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Directing A Piece of My Heart

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ABSTRACT

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This document is a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the Masters of Fine Arts degree in Theatre Arts at Minnesota State University, Mankato. It is a detailed account of Matthew Caron's directorial process for *A Piece of My Heart* by Shirley Lauro. The play was produced in the Andreas Theatre and ran from September 17 to 23, 2014. The thesis chronicles the director's artistic process from pre-production through performance in five chapters: a pre-production analysis, an historical and critical perspective, a rehearsal and performance journal, a post-production analysis and a process development analysis. Appendices and works cited are included.

DIRECTING *A PIECE OF MY HEART*

by

MATTHEW CARON

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF FINE ARTS
IN
THEATRE ARTS

MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY, MANKATO

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CHAPTER I

EARLY-PRODCUTION ANALYSIS

This early production-analysis will focus on Matthew Caron's directorial approach to *A Piece of My Heart* by Shirley Lauro, produced by Minnesota State University, Mankato's Department of Theatre and Dance, September 17-20, 2014. The scenic design is by Anna Alex, lighting design by Tierra Anderson, costume design by Amber Kuennen, sound design by Luke Walchuck and technical direction by Jim Johnson.

A Piece of my Heart is a drama inspired by the stories collected by Keith Walker in his book of the same name. The book, published in 1985, was the first to collect and share the experiences of women who served in various capacities in the Vietnam War. Reflecting many of the stories in the book, the action of the play spans a 20-year time period, showing the evolution of the women from their idealistic pre-war selves in the 1960s, through their trials and sufferings during and immediately following the war, to a time of healing in the 1980s. It is this idea of healing that is the central theme of the play.

While this play could be viewed as an anti-war piece of dramatic literature (indeed, it paints an appropriately grim picture of the most infamous war of twentieth century America), it should not simply be relegated to a piece of political propaganda. Furthermore, while the theme of "anti-war" is noble, timeless and universal, *A Piece of my Heart* stretches beyond the universal into the personal. Rather than viewing this play

as strictly anti-war, it is important to see if for what it really is: the story of each individual woman, which, in a sense, is the story of *all* women who served in the bloody conflict of Vietnam. Lauro expresses something similar to this idea in the Author's Suggestions section of the script. She says, "The women are dislocated, fragmented. Something about them looks alike. In some ways all add up to one woman as all tell the same experience. As if one person split" (10). It is from this sense of each woman being a piece of a whole that the style of the play is derived.

The play is clearly fundamentally presentational. The characters are in direct address for most of the action of the show. Lauro suggests that each character has an "urgent need to communicate" their story which is why they have a direct relationship with the audience (7). The audience is not intended to be simply a passive observer of events on the stage. Instead, the manner of expression should engage the audience on a personal level, as if each woman is telling her story to each individual audience member, rather than to the audience as a whole. This style also captures the spirit of Walker's book, where each woman he interviewed simply told her story to him and he recorded it. Their stories were not intended to be speeches delivered in an auditorium but, rather, very personal accounts of their Vietnam experiences. So it should be with the women of the play. Yet it goes even further, for in the play, the stories aren't simply being told, they are being *relived*. It is more than just "let me tell you my story," it is "let me *show* you my story." The women in the play have an urgent need to communicate their experiences that goes beyond recitation of events into replaying them in order to best share these experiences with the audience.

The collective objective of the women, then, is to tell in order to heal. The action of the play can be roughly broken down into four main stages: pre-war, war in Vietnam, short-term post-war and long-term post-war. Each stage of the play has its own set of objectives and obstacles for each individual woman. At each stage, the stakes are high and the potential losses are catastrophic. Generally speaking, the first stage of the play—prewar—gives a glimpse into the attitude of each woman before they were deployed to Vietnam. While each story is slightly different, it essentially boils down to a sense of optimism, patriotism and naïveté. The bulk of Act I of the play deals with the experiences of the women during the second stage: war in Vietnam. This stage can be broken down further into the sub-stages of acclimation to their new environment, integration and, finally, ending their tour of duty. It is during this stage that the women are subjected to the horrors of war. The things they did and the things they witnessed wound them and stay with them for the rest of their lives.

