

There Must Be Happy Endings: On the Raveling of Optimism and Honesty

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Abstract:

There Must Be Happy Endings: On the Raveling of Optimism and Honesty is a collection of eleven essays addressing questions about and within the author's interdisciplinary, critically and socially engaged theater-making practice. Presented in three parts – Difference, Desire, and Meaning – the essays constellate around the challenge of reconciling the desire for hope and possibility, connection and transformation, with the necessity of navigating spaces of darkness and despair, hate and violence. In the face of an enormously unjust and chaotic history and present, is it acceptable – is it even ethical? – to be committed to making optimistic theater? Is it possible to be both honest *and* hopeful?

Keywords:

theater, honesty, chaos, race, desire, despair, hope.

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Contents

Acknowledgments

Introduction

There Must Be Happy Endings	1
Part One: Difference	10
August Wilson's Come and Gone: On the Current State of Cultural Power in the American Theatre	11
Slightly Beyond Knowing: The Neo-Utopian Vision of Harriet Jacobs	25
"The Old Dark Cloud Comes Over Me": The Perils of Militant Optimism	31
WWMLKD	40
Part Two: Desire	49
The World's True Yearning	50
A Play With God Inside It	57
Not An Artist	69
Part Three: Meaning	75
Arising From Sullen Earth: The 52 nd Street Project's Transformative Teen Shakespeare Project	76
Golden Myths, Dark Cities: Saving the World in Brecht and Batman	87
Invest the World With the Brightness of Your Attention: Musical Theatre, Genocide, and Joy	92
Contact	101
Notes	106
Appendices	
a) Annotated Bibliography	114
b) Practicum Report	122
c) Artist Statement	128

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"The universe disintegrates into a cloud of heat, it falls inevitably into a vortex of entropy, but within this irreversible process there may be areas of order, portions of the existent that tend toward a form, privileged points in which we seem to discern a design or perspective. A work of literature is one of those minimal portions in which the existent crystallizes into a form, acquires a meaning – not fixed, not definitive, not hardened into a mineral immobility, but alive as an organism." (Calvino, "Exactitude," Six Memos For the Next Millenium)

The time spent with my Goddard brothers and sisters has been transcendent because it has been so full of these privileged points, in which the chaos suddenly crystallizes into purpose and beauty. Together, over and over, we have re-affirmed the possible and fortified each other with hope before departing once more into the vortex of entropy.

Introduction: There Must Be Happy Endings

And I walk out now,
in dead shoes, in the new light,
on the steppingstones
of someone else's wandering,
a twinge
in this foot or that saying
turn or stay or take
forty three giant steps
backwards, frightened
I may already have lost
the way: *the first step*, the Crone
who scried the crystal said, *shall be*
to lose the way.
-Galway Kinnell, *The Book of Nightmares*

When I used to teach playwriting to nine-year-olds, I taught that every play starts with characters. The characters have wants and fears, and eventually those come into conflict – the tree wants to grow taller than the other trees so she can see the world beyond the forest, and the woodsman is afraid of his sick child dying during the long cold winter. The woodsman starts to chop down the tree. Next comes what I called “action” or, sometimes, “change of emotion,” to help the young writers understand that an action isn’t always physical. Perhaps the woodsman hears the cries of the tree and, taking pity on her, decides to make do with the branches which have fallen on the forest floor. Perhaps the tree smacks the woodsman on the head with a heavy branch, knocking him out and leaving him to freeze to death in the snowy forest, while his daughter freezes at home. Or perhaps the woodsman convinces the tree that if she really wants to see the world beyond the forest, the best way to do it is to come with him. Chopped into bundles of wood, she will travel more widely than she ever dreamed of – before meeting her fiery death. Every story has an ending.

And every story has a beginning, even if the first step is to lose the way. So my story begins: I watched from the 17th floor of a building on Varick Street as a jetliner dropped out of a perfect azure sky and flew, inconceivably, into a building several blocks away. A man next to me kept repeating, “My nephew works in there. He works on the 90th floor.” We were close enough to see bodies leaping from the upper floors. As I rode my bike frantically up 8th Avenue towards my apartment in the West

Village, I saw the hundreds of people lining the streets convulse in unison, crying out. I realized later that must have been the moment when the first tower fell. I watched the second tower collapse from the roof of my building.

In the following weeks, everything made more sense than it ever had. I'd had a personal experience with the world's fundamental chaos, its violent unpredictability, which I had before only understood in the abstract. Before, the world had baffled and saddened me with its injustice, its hate, its tragedy. How could we let these things persist in our beautiful world? Now I understood that *this was the world*: unjust, irrational, cruel. After that September, I saw it everywhere. I saw it in those nine-year-olds in my playwriting class, whose lives were often at the mercy of crushingly illogical public systems (schools, family services, immigration, the criminal justice system). I heard it in the sobs of my roommate through the wall at night. I watched the faces of strangers on the street and recognized that we were bonded by our devastation, our disorientation. I sensed it in the voices of young citizens of Baghdad that came over the radio in the months and years after my country invaded theirs. Before September 2001, I'd believed Martin Luther King when he declared "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." I'd believed that there was a way to do things that mattered. September 11th was the beginning of a long journey towards a different understanding of the world, a journey I'm still on.

Still, both before and after that clear blue Tuesday, there I was – the same broad shoulders, the same dark eyebrows and weird stubby toes. Before September 11th, I made theater. Afterwards, I made theater. I still make theater. Sometimes it feels like profoundly meaningful work; other times, it feels hopelessly narcissistic. Though there is a freedom, now, in the narcissism, since I have begun to suspect that there is actually no such thing as a moral universe. Playwright Tony Kushner, grappling with King's words, wrote "I have always believed that I could *choose* to believe, or not to believe, that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice" (italics mine). I'm not ready to make a choice about the shape or trajectory of the universe or its contents, but I do feel that I *can* choose to believe, or not to believe, that the universe contains a great deal of potential for the surprising and unexpected. I can believe in what Howard Zinn called "the optimism of uncertainty" – the understanding that, even in the most dire and horrifying of circumstances, there is frequently a surprising twist to the story, that there are, as Hamlet cautioned, more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in my philosophy. I now find this a comforting, rather than a

terrifying, thought. I also find that the labor of making theater is a constant exercise in the optimism of uncertainty; time after time, the improbable alchemy of performance works its magic, transforming the unlikely, the unworkable, the resistant, the shabby, the amateurish, even the incompetent, into moments of beauty and grace.

So, I continue to direct plays. I also write, teach, and participate in the making of performance in multiple roles including dramaturgy and new play development, mentoring artists (particularly young artists and artists of color), and as an audience member. My theater-making practice includes a wide range of activities, nearly all of which involve deep collaboration across and between artistic disciplines – an inevitability when the aim of the undertaking is a complex event including music, text, visual designs, performance, and physical space, not to mention community building, dialogue with an audience, and social and critical engagement on multiple levels.

Educator Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich points out that it is quite possible to work between and among disciplines without being truly interdisciplinary in approach. Real interdisciplinarity has to do with a kind of “out of order” thinking, rather than what specific knowledge is engaged – not just thinking *within* but also thinking *about* the methods, discourses, and theories that are the framework of all disciplines, even interdisciplinary ones. Minnich, whose doctorate is in philosophy, could just as easily have been speaking about theater when she said:

“It is not the subject matter (substantive or methodological) of the academic field of philosophy that interests me the most. It is that this field has to do with thinking, with raising and pursuing questions wherever they may lead, including through the territories staked out as ‘theirs’ by other scholars – including other philosophers. That is, I find in this discipline a closeness to the wellspring of our being as thinking, boundary-crossing and meaning-making creatures, and I love that.”

The practice of theater-making brings me close to this wellspring – in fact, it seems to me that the need for performance originally sprang directly from the wellspring of human inquiry. Because: human beings tell stories. From ancient tales sung around the campfire and images scratched on the cave wall, to today’s podcasts and blogs, we tell stories. We tell stories to remember, to celebrate, to shock, to reassure, to worship, to learn, to grieve, to honor, to warn, to question, to subvert, to coerce, to pass the

time. Every story that is told must begin somehow, and it must also end. And I like endings. An ending gives those listening to the story the opportunity for a collective breath. It draws a line around the experience of story hearing and telling. It picks something up, holds it in its hands, and offers it out, whole. An ending is honest. Or rather, an ending is honest about its deception. An ending stands up and declares, “That was a story, and now back to life.”

The question of the ending is not whether or not there will be one but what kind of ending it will be. The storyteller must make a choice; where and how the story ends not only speaks to the storyteller’s beliefs about King’s “moral universe,” it also has the power to shape the beliefs of its listeners. How does a storyteller pick the “right” place to end a story? Out for a walk the other day, I saw an ambulance go shrieking down the street. It turned into the cemetery. A few minutes later it pulled out, shrieking its way towards the hospital. I imagined a story, as I often do: at the funeral, the wife of the deceased man collapses as she sprinkles a handful of earth on his coffin, hands clutching her heart. And if we were telling this story, where would end it? At the moment when she accepted his marriage proposal 50 years earlier? The moment when he finally forgave her that brief affair with a co-worker, silently taking her hand during mass? After the suicide of their eldest son, or when they held their first grandchild? The husband’s death a few days earlier? The collapse of his wife next to his freshly dug grave? The ambulance, brightly hurrying to the Emergency Room? Or ten years in the future, after a long series of home health aides and more trips to the ER, eventually a nursing home and a long convalescence... when she, too, will die, hooked up to a dozen machines? Two months after that, when her busy, out-of-state grandchildren send a few emails arranging for a service to clear out her storage unit? Years later, when a stranger finds a box of love letters in a dusty corner of an antique shop – some from the husband, some from the co-worker – and makes up a whole new story?

Life has no endings. Or rather, each individual life has one obvious ending, but Life doesn’t end. The sun, as they say, keeps on rising and setting, and the earth keeps on spinning, players in a planetary drama of such grand scale, it’s impossible to tell what scene we’re in. As long as something exists, anything at all, somewhere in the universe, nothing ends. Nevertheless, the decision to tell a story includes the promise of an ending; although there are many kinds of endings, all stories that plan to be told need one. Many times in the theater I’ve seen attempts to subvert the ending: installation performances allowing each audience member to choose when and how the experience

begins and ends, plays with no curtain call, which leave the audience sitting in tense silence for long minutes until uncertain applause begins and peters out, performances that turn up the music, pull audience members into the aisles, and transform the performance into a dance party. But these are just different kinds of endings, and in all these cases, as an audience member, I knew when the show was over.

Bertolt Brecht experimented with some ways of changing the audience's traditional relationship to a play, including an ending. *The Threepenny Opera*, written in 1928 with music by Kurt Weill, depicts a seemingly amoral underworld of thieves and murderers, forced to a life of crime by society's inequities. The finale comes after a ridiculous last minute reprieve from the King, interrupting the hanging of the notorious criminal "Mack the Knife," whose namesake ballad is reprised, with new lyrics, in the show's final moment:

So we reach our happy ending.
Rich and poor now can embrace.
Once the cash is not a problem,
Happy endings can take place.
Disagreements over spoils are
Always worked out in the end.
'Cause the rich who hold the reins know
How to win back what they spend.
Some in light and some in darkness,
That's the kind of world we mean.
Those you see are in the daylight.
Those in darkness don't get seen.

Presumably, the lights then go out on the actors, performing the invisibility of the poor to the well-off theater audience. Although the supposed "ending" of the narrative (Mack's reprieve) is "happy," Brecht ends the performance by reminding the audience of the improbability of such a "happy ending" in real life – thus, revealing that the actual ending is "unhappy," and hopefully, spurring the audience to political action.

Fifteen years later, having witnessed the horrifying possibilities for political and social "unhappy endings" in his native Germany, Brecht would nearly invert the happy/unhappy ending of *Threepenny* in his "parable play," *Good Person of Szechwan*.

Good Person presents a series of complex questions about modern life: How can a person make money without exploiting other people? Yet how can a person help other people if she doesn't have the money to do so? Is it ethical to prioritize our own personal happiness, or should our pleasure be secondary to making sure the basic needs of our community are met? Can people be expected to be honest if they are hungry and cold? The last scene of the play portrays the Gods departing hurriedly from earth, horrified and overwhelmed by these questions and unable or unwilling to provide answers. Their human guinea pig, Shen Teh, screams helplessly after them as they ascend into the heavens. The End. Sort of.

The text concludes with an epilogue (rarely performed), in which "A Player" apologizes for the unsatisfactory ending, explaining "we had in mind a sort of golden myth/Then found the finish had been tampered with." He insists it is important that audiences like the play, and asks for suggestions ("Should men be better? Should the world be changed? Or just the gods? Or ought there to be none?"). The epilogue concludes:

There's only one solution that we know:
That you should now consider as you go
What sort of measures you would recommend
To help good people to a happy end.
Ladies and gentlemen, in you we trust:
There must be happy endings, must, must, must!

The "must, must, must!" can be read as ironic, even mocking, a commentary on the audience's feckless desire for an unrealistically happy ending onstage (particularly, one might imagine, in Hollywood, where Brecht was living in exile). But it could also be an authentic plea for the audience's action, a plea that *Threepenny* was too dark, too political, or perhaps had too much contempt for its audience, to make. In the tradition of the Epic theatre – like Prospero's "let your indulgence set me free" and Puck's "give me your hands if we be friends" – perhaps the Player in *Good Person* is meant to step in front of the curtain in earnest, bring up the lights, look directly into the eyes of the audience, and ask us all to consider what a truly happy ending might mean for Shen Teh and others like her, for ourselves and others like us – and not like us. What would a happy ending look like? What could it look like? How can we make one? In a quasi-

inversion of *Threepenny's* “happy/unhappy,” I believe *Good Person* gives us “unhappy/up to you” – or possibly even “unhappy/hopeful.”

In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Penelope unravels her weaving each night, as a ruse to postpone a second marriage and thus remain faithful to her absent husband Odysseus. While Odysseus travels the hero’s journey, facing monsters inside and outside himself, returning home with new knowledge; Penelope, at home through the entire space of the journey, waits – raveling and unraveling. Each time she unweaves her weaving, Penelope re-iterates the possibility of a happy ending for both her story and Odysseus’.

Ravel and unravel are peculiar words. They may be used interchangeably as verbs meaning “to disentangle; unweave; disintwine; come apart,” but to complicate matters, ravel, although rarely used, can also have the *opposite* meaning: “to tangle or entangle.” So to ravel can be to disentangle (and therefore clarify) or unweave (and therefore dismantle) or entangle (and therefore confuse). Perhaps Penelope embraced all these meanings with her inventive, persistent task – at once complicating and clarifying her desires, crafting an alternative, alternative counter-narrative to her husband’s now-paradigmatic voyage.

I appreciate the peculiarity, the instability of the verb: “to ravel.” And I relate to it. Writing – and making theater – often feel steeped in this kind of confused action. Is it getting easier or harder? Making more sense or less? Am I going in circles? Have I been here before? I frequently fear that my attempts to push an image or an idea even further may turn a previously coherent whole into a confusing mess. In my ravelings here, working with such slippery, multivalent materials as optimism and honesty, hope and fear, I, like Penelope, have allowed for the possibility that entanglement can be as productive as clarity, that dismantling can be as interesting as resolution. So too I’ve tried to retain her faith that happy endings are not arrived at but made, and re-made, and re-made.

The essays collected here address questions about and within my interdisciplinary, critically and socially engaged theater-making practice. The essays constellate around the challenge of reconciling the desire for hope and possibility, connection and transformation, with the necessity of navigating spaces of darkness and despair, hate

and violence. In the face of what I perceive as an enormously unjust and chaotic history and present, is it acceptable – is it even ethical? – to be committed to making optimistic theater? Is it possible to be both honest *and* hopeful? Many artists and thinkers have written about how it is *necessary* to continue to make art – how we, as a culture, must continue to tell and witness stories to be reminded of our shared humanity, how we must nurture our imaginative lives in order to imagine a better world. My questions are about how it is *possible* to do this – how to move fluidly through these contradictions, how to gracefully hold opposition in one’s work and life. Although I write from the viewpoint of someone making theater, I believe that this balancing act is one that all sensitive human beings must at some point attend to. It is the essential question of how to, as Walter Lippmann wrote, “live forward in the midst of complexity.”

There is a woman here in Providence who teaches playwriting classes to youth similar to the ones I used to teach. She has one rule in her classes: no unjustified violence. This is important to her because the young playwrights see so much violence in their daily lives and she does not want to condone the idea that violence is an acceptable solution to conflict. Therefore, the violence in their plays must be a last resort, after other solutions have been tried. We argue about this, because I think this is one of the worst rules I’ve ever heard. Life, especially for an urban nine year old, is *full* of totally mysterious, unjust and unjustified events. If these young playwrights aren’t allowed to address things they *don’t* understand, to inhabit and unfold the profound questions of their lives through their writing, then how will writing a play ever be something more than a fun homework assignment? I suspect that the most incomprehensible kind of unjustified violence – the events of World War II in Nazi Germany – were what led Brecht to insist that, somehow, we *must* find a better way to happy endings – must, must, must.

In the writing of these pages I have found myself drawn to many sources, but none so consistently as Italo Calvino’s *Six Memos For the Next Millennium*. Calvino writes about writing – about what he values in literature, about the qualities of literature that have the power to endure into and influence the next millennium. Each essay begins by addressing one virtue – Lightness, Quickness, Exactitude, Visibility, Multiplicity – and inevitably circles back around to include praise for its opposite. Calvino presents pairs of images – the crystal and the flame, the butterfly and the crab, Mercury and Vulcan, the encyclopedia and the void – representing the opposing forces which,

through their opposition, create and define the way we view the universe. Calvino writes about literature because he believes literature can help articulate the mystery of human consciousness, that it has the ability to help us make some meaning out of our vast and chaotic experience. He lays out aesthetic concerns which are really concerns about the human condition, about how to “live forward in the midst of complexity.”

Part of the strange power of Calvino’s slender volume is that its title boldly calls for six memos while the text provides only five. Calvino died before he could finish them. Though a reproduction of a hand-written list at the beginning suggests a possible sixth virtue – consistency? written, and then erased – the book offers the reader only five. Did Calvino suspect that he would not finish? If he had lived just one more week, one more month, would we have the final essay? Or is there something deliberate in its absence? A faithful reader, like myself, cannot help but consider: what is missing? What do *I* believe? What virtues will *I* defend in this millennium? Maybe it is this, after all, that draws me to it. The murmur: “complete me!,” the insistent call, the challenge: “*You* should now consider as you go/ what sort of measures *you* would recommend/ to help good people to a happy end.”

Difference

How can a white woman write about people of color, without appropriating, yet again, the markings of difference? Yes, I could ante up in the realm of identity politics and proclaim my whiteness from the start, acknowledging and underscoring my social privilege. But was there something beyond the acknowledgement of that gulf? As opposed to the gulf, should I look for and could I find an intimacy with “racially marked work” despite or even *because* of the breach of race? And how to write an intimacy of difference?

– Rebecca Schneider, “Seeing the Big Show”



August Wilson's *Come and Gone*: On the Current State of Cultural Power in the American Theater

My Seattle elementary school was basically segregated – supposedly by ability, but effectively by race. I was a White kid. Since the Black kids were in different classes, they sat in different tables at lunch; since they lived in different neighborhoods, they went home on different buses. In fifth grade, some artists came to do a play with us. They selected half the cast from our class, and half from the other class. Together, we wrote a script that depicted a school with a deep-running rift down the middle, “like the San Andreas fault” (I recalled this line with horror six months later, when the Quake of ‘89 hit the Bay Area, an event that would figure large in the recurring nightmares of kids up and down the West coast, me included). The play ended with us all joining hands and singing, “Stop playing this game, we are all the same, we are all the same.” We’d written the song; we knew it was what we were supposed to write, both dramaturgically and morally. But, in spite of the pleasure of singing it in the cafeteria to a packed crowd, we never did figure out how to share a lunch table with our castmates. Afterwards, life continued in its usual segregated fashion at Madrona Elementary. The song, which I can sing to this day, also persisted, echoing cheerily in my head: we are all the same, we are all the same.

As an adult, I became a theater artist myself, following in the footsteps of those optimistic folks who conceived our cafeteria performance. Last year, I had a meeting with a student actor who identified himself as “a proud Chicano.” I asked him about his experience being a person of color in an overwhelmingly White college. “Oh,” he said with surprise, “I don’t bring *that* into the room.” What about when he played Othello, I asked? What was the race of the character? “Um, I guess he was Black. We never really talked about it,” he admitted. In fact, he offered with a sigh, there was only one time that his race had been referenced by a director or teacher: in the chorus of a musical, he’d been asked to bring some of his “Latin machismo” to the reading of his one line of dialogue. Although this student was an exceptionally skilled, generous and sensitive performer, and a social and collaborative person, he insisted that once he finished school he would pursue a career in solo performance. The only way he could conceive of to bring his whole self “into the room” was to build the room himself. His experience surprised me, but it shouldn’t have. The same loving, cheerful chorus I

knew so well was probably running through the heads of his classmates and teachers: we are all the same, we are all the same.

It took four years working at a Black theater company for me to embrace the idea that we are not, in fact, all the same. By the time I worked with this Chicano student, I understood that to tell him he was “the same” was to erase him, and all the ways his experience might be different from my own. I understood that the impulse, however politically correct, not to discuss this student’s race in relationship to the characters he played was to tacitly request that he play them, and that they function within the world of the play, as culturally normative (a.k.a. White – with the confusing exception of Othello). Anne Bogart writes that, “an actor senses the quality of the [director’s] watching... the one gift we can give to another human being is our attention.” As cared for as this student felt on many other levels by his directors and teachers, he sensed that the quality of their watching was incomplete.

Shortly after meeting this student, I saw the Broadway revival of *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, one of my favorite of August Wilson’s plays, produced by Lincoln Center Theatre (LCT). I was interested to see it since I love the play, and also because of the furor over the fact that it was directed by Bartlett Sher, the Artistic Director of Intiman Theatre and *A White Guy*. Although the Whiteness of a director of a Broadway show doesn’t usually make headlines, this time it did, since during his lifetime Wilson had famously refused to allow White directors for major productions of his work. In his 1997 address to Theater Communications Group, “The Ground on Which I Stand,” Wilson famously advocated for a Black theater, declaring that he was from the tradition of Black artists that performed in the slave quarters for other Blacks, and not in the big house for Whites. Although his views were decried from many quarters as separatist, Wilson stood his ground. But in 2009, less than four years after his death, Wilson’s widow Constanza Romero approved the LCT production with Sher as director.

On April 22, a few days after the show opened, *The New York Times* ran an article on the controversy surrounding the production. The many reader comments on the *Times* article are what you’d expect: a passionate bunch of people, some (mostly Black) angry about Sher’s selection and the ongoing lack of opportunities for artists of color, and some (mostly White) angry about the idea that a talented director would be denied an opportunity because of his Whiteness. A lot of readers latched onto a statement in the

article about the “actors directing the director.” Black people said: this proves Sher wasn’t qualified to do the play! White people said: this proves we can all work together and get along!

Personally, I was interested in a passage that described LCT Artistic Director Andre Bishop’s selection of the play. Bishop said he loved the play, but was also seeking “a match for Sher.” Reading between the lines, and knowing the producer’s point of view (having been the Associate Artistic Director of The Providence Black Repertory Company for the previous four seasons), I suspect that Bishop was committed to finding a project for Sher, not committed to producing a major Wilson revival. If Sher hadn’t been interested in doing *Joe Turner* (or if Wilson’s estate had denied them permission to produce the play with a White director), my guess is that Bishop wouldn’t have gone ahead with the production and sought another director; he would have worked with Sher to find a different project they both were excited about. If this was the case, it renders moot the idea of “choosing” a White director over a Black one. As long as major American theaters are run by White people (mostly men) and make their primary relationships with White (male) directors (and designers and playwrights), those are the people who are in control of the stories we see and how we see them.

I thought the production was beautiful and interesting in many ways, and the wonderful actors were a joy to watch, but the entire play felt a bit sanitized (“well-scrubbed,” as an online reader of the *Times* review commented). The characters preciously clutched live pigeons, then went offstage to (as we are told in the text) slit their throats, bury them in the dirt, and pour the blood on the ground. The furniture floated surreally on and off stage in front of gorgeous fields of saturated color – a trick which felt more or less innocuous until it became maddeningly distracting at the most crucial moment, diverting my attention from the meticulously crafted crescendo of the play’s last five minutes. In addition, there was another enormous problematic design choice right at the end of the final scene. In this beautiful scene, what at first appears to be a happy ending – the tortured Herald Loomis is finally reunited with his wife Martha, who he has spent years looking for – quickly builds to a tense standoff as Loomis brandishes his knife at a roomful of friends and family, culminating in one of the most memorable moments in all of Wilson’s work:

LOOMIS

What kind of meaning you got? What kind of clean you got, woman? You want blood? Blood make you clean? You clean with blood?

(LOOMIS slashes himself across the chest with his knife. He rubs the blood over his face and comes to a realization.)

I'm standing! I'm standing. My legs stood up! I'm standing now!

(Having found his song, the song of self-sufficiency, fully resurrected, cleansed and given breath, free from any encumbrance other than the workings of his own heart and the bonds of the flesh, having accepted the responsibility for his own presence in the world, he is free to soar above the environs that weighed and pushed his spirit into terrifying contractions.)

Goodbye, Martha.

(LOOMIS turns and exits, the knife still in his hands. MATTIE looks about the room and rushes out after him.)

BYNUM

Herald Loomis, you shining! You shining like new money!

End of Play.

Earlier in the play, the conjure man Bynum recalls meeting a “shiny man” who showed him the secret of life, a man who “had this light coming out of him. I had to cover up my eyes to keep from being blinded. He shining like new money with that light.” The image of the shiny man is someone who “knows his song,” who understands his purpose in life and is able to experience peace and freedom. Sher’s production interpreted the second to last stage direction with an exuberant shower of gold glitter, bringing a perplexing literalness to the final image, and dramatically undercutting the power of the play for me. At the moment when I should have been left breathless in my seat, too overwhelmed even to applaud, I was turning to my companion to ask “Wait... was that... glitter?”

Not everyone found these design choices as ineffective as I did; the production won extensive critical praise and sold fairly well for a straight play on Broadway with no boldface names. I can understand why: it’s an extraordinary play, and even gold glitter didn’t succeed in ruining it for me. But as I continue to work as a director and an educator, my thoughts keep returning uneasily to this *Joe Turner*. It closely touches ongoing questions about my own work, which has often included plays by and about Black people: in an America where racism (not to mention other ‘isms’) are far from

eradicated, and where I know, as Rebecca Schneider does, that representation through performance has so frequently been a site for the production and reproduction of cultural meanings that perpetuate racist roles, images, and assumptions, how can I (a White woman) make performances with and about people of color, without appropriating, yet again, the markings of difference? How to write – direct – conceive – produce – an *intimacy* of difference? Could I? *Should* I? *Why*? As Anne Bogart reminds me, I have chosen an art practice requiring me to *pay attention* to others, which gives me a radical opportunity – a responsibility, even – to watch fully, with deep commitment and honesty. Can my honest attention to difference become...intimate? These are the questions which have kept me thinking about this production of *Joe Turner*, and everything it represents.

Let's start with the creative team. Acclaimed African-American artists Taj Mahal and Dianne McIntyre created the transition music and “juba” staging, respectively, but the production's visual designs were created by a team of seasoned Lincoln Center designers and Sher collaborators who appear, from their photographs, to be White. I don't know if LCT tried to engage Black costume, lighting, or set designers. However, it seems highly likely that they could have had their pick of any designer they wanted, especially Black designers, for a Broadway revival of an August Wilson play. On the other hand, I'm aware that the assembling of creative teams is a delicate process. As a director, you want a team that shares your aesthetic and understands your vision, so that the group can collaboratively build towards its fullest realization. I, like Sher, try to engage designers with whom I already have strong working relationships and a shared vocabulary. However, I'm also very deliberate about who sits around the table at every stage of the process because I am aware that decisions about sets and costumes are not only about the way things look. A production's aesthetic isn't just cosmetic; the aesthetic also contains – even establishes – the production's point of view. In the case of Sher's *Joe Turner*, I had the nagging feeling that what *Variety* called the “shimmering beauty” of the production grew from a “this story is universal” point of view, that its aesthetic anticipated our country's movement towards a “post-race” or at least a “post-racism” America – a frequent theme in Obama-era America, and one I always find uncomfortable.

