

Camino Real

A directing process in sixteen blocks.

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Introduction: Pathei Mathos

I have said for a while that I got my New Yorker card early, when I started going twice a week to therapy. A year into living here, I was at the bitter end of a decade-long collaboration and consoling myself with a relationship that in my core I knew was not right. At the end of that sidebar in the chapter of the year I turned 32, I was, for the first time, an “I” rather than a “we”. This all happened concurrently with my journey through graduate school, and in my isolation and instability I withdrew into a melancholic depression.

Brian introduces the Greeks by discussing the concept of Pathei Mathos, or learning through suffering. My classmates and I would remind each other of this idea on late-night “Get down off the ledge” phone calls throughout the first year. The theory extended itself into advice from graduates of the program: “I learned the most from my worst presentations”; “The only ones I regret are the ones I didn’t really try” are just two of the *Mea Culpas* that I have heard (and felt) over and over again.

In Bryan Doerries’ *The Theater of War*, he proposes that the *pathei mathos* we experience through tragedy is “aimed to arouse powerful responses... in order to facilitate a healthy and balanced response to personal suffering and the suffering of others”.¹ I might extend Doerries’ logic to our program: By undergoing the continuous strenuous stress of the emergency of production, I have developed a more healthy and balanced response to not only my own suffering (and privilege) but to the individual

¹ Doerries, Bryan. *The Theater of War*. New York: Knopf. 2015. P. 37

ideologies, aspirations, oppressions, and fears of those whose lives share in my personal and professional communities.

Doerries defines *catharsis* as “the purification of potentially dangerous emotions, such as pity and fear, of their toxicity”.² He cites a Yale research team’s 1993 coinage of the term *allostatic load* to refer to the human body’s responsive creation of the hormones epinephrine and cortisol and its effects on the cardiovascular system. He proposes that tragedy and its inherent catharsis was “mass therapy for lowering the Athenian allostatic load and recalibrating the city’s response to stress”.³ My three years at Columbia have been a recalibration of my own response to stress and, as such, an introduction to a version of myself that I am still in the process of getting to know.

In her first critique session, Anne points out the strengths and Achilles Heels of each of the students in her first year class. “Matt, your work is full of craft, musicality, and intelligence”, Anne told me. “And your Achilles Heel is, ‘Why are you a director?’”. My time at Columbia, my therapy, my transformation into my mid-thirties, and the distance from my native Midwest have all contributed to seeking out “the” answer to this question.

Pathei Mathos requires presence - physical, spiritual, vulnerable presence - a depth of engagement with the world that in much of my life prior to Columbia and at various low-points along my journey here I ran away from with abandon. At the end of the second year, David Diamond asked my classmates and I to finish this sentence: “You’re 80, you’re on a porch, you light a cigar, you sit in a rocking chair, and you think,

² Ibid. 36

³ Ibid. 37-38

'I've lived a fulfilling and happy life because _____'. By this time in my experience at Columbia, the *pathei mathos* was doing its work on me, and I was often petrified, not being able to handle its severity. *Catharsis* felt a long way off and my allostatic load was off the charts. I rambled through several sentences of convoluted ideals, including the lyrics to a Fiona Apple song ("I just want to feel everything!") and what turned out to be the inverse of one of the fears I articulated in my first class with Anne, when prompted to write down our anxieties: "On my porch I'll be fulfilled because I will have been awake to the changes in myself" and caught a lump in my throat. "You'll be fulfilled because you were present", David Diamond paraphrased. I burst into tears, as I did just now, writing these words and remembering the moment again.

Our greatest weakness - our Achilles' Heel - is also our greatest asset. I am a director so that I might feed my presence, curiosity, and responsiveness - with the world, my loved ones, and with myself. I tell stories so that I might remember and relive deeply felt emotions that I have forgotten, dismissed, or buried and therefore continually become a more awake, balanced, and outwardly inquisitive version of myself.

Only in the articulation of this paper have I gained the courage to state the following: I do not now nor did I ever understand, or even particularly like *Camino Real*. Saying this is painful, but unquestionably the culmination of the *pathei mathos* I have lived in these three years, and is the product of recognition and the fuel for reversal.

I heard the musical duo and married couple, Abigail and Shaun Bengson, describe that there are four criteria that they consider when deciding whether to take a job or not. They are: money, collaboration, prestige, and passion. Each of them carry equal importance, propose The Bengsons, though, if any three are met, a project is “worth” the undertaking. For example, if you are passionate about a project (on its own terms), have the opportunity to collaborate with people you respect, and are able to garnish a certain amount of momentum, or prestige, behind the project, it is worthwhile even if the money isn’t great, because the prestige and the intrigue of the collaboration could pay dividends later. Conversely, a gig might be paid well and offer a certain amount of prestige, but if neither passion (in form of timeliness, desire, or cultural necessity) nor collaboration (which, coupled with good money and industry credibility, could cultivate passion) they will feel unfulfilled. In the case of *Camino Real*, money is off the table, so each of the other three would need to be fulfilled under this logic.

First: Collaboration.

I wanted to work on an American play by a gay playwright. Check

Opportunity to work with a diverse group of actors. Check

Dramaturgical grounding for an interruption by a marching band? Check

Collaboration Is A Go.

Second: Prestige

It’s a hugely ambitious project. Check

Anne recommended it. Check

Third: Passion

...

Two out of four. REJECT.

