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## **Redirecting My Path and Reclaiming My Voice: An Actor Becomes a Director**

Lindsay Rae Taylor

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**REDIRECTING MY PATH AND RECLAIMING MY VOICE:  
AN ACTOR BECOMES A DIRECTOR**

by

**Lindsay Rae Taylor**

Bachelor of Fine Arts  
New York University, 2001

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2019

Accepted by:

Robert Richmond, Director of Thesis

Amy Lehman, Reader

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this body of work to my family and friends, who have offered love and support throughout my career. Also, to my mentor, colleague, and friend, Robert Richmond, who gave my first professional acting job and convinced me that I could become a director. Finally, to my husband, Andrew Schwartz, who always encourages me to move forward.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I want to acknowledge Marybeth Gorman Craig, Robyn Hunt, and Dr. Amy Lehman for their friendship, scholarship, and inspiration. I would also like to acknowledge the actors, designers, crew, and faculty of the Department of Theatre and Dance. It has been an honor and a gift collaborating with all of you.

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is an exploration of my growth as a director. I dissect and discuss five of the seven productions I have directed over the past three years, discovering my directing style and identifying the tools that I will take with me as I shift into my profession. Each chapter describes my preparation, process, and evaluation for every project. It is a reflection of my journey and a celebration of my work.

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*"I hate the word 'production' ...it's a ceremony, it's a ritual...you should go out of the theatre stronger and more human than when you went in."*

*-Ariane Mnouchkine*

## INTRODUCTION

When I started graduate school in the fall of 2016, I was hoping to build my confidence. I was feeling very wounded and beaten down from my recent experiences as an actor. Having aged out of my ingénue type, I lost my way as an actor. I would look at character breakdowns and was unable to identify where to place myself. If I did not know where I belonged, how would a casting director?

The thought of directing was terrifying to me, but also had the potential to be empowering. Having spent the bulk of my career being told where to stand and how to speak, the notion that I would possess a commanding voice in the room was liberating. Not a natural leader, I was intimidated by this position, but I knew that it was a necessary step for me in recognizing my vision as an artist.

Politically, the world was in an exciting place. It was looking very likely that Hillary Rodham Clinton would be our next president. With her opponent being Donald Trump, the race seemed like a no-brainer. One candidate was overly qualified for the position and the other lacked all requirements for the job. Throughout the course of my first semester, I watched their debates and experienced a tremendous fire in my gut about placing a woman in the White House. It felt like we were in for a change—we would have our first female president. It led me to believe that I might leave my home with a different perspective at the start of my day. Knowing that our country would be governed by one of my sex, I expected to feel that I had a more secure place in our culture,

that my worth would not be measured against a man's, that my existence would be independent and not gaged in relation to men. I found a distant parallel to my own journey, as I embarked on the pursuit of my MFA in directing. I was taking a big leap, and a scary one, but we women were on the rise and ready for battle.

Since the world was on the cusp of making this progressive change, I felt supported and inspired to make my own progressive change in charting my career path. It was an appropriate and overdue time to take control of my destiny. As an actor, you are always waiting to be chosen. I realized that *I* could be the one making the choice, shifting from a submissive artist to a proactive one. I could set an example for young female artists in our department by guiding a cast from concept to rehearsal to opening night, sans judgement. Having a female president would legitimize my place in the world, my position in my field, and the work I aimed to create. I also noticed that the lack of female directors in this industry mirrored the state of our nation. In the fall of 2016, I was confident that change was ahead and that my efforts as a director would help set the course for some of my students. I was invigorated by the realization that the world was changing as I rerouted my own trajectory. I was full of energy, hope, and determination.

How devastating it was when Hillary lost the election to Donald Trump. I was dumbfounded. The morning after the polls closed and the decision was final, I walked out of my front door in fear. I was afraid what this meant for women and other minorities—how our previous president, Barack Obama, had paved the way and built a solid foundation for Hillary to continue the work. I knew that Trump would slowly dismantle the structure that Obama had put in place and that, as a woman, my opportunities would gradually become more limited. I understood that my rights concerning my body, my health, and my career would be confined.

In August, I was intimidated to begin my graduate studies and attempt to mold myself into a very different artist. I expected that, by November, I would be acclimated to my new schedule, my new goals, and my new path. If I was scared before, November only brought a new host of fear. I felt like I had been knocked off the tiny block structure I had only attempted to build—that I needed to begin again, reset, even though I was only two months into my three-year journey.

With Trump as our new president, my outlook shifted from empowered to defeated to angry. Suddenly it seemed that, not only did we take a giant step backwards, but we now had an even bigger war to fight. This election proved that we were not ready for a woman to take the lead, despite her having a lifetime of preparation and experience to do the job. When I began graduate school that fall, I was sure that my circumstances would only get easier as the months passed, with a woman in the oval office. Women around me would be inspired, charged, and empowered—they would feel supported and justified in their life choices. For myself, I would be more confident, less hesitant, and I could sense a forward momentum from women everywhere. When she lost the election, it put a surge in me to choose projects that provided a platform for women's voices, that told stories about women, that celebrated their hardships and achievements, and also illustrated how behind we are as a society in recognizing women's contributions.

How far we fell on that day in November, when Trump was elected to be our 45<sup>th</sup> president. I suddenly felt foolish that I could assume women would ever be granted that rank of power. And who was I to expect that I could make a big change in myself, in my life, to take on a traditionally male role in my field?

I expected the upward climb to become less steep, I expected that women would not have as many daily hurdles, I expected to be treated equally, demand

respect, and carry myself with a new-found poise and distinction. Well, these things were not put in place for me, so I had to buck up and press on. It was up to me to make my place in this industry and to use my work to affect others. So, I recharged and redirected my purpose. I was no longer on a mission for myself, but for women and men in my community. I needed to choose projects that would provide a voice for female actors and teach men a little something about what it is to be a woman. Because the women were ready to speak, and the men that surrounded me were ready to listen. In a way, we had nothing to lose, so why not be bold? Why not do the things I have always wanted to do and tell the stories I have always wanted to tell? They felt more important than ever, so I did.

Over the past three years, I have directed seven productions, and I have assistant directed four. This an analysis of my journey, which is one of tenacity, persistence, and growth. I discuss five of the seven shows I have directed: *The Bald Soprano*, *Top Girls*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Silent Sky*, and *The Wolves*. I chose the first project for lightness, ease, and fun. The plays that follow have a much more distinct mission. They are stories about women, written by women, starring women in leading roles, with a woman at the helm as the director.



## CHAPTER 1

### *THE BALD SOPRANO*

*"It is not the answer that enlightens, but the question."* -Eugene Ionesco

I chose *The Bald Soprano* for a number of reasons. It is one act, so as my first solo directing project, I felt like I could handle it. I was not sure how well I would manage my time, what challenges I would discover, and how quickly I would be able to solve problems. I wanted to take on something that would allow me to be very thorough with table work, give the actors a chance to share their voices, and also give me a little bit of a buffer in my timeline so that I could draft and redraft in terms of staging. I also wanted to select a play that would be fun for actors. I love absurdism, but I had never really worked on an absurd play, either as a director or as an actor. I saw a production of *The Bald Soprano* in France at Le Theatre de la Huchette, where it has been running since 1957. I was very familiar with the script, and I knew a group of colleagues who had been in a production of it together who said they could not stop laughing throughout the process. It is one of those special shows that creates a bond between the actors, providing them inside jokes for years to come. *The Bald Soprano* was scheduled for performance in April, at the end of the semester, just before finals, so I figured, what better way to celebrate spring and the end of the year than with a short, light, and fun comedy?

The preparation for rehearsal was lengthy, somewhat panicked, and at times, intense. I began thinking about it in the spring of 2016, when it appeared on UofSC Theatre's season brochure. I had to make decisions about where to set it and why, and I needed to justify any bold concepts with examples from the text. I began with the clock, as a 7<sup>th</sup> character in the play. Very present, very vocal, and very unpredictable, this inanimate object needed to be treated almost as an actor, and as a major key in unlocking the story we were trying to tell. *The Bald Soprano* is about language and our inability to communicate effectively. People talk to each other, but no one is actually listening and responding. The play makes me think about our devices—how, as a culture, we are making an effort to communicate more effectively, but we are actually further isolating ourselves.

I had a thought that perhaps the clock, this ever growing, controlling presence in the room, would eventually take over, without the characters realizing it. I imagined them caught in the cogs of the machine, almost mechanical in their nonsensical dialogue. In the final scene, it feels like they have all caught an inarticulate disease—they are desperate to connect with one another, but they are being controlled by an external force that will not allow it.

The play ends in the same way that it begins, with the same dialogue, only this time with Mr. and Mrs. Martin speaking the lines of Mr. and Mrs. Smith. I thought this supported my idea of them becoming one with the clock—that the play was on a continual loop. If the play kept going until the end again, we would most likely find the Fire Captain and Mary in these opening roles. In fact, in my dramaturgical research, I read about a production in Philadelphia that did exactly this—it was the 24-hour *Bald Soprano*. At any hour of the night, one could attend and see different actors in different roles, their fatigue to adding to the absurdity.

I was undecided about what adaptation of the script to use. I was drawn to one I knew, by Donald M. Allen, but I was also intrigued by a more recent adaptation by Tina Howe. On a whim, I ordered Howe's for my production. The reviews I saw about this adaptation suggested that it was more accessible and contemporary. Plus, the translation I knew was by a man, and since I was fired up by the recent presidential inauguration, my instinct pushed me towards Howe's script. When I read it, I was jarred by some of it—sections that sounded rhythmically strange to me. I feared I had made a mistake. Yet the choice was made, this was my text—so what could I do to ease my worry? I brought the other translation to our table work sessions, and we compared some passages. This was the chief job of my assistant director. I asked her to follow along with the older rendition, and then we charted the differences, discussed them with the actors, and then selected substitutions. Most of the time, the Howe was preferred. Sometimes I left it up to the actor and advised that they switch it up throughout the rehearsal process to surprise their scene partner. This was effective and fun.

Attached to the thought of the loop and the clock, I started listening to music that fed into that. I was drawn to the Talking Heads and their album *Stop Making Sense*. The title of the album married well with my interpretation of the play--the dismantling of language. I was particularly attracted to the track, "Once in a Lifetime," which would eventually become the underscore for the final scene into the curtain call. I also found inspiration from the 1968 film, *The Party*, starring Peter Sellers. I wanted to capture the pandemonium that ensues at the end of the movie in the final scene of *The Bald Soprano*. Also, the aesthetic matched how I envisioned the costumes for the show, which was the 1970s era.

Though the play is absurd and does not want to take itself too seriously, we needed to know what our reality would be and what was at the core of this rendition of *The Bald Soprano*. I planned to treat the play like realism by finding characters arcs, fleshing out relationships, and discovering backstories. I knew that the biggest hurdle would be keeping us all from trying to be “in” on the joke. We needed to find the stakes, and almost play it like a drama, so that the comedy could shine for the audience’s enjoyment. Despite the absurd circumstances, our work was to root the actors in something tangible and playable.

I was nervous to begin. I had been researching the play for so long. I had written an analytical paper on it in my text analysis class, dissecting every element of the text—really delving into this fifty-minute marathon as if it was a five-act play in verse with uncovered hidden meaning. I was trying to extract any and every detail I could grasp, so that I would be overly prepared to begin the process—a process that was haunting my dreams for fear of failing the playwright, the cast, and myself. I was freaking out. I made it the focus of my dramaturgy class in the spring, leading up to rehearsals. I thought that I needed to know everything about this play, because I was worried about not having the answer. And then I realized that it was my job to ask questions, not dictate solutions. During the first rehearsal, we read the play aloud for the first time, and I set myself free. The actors posed inquiries and we discussed them as a group. Though I was the designated leader, I finally understood that I did not need to know everything. Their ideas and thoughts were rich. After being alone with it for so long, it was so refreshing to hear their thoughts and different interpretations of the script. I suddenly felt the warm blanket of collaboration draped over me, and I knew that we had a something unique. What was special about it was not the director. It was the

collective energy in the room, the excitement of creating, and the willingness to be boldly humble. I encouraged this way of working as we progressed, hoping to empower the actors. I wanted them to have autonomy over their choices. This approach resulted in performances that were organic and authentic.

During the first week of rehearsal, we went around the room and I asked them each to share one word that they loved and one word that they hated. Insistent that the spine of the play was related to language, I wanted to channel the group to identify their language of choice versus that of obligation or circumstance. I kept a list of the words and threw them into the room over the course of the next few weeks as a tool to lighten things up when we were getting too serious, or to temporarily replace a word for an actor in the text to find truth.

We played some theatre games, one of which is called “Identity Circle.” For this exercise, an actor steps into the circle, says something about themselves, such as, “I’m from South Carolina,” and then, if that statement is true for anyone else in the group, they also step into the circle. The group then restores itself and we begin again. It went on for a while, and we discovered things about one another—details we had in common, our shared likes and dislikes, our ambitions, and our pet peeves. Then one actor stepped in and said that he was “more nervous right now than he should be.” I felt exactly the same. I was relieved and surprised that he put this out into the room. I was inspired by his courage. I then stepped into the circle and joined him, because this assessment was absolutely true for me, too.