My attempts to track down Sher's own thoughts on the production's design choices only reinforced this feeling. The LCT production blog reports on a panel event the theater held in which Sher discussed the revival's production concept:

“[Sher] mentioned that Lloyd Richards, who directed the Broadway debut in 1988, and his designer, Scott Bradley, tended to work in a tradition of ‘deep naturalism.’ Sher said that he and his set designer, Michael Yeargan, were ‘more attracted by the poet in August Wilson.’ Sher acknowledged the revival’s costume designer, Catherine Zuber, and how her designs were going to take the slight liberty of ‘looking more like 1912 than 1911.’ Zuber added: ‘This allows the ladies’ clothing in particular to look less Victorian, less buttoned-up.’ The overall effect, Sher said, will be to evoke a sense that in the era of *Joe Turner*, as in our own day, ‘there is a sense that a seismic shift is taking place in the country. In 1911, as in our own day, people have a sense that five years from now things will be very different than how they are today.’”

The design decision itself may seem like a small thing, and perhaps it is – but the reason for the choice speaks to the production’s point of view: a comparison between America’s post-slavery “seismic shift” at the turn of the century, and a similar shift happening today. The decision to move away from “deep naturalism” and towards “poetry” seems intimately informed by this point of view.

Sher expanded on this comparison in interviews, saying, “I’ve learned more from this cast than any group that I’ve ever worked with. But I also learned an enormous amount about the lack of opportunity in theater today. More Ibsen should be directed by black directors. More Shakespeare. More Chekhov.” Later, Sher declared he felt a sense of responsibility to make such hires at his own theater and “that’s what every theater needs to be doing, so that everybody’s expanding equally...I think that’s the transition we’re in now. Whereas those rules are going to start to dissolve and separate, and we’re going to have less ability to look, in the next generation of directors, at such clear boundaries in who does what work...It’s a step along the way to making sure that people think in less prescribed categories about who they hire for certain kinds of shows.”

I disagree with the contention that we’re currently experiencing a strong movement towards equity in the mainstream theater – and there would certainly not be a “seismic shift” in the experience of Wilson’s characters in the next five years. As much as our country may have shimmered with possibility in 1911, the following decades were some of the worst in history for minorities in America, seeing the peak of Jim Crow

with violent consequences ranging from voter disenfranchisement to lynching – 468 in the state of Texas alone from 1885 to 1942, of which 339 were Black, 77 White (mostly European immigrants), 53 Hispanic, and 1 Indian. Nothing demonstrates this better than Wilson’s plays themselves – which span the rest of the decade with the same tense beauty that infuses *Joe Turner*. Wilson’s great achievement is capturing the co-existence of the beautiful and the horrible, grappling for supremacy in the soul of every human being and in the events of our shared history – a struggle as potent today as in 1911.

This is not to deny the poetry in *Joe Turner* or any of Wilson’s work. The play is at once lyrical and familiar, sweeping and intimate. Past and present collide, as do the realms of visible and invisible. A production that emphasized only the “deep naturalism” at the expense of the “shimmering beauty” would certainly miss the point, and vice versa. But it is not just the presence of naturalistic and poetic elements that matters in *Joe Turner*. The play’s beating heart lies in the *tension* between epic and ordinary. This tension is an aesthetic reminder of the collision of grief and praise – the wrenching heart of the blues – that characterizes Wilson’s confrontation with American history. His characters live with this tension; his audiences should too. The pain of history is ever-present – and at the end, made visible in the blood on Loomis’ face. It is this pain which both haunts and cleanses Loomis. To glitterize the moment is to upset this fragile balance – a disservice to Wilson’s complex, transcendent finale.

When assembling a creative team, in addition to the question of aesthetic, there is the question of opportunity. Both were factors in my desire, while working at Black Rep, to engage non-White designers on our productions – a task that was much harder than I thought it would be. In spite of my extensive efforts to track down Black designers and even design students, Black Rep hired a grand total of perhaps five non-White designers during my four seasons there – not a great percentage for a Black theater company with fifteen or so designer slots per year. This bothered me less when the director was Black, but when the director (me) was White, I felt it was important to be certain that a Black perspective was represented throughout the collaboration, much of which happens before actors are involved – including, of course, decisions about which actors are cast. This was a relatively easy task at Black Rep; I was, after all, working at a Black theater, in the context of an entire season full of plays about the Black experience, in a space pulsing with the life of a Black community. My colleagues were diverse, but my Whiteness put me in the minority; I took my marching orders

from a Black Artistic Director and Managing Director, who were governed by a predominately Black Board of Directors. During an artistic process, the Artistic Director was frequently in the room, and our Affiliate Artist company was involved in discussions about the play and production from the very beginning. It was a humbling – and frequently challenging – experiment in collaboration to constantly be checking my own instincts against those of my colleagues, to allow their perspective to inform not only my directing “choices,” but my view of the play, what it meant, and why we were producing it. The answers to these questions directly shape a production’s point of view – and the point of view guides every minute directing decision about who goes right and who goes left, or how much time it should take to walk down the stairs.

Since leaving Black Rep, I’ve directed plays by Black playwrights at theaters which, judging by the demographics of their boards, staff and audiences, could fairly be called White institutions. It’s clear to me that producing Black theater is *very* different than producing a play by a Black playwright at a White theater. You can hire a Black Assistant Director (as Sher did, as I have done), you can encourage deep collaboration with your cast, you can bring guests into rehearsal, you can do extensive research... it doesn’t change the context. Context matters, as Wilson reminded us by comparing regional theaters to “the big house” of the slave master – even though his plays and career were developed and championed by those institutions. In a country where thriving Black arts institutions were few and far between, and frequently grievously under-resourced, a playwright who cared about his work being seen and his career moving forward had (and has) little choice but to seek out and embrace productions by major theaters and companies, almost all of which can be described as having a predominately White institutional culture. The general demographics of the American theater have changed little since “The Ground on Which I Stand” in 1996 – in fact, though Wilson then bemoaned the fact that there was only one Black company in the membership of the League of Resident Theatres (LORT), the largest and most prominent non-profit American theater association, today there are even fewer: none. Perhaps Wilson’s demand that his plays have Black directors was an attempt to mimic, on some small scale, the culture of a Black institution in a White one. In the semi-closed economy of the rehearsal room, the director has a great deal of power: he or she sets the tone, determines the point of view, and guides the decision-making. Still, once the play ventures out of rehearsal and into performance, the tone is set by the institution – its policies, its staff, and its audiences – and if the play is at a LORT theater in 2010, the institutional context will be White.

One might say that, regardless of context, what really matters for a playwright is that the director deeply understands the play. Wilson was lucky in his lifetime to find several great collaborators, Black men who became experienced and recognized interpreters of his work – beginning with the legendary new-play-champion Lloyd Richards, who rose to prominence when he directed the original Broadway production of *A Raisin in the Sun*, and went on to nurture most of Wilson’s ten-play “20th century” cycle, including *Joe Turner*. But not everyone is lucky enough to find such synergy, and it may come in unexpected form. Sometimes the race of the director ends up not being the most important factor for an inspired production of a new play, even in plays that specifically deal with Black life and Black history (the rich collaboration between Black playwright Lynn Nottage and White director Kate Whoriskey being one prominent example).

I’ve had several such successful collaborations with Black playwrights. In addition to my great pride in the resulting productions, and my pleasure at being able to bring important new work to the stage in a way that satisfies its author, I am simultaneously aware of the loss of opportunity that my hiring represents – particularly at a theater which has no non-White directors in its season. The fact is, I have a job and a Black director doesn’t. And when the next job comes up, and it’s *Top Girls* or *Into the Woods* or whatever other play that’s not by a Black writer, the hard truth is that based on my now increased experience, and the hiring records of American theaters, I am more likely to get that job, too (though less likely than if I were a White male). In this way, my production, like Sher’s, represents a loss with far-reaching reverberations. It represents the widely-cast net of privilege – gossamer thin in places, not always easy to identify, but always present. White artists like myself and Sher may recognize this privilege, but acknowledging it is not the same as combating it.

In fact, it turns out that at the time Sher’s *Joe Turner* arrived on Broadway, a Black director hadn’t helmed a Lincoln Center Theater production in eighteen years. *Eighteen years!* This piece of information was not reported in any of the articles surrounding the furor over Sher’s selection as director, but ferreted out by Kurt Anderson, of NPR’s Studio 360, a few months later, in an illuminating segment which also included an interview with Constanza Romero, Wilson’s widow, who expressed her satisfaction with Sher’s production of *Joe Turner*. Romero reminded Anderson of Wilson’s one-man show (performed at the Seattle Repertory Theater in 2003), *How I*

Learned What I Learned. It was directed by Todd Kreidler, a 28-year-old White guy, who Wilson invited up onstage at the end of the show to shake his hand. The playwright's intention seemed to be to disrupt the impression that, on principle, he didn't allow White artists anywhere near his work – without erasing his initial contention, repeated in “Ground” and many other places, that *race matters*. While Wilson identified Aristotle's *Poetics* as a foundation of his aesthetic, he is very clear in “Ground” and elsewhere that because his plays are about Black life, directing them successfully requires a specific type of cultural intimacy. Cultural intimacy does not have to equal deep naturalism – though for some directors, Lloyd Richards included, it might – but it does ask for the privileging of a Black aesthetic derived from Black thought and Black life.

This brings me back around to aesthetic; it is here where every artist, no matter how collaborative or innovative, must identify the ground on which he or she stands, in the sense that Wilson meant it: What is my creative lineage? Where do I come from? To whom am I indebted? How do I honor this ground in my work?

I work in what I would identify as an epic theatrical aesthetic – a tradition that, for me, begins in the same place Wilson's does: the public, Democratic, theater of the Greeks with its emphasis on the community (chorus) as conscience and commentary, and theater-going as necessary local conversation. This conversation is extended in the work of Bertolt Brecht and his influence on those who seek new ways to reveal and resist privilege and power through performance – on the one hand, theater for social justice movements exemplified by Boal's Theater of the Oppressed, and on the other, post-modernist movements which seek to dismantle and problematize race, gender, and other constructed identities, such as the plays of Caryl Churchill and Suzan-Lori Parks. Most of all, the epic theater centralizes and makes visible questions of why and how to tell a story – this concern frequently shows up onstage in my productions in the form of actors directly addressing the audience, objects transforming through multiple uses, actors playing multiple characters or playing across age, gender, and racial lines.

This is not the only ground I stand on; I also know that my aesthetic is informed by and intersects with elements of a Black aesthetic in crucial ways. These include: a concern with creative resistance and survival, related in George Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* to the figure of Topsy (“there's a madness in me and the madness sets me

free”); a delight in re-appropriation of text, image, and movement, which were important strategies employed to disguise the subversive elements of Black art-making in the New World, from the Cakewalk to Haitian voodoo; the juxtaposition of diverse elements and influences, evident in the improvisational, virtuosic form of jazz and, later, in the hip-hop remix. Through careful attention, I’ve come to recognize these places where my “epic theater” aesthetic converges with elements of a Black aesthetic and other places where it diverges; I am less interested, for example, in the ritually driven “drama of nommo” aesthetic, as well as in the “deep naturalism” of many Black plays, exemplified by *A Raisin in the Sun*.

My aesthetic impulses and knowledge combine to inform my choices about why and how I take on particular projects, and who I seek as collaborators on those projects. I weigh the parts of my identity and experience, each twinned and complicated: my formal education in Western theatrical forms and performance studies theory *and* my years working in the Black theater, my White-upper-middle class upbringing *and* my Armenian and Jewish heritage, with their histories of violent oppression. I am still hopeful, even eager, as I approach each new project – and also very careful. *An intimacy of difference* lingers in my mind, an insistent counterpoint to that old familiar song: we are all the same, we are all the same.

Also insistent is the dilemma that has stayed with me since *Joe Turner*: whether and how to direct a production of an August Wilson play that deliberately departs from a Black aesthetic. It is probably unfair to label Sher’s *Joe Turner* as embodying a “post-race” aesthetic, but I don’t think it was a Black aesthetic. But even if I disagreed with Sher’s interpretation, does that mean directors shouldn’t experiment with new approaches to this play? Characters in *Joe Turner* are trying to negotiate and reclaim their identities in a post-Civil War America, casting about to discover what kind of “life,” “liberty,” and “happiness” might be possible or desirable for them. The play depicts an America full of possibility, but soaked with extraordinary pain – a theme which seems to have endless possibility for reinvention depending on what pain the nation is recovering from at any given moment. Sometimes a new approach to a text can illuminate it in thrilling and surprising ways, causing a play to arrive in the present moment with resonant immediacy. Sher believed his production could do just that; he explained “culture is one part of what’s at play, but there’s a lot of other things which make good storytelling work... That’s my job that I bring to it. That’s my skill.”

Sher believed that the Bart Sher aesthetic was able to illuminate new and interesting facets of this play, revealing a *Joe Turner* for the Obama era. The production sought a departure from past productions, and judging by the overwhelmingly positive critical reception, including a Tony award for actor Roger Robinson, many agreed that it was a worthy departure; in fact, a good number of critics felt it was a marked improvement on the “deep naturalism” approach, allowing Wilson’s poetry to find its true form. Then again, out of the dozens of reviews of the show, I couldn’t find one which was written by a non-White reviewer. And quite frankly, it starts to get under my skin to read a slate of such reviews that say things like, as David Barbour wrote in *Lighting and Sound America*, “In Sher’s hands, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* is finally fulfilled as both a comic drama of black life in the early 20th century and as an incantatory vision of the Black race at a turning point – struggling to shake off the taint of slavery and reaching out for freedom in a America transformed by industrial revolution. It’s an extraordinary production.”

Who gets to decide when a play is “finally fulfilled”? That would be a rhetorical question, except, as things stand in contemporary America, it’s not. The critics (White, mostly male, mostly of a certain age) get to say it. Who gets to direct (and design and produce) plays at Lincoln Center? Again – not a rhetorical question, at least not for the past eighteen years. These sociopolitical realities complicate and obscure the central artistic questions for me. As I ask myself what aesthetic Sher’s “shimmering beauty” represents, and come up with various answers – poetic lyricism? universal humanity? Bartlett Sher? Lincoln Center? Broadway? – all these seem to equate with an aesthetic of privilege. Unfair? Maybe. But as it turns out, a lot of things are unfair.

As long as there is such an enormous opportunity gap, politics and aesthetics will remain hopelessly tangled – in which case, I think those of us with power and privilege need to approach our work with increased humility and awareness. I say “our” because privilege and power do not just exist on Broadway or among White men; anyone who benefits from the way the system is set up, at any level, experiences privilege, and anyone who makes choices that effect other people, on any scale, has power. *We all* must cultivate a sense of responsibility towards making our field more open, more curious, more thoughtful, more responsive – and commit to acting on that responsibility, even when it means fewer jobs for us and our friends. Anyone who rejects or ignores this responsibility perpetuates the troubling inequities in the theater,

and everywhere else. If inequity is not a good enough argument, there is also the issue of homogeneity, which never made for good art or good criticism. The more varied the voices and visions we hear and see, the more stimulating our theatrical and critical landscape will be.

In the case of *Joe Turner*, the issues surrounding power, privilege and opportunity, turned for me what would have otherwise been a not-to-my-taste production of an extraordinary play into a troubling moral impasse. The questions I have about the production continue to burn brightly for me – as do the questions it raised about my own work. Still, if Sher hadn't directed *Joe Turner*, I would never have seen it, and I'm glad I did. More importantly, if Sher hadn't directed *Joe Turner*, it's likely that LCT's abysmal hiring record regarding Black directors would have remained unremarked, and I'm glad it didn't. In the end, I'm pleased that Sher was able to bring Wilson's masterwork back to Broadway, where it belongs. I am equally grateful for the 92 comments on the *Times* article (written, by the way, by a White journalist), proof that Americans are engaging once more in Wilson's public debate over cultural power. Wilson's speech in 1996 changed the conversation forever, giving an articulate touchstone to institutions – like Black Rep – that were just a twinkle in the eye of a recent college graduate. Reading the *Times* article, I wondered: is it too much to hope that the current conversation might move us forward in similar ways?

A few weeks later, as if in answer, there was another piece in the *Times* about *Joe Turner*. It seemed that during his presidential campaign, Barack Obama had promised his wife Michelle that once it was all over he would take her to a Broadway show. Accordingly, after an intimate dinner in the Village, the First Couple attended the May 30th performance of August Wilson's masterwork, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, directed by Bartlett Sher. Oh, how I wish I had been in the audience that night. One woman who *was* there wrote into the Lincoln Center Theatre website to say how powerful the experience was; that the play and the Obama's historic presidency felt like bookends on the civil rights struggle. Another audience member wrote that she "felt the energy from the audience and the occasion meld into one," until everyone in the theater was, indeed, "shining like new money" – no gold glitter required. Although, it was there, too.

I wonder what our President said to his wife, flying home from their date on Air Force One – she, the descendent of slaves, and possibly also of slave owners; he, the

descendent of White middle America and a Kenyan exchange student. Did he feel like a bookend? Or did he feel, like Herald Loomis, covered in the cleansing blood of the struggle, ready to sing his song, but still and always at the very, very beginning – with a long road ahead?

Slightly Beyond Knowing: The Neo-Utopian Vision of Harriet Jacobs

with editorial assistance from Dr. Jean Fagan Yellin

A version of this essay originally appeared as the director's notes for the playbill of "Harriet Jacobs" at Central Square Theater, January 2010, and as the forward to the published script "Harriet Jacobs" by Lydia R. Diamond, Northwestern University Press.

In 1861, a book appeared in Boston whose title page named neither an author nor a publisher. It read, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself, Edited by L. Maria Child*. The first line of the author's preface declared, "Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction," and claimed that other than disguising the names of people and places (mostly, the author gently implied, to protect the guilty), the incredible tale was "strictly true." This preface was signed "Linda Brent," the pseudonym of the "slave girl" of the title. An editor's introduction by Child, a prominent author and White abolitionist, underscored these claims and vouched for "Linda's" reliability.

The "Linda" of *Incidents* was actually a middle-aged resident of Cornwall, New York, named Harriet Jacobs, who had been held a slave in Edenton, North Carolina, before fleeing to the North nearly twenty years earlier, at age twenty-nine. Jacobs's brother, John, had arrived in the North before his sister and was well known in the abolitionist community, at one time lecturing alongside Frederick Douglass. Harriet, too, had become part of this community. In her correspondence with notable reformers of the time, both Black and White, Jacobs sometimes even signed "Linda" alongside her own name.

Somehow, however, in spite of her relatively high profile during her lifetime, it did not take long for Harriet Jacobs to be all but erased from the pages of history. The style of *Incidents* is unique and its content is so astonishing that literary and historical scholars came to doubt Jacobs's authorship—and even her existence. By the middle of the twentieth century, it was generally held that the book was another novel by Lydia Maria Child. Luckily, some of Child's correspondence concerning the manuscript was discovered by Dr. Jean Fagan Yellin, a professor at Pace University. Yellin's unflinching scholarship snatched Jacobs from the abyss of obscurity, unearthing the evidence of her authorship and affirming the accuracy of most of the events she described. Yellin did not stop with two editions of *Incidents* (reclassified by the Library of Congress to indicate Jacobs as the author). She followed the trail of Jacobs's exceptional life past

the time of the book's conclusion, publishing a meticulous and engaging biography in 2004, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life*.

With Jacobs definitively established as the narrative's author and her book as an autobiography, we are left to wonder what made this document so unbelievable. Certainly Jacobs's story itself is extraordinary. The events of her life in slavery differ in striking ways from other information we have about the lives of female slaves: learning to read at a young age; rejecting the sexual advances of her master, Dr. James Norcom; entering into a consensual affair with an unmarried White slave owner with whom she conceived two children; and escaping from Norcom only to remain right under his nose—hidden in a crawlspace under the roof of her grandmother's porch for seven long years. The events of her life after slavery seem no less extraordinary. "We don't know of any woman who was a slave in the South, a fugitive in the South and the North, who wrote a slave narrative and then went back down South to do relief work and establish a school," Yellin pointed out. "And she wrote about it in the northern press to publicize the condition of the Black refugees from slavery. We just didn't have that story before; and now we do." The last point seems particularly salient: we did not have that story before now. It is therefore conceivable, even probable, that there are other stories which we still "just don't have"—some that may bear a similarity to Jacobs's and some that may be extraordinary in different, unprecedented ways.

Yellin recently published *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers*, the first scholarly edition of the papers of a Black woman held in slavery. That long-overdue volume serves as a reminder that our most familiar stories about Black women in slavery are not in their own voices—in sharp contrast to those of both Black men and White women of the same era. Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of perhaps the most influential abolitionist text, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was a White woman. Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, female heroes of the slavery struggle, were illiterate; although their stories were transcribed, they were not able to create a written record of their own making. While Frederick Douglass and other men who had been held in slavery touched on the experiences of their female friends and relatives, none was able to be as frank about the experiences of women in the slaveholding South—both Black and White—as Jacobs. In particular, Jacobs describes unconscionable sexual practices that thrived under chattel slavery: the ubiquity of the rape of slaves at the hands of their masters, including the rape of children, and the unnatural result of such an act—a parent owning, and profiting from the sale of, his own offspring. She writes of the spread of

this perverted sexual culture to the wives and children of slaveholders, demonstrating the incompatibility of the system of slavery with the era's emphasis on feminine purity and virtue.

Jacobs's embarrassment about her own complicated sexual past almost kept her from telling her story. "I had determined to let others think as they pleased, but my lips should be sealed and no one had a right to question me," she wrote to her Quaker friend Amy Post. "For this reason when I first came North I avoided the Antislavery people as much as possible because I felt that I could not be honest and tell the whole truth." In all likelihood, if it were not for Post's encouragement, even insistence, *Incidents* would never have been written, let alone published.

When Jacobs finally did decide to tell her story, she was not only a former "slave girl"—she was a mature woman who had lived for almost twenty years in several Northern cities, journeyed to Europe, and worked and corresponded with some of America's most prominent abolitionists. Her perspective was more expansive than that of many of her readers who may not have traveled or read as widely as she. She had had the chance to observe the response of Northern and European audiences to abolitionist arguments and to gauge her own rhetorical power through anonymous letters she sent to the editors of local newspapers.

Earlier, wanting to tell her story but doubting her ability to write effectively about her experiences, Jacobs had enlisted the aid of her prominent White friends Amy Post and Cornelia Willis to contact another White woman whom she thought might be able to help—the day's most famous abolitionist writer, Harriet Beecher Stowe. When approached with the request to bring Jacobs's unusual life to the page, Stowe replied dismissively that she would be happy to incorporate an anecdote about Jacobs's story into her new book, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Incensed, Jacobs declared her story "needed no romance" and finally began to write the book herself. Her comment about "romance" is notable, because *Incidents* is frequently cited as employing the conceits of the Victorian romantic novel in order to engage the sympathies of nineteenth-century female readers. Actually, its skillful mimicry of the genre was one of the factors that critics cited when expressing doubt about whether the book was, in fact, an autobiography. But if Jacobs had intended her story as a romantic novel, she could have taken advantage of Stowe's offer and spared herself the long hours writing in her employer's attic, late at night, after a full day of work.

Jacobs wanted her story to stand on its own. She clearly intended it to be more than a romantic account, and perhaps even more than a historical document to aid the cause of abolitionism. There is a detectable edge to both the romantic and abolitionist sentiments in her text. Over and over she reminds her readers that the nineteenth-century moral code is in direct conflict not only with the system of slavery but with the ubiquitous racism she finds in Northern states and with the compromised morality she experiences everywhere in her travels—even in her own soul. When she receives a letter in which her grandmother reports that old Master Norcom has died and expresses a hope that he has “made his peace with God,” she cannot agree. “I cannot say, with truth, that the news of my old master’s death softened my feelings towards him,” she writes. “There are wrongs which even the grave does not bury. The man was odious to me while he lived, and his memory is odious now.”

In the book *Utopia in Performance*, critic Jill Dolan suggests that some contemporary performance may have a “neo-utopian” vision—a perspective inverting the Romanticism inherent in old ideas of utopia, which clung to the idea of restoring the virtues of a foregone golden age. Neo-utopianism, on the other hand, is “romantic about the future—not about the past.” Inherent in Jacobs’s brand of Romanticism is this kind of neo-utopian vision. Perhaps this is what makes the narrative feel so far ahead of its time. Jacobs of course calls for abolition, but she also calls for human rights and humanity on multiple levels—she indicts everyone from her “kind” White lover (who is willing to treat his own children as property) to a Black preacher (whose warning that Jacobs may be condemned for her sexual history sentences her to years of shamed silence) to the liberal Northerners (who claim to oppose slavery while enforcing the harsh Fugitive Slave Laws) to even her beloved grandmother (who is sometimes blinded by her bouts of anxiety and religiosity). Jacobs’s refusal to let anyone off the hook—least of all herself—is grounded in an implicit sense of faith, of possibility. We can *all* do better, she seems to be telling us—we *must* all do better.

Nearly 150 years after the publication of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, interest in the text has surged. It is being read, taught, and studied extensively – and now performed, thanks to a stage adaptation by playwright Lydia R. Diamond. Jacobs finds a perfect collaborator in Diamond, whose interest in *Incidents* seems to lie not in its incidents, but in its neo-utopian vision. Diamond’s play, *Harriet Jacobs*, places a version of the narrative of Jacobs’s life alongside an inquiry into what we may think we

already know about her life. This juxtaposition pointedly performs the question that artists and historians often ask in private but too rarely put at the center of their work: “Why are we telling this story?” The play does not answer this question, but it implies that if our goal is to learn from the past, we are not served by telling and retelling the same story, learning and relearning the same lesson. “You’ve heard about that,” says Harriet in the play, after a gruesome description of the way slaves are treated on a plantation, “or at least something like it. This is not what I wish to tell you.” Diamond’s text, like Jacobs’s, asks us to consider all the ways we *don’t* understand history, all the ways we have become comfortable with one kind of narrative of slavery and, by extension, with one kind of narrative about race, class, gender, power, and privilege.

Jacobs and Diamond, both writing in times and places removed from the incidents they recount, share a keen understanding of the images their audiences have already absorbed of the institution of chattel slavery, and both attempt to use those images in the service of their particular goals. For example, Diamond has set some scenes of the play in a cotton field—though she was well aware that Jacobs lived in North Carolina, a state that grew not cotton, but tobacco and corn. Yet here—like Jacobs, who in describing the mistreatment of a slave, concludes, “These God-breathing machines are no more, in the sight of their masters, than the cotton they plant, or the horses they tend”—Diamond invokes cotton metaphorically as an easily recognized symbol of the labor of slaves in the American South. Diamond then goes on to treat the image of the cotton field in a series of surprising ways—a site for fantasy, beauty, and romantic games. When Diamond reintroduces a familiar role for the cotton field—as a site for a brutal beating by an overseer—it is thrown into stark relief against the lingering sense of beauty and possibility. While we might once have felt familiar, even comfortable, with the cotton field as a symbol of slavery, we are now experiencing the same image as unfamiliar, uncomfortable, unknown. “I promise that you may believe you have heard it, you may believe you know this,” Harriet says in the play’s opening moments, “and I suggest that it is slightly beyond knowing, because still, I hear the stories, I live the stories, and I do not yet understand.”

In this most fundamental way, the play hews faithfully to the essence of Jacobs’s life and work. To reach her audience, Diamond, like Jacobs, embroiders with the neo-utopian thread of image, metaphor, and emotional appeal. Each asks her audience to imagine (and re-imagine) the experience of living inside the “peculiar institution” of

slavery for Black and White Americans, men and women, free and slave, rich and poor. Each asks us to consider that, for those who lived its reality every day, slavery was difficult to comprehend, and that even now—or especially now—it remains “slightly beyond knowing.”

Perhaps as we become more comfortable with the idea that some parts of our history are slightly beyond knowing, the more comfortable we can become with Jacobs’s and Diamond’s neo-utopian vision of America. They insist that we carry the past with us humbly, aware of its mysteries but not paralyzed by its weight, and not overwhelmed by its shadows—moved by romantic imaginings of our shared future rather than by imperfect recollections of our shared past.

“The Old Dark Cloud Comes Over Me”: The Perils of Militant Optimism

Summer was like your house: you knew
where each thing stood.
Now you must go out into your heart
as onto a vast plain. Now
the immense loneliness begins.
–Rilke

As a child, I had what I would characterize as a dramatic personality. Prone to exaggeration, to extremes of feeling, to profound attachments – not only to my friends and family, but also to characters in books, athletes on the University of Washington women’s basketball team, paper dolls, and, once, a dying beetle on our front walk. I wrote a lot of poetry while sitting in the corner, had existential crises at summer camp, scratched half-heartedly at my wrists with a rusty nail when the boy I liked failed to like me back, and locked myself in my closet because I was convinced I had cancer...all of this while living an unfailingly stable, upper middle class life. My family was supportive and loving. I went to great schools. I was cute. When another child at school behaved badly, my mother would point out that his parents were divorced, or that she had a learning disability. Having all the advantages of health, wealth, and stability, I had no excuse for boredom, sadness, or underachievement. “After all,” Mom would say, “if you can’t be happy, who can?”

