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Make No Assumptions: An Invitation to the Theatre

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Make No Assumptions: An Invitation to the Theatre

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Thesis

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my loving, patient, talented, beautiful and supportive wife,
Erin Barlow.

“The enemy of art is assumption”

-Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares*

“An actor can only be guided and inspired by someone who is whole-hearted in his
creative activity.”

-Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*

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Abstract

Make No Assumptions: An Invitation to the Theatre

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This essay is an in-depth look at my how my desire to make no assumptions with regard to creating art led me to *invitation* as a guiding principle when directing for the theatre. This thesis will cite examples from three productions I've directed as a Master of Fine Arts candidate in the Department of Theatre and Dance at The University of Texas at Austin.

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INTRO

Who is your audience? This is the question that as a director I am constantly wrestling with. In countless books and articles dedicated to the craft of directing, I've been told that in order for me to direct a play, I have to know my audience so that I can craft the play to speak to them. Assuming who the audience is can lead to assuming what an audience wants to see. If you assume what the audience wants to see, then as a director, you can steer the action of the play towards a bias that may be in conflict with the playwright's intent. Worse yet, you could create the piece in order to please your audience rather than provoke response. Theatre that does this is often called "safe" because it backs away from portraying the truthful complexities of humanity that could provoke and challenge an audience.

This idea of knowing your audience has become problematic for me because it is asking me to make assumptions about the identities of the people walking through the door and to create art in a very specific way to speak to this assumed audience. Our world continues to become more diverse and there are groups of human beings that are being alienated by the theatre. Plays are losing their potency due to "safe" performance decisions designed to please. In order to be a director that wishes to play a vital role in theatre's evolution, I need to do two things: create theatre that makes no assumptions about the people in attendance, and direct the plays so that the storytelling accurately mirrors the complexities of human existence. This includes an ever-growing and diverse population. The best way for me to achieve these goals is by creating invitation. Invitation is not just a passive act of requesting somebody's presence. It can mean to

remove obstacles or to strengthen the possibility of something happening. Invitation also means to attract, allure or entice. The strongest definition that I discovered defines invitation as a provocation. A provocation is an action or occurrence that causes someone to begin to do something. I see provocation as an ideal to constantly strive for in my work. If somebody attends a production I've directed and are consequently provoked to take some real world action, then I have used the art form of theatre as intended, to be an agent of change.

In this thesis I will demonstrate how I use various interpretations of invitation in my directing work to diversify audiences and stages of the future through provocative storytelling that is relevant to the world we live in today. I will use examples from three productions I've directed at UT: A new play for young audiences by fellow graduate playwright, Gabriel Jason Dean, called *The Transition of Doodle Pequeno*; an original adaptation of Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, *The Scarlet Letter* by fellow graduate playwright, Sarah Saltwick; and William Saroyan's 1941, rarely produced play, *The Beautiful People*.

Invitation through Casting

There are two specific ways that I use casting as an act of invitation. One way is by choosing actors whose presence will clarify storytelling. Productions that are not mindful of casting choices can create storytelling obstacles. A storytelling obstacle is anything that takes an audience out of the play causing them to think about something other than the story. For instance, if I cast a family that does not physically look as if they could be related, I run the risk of creating a storytelling obstacle. If there's a significant difference between the actors' ages and the characters they play, it has the potential to pull audience out of the story. I would rather not give the audience an opportunity to question the plausibility of a casting choice. I'd rather they spend that time invested in the story.

In a university environment, age can become a particular casting challenge. In the university environment, a director is tasked to populate plays that often contain characters that cover a wide spectrum of ages with a talent pool consisting of actors in their early twenties. A primary tool of the actor in portraying roles is the ability to draw from past experiences. For this reason actors often have an easier time portraying characters younger than themselves versus having to portray older characters. Playing younger is often more plausible since the undergrad actor can call on past experiences. Playing older is trickier since there is no internal familiarity for the actor to access because they simply lack the life experience. From an educational perspective, I don't believe it's in the best interest for undergraduate actors to be worried about playing ages that are out of reach. A large part of the focus for an undergraduate studying acting is strengthening the ability to

filter a character's given circumstances through honest portrayals of themselves.

Knowing I was going to predominantly be working with students from The University of Texas, I wanted them to be able to strengthen their craft by taking away the pressure to play an age that is not their own and encourage them to bring their current selves to the roles that they are playing. When playing somebody young, I encourage actors to use their current selves to not play age but capture a youthful spirit, which is often inherently present in actors of this age. This was the case with *The Transition of Doodle Pequeno*. When playing somebody older, I encourage young actors to use their current selves to consider status rather than age. Having a young actor play higher status to another character on the stage can often provide just enough of the illusion of older age without pressuring the young actor to adopt a gravelly voice or slumped posture. This was the strategy I often used in *The Scarlet Letter*.