We spent most of the first week at the table, discussing relationships and comparing the different adaptations. I did some physical work with them, set to music, so that they could explore without the text. We created biographies for each character so that everyone would have a solid foundation. We took each scene and

broke it up into three acts, so that we could better understand the beat changes and make those shifts together. We also did some improvisational games to add to the playfulness of each scene. Given a play of this style and length, some of this felt excessive. However, when we moved into staging, it proved fruitful, as we had a firm grasp on character objectives and overriding themes.

We came up with a spine for the play—a statement that we referred back to often in the process, just to remind us all of the story we were trying to tell. The phrase we used was “keeping up appearances.” This meant that, for every character in every scene, they always had this desire at the back of their minds.

I do a lot of ensemble-building work with every project, leading the cast through a warm-up, teaching them songs that we do in rounds to educate them about listening and responding. We had to use British dialects for the show, so I used a lot of songs that I learned when I studied abroad at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in our vocal drills. We spoke in dialect during warm-ups and we had a dialect coach, Marybeth Gorman Craig. She visited us early in the process, and then she attended rehearsals as we approached opening with some final notes and suggestions. I brought a beach ball to every rehearsal that the actors tossed in the air to one another, reminding them to keep buoyancy in the language and action.

I learned a very valuable lesson when we started staging. We were fortunate to be able to rehearse in the space. I spent a lot of time alone in the Lab Theatre, trying to figure out how to place the furniture. It is a difficult space because of the thrust configuration. The strongest position on stage is upstage center, but this point is also very far away from the audience, robbing them of intimacy. After thinking and rethinking, I decided that I just had to begin. I needed to start somewhere, so I made a choice and then I continued to adjust it. This is

also the attitude I adopted with staging rehearsals. I can spend a lot of time talking myself out of my options, but the point is to just make a choice, see where that leads, and then adjust. For me, understanding that I did not have to be right about it all the time was very freeing. I embraced the notion of making a mess of it, and then I enjoyed building on that structure, unsteady as it may have been. I have a lot of anxiety concerning beginnings and endings, so it was helpful for me to recognize this, and then find a way to move forward. In every process now, I remind myself of this—that I do not need to have all of the answers and that there is no “right” way of approaching the work.

We traversed through the play, laughing our way through it. We found nuance and subtlety, always allowing Ionesco’s words and sense of humor to influence each decision. Every rehearsal was collaborative and inventive. Given that the play was so short, we could find depth and specificity moment to moment.

Opening night was surreal. It was my first time sitting in the audience as a director. I had no idea how people would react. The actors soared that evening with a crowd. They were fast, funny, connected, and they worked as a team to tell the story. I saw all of the work from the previous six weeks manifest itself in the most rewarding and extraordinary way. I remember feeling proud and happy. We had a great run filled with praise and sold out houses. My only regret is that they only had four shows. They really hit their stride by closing night, navigating the dialogue with the audience’s rhythm. It was an odd feeling, sitting out there, watching them take it. I knew I was no longer needed, yet my footprints were all over the stage. I enjoyed hearing the audience’s reactions, but I was also anxious. I constantly wondered if the next laugh would come, if the lines would come out accurately, if the sound and light cues would be called correctly... this continues

to be the case with every show. It is very difficult to sit back and appreciate what I create, given the nature of live theatre.

This cast and this process will remain a special memory for me forever. We said goodbye to *The Bald Soprano* having put up good work, but also having had an unforgettable experience. There was something about this group, this play, and this time of year that left us with undeniable and lasting joy. When I see these actors now in the hallways, we always embrace one another and laugh. I grew so much through the course of those six weeks, and I discovered many tools that I took with me. Watching *The Bald Soprano* in performance taught me about my strengths as a director. I walked away from it knowing that I was precise, organized, and collaborative. I recognized my attention to composition and space, and my tireless effort to keep the production cohesive in all elements. I was a thorough, clear, strong, and generous leader, and I was ready to direct again.





Figure 1.1: *The Bald Soprano* Publicity Photo. By Jason Ayer. Left to right: Allie Anderson, Kelsie Hensley, John Romanski, David Neil Edwards, Riley Lucas, and Ashley Graham. Costumes by Kira Neighbors.



Figure 1.2: Mr. and Mrs. Smith. Production photo by Freddie Powers. Left to right: John Romanski and Ashley Graham. Costumes by Kira Neighbors. Scenic and lighting design by Curtis Smoak.



Figure 1.3: Bobby Watson. Production photo by Freddie Powers. The Smiths. Left to right: Ashley Graham and John Romanski.



Figure 1.4: Mary and the Martins. Production photo by Freddie Powers. Left to right: Kelsie Hensley, Riley Lucas, and Allie Anderson.



Figure 1.5: The Fire Captain. Production photo by Freddie Powers. David Neil Edwards.



Figure 1.6: The Fire Captain, the Martins, and the Smiths. Production photo by Freddie Powers. Left to right: David Neil Edwards, Allie Anderson, Ashley Graham, Riley Lucas, and John Romanski.



Figure 1.7: The Martins and the Smiths. Production photo by Freddie Powers. Left to right: Allie Anderson, Ashley Graham, Riley Lucas, and John Romanski.



Figure 1.8: Cacao Trees. Production photo by Andrew Schwartz. Left to right: Allie Anderson, Riley Lucas, John Romanski, and Ashley Graham.



Figure 1.9: Cockatoos. Rehearsal photo by Andrew Schwartz. Left to right: John Romanski, Allie Anderson, and Ashley Graham.



Figure 1.10: Text Work. Rehearsal photo by Andrew Schwartz. Left to right: Lindsay Rae Taylor and Allie Anderson.



Figure 1.11: Choreography. Rehearsal photo by Andrew Schwartz. Left to right: David Neil Edwards, Lindsay Rae Taylor, and Allie Anderson.



Figure 1.12: Closing Night. Photo by Andrew Schwartz. Left to right: Allie Anderson, David Neil Edwards, John Romanski, Lindsay Rae Taylor, Kelsie Hensley, Ashley Graham, and Riley Lucas.



Figure 1.13: Publicity Photo 2. By Jason Ayer. Left to right: Kelsie Hensley, David Neil Edwards, Ashley Graham, John Romanski, Allie Anderson, and Riley Lucas.

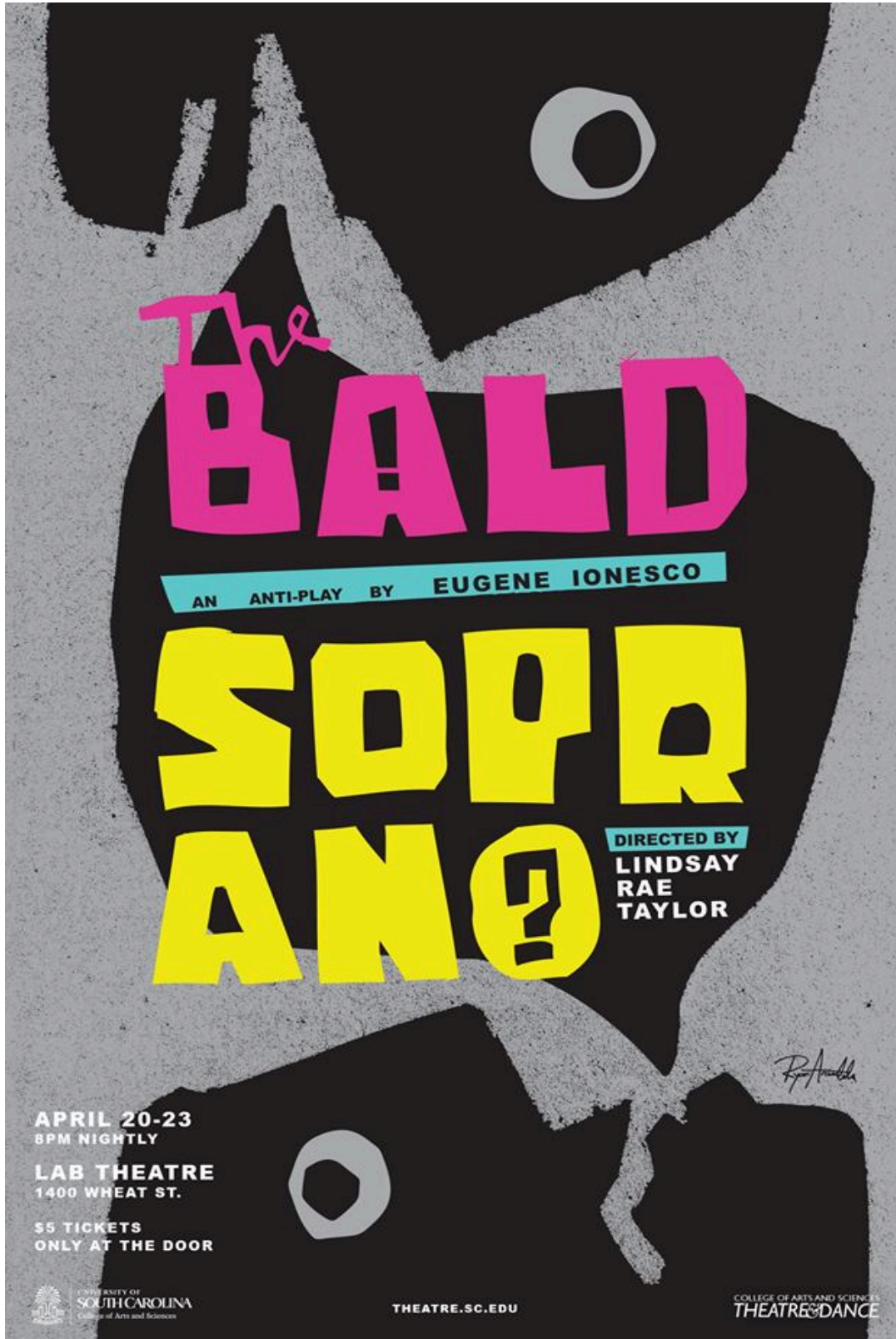


Figure 1.14: *The Bald Soprano* Promotional Poster. Illustration by Ryan Aramabula.



## CHAPTER 2

### *TOP GIRLS*

*“Playwrights don’t give answers, they ask questions.”—Caryl Churchill*

For the 2017-2018 UofSC season, the plays were centered around the theme, “Women Warriors.” I suggested *Top Girls*, but there was a concern that it would feel dated. Sadly, this assumption was wrong. Though it takes place in the 1980s, it is shockingly relevant. It revealed just how far behind we are as a culture in terms of how women are treated and perceived. I was particularly interested in how women behave towards other women when they are trying to get ahead, having an acute awareness of securing that one seat at the table. I was also eager to tell the story of women balancing the choice of whether to pursue a career or to raise a family and the obstacles that stand in their way when trying to manage this decision, and the judgement that follows. Women are harshly sentenced either way. If we decide to be a wife and procreate, sans career, we may be labeled as homely, afraid, conservative, and ultra-feminine. Conversely, if we choose to put all of our focus on our work and not have a family, we may be viewed as abnormal, or as Caryl Churchill phrases it in *Top Girls*, “not natural” (Churchill 70).

I describe *Top Girls* as “a nonrealistic play in realistic circumstances.” It takes place during the time of Margaret Thatcher’s appointment as Prime Minister of Britain. I saw a direct correspondence between Thatcher and Hillary Clinton. I could not fathom a more appropriate time to revive this play. Both of these women

had to adopt a male's persona in order to take on a man's position. To be the first female leader meant shedding stereotypical female traits and assuming attributes associated with men. Thatcher and Clinton were driven, intelligent, and tough. They knew how to play a "man's" game.

I began working on *Top Girls* during the summer of 2017 in preparation for casting and design meetings. As is my way with most shows, I began with sound. During my first year as a directing student, my mentor, Robert Richmond, asked me to identify my way in when starting a new project. He explained that it could be films, paintings, places, objects, or music. He said that it was important to recognize what ignites my imagination. For me, it is definitely sound. This is no surprise to me since I spent the bulk of my career working with the Aquila Theatre Company, under the direction of Robert Richmond, where we had the most rare and wonderful gift of a composer in the rehearsal room, creating original underscoring underneath our soliloquies. It is no wonder that I hear music when I read a script or when I imagine the journey from one scene to the next. Music instantly evokes an emotion and allows me to visualize the play more concretely when I am generating ideas. It immediately changes the energy in the room, manipulates the climate, and takes us somewhere else.

Since *Top Girls* takes place in the 1980s, it offers many fun and memorable songs to use in transitions. I really wanted to begin the show with an opening number, featuring the characters of the first scene in isolation, getting ready to attend this dinner party with other significant women in history. Throughout my life, I have always been fascinated by the care women take in their appearance when socializing with members of their own sex. Scenic designer Carly Sober and

I decided to place a vanity table center stage, leaving the looking glass space empty so that the audience could see the characters examining their faces in their reflection. I chose Beyonce's *Who Run the World (Girls)*, which is not from the 1980s, but was an attempt to connect the time period of the play to our world right now. I wanted to begin with an explosive burst of female energy that would set the tone for the evening. The cast and I collaborated to find ways of incorporating sensuality, vulnerability, irony, and strength in this number, while also physically setting the stage for the first scene. This song was almost ironic for the play, as some of the women in *Top Girls* do run the world, but at a great cost. For the rest of the play I used familiar favorites, always thinking of the scene that was coming after, so as to suggest where we are taking the audience as opposed to where they have just been. These included *Wannabe* by the Spice Girls, Cyndi Lauper's *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun*, and *Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)* by the Eurythmics, which bridged into intermission. Pat Benatar's *Hit Me With Your Best Shot* opened Act Two, and Joni Mitchell's *Blue* took us into the final scene of the play. *Blue* was an ode to Joyce and her life with Angie. *Dreams* by the Cranberries played for curtain call as a bittersweet and uncertain end to the story. I decided all of these tracks before rehearsals began and they became a foundation for the group as we worked.