Even as a little girl, I had a strong sense that the world’s unspeakable beauty was matched only by its unspeakable horror. I remember the moment when I first identified this feeling: at age eight, on the soccer field, in my shiny blue and gold jersey. My team was called the Unicorns. We’d just had a team meeting about something – I can’t remember what – and everyone got very upset, including the coaches and parents. The meeting descended into a series of overlapping, hyperbolic arguments. Suddenly filled with melancholy, I wandered away from the group and sat on the bleachers. I watched the Unicorns and their adult guardians gesticulating wildly at each other in the middle of the field. I looked up at the beautiful sky, darkening blue with a glow of apricot at the edges, framed by a lattice of almost-bare branches. I thought about all the terrible things that were happening in the world: the wars, the bombs, the dolphins caught in fishing lines, the starving Ethiopians. When my dad came to pick me up, I was weeping inconsolably. It was the world, the world...I felt

unbelievably sad for the world. And something about that feeling seemed correct, a correctness that put me on a different level from the other Unicorns. Wiping my eyes righteously, I felt my higher purpose. I would be part of the world's hope.

It was not ok to be sad for myself, but to be sad for the world was acceptable. And part of being sad for the world was the commitment to make it a better place. This, I think was one of the founding tenets of my art-making from age eight onwards. From the poems I wrote on the school bus in third grade for my babysitter who was afraid of getting old (“Time/It passes/It comes and it goes/It leaves us breathless in times of woe/Never meet will we again?/It’s all her doing!/Small as an elephant/Big as a flea/Leaving no trace/But a memory.”), to the short fiction about poverty in the South Bronx I labored over in college, I was careful to address things that were allowed to matter – things outside of myself.

In my adult career as a theater-maker, I taught youth in Hell’s Kitchen to develop their unique voices through writing and acting, I directed plays about police violence against young Black men, I championed the creation of new work about civil war in Africa. I worked hard, and I cared passionately. I embraced a stance of what Jill Dolan calls “militant optimism” – a persistent belief that theater can model utopian social relationships and reaffirm hope and faith. Like Dolan, I would “go to performances anticipating transformative experiences... [not] iterations of what *is*, but transformative doings of what *if*.” Sometimes the work was challenging, even risky, but I always knew I was doing the right thing. Just like that day on the soccer field, my purpose and my path were clear. In that sense, I felt comfortable.

As a director, I was drawn to projects that dealt with difficult subjects with sensitivity, grace, and humanity, plays that made the audience cry but also left them with a tiny, warm, spark. I was less interested in Mamet, Pinter, Albee, more interested in Lorca, Kushner, Vogel. Most of all, I was drawn to new scripts by writers struggling to make sense of old questions in fresh, immediate, local ways. Every few years I would read a new play that grabbed me by the shoulders, yelling “Yes! We understand each other! We were made for each other!” and I would know I’d found my next directing project. So it was with a script by Lydia Diamond which had been developed at the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago in 2007. The play, *Harriet Jacobs*, was freely adapted by Diamond from Jacobs’ 1861 slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. It

was my great fortune to direct the second production of the play at the Underground Railway Theater in Cambridge in 2009.

The script was challenging both in its harrowing subject matter and its confrontational approach. Written to be performed by an all-Black cast, portraying both Black and White characters, it allowed Black actors to step in and out of roles of slave and master in the antebellum South, as well as to speak directly to the audience, addressing how and why complex history is recalled in the present moment. According to the playwright, the casting served multiple purposes: to provide rich roles for Black actors, to provide contemporary Black Americans the opportunity to fully tell their own story, and to allow actors to grapple with their relationship to the material rather than their relationship to their fellow actors – three weeks of rehearsal is barely enough time for a group of Black and White Americans to get to know each other enough to begin to talk honestly about race, let alone to re-enact the dynamics of slavery on stage with any kind of new insight or productive energy. Most of all, the casting opened up room for a shift in audience perspective. Watching a White slave-owner make advances to a teenage slave girl and then turn around and threaten his pregnant wife – a familiar scene from historical movies, plays, and books – became a different experience for the viewer when all three characters were played by Black actors. Rather than race being the most visible factor, the engines of money, power, and privilege were revealed.

To work on a play like *Harriet Jacobs* is both thrilling and terrifying because it represents not just a creative engagement but a social, political, and personal one. It is impossible for a group of artists to bring this play to life without confronting the legacy of slavery in their own daily lives – especially when a White person is directing an all-Black cast in a play about slavery. The irony wasn't lost on me. Our group of actors, designers, and technicians, along with the theater's staff, took a deep breath and committed to this engagement.

It was a powerfully moving process, and also hard. There were many moments of beauty and revelation. We also experienced resistance, anxiety, confusion, anger, and fear – directly, and also indirectly, in the form of illness and injury among the cast. I myself threw my back out badly, and began having panic attacks for the first time in my life – which sent me to the ER in the middle of a snowstorm, convinced that I was having a pulmonary embolism. As an impressive culminating flourish, the theater lost power for our entire scheduled tech weekend. We huddled in front of sunny windows

in the dressing room, running lines and waiting for the lights to come back on (they didn't). In a phone call that night, Lydia reminded me uneasily that the play's premiere at Steppenwolf was beset by an almost unbelievable string of disasters: there was no heat in the rehearsal studio during the coldest weeks of a Chicago winter, both Lydia and the lead actress ended up in the hospital with exhaustion and stress-related conditions, another person working on the production was committed to a mental institution, and, tragically, the assistant stage manager – who was young and seemingly healthy – died the week the show opened. Lydia wondered aloud, “Does Harriet hate this play? Maybe I shouldn't have written it. Maybe this stuff is supposed to be left alone. Maybe I shouldn't have brought it here, so close to her.” Harriet was buried in the Mt. Auburn Cemetery, three miles from our theater in Cambridge. Just a few days before, the actress playing Harriet in our production had gone to visit her grave.

I cried on the train back to Providence that night, feeling overwhelmed, wondering how I was going to make the show work with no tech weekend. Was Harriet angry? Why? All we did was think about her and try to honor her memory! We had done everything right! I was so tired! My back hurt! It wasn't *fair*! Then I remembered something that Nambi Kelley, the actress who played Harriet in the Chicago production, had said: “I'd be sitting in the rehearsal studio, freezing cold, and I'd think about how much more Harriet went through. How she endured seven years of freezing cold, and burning hot, and so much more. The least I could do is endure a little discomfort as a part of telling her story.” Was *I* prepared to endure a little discomfort? Or, maybe, a lot?

I went back to my books to read Harriet's words. After the war was over, Harriet returned for the first and only time to the place of her seven-year confinement. She wrote a letter to Ednah Dow Cheney, a friend in the North:

“I felt I would like to write you a line from my old home. I am sitting under the old roof, twelve feet from the spot where I suffered all the crushing weight of slavery. thank God, the bitter cup is drained of its last dreg... I had long thought I had no attachment to my old home. as I often sit here and think of those I loved of their hard struggle in life... they have made the few sunny spots in that dark sacred to me. I cannot tell you how I feel in this place. the change is so great I can hardly take it all in I was born here, and amid all these

new born blessings, the old dark cloud comes over me, and I find it hard to have faith in rebels.”

Although I’d pored over these letters for hours, it was as if I’d never read this passage before. Could this be Harriet Jacobs speaking, abolitionist heroine, brave and smart survivor? Are these her words even after she published her book, after slavery had ended, after she was reunited with her children? Can it be possible that these monumental victories, for which she cared so passionately, did not bring more than a few tiny sparks of light into her own soul?

It began to dawn on me that Harriet was a darker spirit than I’d realized, that she struggled mightily with despair and depression throughout her life. Faith, especially, was always a struggle for her, as she attempted to make sense of a God who would allow the horrors of slavery to continue, and in spite of her belief in Christian ideals of charity and mercy, she was unable – or unwilling – to forgive the men and women who had participated in the enslavement of other human beings. Even though I’d read and re-read her words, I’d never recognized the extent of this struggle. I’d cared so much about Harriet, admired her so much, that I wasn’t really seeing her. I realized with a chill how tempting it is to romanticize those who lived through terrible things. But no saint could survive the experience of being a slave in America, and live to tell the tale. Survivors must have complex arsenals at their disposal, as Harriet certainly did.

No, Harriet wasn’t a sanitized heroine, and Lydia’s play didn’t ask her to be. Instead, our text allowed for a woman who was by turns impatient, sexy, manipulative, deeply depressed, really smart to the point of smart-ass at times, full of desire, desperately confused. She was also a person of enormous strength and tenacity. In her letter to Cheney, she went on to discuss the political, social, and economic situation in the area in great detail. Even under the shadow of her dark cloud, she never disengaged with the larger struggle for justice. All of this was reflected in Lydia’s text. I went back through the play with the actors, humbly, finding places where we had scrubbed our heroine too clean. We put the texture back in. The play was better. I will admit that it didn’t *feel* better to us – it felt more uncomfortable, less liberating – but the story was being told more clearly, more honestly.

Harriet struggled her whole life – physically, politically, socially, and spiritually. We, in engaging with her story, should have expected to inherit those struggles. It wasn't easy for her, so why should it be easy for us? That night, after the tech day with no electricity, I tried to stop fighting the struggle and honor it, allow it to exist. Two days later, power back on in the building, I had the cast and crew bring in family photographs and we built an altar for them in the middle of the theater. We made a circle around it, sang, prayed, burned sage, hugged each other, and welcomed Harriet into our hearts and the space. The rest of the run, and a tour, went off without a hitch. Without a logistical hitch, that is. Privately, I know we all grappled with hard questions, weird shadows, and persistent doubts – honoring our commitment to keep our hearts and minds active as Harriet did.

When the show was over, I felt unsettled, unsure of how to proceed. I had to face the reality that without the panic attacks and the lights going out, I would have misinterpreted both the complex history of the woman whose memory I wanted so badly to honor, and the complex present of my collaborators whom I so deeply loved and respected. I'd always assumed that my militant optimism was a magical shield that allowed me to descend, unscathed, into the darkness. But was I using my magic shield as a convenient way of resisting the possibilities of that darkness? Did my commitment to work from a place of persistent hope obscure my ability to be present with ideas, people, and stories that were different from myself?

I knew that it had, and it did. I was still that eight year old Unicorn, descending into a sentimental free-fall. Sentimentality, James Baldwin wrote, “is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty.” Baldwin's harsh words were for Harriet Beecher Stowe, the White author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and a one-time hero of Jacobs' – until Jacobs wrote to Stowe for help publishing her life story and Stowe dismissively offered to mention Jacobs as an anecdote in her latest book. Perhaps Stowe meant well; perhaps “meaning well” is just a euphemism for “secret and violent inhumanity.”

Elin Diamond wrote of this kind of violence – the violence of solidarity, the violence of identification, the “annihilation of difference” which collapses “you” and “I” into “we.” I now understand that my vow on the soccer field – to be part of the world's hope – was violent in this way. By committing to change that which was outside of

myself, by both equating myself with and separating myself from “the world,” I could only hope to “speak of” rather than “speak to.” By making art that addressed “universal” human problems of injustice without honoring the intimacies of individual experience, I was effectively erasing both the Other and myself. By believing that my militant optimism could pierce through Harriet’s “old dark cloud” and cast her story in a new light of hope, I denied the very center of her experience, and with it, any possibility for real contact. Hope, at least the way I was used to practicing it, seemed to have a sort of directionality to it; it came from somewhere and wanted to go somewhere else. Hope had an agenda. It seemed my militant optimism was a little too, well... militant.

I realized that descending into the darkness with the shield of militant optimism had a few problems – the first one was that the entire time I was in the darkness, my goal was to either obliterate it (with light) or get the heck out of there (taking everyone else back to the light with me). I had decided I wanted to change a place without ever really inhabiting it. I traveled into a foreign land thinking that I knew more than its inhabitants, determined to make a heroic rescue. Put it like that, it sounds familiar, doesn’t it? Kind of like...colonialism.

The second problem is the dichotomy that my shield of militant optimism enforced on my own thinking, and thus, my art-making. My insistence on the opposition of darkness and light echoed the rhetorical structures which had shaped my education and upbringing – Western rationalism, Cartesian dualism – the primacy of reason, the opposition between the immaterial/unconscious realm of thought and feeling, and the realm of truth and knowledge arrived at through logic and science. Even in my conception of hope, I was unable to break free of this paradigm, which, by viewing light and darkness as opposites, left no room for anything other than an oppositional relationship between them. Taoist philosophy, by contrast, imagines a universe assembled not from opposing forces but from interdependent ones, illustrated in the symbol of yin and yang, which places symmetrical swirls of white and black side by side to make up the whole of a circle; the white side containing a small circle of black, and the black side, a small circle of white. The *Tao Te Ching* explains:

Having and not having arise together.

Difficult and easy complement each other.

Long and short contrast each other.

High and low rest upon each other.
Voice and sound harmonize each other;
Front and back follow one another.

Or, later:

Give up learning, and put an end to your troubles.
Is there a difference between yes and no?
Is there a difference between good and evil?
Must I fear what others fear? What nonsense!

But I am not a Taoist, and while I understood the constraints of my own thinking, I was unsure how to escape them. Is there a difference between good and evil? I'd always thought so. Must I fear what others fear? Maybe. I was left cold and scared, and kind of lonely. Before it had seemed that Harriet and I were together, aligned; now I wasn't sure. "Now you must go out into your heart as onto a vast plain," Rilke wrote, "Now the immense loneliness begins." I understood the *must*. I knew that I *had* to live with this feeling, I just wasn't sure *how* to live with it. How could I abide with the knowledge that I might not *ever* find hope, that there might not – should not – be a happy ending? In cold, dark, lonely moments, if I didn't have that light of hope, if there was no difference between good and evil, yes and no, how could I see which way to go? How could I even begin to engage with Harriet, or anyone else? Martha Graham said "No artist is pleased. There is no satisfaction whatever at any time. There is only a queer, divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching." Was that really the best I could hope for – the divine dissatisfaction, the blessed unrest of simply staying in motion?

The next play I read and loved after *Harriet Jacobs* was John Guare's *Landscape of the Body*, a script that couldn't have been more different from *Harriet*, but which nevertheless grabbed me by the shoulders in that old familiar way. Guare's surreal tale of murder and memory in 1970's New York City is contemporary, urban, thorny, and darkly funny. Meditating on morality and mortality, it asks, what do we believe? To whom are we responsible? What choices do we make that ultimately ever *really* matter? The complex answers offered in the text suggest that landscapes are always shifting – of body, of memory, of truth, of desire, of action – but that it's possible to continue to choose forward, it's possible that, as Guare writes in the introduction,

“there might just be something inexhaustible in the human spirit that constantly says *yes* once more.”

I read that sentence over and over again. The key seemed to be the word “might.” *Might* considers hope as a possibility, not a certainty, allows me to constantly discover it, to be surprised by it, to honestly recognize it rather than impose it. *Might* also requires a leap of faith – to walk into the world (or a rehearsal room) not knowing what I will discover, available to the continuum of light and darkness, good and evil, and beyond. There is certainly an unrest in that, a vague dissatisfaction, sometimes a dark cloud, frequently an immense loneliness. And to all of that, I now say, or try to say, *yes*.

Still, I have to smile at the idea of that little Unicorn – in her shiny blue and yellow uniform, crying on the bleachers until her father came to collect her – harboring a secret and violent inhumanity. Like all of us, that little girl was just trying to make sense of the world she was given. Like all of us, she is still trying.

WWMLKD

I think that the past is all that makes the present coherent, and further, that the past will remain horrible for exactly as long as we refuse to assess it honestly.

– James Baldwin

Don lived in Newport, Rhode Island, in a sunny wooden house surrounded by lilac bushes. Many nights, the smell of the blossoms drifted in through open windows as we discussed his sons' heartaches and triumphs on the basketball court, or tried to stay awake for *The Daily Show*. I didn't have a television, and I remember the first time I really wanted one: November 7, 2006. I rushed to Newport after work; Don was fielding some teenage crisis at his job as director of the afterschool program at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Center. I met him there at and turned on the TV in the darkened craft room as midterm election results started to trickle in from around the country, results that would eventually spell the largest Democratic gain in Congress in thirty years. After all the kids had gone home, Don came in and sat down on the ragged couch next to me; holding hands, we watched red states turn blue, sniffing the first hint of hope in much too long, a hint which would bloom and intoxicate us over the next two years. By that time, though, our powerful romance would be over.

Newport is a popular tourist destination, beloved for its picturesque beaches, waterside social scene, and famous cliff-side mansions. The city proudly touts its colonial history as a haven for early settlers seeking religious freedom and, later, a hotbed of revolutionary activity during the struggle for independence from British rule. A historical distinction which goes largely unmentioned in tourism materials is that Newport was once North America's largest and busiest slave port, responsible for the enslavement and transport of 106,000 Africans – a commerce which continued illegally for decades after 1807, when the transatlantic slave trade was outlawed in the newly formed United States. But the 350,000 tourists who visit the city each year will find no plaque, monument or museum commemorating this part of Newport's history – just sparkling beaches, overpriced seafood, and those mansions perched splendidly on the cliffs. Tucked away in a corner of the town's cemetery are a handful of grave markers of free Blacks and slaves; the past here appears mostly un-assessed and so perhaps, according to Baldwin, still horrible.

On two occasions, the King Center held their annual benefit in one of the cliff-side mansions. The first time, Don was the only Black man there – other than the members of the excellent band, which kept the guests dancing all night. At one point, when the band was on a break, one of the guests approached Don and asked him, “Do you guys do that Aretha Franklin song, R-E-S-P-E-C-T? Can you play that one?” Don politely informed the guest that he had the wrong gentleman, and walked away. The following year, Don was waiting outside to pick up his car at the end of the night, when someone walked up to him and handed him a valet parking slip. “It’s a silver BMW,” the man said, “Thanks.” This time, Don was tempted to go get the car and drive it away, considering it a gift. But instead, he sighed and informed the guest he had the wrong Black man.

At the time Don told me these stories, I was directing a play in which the main character is mistaken for another Black man by a White police officer, and is shot dead as a result. I was secretly happy that the man I loved lived in Newport, RI, where the results of mistaken identity are merely infuriating, not fatal.

And I did love him. Don made me feel suddenly awake, like a switch had been thrown. Sometimes the awakesness was so electrifying that I felt ready to do anything – *anything* – to stay with him, to make it work. The way he looked at me across a room told me he felt the same way. It was mysterious to both of us, I think. We were so different. Don was born and raised in St. Louis, one of thirteen siblings, without much money but rich in charm and energy. He loved SportsCenter and classic soul; he was also twenty years my senior, divorced, with two teenage boys. Usually I still felt like a teenager myself, getting by on my winning smile and impressive vocabulary. I loved long walks and Joni Mitchell. I was the child of Ivy League educated academics, raised – along with one brother and a misbehaved dog – by two loving parents who only ever wanted the best for me. Gently, and then less gently, they wondered aloud whether a man twenty years older with significant family commitments was really the best for me. Don’s mother might have wondered whether this little White girl was the best for him and his kids, too – if he’d ever mentioned me to her. I suspect he never did.

Growing up in Seattle, I was bused, with other children from my attractive neighborhood, to an “accelerated” academic program housed in a “regular” public

school across town. In retrospect, I've often questioned the rationale of this arrangement. Busing in a bunch of kids to a highly selective program that quite visibly occupied a few classrooms in the middle of a public elementary school? Even without the race factor, it seems cruel; given that the bused-in kids were mostly White and the rest of the school population was not, it seems especially questionable. On paper, Madrona Elementary appeared to have an impressively diverse student body. In reality, it was simply a segregated school within a school. Even at the time, I remember finding the arrangement tense and peculiar. In school documents and announcements, our classrooms were called "APP" for "Accelerated Progress Program" (for awhile it was called Individualized Progress Program, but the "I pee-pee!" jokes got to be too much.) The other classrooms were actually called "Regular." Never the twain did meet – except in our once-a-week science class, and at the annual MLK Day assembly, where we all stood and sang "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing." I remember thinking it was the most beautiful song I'd ever heard; singing it in assembly made my chest fill up with light and gave me a lump in my throat.

On my last day of fourth grade, as I was swinging on the bars on the playground, a tall, slender sixth grader, one of the blackest kids in the school, came up to me. I had never spoken to him and if I'd met him in the street I wouldn't have been able to recognize him as a fellow Madrona student.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," I said.

"On the first day of school next year, I'm going to kill you," he said. He looked hard at me to reinforce the point. Then he walked away.

I knew he was a sixth grader and wouldn't be back next year (unless he had failed and had to repeat? The thought filled me with dread). Still, I remembered what he had said and spent the first week of fifth grade on the lookout. I don't remember associating this incident with race, as there were plenty of scary White boys, too – it took me years to recover from the time, in second grade, when Tommy Heberline had his two friends hold my arms at recess, took a running start, and kicked me squarely below the belt. Ouch.

Seattle, flavored by the gold rush, the rain, and Chief Sealth, carries a different legacy than St. Louis, or Newport. Things feel newer there, more expansive. Later, I got so used to living in Rhode Island, I would sometimes forget that I'd grown up in a land of mountains and lakes, not in a land of designer sunglasses and ivy leagues. Don always wanted to visit Seattle. He said he wanted me to take him to all my old haunts, show him the places I had known as a child. I imagined standing in front of the monkey bars at Madrona Elementary with him, where I had received my first and only death threat. Even as I conjured the image, it faded away; outside the salty nights and lilac-drenched mornings of Newport, our romance seemed fragile and unlikely.

But one spectacular weekend in July, 2007, we were still optimistic about our chances, and Newport's harbor looked so pretty in the twinkling late-afternoon sun. It was the weekend of the Great Newport Chowder Festival, and Don was supervising his young charges from the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center as they raised funds for their after-school program by selling donated slices of cherry and apple pie to sun-burnt tourists. Kayla, an enterprising twelve-year-old, asked Don if she could try to barter a slice of our pie in exchange for some fries from a neighboring booth. As Kayla trotted off in the direction of the deep fryer, a tall, tan woman approached us. Pin-straight hair hung in a brilliantly blond sheet down the back of her light blue polo shirt, and expensive-looking sunglasses perched lightly on her head. She looked to be in her late 40's – although it was hard to tell, as she might have been one of those lucky women whose smoothly tanned skin and gym-toned body subtracts fifteen years from her age. She approached Don with a smile.

“Hi! I saw your sign,” she chimed, gesturing to the King Center's banner above the cornucopia of pie. “Martin Luther King! That's so great.” The woman explained that she was a frequent visitor to Newport, although she had lived on Long Island all her life. She had recently seen the civil rights documentary “Eyes on the Prize” on her local PBS station. She told Don how much the film had affected her. “This happened during my lifetime,” she said, “but I didn't really know about it. I'm really sorry to say that I had no idea what was going on at the time.”

She recounted in detail what she had seen on the screen: the lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Till, the marches, the sit-ins, Little Rock, Montgomery, Dr. King's assassination. She said she finally understood the importance of Dr. King's life, that now she, too, saw him as a hero. I was standing there listening, but Long Island was

talking only to Don – looking deeply into his eyes, her voice trembling. He leaned forward, letting her talk, hearing her gracefully – one of his most beautiful qualities, and one I knew well.

Somewhere in the midst of this, Kayla returned with an overflowing cone of fries.

“I’m back!” she shouted at Don.

“You’re not even gonna give me some fries?” he asked, playfully reaching over her shoulder.

Kayla snatched the fries away and turned to raise an eyebrow skeptically at him. “Nah, these are mine. Go get your own fries.”

Long Island smiled gravely and leaned down to look into Kayla’s face. “Now, honey, just think,” she suggested, “What would Dr. King do?”

Kayla looked straight back at Long Island for a fleeting moment, her eyebrows arching even higher, so that they looked ready to fly up off of her forehead into the salty Newport breeze. Then she said, simply and directly, “Eat ‘em,” before stalking back to the pie station.

Don and I had to wait until Long Island was summoned away by her husband before we could collapse into a fit of giggles over the incident. “What would Dr. King do?” we chortled, gasping for air: “Eat ‘em!!!” It was hard to explain exactly why it was so funny. Perhaps it was the equation of the civil rights movement with the golden rule, or the relationship of either one to a cone of Chowder Fest fries. Perhaps it was the deep suspicion that Kayla was right – Dr. King would simply have raised an eyebrow and eaten the fries – or maybe it was just the look on her face and her matter of fact tone as she delivered the message to Long Island: Sorry, lady, but I know that man better than you do. Sorry, lady, but it’s gonna take more than a documentary to help you digest the 40 years of public life that you missed. Lady, do you know about this harbor?

I imagined Don at one of those King Center benefits up on the cliffs: his old suit – worn thin in one elbow – accessorized smartly with a shiny striped tie and a leather

cap, a knee-weakening smile and an infectious chuckle. I imagined him charming a woman like Long Island, her blond hair swinging as he spun her around the dance floor. Donations from women like Long Island kept the doors open at the King Center. Perhaps one of them had even donated the pie that Kayla was selling (and bartering) at the Chowder Fest. And perhaps they would never make those donations without first seeing “Eyes on the Prize.” The King Center couldn’t do what it did without Long Island feeling the way she did. At least she was partway into the conversation, and even if she didn’t know how much further she had to go, the fact that she was there at all had to count for something. Didn’t it? I thought of my own parents, who had not only lived through the events of “Eyes on the Prize,” but who, unlike Long Island, had been paying attention the first time around, and whose lives had been changed by what they witnessed. What had I witnessed? One death threat from a sixth grader, in an otherwise halcyon existence of Accelerated Progress, lilac blossoms, and soaring choruses of “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing.”

The Long Island incident made me suspect myself of something, although I didn’t know why or what. The tremble of her voice stayed with me, the awakening in her eyes – a strange brightness, as if she were seeing Don differently from any other man she’d ever met, saying things she’d never said before. Did she really see him? Did I? Or did we both see only what we wanted to see? She didn’t understand why he made her feel the way he did, and that made me nervous, because I didn’t understand why he made me feel the way I did either.

It occurred to me for the first time that perhaps I was a victim of mistaken identity that day at the end of fourth grade at Madrona Elementary. Maybe the deadly sixth-grader had mistaken me for another White girl? Given the well-enforced segregation at our school, it was not an entirely remote possibility. Or maybe he had just mistaken me for A White Girl – in which case, I guess, he’d mistaken me correctly.

This summer, listening to public radio on a long drive, I heard a story about the fiftieth anniversary of the lynching that inspired the song “Strange Fruit,” written by Abel Meeropol and made famous by Billie Holliday. You’ve probably seen the photograph from this lynching, the same photograph that compelled Meeropol to pick up his pen. It shows a crowd of White folks in Marion, Indiana: men in work clothes, a young couple holding hands, an older woman, even a pregnant woman. Some are smiling. They look, according to the NPR story, and I agree, like they are at a county

fair. Behind them, the mutilated and murdered bodies of two teenagers hang from a poplar tree.

Blessedly undocumented in the photo was sixteen-year-old James Cameron, a third defendant who was dragged from the jail after the other two young men, but escaped their fate. Although the mob had the rope around his neck, for some still-unknown reason, they did not string him up alongside the others. Cameron was returned to the jail, where he remained until his trial. Although he was found guilty and served a prison sentence, he was formally pardoned by the state of Indiana in 1993 – more than sixty years after the night that photograph was taken.

“When a traumatic event happens like that, it makes an indelible imprint on the mind,” Cameron said. “But I told [the governor], since Indiana had forgiven me, I, in turn, forgive Indiana.” After his release from jail, Cameron founded three chapters of the NAACP, served as Indiana’s State Director of the Office of Civil Liberties and founded America’s Black Holocaust Museum. He died on June 11, 2006, at the age of 92.

There was something about that number, 92 – the dignity and the beauty of that number – that pointed so eloquently to all the years stolen from so many other young men. I had to struggle against a sudden flood of tears which threatened to drown out the highway in front of me. I thought of the play I had been directing at the time of the Long Island incident, based on the shooting of 19-year-old Timothy Stansbury, Jr. on the roof of his apartment building. He was on his way to a party, holding a CD in his hand. Or, in the play, he was a 17-year-old rushing to a date, holding his iPod in his hand. Or, he was a 14-year-old whistling at a pretty girl. Or, he was a 23-year-old reaching for his wallet. Or, or, or. What really separated Timothy, Emmett, Amadou... from Zack or Nick, Don’s teenage sons? Absolutely nothing. There was no logic. There was no reality. There was no... And then, what separated me from Long Island? What separated me from a young woman in Marion, Indiana, laughing like she’d just stumbled off the tilt-a-whirl at the county fair?

Maybe that sixth grade boy on the playground in Seattle could have been James or Timothy. He could have been Zack or Nick. And I could have been any White girl. Maybe he was trying to make me feel what he felt – instill in me a dark shadow, a quickening of breath, a look over my shoulder, a stab of fear that comes unbidden,

illogical, the knowledge that I could be walking across a playground, or the roof of my building, and, for absolutely no reason at all, be killed.