The Transition of Doodle Pequeno tells a fantastical tale of a young boy named Doodle Pequeno who is left alone on Halloween night by his working mother in his brand new apartment. There, he interacts with his imaginary pet goat, the kids of the neighborhood and the mysterious old caretaker of the apartment complex. Discussion with playwright Gabriel Jason Dean revealed that two of the roles needed to be ethnically specific, which left four roles open to whomever was best suited for them. Four actors were cast as young kids. There was also the character of Valencia the talking goat, which was magical and could be played by any age/type. Finally, there was one character, Baumgartner that was an old man. My challenge became how to cast this production so that the audience could visibly see an age difference between the young kids and

Baumgartner. I was able to cast an older grad student who happened to be available for the role of Baumgartner. None of the actors were actually the ages of the characters they were portraying. The actor playing Baumgartner was about ten years older than the undergraduate actors, which was enough of a contrast for him to appear visibly older on stage. This casting choice was a way for us to invite the right tone and visual look for the play without having the student actors feeling pressured to play age.

The second way I use casting as an invitation is by populating the play's cast with diverse human beings. *The Transition of Doodle Pequeno* is a wonderful tale about friendship aimed at young people. It contains powerful subject matter such as bullying, gender identity and the power that language has to do significant damage to another person. Having this story delivered by a community of artists made up entirely of ethnically diverse actors (biracial, Latino, and Asian-American) invited the audience to see their experiences reflected on stage. In our rehearsal room, the actors often spoke of their personal connection to the material, having at one time or another been the victim of society labeling them according to their ethnicity. This built a fierce commitment to the play and to one another, along with inviting audience members to attend a production that was as diverse as the cast.

During my second year of graduate school, I had the unique opportunity of being paired with fellow graduate student, playwright Sarah Saltwick, who was charged with creating the script for an adaptation of the novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. Similar to *The Transition of Doodle Pequeno*, *The Scarlet Letter* deals with a judgmental and often hypocritical society whose insistence on people adhering to fixed definitions of morality

carries harmful and deadly consequences. The challenge for Sarah and me became how to activate this strong, universal theme so that it could resonate with a modern audience.

The novel places emphasis on the main character Hester's act of adultery, which by today's standard no longer feels like a great crime. Hester believed her husband to be dead, which led to her affair with the town minister, Arthur Dimmesdale with whom she had a child. Today, it is not uncommon for children to be born out of wedlock and ministers are often able to have romantic relationships. There is nothing in the novel that suggests the minister need be celibate. This act of adultery no longer felt timely. What did feel timely was how society's moral judgment, still alive in our society today, could affect Hester's young child. Sarah wrote the character of Hester Prynne's daughter, Pearl, to play a large part in the driving action of the adaptation. I employed a similar strategy I used for *Doodle* where I surrounded an older actor with younger actors. For *The Scarlet Letter*, I cast a younger actor and surround her with older actors. If the character of Pearl is the only young child in the entire play, then every actor around her is going to appear older, without feeling the pressure to play age. With the addition of Cara Spradling as Pearl, came the implementation of both casting practices. I was inviting increased storytelling plausibility for our audience along with a younger demographic of audience member that may not have come to see the show had their friend/schoolmate not been involved.

William Saroyan's *The Beautiful People* is about humanity and the challenges of human existence. It spins the tale of a family made up of a father and his children. Jonah Webster, the patriarch, worries that the harshness of society will render his teachings to

his children useless, or worse will make the teachings appear to be lies. Throughout the play, this family encounters and warmly welcomes characters from the outside world into their home. As each outside character made their entrance in the play, I exposed the audience to a different diverse human being starting with a Caucasian actress, then a Latino Actor, a Filipino actor, a Nigerian actor and finally a character of indeterminate gender. These casting choices were a deliberate attempt to continually open up the world of the play to the audience by reminding them that these diverse people populating the same space is a reality in our world today, and that we are all united by our humanity. The presence of these diverse actors updated Saroyan's dated world that at the time would've been populated by all white people. Through the casting, I was able to keep the spirit of Saroyan's themes while creating an invitation to audience members that may not have attended the production otherwise.