There are many plays that can and must be told today with a plurality of races, genders, sexualities, and *Camino Real* very may well be one. But it never sang to me, and any song that I experienced in its creation came only through the criterium of collaboration, because there was no real prestige to “Anne suggested it”, only ego, hubris, and bluster.

So it is with a sense of recognition and reversal, those only two things that can bring about catharsis and thus reset my allostatic load, that I present the following analysis of my time directing *Camino Real*.

Camino Real: A process in 16 blocks.

ACT I:

BLOCKS 1-6.

THE DNA

Block One: Why?

Gregory Mosher took me aside one day in June of 2016, concerned about my pick for my thesis, William Inge's *Bus Stop*. He told me that "if you get good actors for that show, it will be a good show." If the actors aren't any good, he told me, I would be bogged down with responsibilities of being an acting coach rather than allowed to direct the play.

Relaying this to Anne, she asked me what I was interested in. "I want to direct a canonical American play by a gay writer," I told her. "I have lived my life loving Brecht, Moliere, and now in grad school, Chekhov, but I have never directed a play that feels like it has come from my queer American-ness." "Why don't you take a look at *Camino Real*", Anne answered. I went to California for two weeks and read the play by the ocean. I didn't understand it, its scale and its opacity frightened me, and I sensed that it would be a huge stretch on my visual storytelling skills, a hunch that ultimately confirmed its worth as a Thesis with a capital T. There is an entire unscripted visual story that happens in the Skid Row section of Camino that I needed to solve. Gigantic set pieces, including the Fiesta, the Fugitivo landing, and the other crowd sequences are sketched

by Tennessee based on Kazan's solutions, but would need to largely be conceived and implemented by me and with my guidance. This seemed to check all the boxes of things I knew I needed to still work on in my directing. Like taking my medicine that tastes terrible but I know that it's "good for me". I would have to learn to fall in love with the play, and, like when one convinces oneself to fall in love with anyone or anything, the fate of the affair was dubious.

I decided to direct *Camino Real* around the same time that Donald Trump was officially nominated to be the Republican candidate for president at the RNC. It was the first time that I imagined that he could actually win. The reality that my thesis production would take place around the time of the 2016 presidential election had been at the back of my mind since coming to Columbia. When I realized that the show would be opening five days after the inauguration of either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump, it hit me that if I wasn't looking at the play through a political lens, the audience would have no reason to listen, no means of engaging with this difficult and meandering text. In my notes, the earliest questions sparked by the text were "What is it to be spiritually fatigued?" and "What is it to live an honorable life?" and also, "What is time? What is eternity? How does time work?" and, most importantly, "What the hell is this play about?"

Early answers to this question included "Camino Real is about a human being who is lost in a world that he doesn't understand, where every interaction he has ends badly, and where the powers that be enact terror upon his life on every physical and spiritual level." I was tempted to see myself and my own brand of Midwestern sunniness

in Kilroy, but the closer I got to the play the less I could imagine anybody with my level of privilege being treated the way that Kilroy is in today's America. So it was very early that I conceptualized my major "why" of the production - in an early note I "to bring together a group of 'othered' individuals who might together find a communal way of dealing with the isolation and negativity brought on by the 2016 election" and extend that sense of community into all the aspects of the production and its relationship to the audience.

Block Two: The haves and the have nots.

Knowing that the play would happen at the Connelly, my first order of business was figuring out how to connect the playing space with the audience. Most of the work I have seen there suffers from feeling so far away. My first idea was maybe my best one and it carried me through many other decisions: Build out the stage to where it meets up with the risers so that the first row of audience is on the floor of the stage. This would be allowed, CU production affirmed, but I would lose up to twenty seats. A dramaturgical lightbulb lit up: maybe there could be audience on the stage?

There are two sides of the street in *Camino Real*: Siete Mares (the Luxury hotel run by Gutman) and Skid Row - home to the loan shark, flophouse motel, gypsy's stall, and other 1950s stereotypes of locales "on the other side of the tracks". Skid row is also more densely populated - Williams calls for nameless vendors, sex workers and other service industry types as well as a homeless population. "SKID ROW IS AUDITORIUM; SIETE MARES IS STAGE - GOLDEN PROSCENIUM.", I wrote. It built in the dichotomy of the elite (those few who sat onstage in the Siete Mares - there were ultimately twelve of them) against the skid-row dwellers (the larger audience inhabiting the traditional house. So essentially the two sides would become othered or estranged from each other. This decision also provided the production with its analogue: This Camino is REAL, and we are REALLY on the Lower East Side, and therefore the play needed to look like the REAL melting pot of ideologies that is the America I love.

At my first design meeting, I proposed all this to D'Vaughn Agu and Peter Mitchell, the initial collaborators I asked to join the team, and they were very excited.

With the modest Columbia budget (I was firm in my desire to not raise money for the production) I wanted to make the most of the real architecture of the space and “casting” the audience felt especially necessary for a play I was having a hard time getting into. I was devilishly pleased to suggest that Gutman would choose the Siete Mares guests by what they were wearing; only the best dressed would sit on stage.

All of these things were great for the general atmosphere of the play, and it even could be seen to be in agreement with the dramaturgy. I wanted to see the humanity in Skid Row, to point out each character’s “otherness” truthfully, but my collaborator Tennessee didn’t care about them or give textual opportunities for characters like Abdullah, The Gypsy, Esmerelda, etc. to be seen as anything other than prostitutes, shysters, and criminals. Just because a playwright presents a diverse cast of characters, that doesn’t mean that those characters will be treated justly through a contemporary lens.