Having studied this play in my undergraduate career, and having seen a few productions of it, I am always struck by the role of Angie and her last line "frightening." (Churchill 98). There are many different ways to double these roles. In preparation for casting, I did a lot of dramaturgical work concerning production history. It seemed to me that some doubles are obvious and that others may simply

be dependent on the versatility of the actors. I knew for certain that I wanted Angie to play the Waitress in the opening scene. I have always thought that when Angie says “frightening” to Marlene at the end, (Churchill 98), she is referring to a dream that she had, which is the dinner party from Act One, Scene One. Angie wants to be like Marlene, but how horrific to witness all of those women during that section, first treating her as if she barely exists and then drunk, yelling, weeping, and full of regret, wondering why they are all “so miserable” (Churchill 30). This is also why I became strongly attached to songs that referred to dreams. While Marlene is our protagonist, I have always been drawn to the character of Angie and her function in the play. It was very important to me to have a strong connection between Marlene, Joyce, and Angie. They became a grounding pyramid for me in realizing this story on stage. The rest of the doubling became about the actors I wanted to use, and their skill sets and range, and then of course, the logistics of costume changes. The biggest surprise for me was a decision I made about tripling one track. I had one actor play Dull Gret, Kit, and Shona. This ended up being quite an impressive performance from this actor, who defined these three women with expert agility.

Because this play felt so incredibly timely to me, and because it I knew the title might be foreign to a lot of young theatre-goers, I wanted to find a way to connect it to the community. I spoke with Megan Plassmeyer at WREN (Women’s Rights and Empowerment Network), and she assisted us in promoting the show. She also agreed to do a post-show talkback concerning women in the workforce. Not only did this connection help sell tickets to performances, but it also widened our audience. So many nights when I was in the audience I saw women arriving

in groups, having a night out together, and all because they were aware of the project through WREN. The talkback empowered the cast to speak about the work from within and the bigger mission of doing this play at this moment in history.

Our rehearsal process began a week of table work. We had to get on top of the dialogue and also the sequence of events, since the play is nonlinear. Marybeth Gorman Craig came to work with us on dialects. We had to be very specific with the dialects, since everyone, aside from Marlene, would be doubling. Marybeth helped us research regionalisms as indicated in the script. Isabella Bird mastered the Scottish tongue and Dull Gret took on Welsh. We always stressed clarity over accuracy. Sometimes if an actor is too good at the accent, the audience cannot make out the words. I wanted the dialects to serve as a guide for character development, rather than a narrowing of choices.

We had much discussion about relationships and backstory. Our big question was—did Angie kill Joyce? Our Angie felt not, but I thought it was a much stronger choice to imagine that she did, so that when she shows up at Marlene’s office, the stakes are higher. We delved into each scene beat by beat, breaking it down, and incorporating dramaturgical research. We were trying to come to as consensus as to what elements of the play were most relevant given the current political climate and how to emphasize those moments in our production.

I wanted to be sure that the cast had a really strong grasp on the text before we put it on its feet. Like *The Bald Soprano*, we had the luxury of rehearsing in the space where we would be performing, so we moved in there and made CPE our evening home. If the whole group was called, we would usually get up and do something physical, then adjourn to the table behind the partition to work on the

text. The biggest challenge in this play is the dialogue in the opening scene. The women are constantly overlapping one another when they speak, interrupting and talking simultaneously. We tried to approach it like a piece of music, myself playing conductor. This was effective in some sections, but I still feel that the point of this scene is that the audience cannot possibly hear everything that is being said. Each audience member should have a very different experience, depending on where they are sitting. Is it a little frustrating? Absolutely. However, the chaos of the conversation is one of the things that I love most about this play. Once we were in performance, I would arrive at the theatre to set up and the entire cast would be sitting around the table getting ready. I observed them eating, sipping tea, putting on make-up, doing their hair, all the while carrying on with three or four different conversations. It was incredible. They could be listening and responding to two or three people simultaneously—keeping one ear in one exchange, while dipping in and out of another, multitasking as women are trained to do. It made me laugh, because as an outsider walking in, I was overwhelmed. It was then that I realized we got that scene exactly right. Caryl Churchill stops all other voices when she really wants you to follow one thread. For example, Pope Joan's story arrests all the other ladies as they listen intently to her. I was so impressed with the cast and how they handled it. This was a very cohesive group of women. They were a true ensemble and they understood the balance of give and take.

I did a lot of warm-ups with this group in the beginning. Sometimes it involved stretching and vocal exercises, and other times we played ensemble-building games. We tossed the ball in the air while counting, and I taught them a lot of songs they could do in round as a quick vocal warm-up before each show.

For performances, I did not require them to always do a group warm-up. It can be difficult for them to organize it, because they all have different pre-show routines, depending on the demands of their hair, make-up, and costumes. But I did ask that they come together backstage, ten minutes prior to curtain to connect with one another. I suggested singing one of the rounds, because all of the ones we learned had British dialects, which would help them in performance. I thought that they should visit that sound before speaking their lines on stage. I was not sure if they would always make this happen, but on the final night, I heard their voices echoing through the building, singing *Calcutta*, and my heart melted.

After a week at the table, we started staging from the beginning. I chose to have a long table for the dinner scene, much like “the last supper.” I was concerned about this looking too theatrical—meaning, what is the logic of no one sitting with their backs to the audience? I justified this with the fact that it is a surreal scene. Figuring out where to place each character was puzzling. We needed to keep in mind that the scene is ultimately about Marlene and the information she is gathering from these conversations. We tried putting her in the center seat, then we experimented with her not sitting at all, and we eventually settled on putting her at the head of the table. We came to this decision because the bulk of the dialogue happens between the other characters, including some very long passages. We placed Pope Joan in the center seat, holding court in a way, because her birthing story needed focus. Given the nonrealistic tone of this scene, I opted for no actual food props, and only water in the wine glasses. Pretending to drink imaginary liquid is one of my least favorite miming techniques, but somehow the gesture of eating imaginary food bothers me less. We incorporated sounds of forks

and knives hitting plates, which gave it a specific style and intention. The major struggle in this scene was always being clear about whom was talking to whom, as often these women are having parallel conversations. In an effort to keep it from getting static, we had to find ways and reasons for them to change places sometimes. Staging this scene was a lot trial and error. We would get to a point and then have to backtrack, map it out again, run it, reverse it...it was a beast. The actors earned the exasperation they felt at the end—drunk on the floor, screaming and crying, proclaiming injustices...it was an extraordinary feat to get through it with such dexterity. In performance, the end of this scene was often punctuated with a round of applause from the audience.

Staging the next two scenes of Act One was vital in terms of setting up where we were headed in Act Two. One of my traits as a director (and as a human) that I am always trying to improve upon is my indecisiveness. I get overwhelmed and worry about straying too far down one path, to only have to go back and re-block it all. However, I have learned that having the openness to accept when one should go back and restage is vital. If it does not feel right, fix it. Often the actor will respond with “oh, this feels so much better,” which is comforting. My current take on the staging process is that you really have to dive in and not be afraid of making a mess of it all. I execute my first pass, then I go back changing it and shaping it, and then I may even take a third pass where I adjust it all again or reverse things. More often than not, the third pass is fine tuning. I can be obsessive about the composition of it, so I am trying to be more conscious of micro-managing the movement of the actors. As an advocate for precision and pace, this can be challenging for me. I strive to use repetition rather than demonstration.



I began the office scenes with all of the desks diagonally in space—no sharp edges, imagining that the rooms would be designated by light. I went this route first, because I was justifying everything with the notion that the play is nonrealistic. However, this went against part of my own assessment of the action being set in realistic circumstances. Just because the play is nonlinear does not mean that the furniture is floating in space—an office can still look like an office and should have a clear and stylized entrance and exit. Still, I kept moving along in this way, with the furniture slightly askew, and in a flurry of spike tape, trying to get the obtuse angles just right.

For Joyce's backyard, at first I was set on using the office table as a fort for Kit and Angie. I started working on it in this way, but then met with the scenic designer, Carly Sober and her mentor, Nic Ularu. In our meeting, we discussed how the play had a very cinematic feel to it, and they suggested that there be a flow in between scenes. Nic added a crucial detail, which was to glide panels in and out, hanging blinds, trees, and portraits on them rather than picking up leaden furniture. It would keep the action light and smooth and add a clean and sterile quality to the aesthetic. Joyce's backyard eventually became a blanket on the floor with a small tree hanging from a frame, which was wheeled in from behind on a panel that had been previously used in an office scene holding blinds. It was simple and effective. It changed the location with ease and clarity.

The only scene that had a heavier feel to it was the final scene between Joyce and Marlene in Joyce's kitchen. We wanted the sense of warmth and clutter. This was not easy, given the minimal design. The actor playing Joyce asked to have activities in the scene—things with which Joyce could distract herself. This need

was valid, and it worked well both in rehearsal and in performance. She would perform the physical action of making tea, but then lace it with an intention that affected Marlene and advanced the scene. She was not disappearing into these objects, but rather using them to play an action. This final scene was one that benefited from rehearsals where we focused on the rhythm of the text. Churchill does a lot of work for the actors in this dialogue, but they have to be word-perfect and obey the syntax set in place. These two actors happened to be the only two graduate actors in the cast. It was my first time directing graduate students. I was curious how the mixing of graduates and undergraduates would play out, and I ended up being very happy with the blending of training and experience. The age gap between them was helpful in casting, and then to have these two graduates tackle that last scene was both moving and explosive.

The biggest turning point for me in the process was when I asked Steven Pearson and Robyn Hunt to come watch a run-through halfway through the process. Steve had a lot of feedback afterwards. We stayed in the theatre for an hour and a half after the actors left, working through his notes. His overall observation was about the architecture of the space. Because I chose to put the furniture on these diagonal planes (for fear of being boring or uninventive by placing it all symmetrically forward), the actors looked lost. The furniture was not rooted in realism, which had a wandering effect on the actors. They had nothing to ground them. He suggested I position the furniture straight on and establish doors and hallways for the actors, even if the actual structure was not there, so that they would have a better understanding of entrances and exits. My initial instinct when I started staging was to place the desks and chairs in this way, but again, I

saw the set rendering, with the desks askew, and somehow thought that I should obey that, even though Carly did not have strong feelings about it. I thought that, by tilting the world, it would add to the coldness and surreal nature of the play, but it was not helpful to the actors. So, I walked into that run-through feeling that I was ahead of schedule, but I left that evening understanding that my work was just beginning. This was my first pass, and I learned a lot of things from it, but I needed to change it drastically, and I needed to do it the following day. I went home and stayed up very late, going scene by scene, reversing the blocking, changing exits and entrances, and making a game plan for the next day. Luckily, our Saturday rehearsal followed this, so we had a longer rehearsal block that took place during the day instead of the evening, so we all had more energy. That Saturday, we pushed and changed it all. The actors were fantastic managing all of the adjustments and agreed that it felt better to them. It was a hard, but we got there, and I was much happier with the shape of it all. I was so impressed with the actors, and it made me even more confident to know that I could make such bold shifts and they could handle it so well. I left that day feeling better than ever about where we were and what we had achieved.

The other major dilemma for me was the opening sequence. I kept thinking that maybe we could get a choreographer to help us. For months I had been envisioning this opening to *Who Run the World (Girls)* by Beyonce, where we would meet each of these women getting ready for this dinner party. Again, I was drawn to the idea of how women prepare to hang out with other women. I would argue that most of us work harder at putting ourselves together in these circumstances, because more often than not, women feel more judged by other women than men

(particularly in a situation like this with these women celebrating their lives and their achievements). There is a sense in that opening scene that the ladies are trying to prove something to each other, or to themselves, almost one-upping the previous speaker. I also wanted it to be a powerful statement about women ruling the world, but at what cost. I wanted to show them being sexy, vulnerable, powerful, supportive, and maybe even objectified in trying to look the way they are expected to look, with big grins and vacant faces. Functionally, I needed them to set up the space for the opening scene by bringing in the furniture and props before the first line was spoken. We ended up not being able to hire a choreographer, so I spent some time in my living room watching Beyonce on Youtube, trying to mimic some moves that everyone could do. I then constructed a narrative verse by verse, so that I would have some idea of how to organize it with the cast. I had a pretty solid routine in place, and they, of course, brought thoughts and suggestions. I was worried that I was trying to do too much, or that I was tacking something onto the play that did not belong. However, watching it night after night, it had the effect that I was after. We highlighted each woman at the vanity table with Tyler Omundsen's brilliantly effective lighting design, and the other ladies became statues in the surrounding space, spinning ever so slowly, as if they were ballerinas in a jewelry box or placed on some sort of pedestal. We also had sections that were choreographed with moves and poses, creating static images, and we aligned gestures from Pope Joan and Lady Nijo during the lyrics about a woman's persuasion building a nation. It was one of those rare moments where the vision I had in my mind truly came to life, and in an even better way

than I pictured it. The collaboration with the actors empowered them and gave them ownership, as well.