Invitation through Dramaturgy

Reviving older stories for contemporary audiences has become more challenging than ever. “Museum pieces,” which are by-the-numbers revivals of plays set in the past, have now begun to lose relevance in the theatre due to our country’s ever increasing multi-cultural society. Most often, these plays are cast with all white people. Some theaters employ the technique of “color blind” casting as a way to strive for more inclusivity. “Color blind” casting, however progressive one may think it is, has become problematic. “Color blind” casting assumes that a performance body is somehow race neutral which can often negate the uniqueness of one’s ethnicity. I’ve witnessed actors of color feeling as if they cannot be themselves when cast in roles created by white people and for white people. I’ve been an audience member who has questioned the logic of a play that uses “color blind” casting to ask me to believe something implausible. For instance, they make us think that there is no scientific way those two people could have parented that child. When I begin to question the plausibility of something that I see on stage, I experience a storytelling obstacle. In order to follow through with my casting choices for *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Beautiful People*, I needed to come up with an alternative way to present these plays so that the casting did not become a storytelling obstacle. The solution I found used dramaturgy (design and text analysis) to construct a performance environment that removes storytelling obstacles and casting exclusivity.

As artists, we have the power to create the world on stage in any way we wish. When tasked with staging revivals of older plays, my first conversations with designers is often about liberating ourselves from the specific time period in history in favor of

creating a new environment that is an amalgam of the past and the present. At its most successful, these new worlds respectfully honor the historical time of the story while offering enough contemporary elements that serve to remind people that the story could just as easily occur right now.

I demonstrated this methodology in *The Scarlet Letter* by steering my designers more towards the abstract by using a metaphor of “church.” The act of attending church felt like an ideal universal frame for the play. Within this frame, I felt confident that we could house elements of the past and the present. It would certainly address the religious themes present in the novel, and some of the key scenes in the play actually took place in a church.

We were in a three-quarter seating arrangement, so there was something intriguing about the audience feeling as if they were all sitting within the church. We added church pews to the set. Three pews would be placed in front of each of the three sections of audience seating. When the actors sat in them, they faced the same direction as the audience. The actors were onstage the entire time. When they were not activated in the storytelling, they sat in the pews, making the entire act of performing this play a churchgoing metaphor. The familiarity of entering a church became a bridge for the audience to experience a story from the past in the present. Casting actors as a group of people in a church communicating the story is different than casting a group of people to be 17th century Puritans. The former allowed me to assemble an ethnically diverse group of actors, the latter would’ve asked me to cast all white or “color blind.”

With an interest in taking this “church” metaphor a step forward, I worked with another graduate student director, and frequent collaborator David Toro, to repurpose the more contemporary music of Tori Amos into old time sounding church hymns. David was able to transpose the modern music into the hymns while also working with the cast to transform them into a church choir. Here was another case of inviting the present to collide with the past in order to further support the world of the play that was being built.

The metaphor for the entire design team for *The Beautiful People* was “nostalgia,” which I define as a longing for something from the past and wishing that you could experience it again. With the increased use of social media and the faster access to photos and images of the past, I find the feeling of nostalgia in our society to be on the rise and happening at a quicker pace. Our society gets nostalgic about things that actually haven’t occurred that long ago. The conversations our collaborative team had around this metaphor fueled the designers to create a dreamier and more magical world with elements from the past and the present living harmoniously to create a strange amalgam. It was strange enough to support the plot but familiar enough to keep the audience from deciding that these events couldn’t happen there. The intimacy of the venue allowed for us to deepen the audience invitation, electing to tuck the audience in the four corners of the main room in this family’s house while still keeping them intimately in contact with the performers and with each other. At times, they could be the mice that Owen and Agnes often refer to, at other times figments of Owen’s imagination or ghosts of the past, who once inhabited this house. In this configuration we were able to increase the

possibility for the audience to feel connected to the family and the actions taking place on stage, absorbing the family's nostalgia and tapping into their own.

Sometimes the actual datedness of a particular play can create storytelling obstacles. Though written in 1941, *The Beautiful People* is a universal story about human relationships and family. Much of the text feels contemporary. What makes the show dated are the specific monetary amounts that are distant from our contemporary understanding of monetary value. I've been an audience member at plays where the moment a dated reference to a monetary amount is made, the older members of the audience laugh (oh my, how times have changed) and the younger members can't relate to it. If the audience members are thinking about the money reference, they are no longer able to connect to the more important information being revealed. In the case of *The Beautiful People*, the dated money references became a storytelling obstacle, lessening the stakes being communicated within the scenes. I could've updated the monetary amounts to be more relevant to today, but I was not interested in a modern day version of the play. With this revival, I was interested in situating the story in a new time that exists between the past and the present. It was important that the audience still understood that money was being exchanged but the specific monetary amounts were not essential to the story. For example, the line "...when the pension check comes please send me two or three dollars" became "...when the pension check comes please send me some money." By removing the storytelling obstacle, I'm inviting the author's intention for the scene to have a clearer pathway to the audience.