The costume designer I ended up working with contacted me early on, asking for the job. We met and I had an gnawing voice inside me saying, “no”, but a week later, I sent him a text message inviting him to join the team. An inner “no” and an outward “yes” perfectly sums up my feelings of our collaboration every step of the way. I basically only said yes to him, not having the reason to debate. Melville’s melancholic and increasingly inert Bartleby comes to mind, who, when asked to do anything at all, responds, “I’d prefer not to”.

Block 3: Early conceptions of the characters:

Tennessee went to therapy for the first time after *The Rose Tattoo* was a failure. Coming to *Camino Real* while also engaging with a therapist was one place where I felt a kinship with the playwright, and used my work in therapy to also try to divine the underlying needs of each of the play's characters. Tennessee considers himself a romantic - his definition is "somebody with the capacity to feel tenderness towards another human being". In the beginning, I was obsessed with the "romantic characters", but beyond the desire for each of the real or legendary characters to be played by actors who were near to the age that the real-life or literary figure was at the age of their death. (Marguerite and Jacques were played by actors who were 37 and 83, respectively.)

I knew that Kilroy was the "spine" that Kazan had insisted to Williams that Kilroy be the central figure. I agreed. I wrote in my notebook: "We are Kilroy. Thrust into a world we do not understand, robbed of our identities, and confronted with horror, we seek solace in feeding our physical selves. Gutman will provide the weapon and the kill room to murder the past." Reading that note in the clear day of time's distance, I can see that, inside, *I was* this Kilroy: alone, and feeling somehow different, experiencing loss and loss's after-effects, desperate for this moment to already be the past....

Kilroy provides the audience's way into the play. In Williams and Kazan's original conception, the 1953 Broadway audience needed to see themselves in this man. Kazan framed his conception of the play around two questions: "How do I get out of here?" and "How does one die with honor?". For two men living through the era of the HUAC hearings and governmental purges of feared Communists, it is easy to see how sticking

these questions to the text gave a solid grounding for playwright and director to work from. The political climate introduced by Donald Trump made it the best time to be a bigot since 1953, and the first episode of the play is of a man who is shot dead for attempting to drink water uninvited in the Siete Mares. The real deaths of black men at the hands of law enforcement dictated that both Kilroy, who is harassed by Gutman's officers from the moment he enters, and this Survivor, whose death was to open the play, be played by African American actors.

Gutman was forever a mystery. I needed the right actor. I had conceived it with an actor from the program, who later had to back out due to the death of his father, to be a gender-fluid Emcee type, in drag for the second act and performing lounge songs. When he backed out, I had only two weeks to the beginning of rehearsal, and as I got to know the role, it turns out that Gutman, as the power figure, was too "on the nose" as the Emcee. He is much more sinister and culpable in the action; he literally has the power of choosing life and death on the *Camino*. I would find the actor and the conception, but later...

I was most excited, in the early months of preparation, about the Baron de Charlus. I had read in Michael Paller's *Gentlemen Callers* that The Baron was the first gay character depicted on Broadway who was not self-loathing, or in the closet. Indeed, his flamboyance and frankness about his sexual desires is refreshing, as it is dangerous to those in power. I imagined him to have a big disco number, or a striptease, or to host a big dance party that involved the audience to underline the subversive act of being

oneself. Like many of my initial ideas, these stayed in notebooks, and were never considered again.

Block Four: A page of my notebook.

Camino Real's *dreamlike* quality drew me in, but its kaleidoscopic impossibility of structure pressed down on my mind. Each time I would sit down to read and take notes on the play, associations would take over: I would read a scene, write down a hundred questions, become overwhelmed, pick out something concrete that I might research - the original production, Jungian dream imagery, "Notes on Camp" - and put away the script for the day.

I include this material to give a general picture of my mindset going into auditions in service of showing how little my research had to do with finding solutions to the staging of play itself. I read around the text for months, as the bibliography will attest. I am thrilled to have learned what I learned, but I regret not synthesizing it or putting an end to its wandering. The play frightened me and I thought it was a knowable thing, if I could know myself, my craft, and Tennessee's intentions a little better.

[Notes on *Lemonade* (Beyonce):

Never move at a five ([tempos of] four and six are more interesting (VP useful)

Every situation must be iconoclastic AND incendiary

That bikini!

Simultaneity is an innately theatrical tool that asks the audience to pay attention to more than they think they can.]

"The Political and the personal are inseparable

Our inner world determines what happens in the outer world."

Whose dream is CR? Tennessee's? Mine? --COMPLETELY EXPOSED.

"...bringing about a poetic creation in the soul of the reader [<--audience member]"

AIMS:

To expose the political and social wounds of the play [--and of me]

To touch the actual concerns of the audience [and my own]

To infect them [and myself] with the urgency of these issues

To be honest with the play - to get to the core of the text

Realism is not the simple depiction of the world as it looks. It is a view on the world with an attitude that demands change[!]

[We live in the Camino Real - we do not know that hand that guides us, we only know what we see and desire (and, via negativa, who we are not).]

Capitalist realism - presents no danger to the ruling ideology - [extended to theatre:] actors are objects with neither identity nor the capacity to act.