Act II is dedicated to the post-war experience of the women. It is here that the women share their experiences upon returning to the United States. This portion of their stories mimics a typical cultural adaptation curve of a honeymoon phase, followed by crises and culture shock, a period of adjustment and, finally, adaptation. Each woman is ecstatic to be back home following her service, yet it soon becomes apparent that their experience in Vietnam has affected them in such a way that their ability to successfully integrate into civilian life is impeded. They experience difficulty holding down jobs and maintaining relationships. They deal with depression, alcoholism, post-traumatic stress disorder (a disorder not officially recognized at the time) and Agent Orange Disease.

Finally, nearly 20 years after leaving Vietnam, each woman finds a way to cope and begins to adjust to “normal” life. It is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. and the camaraderie surrounding its dedication that ultimately allows the women to feel a sense of closure to this difficult and complicated portion of their lives.

Having provided a general overview of the story line of the women as a whole, each individual character will now be explored for her personal story, beginning with Martha. Martha is 22 years old when the play begins and 42 at the end. Lauro describes her as “strong, self-composed, aura of self-discipline . . . almost pioneer in feeling” (11). These are appropriate descriptors as the audience quickly learns in her introductory monologue that Martha was an “Army brat,” born at Fort Benning to an Army career father and a Navy nurse mother. She has a strong desire to follow in her parents’ footsteps and, as she says, she becomes a Navy nurse to “serve my country and protect our men” (14). The nobility of her motivations are soon put to the test when she arrives in Vietnam with the rank of Captain and is put in charge of the night shift at an American military hospital. She is responsible for over 300 patients, most of which are wounded G.I.s. She is immediately overwhelmed by the number and severity of the wounds, and is advised by the Head Nurse to “build a psychological wall,” and to stuff everything “behind that wall” (39-40). In addition to this wall, Martha begins to drink heavily in order to cope with the horrors. As with most of the women in the story, the Tet Offensive marks a significant tipping point in Martha’s life. During this catastrophic event, Martha is forced to triage the endless stream of wounded coming to the hospital. She keeps track of them on a yellow sheet of paper, which becomes a significant item for the character, as

it figures in to part of her PTSD when she returns home. When she does finally get back to America, she is elated. Yet, she quickly finds difficulty in adjusting to civilian life. She first gets a job as a civilian nurse at Texas Medical Center. There, she discovers a sense of petty competition that she cannot tolerate. She also suffers from depression and a lack of ability to focus which affects her ability to learn new things. Frustrated, she quits her job and joins the Reserves in order to train military nurses. Again, she quits. Eventually, she finds a way to deal with her past experiences by teaching nurses at the VA—specifically, teaching about the treatment of Vietnam veterans. This marks Martha’s turning point. However, she still suffers from PTSD. She has flashbacks to the yellow paper from the Tet Offensive. Through “rap” groups, counseling sessions and journaling, Martha ultimately comes to terms with her experiences. She finds a job as a counselor of women vets. She rejoins the Reserves to once again teach nurses. She becomes somewhat of a public figure, “in the Establishment preaching anti-Establishment,” as she says (118).

In terms of casting, it will be important for the actress portraying Martha to be able to encapsulate the strong, pioneering characteristics Lauro describes. The fact that Martha grew up in a military family, achieved the rank of Captain and had the courage to speak out truthfully about topics that weren’t considered politically correct, suggests that the actress will need to depict the character’s confidence and bravery.

Sissy, who begins the play at 20 years old and is 40 by the end, is described by Lauro as, “sweet, feminine [and] outgoing” (11). Her opening monologue reveals a sense of wanderlust as she describes a desire to get out of her hometown of Erie, Pennsylvania.