Inviting Audience Interaction

Another way in which a director uses invitation in the creation of theatre is to put the performers or the performance in direct contact with the audience. At times, it can be the quickest and most immediate route to connect the audience with the play.

The use of direct address in *The Beautiful People* helped put the focus of the story on the character of Owen, played by Caleb Britton. Even though it was a story about family, Owen's journey felt like the primary lens for this production. Owen starts the play in a rather unique fashion, as he uses his imagination to conjure different fantasies to amuse himself such as car racing and airplane flying. By encouraging Owen to interact with the audience during that opening sequence, we were able to posit the audience as figments of his imagination. This technique fed Caleb the actor as well, so that he could use the audience to actually play off of rather than manufacture invisible figments of his imagination in a blank space. This was also the very beginning of the play so Owen's direct address was able to capture audience attention. Caleb Britton is a very charming and sincere actor who brought genuine sincerity to his interactions, which increased the chances of audience to invest in Owen and his journey within the play.

The biggest moment of audience involvement that I attempted occurred with *The Beautiful People* when I invited audience members to create flowers that would eventually be taken from them and be incorporated within the play. The moment was born out of a need to fill a transitional moment in the play. Between scenes one and two, we needed to set out flowers that spelled out "Agnes," the name of Owen's sister. The collaborative team, in trying to come up with a way to accomplish this, recognized the

opportunity to grab the audience's attention from the moment that they stepped foot in the venue, arrived at the idea that the flowers would come from the audience. Once the decision was made, we embraced it fully. We created a flower making station at the entrance of the venue, complete with construction paper, crayons and markers. We encouraged the audience to make a flower to bring to the play. At a point in time between scene one and scene two, Caleb would collect all of the homemade flowers created by the audience and use them to spell out the name of his sister. We found another opportunity to hear the horn playing of Owen's lost brother Harold, used in the back round to accompany the moment. Caleb was so powerful at connecting with audience members during the first scene that they seemed willing to journey anywhere he wished to take them. It was very satisfying to see so many audience members leaning forward as they watched their artistic flower creations find their way into the performance.

Initially, the moment was created to solve a challenge I was having with staging but it ended up becoming one of the boldest artistic choices in the play. The key was to fully embrace the choice once the decision was made. Then the moment no longer became about the required set change, but transformed into something larger. The moment became about tethering the members of the audience to the play in a very personal way. Those that took the time to create the personal artifact of the flower now had a hand in the creation of an important moment in the play. The time and creative investment that they made creating the flowers were invited into the performance and remained on stage for the entirety. From that moment on until the end of the play, there

existed a constant reminder that the audience was just as much a part of the creation of this story as everyone else involved.

I've attended many theatre events where the audience comfort level with interactivity is assumed. This type of assumption runs the risk of alienating those audience members who were not expecting to take an active role in attending the theatre. Recognizing that some people may not be interested in the arts and crafts portion of the event, it became important to me that audience members did not feel judged if they chose not to participate. I emphasized to the volunteers working the box office to invite audience to make flowers as opposed to making them feel as if it were a requirement. That being said, I did create a situation that left open the possibility of two different audience experiences. Those that invested in the experience of making the flowers may have felt rewarded for their efforts as they became more personally linked to the production than somebody who did not make a flower. Maybe the person who did not make a flower wishes they did. Maybe the next time they go to the theatre where a similar invitation is provided, they might be more inclined to participate. I can only speculate. The most important thing to me was creating the invitation and the possibility for a deeper audience experience.

Inviting Complexity

The best theatre that I see reminds me of the complexities that exist within the relationships of human beings to themselves, others and the world around them. It challenges my understanding of what it means to be a human being. It gets audience members talking. It's the difference between the lights coming up after a performance and all the audience members retreating to their cell phones versus the lights coming up and the audience members engaging in dialogue because they have been compelled by what they've experienced. I seek to emulate this in my work by inviting the complexities of the story and the characters to the surface.