I never understood this before. And how – *how?* – could I not have understood this? How could I not? But... how could I? How can anyone understand *this*? And if we can't understand it, how can we ever forgive? I believe that somehow Cameron could and did. But how? I don't know how to do it. Perhaps, even if there were a statue in downtown Newport commemorating the city's leading role in the slave trade, it would only serve to remind me of my bafflement, my anger, my non-forgiveness – just as the scent of lilac blossoms, now, brings on only an overwhelming sadness, a reminder of what I will probably never understand.

Baldwin implies that only when we assess the past honestly can we expect the present to become coherent. But what if the present never becomes coherent? Does it mean that we aren't being honest in our assessment of the past? Or even with the most profound honesty we can muster, will some things still retain their baffling power, their cruel mystery? I struggle for honesty, but both past and present seem stubbornly incoherent, resplendent with complexity, shifting tauntingly in my peripheral vision. Sometimes – there! – it's just Luck. Sometimes – aha! – it's Mistaken Identity. Many times – yes, I see it now – it is truly Hate. And sometimes – at least for a little while – it is actually Love. None of it makes much sense. What to do? What would Martin Luther King do? – that is, after he ate his fries?

I still didn't have a television in 2008; instead of going to Newport, I had to stream the election coverage on my laptop until, sometime in October, it got too exciting to watch alone, and I went to neighborhood bars for the debates. Don and I sent a barrage of text messages back and forth, the grief of our separation almost eclipsed by an accelerating sense of national possibility, of *yes we can*. On November 4th, we stood next to each other in a crowd of fellow artists at the Providence Black Repertory Company, watching red states turn blue. We'd hung a large projection screen in the theater for the occasion; behind it, a set still breathed quietly on the stage. The actor who'd played the murdered Timothy Stansbury, Jr. the year before now stood, staring at the screen, a young Black man, tears streaming down his face, bathed in the blue light of the screen, watching the world change.

Elaine Scarry wrote of the relationship between justice and beauty – both, she says, rely on symmetry, the “fairness” that keeps the world in balance. However, since justice – and injustice – often take place beyond the bounds of easy sensory perception, we rely on beauty to remind us of justice and to reawaken our commitment to it. But occasionally, if we are lucky, “the fair political arrangement itself... will be condensed into a time and space where it becomes available to the senses, and then... its beauty is visible.”

I thought of all the times when the world seemed insurmountably unjust. When the weight of history crushed the light and air out of the present. When anger and fear threatened to strangle our hope, our joy, our creative practice in that very room. In this one moment, the weight of impossibility lifted, and in its place... a long, open runway. We watched as those two happy little girls in party dresses walked hand and hand with their elegant parents down that runway. Fueled by the roar of the crowd, the family looked to me like they were about to take off in flight.

Condensed in time and space, the fair political arrangement was suddenly visible, splendid. The past – mine, and America’s – remained bewildering and incomprehensible, in spite of which the present asserted itself with acute coherence: beautiful, and oh so lonely.

Desire

“Let me tell you why you’re here. You're here because you know something. What you know you can't explain, but you feel it. You've felt it your entire life, that there's something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is, but it's there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad. It is this feeling that has brought you to me.”
– Morpheus to Neo in *The Matrix*



The World's True Yearning: Our Desire for Desire in Popular Narratives

Just the first line of the most iconic of wishing songs – “I’m wishing (I’m wishing) for the one I love!” – and generations of former little girls can immediately call up the famous scene in which Snow White warbles her desire into a wishing well, surrounded by white blossoms and pretty but excitable white doves. No doubt the film made a strong impression on lots of boys, too, but I can’t speak for them. In any case, *Snow White*, the first full-length animated feature film ever – and the one which launched the Disney empire – elegantly and cheerfully demonstrates the role of desire as the first step to a happy ending. The performance artist Deb Margolin has said that desire “is our dramaturgical force”; the poet and critic Susan Stewart, in her book *On Longing*, sees all narrative as “a structure of desire.” Desire is the force that sets things in motion; without it, nothing would ever happen.

Thus the “I wish” song is a familiar engine of both stage and screen musicals, a way of getting the ball rolling. Songs like “Goodnight My Someone” from *The Music Man* (“Sweet dreams to carry you close to me...”) or “Much More” from *The Fantasticks* (“Please God, don’t let me be normal!”) fit the bill beautifully, though it’s possible to find one in almost every show. “Everybody’s Got The Right To Be Happy,” the subversive soft-shoe number that begins and ends *Assassins*, Stephen Sondheim’s revue of assassins and would-be assassins of American presidents, is an “I wish” song gone wrong. The opening slyly anticipates each character’s wish, offering an answer to the unasked question (how can I get what I want?) in its repeated refrain: “Come on and shoot a president!” In the show’s final moment, the motley crew, guns in hand, sing: “Everybody’s got the right to some sunshine/ Not the sun but maybe one of its beams/ Rich man poor man black or white/ Everybody gets a bite/ Everybody just hold tight to your dreams/ Everybody’s got the right to their dreams” – before triumphantly firing into the audience.

In fact, Sondheim, master of the meta-musical, frequently uses the “I wish” song to comment on the dangers of desire. The first act opener of his fairy-tale mash-up, *Into the Woods*, has multiple characters, including Cinderella, Jack in the Beanstalk, and Little Red Riding Hood, singing the lyric “I wish!” repeatedly. Everyone’s wish is granted by the end of the first act in the familiar fairytale way (“Journey over, all is

mended/ and it's not just for today/ but tomorrow, and extended/ Ever after!"), but the second act begins with an "I wish!" reprise – predictably, the characters have all found some new desire. At the show's conclusion, after the characters have learned their lesson about desire ("Careful the wish you make, wishes are children/ Careful the path they take, wishes come true – not free"), in the micro-instant of space between the satisfying resolution of the big finale and the beginning of the applause, Cinderella steps forward with one last plaintive, "I wish...!" Curtain.

Into the Woods poignantly underscores how "I wish" directly manufactures the need for "happily ever after" – while slyly noting that the continued existence of desire makes a happy ending impossible. Desire enables narrative. Narrative requires an ending. And yet a happy ending requires the elimination of desire – not an easy task for living human creatures. To paraphrase Blanche DuBois in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the opposite of desire is death.

I've noticed that in popular American narratives, the characters' yearning appears on the surface to be the flame of sexual desire, or the longing for romantic love, but it's rarely quite that simple. Lurking under the surface is the *Matrix*'s "splinter in the mind," the inarticulate longing – if only I could *know*, if only I could *create*, if only I could *connect*. This desire is both literal and figurative; there are elements of both physical and metaphysical desire. One does not merely stand in for the other; the two complement, augment, and reflect each other.

The Broadway musical *Spring Awakening*, with a spare, darkly clever book by Steven Sater, and lush, emotional rock music by Duncan Sheik, takes its source from the turn-of-the-century German play of the same name by Frank Wedekind. Although the play was originally considered fairly racy for its frank depiction of adolescent sexuality, and harsh indictment of the repercussions of repressing it, the 2006 musical became a critical and cult favorite, boasting seven Tony awards and hordes of young people posting on online fansites and waiting for standing room tickets.

The musical opens with a chorus of girls lamenting their mothers' collective failure to educate them on what really matters ("Mama who gave me no way to handle things, who made me so sad"). But the deeply poetic language – "So pray that one day Christ will come a calling/ And light a candle/ And hope that it glows/ And some just lie there calling for him to come and find them/ But when he comes they don't know

how to go” – makes it clear that their desire is not just to know where babies come from, but more sweeping, profound, and existential. The song arcs from a sad, angelic beginning to a driving, angry, culmination. In the next scene, the girls’ male counterparts are reciting Latin in an oppressive classroom. Unfairly punished for aiding a fellow student, the young hero Melchoir reflects on how adults insist that he should “trust in what is written,” but that he knows “there’s so much more to find.” He vows to pursue the kind of knowledge he values: “On I go to wonder and to learning/
Name the stars and know their dark returning/ I’m calling to know the world’s true yearning/
The hunger that a child feels for everything they’re shown/ You watch me, just watch me/
I’m calling and one day all will know.”

This wave of hunger is overwhelming, and extends from the first few scenes to drive the narrative towards its tragic conclusion. The language the teenage characters use to describe their desire is equally heightened whether they are talking about their intellectual life and the oppressive rules of the adults around them, or singing about masturbation and schoolgirl crushes. Although there is sex both described and witnessed onstage – mostly violent and/or creepy – these young people never seem to actually be singing about sex. The adults in their lives who think that it’s all about sex – or claim to think so – are missing the point. When Melchoir sings about what he imagines sex will be like, his almost spiritual longing is set to a plaintive, hymn-like melody, with typically poetic lyrics: “Where I go/ When I go there/ No more shadows anymore/
Only men with golden fins/ The rhythm in them rocking with them to shore... No more weeping anymore/Only in and out your lips/ The broken wishes washing with them to shore.” Melchoir *is* interested in physical pleasure, but only as an extension of his interest in knowing *everything* – especially things that he suspects are being hidden or distorted by the adults around him. Most urgently, he seeks transgressions even more dangerous than sex: enlightenment, unity, freedom. These are desires that the repressive adult regime has every reason to fear.

John Cameron Mitchell’s off-Broadway musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* also became a cult favorite, both on the stage and as a film with the same cast. Hansel is a young German lad who is seduced by an American GI. In order to marry the soldier and start a new life in America, Hansel must become a woman – but after the sex change operation is botched, Hansel, now Hedwig, ends up alone in a trailer park in middle-America, with “an angry inch” between her legs. As Hedwig searches to discover who she is, she meets Tommy Gnosis, a young man in whom she sees herself.

Hedwig's view of the "origin of love" comes from a long-ago bedtime story, derived from a passage in Plato's *Symposium*, in which an angry god splits humans in two and leaves them always searching for their other half. Tommy, she implies, is her other half, once violently wrenched away from her, with whom reunion is inevitable – although, perhaps, equally violent.

Hedwig's story emerges in pieces as she performs her cabaret act at a dive bar with her band, The Angry Inch. Her narrative is driven – and sometimes derailed – by both her memories of desire and the inarticulate desire that overtakes her in the present moment. She shouts out the back door to where Tommy is supposedly performing his own show at a nearby arena. Occasionally, we can hear his voice, and his fans cheering. In those moments, we can palpably feel the wave of desire – for fame, for love, for being noticed, for being accepted. Over the course of the performance, the scale of the desire subtly slides outward, so that by the end we are aware not only of Hedwig's need to love and be loved by Tommy, but her desire to love everything and be loved by everything; not only Hedwig's longing for Tommy to hear her, but her desire to really listen to the world around her and be listened to in return. Desire has expanded to include the entire universe – but at the same time, it has trickily retreated, equating our relationship with the universe with our relationship with our own souls. As Hedwig starts to release herself to everything around her, she is finally naked before us, able to be who she really is, for her/him-self.

The story of *Spring Awakening* ends with Melchoir at the graves of his loved ones, alone and bereft, painfully aware of the "longing" and "yearning" of the dead for the knowledge and connection they were denied in life. It is a bleak image, for we know that the world around him has not and will not treat him kindly, and we doubt his ability to find a safe vessel for his desire. Yet the show doesn't leave us here. There is a coda, the satisfying catharsis of one final song, which promises that the intensity of spring – "all the sorrow at the heart of everything" – will fade, and the world will glow with the soft peace of summer. *Hedwig*, too, ends with a song of unity and strange peace; Hedwig lists famous rock 'n' roll divas with her own name at the end of the list, connecting herself to the past, present, and future of music, which goes on – just as she will. "All shall know the wonder," sing the teenagers of *Spring Awakening*, "all shall sing the song of purple summer." "Lift up your hands," Hedwig sings, over and over again, until it becomes an anthem, "Lift up your hands!" We are *all* asked to lift

our hands, we are *all* invited to sing the song – and perhaps, in the momentary suspension of desire, some kind of union is finally achieved.

Plato wrote of man's yearning for ideal beauty and finality, a harmonious unification not only between bodies, but between knowledge and pleasure. In his *Symposium*, from which Hedwig's creation myth is derived, Plato has Socrates discuss the concept of *eros* as the longing for wholeness or completeness, the desire for communion not only between man and woman but also between man and the Gods. Two thousand years later, philosopher Erich Fromm wrote, "Man – of all ages and cultures – is confronted with the solution of one and the same question: the question of how to overcome separateness, how to achieve union, how to transcend one's own individual life and find at-onement."

No matter how aggressively contemporary American life can seek to perform a bait-and-switch – replacing the fierce, transcendent force of Desire with the small-d desire for a vacation, a good steak, a raise, a college acceptance letter, or an iPhone – we persistently produce narratives that resist or subvert this simplification, insisting on pursuing what Adrienne Rich calls "the drive to connect, the dream of a common language." Musical theater may provide one ideal vehicle for conveying the metaphysical side of the you-can-have-it-all American mentality; another place this capital-D Desire shows up is in our culture's obsession with the vampire, which has pervasive manifestations in young adult and adult literature, as well as on big and small screens across the nation.

If you know anyone born in the 90's, chances are good that you've heard of *Twilight*, the teen vampire saga which took the country by storm in 2005 and hasn't yet released its hold; its several volumes are currently in the process of being made into top-grossing movies. In the first book, an average high-schooler, Bella, falls in love with a fellow student, Edward. Edward turns out to be a vampire, but a sort of born-again, reformed vampire, who drinks animal blood and tries to protect human beings from harm. The powerful attraction between the two is dangerous since Edward is desperately drawn to taste Bella's blood. Although Edward is horrified at the idea of condemning the woman he loves to undeath, the prospect is a bit titillating to Bella.

The cover of the book is a bright red apple cradled in two pale hands, and the author, Stephanie Meyer, begins her book with a familiar quote from Genesis:

*But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,
thou shalt not eat of it:
for in the day that thou eatest thereof
thou shalt surely die.*

Publishers Weekly's starred review describes "Bella's infatuation with outsider Edward, the sense of danger inherent in their love, and Edward's inner struggle" as "a perfect metaphor for the sexual tension that accompanies adolescence" which "will be familiar to nearly every teen." Is it possible that, once again, adults have missed the point? Just like Melchior's, Bella and Edward's desire exists on and off the physical plain, their dilemmas both sexual and spiritual. What they want – and why they fear they cannot have it – is bigger, more powerful, more inchoate. From here, the series explodes into various complicated plot points – but it's my guess that the initial enthusiastic response to *Twilight* was driven in no small measure by its strong evocation of metaphysical Desire.

In *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, Nina Auerbach traces the evolution of the vampire across history and geography, from the pre-Dracula European "congenial friend," dangerously intimate with mortals, to the "seditious urbanity" of 20th century American vampires. Auerbach notes that her chosen field of study has not been treated kindly amongst "serious" academics ("I was received with polite revulsion at a Women's Studies symposium when I gave a paper on undeath") but argues that vampires have much to teach us about ourselves:

"Ghosts, werewolves, and manufactured monsters are relatively changeless, more aligned with eternity than with time; vampires blend into the changing cultures they inhabit. They inhere in our most intimate relationships; they are also hideous invaders of the normal...they are everything we are, while at the same time, they are fearful reminders of the infinite things we are not."

I think we love vampires and musicals for the same reason – their mutability, the fluidity with which they are able to become empty vessels for our least articulable longings. Musical, like vampire, are endlessly adaptable; also like vampire, they have often been dismissed by "serious" critics. As Scott McMillin points out in *The Musical As Drama*, the form is "popular and illegitimate...retaining links to the tradition of

low culture despite its high prices” not in spite of but because of its complexity; at the heart of the form is “the double-coding and the subversion and the repetition” which draws us to it:

“The songs seem designed to make audiences feel good... but they have an unsettling effect anyway, because they resist the book. They stand apart from the book, even from the book with which they might seem to be integrated, declaring that something else is going on here, something that the book cannot observe, something that might be under the surface. We are adding that the numbers do not leave the secret under the surface. They dally with the secret and rearrange it into song and dance, often with a glee that can be disturbing...at the same time it is being pleasurable.”

This compelling tension between pleasure and disturbance is at the heart of big-D Desire. Susan Stewart writes that because all narrative is fueled by nostalgia, a “longing for its place of origin,” “the direction of force in the desiring narrative is always a future-past, a deferment of experience in the direction of origin and thus eschaton, the point where narrative begins/ends.” In other words, we simultaneously long for the beginning and the end of the story, the beginning and the end of the world. Certain kinds of narratives allow us, even encourage us, to have these two things at once, enfolding the pleasurable ache of eternal Desire in the same embrace as the pleasurable lie of happily ever after. Just like Snow White, we find delight and disturbance in both the electricity of endless aspiration and the myth of fulfillment. We want both. And why not? After all, everybody’s got the right to their dreams.

A Play With God Inside It

“A man with God inside him is still preferable to a man with only his breakfast inside him.” – Jeanette Winterson, *Art and Lies*

In college, I took a religious studies course. As with most of my college classes, I recall next to nothing about it, with the exception of one particularly memorable assignment: identify a ritual in your life, and write 1000 words about why it fits this course’s definition of sacred practice.

I wrote about listening to my favorite public radio program, *This American Life*, produced by WBEZ in Chicago, and hosted by Ira Glass, whose radio persona was (and still is) a cross between Woody Allen, Noam Chomsky, and someone’s sexily existential older brother. “Each week we choose a theme, and bring you a number of different stories on that theme,” Ira says at the beginning of each episode, setting in motion an hour of consistently moving, provocative, and deeply relevant storytelling. I would listen, sometimes closing my eyes, inhaling a sense of the vastness of this nation, how many stories there are, how many ways of telling. Listening over time, I experienced the staggering scope of human ambition, the folly and the genius of the human mind, the stubborn loyalty of the human heart. Many times, I experienced a kind of cosmic communitas, a sense of connection over time and space, a sense of my place in the universe.

I remember sharing the essay with my parents, who were really pleased with it. I think their pleasure came from a feeling that I had finally returned to the fold. Although my brother and I were the offspring of confirmed atheists, raised in a fanatically secular household, we nonetheless turned out to be deeply spiritual, perhaps even religious, children. Because there was no provided framework on which to hang this strange inner vastness, this electric longing, we improvised. I worshipped at the altar of the theater, making paper-doll icons of the actresses I saw in plays, memorizing and reciting their lines, and creating my own elaborate productions. This activity managed to slip by the religion police, perhaps because my parents didn’t know how I *felt* about it. When I walked into a theater, my chest expanded, sometimes even to the point of physical pain. I breathed in deeply. This brought on an existential throb that resonated through my whole body and took on a pale purple glow, leaving me tongue-tied and yearning. I called this feeling “*It*.”

My brother Eric actually went so far as to develop his own religion, which was called “The Crow Clan.” It involved not eating duck (or, presumably, crow – although that never became an issue), and creating pieces of religious art with crayons and shoeboxes. I never completely understood The Crow Clan, but I understood the need for it. Eventually, Eric’s abiding interest in religious ritual drove my parents to enroll us in Sunday school at the Plymouth Congregational Church in downtown Seattle. I was interested in the experience – I liked the imposing scale of the building with its weird, contemporary stained glass and stucco sanctuary – *and* they had a Christmas pageant! But ultimately it confused me. I felt alienated by the fact that everyone else seemed to know and believe a bunch of stuff that I didn’t. In my house, any occurrence of the word “God” was marked by a casual scoff with a strong undercurrent of suspicion. I wasn’t comfortable saying “God,” or being around people who said it. And it was weird being the kids whose parents just dropped them off and left, instead of going to the church service. Our visits to Plymouth tapered off and finally ceased.

Lewis Hyde writes of the distinction a reader makes between a certain kind of paperback romance novel, mass-produced through adherence to a market-derived formula, and a book that will have enduring meaning in our lives – we recognize the former as a commodity, whereas the later is “the gift we long for, the gift that, when it comes, speaks commandingly to the soul and irresistibly moves us.” In her intensely poetic study of Haitian Voudoun, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, Maya Deren writes that ritual dances can be distinguished from secular dances not by the physical choreography but, like all sacred art, by a “special ethos,” the same “quality of form” which alerts the viewer that “the painting before us is a Madonna and not a woman with a shawl.” It was this gift I craved, which I would recognize by its special ethos, and which I did not find at Plymouth. But I *did* find a whisper of it in books, in dancing, in the theater – or rather, those things stirred a desire in me, waking up something that daily life wanted to put to sleep. This was the feeling I knew as *It*.

Eventually, though, I started to suspect that *It* was not just the feeling of desire but also the desired feeling – that *It* was it. From there it was a short leap to conclude that *It* was also God. I kept this to myself. Growing up, I thought the only people who talked about God were Republicans and cigarette smokers. I was 19 years old the first time I met a healthy, progressive person who used the word in casual conversation; she was a fellow camp counselor at Explorations Summer Camp. She wore a “What

Would Jesus Do?” bracelet. And she was smart and liberal. I still winced every time she said “God.”

In *Utopia in Performance*, Jill Dolan speaks of some performances as messianic (in the “Benjaminian” sense; as in Walter Benjamin: “one of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later”) – reaching towards an imagined future moment of transformation (or, per Benjamin, revolution), “images toward which, without knowing their real contours, without the necessity that they be fixed or real, we direct our hope.” With some amusement, Dolan tells the story of her performance-theorist colleague Sue-Ellen Case insisting that she “come out of the closet” about the religious implications of her interest in “utopian” performance. “I do believe in the spiritual aspects of utopian performatives and the way they call me to something ineffable and strangely full of solace,” writes Dolan, but “I’m not sure...why my admitted longing to articulate a spiritual effect in performance should be reduced to religiosity, or, worse, fundamentalism.” Stressing her “keen desire to reclaim a commitment to human commonality,” Dolan repeatedly asserts that in the most powerful performance, interconnectedness and interdependence trump identity politics and performance theory. “Theater,” she writes, “can be a secular temple of social and spiritual union not with a mystified, mythologized higher power, but with the more prosaic, earthbound, yearning subjects who are citizens of the world community, who need places to connect with one another and with the fragile, necessary wish for a better future.”

Audre Lorde, too, objects to this conflation of spiritual and religious; in her essay “The Uses of the Erotic,” she insists that the most deeply political and spiritual feelings and actions are united by their genesis not in fundamentalism but in the “internal requirement towards excellence which we learn from the erotic”:

“It has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical. ‘What do you mean, a poetic revolutionary, a meditating gunrunner?’ In the same way, we have attempted to separate the spiritual and the erotic, thereby reducing the spiritual to a world of flattened affect, a world of the ascetic who feels nothing. But nothing is farther from the truth...[The erotic] is a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling. And that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy

comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible, and does not have to be called *marriage*, nor *god*, nor *an afterlife*.”

Suzi Gablik, in *The Reenchantment of Art*, calls for art rooted in “the responsive heart” rather than “the disembodied eye,” a return to a sense of “aliveness, possibility, and magic” in art-making, an adopting of “the ecological perspective” (versus a traditional aesthetic perspective in which only the image matters) that “connects art to its integrative role in the larger whole, and the web of relationships in which art exists.”

While rejecting words like “god” and “religious,” Dolan, Lorde, and Gablik advocate for access to the full range of human perception, visible and invisible, when making and critiquing art. They refuse dichotomy, positioning themselves at the crossroads, which, in Haitian voodoo, is the most fertile and also the most volatile place. Deren writes that many drawings and paintings used in voodoo ritual present a vertical axis intersecting a horizontal one. In these sacred images (called *vever* in Creole, examples of which are reproduced in *The Divine Horsemen*), the horizontal axis is the material world, as we see it in our daily lives. The vertical plane is the spiritual dimension, the unseen world. The intersection of the two represents the point of contact, the place where that which is beyond this world is reflected in it, the site of “what could and should be... the metaphysical processional.”

When I first saw these images, I thought that in a theatrical sense the horizontal axis could represent plays concerned (literally or metaphorically) with living rooms, with the life of the body, whereas the vertical axis would be plays concerned with the invisible world, the life of the spirit and the subconscious. The horizontal axis might include *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* and *A Raisin in the Sun* as well as the work of Anna Devereaux Smith and community-engaged companies like Roadside and Junebug. The vertical axis might include Strindberg, Suzan-Lori Parks, the work of some physical theater companies. Then there are those who travel extravagantly on both axes, refusing to be contained: like most of the works of Maria Irene Fornes, Jose Rivera, Sam Shepard and August Wilson. These are works at the crossroads.

Yet the fact remains that, watching all types of plays, as an audience member in the theater I am often just vaguely interested, sometimes flat-out bored, and only occasionally moved. Compare this to my enduring, passionate commitment to *This*

American Life (a program which typically displays horizontal axis behavior). Listening today, I am still overwhelmed by that sense of cosmic communitas, the connection over time and space – exactly what I was looking for those many years ago, feeling anxious and alien in the stucco sanctuary of Plymouth Congregational Church.

It seems the location of a play's (or radio program's) text on the axis has little to do with whether any given production will have that "special ethos" that makes it feel like a Madonna rather than a woman with a shawl. While the text, and the production's interpretation of the text, may determine to some extent whether, to paraphrase Jeanette Winterson, a play has some God in it (or only its breakfast), there are also other factors: the process undertaken to devise or adapt the text, the circumstances of the rehearsal and presentation of the text, the relationship to the physical space and the geographic location in which the play is performed, the way the production positions itself in relationship to its audience. When all or many of these factors converge at the crossroads, we begin to approach "the metaphysical processional."

Artists tend to think a lot about choices directly related to the creative process and product, what one might call the production's aesthetic. How are the visual and aural elements of the production introduced, what's the relationship between them, what story do they tell, how do they work on the audience? What is the relationship, both physical and psychological, of the performers to each other and to the audience members? What cues or instructions are being given to the audience about how to enter into and how to process the experience unfolding in front of – or around – them? It's important (and exciting) to address these questions from an aesthetic point of view, within the artwork itself, but I've noticed over and over again that it's also important to address the same questions about the context in which the artwork is presented. It often occurs to me as an audience member that the way the poster looks and what my friends have said about the play shape my expectations before I even reach the door of the theater. Once there, the energy of the lobby and my interaction with the box office and bar staff color my evening more deeply than a note in the program from the Artistic Director. The pre-show music and curtain speech represents my direct point of entry into the performance. In many theaters, these are thought of as a combination of marketing and customer service concerns – making sure the poster is alluring and the curtain speech sells subscriptions (marketing), making sure the tickets are ready, the drinks are cold, and the staff is welcoming (customer service). One theater I often visit has really comfortable seats, and sells

popcorn and beer at the concession stand, it says, “Welcome! Don’t worry, this is going to be entertaining, and interesting too!” Another nearby theater exudes a feeling of elegance and luxury (“Dahling, welcome to the THEA-TAH!”); yet another cultivates an ascetic air of intellectual expectation (“Welcome to an intensely thought-provoking and very interesting production. It may also be very long.”).

In the four seasons I served as Associate Artistic Director of the Providence Black Repertory Company, I was primarily responsible for selecting the plays in each season. And thanks to the dubious benefit of working at a small theater company with no marketing or customer service staff, I was also responsible for setting the context for each play. I wanted to issue an invitation for dialogue, to suggest “Welcome to the conversation.” I wanted my audience to sit forward, not just because the play was good, but because their presence *mattered*, because their contribution was, in fact, the point.

My favorite Black Rep program was “The People’s Matinee,” a pay-what-you-can performance every Sunday afternoon. These were wildly popular, and very lively. There is a tradition of “back talk” in the Black Theater (there’s a whole genre that a friend of mine calls “Oooh girl!” plays – meaning, they are designed to elicit frequent cries of “ooh girl!” from the sympathetic audience), but it eventually occurred to me that having an audible audience commentary during a performance is not the same thing as artists and audiences being in dialogue. We decided to hold a talkback with the cast after each People’s Matinee. The conversations were great but they were predictable. Audience members would ask about the actors’ process and/or shower them with compliments, actors would respond by holding forth on their views on the play. Rarely was there a real discussion about what the play made an audience member feel or think.

After some trial and error, we found a format that worked well to guide our talkbacks, inspired by Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process:

Warm Feedback

-The facilitator thanks the audience for being there and introduces the process. She asks the audience to list things they especially liked or remembered, images that stay with them from the show. She moves through this first section with energy and purpose, thanking each audience member for his or

her comment without further discussion. It's important to allow the audience an opportunity to gush a little bit, so that they can feel they have given the artists their props before moving onto a larger, potentially more critical, conversation.

Artist Questions

-The facilitator presents a pre-determined question, ideally one that the cast has returned to throughout the rehearsal process, and honestly asks for audience response. Sometimes this opens up a dialogue between cast and audience as the group struggles collectively with the question. It is good to have three prepared questions, though there will almost never be time to address more than one – or sometimes the audience may naturally segue from one to the next.

Audience Questions

-The facilitator opens up the floor for the audience to ask questions of the artists or of each other. It's important to mention in the introduction that questions for the artists should be held until part three and to stick to this, “parking” any questions that may come up in parts one and two so that the audience has a chance to respond to the play without looking to the artists for the “right” answers.