She indicates that she “wasn’t into anything,” in terms of college or political activism (15). In fact, she seemed to want to become a nurse for the simple reason that she didn’t want to be a teacher or a secretary. After some successes during her first year in nursing school, she decided to join the Army. Her experiences in Vietnam were very similar to Martha’s—dealing with the mass casualties, the long hours and the constant threat of attack. At one point in the play, Sissy expresses how important it was for the women in Vietnam to be there for the men at all times. She says: “I always think no matter what you’re going through the guys have got it worse—so we have to be there for them after hours—partying, socializing . . .” (59). Like many of the women in the play, Sissy gets romantically involved with a man while in Vietnam. Bill, a G.I., dies by stepping on a land mine while going to urinate. Sissy blames herself for this since he wouldn’t have had to go into the woods if he wasn’t trying to be respectful in her presence. She carries this guilt with her back to America. Another experience that shapes her is when a G.I. snaps a photograph of her simply because she’s attractive and he wants to remember her when he’s in the field. That same soldier is later brought into the hospital with both arms and legs blown off, with her picture still in his possession. It is this photograph that she lays at the foot of the Wall at the end of the play.

Upon returning to the United States, Sissy is also affected by PTSD. She has flashbacks to the choppers bringing in mass casualties when she hears commercial helicopters flying above. She also must undergo an additional trial in the form of Agent Orange Disease. Several pages of the script are dedicated to sharing Sissy’s experience with trying to figure out what is wrong with her daughter, Danielle, while enduring

baffled doctors and an evasive government spokesperson. Sissy eventually finds peace through her faith. She becomes a Born Again Christian, earns a Master's Degree in Pastoral Psychology and sets up her own practice, counseling her patients to "feel harmony" (117).

The actress playing this role will need to be able to capture Sissy's initial sense of wanderlust and an eagerness to do good in the world. The events in Vietnam seem to subdue Sissy's outgoing, warm nature rather than incapacitate it. There is a subtle strength to Sissy that will be important for the actress to understand.

Whitney is a 21-year-old graduate of Vassar College with a degree in primary education. Whitney begins the play with a desire to complete a year of service before taking a position at a boarding school. She is seduced into selecting Vietnam as her destination because, "Saigon's a sophisticated, cosmopolitan city, they say—diversity of people to meet—all walks of life—and they speak French!" (16). Like Sissy, she is also driven by a sense of wanderlust, as she feels as if she is ever going to do something exciting with her life before she becomes a boarding school teacher, it ought to be now. With that, she signs up to be in the Red Cross. While in Vietnam, she takes the Red Cross rules of propriety very seriously and refrains from sexual contact with men. This contributes to a series of emotional issues for Whitney. It begins when she gets involved with a pilot named Bruce, who becomes violent with her when she doesn't consent to have sex. He is shot down the next day. Seeking comfort and some sort of safe emotional relationship, Whitney is driven into the arms of a female friend named Jane. This suggested pseudo-lesbian relationship seems to be motivated by emotional needs

rather than physical ones. Whitney's emotional issues follow her back to the States, where she finds it difficult to maintain meaningful relationships, particularly with men.

Relationship issues aren't the only problem Whitney picks up in Vietnam. She also takes up drinking. Alcohol became both a social norm and a coping tool for many of the women, but it is particularly exemplified in the character of Whitney. This problem also follows her back to America, where she becomes an alcoholic: "I can't stop drinking!" she says (108). Eventually, Whitney attends Alcoholics Anonymous, gets her alcoholism under control and finds closure by leading VA "rap" sessions.

As a college graduate and educated woman, Whitney needs to be portrayed with a certain formality and dignity. Lauro uses the word "aristocratic" to describe her (11). She seems to be driven by a sense of duty and honor in the way that she adheres to the Red Cross rules as best as she can. Yet despite these dignified descriptors, the actress playing Whitney will need to show a complex vulnerability and naïveté that is common to many of the other characters.