Most of the guests that I asked to come to watch a rehearsal were impressed with where we were, given how much time we had. This was both an asset and a handicap. I pushed them really hard in the beginning, but the week leading up to tech, we all started to run out of steam. I was giving the same direction over and over again, struggling to find another way to communicate my notes. I started to wonder if I just needed to step back and let them fly on their own a bit, maybe just do run-throughs, line-throughs, and loosen the reins a little. Driving up to fall break, everyone was exhausted, and it showed. I encouraged them all to relax during the days off, even though tech loomed on the other side.

We did a dry tech, which was useful, although not entirely productive. I cannot fully understand the lighting plot without actors. On many occasions, I have agreed to some lighting decisions during dry tech that I then have to change drastically once the actors are there. Also, having our mentors in the room added pressure. During this tech, my lack of experience was magnified at every turn.

The actors picked up on my anxiety and it was infectious. Certain actors were struggling with costumes and make-up changes. I went backstage to find some of them in tears, others wanting to know if I was okay, which just made everything worse. I was trying to remain calm. I remember assisting Jeremy Skidmore and he was very good at hiding his inner panic. I wanted to assume that façade, but I was cracking at the surface. I worried that I failed in preparing the cast for this part of the process, and I also felt isolated, because suddenly I was very much on the outside. They were on stage and I was off. During a dress run,

they completely dried during the opening scene. I just sat there in the silence, my jaw agape, since this scene had always been so solid. Robert asked me if I wanted feed them a line, but I thought they needed to find their own way out, so we all waited until they found a thread. It was excruciating.

We had also run all of the quick changes leading up to our first tech, and they were all very smooth. However, during dress rehearsal, they seemed to take much longer. I started to get impatient and struggled with how to resolve it. In the end, the changes were perfect, but that was a hiccup I did not anticipate.

The opening sequence looked fantastic in the end and achieved exactly what I wanted. I loved it, but without the help of Robert and Jim Hunter, it would not have turned out that way. Tech left me a little defeated, feeling so dependent on my mentors to guide me through and not being able to handle it on my own.

Opening night was uncomfortable for me. I sat there, gripping my program with white knuckles, flinching every time something was off or not as electric as it had been in rehearsal. There were some technical glitches, involving noisy crew members and ghosting lights. Despite having reiterated so many times how important it was to be quiet in CPE's very confined space with no wings or green room, it was the most distracting show yet. It also took some time for the stage manager to get into a rhythm with the actors. If we had been able to have a longer tech period, I think this would have helped her immensely.

Having said all of this, each show that I returned to grew and grew. It was as if we had a week of previews and were finally ready for opening night. The final show was breathtaking, with all parts working together harmoniously. I sat in the audience that night and felt such gratification. I was proud of them, I was

proud of myself, and I understood why we put ourselves through this. It was like I finally exhaled and could see how exceptional it was. I could recognize pieces of myself amidst the collaboration with actors and designers. I felt triumphant, confident, and a little more excited to do it all over again in the spring.



Figure 2.1: *Top Girls* Promotional Poster. By Freddie Powers. Left to right: Cassidy Spencer, Liv Matthews, Amber Coulter, Kimberly Braun, Kelsey McCloskey, Amelia Bruce, and Libby Hawkins.



Figure 2.2: *Marlene*. Production photo by Freddie Powers. Pictured: Kimberly Braun. Scenic Design by Carly Sober. Costumes by Anna Ison.





Figure 2.3: Opening Sequence. Production photo by Freddie Powers. Pictured: Amber Coulter. Lighting Design by Tyler Omundsen.



Figure 2.4: Lady Nijo. Production photo by Freddie Powers. Pictured: Libby Hawkins, Amelia Bruce, Cassidy Spencer, Kelsey McCloskey, Liv Matthews, Amber Coulter, and Kimberly Braun.



Figure 2.5: Dull Gret. Production photo by Freddie Powers. Pictured: Liv Matthews.



Figure 2.6: Act I, Scene 1. Production photo by Freddie Powers. Pictured: Libby Hawkins, Amber Coulter, Kelsey McCloskey, and Kimberly Braun.



Figure 2.7: The Bastards. Production photo by Freddie Powers. Pictured: Liv Matthews.



Figure 2.8: Kit and Angie. Production photo by Freddie Powers. Left to right: Liv Matthews and Cassidy Spencer.



Figure 2.9: Matricide. Production photo by Freddie Powers. Left to right: Liv Matthews and Cassidy Spencer.



Figure 2.10: Act I, Scene 3. Production photo by Freddie Powers. Left to right: Liv Matthews and Cassidy Spencer.



Figure 2.11: Sweet Dreams. Production photo by Freddie Powers. Pictured: Cassidy Spencer.



Figure 2.12: Shona. Production photo by Freddie Powers, pictured: Liv Matthews.



Figure 2.13: Act II, Scene 1. Production photo by Freddie Powers. Left to right: Cassidy Spencer, Libby Hawkins, and Kimberly Braun.



Figure 2.14: Marlene at the Office. Production photo by Freddie Powers. Pictured: Kimberly Braun.



Figure 2.15: Act II, Scene 2. Production photo by Freddie Powers. Left to right: Kimberly Braun and Libby Hawkins.



Figure 2.16: *Top Girls* Company Photo. By Freddie Powers with cast, crew and design team.

## CHAPTER 3

### *SENSE AND SENSIBILITY*

*“We are losing women’s voices. I was tired of watching talented women disappear, and even more tired of it being accepted as an unfortunate but incurable problem. I began writing because I wanted to create work for women AND men in female-centered stories; I particularly aim to create new female classics.” –Kate Hamill*

This was probably the scariest preparation for me. *Sense and Sensibility* would be my largest cast yet, my first mainstage show, and my most inventive process to date in terms of staging. Kate Hamill’s script is very fast-paced. Sometimes the location changes within a page. As soon as a scene is established, it changes. You have to keep up, and that was the trick--staying ahead of the audience to keep them on the edge of their seat. They hear the name Jane Austen and expect to see a production that is stuffy, unrelatable, and full of stagnant poses. Oh no--not Kate Hamill’s version. It is very contemporary and highly accessible.

The script itself feels very cinematic, and the original production was created in a small thrust space in New York City by Bedlam Theatre Company. Its genesis did not include a big budget and a large cast. However, in a university setting, and on a larger stage, it needed to be inflated a bit. I knew our version should echo the original production in terms of idea, but it had to be inflated to fill Drayton Hall. It called for movement and whimsy, romance and comedy, beauty



and elegance. We approached it like a choreographed dance. Though the text indicates scene breaks, we treated it like an ever-flowing piece of ribbon.

I was able to see a production of it at a nearby professional theatre. I was hoping to gather information, see how the script worked in a larger space, and I was curious to see how another director would handle the demands of the adaptation. I was completely disheartened. It was labored, slow, boring, uninventive, and disappointing. I could not believe it. I was terrified. Then I realized that I learned what I did *not* want it to be. I knew that I needed to create the opposite of what I had just seen.

Because the play has a light, airy quality to it and moves so quickly, I wanted to borrow a device from the original production (and from other recent productions), which is to put all of the furniture on wheels. This is not a new concept in terms of theatrical tricks, but I think it is a necessary one for this show. In fact, as I researched other productions, I noticed that most theatres were using this tool with this play, yet the one I saw did not, which resulted in a static, stuffy, and leaden performance. Kate Hamill does not leave you in any one place long enough to establish a strong sense of place. Instead, the relationships become the constant and the thread for the audience. It was imperative to keep it moving.

Robert asked me how I pictured the play in terms of material—did I see it as metal or wood? He also wondered how I saw it on the Drayton stage, given the mass of fly space to fill. I kept coming back to the idea of letters. We live in an age now of immediate response with our mobile devices. Our attention spans have decreased significantly with the ability to get an answer immediately with the touch of a button or swipe of a screen. I was looking for a through-line in the script

and recognized letters as another character on stage. There is a letter in almost every scene, and there is great anticipation of what the letter contains, as it often concerns the destiny of the recipient. For the Dashwood sisters, letters are integral in determining their fate, so I wanted letters to be ever-present as the backdrop to our set. Scenic designers Carly Sober and Nate Terracio were on board with this, so we found a letter that Jane Austen had written to her sister about a party she attended. They painted the text on a giant sheet of material that stretched from the ceiling to the floor, which became the back wall and also served as a ground cloth to designate the actors' playing area. The fabric allowed us to explore with shadow play during some scenes, permitting us to delve into the psychological journey of Elinor and Marianne.

I aimed for our production to be open-handed, not hiding the fact that these were actors putting on a play. All of the props were visible on stage, kept in trunks on stage. My intention was to keep the action bubbly and bright, which led me to my overriding conceptual statement about the play, which explained it to be “a frothy romp through a Jane Austen dream-world.”

The original production had a cast of ten actors, and the one I saw used twelve. Because ours was in Drayton, I wanted to have more actors to fill the stage, and also to give more opportunity to students in the department. I saw the Gossips as a consistent presence on stage throughout, so I distributed those lines to everyone, aside from Elinor and Marianne. One actor tripled as all of the servant characters, and then the rest of the cast had one central role, while also doubling as a gossip. I thought this worked well in creating an ensemble, while reminding the audience that the Dashwood sisters were the focus of the story.

For sound, I used contemporary tracks that were related to the themes of the play. However, I thought that including the lyrics would feel jarringly modern. I wanted the audience to hear a tune that they recognize, and then discover that it is Beyonce or Sia. Sound designer Danielle Wilson and I researched together and found many options for this soundscape. We used a lot of arrangements by the Vitamin String Quartet and the Piano Guys. Keeping with the letter theme, I chose Stevie Wonder's *Signed, Sealed, Delivered (I'm Yours)* for the curtain call.

Our first rehearsal began with a show and tell for the department, where the designers and I presented our vision for the production. I was extremely nervous. I struggle with interviews and public speaking, so it is a constant worry of mine. I can express myself very well on paper, but it seems that I lack confidence when I am trying to articulate my thoughts in front of an audience or on camera. I was anxious all day about this presentation. While I cannot say that I was pleased with my performance, I was glad for the opportunity to gain more experience and identify ways of improving in this area. I want nothing more than to be passionately eloquent when talking about my work, which takes practice.

After the show and tell, we read the play for the first time around a table. I became very overwhelmed. It was hard for me to imagine stage pictures, though I had sketched a few in my director's book. I was not sure that I even liked the play. Was I the wrong person to direct this? I had never been a huge Austen fan, I am not British, I was not sure what the message was in terms of why this play and why now, I was an inexperienced director looking at a play that required a lot of invention, and I did not choose this play, but rather, it was given to me because the department felt it should be directed by a woman. I was in a panic, and I was

also very concerned that I was missing something integral to working on this play, which was a need to tell this story.

The second rehearsal was in-depth dramaturgy session with Dr. Amy Lehman and Dr. Andrea Coldwell. It was really useful to learn more about the characters and themes. We revisited the information that we learned throughout the process in order to justify acting and staging choices. Both Amy and Andrea spoke zealously about Jane Austen's work. Their energy was catching in the room and inspired us all. I began to better understand the obsession that women have with Austen's writing and it became a first step for me in loving this play.

We continued to do table work for the next couple of days, but quickly found that it was time for us to get up on our feet. I needed to start staging, as spring break was approaching, and I wanted to have a rough sketch of the show to contemplate during the week off. We were given most of the furniture that we would be using, all on casters and ready to be wheeled around. Before this exploration started, I wanted to do an exercise with the cast that would remind them of the mood of the piece. I took them outside, onto the lawn next to Booker T. Washington, and we played a familiar theatre game that we all knew. The rules of the game were the same, but I replaced the words of the game with Jane Austen phrases. So, we passed the energy around the circle with "hull-lo," reversed the action with "engaged," moved it across the circle with "quill," and also added actions to words such as "Willoughby," "handkerchief," "a very wet spring," "f-f-f-Ferrars," and "Mrs. Jennings." Being out in the grass and getting a little silly with the text set a playful tone for the coming weeks.

Like I learned with *The Bald Soprano*, I knew I just had to start. I was sure we would make a big mess of it at first, but we needed a draft. I avoided the urge to discover how we would get from place to place, but instead just pushed through scene to scene, knowing that it would all change drastically and make more sense once we had a base on which to build. It was frenetic, funny, strange, and left us all a little punch-drunk at the end of each rehearsal, but it was a beginning.

Because the play is centered around Elinor and Marianne, I very much wanted things to happen *to* them, almost out of their control. For example, if a book was needed, another actor would bring it to them, placing it in their hands, as if it appeared to them out of nowhere. We incorporated a style of movement that made these props look as if they were floating their way to the recipient.

As the weeks progressed, we moved into the space. We worked with a choreographer, Regan Baker, who staged the dance sequences, and everything became clearer as props and set pieces entered the room. Every rehearsal took another big leap, leading us to our technical rehearsal, where we then made even more adjustments as we added in moments involving shadow play.

*Sense and Sensibility* became a dance piece with text, just as I imagined it. It was precise, fluid, and magical. Our first audience was on circle night, and I remember sitting there in shock watching it in motion. It was absolutely stunning, and the collaborative nature of the journey was apparent on stage.