This format encouraged more conversation about the ideas in the play, but it became clear that we had to train the actors in this method as well as the facilitators. Essentially what we wanted was not a “talkback” but a “talk-back-and-forth” – where everyone talks to each other, where many questions are raised and ideas suggested, but where there is not a “right answer.” Actors (and director) must truly believe that they don't have the answers about a play they've been eating, sleeping, and breathing for weeks, that it was actually possible, in a 30-minute talkback, to co-create knowledge and meaning with the audience.

Although these new talkbacks were less of a cheerleading session than those in the past (in fact, they were often contentious and unsettling), I was surprised to find that they were much more affirming. Hearing how deeply our work was affecting audience members was profoundly meaningful for the actors and myself; seeing our commitment and desire for engagement was invigorating for our audiences. The

talkback became a sustained point of contact, beyond the intoxicating yet fleeting *communitas* of the performance, which held space for our shared desire for dialogue, for back-and-forth.

My final show at Black Rep was Tracy Letts' *Bug*, a darkly comic thriller which takes place in a motel room outside Oklahoma City, where a depressed waitress and a handsome stranger drink, smoke crack, fall in love, and become convinced that their bodies are infected with bugs planted by the US government. In the first week of rehearsal, all the cast did was argue about bugs: Are there bugs? Are there no bugs? What's the truth? Eventually, it became clear that we weren't going to answer these questions in a satisfying way and yet *we could do the play anyway*. This way of working – with pervasive doubt, huge questions, and profound differences of opinion amongst collaborators – was really hard. But it translated beautifully to the stage, and the audience talkbacks – which frequently ran over an hour long – were among the most compelling events I've witnessed in the theater. The fact that the play had been built on a foundation of questions was reflected in the tone and content of the talkbacks. A sense of the basic unresolvability of any of the plays major themes and questions, an absence of confidence in logic or justice, provoked wide-ranging and surprising conversations. Given tacit permission to make their own meaning, audiences related the play to the then-current bank bailout, to wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to the healthcare crisis, and a slew of relationships and questions in their personal lives. As a director (and, most of the time, the talkback facilitator), it was instructive to see how the dynamic of the talkback would reflect back my own rehearsal dynamic to me. In both situations, I had to model the “not knowing,” refusing to dictate the reality of the play, while still providing confident leadership.

In addition to tweaking the talkback format, my colleagues and I developed *Black Notes*, a “program ‘zine” which included traditional playbill components like actor bios, alongside poetry, interviews, images, quotes, and scholarly articles. We built each season of *Black Notes* around a theme (one year it was “Promised Land,” the next “Skeletons in the Closet”) which was reflected in the plays in the theater season, the carnival parade in Black Rep's summer music festival, and educational workshops. I loved *Black Notes*. It felt like a way of holding context in my hand – a breathing constellation of artifacts, events, and conversations, a convening with multiple points of entry. Artists, audiences, Black Rep staff members, the media, students, could engage with a set of provocative questions by seeing a play, attending a talkback,

hearing some music, writing a poem, reading *Black Notes* while they had a drink at the bar – or, I imagined, someone who had never been to Black Rep might pick up her daughter’s copy of *Black Notes* off the kitchen table at home. I never believed “the play’s the thing!” but rather, the play is one thing in a collection of things which, taken together, exerts a powerful force. In what direction, it’s hard to say, but a force – a motion.

If our theater had existed a little bit longer, some really interesting things would have started to happen. Black Rep was a hybrid space – from 7-10 p.m., an intimate theater space; from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., a sleek bar/lounge with leather couches, pitchers of rum punch and mojitos, and live music. Like many theaters, we found that the inviting space (and the strong drinks!) were attractive to patrons, but we wished for more crossover – both between the two sets of patrons and between the content of our theater and late-night programming. How could we encourage theater audiences to stay for a drink and talk? How could we encourage bar patrons to come early for a play? How could we make sure that there was a strong mission-based throughline in the experience of every patron, no matter when they were in our space? We wrote a grant to train bartenders and front of house staff in the same way we trained actors for talkbacks – so that a conversation over the bar or in the lobby could turn into a mini “back and forth.” That grant also included money for an expanded web presence which would extend opportunities to “talk back and forth” into the virtual world through social networking in multiple media, and the development of specially printed menus, napkins and coasters for the bar (developed in partnership between bar staff and humanities scholars) which would stealthily expand *Black Notes* into the bar all season long. Black Rep did actually receive this grant – but too late. By that time, the theater had effectively gone under, like millions of Americans, done in by years of living month-to-month, over-extended credit, and the final blow of the recession.

As a freelance director since leaving Black Rep, one of my biggest frustrations is that my ability to articulate the context for each production is limited – and so limited is my ability to negotiate the play’s spiritual dimension. As I write this, I am aware of the potential silliness of the argument that re-vamped talkbacks and programs somehow bestow divinity on a performance; it’s like saying that the right museum audio guide has the power to turn “a woman with a shawl” into “a Madonna.” Of course, the actual artwork is important. But I remain convinced that context is just as important. Deren writes:

“It is the relationship of segments which is important... In Voudoun one *and* one make three; two *and* two make five; for the *and* of the equation is the third and fifth part, respectively, the relationship which makes all the parts meaningful. The figure of five contains man’s entire nature: his single origin and his multiple progeny, his mortal matter and his immortal image, his humanity and his divinity. The figure five is as the four of the cross-roads plus the swinging of the door which is the point itself of crossing, the moment of arrival and departure.”

The *And*, the relationship between segments, is context. It is the relationship between the segments that makes all the parts meaningful – although if the segments do not have more than their breakfast inside them, the *And* doesn’t have much to work with. I once heard Ira Glass say in an interview that he doesn’t believe in anything; the interview left me fairly certain that Glass shares my parents’ views on both the word and the idea of God. And yet, when segments are treated with extreme care and meticulous attention, connected by a context of deeply sympathetic shared humanity and curiosity, and presented in a medium, radio, which expertly fuses the intimate and the vast, it is clear that *This American Life*, like my parents, has more than just its breakfast inside it – no matter what you call it.

In *The Life of the Drama*, Eric Bentley discusses why, and when, we feel we have had a “momentous experience” in the theater. Some of it, he says, has to do with our emotional experience, with what we feel the “import” of the play to be. He then concludes:

“If part of this conviction derives from what the play means, another part derives from the mere fact *that* it means. Meaningfulness is in itself momentous for human beings, as they discover, *a contrario*, whenever life has no meaning for them. All art serves as a lifebelt to rescue us from the ocean of meaninglessness - an extraordinary service to perform.”

Extraordinary indeed. Yet can it be that *all* art performs this service of meaningfulness? For me, the answer is no. Some art is what Peter Brook calls “Deadly” – inaccessible, untruthful, or, usually, boring – which is to say in some crucial way not alive, not interested in its origin in human experience, not reaching towards

necessary. An experience of art has the *potential* to be an experience of meaning, Calvino's "privileged point" of order, form, and perspective in an otherwise entropic universe. There have been certain experiences of art which have taken on that sense of "alive" significance for me (seeing Mary Zimmerman's *Metamorphoses* in Manhattan right after 9/11 comes to mind), and there are certain works of art to which I return, time and time again, as sites of profound meaningfulness – like Brecht's *Good Person of Szechwan*. I would amend Bentley slightly to say that each artwork holds the *promise* of meaning.

In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey wrote that as recently as a century or two ago, and certainly before that, bowls, chairs, and other everyday objects were both artful *and* useful – a necessary part of daily life. Stroll through any modern museum today and you will see those same objects lit up in glass boxes. Museums, Dewey offers, are a tool for separating art from experience and making it a memorial to the rise of imperialism and capitalism, thereby introducing the idea that art is *separate* from experience. Dewey writes that those who care about art must think in a more holistic way:

“Mountain peaks do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon the earth. They *are* the earth in one of its manifest operations. It is the business of those who are concerned with the theory of the earth, geographers and geologists, to make this fact evident in its various implications. The theorist who would deal philosophically with fine art has a like task to accomplish... In order to understand the meaning of artistic products, we have to forget them for a time, to turn aside from them and have recourse to the ordinary forces and conditions of experience that we do not usually regard as esthetic.”

To artists, art always seems necessary, because it is our life and our livelihood, and because we are usually surrounded by others who value the work that we do. But what happens when we assume that our work is valuable, is positive in some kind of absolute sense? I think part of what happens is that we settle for smart or pretty or entertaining performances – events that hold the mountains separate from the earth and so, to our audiences, will never feel like the gift they long for, the gift that “speaks commandingly to the soul and irresistibly moves us.”

The text of the play is one part. The aesthetic of the production is another part. And then there is the *And* of context, the relationship between the parts, the swinging door.

The whole picture, like the vever, must allow space for convergence, a pause at the crossroads, an opening through which what could be, what should be, might enter. This is the gift I long for. Such a performance – interdependent, ecological, erotic, meaningful – feels, even to me, like a play with God inside it. I remember the tongue-tied yearning I felt in the theater as a child, the pulsing purple glow. It’s hard to say what I was looking for then, but I think it was more than *It*.

Up until I was eight years old, we lived in Seattle’s Fremont neighborhood; the drive home took us down a hill with a panoramic view of the mountains (at least, when the mountains were “out,” as they say in Seattle – as if the mountains are a dog that someone lets in and out on some established yet totally illogical schedule). One night, driving home, my father slowed the car at the top of the hill, so that we could admire the extraordinary sunset unfolding over the mountains, a flaming riot of pink and orange. My mother, my father, my infant brother, and I stared out the window, our faces bathed in a rosy glow. There was a long silence. I thought, “This is an important moment in your life because it is Beautiful and you are Here. Pay attention. Take a picture of this in your mind and never forget it.” I never have.

Twenty-five years later, I find with surprise that this memory is of a deeply spiritual moment, a moment that went beyond the insistent yearning of *It* to a suspended, celestial peace. The invisible *And* vibrated – relationship, satisfaction, completion. Even in a car full of atheists, it had that special ethos, that quality of form, which allowed us all to recognize that, briefly, we were at the crossroads – inside the metaphysical processional, ushered into the divine hush of communion.

Not an Artist

I think this is my earliest memory – perhaps age four or five. I am dreaming, and in the dream, there is the most perfect candy cane in front of me, its red and white helix shining with vivid, mouthwatering beauty. I reach out to take the candy. As I do, I am aware for the first time of the boundary between sleep and wakefulness. I have the sense of myself in the bed, in my room; I remember and understand that I am waking up from my afternoon nap. As my fingers close around the candy cane, I can actually feel the object in my hand. I can feel it not only in my dream, but in my waking life. I realize that I have the power to transport the object out of my dream and into my bedroom. I know that I must wake up very slowly, very deliberately, taking the candy cane with me, allowing it to gently materialize under my waking hand. As I slowly, slowly, slowly, will this object to make the journey with me, my father comes into my room, turns on the light, and calls to me. I am jarred awake, and the candy cane dissolves in my outstretched fist. I am awake, holding nothing. I believed then, and will likely always believe, that if I had not been interrupted – five more seconds, ten more seconds! – I would have sat up in bed, awake and awestruck, holding in my hand something from another world.

In his essay on “Quickness” from *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*, Italo Calvino relates the story of an aging Charlemagne, who fell under an enchantment that caused him to passionately love a young girl, even after her death. The cause of the enchantment was a ring, hidden under her tongue. The ring was discovered and removed by the Archbishop; as soon as it was in his hands, Charlemagne instantly fell madly in love with him. The Archbishop then hurriedly threw the ring into a lake, whereupon Charlemagne refused to leave its shores, “his eyes fixed on Lake Constance, in love with the hidden abyss.” Calvino offers that the passage of the ring links an otherwise random series of people and events, exerting “a kind of force field that is in fact the territory of the story itself.” The narrative is fueled by “the drive of desire toward a thing that does not exist, a lack or absence symbolized by the empty circle of the ring.”

Related or not to my childhood dream, which has only become more vivid over the years, I am haunted by “the drive of desire toward a thing that does not exist.” Except, of course, being inside the story rather than outside of it, I am not certain that it does

not exist. Struggling to find a way to contain this desire, to articulate it, I have been drawn to a path that embraces the struggle for articulation: becoming an Artist. “I am an Artist?” I said tentatively, testing the ice on a pond at the beginning of winter. “I am an Artist,” I said, putting the full weight of one foot onto the ice and then pausing, undecided.

“I am an Artist” has always felt like a statement of desire to me, analogous to saying, “I desire to be an Artist” or “I desire to know what it means to be an Artist.” I surveyed the first line of my bio: “Megan is a Theater Artist based in Providence, RI.” *Artist* itself felt like a sacred word; by invoking it often enough, and associating it with myself, I might be able to coerce it out of the dream world and into my lap.

Apparently I invoked the word quite frequently, because my partner, Sean, started to react with a grimace every time it appeared. It didn’t take much to get Sean to admit how much he hates the word “Artist” – he felt, he said, that it was inevitably accompanied by an air of privilege and arrogance, as well as the use of superfluous Big Words and the implication that anyone who is not an Artist cannot possibly understand Art and is probably not living up to his or her full human potential anyhow. He also pointed out that I used the word Artist *all the time*. I was slightly taken aback, but an informal poll made it clear that Sean wasn’t the only one with this aversion to the word.

Slightly bruised feelings aside, I decided to spend a year not naming myself an Artist and see what happened. But what would I call myself? I made a list of the Things That Define Me: Human Being. Woman. American. Straight, White, upper middle class, American woman. At that point I got a little bit stuck. Daughter? Friend? Lover? Rhode Islander? Optimist? None of these seemed likely to help me re-write the first line of my bio. Director? (In this list, that felt like a terrible word – so directive!) Curator? Facilitator? Educator? Collaborator? I *did* feel like a collaborator across many areas of my life, professional and personal, but my dad said that when he heard “collaborator” all he could think of was people who helped the Nazis.

I decided to retreat to simplicity, and finally succeeded at re-writing the first line of my bio: “Megan is a theater-maker from Providence, RI.” When introducing myself, I said, “I make theater” or sometimes “I’m primarily a theater director, and also a teacher, dramaturg, _____ (whatever else I was doing at the moment).” It was mostly a

semantic experiment, but things did start happening. For example, when I was working in tiny Middlebury, Vermont, an article in the local paper said something like “the shows were directed by newcomer Megan Sandberg-Zakian, a ‘theater-maker’ who hails from Rhode Island.” Someone else had called me a theater-maker! And I liked it.

Another thing that happened was that I spent less time talking about myself. I realized that I used to start many sentences with “As an Artist...” and then launch into something about the economy, or politics, or local food, or whatever. Without my standard opener, I was forced to think about what I really wanted to say. How did I want to position myself? Was I positioning myself in relationship to or in opposition to the other people in the room? Did they start sentences with “As a Doctor...” or “As a Black woman...?” No, they usually did not. And when they did, it was annoying. What did I think that being an Artist had to do with – well, anything, really? Did it give me some kind of special knowledge or dispensation? And what did my art-making have to do with my Artist identity? If I were to accurately identify myself, pick the most important descriptors, would Artist come first?

I started noticing how frequently other artists called themselves Artists (and other more specific capitol-letter artist monikers, like Actor, Painter, Writer etc), naming themselves with a position, never an action; “I am an Actor” rather than “I act.” And while I do believe that we are what we do, I like the idea of saying what we do, and why, rather than what we are. “I make theater,” I said with slightly more conviction.

However, before long, it became necessary to consider what it actually meant to “make theater.” What do I actually *make* when I direct a play? Not anything I can hold in my hand. I don’t make a script, or a character – other people make those things, playwrights and actors. Sometimes I make props or programs, but only as part of a group effort to generate all the things that have to be present in order to achieve the event of the performance. The process of staging a performance of a play for an audience is inherently collaborative; I can’t point to any one thing and say, “I made that.” So what’s my part in this collaboration? I read. I write. I convene a group of creative minds. We read and write together. I listen. I suggest. I watch. I imagine. I ask questions. I read and write some more. I repeat this many times. The result of this process is some collective understanding, some meaning, which my watchfulness has nurtured and affirmed.

If I “make” meaning as a director, I do it because of that “drive of desire”: I long to know, to understand, to be connected, to be part of something. I admit that my desire for the result of theater-making – the meaning, the understanding, the connection, the “something” that is generated – is much greater than my desire for the process of theater-making. That is to say, I am not one of those people who absolutely loves rehearsal, who would rather be in a rehearsal room with a great text and a bunch of talented people than anything else. No. In fact, I often hate rehearsal. I feel scared (all these people want me to tell them what to do?) and exhausted (*really* watching and *truly* listening takes so much energy!) and sometimes bored (oh no! Am I bored because the play is boring and I’m a bad director?) which leads me back to terror. I often feel longing for other things while I’m in rehearsal – usually some combination of a hot bath, a long walk, a good meal, a quiet nap, a satisfying snuggle, or a mindless movie. Oh how I *wish* I were at a mindless movie snuggling with Sean instead of this boring, exhausting, and terrifying rehearsal! It’s at this point that I start to suspect that, semantics aside, I really am Not An Artist, and will at any moment be unmasked as an imposter and a fraud; someone is sure to barge into the room and interrupt, leaving me disoriented, awake, and holding nothing.

But eventually, usually around the time sets and lights and costumes appear, something begins to happen. Suddenly I would rather be in the theater than anywhere else; I come early and stay late to stare at the half-assembled set, inhale the dizzying fumes of freshly painted floor. And as audiences start to trickle in – dress rehearsal, previews – I get that flutter in my chest, that weight in the pit of my stomach. I start to see the performance in almost cosmic terms – as if I am floating above it, aware of its internal logic, the skeletal web of meaning that it weaves, night after night. My job, those precious days between technical rehearsals and opening night, is to nurture that web, to gild its delicate strands with silver and gold, to make them visible, to make them strong.

Watching each run of the show during that time, I *long*, a painful, achy, hold-my-breath kind of longing, for clarity, for synthesis. I long for the story to be told, for the rise and fall of each moment to feel inevitable, for each image to resonate with unexpected but undeniable truth. When images disintegrate, moments stumble, and action obscures, I long to repair them. I must repair them. I don’t sleep. I write pages of notes. I call actors on the phone. I have emergency brainstorming lunches with

designers. I email the playwright. I do some more research. I rehearse. I rehearse. I rehearse. I strain to achieve Calvino's "inner inevitability" which "mark[s] every image as form and as meaning, as a claim on the attention and a source of possible meanings." I want it to be beautiful.

In her slender and eloquent *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry writes that beautiful things are characterized by "an impulse towards begetting" – they make us want to replicate them. She describes the alliance between beauty and truth:

"The beautiful person or thing incites in us the longing for truth because it provides by its compelling 'clear discernibility' an introduction (perhaps even our first introduction) to the state of certainty yet does not itself satiate our desire for certainty since beauty, sooner or later, brings us into contact with our own capacity for making errors. The beautiful, almost without any effort of our own, acquaints us with the mental event of conviction, and so pleasurable a mental state this is that ever afterwards one is willing to labor, struggle, wrestle with the world to locate enduring sources of conviction – to locate what is true."

Thus beauty ignites the desire for truth; it "creates, without itself fulfilling, the aspiration for enduring certitude." In addition, beauty, being symmetrical, and therefore "fair," inspires in us the desire to replicate this symmetry, thereby also igniting our desire for fairness and justice. And the presence of beauty may remind us of justice, which is often hard to see or experience, unlike beauty, which is widely available to the senses, widely present (as Scarry points out, "prae-sens, standing before the senses").

At the end of the book, Scarry offers that, despite the conventional view of what it means "to create" something, her definition of beauty requires that bringing new beauty into the world *and* stewardship of existing beauty must both be described as creation.

Opening night, exhausted by desire, I sit in the audience and, barely breathing, try to simply be in the room with other people, watching. Although I am not sure what I have made, although I may not call myself an Artist very often, I know that by acting as a steward of beauty, I have performed an act of creation. There is rarely any sense of

completion or achievement, never any thrill of climax and release. Instead, the force of desire drives on, steadily. It is not unwelcome. Even if it drives towards the thing that does not exist, still it is powerful fuel. We all have something that keeps us in motion. I choose this.

Don't I? Quite often, in the queer emptiness that follows opening night, I ask myself whether I will continue to choose this, whether I could – or would – do something else. The empty space ahead begs the question of what will come to fill it. It could be filled with gardening or babies, teaching or consulting. Why make theater? The truth is that there is no reason, really. Theater-making is incidental; dedication to the stewardship of beauty – and its companions, truth and justice – is essential.

In fact, sometimes I feel myself very close to making another choice – biting into a just-picked strawberry, still warm from the vine, seeing a student's eyes light up, or holding my best friend's newborn son – like the dream of the candy cane, I can feel my fingers closing in on something unencloseable. I am brushing the surface of a thing with no surface. In that privileged threshold between the dream of the night and the night itself, lives an image with the power to cross both worlds, an image with the "inner inevitability" to convey both the power and the weakness of desire, to itself engender, and thus expose, the myth of the ring, the empty circle. And yet, in the end, it is the ring – the shepherd of desire – that connects us. The story is not determined by our individual actions, but neither is the space of the story circumscribed by the nothingness inside the ring. Rather, the story is discovered in its *passage* – from peasant girl to Archbishop to mountain lake, or from candy cane to opening night to words on a page – it lights up the points of contact, like tiny stars, which, with enough distance, can be imagined into constellations.

Meaning

The universe disintegrates into a cloud of heat, it falls inevitably into a vortex of entropy, but within this irreversible process there may be areas of order, portions of the existent that tend toward a form, privileged points in which we seem to discern a design or perspective. A work of literature is one of those minimal portions in which the existent crystallizes into a form, acquires a meaning – not fixed, not definitive, not hardened into a mineral immobility, but alive as an organism.

– Italo Calvino, “Exactitude” in *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*



“Arising from Sullen Earth”: The 52nd Street Project’s Transformative Teen Shakespeare Project

This theater is about making children proud of themselves and all choices we make for this company, artistic and otherwise, are based on this precept. The Project is not about teaching children to act, though they will learn to. It is not about teaching them to write plays, though they will learn that as well. What it is about is giving any kid an experience of success. It is about giving a kid an opportunity to prove that he or she has something of value to offer, something that comes from within that he or she alone possesses, something that cannot be taken away. The Project is a theater company not a social service organization. There are times when this work feels like social service but our aim is to produce engaging, funny, and moving theater work for a general audience. The theater is a particularly useful medium for elevating a child’s self-esteem because success in the theater is immediate and public. The children never have to audition or show any aptitude beyond the ability to understand the rules and to be appropriately contrite when they break them. This Project is not about exposing children to the arts, though that happens. It is not about exposing their lives on the stage, though often a child will write something revealing. It is about adults and children who create plays together and in doing so, form a community.

– Willie Reale, *52 Pick Up: A Practical Guide to Doing Theater with Children*

I saw Carmen on the block today – she spotted me from far away and waved, walking her slow, loping, all-the-time-in-the-world walk towards me and hugging me in that slight, polite way, “How you doin’?” Carmen – all curly curly hair and glasses, bony shoulders, short shorts and sneakers. I knew she hadn’t been to school, but she smiled, she had a boyfriend, she had plans to get her GED. And she was happy to see me.

I met Carmen during my time as Associate Artistic Director at The 52nd Street Project, a not-for-profit theater company dedicated to the creation and production of new plays for, and often by, kids between the ages of nine and eighteen that reside in the Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood of New York City. Through a series of unique mentoring programs that match kids with professional (and volunteer!) theater artists, The 52nd Street Project (or simply “The Project”) creates over eighty new plays and serves over 125 children every year. The Project is a well-known and well-loved

institution, among theater folks and the Hell's Kitchen community alike. Both Carmen and I, however, are fairly recent developments in Project history.

“The Project”: History and Programs

The 52nd Street Project began in September of 1981 when someone from the Police Athletic League (PAL), an after-school center for kids from Hell's Kitchen, walked across 52nd Street to the Ensemble Studio Theater (EST), a thriving little off-Broadway outfit. The PAL emissary asked around at EST to see if anyone would be interested in teaching an acting class to kids across the street. There was one affirmative response from a droll young actor and writer named Willie Reale. Before long, Willie realized that there was no way he was going to retain the attention of a bunch of kids after school by just having an acting class. There had to be a payoff, something to work towards. So, naturally, he wrote a play for the kids to perform. This play, “Seen But Not Heard,” was produced at the Ensemble Studio Theater, and that was the beginning.

Over the next several years, Willie continued to create productions with kids at PAL and perform them at EST across the street, recruiting his friends in the professional theater community to perform alongside the kids, as well as compose, design, write, and direct. In 1986, the Project became a funded organization, and in 1994, Willie was named a MacArthur Fellow (more commonly known as a “Genius Grant”) for his unique theatrical vision and his work in the Hell's Kitchen community. In 1996, the Project moved out of a series of small office spaces and into the “Clubhouse,” a complex with offices for the staff, two classroom rehearsal spaces, a kitchen/lounge, storage space for costumes and props, and a full array of resources for kids including computers, an extensive library, art and school supplies, and, of course, snacks. The way Willie tells it, what we know now as The Project evolved because the kids kept asking him “When's the next show?” and he couldn't find it in his heart to say “Never!”. The programs that resulted are outlined in *52 Pick-Up: A Practical Guide to Doing Theater with Children*, which gives a much more complete picture of The Project's mission, history, and programming than is possible here. Over the years, The Project programs have been consolidated into this series of consecutive opportunities for youth:

Playmaking: Every kid is introduced to The Project through this playwriting workshop, based on a curriculum adapted by Daniel Judah Sklar from his

book, *Playmaking*. After the nine weeks of class, the group spends a weekend in the country writing their final plays, which are then performed in an off-Broadway theater by professional actors and directed by professional directors (all of the new plays written at The Project are short form).

Replay: An advanced nine-week playwriting class for *Playmaking* graduates, which culminates in loosely staged readings of the final plays by professional actors, as well as publication of the scripts in a bound volume.

One-on-Ones: Ten kids are each matched up with an adult partner who writes a play specifically for the two to perform together. The Project takes all ten pairs out of town for a week in the summer to rehearse their plays (and go to the beach and eat ice cream); upon returning to the city the show (ten short plays) has a weekend run at an off-Broadway theater.

Playback: A group of teenagers, each matched with an adult partner, takes part in a weekend writing retreat to come up with a play for themselves and their adult partner to perform. After a three-day rehearsal retreat, the plays are presented in a weekend run at an off-Broadway theater.

Two-on-Twos: An adult playwright writes a new play for two kids to perform together. The play is directed by a professional director and has a weekend run at an off-Broadway theater.

Teen Ensemble: A two-year long, college-level introductory acting class for teenagers who have completed the preceding Project programs, culminating in the full production of a Shakespeare play (featuring the teenagers side by side with adult professional actors), which is performed in New York and then tours to an exotic location (past trips have visited London, the South of France, and Texas!).

Kids are only admitted into the Project as nine to eleven-year-old members of the *Playmaking* class. After they have completed the *Playmaking* class they are then full-fledged members of The Project. Project Kids can come to the Clubhouse any day after school for homework help (or just to hang out), and they are invited to participate in each of the other theater programs in sequence.

Because virtually all of The Project's programs involve one-on-one relationships between kids and adults, Project staff and volunteers are able to cater each kid's specific experience here to his or her needs. Artistic Director Gus Rogerson spends a good deal of time examining the "match-ups" (which kid will work with which actor

or director) because he knows how important it is to marry the strengths and needs of our kids and of the adult volunteers who work with them. It's like setting two people up on a blind date, except instead of going out to dinner and a movie, the couple has to make a play together. A good match-up is about 75% of what makes a good play (as in any relationship, the rest is hard work), and the goal is always a good play. Of course, sometimes a kid will form a relationship with his or her acting partner that extends beyond the theatrical experience, and that's great, too.

Match-up decisions form the cornerstones of experiences kids have at The Project. The Project staff works with each adult to determine the best approach for each child, using their strengths to address their weaknesses. What they ask of kids is simple: depending on the program, kids are asked to write a play, or to perform it, or both. Of course there are other tasks leading up to this, such as coming to class and to rehearsal, learning lines, etc. But at the end of the day, if a kid does the show, she's a success – and so are the adults working with her. So in spite of the individualized approach, it all boils down to the same thing: we are successful if the kids are able to do what we ask of them.

Much of the work at The Project is the minutiae of doing theater with children – a lot of yelling “Louder!” and “Clearer!” – but it's all geared towards making each performance really, really good. If it's good, then people will laugh, and people will be breathlessly silent, and people will stand up and shout and clap. Being onstage, and seeing a hundred people react like that to the play that you wrote or performed – well, as Willie said, “I have seen the joy in their eyes and have heard it in their voices and I have watched them take a bow and come up taller.”

Of course, what we ask is more difficult for some kids than for others, and sometimes success takes different forms. Which is where Carmen comes in.

