier wit only after having seeing it dulled when he attempted too much – too quickly. And Jeanette Farr will admit that she has accepted the value of not only a well-versed dramaturg but also the inner voice that compels her to write in the first place. I am certain that should the same question arise in the future three more very different answers would present themselves. Collaboration is about learning through others, and the lessons are different each time.

Therefore, if collaboration in the theatre is ultimately a teaching tool it is not difficult then to see how such a process can affect the participants, be they playwright or otherwise, by enabling them to see new avenues they may have been unable or unwilling to examine before. It can be something as simple as a conversation between playwright and dramaturg, with the latter playing Devil's Advocate – forcing the playwright to justify to themselves the choices that were made, ultimately validating those choices as sound and allowing for new choices to weave their way into the current script that are not "filler" but powerful words and scenes that support the play as a whole. It can also be as complex as multiple meetings between playwright, professor, department chair, designer,

and director where great liberties are taken, in the interest of experimentation, at the expense of the original piece. But such trials and epiphanies provide valuable insight into the play and the person responsible for it and though the results of such a revelation may not be evident immediately they will undeniably surface in future projects – both on the creative side, in the work proper – and the social side, in dealings with other theatrical artists that have some shared stake with the playwright.

Finally, to what end does knowledge and application of the collaborative process serve beyond any immediate projects? In other words: what's next? For the graduate student of theatre, more often than not, the achieving of a degree is not so much about having done it but being able to do it again in the professional arena. "Arena" here is an excellent choice of words, for what is beyond the safety and relative comfort of the classroom is a harsh and potentially "dangerous" reality. Those friends on whom you relied on so much during your quest for a degree are still there, though they are looking at the same avenues of work as you are. The true goal of the collaborative process that begins with an M.F.A. program is not to cultivate a circle of friends but to create a core of professionals that can seemingly work together in the future towards a common end. Once the diploma is in hand the shift in perspective will become apparent.

To seek a career in theatre is a brave thing and is not impossible. With assistance (worthy collaborators) a clever and talented student can achieve much. Playwright and professor Julie Jensen points to the success of the UNLV M.F.A. playwrighting program. At a recent ACTF gathering seven of the ten plays featured in the Ten-Minute Play Festival were written by UNLV students – one of those was also chosen as an alternate to the Washington Festival. Also at the regional competition a UNLV one-act and full-

length play were produced – complete with student casts and directors. Past playwrighting students have gone on to teach at the college level in a variety of states, work in professional theatres in Chicago and Arizona, write for Disney, teach at a local high school, produce for television shows, and write scripts for video games. True, none of them have yet to make it big as a professional playwright, but what each learned in graduate school enabled them to continue on in some sort of creative field. Of the current third-year students I know that one has plans to move to Los Angeles and write sit-coms, another wants to return to Seattle and work in a theatre there, while the third is still undecided.

Jensen says that “education in the arts make you a bigger human being, more responsive, communicative, and insightful.” This education cannot be gathered alone, it is the purpose of collaboration to provide the means by which a student can recognize and adapt themselves to several ways of thinking. In that sense the collaborative process does not just benefit the student playwright but the student of life – and we’ve already touched upon how you always remain a student in some way or another.

In a very real way then the question as to whether or not the involved and soul-bearing process of collaboration is worth it has been addressed. While we as theatre artists can recognize the reason for collaboration – the joining of ideas for the realization of a show, the *need* for collaboration is much more personal. Taken from the individual standpoint of director, playwright, or designer the collaborative process is very much about a confirmation of creative thought, a destruction of creative thought, or an exploration into other areas of creativity that have not been adequately taken into consideration. While the overall result of an individual’s collaboration is “lost” in the actual production of a

play, the threads of creative thought are unmistakable and weave together into a coherent whole. Thus the need for collaboration, the utilization of individual talent for its own sake, works in tandem with other artists also collaborating to strengthen the current show – the *reason* for working together in the first place.

The final and most legitimate measure of worth for the collaborative process then becomes easily identifiable; through the continued working together of theatrical artists and educators better theatre will be brought into existence as the talents of those involved in the process increase and refine themselves in part to the melding of shared experiences. It is impossible not to be involved in the collaborative process and not be changed in some way – the tattooing of new insights onto one's soul is as inevitable as it is permanent – though the recognition of the benefits may never fully be apparent to the receiver. Nonetheless, such experiences – painful and personal – are excellent teaching tools akin to a baptism by fire; the individual artist will forever be indebted to other artists and the sets of eyes they allow their collaborators to look through vicariously.

By focusing on the specific areas of collaboration that a playwright can easily identify with, I hoped to show some worth in the long and difficult process that is the production of a play. Any produced playwright can tell their own stories concerning a favorite class, an instrumental director, or an off-base critic – this paper is not for them. This thesis is for the student in high school as yet untested, the blue-collar worker unsure as whether or not they should pursue their dream, or the retiree looking for a new challenge. The art of playwrighting is as intense and life-changing as any World War, the scars and long nights

mark a person as one struggling to accomplish something that at times seems impossible. But it is not.

For me this thesis is for the questioning young student – perhaps fresh from High School, or returning after a long absence. It is here that personal experience can serve as a guide as to what is to be expected. A new playwright can hopefully take this paper and attain a better understanding of the process as a whole. To be a student is to accept that something is beyond what is currently known – by allowing for a person to better grasp the nuances of what they must face as a student they are better able to move outside of that and use what they have learned to not only create better theatre but to provide for themselves and their families as well. Theatre truly is a way of life – a person must understand and accept that. We cannot remain in the University forever, what I have provided is merely an understanding of the stepping stones to something else – the true power of the collaborative process for the student is that we as artists are able to survive and continue.

It's not over – quite the contrary, it's just beginning.



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