*Sense and Sensibility* remains one of my most beloved projects. It was definitely the most challenging for many reasons. Being my first mainstage show, it meant working with a design team in a different way. Production meetings turned into many breakout sessions with designers. Scenic was definitely the

biggest hurdle in terms of how to move forward. Ultimately, I was happy with where we landed, but it was difficult discovering how to embellish the script to fill Drayton. Tyler Omundsen's lighting was a dream. He really captured the romantic feel of the piece with amber and lavender hues. He sent me images that inspired him when we began our conversations and stayed true to his aesthetic. I was fortunate to have a professional costume designer, Mariah Hale, with us, who had previously designed *Sense and Sensibility* at The Folger Theatre. Through costumes, she taught me so much about the story we were trying to tell. She had subtle suggestions of accessories that ignited ideas concerning characters and staging. The costumes were absolutely beautiful, which inspired the actors.

My only regret in this process was that I was not able to work with actors more in developing characters and relationships. They found nuance themselves and taught me through their work, but I wish I had been able to be there for them more, rather than being overly concerned with the big picture. I consider myself to be an actor's director. I think of the actor before concept or design, because my career as an actor is lengthier than my time as a director. I was overwhelmed by the task of bringing this play to life. It is the type of show that benefits from having a full rehearsal schedule of eight hours a day, collaborating in a room with actors to find organic solutions. Having four hours a night to rehearse with a six hour call on Saturday (not to mention the classwork and other commitments we were all juggling), meant that I sometimes had to come in with a quick fix that was not fully realized. Actors came to me with questions and thoughts that I was never able to discuss with them in depth. I found myself leaning on them a lot when it came to problem-solving and sometimes felt that they longed for more extensive

notes that were more related to character than movement. However, I think that this show surprised us all and it remains the biggest success of my graduate career. It was the steepest challenge for me in terms of where I was in my journey, paired with the requirements of the script and space. It surpassed my expectations, and I have used some aspects of this production in other projects. It taught me to be fearless and decisive, while remaining collaborative. Because of this experience, I will never underestimate myself again. I am more capable than I choose to believe.



Figure.3.1 *Sense and Sensibility* Publicity Photo. By Jason Ayer. Left to right: Libby Hawkins and Kimberly Braun.





Figure 3.2: Staging Rehearsal. Rehearsal photo by Kimberly Braun. Left to right: Lindsay Rae Taylor and the Gossips.



Figure 3.3: Letters. Rehearsal photo by Elizabeth Jennings. Pictured: Kimberly Braun and the Gossips.



Figure 3.4: Fan Tree. Rehearsal photo by Elizabeth Jennings. Pictured: The Gossips.

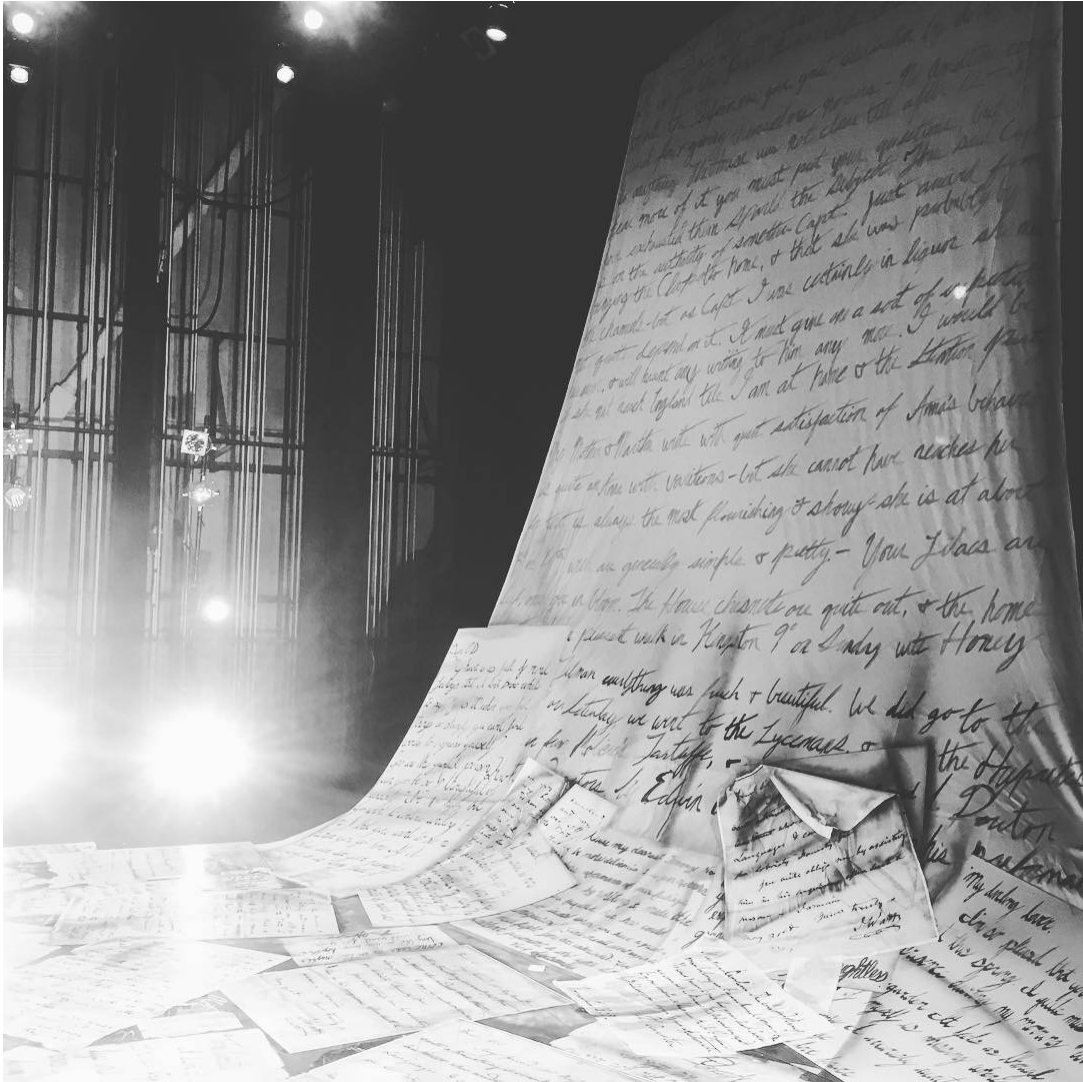


Figure 3.5: Jane's Letter to Cassandra. Promotional photo of the set by UofSC Department of Theatre and Dance. Scenic design by Carly Sober and Nate Terracio.



Figure 3.6. John and Fanny. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Left to right: Will Hollerung and Olivia Hensley. Costumes by Mariah Hale. Lighting Design by Tyler Omundsen.



Figure 3.7: Going for a Stroll. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Left to right: Libby Hawkins, Will Hollerung, and Lochlan Angle. Scenic design by Carly Sober and Nate Terracio. Costumes by Mariah Hale. Lighting design by Tyler Omundsen.



Figure 3.8: Sisters and Parasols. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Left to right: Lochlan Angle, Kimberly Braun, and Libby Hawkins.



Figure 3.9: I've Got a Secret. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Left to right: Liv Matthews, Libby Hawkins, and Amber Coulter. In shadow, Kimberly Braun and John Romanski.



Figure 3.10: The Visit. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Left to right: Kate Chalfant, Libby Hawkins, Tristan Hester, and Allie Anderson. In shadow, Kimberly Braun.



Figure 3.11: Goodbye to Edward. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Left to right: Amber Coulter, Liv Matthews, Kaleb Edley, Kimberly Braun, and Libby Hawkins.



Figure 3.12: Willoughby's Letter. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Left to right: Kimberly Braun, Kate Chalfant, and Olivia Hensley.



Figure 3.13: Portraits. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Left to right: Lochlan Angle, Will Hollerung, Tristan Hester, Kaleb Edley, John Romanski, Libby Hawkins, and Darrell Johnston.



Figure 3.14: Robert Ferrars. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Left to right: Darrell Johnston, Donovan St. Andre, Amber Coulter, Olivia Hensley, Lochlan Angle, and John Romanski.



Figure 3.15: Marianne. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Pictured: Kimberly Braun.





Figure 3.16: *The Storm*. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Left to Right: Liv Matthews, Allie Anderson, Kate Chalfant, Kimberly Braun, Olivia Hensley, and Amber Coulter. In shadow, John Romanski.



Figure 3.17. *Double Wedding*. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Full Company.



Figure 3.18: Curtain Call. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Company curtain call.



Figure 3.19: *Sense and Sensibility* Company Photo. By Jason Ayer. Full cast and crew.

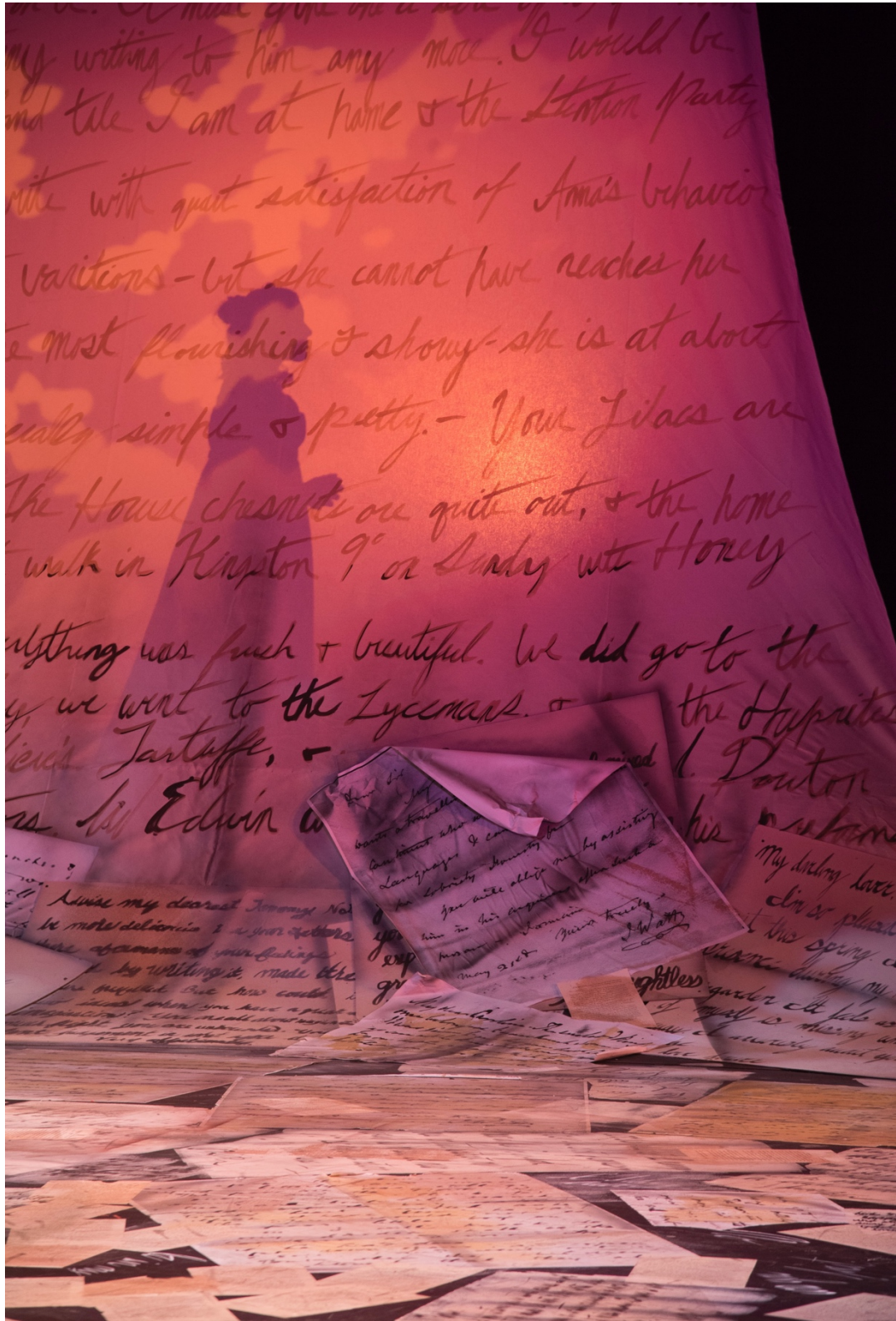


Figure 3.20: Eliza. Production photo by Jason Ayer. In shadow, Olivia Hensley.



Figure 3.21: Elinor and Marianne. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Left to right: Libby Hawkins and Kimberly Braun.



Figure 3.22: *Sense and Sensibility* Promotional Poster. By Jason Ayer. Illustration by Sophie Tipton.



Figure 3.23: Circle Night. Photo by Andrew Schwartz. Pictured: Lindsay Rae Taylor in front of Longstreet Theatre with *Sense and Sensibility* banner on Circle Night.