[my intentionality must clarify power relations in a situation]

Foucault: people know what they do frequently; people know why they do what they do frequently; but what people don't know is what what they do does

[Genres in Camino: Melodrama, Farce, Pagan Ritual, Romance, Satire, Comedy, Tragedy, Pageant...]

Williams on Guests of Siete Mares: They are all doomed. They are all interesting. They have the glamour of their crises.

Italicized text quoted or paraphrased from Bachelard: The Poetics of Space, Boenisch and Ostermeier: The Theater of Thomas Ostermeier, Paller: Gentlemen Callers

Block Five: Auditions.

Auditions were held in the last two weeks of October. My audition notice read: “Casting a company of 16-20 for Tennessee Williams’ great early experimental work, *Camino Real*. Especially seeking performers who self-identify in any “othered” community, including and especially those of gender, race, or sexuality. Musicians of any kind and those with any deeply physical theater or movement training are doubly desired.”

Thomas Ostermeier says that “when [a play] works, it is because the ensemble has developed a shared view on the world of the play, which directly results from the personalities involved and their experiences”. With this in mind, I scheduled auditions as a series of group workshops, rather than asking for monologues. I wanted to get to know some things about each of their backgrounds and also learn how they responded to each other in the group setting, so we began with a name game (based on Anne’s CU audition game), with simple but precise rules. I was also sewing in a genuine desire for each of us to actually meet and experience one another.

Next, I explained my initial ideas about the production (versions of what is written above) and I split the actors into pairs. Each couple was given a prompt and the charge to create seven moving tableaux telling a story with a complete beginning, middle, and end to their chosen theme. The two that were most useful were “Forbidden Prom Date” and “County Jail Tryst”. We then layered text spoken by offstage voices into the created movement sequences, many of which were exciting and several of which ended up in the production. Unfortunately, because I scheduled the audition groups

without having met the actors, chance operations took a front seat in these sessions, and while much of the work was immediate and beautiful, it was out of any context of the play and only confused

While I ended up with the performers I desired and an ethic that was solidified from our first meeting, for several reasons I regret my earliest interactions with the actors: My behavior at these auditions was so warm, so welcoming, that I realize now, I was actually the one auditioning - for the role of "likeable director". Throughout my time here, my classmates and teachers have warned me in various ways that I waste my time with this behavior. Reliving and processing it through the writing of the following Blocks of this journey places it in front of me in a visceral and monumental way.

Block Six: November 9, 2016

My site visit at the Connelly was Wednesday, November 9, 2016. My earlier meetings that day had been cancelled; I had taken the dog out after my iPhone had awoken me with the news that Clinton had lost. The dog and I slept through the day, and I went outside for the first time after the sun had gone down. I carried my *Camino* script on the A train downtown, but it stayed closed as I listlessly rode downtown with my fellow New Yorkers, who were also struck silent. After I transferred to the F, I opened the script to a random page and my eyes were drawn to a line of Gutman's from Block 2: "Revolution only needs good dreamers who remember their dreams!" As I re-read the words a fire ignited in my belly.

Tennessee is proposing that the process of divining and following one's desire is an act of revolution.

With a lump in my throat, I walked out of the station at Second Avenue. I was struck by the silence on Houston St. As I walked east, there were fewer and fewer people, those who were out ambled in more of a Midwestern-style stumble than a normal NYC trot. The atmosphere was heavy. The normal warmth and life of Alphabet City, with its remaining artists and eccentrics, was stubbed out and each person seemed to be a vacuum, a black hole, toward whose opacity the space around them was being sucked.

"It feels like 9/11 out here", I heard an awestruck New Yorker tell her friend, a sentiment I have since heard many times when long time residents of the city describe

the feeling on that day. I spotted a friend who was crossing E. 3rd St. He had just gotten a pink triangle tattooed on both of his arms.

After the site visit, the stage management and design teams and I went to eat. The mood was dour. We had hardly spoken while in the Connelly. I shared Gutman's line that had so moved me on the train, and saw its effect on my company. The table came to life. The light designer started asking questions about the placement of the fountain, the sound designer proposed ideas about speaker placement, everyone weighed in on the idiosyncrasies of the Connelly: In the face of terror and uncertainty I steered us toward our work - our dreams - to guide us towards community and forward movement.

How differently my rehearsal process might have been, had I processed and articulated my success in turning around the team's morale by navigating our attention *toward the work* that dreary November night.

ACT II:

BLOCKS 7-11

A CAUTIONARY TALE TOLD BY ME TO MYSELF

Block Seven: The First Rehearsal

At the first rehearsal, the company was 19 people. Only the actors playing Kilroy, Marguerite, Jacques, and Prudence had been offered and accepted specific roles. The rest of the company had all been promised that they would know their roles by the end of the day. The callback process was similar to the initial auditions: I called a group of actors together and we made short pieces based on the text. My aim was to use the callbacks as a workshop to build material to eventually go into the play, knowing that my time in rehearsal would be very short. Therefore, I learned nothing new about any of the actors I saw, and they learned nothing more about their roles in the show. The work we built had nothing to do with the production; trying to remember these sessions now I have only the foggiest pictures of what was done. My “audition” for them continued: I was cast in the role of Mother-Director with all the good will and dilated irises in the world from the actors I invited to join the company. I “saw” them, and they ran toward my look.