Maryjo is the youngest of the women in the play, beginning the action at the age of 17. From Beaumont, Texas, she is the lead singer and rhythm guitarist in the Sugar Candies All Girl Band. She goes to Vietnam with her band because her agent found them a year-long job touring for the troops. Enticed by the idea of money and fame, Maryjo agrees. The use of words like "my" and "me" in her opening monologue suggest a certain self-centeredness to her motivations, which isn't surprising considering her age and the glamour associated with being in band. She says: "Half a million American boys groovin' on *my* music and lovin' *me* 'cause I'd be liftin' the worries of the war right off

their shoulders with *my* love for them . . . Oh boy! Book me on!” (15). The biggest event to shape Maryjo’s Vietnam experience is sexual violation. She hints at a rape in the first act but finally shares the details in the second. Her whole band was raped by a group of U.S. soldiers in a shack in the jungle. When they reported the incident to the officers, the men simply chuckled and ignored it.

When she returns to the States, her band is not paid for their tour. Furthermore, they fail to procure any more jobs because, as the agent tells them, “Too much anger in your voice—tension through your whole body! Clientele in night clubs like sweet sounds. Soft, sexy girls” (98). From then on, Maryjo stops singing, begins to drink heavily and seeks out destructive relationships. Unlike the other women in the play, Maryjo does not have a monologue that explains how she learned to deal with her experiences. Instead, all that is shown is Maryjo leaving her guitar at the Wall “for my beautiful guys! That I sang my heart out to—long ago” (122). Her healing is never explicitly stated, yet it can be inferred due to the context surrounding the end of the play.

Another element that separates Maryjo from the other characters is the presence of her music throughout the first act. She is continually singing songs, ranging from contemporary pop songs to Christmas carols to hymns at key moments during the action. This live music heightens the immediacy of the action, acts as a kind of dialogue for Maryjo and provides a sharp contrast to when she gives up her music in the second act. It highlights the absence of the music in Act II that was so important to her in her youth. It is almost as if Vietnam stole her love of music just as it did her innocence.

Clearly, the actress that will play Maryjo needs to be a singer and guitarist. A folk-like, simple sound akin to the famous female vocalists of the era would be ideal. Presumably, Maryjo was hired not only for her musical talent, but for her looks as well. Therefore, the actress cast in this role will need to be attractive with a certain degree of sex appeal. Lauro suggests that the character should be outgoing and bubbly, which seems to be consistent with the text. Additionally, the character's dialogue is written in such a way as to be conducive to using a Texas dialect.

Leeann is a half-Italian, half-Chinese New Yorker and a self-described anti-war hippie. She enlists as an Army nurse for several reasons. First, her year of service will pay for her final year of nursing school. Second, she feels that she can express her feelings toward the war by taking care of wounded Vietnam soldiers. Finally, she wants to be stationed in Hawaii where everyone looks like her to escape the racial prejudice she experienced in New York. As a nurse in Vietnam, she experienced many of the horrors that Sissy and Martha did. One of the most prominent events for Leeann had to do with the gunning down of five U.S. soldiers. The men were brought through her hospital and all died. Shortly thereafter, the person responsible for the attack—a 15-year-old Vietnamese boy—is brought in. The Head Nurse orders Leeann to treat him, and she violently refuses, attacking the boy and nearly strangling him. Leeann's biggest challenge with reintegrating into the civilian life is her rage. She is unable to hold down a job, she resents the veteran amputees she is caring for, she rages against the Iranian hostages that are freed in 1981 because they got a hero's welcome when they did nothing but sit around, while she experienced hell for a year and was forced to burn her uniform

and hide her military service. Eventually, through rap sessions and counseling she begins to heal. The real step seems to come when she is able to focus her negative energy into a positive cause. She becomes a lobbyist for veterans' causes, including POWs, MIAs, Amerasian children left in Vietnam and victims of Agent Orange.

All of the actors in the play are used to portray a variety of characters throughout the action, but none is as significant as Bien, the Vietnamese housekeeper played by the same actress that plays Leeann. Bien personifies the confusion that the women feel toward the local population. On the one hand, Bien is a loved member of the household. Whitney loves her and Maryjo promises to give guitar lessons to the little Vietnamese boy Bien brings around. Yet Bien also has mysterious connections to the Vietcong and, therefore, is not entirely trusted.