Carmen's Journey

Carmen, as you may remember, is a slight Puerto Rican girl who, when our story begins, is sixteen years old and in the second year of the Teen Ensemble. In the first year, Carmen had been the pariah of the class – skipping classes and coming late, participating only marginally in group activities, and generally alienating everyone with her sullen behavior. She was described by her classmates as “rude,” “trashy,” and

“wack.” Gus, the Artistic Director, had more than once considered kicking her out of the class, but in the end she’d made it through.

The first class of Year Two: we were doing a group exercise from a line of Shakespeare, “Peace, Kent, keep not the dragon from his wrath.” Each teenager was to say the first word of the line, “peace,” using that word to scare someone across the circle. Teenagers love this kind of thing, and were soon shooting the most terrifying “peace”s I’d ever heard across the circle. Among these loud, pugnacious, tightly wound teenagers, Carmen stood out. Limbs languid and eyes unfocused, when it was her turn Carmen scuffed the carpet with her toe and kept her eyes focused on the floor. She muttered “Please.” Please? The word, the instructor informed her, was “peace.” Try it again, and use the word to scare the person across from you. She tried it again, and a third time, still saying “please,” and scaring no one. Not wanting to embarrass her, we moved on.

It soon became clear that Carmen was often coming to class stoned. In fact, she probably went most places stoned. She was also recovering from a double whammy of heartbreak (she was devastated by the defection of her long-term boyfriend to another girl), and an abortion (also courtesy of said boyfriend). Unlike most kids in the neighborhood, her parents were still together, though I suspected both of them of physical violence, towards each other and their daughter. Carmen attended a small alternative school where, although she should have been a junior, she’d only accumulated the credits necessary to complete one year of high school.

When we assigned the teenagers their own personal Shakespeare sonnets to work on in the fall, Carmen could barely read hers out loud in front of the class. She stumbled over the words, and offered interpretations of the text that were, at best, perplexing. Each teen was assigned a director, and charged with the task of memorizing his or her sonnet and performing it in a few weeks with “given circumstances” – i.e., setting the sonnet in a particular situation and speaking it with a particular intention. Carmen and I were working together, mostly because the Project staff didn’t want to assign her one of our adult volunteer artists for fear that she wouldn’t show up to classes or rehearsals, dissing our generous volunteer. I, as a staff member, was deemed diss-able.

Our sonnet, Number 29, went a little something like this:

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
I all alone beweep my outcast state
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries
And look upon myself, and curse my fate.
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope
With what I most enjoy contented least.
Yet in this state, myself almost despising
Hap'ly I think on thee, and then my state
Like to the lark at break of day arising from sullen earth
Sings hymns at the heaven's gate.
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

After much discussion of the text, Carmen decided that she would speak her sonnet as a teenager who'd had a terrible day in school because "some girl said things to her" (in high school, "saying things" can be infinitely more brutal, and specific, than it sounds). She enters her room after school and begins to talk about how much she hates her life and wishes she were someone else. Then, suddenly, she remembers a good friend of hers who cares about her and loves her, and that thought makes her feel better.

It took a long time to establish a clear given circumstance, since Carmen kept staring off into space and going off on tangents. I kept asking questions. Once we had it nailed down, we began to work on staging and memorizing the sonnet. We developed a memorization method that worked for both of us: I would jump up and down around the room, saying a line (or half a line, more often) of Shakespeare. She would pace around the room too, and repeat the line back to me. I repeated the line again, varying the inflection, and she would mimic me. This went on for hours. We would spend ten minutes at a time on three words. I think "arising from sullen earth" probably represents about 45 minutes of pacing and jumping. Amazingly, she didn't lose interest. She wanted to memorize the sonnet. I was encouraged.

Our breakthrough occurred on the day we began to polish up the blocking, close to when we would perform for the group. "Wait, do your entrance again. How can we tell you just came home from school?" I asked her. She started the scene again, this

time carrying a backpack which she flung down violently on the floor upon entering. She then plopped herself into a chair and sighed before beginning the sonnet. Looking back, I can see this as the moment when I first believed in Carmen, really believed in her. Before that, I thought that she was just another tough kid. I was going to help her accomplish something so that she could feel good about it, but it was going to be hard. However, in that moment, I saw a perfectly and sweetly communicated anguish in the way she entered that scene. To me, that moment opened up a corridor of possibility. I suddenly saw – and loved – Carmen’s own particular brand of greatness.

Carmen went on to perform her sonnet with grace, charm, and deep emotion – though not quite perfect command of the text – and to write a play incorporating the sonnet, which she starred in. She stopped standing me up for rehearsals and almost always came to class, often arriving early to sit and chat with me or other staff members. So in January, when it came time to cast *The Tempest*, the play we’d chosen for the class to perform, Carmen was cast as Miranda. Though her classmates all had demonstrated better command of language than she had, as well as stronger work ethics, better focus, more consistency, and more basic acting talent, we saw in Carmen the very essence of what Shakespeare seemed to have attributed to the romantic heroine Miranda – a sweet willingness, a sincerity, a goodness, a romantic soul, and a tenuous grasp of reality. Of course, as the rehearsal process went on we saw other things in Miranda that emerged effortlessly from Carmen’s performance – her boredom (wouldn’t you be bored if you were stranded on a desert island with your father for 12 years?), her rebelliousness, and her confidence.

Carmen and her classmates had a successful premiere of their *Tempest* in New York, after which we all packed off to England where we performed in a small theater in London, and in an old barn in the Suffolk countryside. Carmen was delightful on this trip – happier and warmer than I’d ever seen her. Before the final performance, the group had the amazing opportunity to be interviewed by the BBC in the stately garden of the manorhouse where we were staying. Carmen, never eloquent, nor comfortable speaking in public, was startled when the interviewers first approached her to ask her about her experience at *The Project*. At first she waved them away, refusing to talk, but then, as they were recording, the microphone in her face, she took a deep breath and began. She floundered a little, and then she reached over and took my hand. I returned the pressure of her dry palm, her voice steadied, and she began to

talk about how much The Project had meant to her. In the middle of a Suffolk garden, holding my hand, this teenager from Hell's Kitchen took a deep breath – and told all of England about playing Miranda.

The Project staff considered Carmen our big success story for the year. Not because she accumulated enough credits to move on to her junior year of high school (she didn't), or because she showed up at school more regularly (she didn't), or because she stopped smoking pot (she didn't), or because she stopped engaging in risky sexual behavior (I assume that she didn't...). It was because she was successful at the limited but challenging task we'd set out for her – learning the role of Miranda in *The Tempest*, and performing that role as part of an ensemble of her peers in New York and in Europe. In spite of what we all might have predicted at the beginning of the year, Carmen was wildly successful at what we asked her to do. In addition, it was clear to us that that success was in some way part of a radical change in the way Carmen faced the world. A young woman who had been sour and withdrawn emerged a year later smiling and open. As her yearlong private Shakespeare coach, I felt the changes in her almost palpably. Of course, there's no way to know what role The Project or her part in *The Tempest* played in this transformation. We may have just been privileged to witness a teenager emerging from a sustained depression. But I suspect that The Project was at the very least one of the rungs on the ladder that she used to climb back out into the sunlight. The fact was that we asked something of Carmen that she had to change her behavior to accomplish – and she did it. When I see her on the street now, I see a spring in her step. She moves with the confidence of someone who knows she's worth something.

“I Know I Can Do It Because I Did It”: Learning Through Success

The Project is in certain respects a self contained environment. We expect brilliance from our kids, and because of the clear parameters and persistent support, they usually deliver. Hence, a child that is known as “stupid” somewhere else can be smart here. A child that is abusive to her peers elsewhere can be nurturing here. And a teenager that can never finish anything can be the star of a Shakespeare play. A side effect of this, of course, is that kids who decide they can't do what we ask will usually leave the Project early on, or never walk in the door in the first place. But most of them figure out that if they want to succeed, we'll do everything we can to help them, and that the end result will be pretty darn great.

Actually, once kids realize that we want to help them succeed, there's no getting rid of them. Every day around three o'clock, noisy hordes flood through the door of The Project Clubhouse. The day after I ran into Carmen on the block, a spring in her step, I made the rounds of a busy afternoon at The Project Clubhouse with a tape recorder. First I opened the classroom door to interrupt fifteen year olds Michael and Justin who were writing and performing raps. Michael announced, "I learned how to act and not be afraid and stuff in front of people. And to show myself."

"How do you know?"

"Because the first time I ever acted, I was afraid. But now I'm not. And back then I wasn't that good at writing plays, but now I could write a play so fast. And if you ask me any question, I could answer it real fast, like I'm doing right now." He and Justin then dissolved into teenage boy posturing.

Mayleen, sixteen, looking on from her perch at the front desk where she works as our receptionist after school, commented dryly, "Most of the kids come in here like real shy, and then afterwards it's like Justin and Michael who won't stop talking and are always here. You can see them open up."

In the kitchen, thirteen-year-old Solangee told me that she'd learned how to write better and to like writing. "But how do you know?" I asked.

She chewed thoughtfully on a slice of pizza. "Well, after I was done with Playmaking, I wrote a story one day 'cause I was bored."

"Would you have done that before you took Playmaking?"

"No, 'cause I wouldn't care. I would think about doing it, but I'll just leave it there."

Twelve-year-old Suzette, looking up from her homework, had a different answer when I asked, "But how do you know that you've learned those things?"

Suzette replied, "Because I've done them."

Then there was ten-year-old Victor, in the middle of a heated “Monopoly” game with an adult volunteer, who impatiently explained “Well, all we do learn is how to make plays, mostly.”

“And what’s the point of learning that?” I asked.

Victor looked at me as if I were truly a moron. He said, loudly and clearly, “Because it’s really, really fun!” Then he waved me away, stretched out on the floor, and rolled the dice for his next turn.

Postscript: “Who is it That Can Tell Me Who I Am?”

Not too long after this conversation with Victor, I left Hell’s Kitchen to take a job at a theater in Rhode Island. Five years later, I had the chance to return to The Project to direct the 2009 Teen Shakespeare show, an action-packed 90-minute version of King Lear. Victor played Edmund (brilliantly). He also became my Facebook friend where, months later, he still occasionally posts status updates like “All with me’s meet that I can fashion fit!”

Carmen, too, is now my Facebook friend. Thanks to Facebook, I know that she got her GED, completed an Associates Degree, and works as a receptionist at a law firm. She lives in Hell’s Kitchen with her parents, and her son Louis, who just turned five. Her mother has lung cancer, and so Carmen is trying her best to stop smoking – and finding it harder than she thought.

Recently I told her that this article was being published and asked if she had anything to add. She printed out Sonnet #29 (“to refresh my memory”), commenting that she relates to it much more now than she did when she was a teenager.

“As you already know, I was a troubled teen,” Carmen reminded me, “Now that I think about it, I was living life a little too fast. The teen class [only] kept me out of the street for a hour or so, but it was fun... I express myself, my character, and I learn some things about myself... I learned people would still love and like you for who you are as person... I been to places I never thought I would of gone in my life.” And I don’t think she meant just the physical places like London, but the more personal journeys as well. Lear’s question echoed in my head: Who is it that can tell me who I am? At the time when we are most in search of our own identities, a great gift of The

Project's teen program is the space, the time, and the language to keep asking ourselves life's big questions. What do you do when you are in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes? To be or not to be? Who am I?

Carmen went on to list a dozen other ways The Project impacted her, from giving her strong female role models, to advocating for her within the school system, to "FUN FUN FUN." Still, in her Facebook message, she struggled to find the words for what she really wanted to say ("I have so many great memories about the Project that my mind overloaded.") "Anyway," she concluded, "all I know, once Louis turn 9 years old, I'm going to put him in the Project."

Golden Myths, Dark Cities: Saving the World in Brecht and Batman

Homeless heroes, once in service to our country, begging for money with hats pulled low over their faces. Skyrocketing unemployment and foreclosure. A city holding on for dear life in the midst of a worldwide slide into depression and panic.

In American cities in 2009, this apocalyptic vision of the dark cities of fantasy – *Watchmen's* New York, *Bladerunner's* LA, or *The Dark Knight's* Gotham – is starting to feel closer and closer to reality, a darkening that also must have been palpable during our last great international economic crisis in the 1930's, when Bertolt Brecht began to conceive his stark parable of morality in a cruel world, *The Good Person of Szechwan*. In Brecht's play, as Szechwan and the world around it slide into chaos, three Gods descend from on high to investigate the dire reports they are hearing about the state of the world. They decree that if they are able to find enough good people able to live a moral life, then the world is not flawed, and can remain as it is. Will the Gods be able to save Szechwan? Perhaps their "good person," Shen Teh, can save the day? Or maybe her ruthless alter-ego, Shui Ta?

In 1938, the same year that Brecht began to write *Good Person*, D.C.'s Action Comics #1 introduced a new character to the American public: Superman. Although heroes have existed for as long as there have been stories, Superheroes of the cape-and-special-power variety were a distinctly American invention, starting with that 1938 comic and gaining enormous popularity during World War II. The invention (and staying power) of the Superhero is often seen to represent a particular brand of mid-century American optimism, both in its heightened rendition of the American Dream – an ordinary man, a poor man, can become a hero to millions! – and the cheerful belief that no matter how bad things may seem, there is always a solution to a tricky situation (like a cat stuck in a tree or impending nuclear war).

In American popular mythology, from Captain Marvel to Indiana Jones, heroes reliably save the world from destruction at the hands of a series of evil villains. But the world that they save is a flawed world, corrupt and unfair, full of crime and peril, full of disappointments and setbacks destined to disillusion, disenfranchise, and disgust ordinary citizens. How do we know this? Because the *need* for heroes never

diminishes. After witnessing the cheering throngs, the relieved embraces, the hero zips off again. Somewhere, some innocent person is in trouble. And that means somewhere, some bad person is making trouble (and opening the door for a sequel). In Brecht's *Galileo*, the title character declares, "Unhappy is the land that is in need of heroes." Indeed, the unpleasant truth is that only a bad world needs someone to save the day.

Ostensibly, superheroes exist to make the world a better place. But if the world really became a better place, superheroes would be out of a job. And if heroes need a bad world in order to be truly super, perhaps a bad world needs its superheroes in order to remain truly bad. Is it possible that the existence of heroes is actually what keeps things from changing for the better? Does the faith and hope inspired by witnessing acts of heroism simply distance us from the true nature of the world we live in, making it more possible for villainous elements to thrive?

The latest film in the Batman franchise, Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, was inspired in large part by a 1940 comic book debuting a new villain, The Joker. "As we looked through the comics," Nolan told *The New York Times*, "there was this fascinating idea that Batman's presence in Gotham actually attracts criminals to Gotham, attracts lunacy."

The Joker describes his engagement with Batman as "a battle for the soul of Gotham city." Batman is playing by the rules of the traditional super hero/villain battle. But by refusing to play along with the rules of conventional morality, by refusing to have a motive, an intention, or a destination, the Joker undermines our natural sense of how the story should end. He curtails every showdown by sending our hero running away to avert some other catastrophe that the Joker has set in motion. The Joker stands still while Batman, and the city, run frantically around him. Refusing to conform to the Supervillian blueprint, the Joker doesn't want power, and he doesn't want money. He doesn't want to destroy the world, or to dominate it. He wants to destabilize, to unhinge, to reverse... to reveal the ways that the world is irrational and unpredictable, conforming, like him, to only one rule: chaos.

Being an advocate of reason and logic over emotional response, Brecht would perhaps not have subscribed to the Joker's chaos theory. On the other hand, Brecht was critical of cookie-cutter logic, the fantasy of reason, the story we are told about "the way

things are.” He would likely have preferred honest chaos to corrupt and unjust structure. In *Good Person*, the Gods have created the moral precepts that elevate or condemn human behavior; they are the ones who define “goodness” and “badness.” The Gods have decreed that “the world can go on as it is if we find enough good people.” This sounds like a sound idea in theory, a noble goal: saving the world. Yet, as the play unfolds, we see that the world of Szechwan is unjust, corrupt, and yes, chaotic. Fighting to save this world begins to feel unsettlingly misguided. Perhaps it *should not* “go on as it is.” It is too horrible. Driven to the edge of sanity by her designation as a “good person,” torn apart by her attempts to obey the divine precepts, Shen Teh sobs to the Gods,

“Oh, your world is arduous! Such need, such desperation!
The hand which is held out to the starving
Is quickly wrenched off! He who gives help to the lost
Is lost for his own part! For who could
Hold himself back from anger when the hungry are dying?
Where could I find so much that was needed, if not
In myself? But that was my downfall! The load of commandments
Forced me into the sludge. Yet if I broke the rules
I strode proudly around, and could eat myself full!
Something is wrong with this world of yours. Why
Is wickedness so rewarded, and why is so much suffering
Reserved for the good?”

“You know what I noticed?” the Joker observes, “Nobody panics when things go according to plan. Even if the plan is horrifying.” Brecht, watching from the safety of California as the horrifying events of the 1940’s unfolded in his native Germany, would certainly have agreed. *Good Person*, like many of his plays, problematizes the established plans – by the government, by church, by the theater – and pushes for new ideas, new forms, new approaches. The Joker and Brecht, then, share a healthy dislike for the status quo.

Both also try to “show the schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are” (as the Joker says), pulling the rug out from under their well-meaning heroes: Shen Teh and the Gods in *Szechwan*, Batman and “white knight” District Attorney Harvey Dent in *The Dark Knight*. Horrifying consequences result from good

deeds; attempts to behave morally lead to impossible ethical dilemmas. Forced to compromise, we see these heroes strain, and then snap. Shen Teh turns permanently into Shui Ta and makes her living selling ruinous illegal drugs to the community she previously nurtured. Batman loses control, becoming vengeful and violent. The Gods abandon their quest for a good person and lie to the world about their findings. Dent, pushed over into madness by his disfigurement and the death of his fiancé, transforms into Two-Face, the chance-obsessed villain willing to turn his brand of vigilante justice on small children – or not – at the flip of a coin.

So perhaps Brecht, like the Joker, is “an agent of chaos.” The last moment of *Good Person* is chaotic – disturbingly irrational, morally muddy, and narratively unsatisfying. As in the last scene with Batman and the Joker in the film, we are left with a sense of the world having been turned on its head – literally, in the movie, as the camera tilts to show the Joker’s face right-side up, although he is hanging upside down, the now-inverted city dropping eerily behind him. He appears to have been defeated and captured, but we do not feel any relief; the Joker is laughing and in control.

The movie goes on to add a brief coda in which Batman defeats Two-Face and takes the blame for his murders, fleeing into the night, as, according to Commissioner Gordon, “the hero Gotham deserves.” In the end, *The Dark Knight* chooses the illusion – the fantasy of reason over the reality of madness, the fantasy of protection over the reality of destruction. In pretending that Batman committed the murders actually committed by Two-Face, the myth of the hero is preserved, albeit with a twist – the people of Gotham have Harvey Dent as their hero and Batman as their villain, and we, the audience, have it the other way around. Either way, the cover-up distorts the truth – the world is too awful as it is; we deserve better. With this coda, *The Dark Knight’s* ending leaves us back where we began – dependent on a dysfunctional cycle of violence and redemption that perpetuates an unjust world – a world full of vibrant and caring people, but too cruel to allow them to be good.

Brecht adds a coda, too – an epilogue, where he turns the problem over to the audience. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he begins, “don’t feel let down/ We know this ending makes some people frown/ We had in mind a sort of golden myth/ then found the finish had been tampered with.” He goes on to explain that “nothing’s been arranged” for the ending of the play, and ask the audience for their opinion. The only solution, the epilogue concludes, is for the audience to keep thinking about what they

feel is right, to consider “what sort of measures you would recommend/ To help good people to a happy end.” Brecht ends his play by placing the fate of the community squarely in the hands of the community – not in the hands of a mysterious protector who rides off into the night, but in the light, where we can see it.

Good Person, like many of Brecht’s plays, describes worlds too ruined to be saved by just one of us – whether it’s an ordinary good citizen, a masked avenger, or even a god. Instead, he asks us to consider our collective responsibility and take collective action. To do this, he implies, we may have to endure a certain amount of chaos. We may have to break the rules and make new ones. To walk away from the golden myths we are used to will no doubt be difficult. The landscape of morality is a dark and scary place with no superheroes to guide us. The goal of “saving the world” dissolves, or alters slightly. The world cannot, should not, be preserved as it is. So then what?

“Don’t believe your eyes,” Brecht counsels, “Don’t believe your ears./ What you see is darkness./ Perhaps it is light.” And on this, perhaps, both Batman and the Joker would agree.

Invest The World With the Brightness of Your Attention: Musical Theatre, Genocide, and Joy

Contradictions are our hope!
– Bertolt Brecht

Musicals and love stories are two things that a Serious Theatre Artist should not have a passion for, or at least not her primary passion. I realize this. I tried to cultivate an appetite for the post-modern and deconstructionist, for the poetic or political, for satire, for stark imagery, for multi-media, even for puppets. But it was unavoidable: I kept coming back for more musicals and love stories.

My infatuation began at a young age – I was four when I first saw Judy singing “Over The Rainbow” in black and white on our tiny TV. I started with the gorgeous saturation of Rogers and Hammerstein, moving on through the perplexing pleasures of Sondheim, into the dark corners of Kander and Ebb, and back out into the flirty embrace of Cole Porter. After a glorious seventh-grade production of *West Side Story*, my gerbils were named Anita and Maria. Later, Weill called insistently to me, outlasting my luxurious but short-lived detours through *Rent*, *Spring Awakening* or (sigh) *Dreamgirls*.

Performance theorists have written about how theater may create an experience of “communitas” (a term popularized by anthropologist Victor Turner) – an intense feeling of social togetherness and belonging. Those of us who love musical theater may recognize this as the glowing vibration that comes from being in a room full of people thrilling to the same chorus. There is a certain, delicate moment during a great musical theatre performance when I can almost see my chest being filled with pale, golden-violet light, and I am certain the same light has infiltrated the other 5000 people in the theater. It takes only a tiny ripple to shatter this illusion – a blast from an air conditioner in an already too-cold theater, the crinkle of candy-wrapper behind me – but while it lasts, it is divine. Most deliciously, it is possible for me to re-create a version of this glow back home, by playing one song from the musical’s soundtrack on repeat, closing my eyes, and staying very still – or alternatively, singing along at top volume in the car with all the windows down – re-igniting that luminous feeling, which now seems to link me not just to other, now-absent, spectators, but to some larger shared truth of the human condition; I feel “a part of something.”

In college, I saw the original off-Broadway production of John Cameron Mitchell and Stephen Trask's *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* at the Jane Street Theatre. What a revelation! It was a musical. It was a love story. It was a rock concert. It was a drag show. It transcended all of these to feel... new, sparkly, intoxicating.

Hedwig tells the story of a boy named Hansel who, desperate to escape Communist East Berlin, has a sex change operation in order to marry an American GI. The operation is botched, and Hansel – now Hedwig – is left with “an angry inch” of flesh between her legs. Hedwig does make it to the US, and after her marriage dissolves, she falls hard for an American teenager, Tommy. When he betrays her, Hedwig pours her grief, anger, and hope into her music, playing gigs at low-rent venues near the large arenas where Tommy, now a star, is performing. The conceit of the show is that we are patrons at one of Hedwig's dive-bar gigs; every so often she opens the back door of the venue to let Tommy's bright lights and stadium-sized cheers spill in. It seems to be just another rock show, until slowly, things start to unravel, and we realize that this night may be different from all other nights.

When the show works well, as it did when I sat spellbound in the Jane Street Theatre, the whole room arrives together at the recognition that Hedwig is at once rock star and freak, innocent and corrupted, broken and whole, she and he. At the end of the show, Hedwig and her band sing ecstatically “Lift up your hands!” and everyone in the audience does lift up their hands, celebrating Hedwig, celebrating us all. For me, “lift up your hands” was like the ultra-deluxe super-size edition of *communitas*.

Ten years later, I had the opportunity to direct *Hedwig* at Perishable Theatre in downtown Providence. Rhode Island had been hit hard by 2008's economic downturn, and rates of unemployment and foreclosure were among the highest in the nation; Vanessa Gilbert, Perishable's Artistic Director, decided that a season of musicals was just what the doctor ordered to combat the recession blues. Musical lift the spirits and remind us of what we all share; musicals fill us with light and send us out into the dark streets singing; at the end of the day, a musical is *fun*.

The week I began rehearsals at Perishable, I was also attending a conference at Brown University, convened by playwright Erik Ehn. The Arts in the One World Conference brought an impressive international group of artists together to talk about,

among other things, the use of the arts to promote dialogue and reconciliation after genocide. Most of the first day dealt with ongoing genocide denial in Rwanda, where 800,000 people were massacred in 100 days in 1994. Sitting in the darkened auditorium, I felt a profound sense of exhaustion. Glancing down at my notes, I saw that the page was blank other than an instruction I'd written down from Erik, who, sensing the flagging energy, had instructed us: "Invest the world with the brightness of your attention." I sighed. My attention felt decidedly dull.

At the end of the day, it was a pure thrill to walk down the hill and feel the thundering bass of my rehearsal room. Hedwig's energy, her desire, picked up my tired, despairing spirit and set it back on its feet again. I thought "Yes! Fun!"

In spite of myself, though, I felt something else happening that week. Although I wanted to see *Hedwig* as a fun escape from talk of genocide and terror, the opposite happened: the genocide and terror in *Hedwig* leapt out at me. Yes, I'd always known that Hedwig was German. I'd caught the series of glib little jokes about ovens. I saw the metaphorical significance of the cat-and-mouse game our heroine plays throughout the show with her husband Yitzhak, a Croatian Jew who wants to be a drag queen. According to Hedwig, when they met in Zagreb Yitzhak was "billed as 'the last Jewess in the Balkans,'" and "lip-synched something from 'Yentl' under the name Krystal Nacht." Subsequently Hedwig would recreate the devil's bargain that brought her to the U.S. from Germany by offering Yitzhak passage to America "on the condition that a wig never touch your head again."

I knew all of this, but it seemed to me mere backstory, a set-up for the rock & roll love story to come. But suddenly, I saw that this *was* the love story, this was why the punk rock songs were being sung: oppression and freedom, power and terror, loss and choice, trauma and possibility. The moment at the end of the show when Hedwig hands her wig to Yitzhak took on an expanded significance for me, as I began to perceive Yitzhak's freedom in relationship to a series of personal and historical narratives of violence and trauma; in that light, the revelation and revolution of the ecstatic final moment carried enormous weight – even seriousness.

And in fact, musicals have always been more serious than I gave them credit for. Early American musical theater was driven by a narrative of removing or accepting the outsider in order to create a unified community. Difference creates danger and threat;

conflict is resolved by either removing or, more often, incorporating the Other and hence eliminating any difference (think *Show Boat*, *Oklahoma!*, *South Pacific*, *The Music Man*). In *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, Raymond Knapp points out that this dramaturgical construction is consistent with American formulations of nationalism. While nineteenth century European nationalism was concerned with restoring land to its rightful owners and seeking to cleanse the resulting “nation” from perceived “impurities” (an approach which led to the worst human tragedies of the twentieth century, from Germany to Turkey to Kosovo), this was a model impossible to adopt by Americans of European descent, since the land they inhabited was clearly not originally theirs. Americans thus necessarily inverted the idea of nationhood from “purity” to “melting pot.” Knapp notes that most musicals “exhibit a specifically American strain of inclusiveness and reconciliation,” often using marriage to represent “the merger of supposed incompatibilities.”

Musically, the use of individual actors singing, and then adding the chorus, building till there is unison and harmony, underscores this melting pot message. Of course, there are musicals that disrupt this paradigm both narratively and musically (like my old friends Kander, Ebb and Sondheim), but, for me, the tension and complexity that those works hold is a very different sort of pleasure from the delirious joy of a whole stageful of people singing their hearts out together in perfect harmony – as in “Lift up your hands!” It is this unified swell that, in my experience, leads to the feeling of *communitas*. I began to wonder if my thrill at the swelling chorus reveals a desire to be part of the melting pot, where we can all be the same, and together. Do I believe that a feeling of sameness, of connection, leads to healing? Isn’t this the same impulse which sets violent events in motion in the first place – the desire to erase difference?

I don’t know much about how or why my grandparents and great-grandparents came to this country. I only know that they came – from Turkey, from Romania, from other places unknown – and that they came in time. On the Armenian side, barely in time to escape the massacres during World War I at the hands of the Turks; on the Jewish side, decades before the unimaginable events of World War II. No one in my family ever told me a personal story of the forced marches or the concentration camps. I never asked what it was like to watch, from the Eastern coast of the United States of America, newscasts announcing the obliteration of the people and places they’d left behind. And yet, it seems to me that the stories they did tell were steeped in the dust and ashes of these defining events. My cultural history is, at least in part (a part that

sometimes stands in for the whole), a story of genocide, of murder on a massive scale, of immense, immeasurable, loss. I vividly remember the books I read as a child about the Holocaust and the Genocide – *Number the Stars*, *The Road From Home*. If I read other books about what it meant to be Jewish or Armenian, I don't remember them. Eventually, I learned to dread these books (and movies and plays); they felt less like catharsis or healing and more like, as Delaware First Nations playwright Daniel David Moses put it, "dancing around a wound."