That Wednesday night, November 30, the cast was short at least five men, including a hole in the role of Gutman. Most of those present had met each other and we had all gotten to know each other pretty intimately in the audition process (if not the

play), but I took the first 100 minutes of rehearsal to play a “getting to know you” game and talk to them about the play. In going over the rehearsal reports to prepare for these blocks of writing, I highlighted in green the sections of Abraham’s “work accomplished” sections that, in hindsight, were productive, and underlined in red the summaries of work that I would come to call WOT, or Waste Of Time. This first rehearsal was almost entirely underlined in red.

I remember reading these reports during the process and saying to myself, “He’s not representing what you actually did in rehearsal! He is hearing and reporting on only the most general things you say! Everybody is going to think that you’re just wasting time!” As it turns out, in a *pathi mathos* way, I am so grateful to have his impressions of what the work accomplished was. It puts me in front of myself and allows me to really ask what was going on.

After our getting to know you session (which would, by no means, be the final one of those), the company gathered in a circle and began reading the text, stage directions and all, as a round robin. This was the only useful hour of work at the first rehearsal. But the WOT for the first 100 minutes and D’Vaughn’s presence to discuss the set kept us from being able to read the entire play.

The actors were totally game to do this work, and also to hear the play, but the moment they started reading, I went into my own world of anxiety: “*They are all expecting you to tell them what roles they’re playing! Why haven’t you done this yet?*” I stopped paying full attention to them and got out my cast list. As they finished Block six, it was 9:30PM and the moment of truth was upon us. I stood in the center of the circle

and told everyone their roles. Everyone left, hugging me and each other. It was still a love fest.

On the rehearsal report I wrote, in red, “lack of patience; lack of cohesion”. This was my only time seeing the entire company until the final night of our December rehearsals. Consequently, the entire play was never seen in one day until Sunday, January 22, our final rehearsal before an audience. The missteps I took before rehearsal even began (relying too much on hunches, researching around the play rather than digging into it, worrying about everybody in the world’s perception of me, neglecting the fact that I did not want to direct this play) were all painfully visible to me in this first rehearsal, and the vastness of the piece and my terror in its shadow kept me from breathing deeply and taking my own temperature.

Block Eight: 26.5 out of 40.

My slot in the Connelly dictated that I would need to hold one third of my rehearsal time (40 out of 128 hours or 11 out of 30 rehearsals) before the Christmas break. At the time, I liked this idea - it would give the company and me time after getting to know each other to calibrate and live with the play and the characters without the emergency of rehearsal.

Here are some of Abraham's notes from the December rehearsal process:

“We discussed the importance of memory in the play and especially with the character Prudence.” (12/1)

“Matt discussed how he wants the ensemble to always be doing things onstage, so the audience will “never have nothing to look at”.” ... “Followed by a read through of blocks 3, 4, and 6 and a discussion of them.” ... “Matt brought us back from our last break by playing “Under Pressure” and singled out a few lyrics.” ... (12/3)

“Matt had them write down individually what the world would be in music, a New York City block, color, national holiday,...” ... “The company then broke into three groups and each group developed 7 tableaux based on their thoughts.” (12/4)

“We briefly discussed the read-through we did on Saturday” (12/6)

“We then discussed the character’s relationships and how we can incorporate modern influences especially with what’s happening politically in the world currently”. (12/7)

“We discussed how the characters are looking for some form of escape and how escapism applies in the play overall”. (12/8)

“In today’s rehearsal we began in a circle and shared our name, pronouns, where we live, and the last show we saw.” ... “We talked about the characters’ hopes and dreams and how when we’re scared we’re easily distracted and buy things”. (12/10)

“We’ve been exploring all of the different types of birds in the script and we discussed how Gutman could represent a turkey vulture”. ... “Rehearsal ended with a discussion of the block.” (12/11)

“We ended rehearsal with a discussion about how to depict Kilroy in the patsy costume as well as the word “patsy”.” ... “This was our last rehearsal before our two week winter break. The company will continue discussions outside of rehearsal”. (12/13)

We “discussed” many things in December. By a rough calculation, we spent 26.5 of our 40 hours, or $\frac{2}{3}$ of our time “in discussion”. Looking at this now, in addition I am prompted to wonder what my underlying drive was in these rehearsals. It goes without saying that I was unprepared to look into the specifics of the text, but I have to look more deeply at what I was really doing. It seems like I was saying, over and over again, “I will see you! I take you seriously! You can trust me!!”. I still had not taken over the

room as the company's director, I was still too busy being its mother. (My own relationship to "seeing" and "being seen" being extremely complicated by my relationship with my own mother, and in many ways, my behavior in the process of making *Camino Real* was a corrective for my own life - I wanted to get to know *them* and help them to get to know their characters.)

Unlike the evening after the election, when I went to the play to escape the confusion and fear of the world, my rehearsals in December were about losing myself in the world around me to escape my confusion and fear surrounding *Camino Real*.

My warmth, my diplomacy, my careful listening and desire to bring out the best in my performers are some of my greatest assets as a director. But they become my greatest hindrances and incite my greatest wasting of time when I prioritize these qualities for their own sake, rather than treating them as part of the contract that people enter into with me. It is my great fortune that people enjoy being in the room with me, so my charge moving forward is to put all of these qualities to work *on the work*.

Block Nine: Some Bright Spots.