The actress playing Leeann will need to be particularly versatile in order to play these two distinct roles in addition to the others required by the script. As Leeann, she will need to embody the tough, urban attitude she has and transport that into the realm of rage. As Bien, she will need to be quite the opposite—subservient, charming and likeable but not entirely trustworthy. Bien's dialogue is written in broken English, so it will be important to treat that carefully so as not to make a caricature of it. Obviously, the actress will need to be Asian, or at least made to look Asian.

The last of the women characters is Steele. The oldest of the characters, she is 35 when the action of the play begins. A native of Jackson, Mississippi, Steele has already been a WAC (Women's Army Corps) for eighteen years before she decides to go to Vietnam. As an African American, she experienced much racism, as exemplified by an

instance she shares in her opening monologue. She was the only black member of the Army band and was singled out because of it. Yet despite the racism, she exhibited much success before going to the war: she is a college graduate, a French and Spanish linguist, a POW interrogator and in Strategic Intelligence, to name a few. She volunteered to go to Vietnam in order to use her intelligence experience to help save American lives. The experience that defined her time in Vietnam was connected to an intelligence report that she wrote which predicted the Tet Offensive. Yet, because of factors beyond her control (perhaps because she was a woman, or black, or because she said the enemy was Chinese instead of Vietcong), her report was ignored by her superiors. Because of her work in the military intelligence field, she becomes a target for enemy aggression. She was attacked and suffered a severe back injury because of it.

Upon returning to the U.S., she stays in the Army and is promoted in rank, yet is relegated to the desk job she had before she went to Vietnam. This is a great disappointment to her, as she hoped her experience in Vietnam would allow her to advance. Like the other women, she suffers from PTSD, having an episode where she pulled an IV needle out after back surgery and thought she was shot due to the blood that was spilled. Eventually, she retires after 30 years in the service and earns her Ph.D. At the Wall, she leaves the copy of her Tet report as a way of letting go of the past.

Throughout the play, Steele maintains a certain sense of humor and positivity despite her experiences. The actress playing her must capture this humor as well as portray a clear sense of strength and intelligence. As the oldest of the women, there is a sense of maturity and a grounded quality that must be evident as well. Steele is a career

military woman, so physicality will be a strong consideration. The actress playing this character must also be African American.

The last role in the play is the American Men. The actor playing this role will be called upon to portray at least 14 discrete characters throughout the course of the play. These characters are mostly a variety of U.S. military troops from infantrymen to officers, but also include stateside characters such as a gold star father, a TV announcer and Maryjo's agent. These different characters serve mainly utilitarian functions in the play and exist to better illustrate the challenges and triumphs of the women. The male characters are the only ones who never break the fourth wall and are purely representational, even though they are presented in a theatrical manner. Lauro suggests that the actor have an All-American look about him, which seems appropriate. Regardless of his look, the actor must be incredibly versatile and care will have to be taken to coach him in how to make each character separate and distinct.

It is important to remember that each female actor will also be playing multiple roles. Each woman weaves in and out of the stories of the others, portraying important people in their lives at significant times. For example, Martha is also Jane, Whitney's companion; Maryjo is also Danielle, Sissy's daughter; and so on. Furthermore, many of the experiences of the individual women described above also represent similar experiences for the other women. For example, Martha, Sissy and Leeann all experienced similar horrors in their respective nursing wards, yet the action of the play blends them all together in a cacophony of overlapping dialogue and action that is able to succinctly encapsulate the collective experiences of those women. Similarly, the "down-

time” description (noted in the paragraph above about Sissy) is common to nearly all of the women. Again, this portion of the play theatrically blends the experiences together in a way that is consistent with the fragmented-yet-pieces-of-the-whole style expressed above.