## CHAPTER 4

### *SILENT SKY*

*“In our troubled days it is good to have something outside our planet, something fine and distant for comfort.” -Annie Jump Cannon*

Moving into my third year, I secured an internship to direct *Silent Sky* for the theatre department at Oklahoma City University. They flew me out for auditions in the fall of 2018, while I was fulfilling another internship assignment, assistant-directing Davenant’s *Macbeth* at the Folger Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, DC. I went out to Oklahoma City for five days of casting and callbacks. I was looking to assemble a cast of five, and I saw nearly three-hundred undergraduate actors. The department was filling roles for the entire semester, and my show fell right in the middle of the other four shows, which meant mine would conflict with every other production. I was advised to call back forty actors, and to have five different casts in my mind to negotiate with the other directors. When I walked into the audition room, there was a spot for me behind a long table. The other directors were already there—one faculty member, two student directors, and then one other guest director. They were all white men. I found myself taking on the feminine role of organizing my space to make room for others amidst the computers, legal pads, and scripts cluttering the table. The other guest director was no stranger to the department. He had directed there a few times before, so familiarity surrounded me, and as a woman and a new face, I definitely

felt like the outsider. Actors came in one by one, bright-eyed and eager to please, and I noticed that the women were smiling at me enthusiastically. I wondered how many times female directors had been on the other side of this panel. I felt both triumphant and sad about the reality of the situation, but nonetheless, I was fueled by the empowerment of having a seat at the table and I understood my task. I took very strange and specific notes trying to keep the actors clear in my mind. I had become accustomed to knowing my casting pool prior to auditions, as is the case with UofSC, so I was a little overwhelmed. Like our department, OKCU lacks diversity, which was disappointing to me. Yet most of the actors I saw were BFA students under conservatory-style training, so they were quite serious, extremely passionate, and auditioned with expert poise. I was struck by their knowledge of new plays, based on the monologues they chose. They seemed to be very educated and very dedicated to their discipline. We completed two days of auditions and then made our individual callback lists.

I arranged my callbacks in two groups so that I would have the opportunity to work with them all physically first, and so that each actor would have the chance to read more than once. I was balancing two objectives: to cast a cohesive group that made sense for the show and to get to know their personalities in order to discover which actors I wanted on the journey. I left the second session with a lot of questions in my mind, but I ultimately felt I could cast the show in many different ways, given the talent pool before me.

The following week was about waiting to see which mainstage shows took some of the actors I wanted, and also, what students were assigned to crew duties (the crew assignments were non-negotiable, so I had actors I wanted on stage who

ended up backstage on other projects). *Silent Sky* was a Stage II production at OKCU, which is a lab show with a budget of \$200. The other two lab shows were directed by undergraduates. The three of us were the next step down from the mainstage shows and the lab assignments. One week after returning to DC, I had a virtual meeting with the other two directors and the faculty in charge of Stage II. It was a fairly simple process, as we had already been communicating. I was mostly frustrated by the lab assignments. I was able to get my first pick for the roles of Henrietta and Annie, and my second choices for Williamina and Margaret, but Peter was my fifth string. Ironically, this actor brought the most joyful energy to the room and demonstrated more professionalism growth than any other actor in the production. He was a freshman, while the rest of the cast was comprised of seniors and juniors. I was impressed by his persistence and hard work throughout the process. He asked intelligent questions and implemented my notes with ease. The department strongly encouraged me to cast understudies, given the number of students eager to participate in productions, and though they would never have a rehearsal or a performance, OKCU swings have gone on for a technical rehearsal or a show. It was suggested that I use one woman and one man, but because it would be such a large task for the woman, I decided to have two female swings and one male. One woman covered Henrietta and Annie, the other took on Margaret and Williamina, and the man studied Peter.

One of my biggest concerns in preparing for this project was the fact that it is a play about astronomy. Never one to delve into science, I was intimidated by the subject. There are so many specifics in the script and I knew that I needed to be ready to answer questions from the actors. I needed to know what they were



measuring on those glass plates. I checked out some books from the library on Henrietta Leavitt, and I spent a lot of time trying to understand it all, but I still worried that I was coming up short. I sought help from Dr. Steven Rodney, an astronomy professor at UofSC. When I returned from DC, just before heading out to Oklahoma, we scheduled a meeting where he took me through the findings of Ms. Leavitt. He explained the significance of her work and how it continues to influence modern cosmology. I was fascinated by Leavitt's extensive research, and I found inspiration in her tenacious navigation of a man's field. I left Dr. Rodney's office with pencil-sketched drawings and a deeper understanding of her work.

With the challenge of building a play on a small budget, I had no choice but to imagine it in a minimalistic way. Steven Pearson had directed this show with the UofSC graduate actors the previous fall, which is what prompted me to choose this play, as I was very moved and intrigued by the production. Steve built small easels for the women to use in the scenes, and he also made plexiglass star plates that were specific to what they were studying. He allowed me to take these props, along with other letters and pamphlets he and his cast created, out to Oklahoma. This was a tremendous help, and I packed it all up with me to drive out west. This was a lesson for me concerning the importance of making good connections. Colleagues can become invaluable resources and collaborate from afar.

OKCU gave me a lighting designer, but scenic, sound, and costumes were up to me. As I previously mentioned, I typically hear a soundscape for a play as I imagine staging. So, months before the first rehearsal, I began searching for transitional and underscoring tracks. I used composer Max Richter as inspiration and built a sound design primarily from his albums. I had to find some additional

songs to use for the ocean liner scenes, echoing big band sounds with a touch of romance. I knew that the actors would have rehearsal skirts, so I planned to use those with some added vintage pieces we could purchase. When I was in Oklahoma for casting, they walked me through set pieces I would have at my disposal. The selection was very spare, with very few tables and chairs, so I knew I needed to get creative. However, their department had a plethora of blocks that varied in size, so I opted to go that route. Blocks are functional and provide methods for invention. I liked the consistency of using them for desks, beds, chairs, and even the bow of a ship. I could envision scientific transitions in my mind that would marry well with the precise and sterile nature of the script's narrative.

Like *Sense and Sensibility*, this was a story that was happening *to* the protagonist. We are meant to follow Henrietta on her journey, so I wanted to keep her on stage as much as possible and build the settings around her with objects arriving *for* her. In retrospect, this was my favorite element of the production. Having just worked on a play with challenging transitions, I was confident in my ability to make this flow seamlessly from place to place, while following one character's trajectory. Making her the focus of the story was my chief priority.

I sent the cast an email before making my way out to OKCU, with some inspirational images and a link to an interview with Lauren Gunderson about the play. I left them with a John Patrick Shanley quote to consider for our work, which was deeply rooted in my feelings about the coming weeks: "All the really exciting things possible during the course of a lifetime require a little more courage than we currently have. A deep breath and a leap." (Shanley 3).

The first rehearsal began in my typical fashion—I brought in snacks and flowers as we sat around the table getting to know one another before hearing the text aloud. I asked the group to share one thing they loved and one thing that they hated. It ran the gamut of loving cosmetics to hating the musical *Oklahoma*. I could tell from the start that they were a very cohesive bunch. We read the play, and I did some dramaturgical work with them, doing my best to answer their questions about character, relationships, concept, and astronomy. Ultimately, the first rehearsal is about getting to the second rehearsal, which is when the work really begins. Over the course of the next few days, we sat in a circle with scripts, but without tables. I placed extra chairs in the room so that the actors could move closer to each other during the scenes, which made me aware of acting instincts and sparked ideas in my mind for staging. We had great discussions and, as I did with *The Bald Soprano*, we dissected each scene into three acts, titling each section as we worked so that we were all in agreement with the larger beat shifts.

In the second week of rehearsals, we began staging. Because this was my first semester working in isolation—not living in my home, not taking classes, and instead spending my days planning for my evening rehearsals and beginning my thesis, I walked into every rehearsal more organized than ever. Everyone at OKCU was very busy, so aside from mentoring some students, teaching a workshop, or meeting with my lighting designer, my brain was consumed with creating this play. Throughout the entire process, we were working ahead of schedule, which was a first for me. I was decisive, clear, motivated, and ready. I noticed that I was quicker at solving problems and I was better at resisting the urge to overthink. I

recognized significant growth in myself as a leader, and as a director. I was overjoyed with the notion that I was improving.

We were performing in a thrust space, but would not be in the theatre until tech. The stage manager taped out the floor in our rehearsal room and we were able to have all of the blocks and props from the first day of staging. The thrust space at OKCU is very deep--it is essentially working in the round from most angles. It felt like staging a production in a thrust/runway/round hybrid configuration. Diagonals became our friend. I had to teach the actors about turning out and opening themselves to all sides. I also needed to move the actors frequently, orbiting them around the space. We constantly swirled the action so that no audience member would be denied a good view. My gaze shifted from acting to movement more than I liked, but it was necessary to get a solid shape, and then come back to the acting once they were secure in their blocking.

Another big challenge for me was getting the sound design ready so that we could put it into the play with my stage manager before heading into tech. This was very hard for me. I have always struggled with technology. Going back to school in an electronic age has been a constant obstacle for me in pursuit of my MFA. I had to learn QLab. Though I have always taken control when it comes to sound, I am forever relieved to have a sound designer to mix, edit, and contribute to the collaboration. Though I generally have a big idea, I welcome the sound designer's expert advice and additions. Now, I was on my own, navigating it for myself, and I was ultimately responsible for a vital thread of this production.

I sought help from Youtube and also students that knew QLab better than me. I flew home for fall break and scheduled a session with Charlotte Zuraw, my

sound designer from *Top Girls*. She was my savior and sent me back to Oklahoma with a solid knowledge of the program. I passed it on to my stage manager, who had never used QLab, but picked it up like a pro and took it off my hands so that I could take my focus off of being the sound designer and go back to directing.

Once the sound and shape of the show were in place, I worked the actors hard in terms of specificity by side-coaching scenes that lacked clarity. I wanted to be sure that the moves were motivated and not mere choreography. This was useful to the actors and grounded the production. We adjusted as needed and continued to make discoveries as we worked. The actors expressed the longing for more acting notes. I took this into consideration and chose to spend our week before tech blowing it up before we had to lock it down. I wanted to give us one last opportunity to play and explore, simultaneously breaking up any stagnation.

We spent the week before tech breaking it down again. We did speed runs, identifying the laughter and lightness, trying to keep it effervescent and fun. I began each rehearsal that week with character exercises. I played some of our preshow tracks and had them walk about the space independently, exploring their own backstories and trajectories. They made physical statues of themselves, choosing what material would compose their monuments. I asked them to locate memories in their minds of specific moments in their characters' lives, and to locate objects that were significant to their role. They responded well to my prompts, and these details filtered their way into the show. One night I gave them different genres, including soap opera, science-fiction, western, and film noir. This illuminated and heightened certain sections that we incorporated into performance. It was exciting to see the actors liberated without the confines the

blocking. Suddenly there was a new energy and focus to the room. It was free, it was electric, and it was ready to add the magical elements of tech and an audience.

While *Silent Sky* was not my strongest in terms of production value, it taught me many valuable lessons. The first being that, while a small budget can seem limiting, it inspires inventive and collaborative possibilities. More than any other show in my thesis, it brought me back to my mission as a director, which is to facilitate a safe space for actors to create characters and explore relationships. It allowed me to concentrate on the actors' journey, without being tempted to focus on concept at the expense of content. Although I need to find the balance of both, it was refreshing to come back to realism after the broad strokes of acting that were necessary with Austen. Because we were narrowed by the limits of cost, it showcased the bare bones of what should always be there--the actors' objectives as they pertain to the story and the avenues to take in realizing them on stage.



Figure 4.1: Taking Notes. Rehearsal photo by Andrew Schwartz. Pictured: Lindsay Rae Taylor.



Figure 4.2: Measuring Stars. Rehearsal photo by Andrew Schwartz. Pictured: Onnika Hanson.



Figure 4.3: Girl Almighty. Rehearsal photo by Andrew Schwartz. Left to right: Rachel Necessary, Nicole Waltman, and Nathan LeBlanc.



Figure 4.4: Giving Notes. Rehearsal photo by Andrew Schwartz. Left to right: Onnika Hanson and Lindsay Rae Taylor.





Figure 4.5: Note Session. Rehearsal photo by Andrew Schwartz. Left to right: Nathan LeBlanc, Lindsay Rae Taylor, and Onnika Hanson.



Figure 4.6: Correcting Henrietta. Production photo by Hal Kohlman. Left to right: Nicole Waltman, Rachel Necessary, and Onnika Hanson. Lighting design by Landry Strickland.



Figure 4.7: Working Alone. Production photo by Hal Kohlman. Pictured: Onnika Hanson.



Figure 4.8: Peter. Production photo by Hal Kohlman. Pictured: Nathan LeBlanc.



Figure 4.9: Peter and Henrietta. Production photo by Hal Kohlman. Left to right: Nathan LeBlanc and Onnika Hanson.



Figure 4.10: The Computers. Production photo by Hal Kohlman. Left to right: Nicole Waltman, Onnika Hanson, and Rachel Necessary.



Figure 4.11: Hearts and Stars. Production photo by Hal Kohlman. Left to right: Onnika Hanson, Addison Pollard, and Nicole Waltman.



Figure 4.12: Wonder. Production photo by Elina Moon. Full company.



Figure 4.13: Final Dress Rehearsal. Rehearsal photo by Hal Kohlman. Company warm-up.



Figure 4.14: Look Up. Production photo by Hal Kohlman. Full company backstage.



Figure 4.15: *Silent Sky* Promotional Poster. By Oklahoma City University.

## CHAPTER 5

### *THE WOLVES*

*"We are always the same age inside."* -Gertrude Stein

I first learned of *The Wolves* in December, 2016 when I was visiting New York City over winter break. My devastation concerning Trump's election was fresh and I began my search for plays that were women-centric. My husband and I were looking for shows to see in the city and one of Time Out's Critic's Picks was *The Wolves*, which was playing off-Broadway at the Duke. It received rave reviews and it seemed to be exactly the type of play I should be directing, given the current political climate with the Women's March on the rise. Unable to see it in performance, I purchased a script from the Drama Bookshop and read it. It had so many elements that intrigued me: overlapping dialogue, precise movement, an all-female cast, a female playwright, and it was meant to be performed over the course of ninety minutes. I also loved the connection between sports and theatre. I am always talking about this when I direct and when I teach, and I believe that sports translate really well on stage. In the way that actors are an ensemble coming together to tell a story, athletes are working as one to score a goal in order to win a game. I put it on my wish-list of plays, hoping it would cross my path someday.