One thing that kept me from despair in December was the relationship I developed with the man who played Gutman, Cecil Baldwin. Finding Cecil, of the in-some-circles famous podcast, Welcome to Nightvale, was a great fortune. I had had a piece of advice to get an actual news anchor to play the role, and Cecil's character on Welcome to Nightvale is "The Announcer". He was completely uninterested in the kind of relationship I had with much of the rest of the company, and therefore his and my work was always practical, and he would call me out if it wasn't.

Because he was also present in the room, he tried shit, which I could respond to, and build upon. The problem with being a mother in rehearsal is that no matter how much one tells her children that she wants them to be autonomous, they have been conditioned to just be as good and as nice as possible. They *want*, they *need* that warm look from mama, so they pacify themselves and await instructions.

My relationship with Cecil, as well those with the few other "seasoned" actors in the cast, grounded me then and allows me now to see the version of myself that serious actors trust.

In the period between rehearsals, one of the actors, who was home in Texas for Christmas, went to the University of Texas Austin Library, who holds all of Tennessee's drafts of *Camino Real*. He scanned ten different versions and fragments of the script, which I devoured. Also of great use and interest was the prompt book to the original production, which I made a copy of from the Performing Arts Library at Lincoln Center. From this research I added lines that Tennessee had written and restructured the

opening of the show, which opened with the death of the Survivor. This work over the break brought me back ready to work and with some structure under which to do it.

Block Ten: Signs of life.

While the rehearsals in December were marked up in mostly red in my analysis of the rehearsal reports, January's reports had significantly more green. This is due in many ways to the addition in the room of Cristina Ramos, whom I, knowing I was in over my head and concerned about actually getting through the play, brought on to join me as the fight choreographer. For the first week back in January, Cristina and I ran two rooms simultaneously, sometimes also sending a third group off to rehearse with the fight or dance captains. These rehearsals were thrilling for me, and I think for the whole company. We would break off, develop work, and come back together to develop and concretize these huge sequences.

In addition to staging drafts of the Fugitivo sequence, the Fiesta, and proposing storylines and business for the Skid Row actors to develop, her presence allowed my mind to focus on the text and the relationships between the principal characters - to quiet down the noise of the external action so that I could get a handle on the situations that the characters were going through.

This newfound spaciousness gave me the fortitude to search out the polarity between Kilroy, who wants to live, but must die, and Gutman, who wants to die, but must live. It was around this time, too, that revelations like this one began to provide enough information about the characters and the situations themselves that I could take a greater interest in the play. I didn't fall in love with the play, but in falling in love with the humans and a bit with my own ideas, my passion for unlocking the situations was fueled.

I have realized also that I am totally capable of devising all of the staging that Cristina made - I will describe how later, when I discuss my eleventh-hour restaging of the Fiesta sequence - but I have also realized, through my miseries in the *Camino Real* process, that my biggest job, *long before* starting in the room with the actors, is to find and propose structures to impose on staging. I am reminded of and haunted by Anne's advice for devising: Always propose that the company find solutions but *always* have your own already worked out.

Block Eleven: Nursie. Or, An unrehearsed one act play.

Block Twelve of *Camino Real* is a thirty-minute play with four characters. I took early notes that it should have the comic timing of an episode of *I Love Lucy!* I had the idea that in the third act of the play, which Block 12 began, the media that had been surrounding the audience throughout the play would reify itself to become the actual mode of playing in the final act. (“We were watching the reality show, now we realize we *are* the reality show.”)

In a vague nod to Tennessee’s original “man in a severe lady’s dress and wig” conception of the role, I cast a 65-year-old Jordanian drag queen named Sultana Lipps in the role of Nursie. I met her one night while having dinner in the East Village in a restaurant where she was having a release party for her new music video, “New York, or Amman”. The ridiculousness of her performance in the video thrilled me - I couldn’t look away. She was Nursie. I introduced myself to her, she offered her hand for me to kiss (I did) and explained the play and the role. “I’m very interested” she told me as she searched her purse for her business cards.

Sultana was unable to join us until the first rehearsal of her scene (she was the true diva of the production) at which she arrived full drag and with an exceptionally fabulous and short skirt. She knew how to make an entrance. I was heartened.

I attribute the sentiment “Be careful who you go to bed with, that’s who the baby’s gonna look like” to Brian and it couldn’t be more fitting for this casting decision. We got down to reading Block 12, and Sultana’s lack of technique deadened the room with the same force as her entrance had excited it. From that moment, through to the

closing performance, Sultana was truly clueless. Things that I take for granted, like, of course she knows to speak the words following her character's name aloud, or, she'll say her lines while onstage, were not a part of Sultana's understanding of rehearsal or performance.

I have long fetishized bad performers, reasoning that the "real" that they bring to the stage is more interesting than the artifice of a mediocre actor. There is a certain trueness to this, but it also puts me off the hook if the performance isn't any good. This professed deference to the "real" removes my culpability while simultaneously demeaning another human being.

Block 12 never really got rehearsed. I never took the time to work the timing of the comedy or the real of the situation, and so the performers played to the payoff, rather than letting the payoff be earned through the work. In other words, they knew the scene was "comic" so they played to what they thought were the "jokes".

But the ultimate joke was on Sultana, and I regret that deeply. I made a scene that ended up being on the brink of collapse every night - if Sultana brought out the wrong prop, the other actors weren't well rehearsed enough to "cover"; It is a testament to the actress playing the Gypsy that in the final performance she found a rhythm that earned her an incredible presence from the audience.