In *The Transition of Doodle Pequeno*, there was a brother/sister duo of characters that were the bullies in the play. They said and did horrible things to another character. A surface reading of the play, led the actors' early choices to emphasize the negative aspects of these characters. They understood their role as villains in the play so they were "playing" at being villains. They had decided that these characters were bad, so all of their lines were delivered with the intent to be bad. If we leave the actors delivering all the lines with this intention then the audience does not have options with regard to how they can respond to these characters. They can hate them and that's where it ends. If the play ends there, then the audience can all agree that they hated those characters and the conversation is over. If the play fails to deliver complicated characters dealing with given circumstances, then the result is often a production that provokes no discussion.

The work in the rehearsal room became about exploring what motivates these characters. It turns out, the older sister Marjoram was being hurtful because of her own

deep fear of being singled out and bullied herself for being different. She is somebody who is very lonely but is unable to truly connect with others unless she is mean to them. Her younger brother, Toph looks up to his sister so much and desperately wants her approval, which motivates his cruel behavior. He thinks he is doing the right thing because he does not know any better. Only by inviting the deepest understanding of these characters were we able to bring these more complicated performances to light. The audience now has many more options when it comes to how these characters and the situation sits with them rather than just disliking them for being bad.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Sarah Saltwick and I had the opportunity to complicate the characters we were creating in order to boost the complexity of the story we were telling. The character of Roger Chillingsworth is the former husband of our main character, Hester Prynne. He returns to town after being captured by Native Americans to find his former wife being publically shamed in the town and holding her new baby. Chillingsworth becomes hell bent on finding the father of the child and seeking revenge. Other adaptations of the novel and research photos often portrayed Chillingsworth as a gnarled old villain, grotesque and wicked. This portrayal would make Hester's unwillingness to be with him easy to grasp. The audience would have no other choice but to hate him. My discussions with Sarah led us to rethink the character of Chillingsworth. What if his motivations of revenge were based on having a broken heart? He escaped captivity wanting nothing more than to reunite with the love of his life only to arrive and find that she moved on without him. This created more a love triangle that put our audience in conflict. I remember some audience members expressing how much they

thought Hester made a mistake and should've chosen Chillingsworth while others argued in favor of the father of Hester's child, Arthur Dimmesdale as her true love. This did not make Chillingsworth cruel actions any easier. If anything, knowing that they were motivated by a broken heart made them more tragic and definitely more complicated.

Theatre has the ability to provoke thoughtful discussion and inquiry about what it means to be a human being. By inviting complexity, I create an invitation for the audience to experience the play in a more personal way that will provoke post show discourse, which I prefer to unanimous agreement.

CLOSING

Our society's digital interaction with one another has increasingly become as important as our face-to-face interactions. There is a directness and simplicity that occurs within our digital interactions making it so much easier for people to make snap judgments of one another with the push of a button. Digital communication promotes surface understanding of complex ideas because the discussions are limited by our capacity to articulate our thoughts digitally rather than personally. My concern is that lines between our digital communication and our face-to-face communication have begun to blur. Now more than ever, society needs the theatre to remind us of the importance of human interaction.

Who is my audience? Without making assumptions I can tell you the one thing I do know about them: they are human just like me and everyone else involved in creating the production. What we have in common is that we are all navigating our lives within an increasingly multi-cultural society. By finding as many opportunities as I can to create invitation, the plays I direct bind the story being told together with the storytellers and the spectators, united by an exploration of humanity.

Vita

Steven M. Wilson is a director, actor and educator. He is a proud native of Pittsburgh, PA, where he earned his BFA in Acting from Point Park University. He currently lives in Austin, Texas, where he is pursuing his MFA in Directing at The University of Texas at Austin. Prior to graduate school, Steven lived in Chicago for fifteen years and worked with many great organizations including Lookingglass Theatre, The Court Theatre, LiveWire Chicago Theatre and A Red Orchid Theatre, where he is an Artistic Associate. Steven is also a company member of The Hypocrites, where he has performed in over a dozen productions. During his time in Chicago, Steven directed the world premiere of Homer's *The Iliad*, adapted by Craig Wright and the Chicago premiere of Mat Smart's *The 13th of Paris*. Steven often returns to his hometown of Pittsburgh to direct plays for No Name Players. There he most recently directed the world premiere of Sean Graney's *Oedipus and the Foul Mess in Thebes*. In Austin, Steven has directed at The Zach Theatre, The University of Texas, Hyde Park Theatre's annual *Fronterafest* and his thesis production of William Saroyan's *The Beautiful People*. You can view his digital directing portfolio at this link: <http://youtu.be/PED4qXoUndE>.

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This thesis was typed by the author.