The following December, during my second year of graduate school and winter break, I was in New York City and *The Wolves* was playing again, only this time on Broadway at Lincoln Center. I was desperate for a ticket, but the run was

mostly sold out, so they were selling tickets close to \$1000 a pop. I could not afford to go, but my mentor, Robert Richmond, was able to secure a house seat through a friend at a cheaper price. After seeing it, he started taking measures to get the rights, because he absolutely felt it should be on the UofSC stage.

It was difficult to get the rights and took some time, but it finally happened. Originally slated to direct a different show during the 2018-19 season, the addition of *The Wolves* changed my trajectory. I was thrilled to discover that I would be given this show and that it would be in Longstreet Theatre. Longstreet is my favorite space at UofSC. I had assistant directed twice there, once with Jeremy Skidmore on *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play* and again with Robert Richmond on *The Crucible*. This opportunity meant that, by the end of my graduate career, I will have directed in every space in the department—The Lab, CPE, Drayton Hall, and at last, Longstreet. I could not imagine a better way to complete my training.

As always, I had some concerns with some of the demands of the production. First of all, having never directed in the round, I knew that it would be a lot of trial and error for me, especially given that the cast is supposed to stand in a circle warming-up for long sections in the script. I was also worried about the soccer component. This team is elite and undefeated, so the actors needed to be proficient at the sport. Also, they are meant to be moving the entire time while speaking dialogue that is constantly overlapping, so I knew that I needed a committed group, willing to come in nearly off-book from day one. I was also uneasy about the content of some of the text. DeLappe incorporates a lot of strong language and navigates controversial topics from a teenage girl's point of view. I was not sure how audiences in this region would respond. I have no issue working



on plays that are shocking, but I feared the trend of patrons walking out and I was concerned as to how that might potentially affect the actors in performance.

I returned from Oklahoma on November 6<sup>th</sup>, having successfully wrapped up *Silent Sky*. I was feeling charged to return to a campus that felt like home to me and work with familiar students. Auditions were scheduled for November 18<sup>th</sup> with callbacks set for the following evening. I had a notion of some actors I wanted to cast, but I also wanted to see some new faces on the mainstage. *The Wolves* was intended to be an all-undergraduate production, but the all-graduate female production of *The Revolutionists* needed a specific actor from the community, so I would have one graduate actor in my show. The callbacks were intense. I could see that every girl in that room wanted to be in the show so badly. I brought in a soccer ball and had them kick it to each other, just to get a sense of coordination. I also brought in scarves that they tucked into their shorts and we played a game of tag where the collector of the most scarves won. They were cutthroat and motivated. I was taken aback by their energy and fearlessness, and I was excited about the possibilities of combinations for the team. I brought in a variety of pairings, group by group, and my mind started spinning because everyone was so good. There was something about the script that sat so well in their voices. They were all so truthful and real, given that the roles were so close to their age and that the characters speak the way these young women talk in everyday life. I went home with lists and charts and many considerations. Some of the roles were very clear to me, but others were muddier. The role of #7 was very defined for me, as were the roles of #13 and #25. There were some actors that I knew I wanted to have in the room, it was just a question of where to place them, and then there were also some actors that I was hesitant to cast, because I did not know them as

well. I stayed up late that night, but I arrived at a conclusion while it was fresh. We had to wait a week to post, because other shows had to have callbacks. That was a difficult for me, as it made me second-guess my initial instincts. We posted, which is always hard. I hated to disappoint any of them, because I could have cast the show three times with three different casts, given my options.

For the soccer, Robert and I reached out to the Head Coach of UofSC Women's Soccer, Shelley Smith. I met with her and her assistant, Anna Conklin, shortly after I cast the show, and we discussed the needs for the production and how to structure our collaboration. I explained that I was looking for a toolbox of drills to incorporate into performance. With an understanding that each scene needed to be choreographed, as well as the transitions in between, I wanted all of the moves to be rooted in soccer, yet heightened in a theatrical way. Shelley and Anna generously loaned us equipment and we set some dates in the calendar to begin training. I was thrilled to have them on the production.

On my drive back from Oklahoma, I stayed with Karla Koskinen, who was a friend of many friends, and who graciously welcomed me into her home in Birmingham, Alabama to break up my trip. Ironically, Karla had recently directed *Silent Sky* and was also going to be directing *The Wolves* the following season. We had great discussions about both plays and she introduced me to a very powerful speech from Abby Wambach, who is a retired Olympic female soccer player turned political activist. It was her 2018 keynote address to the women graduates of Barnard College. The title of the speech is "The Wolves." The parallels between her words and the play were chilling to me and further fueled my mission for this process. In the address she talks about not being Little Red Riding Hood, who is punished for being curious and straying from the path. She says "You were never

Little Red Riding Hood, you were always the Wolf. *We are the Wolves.*” She goes on to give four rules of soccer that pertain to how women should proceed given the state of our world at this moment. They are: 1. Make failure your fuel, 2. Lead from the bench, 3. Champion each other, 4. Demand the ball. I knew this was something I needed to share with my cast, and Abby’s four rules became our mantra for *The Wolves*. Over winter break, I read Abby’s memoir, *Forward*, and pulled excerpts to share throughout the process. I was so inspired by her tenacity and perseverance. I wanted her presence in the room with us as we worked.

I also had a friend, Mary Tilden, who recently played #13 in the acclaimed 2018 production at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago. I had endless phone conversations with her about her experience and she was an invaluable resource for us as we worked on the show. It was as if we had a lifeline whenever we hit a road block. Mary and I met in person over winter break. She talked me through some of my potential staging obstacles and storytelling concerns. I was relieved to know that some of my worries matched her cast’s struggles. I felt less alone and more confident in guiding my actors.

We were not supposed to begin rehearsal until after winter break, but I asked the cast to meet with me once in December, just so I could hear the text in their voices. I also wanted to invite my female mentors, Robyn Hunt and Amy Lehman, to join, because I was having some trouble identifying the takeaway from the play. I was not sure if it was my age, but there was an unavoidable distance I felt whenever I read the script on my own. I was eager to share the Abby Wambach speech with them, and I also needed to address our off-book date for lines. I asked them to be very familiar with the words post-break, and I set their off-book

deadline one week into the rehearsal process. I knew it was a tall order, but I also knew how freeing it would be for them to get rid of their scripts.

The day before our first read-through, I received an email from the student I cast as #13. She had neglected to read the play until that time, and she was taken aback by some of the language and content. I was not pleased that she was only reading it for the first time at this point, but I offered to meet her in person to try to ease her concerns. We met at Cool Beans in the afternoon before rehearsal that evening, and I listened to her predicament. She said that she did not stand by the character's opinion and could not say these words in front of her peers and family. I explained that it is not her, it is the character, and that as actors, it is our job to teach the audience. I expounded, that on stage, we are constantly asked to do or say things that go against our beliefs—infidelity, murder, racism...the list goes on. We spoke for an hour, and I offered to cut the lines that offended her for the read that evening. I did not want to alter the text, but I wanted her to hear the words out loud and maybe gain a better understanding of the play. She agreed to come that night, and I began preparing in my usual way. We met in the conference room and I brought cookies, flowers, a soccer ball, and tampons. I set up the projector and could not wait to begin. Everyone arrived, minus #13. I called her at 7:00pm, which was when we were supposed to start, and she said that she was not coming. I was furious. She said that she sent me an email an hour before because she thought it would be more formal. I had a room full of actors anxious to begin, so I quickly got off the phone with her and asked the assistant stage manager to read #13. I was incredibly distracted. I was worried that I handled it in the wrong way, that maybe I said something that upset her, and I was also very disappointed not to have the whole group on day one. I was heartbroken and spent most of the read

going over recasting possibilities in my head, wondering if I could simply replace her, or if I needed to rearrange some of the other girls in order to fill the spot effectively. Of course, it always feels personal when someone leaves a show. It breeds paranoia, so I had to fight the urge to dig too deep as to why and simply move forward. I stayed up very late that night trying to sort it out, but eventually decided on someone and set up a meeting with the potential new team member the next day. I wanted to solve it quickly, as we were under the clock in terms of ordering cleats for rehearsal, and the semester was coming to a close. When I met with the new #13, I was nervous, as you never want someone to feel that they are not your first choice. This actor was so thrilled to join us and did not seem to care at all that she was not my initial pick. It made her day, and consequently, mine. I suddenly felt that the universe had a funny way of working—putting us in exactly the right place at the right time, and I was elated to have a full Wolves’ roster.

I spent the next few weeks trying to discover the spine of the play. I kept re-reading the script and jotting down words and phrases that resonated with me. I watched interviews with Sarah DeLappe and studied dramaturgical packets from recent productions. I was considering these characters and where they were in their lives. I understood that they were at a tipping point, actively trying to figure out who they were while traversing an everchanging world and the challenges of adolescence. I landed on the over-riding statement: “Who do I want to be, how do I want to get there, and who do I need by my side?” I finally had a firm grasp on the play, and I was feeling confident about guiding my cast.

In the first week of rehearsal, we spent two days breaking it down at the table. DeLappe’s script requires some detective work, so we spent a lot of time getting specific with backstories, relationships, and timelines. We came to many

decisions that changed over the course of the coming weeks as we found new clues we had not previously noticed. It was a constant uncovering, and I know that, if I were to work on this play again, I would make further sense of it and discover many unturned stones. We were fortunate to be able to rehearse in Longstreet from the first day forward, which was so helpful concerning the soccer and the vocal demands of the space. We were able to explore all of staging options fully, moving in and out of the vomms, while building physical patterns with soccer drills.

On day three of the first week, we had our first training session with Shelley and Anna. It was incredible. A student working in athletics came along to document the collaboration, and the next day our soccer session went viral via the athletics department. It was exciting, but I was worried that we looked better on the internet than on stage. I hoped that it would translate into performance.

From a promotional standpoint, Kevin Bush was exceptional. He and I worked closely together, looking at videos online and trying to figure out what we might want to show on social media without giving too much away. #25 had to shave her head for the show, so we documented this with the wolfpack in attendance and he made a video to Kanye's "Power" that we blasted on Facebook.

We also made a montage of the girls in training, preparing for battle, set to Miss Red's "Shock Out," which was the underscoring for #00's Time-Out in the show. The photos were stunning, and the Wolfpack was empowered. But again, I was concerned that we were all show and perhaps lacked substance. I knew that we had a lot of work to do to match the images that were being publicized.

I came in with specific staging guidelines, which is a different way of working for me. I tend to run a very organic rehearsal room, but I thought *The Wolves* required a little more strategy, much like an athletic game. I had a legal pad

full of configurations, and I also defined external architecture that I thought would be useful for the cast. We needed to orient ourselves in terms of what was offstage in each vom. I made a choice as to where the locker rooms, porta potty, and playing fields were. I also mapped out shapes for each warm-up scene so that audience members would not get an actor's back two scenes in a row. Rotation became our friend and we all became aware of this throughout staging.

I made an effort to work in small bites for them and then go back at the end of each rehearsal and repeat. The rehearsal process was a balancing act between soccer practice, transition work, staging, and text analysis. We were constantly juggling all of the elements, and I structured each week with an awareness of where we were lagging. Anna continued to visit us week by week, giving us tips and adjustments. By the end of week three, we had a pretty solid show on our hands. The actors were off-book, we had created an opening sequence, the soccer was improving, and each scene was choreographed with static stretches and drills, all paired with textual cues. The energy was up. Like *Silent Sky*, I was ahead of schedule, and I could not be more surprised or pleased. The group was focused and collaborative, and we often ended early each night. I was feeling like a stronger leader and a more skilled director.

With the reality of tech approaching, I knew that I needed to get back text work. Volume and articulation were constant battles for us, especially with the group facing inward for long sections of the play. I went through the script and circled words that I really needed to hear in terms of the story. I then orchestrated the dialogue like a piece of music. We incorporated speed runs into our warm-ups. Erica Tobolski, who played the Soccer Mom, is a voice and speech teach in the

department, so she stepped in as a vocal coach for the production, leading the cast through exercises before each rehearsal and performance.

The week heading into tech was challenging. #46 was experiencing some serious health problems, which took her out of rehearsal for a few days. Unable to figure out what was wrong, I questioned her ability to continue the show. She was insistent she could handle it, and I was desperate to keep her in the pack, but we both thought it might be a good idea to have an understudy standing by. I put a swing in place, who attended rehearsals from that point forward. Our ASM ran lines with her, but I had too much to accomplish with the rehearsal time I had left, so I did not have an opportunity to work with her individually. The original #46 seemed okay, but she was still having some shaky moments that started to affect other members of the cast backstage. I kept checking in with her, but she did not want to be replaced, so I forged ahead assuming she would be fine.