It's sort of like bringing someone home who you suspect might be crazy and having sex with them anyway. Use protection, because that baby is gonna be nuts. In my work, that protection is going into an audition process prepared and taking special care auditioning any "real" people I intend to bring into a production so that I am not

exploiting them, making a decision that is detrimental to the company, or absolving myself of responsibility.

ACT III

Blocks 12-16

“...for time is the greatest distance between two places.”

Block Twelve: Emotion vs. Idea: Staging with Music

I love visual art, and it is a helpful mode for communicating ideas with designers with whom I am collaborating, but when I am in a gallery, or looking at an exhibition catalogue, I can only point to something that is technical, like the “That’s Vice” guy from Miami Vice. Aesthetically, it is helpful, but it is not the vehicle through which I can see or hear what’s really going on in a play. It only gives me ideas. Robert Lepage says that his process always begins with an emotion, rather than an idea. Philosophy, like visual art, can provide ideas; One of the great things I will carry with me from Columbia is my new love and aptitude for the study of philosophy, but one of the things that my process on *Camino* teaches me is that the ecstatic emotion I might feel at understanding a passage of Jung or Lacan might inspire my actors’ respect, it also might inspire eye-rolls and it certainly doesn’t stage the play. It is also in the realm of idea, or theory, and I need to engage emotionally, and from the start.

Music touches my emotions first, and always. It is my inspiration, and, in the staging of *Camino*, it was my salvation. It is the structure to which, in the final days of rehearsal, I grounded and molded the text, and it helped me to create some of the visual imagery in the play I am proudest of.

It was the final rehearsal before tech, and I hadn't staged the final two blocks of the play *at all*. We had built a draft of Block 15 in rehearsal, but I knew that it was all garbage. For a couple of weeks, I had been listening to the second movement of the Brahms Second Symphony, and had in my head and on paper worked out how each section of Blocks 15 and 16 would fit if underscored by the piece. I would sit in my house reading all the roles, and make visceral emotional associations with the music. I was a little embarrassed and glad to be all by myself, because each time the music reached its climax, and Kilroy realized he was dead, I would weep. There was a part of me that loved the idea of the underscoring, but another that thought, "that can't work". But it was the final rehearsal and I didn't have another idea, so I sent the key with the minutes and seconds to the sound designer, showed up to rehearsal, and we worked backwards from the final 70 seconds of music (Don Quixote's entrance) adding on and repeating through to the end each time.

The structure of the music acted as an intermediary of precision between me and the cast. I couldn't lie to them and tell them they were amazing; they were executing the staging with the music, or they weren't. We continued to stage backwards until the beginning of the movement, which coincided with Kilroy's death battle with the Streetcleaners. Something about the exquisite pressure and the great sense of goodwill among the cast clicked, and the end of the play existed, immediately, and movingly. The cast also had to bring themselves to the piece, it involved the full company, but the music gave me the verbal vocabulary and the grounding to clearly incite them to play.

If I were to go back in, I would have removed the sound cue for performance. It ultimately distracted from the final, beautiful text, and I believe that it would have lived in the cast's collective imagination and continued to do its work in its absence. In my next process I'll begin with this method.

In my directing, I need a draft, as early as possible. Like with writing, the terrifying, violent act of making the first draft is the only way for me to know if it is precisely what I mean, or not. At the rate we flew in this rehearsal, I could have staged the entire play twice in the 26.5 hours we "talked" in December. I should tattoo 26.5 on my left index finger, the one I raise to my mouth when I am postulating extempore.

Block Thirteen: Alive in Tech

The structure of tech also breathed life into me and the cast. “I like Tech-Matt”, one of the actors said, as I finally found my voice as the leader of the process. Sequences that had made me pull my hair out fell into place efficiently and joyously. The fiesta, which had lived in the rehearsal room, was dull and pointless. In three hours, I completely restaged and re-scored the four sections. We learned in tech that we hadn’t created a solid dramaturgy for the upper playing space under the false proscenium, and so created one on the fly. (This is an oversight that I wouldn’t choose to repeat, and one that we didn’t satisfactorily solve.)

But in general, the play existed as it was seen because of the spark that I felt and was able to communicate to the cast in an extremely short amount of time. But the things that I had to solve in that moment of emergency I can carry into the initial period of my future processes.

Block Fourteen: Performances

The performances were remarkably consistent, especially considering the number of decisions that I made and implemented in tech. I somehow never lost the company, though I am very lucky that the first audiences were as receptive as they were. Between the dress rehearsal and the first performance, the First Act lost five minutes, but the rest of the acts ran the same length (or within thirty seconds of each other) each time they were performed.

After the second performance, I had to quit watching Block 12. I generally took a break for the first $\frac{2}{3}$ of the third act. It was too hard for me to watch a thing that I couldn't fix, over and over again. Importantly, I didn't watch any of the Saturday matinee performance. It is the first time that I have missed a performance of something I directed. It was fantastic.

Block Fifteen: There are some useful German words.

If I am a director so that I might be present to the world around me, I need an articulated structure for how I might achieve this level of presence. While recently on a working trip alone in Germany, on a meandering walk through Berlin I came upon a beautiful building with no visible sign, but on closer look, a small plaque read “GIZ - Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH”, or “German Society for International Collaboration”. This is a company that works with the German government to “[achieve] its objectives in the field of international collaboration”.⁴ There is a lovely metaphor for the director in the aims of this company: The director searches out a working vocabulary to excavate the objectives of a play and instills this vocabulary as a structure or a form to aid in the collaborative process.