I've often wondered how, if at all, these dual histories of genocide are contained in my body. This privileged, White, heterosexual, upper middle class body – the experience of which I understand, or think I do – does it also contain the memory of trauma from another time, another place? Because of the blood that runs in my veins, do I bear unknowing witness? Does just inhabiting my body connect me to the unconfessed nightmares of my immigrant grandparents, to the imagined screams of families just like mine? Six million Jews during World War II? 1.5 million Armenians from 1915 to 1923? Is that all in me? I don't know if my great-grandparents, my grandparents, my parents, ever grieved for these losses. I know I never have. And what about 3000 Black Americans lynched in the twentieth century? Or 800,000 Rwandans massacred in 1994? I live in the world; I breathe the air and drink the water. Are these in me, too?

The Rwandan artists at the conference urged me to watch *Sometimes in April*, a film about the Rwandan genocide, and also, like so many other genocide stories, about what happens afterwards – how it is possible to continue living in the face of so much death, how it is possible to continue speaking after witnessing the unspeakable, how it is possible to continue caring after losing everything. I put the movie in my Netflix queue. One day it came. Then it sat on my dining room table. I didn't want to watch it. I knew what would happen. It would be horrifying. I would cry. I would dance around the wound. I would realize how terrible the world was. Nothing would change. Why did I want to do that to myself? Why would I watch this movie? Instead, I watched my way through the second season of *The Wire*, in which longshoremen and drug dealers and the Greek mafia kill each other. But it was entertaining!

"Your joy is your sorrow unmasked," Kahlil Gibran writes, "The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain./ Is not the cup that holds your wine the very cup that was burned in the potter's oven?/ And is not the lute that

soothes your spirit, the very wood that was hollowed with knives?... They are inseparable. Together they come, and when one sits, alone with you at your board, remember that the other is asleep upon your bed.” Gibran sees joy and sorrow as opposites – complimentary and necessary opposites, yes, peaks and valleys – but primarily related by their opposition to each other.

On the other hand, Native American writer and teacher Martin Prechtel describes joy and sorrow – or, in his lexicon, praise and grief – as inextricably linked, always part of the same impulse: “when you’re grieving for the thing you got, it’s praise, and when you’re praising for the thing you lost, it’s called grief.” He links both grief and praise to the notion of human mortality:

“Your mortality is in your face every time you praise realistically. If a true praise is coming along, then it’s got to contain the notion that you are mortal, and that the praiser is mortal, that the beauty is at this moment we are all together at this place, to be together, and there’s a grief in that that makes the magic of the praise very real, because the stakes are extremely high.”

Prechtel observes – and I believe him – that most Americans don’t know how to grieve or praise “properly” (so that “you look bad when you’re done”). In a contemporary American city, there aren’t a lot of safe spaces for grieving or praising – at least, I haven’t found them. The theater is the closest place I’ve found, and of my experiences in the theater, *Hedwig* offered the most room for both grief and praise.

John Cameron Mitchell has said that he wants *Hedwig* to be post-sexuality and post-drag, “more about gender and love generally.” I wonder if the show might also desire to be post-genocide and post-trauma, more about violence and power generally, about the impossibility of forgiveness, the necessity of release. But post is a bothersome idea – the concept of being post anything implies that our goal should always be to get past this present moment, that progress happens only in a forward-moving straight line. Perhaps – and appropriately in a discussion inspired by *Hedwig*’s story – it is possible instead to aim for trans-something; while post means “after”, trans means “across” or “beyond.” In a trans-genocidal, trans-traumatic performance, we are able to tell and hear a story that is not defined by its relationship to genocide and trauma, but is still able to carry those narratives with respect and compassion. By releasing the politics of

identity categories, the generosity of a trans performance opens up space – for joy, for sorrow, for the grief and praise that we so desperately need.

Hedwig is inspired in part by a story in Plato's *Symposium*: long ago, people had four arms, four legs, and giant heads with a face on each side; some were all male, some were all female, and some were half of each. Zeus grew angry at the defiance of these roly-poly people, and split them in half with a thunderbolt, condemning all future humans to wander around looking to be completed by their "other half." This is why we are always looking for love (and possibly why we, or at least I, crave musicals and love stories).

There are many creation myths in Greek mythology. More widely familiar than the tale of the spherical people divided is a story I discovered at age ten in the appealingly thick *Bulfinch's Mythology* – that of Pandora, the first woman, who, like Eve, is remembered for the disastrous consequences of her curiosity. The Bulfinch version goes like this: Prometheus, aided by his brother Epimetheus, stole fire from the gods. To punish them, the gods created the first woman (the story has some troubling implications already, though I never noticed at age ten), and gave her as a "gift" to Epimetheus. Pandora promptly opened a forbidden jar in Epimetheus' house, from which escaped "a multitude of plagues for hapless man" – all manner of physical illness, as well as ills of the mind such as "envy, spite, and revenge." She quickly closed the jar, but it was too late – all the evils had escaped, save one: hope. "So we see at this day," Bulfinch concludes, "whatever evils are abroad, hope never entirely leave us; and while we have *that*, no amount of other ills can make us completely wretched."

The tale is confusing on several levels. First of all, what is our relationship to items in the jar (or box, as later tellings would have it)? Bulfinch's interpretation loosely implies that we have some *control* over items in the jar, we can conjure them up and use them how we will, whereas those which have escaped are visited upon us, beyond our power to control. The second area of confusion is the nature of hope. Bulfinch notes his preference for an alternative version of the tale in which Pandora is created as a blessing to mankind, and the box (oddly, one paragraph later, the jar has become a box) is full of good qualities – all of which, save hope, Pandora unfortunately allows to escape. "This story seems more probable than the former," he writes, "for how could *hope*, so precious a jewel as it is, have been kept in a jar full of all manner of evils, as in the former statement?" Perhaps. But it's also possible the story's contradictions are

deliberate. Is the myth intended to make us wonder about the wisdom of allowing hope to escape from the jar and range freely over the earth? Could the perils of unchecked hope be as great as the perils of unchecked fear?

This week, when I finished season two of *The Wire*, I considered *Sometimes in April*, lying innocently in its little red envelope on my dining room table. I knew I couldn't watch it – and then I wondered if I could watch it differently. I considered Julie Salvorsen's mandate "to move beyond the self-enclosing indulgence of a tragic response to existence" and embrace an "insistence on engagement based in availability." I put my yoga mat in front of the television, deciding that instead of sitting huddled on the couch crying during the film, I would stretch, breath, and do jumping jacks – a reminder of my body, located in my living room, in Providence, RI, in the fall of 2010. I put the movie in the DVD player, but before I turned it on, I had the impulse to go online and look at images from the Armenian genocide. So I did. Then I pressed play.

At the end of the movie I knelt in front of the television on my yoga mat. I could feel the ache in the back of my calves from all the jumping jacks, the evening breeze coming in through the screen. I did cry, but it felt different. So different, I almost couldn't believe it. I felt *close* to the events of the film – not sentimentally, emotionally close, but physically close – as if I could identify some location in my own body where the story resonated and struck a harmonic, a chord that hung, shining, in the air.

Perhaps, I thought, we are *always* moving on after unspeakable things. Perhaps that's the only thing we are ever doing, the only kind of motion there is. As long as people have existed, people have been hating each other and then killing each other. That is everyone's history: massive destruction, displacement, erasure, exodus. If you trace back – or forward – far enough, everyone has a genocide. *This is* the fabric of the human experience. *This is it.*

Suddenly I was grateful that the greatest of all evils, hope, is still imprisoned in Pandora's jar – restrained just enough to require us to remember, if we choose, the vast horrors of human history, to require us to recognize, if we can bear it, that events just as horrible are still to come. Honestly viewed, the past and the future contain equal amounts of beauty and terror. If a trans-traumatic performance can reach beyond wonderful and awful into a spacious collision of grief and praise, I find it offers me an

opportunity to engage with this kind of honesty. As the bass slams itself against the walls, amidst a tangle of contradictions, with my hands lifted high into the air, I invest the world with the brightness of my attention.

Contact

I would like to end with a discussion of the virtue of contact. Detachment can be useful, at times necessary, but, after writing these pages, I've realized that I have more to say about the quality of contact.

Contact is the place where something touches something else. It is neither the bridge nor the moat – both of which depend on separation, insist on mediated, controlled access – but the temporary rope, flung across the divide in the dangerous, urgent hope of crossing. It is not the wall, nor the wall's destruction, but the transgressing lips of Pyramus and Thisbe, kissing through the crack. It is not the negotiation of the border, not the liminal space of the threshold, but the jolt of meeting someone there from the other side.

An enduring image of contact for me is the moment in the film *E.T.* when the Extra Terrestrial and his human friend Elliott reach out and touch their index fingers together, generating a tiny point of light. Contact forces us to confront a pair of powerful conflicting impulses: the profound desire to know something beyond ourselves, and the equally acute instinct for self-preservation. And though our sense of security and well-being – even our survival – depends in part on our ability to stay safely within the boundaries of the familiar (whether that is a village or a set of political beliefs), our human curiosity compels us to reach out a finger to something alien.

However, contact is circumspect. It is not embrace or fusion, it is not necessarily even connection, with all the mutual understanding and the permanence that word implies. In fact, contact can be jarring, it can be violent; contact can leave us unsettled, or even unhinged. The *E.T.* image reminds us that contact always happens across a void, literal or metaphorical, without erasing the void. *E.T.* still belongs in outer space, and Elliot belongs with his family on Earth; in spite of their profound contact, each remains a mystery to the other. Contact is a temporary shared space in spite and because of the void. It is a briefly experienced “intimacy of difference.”

Julie Salverson writes of the possibility of a performance operating as “an ethical space in which a relationship between detachment and contact occurs.” When certain

conditions are met, a performance can represent an authentic encounter, an experience of or at least a representation of contact. This kind of encounter demands that, as Salverson writes, we emerge from behind the safety of our masks of solidarity in order to “speak to” and not “speak of” an Other. When a performance manages to create the open, unsentimental space where an authentic encounter can take place, the results can be breathtaking.

Several years ago, I saw a production of *Annie* at Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, directed by Amanda Dehnert. In this popular musical (and the 1982 film version), the titular flame-haired orphan sheds her miserable past and is adopted into wealth, fame, and happiness. The poverty, abuse, and loneliness in which Annie and the other orphans are trapped at the beginning of the show is unilaterally subsumed by a fantasy of privileged inclusion which erases their past experience. *Annie*'s exaggerated representation of fusion is a typical musical theater happy ending: it cannot allow the space for contact, it cannot risk the continuing acknowledgment of the void. Yet Dehnert's *Annie* managed to point to all the unresolved questions in our musical happy endings, while also creating a moment of true, heart-stopping contact.

This *Annie* was set in a poor and desperate city; the “orchestra” was a few hungry-looking street musicians wandering around the set. In a desolate orphanage, a little girl wakes up crying from a nightmare. To reassure the child, her friend Annie sings a song of immense longing (“Maybe”). The tyrannical headmistress Miss Hannigan barrels into the room, forcing the orphans to clean although they are starving and tired (“It’s a Hard Knock Life” – sounds familiar, right?). In the midst of this, Annie manages to escape, concealed in a laundry truck. The other orphans are ecstatic – now Annie will be able to find her family! Once Annie exits the truck, she finds herself in the middle of the cold and dangerous city. She has no money, nothing to eat, and no way of beginning the search for her parents. It is the middle of the Great Depression, and everyone on the streets is just as destitute as she is. Exhausted and freezing, she finds shelter in an abandoned theater and falls asleep.

At this moment, the stage was bare, dark, and unforgiving, with one tiny little girl asleep in the middle of it. Finally, a friendly dog walks onstage cautiously, also looking for shelter. Annie wakes up. She sees the dog. She smiles. Suddenly, the rest of the musical unfolds in beautiful color – cuddly dog! Daddy Warbucks! FDR! The New Deal! The sun’ll come out tomorrow! The events in the musical reach a ludicrous level

of fantasy, with Annie being adopted by a doting millionaire, and the nation being promised a way out of the Great Depression. Everyone is singing and dancing at the happiest of endings. And then the lights fade and the stage empties. The shiny mansion retreats and we are back on the dim, forbidding streets of the winter city. It grows quiet, and again we see a little girl sleeping in an abandoned theater, huddled against the cold. It's Annie. She's not at Daddy Warbucks' house after all. In a flash we understand that it was all a dream – the dog, the money, the president, the love. But as Annie wakes up, shivering, a friendly dog walks onstage. They look at each other. End of play.

At the time I saw the production I was working at The 52nd Street Project. The Annie I saw onstage seemed just like all the kids I knew, encouraged by the world to claim televised fantasies as their own – a millionaire, the NBA, MTV. Instead of being allowed to be who they were, in all their specific mystery and genius, they dreamed manufactured dreams, dreams that left them cold and lost in the void of wakefulness.

And yet – as the dog and the girl regarded each other with large, moist eyes, there was the tug of possibility, which wouldn't have been possible without the circus of musical confection that preceded it; after enjoying the spectacle I was now implicated in its demise. How could I have watched that? How could I have believed it? What did I really hope for children who, like Annie, have been denied opportunities? What beauty, what luxury was open to them? This moment of true contact contained both the pain and the pleasure of the possible: I know what is, and yet I also propose what might be. The final image violently destroyed and gently offered out the happy ending in the same moment, the moment of contact between girl and dog.

An interesting coda is that I was one of the very few people ever to see this *Annie*. Lyricist Martin Charnin caught wind of Dehnert's dark staging and was soon threatening a lawsuit. After only a handful of performances, the final image was gone. It was no longer just a dream. Or rather, it was just a piece of musical theater.

Contact is questioning, so contact is risky – and, to some, threatening. Contact exists within and because of questions about ourselves and our relationship to the world, and so it must be, as Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich says, “out of order.” Minnich writes:

“Even if I know something, I can – and should, surely – keep asking what it *means*, what it asks of me and of others, what it suggests, why it *matters* for our lives, and those of others, and for the earth and worlds we necessarily share. Such thinking, which is both individual and social (we think alone, but with many others, and all that we have learned with them, in mind) is always ‘out of order’... being intellectually ‘out of order’ – being stubbornly a questioner of anyone and anything – is indeed threatening to all established orders.”

It is this “out of order” thinking which compels us to reach out for an alien finger without knowing what will happen next – if anything. Salverson writes that the possibility of making contact in a performance requires “an insistence on engagement based in availability and the willingness to step forward without certainty”; the goal is “relationship, not success.”

I meant to write about contact as distinct from detachment, but I find myself writing about it as the opposite of something else – of connection? perhaps, of utopia? For contact is not necessarily optimistic, and certainly not militantly optimistic. Contact contains the possibility – even the probability – of failure. We may not recognize each other, we may not understand each other, we may even injure each other. Yet we reach out.

Even in writing these words, I both desire and despair of making contact. I can write that I am sitting on the porch in the early morning hush, a blanket wrapped around me to guard me from the chill. And even as I write those words, which are, at this moment, true, I know that by noon, the street will be buzzing with the life of the neighborhood, and it will be too hot to sit where I am sitting now. It is as if the passage of a few hours makes my truth into a lie – for as you read these words, or even as I re-read them this afternoon, I am no longer wrapped in a blanket on the porch. And my ideas, which seemed so crisp and dewy in the quiet morning, may have wilted in the afternoon sun. It seems senseless to write anything down, for I am, even now, changing my mind.

It is best, then, not to believe anything I write, since you can be certain I am no longer where I was at the time of this writing. And yet you might, if you choose, believe that I was once there, just as I believe that at some future moment you will be where you are now, reading these words, or perhaps choosing not to read them (indeed, you may

at this very moment be heaving a sigh and closing this volume). If I believe in your future moment, and you believe in my past moment, then it's not too great a stretch for either of us to believe in a collection of alternative moments – a constellation of nows, spread out across the entire span of human history, in which we are inevitably and inextricably implicated by our curious imaginings, our very willingness to say, "I am, at this moment, sitting on the porch, and conceiving of you, in another time and place, reading the words I am writing here." And, if we are being honest, we may recognize that each of these moments is more or less equally weighted with belief, and thus equally significant. The moment that a famous man stepped out onto a battlefield on such-and-such a date, or the moment that such-and-such a poor washerwoman jumped from the window of a burning building to her death, unremarked and unmourned, must stand resolutely alongside the moment of my writing, and the moment of your reading.

To study history or science is the same as to read a box of love letters found at a flea market, to stare at the graffiti on the side of a moving train, or to watch a child learning to walk. Even to sit quietly and recall an incident from your own past is the same. Each act is an act of witnessing, of reaching out to another point in space and time, a point which reaches, equally, out to you. The parallel reaching out represents an extraordinary collusion across time and space, a combined act of radical faith. In the availability of human experience to other human experience, in the twin desires to know and to be known, I find a new kind of hope.

It is this, more than anything, that encourages my hand as I write these words.

Maybe, then, the happy ending is irrelevant, for it is not the happy ending that creates hope, or defines hopeful art. It is the somewhat more dubious value of the happy beginning – which is the only kind of honest beginning – the reach into the void without a safety net. It is the cold little girl and the hungry dirty dog locking eyes. It is the journey of the ring from one hand to the next, the cross of the horizontal axis with the vertical, the moment where the dream of the night touches the night itself. It is the moment of contact, the moment of availability – and so, too, possibility.

Notes



NOTES

Introduction: There Must Be Happy Endings

Galway Kinnell, *The Book of Nightmares* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 19.

The 52nd Street Project Playwriting method, adapted from Daniel Judah Sklar's "Playmaking" method, is detailed in:

Willie Reale, *52 Pick Up: A Practical Guide to Doing Theatre With Children* (New York, NY: the 52nd Street Project, 1994)

Martin Luther King, Jr., frequently repeated this phrase (itself paraphrased from a longer statement by theologian and abolitionist Theodore Parker). One instance was at the end of his final presidential address to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1967 which can be found here:

Martin Luther King, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), 245-252.

Tony Kushner, "Despair is a Lie We Tell Ourselves," in *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizens Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear*, edited by Paul Rogat Loeb (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 170.

Howard Zinn, "The Optimism of Uncertainty," in Loeb, 63.

Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich, "Reflections on the Wellsprings of Interdisciplinary Studies," *Issues in Integrative Studies*, no. 22, (2004): 141-154.

The Threepenny Opera, Digital recording, Kurt Weill (music), Bertolt Brecht (books and lyrics), and Stanley Silverman (musical direction), translated by Ralph Manheim and John Willet (New York: Sony Music Entertainment, 2009). First Released 1976.

I quote here from a version of the song used in the 1976 New York Shakespeare Production of *The Threepenny Opera*, starring Raul Julia as Macheath and directed by Richard Foreman, in a new English translation by Ralph Manheim and John Willet. These lyrics are audible in the cast recording as well as listed in the liner notes of the 1976 record. However, Manheim/Willet's text (published 1979), includes this "Mac The Knife" reprise only in the "Notes" section, not as the final moment of the play. It has very similar lyrics to those quoted here, indicating that they were written as part of later revision by Brecht (apparently without Weill's consent). However, even without this reprise, the final moment of the play, with its funeral anthem on injustice, maintains the "happy/unhappy" reversal that I argue here – perhaps even more strongly, which is not surprising, because the version with the reprise was part of a series of changes Brecht wanted

to make after World War Two, around the time *Good Person* was first performed.

Bertolt Brecht, *The Good Person of Szechwan*, translated by John Willet (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1985), 109.

Definitions of ravel have been collected from many sources. The most useful was the (sadly now defunct) Random House “Mavens’ Word of the Day”:
“Ravel and unravel,” *Randomhouse.com*, 2 March 2001,
<http://www.randomhouse.com/wotd/index.pperl?date=20010302>

Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American century* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1998), 78.

Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (New York: Vintage International, 1993) First published 1988.

Part One: Difference

Rebecca Schneider, “Seeing The Big Show,” *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997), 156.

August Wilson’s Come and Gone

Anne Bogart, *And Then You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 60.

Patrick Healy, “Race an Issue in Wilson Play and In It’s Production,” *New York Times*, April 22 2009,
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/23/theater/23wils.html>

Ben Brantley, “Wilson’s Wanderers, Searching For Home,” *New York Times*, April 17 2009,
<http://theater.nytimes.com/2009/04/17/theater/reviews/17turn.html>

August Wilson, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (New York: Plume, 1988), 93-94.

David Rooney, “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone,” *Variety*, April 16 2009,
<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117940060.html?categoryid=33&cs=1>

Brendan Lemon, “August Wilson’s *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* Backstage Blog,” *Lincoln Center Theatre*, <http://www.lct.org/showBlog.htm?id=186>.

John R. Ross, “LYNCHING,” *Handbook of Texas Online*,
<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/jgl01>.

Kurt Anderson, “August Wilson’s Come and Gone,” *Studio 360*, aired June 5 2009. <http://www.studio360.org/episodes/2009/06/05/segments/133416>

August Wilson, *The Ground on Which I Stand* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2001). Address originally delivered June 26, 1996 to the 11th biennial Theatre Communications Group National Conference at Princeton University.

Wilson's views on working with Black directors are expanded and clarified in this interview:

Sandra G. Shannon and Dana A. Williams, "A Conversation with August Wilson," in *August Wilson and Black Aesthetics*, ed. Williams and Shannon (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 187-195.

David Barbour, "Theatre in Review: Joe Turner's Come and Gone," *Lighting and Sound America*, April 20 2009,
<http://www.lightingandsoundamerica.com/news/story.asp?ID=-X0IVYV>.

A comprehensive list of reviews of the production can be found at:
<http://criticometer.blogspot.com/2009/04/joe-turners-come-and-gone.html>

Slightly Beyond Knowing

Jean Fagan Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2004).

Yellin edited an extended edition of Jacobs' narrative which includes much of her correspondence, including that cited here:

Harriet Jacobs and John S. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written By Herself* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

Paulette Campbell, "Incidents in the Life of an Abolitionist: The Harriet Jacobs Papers Project," <http://www.neh.gov/news/humanities/2004-01/incidents.html>

Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 162.

Lydia Diamond, *Harriet Jacobs*, unpublished manuscript, 2009.

The Old Dark Cloud Comes Over Me

Rainer Maria Rilke, Anita Barrows, and Joanna Macy. *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), 133.

I first heard this poem on the radio program, *Speaking of Faith* (now *On Being*), in a episode called "The Soul in Depression," available at <http://being.publicradio.org/programs/depression/index.shtml>

Dolan, 141.

Jacobs and Jacobs, Ed. Yellin (2009), 338-339.

Baldwin, 12.

Elin Diamond, "The Violence of 'We,'" in *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. J. G. Reinelt and J. R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992).

Lao Tsu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Gia-fu Feng and Jane English (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 2.

Graham's oft-quoted phrase is included in Agnes DeMille's biography *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1992), though I found it at <http://www.neighborhoodplayhouse.org/martha.html>

John Guare, *Landscape of the Body* (New York: Grove Press, 2007), xvi.

WWMLKD

James Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 7.

There are many sources which discuss Rhode Island's central role in the transatlantic slave trade, including activities in Newport. I was particularly influenced by the documentary film *Traces of The Trade* and its accompanying website, www.tracesofthetrade.org. The numbers on Newport come from two excellent series by local media organizations:

Paul Davis, "The Unrighteous Traffick," *The Providence Journal Online*, 2006, <http://www.projo.com/extra/2006/slavery>.

Flo Jonic, "An Introduction to Newport and its History" (Part of the "One Square Mile: Newport" series), *wrni.org*, October 2009, <http://www.publicbroadcasting.net/wrni/news.newsmain/article/7608/0/1697335/OSM.Newport/An.introduction.to.Newport.and.its.history>

Radio Diaries, "Strange Fruit: Anniversary of a Lynching," *All Things Considered*, 6 August 2010, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129025516>

Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 103.

Part Two: Desire

The Matrix, written and directed by Larry and Andy Wachowski (1999; Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Pictures, 2001), DVD.

The World's True Yearning

Snow White and The Seven Dwarves. Walt Disney (1937; United States : Distributed by Buena Vista Film Distribution Co., United States : Walt Disney Home Video, 199?), video.

Margolin, quoted in Dolan, 56.

Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), ix.

The Music Man, music, book, and lyrics by Meredith Wilson (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1958).

The Fantasticks, Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt, 1960.

Stephen Sondheim (music and lyrics) and John Wideman (book), *Assassins: Original Cast Recording* (New York, NY: RCA Victor, 1991). Sound recording.

Stephen Sondheim (music and lyrics) and James Lapine (book), *Into the Woods: Original Cast Recording* (New York, N.Y: RCA Victor, 1988). Sound recording.

Duncan Sheik (music and lyrics) and Steven Sater (book), *Spring Awakening: A New Musical* (New York, NY: Decca Broadway, 2006). Sound recording.

John Cameron Mitchell (text) and Stephen Trask (music and lyrics), *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 2003).

Plato, *Symposium* (360 B.C.E.) Trans: Benjamin Jowett, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/symposium.html>

Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper, 1956), 9.

Adrienne Cecile Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems, 1974 - 1977* (New York, NY: Norton, 1993).

Stephanie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2005).

Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 8.

Scott McMillin, *The Musical As Drama: A Study of The Principles and Conventions Behind Musical Shows from Kern to Sondheim* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 179, 180.

Stewart, x.

A Play With God In It

Jeanette Winterson, *Art and Lies* (New York : Vintage International, 1996), 9.

Lewis Hyde, *The Gift* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), xxiii. First published 1979.

Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (Kingston, NY: McPherson DOCUMENTEXT, 2004. First published 1953), 227.

Dolan, 135-137.

Audre Lorde. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, Calif: Crossing Press, 2007), 57. First published 1984.

Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991)

Deren, 41.

Liz Lerman's critical response process is widely used and imitated:
<http://danceexchange.org/projects/critical-response-process/>

Transcripts of Black Rep talkbacks can be found here:
<http://www.megansz.com/bug-talkback-105.html>

Examples of the *Black Notes* program 'zine can be found here:
<http://www.megansz.com/black-notes-bug.html>

Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama* (New York, NY: Applause Theatre Books, 1964), 147.

Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*. (New York: Atheneum, 1987). Published 1968.

John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934), 2.

Not An Artist

Calvino, 32.

Scarry, 31.

Ibid, 52.

Ibid, 109

Ibid, 114-115.

Part Three: Meaning

Calvino, 69-70.

Arising From Sullen Earth

Reale, 1-2.

Investing the World With the Brightness of Your Attention

Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999, first published 1964), 47.

I first encountered the term “communitas” in Dolan, who cites Victor Turner’s *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974).

Mitchell and Trask, 36.

Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 119-122.

Daniel David Moses quoted in Julie Salverson, “Change on Whose Terms? Testimony and an Erotics of Inquiry” (*Theater*. 31.3, 2001), 122.

Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1996. This edition first published 1970), 16.

Martin Prechtel, *Grief and Praise: An Evening with Martin Prechtel*. Public lecture, Minneapolis MN. Audio CD.

David Rakoff, “The Way We Live Now: Questions for John Cameron Mitchell and Ally Sheedy” (*The New York Times Magazine*, 5 September 1999)

Thomas Bulfinch, *Bulfinch’s Mythology* (New York: The Modern Library, 1993), first published 1855-1863, 16-18.

Julie Salverson, “Taking Liberties: A Theatre Class of Foolish Witnesses” (*Research in Drama Education* 13.2, June 2008), 246-247.

Contact

Minnich, 145.

Julie Salverson, “Change On Whose Terms? Testimony and an Erotics of Injury” (*Theater*, Vol 31, No 3, 2001), 246.

APPENDIX A: ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baldwin, James. *Collected Essays*. New York : Library of America, 1998.

This comprehensive collection of Baldwin's most memorable prose combines politics, personal narrative, historical commentary, and urgent instructions for the future. Baldwin's writing has always moved and inspired me, and in his prose I find inspiration for my own ideas, as well as many examples by a master of the form of the kind of hybrid essay I aspire to write.

Barthes, Roland. *A Lover's Discourse*. Trans: Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1978.

Barthes "puts together" pieces of language from literature, philosophy, and conversation, and then takes them apart again, in order to discourse on the discourse of love. One of his chief texts is Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, to whom he frequently returns as a kind of ultimate lover-speaker. By turns cruel and tender, distant and intimate, obscure and direct, the ultimate impression is one of lonely humans seeking desperately to connect through – and in spite of – the deeply flawed vehicle of language. *A Lover's Discourse* was the first deeply theoretical text which I was able to engage with to a satisfying, even pleasurable, degree. I appreciate the productive collision of closely observed human experience and abstract thinking.