The morning of our first tech day, I woke up at 4:00am with a stomach virus. I was throwing up, I had a fever and chills, and I spent the morning lying on my bathroom floor. I had to be at paper tech by 10:00am, so I got myself together and drove to the theatre. I was still throwing up and was really struggling. Fortunately, I was able to get back home to rest before tech that evening. Tech was smooth, and we worked ahead for the most part. I had hoped to finish it all before the Sunday dinner break, expecting that we would not need all of our allotted tech time. However, we had a really rough run on Sunday afternoon, so I wanted to run it one more time that evening. We took the dinner break early, during which time #7 told me that she caught the virus I had and would not be able to make it back for the evening call. Our supervising stage manager read #7's lines from the house and oddly, the first three scenes were the best they had ever been. The Wolfpack



was back, and I was feeling really good about the show. Towards the end of the third scene, I heard actors screaming backstage to hold. #46 had passed out, so we stopped the show. She appeared from the vom and took a seat in the house. Her mother was there, and I suggested she take her home, but both she and her mother wanted her to stay and perhaps continue. I told her to stay seated in the house and say her lines from there. Eventually she did get back up, but it was very clear that something was very wrong, and I was not sure how to proceed. The understudy called me that evening requesting rehearsal on the night off, to which I agreed. I went in that Monday and worked with her for two hours, both of us assuming that the original #46 would be well enough to make it through the show after a night off. The next morning, #46 passed out during her 8:30am class, landing her in the emergency room all day. The university was now involved, so the matter was taken out of my hands. Putting this actor on stage in her condition was too dangerous a risk, both for her health and for the safety of others. The understudy came in that evening as the new #46. I thought that the cast would be upset with this last-minute change, but instead they seemed relieved. I had not fully considered what it must be like for them worrying about one of your cast members while you are trying to stay in the moment and be with your scene partners. I witnessed them rallying around their new team member they also gained confidence in their individual performances.

Opening night was electric, with all of the usual magic it brings. I was so proud of them as I watched the show. I was moved by the strength of the group as whole, despite those few final hurdles. We did it. I kept giving notes during the run as they found their dialogue with an audience, but they had control of it at that point and no longer needed me. They stopped looking out of the sides of their

eyes, seeking my approval. This production did exactly what it aimed to do—to encourage these young women to stand united, confident, and unapologetic.

I saw the show most evenings and I had many discussions with people that came to see it. A lot of my colleagues and professors had issues with the play's structure. Watching it in performance, I still questioned the story's takeaway. I laughed, I cried, and I enjoyed it, but there remains something a little hollow for me in the text. Perhaps that emptiness is the point, given the age difference between the characters and me. The feedback on my direction was all very positive. One of my mentors felt that my direction was stronger than the play itself. Watching it often, I could appreciate our added details and how thorough we were moment-to-moment. I was in awe of the collaborative energy on stage and I was thankful to the cast, my mentors, crew, and design team. Yet there was something unsettling about it and the way it played out with #46. I hated that she did not get the opportunity to perform in the show, and some of her messages to me were hurtful. I made every effort to stay professional, but my whole heart goes into my work, so there is always some percentage of it that is unavoidably personal. I had to realize that I was their coach, not their teammate. It was a great learning curve for me in setting boundaries in relationships with student actors. A nurturer by nature, I think I allowed myself to get too close with them during the process—always expressing concern for their well-being, bringing them fruit and granola bars on the longer rehearsal days, and being quick to respond if they needed me.

The lesson for me is to be careful about how much I invest. I cannot completely pour myself into every project, and certainly not at my own financial expense and emotional labor. There has to be a separation. When I was pursuing my undergraduate degree at New York University, Frances McDormand came to

speak to our class at the Stella Adler Conservatory. She talked about how you have to be wary of obsessing. Your projects should only be one component of your life and not encompass the entirety of your brain-space. It is not healthy, it is not productive, and it could potentially hinder the work.

I think I possess a need to give these student actors a memorable experience that they will take with them as they begin their careers. As noble as that desire is, I have to be cautious of overdoing it. I have a very good reputation in our theatre department, and in the Columbia theatre community. Actors and designers want to work with me. At the end of three years, this is a very positive assessment, but in the back of my mind there is still fear. I worry that I will not have the idea, that I will falter in rehearsals, and that I will fail and ruin the body of work that I have created. I think that separating myself from my projects will always be a challenge for me. I am hoping that this will become easier once I finish my MFA. I imagine that it will and am looking forward to working in a way that allows more space in my life and my brain to take in other types of art and other experiences, unrelated to my discipline. I aim to find a better balance between my life and my work, understanding that being a director is not who I am, but rather, what I do.



Figure 5.1: *The Wolves* Publicity Photo 1. Promotional photo by Jason Ayer. Scenic design by Jim Hunter. Costumes by Tyler Omundsen. Lighting design by Allison Newcombe.



Figure 5.2: *The Wolves* Publicity Photo 2. Promotional photo by Jason Ayer. Left to right: Rachael Bates, Kate Chalfant, Jordan Postal, Olivia Hensley, Erica Shields, Susan Swavely, Kelsey McCloskey, Amber Coulter, and Kelsie Hensley.



Figure 5.3: #7. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Pictured: Kelsie Hensley.



Figure 5.4: #11. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Pictured: Kelsey McCloskey.



Figure 5.5: Stretch Circle. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Pictured: Full Company.



Figure 5.6: #2. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Pictured: Erica Shields.



Figure 5.7: Let's Hussle. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Left to right: Olivia Hensley and Kelsie Hensley.



Figure 5.8: Ring the Alarm. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Center, Olivia Hensley.



Figure 5.9: High Knees. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Pictured: Full Company.





Figure 5.10: #13. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Left to right: Kelsie Hensley, Amber Coulter, and Rachael Bates.



Figure 5.11: Talking About Coach. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Left to right: Jordan Postal, Kelsey McCloskey, Kelsie Hensley, Erica Shields, Amber Coulter, and Rachael Bates.



Figure 5.12: City Sports Dome. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Center: Susan Swavely.



Figure 5.13: Huddle. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Pictured: Full Company.



Figure 5.14: Torn ACL. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Center: Kelsie Hensley.



Figure 5.15: School Play. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Left to right: Kelsey McCloskey and Jordan Postal



Figure 5.16: Orange Slices. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Back row, left to right: Lilly Heidari, Susan Swavely, Jordan Postal, Kelsie Hensley, and Kelsey McCloskey. Front row, left to right: Erica Shields, Rachael Bates, and Olivia Hensley.



Figure 5.17: #14. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Left to right: Kelsey McCloskey and Amber Coulter.



Figure 5.18: #8. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Center: Jordan Postal.

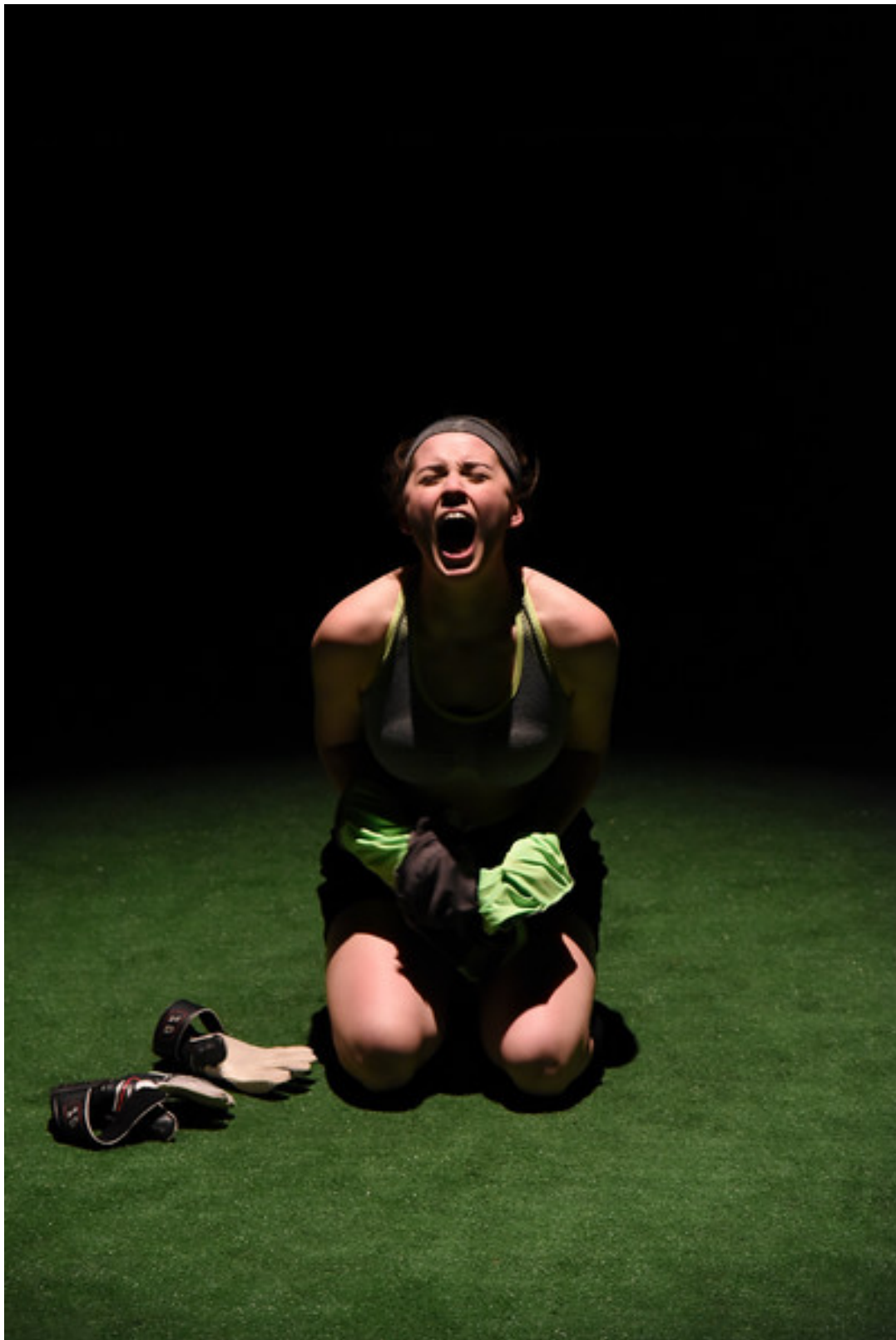


Figure 5.19: Time-Out. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Pictured: Olivia Hensley.



Figure 5.20: #25. Production photo by Jason Ayer. Pictured: Susan Swavely.



Figure 5.21: Talkback. Photo by Abigail McNeely. Company talkback with Mary Tilden.



Figure 5.22: The Wolves Company Photo. By Jason Ayer. Pictured: Cast, crew, and design team. Back row, left to right: Tyler Omundsen, Caroline Clarke, Kelsey McCloskey, Erica Tobolski, Amber Coulter, Susan Swavely, Lilly Heidari, Lindsay Rae Taylor, Kelsie Hensley, Allison Newcombe, Logan Davies. Bottom row, Left to right: Elizabeth Jennings, Jordan Postal, Olivia Hensley, Rachael Bates, Erica Shields, Marilyn Guy, Noelle Tsintzos.





Figure 5.23: Soccer Training. First day of soccer training with Anna Conklin and Shelley Smith. Photo by Lisa Gavaletz.



Figure 5.24: *The Wolves* Promotional Poster. Illustration by Gracie Newton.

## CONCLUSION

As an artist, I have to continue to evolve. Each project is different, each play is different, each theatre, each group of actors, and each design team varies. I have to meet them where they are and take it from there. I have to deal with what is in front of me and never predetermine what it will be. If I do so, I am robbing myself and my colleagues the opportunity to produce our most creative work.

Getting an MFA in directing has allowed me to discover something within myself that I did not know was there. Mid-career and somewhat broken, I am now ignited and charged for the next chapter as a leader, a visionary, an explorer, and a teacher. Directing gave me back something that was lost to me. It renewed my focus, my hunger, and my hope to find a career in the arts. Whether it is teaching, directing, or acting, it is always creating. I have learned the true meaning of collaboration. To be at the helm of a production and having to make so many decisions that affect so many people has been illuminating. Knowing that I cannot do it alone and understanding the value of others' input has been a true gift.

I take this with me: to always remind myself of forward momentum. The clock will always be chasing me, so I have to be prepared, but I also have to move on, no matter what. I cannot rest in the moments I cannot solve—I can come back to them. Sometimes it takes longer to realize certain sections, so I have to accept that and forge ahead. I should learn from my mistakes, but I must not dwell on them. They do not serve me. I have to monitor and adjust and deal with the task

at hand. I cannot get too bogged down in the big picture. If I work moment to moment, the cohesion will present itself.

I think one of my biggest strengths as a director is having an awareness of what the actors need. Whether it is repetition, conversation, or direction, I know what it is like to be in their shoes, and I am sensitive to their needs. This is all in an effort to facilitate an environment that is shared and open, so that we are all on the same page as we tell the story. Actors never hear me say, "here's what you do here," but rather, "how do we do this?" Collaboration is essential.

Over the past three years I have directed seven productions. I have assistant directed four. I have also performed as an actor in four shows. I have taught beginning acting, intermediate acting, advanced acting, and directing to undergraduate theatre majors. I have taken text analysis, Suzuki training, character class, gothic & romantic theatre, play direction 1, 2, 3, and 4, dramaturgy, stage management, costume design, scenic design, lighting design, and a class on contemporary female playwrights. I am forty years old and I have a 4.0. It is never too late to change your path. Growing older and out of my type does not mean the end of my contribution to an artform. Perhaps it is the beginning---a new chapter with fresh insight, wise advice, and invaluable clarity. I type these final words triumphantly, as a confident, driven director, and as a true master of my craft. I am Lindsay Rae Taylor: Actor. Director. Teacher. Artist.

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