Googling “gesellschaft” I found a wiki on the concepts of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, translated into English as community and society, which led me to the 19th-Century theoretical sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies’ *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*⁵, a “seminal” 1887 work seeking to explain political structures as “phenomena and fields of meaning visibly or invisibly linked to all aspects of human life”. Tönnies “relates political behavior to psychology, social structure, economic process, natural law, religion, [and] language”⁶, which encapsulate all of the roots of the issues that theater

⁴ GIZ website: https://www.giz.de/en/html/about_giz.html

⁵ Tönnies, Ferdinand, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (Community and Civil Society). Cambridge University Press. 2001

⁶ Ibid p ix-xi

has sought to help explain since the time of Aeschylus. Maybe one of the director's jobs is Practical-Theoretical Sociologist.

Tonnies defines community as a “social group brought into existence by [a] positive relationship envisaged as functioning both inwardly and outwardly as a unified living entity”, or “*verbindung*”, which can be translated as “union, fraternity, association, connection, combination, alliance”...*Gemeinschaft* is “all kinds of social co-existence that are familiar, comfortable, and exclusive”.⁷

A company working on a play is a *gemeinschaft* in the each of the above ways of defining *verbindung*. I especially like combination, association, and union. Each member of the company adds intrinsic ideological diversity to the combination, brings her or his own associations, unionizing under a common goal - the production. *Gemeinschaft* means “genuine, enduring life together” while *Gesellschaft* (society) “is a transient and superficial thing”.⁸ Therefore, then, the ultimate aim of my rehearsal process relates directly to *Gemeinschaft* so that it might indirectly influence the *Gesellschaft*.

My production of *Camino Real* only means something in the world if I intend at every juncture that it does. I learned that I never need to worry about the culture of the room again. As I have been told and in my heart I know to be true, a joyous working culture is “in my DNA”. And the work gets done by doing the work, not by cultivating an in-house funhouse.

⁷ Ibid p 17-18

⁸ Ibid p 19

Block Sixteen: "I was thinking of - going on - from here"

On the first day of class, I wrote the following answers to prompts from Anne:

In theater, what do you love, and why?

Companies - training together, deep relationships

Repertory - Theater as church

Mask - Raising the particular to the universal - French notion of sentiment

Lyric Theatre

Comedy within tragedy

What are your strengths?

Creating a culture

Talking to actors

Musicality/use of music

Images/Connections

What are your weaknesses?⁹

Making the first brush stroke

Translating theory/discussion into action

Breaktaking/lack of endurance

What is _____ to me?

What is important? What matters?

Making work that is a communion between audience and performer

Kindness, being a human, positivity

Music, education, reading

King Lear

Empowering the oppressed

Living in another's shoes

Allowing for mistakes

Sex, eating well, play

What worries me?

Akrasia¹⁰

Not smart enough

Not being awake to the changes in myself

My relationship to Kyle¹¹/Future of our collaboration

Family problems

⁹ Anne, your answer to this question slapped me in the face because they seemed to be the underlying problems of each of my own: laziness, impatience, distraction.

¹⁰ Akrasia - the state of mind in which someone acts against their better judgment through weakness of will.

¹¹ Kyle Cadotte was my partner in The Bricklayers from 2007-2014

“The point is not to direct someone, but to direct oneself.”

All my life I have been hungry for knowledge, for ideas, for vocabularies to help me to understand and explain the world. Without such frameworks and structures, I tend to diminish myself and use gestures and body language that put me in my own little corner. One of my stump speeches in graduate school was that I want to be an artistic director “so that I can “pass the microphone” to as many ‘othered’ individuals as possible and still have space for my own projects”. When I say this last bit out loud, I raise my shoulders and bring my hands close to my chest, as if protecting a tiny infant close to my body. When I told Anne this, she pointed out this body language: “You don’t need your own little corner,” Anne told me. “You need a yard! I like that idea because a yard generally has a swing set.” “And a barbeque!”, I added.

My classmate and friend Ari Rodriguez has encouraged what he has called my inner “philosopher-musician”, referring to my description of one of my heroes, Dr. Robert Scholz. Dr. Bob, as he was affectionately known, is a now-retired conductor and teacher at St. Olaf College, where I was an undergraduate. He was the first person to articulate to me that the underlying why of art-making is to propose an argument, that ethic precludes aesthetic, that the “perfection” sought after is secondary to and in service of the communion between artist and audience. When my work is meritorious, it is because I have followed his edict that art equals engagement. But in my three years at

Columbia I have discovered my vocabulary and and strengthened my acuity while gaining a sense of spaciousness and the courage to be present to myself. My *pathei mathos* has run its course, for now, and it's sunny today in New York. The things I was afraid of when I came to Columbia are the things I am still afraid of, but the things that I cared about then are the things I still care about now, and I have learned a vocabulary to help me to combat the fears and another to underline those things I value.

I received some feedback after the show that I made a play “where water arrived to a land that once had been barren”. As we rehearsed the end of the play and at each of my nightly pre-show “break a leg”s, I urged the actors to really play in the water - to imagine what it might really be like to experience the ecstasy of playing in a fountain. It was viscerally moving, and it is the positive image I will carry alongside this cautionary tale of the time I directed *Camino Real*.

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