Bentley, Eric. *The Life of the Drama*. New York, NY: Applause Theatre Books, 1964. Developed from a series of lectures Bentley gave at Harvard in the early 1960's, *The Life of the Drama* examines the DNA of the Western theater through a close (and characteristically opinionated) look at Aspects of a Play (character, plot, etc) and Different Kinds of Plays (farce, melodrama, etc). At the time of its publication the *New York Review of Books* called it a "radical new look at the grammar of theatre." While it may no longer feel radical, the book still feels thoughtful and useful. This is a book I will refer to as long as I make theater.

Bogart, Anne. *A Director Prepares*. London: Routledge, 2001.

Bogart, Anne. *And Then You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

Theater-maker and SITI Company Artistic Director Anne Bogart's books discuss the catalysts and roadblocks to making innovative, meaningful performance. She writes persuasively about paying attention, taking risks, and committing to intentionally progressive, transgressive art-making in a repressive world.

Bogart, Anne, and Tina Landau. *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2005.

The book describes the approach to training, performance, creating original work, and directing, developed by Bogart and Landau. It is a combination of how-to book and theoretical text. Although I've never worked with Viewpoints, I found the engaging combination of theory and practice in this book made it

easy to read and easy to apply right away in any kind of rehearsal process. There are a few things which have made it into my permanent rehearsal repertoire.

Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and Trans.: John Willet. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964.

Willet, John. *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht*. (1959) New York: New Directions, 1968. This collection of Brecht's critical and theoretical writings, traces the evolution of his aesthetic and ideas from 1918 to 1956. It's clear how much contradiction Brecht is able to hold and be comfortable with, and also how much more extensive his thinking and writing was beyond the commonly understood "Brechtian" ideas such as the alienation effect. The centerpiece of the collection is "A Short Organum for the Theatre" (1948), a manifesto which sets out to "define an aesthetic drawn from a particular kind of theatrical performance which has been worked out in practice over the past few decades."

Willet's "study from eight aspects" draws across the wide breadth of Brecht's plays, poetry, and critical and theoretical writings. These two texts, in combination with close readings of Brecht's plays and some biographical texts, were influential for me as I developed an understanding of Brecht's epic theater and its relationship to my own aesthetic.

Brook, Peter *The Empty Space*. (1968) New York: Atheneum, 1987.

Brook, Peter. *The Open Door*. (1993) New York: Anchor Books, 2005.

Peter Brook's career, beginning in the 1940's with experimental Shakespeare productions and continuing to his recent work in the worlds of opera and epic theater, makes him perhaps the most influential director of the 20th century. *The Empty Space*, with its passionate delineation of the four types of theater – Deadly, Holy, Rough, and Immediate – has always been one of my favorite books. The more recent *The Open Door* discusses cross-cultural theatrical experiences and how to meet the emotional needs of the audience. These are essential directorial reading, and oft-returned to books in my library.

Calvino, Italo. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. New York: Vintage International, 1988.

The "memos" of the title reflect a series of six lectures which Calvino was to deliver at Harvard University, although he died before he was able to finish writing them. Thus the book contains five essays: "Lightness," "Quickness," "Exactitude," "Visibility," and "Multiplicity"; the last, "Consistency" was never written. Calvino defines and defends the titular virtues in literature – and, by extension, in human nature and experience. He also ends up defining and defending their opposites, delineating a spectrum of aesthetic possibility. The essays draw on a wide spectrum of literary sources with a lack of pretension and a genteel enthusiasm which lends even obscure citations an air of familiarity, managing to make this very literary text feel a bit like a fireside chat with a favorite uncle.

At one point in the essay on Multiplicity, Calvino discusses the writer Carlo Emilio Gadda, who “tried all his life to represent the world as a knot, a tangled skein of yarn; to represent it without in the least diminishing the inextricable complexity.” An engineer and philosopher who was thought of as the Italian James Joyce, Gadda “developed a style [of writing] to match his complicated epistemology.” Here and elsewhere, Calvino draws explicit connections between an artists’ worldview and his or her aesthetic. Reading Calvino helped to crystallize for me how specific and rigorous the connections can be between what I believe and the kind of art I make, and thus how crucial it is to develop a critical vocabulary for discussing work you care about (your own and others’). After reading *Six Memos*, I began to feel that the critical work could be just as creative, radical, and fun as the actual art-making.

Deren, Maya. *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*. 1953. New York: McPherson and Company, 2004.

Deren traveled to Haiti in 1947, intending to collect research and images for a film on Haitian dance. Instead she found herself immersed in and fascinated by the deities, practitioners, and rituals of Haitian Voudoun. Over the course of several lengthy stays in Haiti over a four-year period, Deren observed and participated in the cultural and religious life of ordinary Haitians, witnessing things that few foreigners could have imagined. Although she eventually abandoned her film project, Joseph Campbell encouraged her to write this book, which would become recognized throughout the world as a primary source on Haitian Voudoun. Deren’s extraordinary union of detailed observation with spiritual intimacy – both of these springing out of her skills and impulses as an artist, not an anthropologist – makes her book uniquely compelling. *Divine Horsemen* has been an important example for me of a writer using unabashedly spiritual and erotic language – long before Jill Dolan and Audre Lorde – and still being taken seriously both as an artist and a scholar.

Dolan, Jill. *Utopia in Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005. Jill Dolan’s book *Utopia In Performance* lays out a case for a different way of thinking about the value of performance – theater in particular – as a catalyst for social change. Dolan conceives of audiences as “temporary communities” which can, in the course of a particular kind of performance, have an experience of “communitas,” “a cohesive if fleeting feeling of belonging to the group” – analogous to a moment’s existence in a utopian community. Describing a wide range of performances, from feminist artist Holly Hughes’ solo work, to *Def Poetry Jam on Broadway*, to a local production of *The Laramie Project* in Austin, Texas, Dolan collects the responses of one very engaged audience member (herself) and theorizes about why some work evokes these utopian experiences while others do not.

In addition to being a deeply-felt and persuasive defense of loving and meaningful art-making, this book has provided a useful foil for my thinking,

giving me something to push back against, challenging the usefulness of a stance of “militant optimism.”

Heddon, Deirdre, and Jane Milling. *Devising Performance: A Critical History*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Part of the Palgrave series on “Theatre and Performance Practices,” this text examines the history of “devised” or collaboratively created performance from the 1950’s to the present day in Australia, Britain, and the United States. Through chapters on Acting, Visual Performance, Political Theatre, Communities, Physical Theatre, and Postmodern Performance, the book gives a comprehensive overview of important companies, artists, and events, and their underlying ideas and theories, as well as the cultural, historical, and political context which led to and resulted from their work. This text was an important overview for me as I began to situate myself within this history, identifying some of the provenance of ideas, companies, and works of art I care about.

Hyde, Lewis. *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*. 1979. New York: Vintage, 2007.

The Gift explores the relationship between the labor of the artist and the demands of the marketplace. Hyde starts with the premise that “where there is no gift there is no art” and thus that commodification can corrupt how a work of art is made and experienced, and the nature of its endurance or legacy. Hyde traces a kind of historical development of the marketplace through the development of the practice of usury, or charging interest, and the effect of that development on the function of the gift economy. He paints a picture of those who dedicate their lives to creative labor as the keepers of the gift economy in the modern world.

Hyde’s text resonated deeply with me in terms of identifying why I find satisfaction in the labor of art-making. His description validates the idea that artistic labor may sometimes be effective, moving, even transformative, *because* it is not functioning in the traditional marketplace, and that the gifts that may return to the artist are also outside of the market; this view is useful for chronically underpaid artists seeking an alternative way of measuring the “value” of their labor. *The Gift* was also the initial text which set me on the path of exploring the idea of *eros* as a driving force in my work. Hyde writes, “satisfaction derives not merely from being filled but from being filled with a current that will not cease. With the gift, as in love, our satisfaction sets us at ease because we know that somehow its use at once assures its plenty.”

Audre Lorde. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley, Calif: Crossing Press, 2007. First published 1984.

This volume collects the Black lesbian poet and feminist writer Audre Lorde’s essays and speeches from the 1970’s and 1980’s, which careen from Russia to Grenada, from academic conferences to Lorde’s relationship with her children. Often angry (“focused with precision, [anger] can become a powerful source of

energy serving progress and change”), usually passionate, always charged, Lorde’s prose is an inspirational example of how to write like what you have to say matters. Even when these essays verge on hyperbolic or otherwise extreme, they always feel important.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage, 1992.

Morrison’s dense, slender book of literary criticism explores the African American (or “Africanist”) presence in American literature. She mines the work of Poe, Hemmingway, and Cather, among others, to discuss the way that blackness and whiteness are constructed and deconstructed in our national literature. “How do embedded assumptions of racial (not racist) language work in the literary enterprise that hopes and sometimes claims to be ‘humanistic’?,” she asks. In response, she begins to think like a writer, considering “how books get written, how language arrives; my sense of how and why writers abandon or take on certain aspects of their project” and concluding that “what became transparent were the self-evident ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence.”

Morrison writes that it is imperative for her as an artist “to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains.” I feel this same imperative – not just in terms of language, but in terms of visual image, and the apparatus of the stage, which are frequently cloaked in the same chains.

Mitchell, John Cameron (text) and Stephen Trask (music and lyrics). *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 2003.

Mitchell and Trask’s cabaret-style telling of the life and times of a lonely East German boy turned lonely middle-American woman, the “internationally ignored” rock-n-roller, Hedwig, combines of emotional rock n roll, dark humor, and images from mythology. Hedwig’s struggle for love and acceptance – in the world and in her own body – is a journey of transformation elevated into a search for connection, for completion, and, ultimately, for union.

Mnouchkine, Ariane, Dir. *Les Ephemeres*. 2008.

(http://php2.arte.tv/festivete/content/ephemeres/index_fr.html)

The nearly seven-hour performance of Mnouchkine’s latest work is online in its entirety. The beauty of the staging, the immediacy of the audience, the emotional weight (even when viewed on a tiny screen), and the dream-like yet satisfying approach to narrative, were immensely influential as I began to situate myself in relationship to ancient and modern epic traditions.

Obama, Barack. “A More Perfect Union.” Constitution Center, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. 18 March 2008.

In this now-famous speech, then-candidate Obama responded to the outcry over Pastor Jeremiah Wright's comments in a speech that attempted to unpack some of the historical provenance of those comments. While acknowledging that the anger prevalent in Black America emerges directly from events in American history and the resulting contemporary inequalities, the Senator underscored the need to continue moving forward towards a more perfect union. Obama's so called "race speech" has been an important touchstone for me as I write about my own experiences making theater for, with, and about diverse communities in contemporary America.

Pemberton, Gayle. *The Hottest Water in Chicago: On Family, Race, Time, and American Culture*. Boston: Faber and Faber, 1992.

The Hottest Water in Chicago is a collection of mostly brief, personal essays that touch on the array of topics in the title. Particularly relevant to the work of a theater artist is Pemberton's discussion of how DuBois' notion of Black "double consciousness" can be transcended through performance. "Hearing 'Porgy and Bess'," she writes, "made me understand that a triple-consciousness was being revealed through the process of performance. The singers, as representative stereotypes, sang through the stereotypes to transform them, to transcend the art and even an enthusiastic audience's approval, to reveal a truth through lies that breaks the double bind and announces a self-created black identity. As DuBois describes double-consciousness there is too much room for blacks to sentimentalize their own condition, there can be no movement toward real freedom because they are incapable of changing the ways in which they are seen. Triple-consciousness goes one step further: how one is seen is a given, with variations on the modifiers of both contempt and pity. How one performs the act, in all cognizance of the outside world, becomes a supreme act of individuation that can go beyond Du Bois' 'longing' to the attainment of 'true self-consciousness,' of 'merging [the] double self into a better and truer self.' The same thing happens when Michael Jordan flies, when Sarah Vaughan belts a blue note."

Although this book is not cited in my portfolio, it may have been the most influential text of all, as reading it gave me the first glimpse of what kind of writing I might one day aspire to. I was struck by Pemberton's collection of interdisciplinary texts over the course of her life's experience: poetry, movies, television, theoretical writing, paintings, photographs, Broadway musicals, American history, newspaper and magazine articles, all are captured by her wide net and closely considered. Alongside these she places her personal history – stories from her own life and those of her parents and grandparents, childhood fears and desires. She considers the major intellectual and social events of this century and their impact on and relationship to her family – sometimes literal, sometimes hypothetical or metaphorical. She draws connections between things that happen decades apart, using something she reads as a young professor to understand the events of her childhood, and vice versa. The result is a collection of essays that is at once deeply personal and effortlessly literary.

Punchdrunk. *Sleep No More*. Live performance. Old Lincoln School, Brookline, MA. Fall 2009.

Cambridge's American Repertory Theater invited the exciting British company Punchdrunk to re-stage their Macbeth-through-the-lens-of-Hitchcock installation theater extravaganza for an extended residency in Brookline, MA. The company transformed an abandoned school into a living film noir, populated with characters from both Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Hitchcock's *Rebecca*. The audience entered through a lushly appointed speakeasy-style bar, and was admitted in small groups, deposited throughout the building and instructed to wear large white masks. Each square inch of the enormous building was meticulously designed; a room might yield a bathtub full of eels, a collection of fragrant pine trees, a taxidermist at work, a dead letter office, or some other mysterious, haunting, sensual, and weird scene. Over the course of the evening, scenes and images appeared and disappeared in various hidden corners of the building while indistinguishable audience members wandered through the vast, surreal space like a pack of mad ghost detectives, opening and closing doors, running up and down stairs, pursuing people and places that seemed to vanish into the night.

Aside from *Hedwig*, *Sleep No More* was the most involving theater experience I've ever had – and the only “play” I've ever paid to see twice. Profoundly live and defiantly accessible, its images and ideas continue to haunt me, as does its fantastic success at drawing enthusiastic audiences (the several-month-long run was almost entirely sold-out). I return to it repeatedly as an example of the kind of “necessary” theater audiences will go out of their way to attend.

Scarry, Elaine. *On Beauty and Being Just*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.

This slender volume explores the relationship between beauty and truth. Scarry makes a passionate and convincing case for the return of beauty to the center of our discourse on aesthetics, and how important this return is to the future of the human soul. Upon reading this book, I was instantly interested in how Scarry's theorizing could take Dolan's writings a step further – starting to explain how we are compelled, after witnessing something beautiful, to continue to seek (and make) beauty and truth in our lives.

Yellin, Jean Fagan. *Harriet Jacobs: A Life*. New York: Basic Civitas, 2004.

Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Schomburg Library Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Diamond, Lydia. *Harriet Jacobs*. Unpublished play manuscript, 2009.

After identifying Harriet Jacobs as “Linda Brent,” the author and narrator of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Fagan extended her work into this definitive biography. She reveals the people and places behind the thinly veiled stand-in's in “Brent's” narrative, and she reconstructs Jacobs' long and productive life after the publication of her narrative, as a well-known and

respected author and abolitionist, whose friends and colleagues included many household names.

Yellin's book, Jacobs' narrative and Diamond's play represent an extended engagement with Jacobs' life and work which spanned the entire course of my time at Goddard. Among other important avenues, this engagement provided an opportunity for me to think about translation, adaptation, and the treatment of historical events by artists.

Walker-Kuhne, Donna. *Invitation to the Party: Building Bridges to the Arts, Culture, and Community*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2005.

Walker-Kuhne's book is the only text I'm aware of which successfully and directly addresses why and how arts institutions might build diverse audiences. Drawing on her experience at Alvin Ailey Dance Theater, The Public Theater, and other important cultural venues, the author strikes a strong balance between revealing stories, lessons learned, potential pitfalls, and how-to's – all with a joyful faith that the arts have a unique power to bring Americans together in unprecedented ways. Although this text did not make it into my portfolio, I frequently return to it as an example of the kind of book I'd love to write someday – passionate, clear, and extremely useful.

APPENDIX B: PRACTICUM REPORT

Practicum Report:

Vampire Season

Project Overview

My practicum project, “Vampire Season,” was a provocative experiment in every way: medium (creative writing and audio recording), context (working alone rather than collaboratively), process (I made a point to engage in an open-ended process with an unknown result) and goals (the finished piece served as a record of my experimentation and was not intended for presentation in front of a live audience). My intention was to stretch my practice into all these new areas, most crucially to have the experience of doing creative work geared towards exploration and inquiry rather than dictated by the pressures and constraints of theater production. The outcome was an interesting and engaging, if rough, 25-minute audio piece, as well as some surrounding tangential experiments in “web cabaret.”

In my practicum proposal, I wrote,

Plato related *eros* to a yearning for ideal beauty and finality, a “harmonious unification not only between bodies, but between knowledge and pleasure. Eros takes an almost transcendent manifestation when the subject seeks to go beyond itself and form a communion with the objectival other.” In Plato’s *Symposium*, Socrates defines *eros* as the longing for wholeness or completeness, the desire for “fulfillment between man/woman and man/Gods.” From these ancient philosophers, to Jung, to bell hooks, to Lewis Hyde, the concept of *eros* is consistently used to correspond to the human impulse towards interconnectedness, and a search for wholeness and communion – encompassing relationship to oneself, with other people, and with the divine. This concept, more than any other I’ve found, seems to correspond to what I identify as my central impulse, and the thing I believe is most important, both in my personal life and in my art practice. The answer to the question about what kind of life I want to live and what kind of art I want to make seems fundamentally and inextricably linked by the concept of *eros*, and the sense of expansive possibility, the abundance of grace, that it implies. One of the other things I’ve noticed, though, during my time here at Goddard, is that articulating what I believe is never as easy as I think it is, and that living

what I believe is a constantly engaged and evolving process, an ongoing re-orientation around the shifting tides of time, place, and relationship, not to mention the unpredictable strong winds of health, finances, and politics. Do I really change what I believe? Do I simply get interested in different parts of what I believe? Or do I just find different ways of talking about it?

This project will attempt to put one theory about what I believe and who I am – felt throughout my life, developed and articulated more fully in my past two semesters at Goddard – into practice, testing what I believe to be my central impulse across my personal life and art practice.

The true experiment in this practicum was the unknown-ness of it. Although at the beginning I had a vague plan to read some texts, conduct some interviews, and somehow make a piece for performance, I struggled along the way to find a form to contain what I was learning. The end result was a 25-minute audio recording which now lives on the Internet. Some details about the piece follow.

“Vampire Season” juxtaposes an original piece of short fiction with a variety of music and pieces of found text from diverse sources. The story, in first person, follows an elementary school teacher on Halloween, as she struggles to find compassion, connection, and beauty in her city, her students, and herself. The Teacher’s story is intercut with the voice of a Little Girl, speaking with an English accent, who reads from various texts.

The Teacher’s text is all written by me – although it does include some phrases from other places such as the Song of Songs (“the day breathes cool and the shadows lengthen”) and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (“half-remembered tales of changelings and mandrake roots”). I had hoped these phrases would be echoed in the Little Girl’s text, but for mostly technical reasons it didn’t happen. The Teacher is read here by Rachael Warren, a wonderful actor who is in the company at Trinity Repertory Company.

The Little Girl’s text is a collage from a vast number of sources, including passages from (in the approximate chronological order of their first appearance): The Bible (Song of Songs), Eric Fromm’s “The Art of Loving,” Montague Summers’ early 20th century “scholarly” writings on vampire mythology, Meister Eckhart’s mystical writings, D.H. Lawrence, The New York Times, Nina Auerbach’s “Our Vampires, Ourselves”, Lewis Hyde’s “The Gift,” Alicia Ostriker. The Little Girl’s part is read by ten-year-old Maddy Wood.

The music is from various sources, including the band “Dead Man’s Bones” (the ones with children’s voices). The underscoring of the Teacher text is from an album called “A Priori” by Van Wissem-Jozef.

Documentation

The final recording can be found here: <http://vampireseason.weebly.com>

It is available for download, but the audio player link should stream the entire thing if you do not wish to download it. The piece is about 25 minutes long.

One version of an experimental “web cabaret” created during the process can be found here: <http://vampireseason.weebly.com/web-cab.html>

Evaluation

In my practicum proposal, when answering the question, “How will you evaluate the success of your project?”, I wrote:

“This question is extremely challenging for me, since my usual way of evaluating my own work is not applicable to this project. Part of my success on this project will depend on my successful articulation of my process and its lessons. I would like to push myself to a deeper, more thorough, more critical, more incisive set of articulations. Since my work is usually so short-term and episodic, I would also like part of what comes out of the semester to be an imagining of what it might look like to engage with this inquiry deeply over time, without a clear sense of what/when/where the product will be.

Here’s a set of other possible criteria for success: my ability to engage fully in a creative process with no known outcome, the extent to which I can live in a space of possibility and openness in my work, the risks that I take, and how much I learn which can carry forward into my art practice going forward.”

Although I was initially very critical of the finished piece and nervous about showing it to anyone, with a little bit of distance I was able to see how successful and exciting this project was. Although the project presented me with profound challenges and frustrations, I’m very proud to have traveled so far out of my comfort zone with such solid results.

Through this practicum, I also learned (or started to learn) a new skill, which was fantastic. The experience of working with audio has given me some insight into the process and vocabulary of sound design, which is a great thing for me to know as I go forward into future collaborations. Perhaps most crucially, in terms of process, I was able to live with and work through doubt and ambivalence, doggedly following the center of my inquiry and trying new things, un-sticking myself each time I became stuck. It was instructive for me to see how surprising, new elements became catalysts for moving my work further. I had no inkling at the beginning the semester that I would know so much about vampires by the semester's end, but vampires turned out to be the key to activating my pursuit of the erotic.

Reflection

“Vampire Season” explores the way desire is experienced both on a daily, small, aching level and a larger, more metaphysical level. Hunger and thirst are present both physically (craving food, craving cigarettes) and spiritually (craving connection with others, craving for beauty, craving for substantial, meaningful experience rather than the unsatisfying dullness of daily life). Sometimes (usually) the visceral craving stands in for the metaphysical one.

It also explores a sense of alienation that is (to me) a familiar part of being human – the sense of being outside of things and unable to break through to something in which everyone else appears able to participate. The fact that so much of life is experienced internally, in solitude, waiting for something to open up, unsure when things will change, unsure how much you really want them to.

The Teacher character is unable to give, and thus unable to connect. Perhaps the Girl, too, has this problem, although she doesn't feel entirely real. It feels like she's aware of or can hear the Teacher's story, although the Teacher cannot hear her, at least not consciously. She seems to have little empathy for the Teacher.

When I was recording the Little Girl with Maddy, she kept interrupting the recording session to ask me questions. “How are these two people connected?” she kept asking. “Who is this little girl?” I suggested that maybe she was the voice inside the head of the older woman, the voice of her younger self. Maddy's hypothesis was that she was the voice of God. Later I thought that since the piece is called “Vampire Season,” listeners might imagine she is a vampire. Maybe it's a combination of all these things.

To me, the text she is reading is a mish-mash of what we are told and taught, what we know or suspect to be true, what we fear, what we dream, what we long for, and what we tell ourselves in the darkest hours. It also has something to do with the very nature of the universe and human existence. It makes sense to me to have a child's voice reading it because there is timelessness and dislocation to a child's voice that you don't get with an adult, a kind of universal, eternal quality. I might get the same effect by having a very old woman read it.

For the first time, working on this piece, I got a sense what it might be like to be an artist – like a painter or a composer or choreographer – who can just go into her studio and make something. I have always been jealous of those artists, as I've always needed other people in order to create. It was so much fun to be able to do it all myself and be totally in control. Of course, it was frustrating not being able to fix certain things due to my lack of technical skill or the limitations of my recordings. In some ways you have more control over this medium than in theater, and yet there is not the immediacy of the live. When you're editing, the components are there, and they are as they are. You can manipulate them endlessly, but (just like actors!) you can't always get what you want out of them – yet sometimes, even when you've heard them several dozen times, they still surprise you! I was surprised to find how much staying power is in the original energy and intent that exists when the recording was made.

In my final packet reflections on the practicum, I wrote, "I have to admit that the practicum process was profoundly challenging and frustrating the entire time, up to and including the writing of these words. Because I set out to take a risk and do something outside my comfort zone, I'm not surprised by this – although I am surprised that I didn't get into some optimal "flow" zone towards the end and feel some of the anxiety finally lift. That's the pattern I'm used to from working in the theater! Perhaps I just haven't reached that stage of this project yet."

At the time of that writing I still had not played the piece for anyone; even Kira hadn't heard it. After receiving Kira's overwhelmingly positive response, I felt a vast measure of relief. I later shared the piece with my partner, Sean, with Maddy's mother Karina, and with my resident artist group at Perishable Theatre. Everyone said they loved it and asked me what I was going to do next with the piece. The affirmation of these small audiences was really important to me. Even with their encouragement, I still did

not make the piece public or share it in a larger context, not even at the residency. I'm not sure why.

In the beginning of this process, I found my own erotic impulse retarded. I felt stalled, not vital; full of doubt, not grace. It seemed impossible to access the big ideas about eros that I'd laid out so grandly at the residency. Perhaps it's not surprising that I turned then to the paranormal for some relief. Vampires, I learned, are a blank canvas, tailor-made to tell the story of the particular anxieties of each age. Vampires helped me find my momentum again, a re-ignition, a way back into my own erotic economy.

And then, something else happened – although vampires were the catalyst, I was able to write about desire without writing about vampires, and without writing erotica. It happened almost effortlessly; the empty vessel of the vampire seemed able to gracefully hold all my musings on and questions about desire and connection, without demanding much stage time. Listening to the piece, I realized that Nina Auerbach is right – the secret to vampires is their mutability. In this process, Vampires became a metaphor for what was happening in my own life. A metaphor for me to understand my relationship, to understand my creative process, to come to terms with the impenetrable mystery inherent in both.

I initially liked the title “Vampire Season” because it evokes the wet chill of Halloween. Over the course of the past few months, it's come to mean something else to me, too. During certain times in our lives, the darkness comes closer, so close we can feel it. Other times it recedes, casting only vague shadows. Still other times we stand in the light, so bright and hot that the joy threatens to incinerate us. Monsters and angels circle us and cycle through us all the time. I believe in these unseen forces; I believe in their centrality to the practice of art-making. So much of creating, of telling stories, has to do with how we imagine these forces, what forms we conjure for those monsters and angels. We tell and re-tell across time and space, trying to access the same things. In this way, it is always vampire season.

APPENDIX C: ARTIST STATEMENT

I believe in beginning a theater-making process with the question, “Why are we doing this play here and now?” and returning to that conversation at every opportunity. I am interested in how stories that are frequently told and re-told may shape civic and community life. In moments when our community experiences intractability, viciousness, or despair, how can our narratives be re-framed or expanded to support movement, dialogue, and vitality?

My artistic practice is currently primarily as a theater director, as well as a community-based artist, educator, dramaturg, theater producer, and nurturer of artist communities. In all of these roles, I am interested in work that maintains a neo-utopian vision – one that encourages us to be romantic about the future, not the past.

I find inspiration in the epic and democratic theater of the Greeks, Shakespeare, and Brecht, in the joyful labor of developing and championing new work for the stage, in community-based performance traditions, in artists and organizations that put collaborations with audiences at the center of their work. I’m interested in making and witnessing creative events that ask artists and audiences to take inventory of our cultural assumptions (about power, privilege, class, race, gender, sexuality...), to consider the nature of our participation and complicity in historical and contemporary acts of violence, as well in movements toward a more just, more peaceful, more loving world.

Part of my desire as a theater maker is to participate in a necessary theater – one that we feel we *must* experience in order to make sense of our lives. I am committed to collaboration and interdisciplinarity because it seems to me that necessary experiences are not generated by one person alone, and do not often fit neatly into the proverbial black box. I strive for an interdisciplinary process as a director, drawing from the humanities and social sciences, as well as from current events and other works of art across disciplines, when selecting, responding to, and staging a dramatic text. I am interested in making theater that contributes to a conversation across and between disciplines, traveling out of the narrow space of the theater and into the complex discourse of the world.

I am indebted to and inspired by organizations that cross genre boundaries as part of a larger mission to bring people together in dialogue: the performance space/restaurant/ bookstore *Busboys and Poets* in DC, Appalachia's *Roadside Theater* and New Orleans' *Junebug Productions*, who believe in the power of stories to bring us into thoughtful relationships with ourselves and others, or *The Point* in the South Bronx, which puts the performing arts at the center of a multi-faceted asset-based community development effort. I've been lucky enough to work very closely with two such organizations, The Providence Black Repertory Company and The 52nd Street Project.

Finally, as an Armenian-Jewish Woman, with 20th century genocides on both sides of my heritage, I am aware of the human tragedies that repeat throughout history and geography – tyranny, ideologies of supremacy, the abuse of power, the use of fear to prevent unity and to marginalize movements towards creativity and humanity. When these forces encourage us to view others with suspicion and hostility, I believe that a performance represents a space where we – artists, audiences, citizens – may come together to practice curiosity, compassion, and generosity towards other human beings.