A visual metaphor that might help illuminate the overall directorial concept of the show is that of a beautiful picture frame that represents the collective pre-war idealism (to varying degrees) of each of the women. This frame is violently shattered by the horrors, disappointments and losses they experienced in the war. The picture frame is then put back together imperfectly following the war. The imperfection represents the methods by which the women tried to cope with their experiences—alcohol, failed relationships, disease and post-traumatic stress disorder (N.B., while PTSD isn’t explicitly stated as a diagnosis for any of the women in the play, it is the opinion of the director that it is certainly implied by the action). It is finally through the unique healing that each woman receives that the frame is once again put back together in a healthy way. It still bears the scars of its shattering, there may still be pieces missing, but the frame is whole once again. Each of these individual frames could be thought of as part of a larger one as well. When all of the frames are viewed together, a different image is seen. This, in a sense, is how the women of the play relate to one another. Interestingly, none of the women really know each other in the context of their individual stories, yet when viewed as a whole, they all reveal a brief snapshot of what life was like for the women of Vietnam. The directorial style of the show and the design elements should all reflect this idea.

As a presentational show that depends on direct interaction with the audience and the minimization of the fourth wall convention, staging it in the deep thrust configuration in the Andreas Theatre is ideal. (N.B. The department, based on the needs of the subsequent mainstage show, predetermined this configuration.) However, the deep thrust will present many challenges as well. For one, this will be the first time the director has staged a show in this configuration. One of the main challenges will be to make sure that the actors are as visible to the audience as possible. Since the telling of their stories is of paramount importance to the characters, it is vital that they are able to communicate and make a connection with the audience. One of the best ways to accomplish this is for the audience to see the actors as much as possible. There is a tendency among audiences to believe that if they cannot see an actor's mouth, they cannot hear what they say. Therefore, being seen is essential. In a proscenium configuration, bringing the actors downstage, close to the audience can contribute to establishing intimacy (depending on the size of the house, of course). Yet in the deep thrust, bringing the actors down stage can be a trap, as the further downstage they come, the more they alienate the patrons on the extreme house left and right. Yet if they stay too far upstage, this may be counterproductive to establishing intimacy for those patrons sitting in the center section, as it is furthest away from the upstage area. So, the director will need to experiment with blocking and compositions while relying on the advice of his faculty advisor in order to achieve his desired goals.

The design of the show should have the appearance of simplicity, but in actually will probably be quite complicated. Overall, the director sees the lights and sound as the

primary design elements, with costume and set as secondary. The reason for this is that the set needs to be relatively neutral in order to represent multiple locations, both in the U.S. and Vietnam, spanning two decades. The set should also communicate the general change in location from Vietnam in Act I to the U.S. in Act II. Yet, overall, there should be a sense of Vietnam looming over the women, as they are literally in Vietnam in Act I, and in the shadow of its atrocities during Act II.

Since the actors play multiple characters in multiple places and multiple times—all of which shifts rapidly—the costume choices need to be simple, easy to change and readily identifiable. That is, the costumes should visually support the changes of character, so that the audience can more easily distinguish between Steele as herself, and Steele as the head nurse, for example. The costume choices also need to support fast, seamless changes so that the momentum of the action is not compromised in order to accommodate costume changes.

The director sees the show as a cacophony of light and sound. These two design elements should be in constant change, supporting the episodic structure of the play, as well as driving the action forward. There is a sense of momentum to the action, as if the events the women are experiencing are beyond their control. In the first act of the play this momentum culminates in the sensory explosion of the Tet Offensive and in the second act with the healing sequences at the end. The lights should constantly shift in order to illuminate the various presentational moments of the women as they address the audience, as well as the short vignettes of representational action where the stories unfold. Moments of particular interest in terms of lights are the Tet Offensive—where

there will be an opportunity to use a number of lighting effects to simulate the close proximity of the war and the danger the women are in—and toward the middle of Act II, where the women have reached their emotional low as they attempt to cope with their experience in unhealthy ways back in the United States. Lighting could be used during the latter sequences to underscore the hurt and confusion of the women as they struggle to make sense of their experiences.

Sound should manifest itself in a similar fashion to the lights. Ambient sound can be used to reinforce location but it will, perhaps, be more important for the sound to reinforce action and emotion rather than location. As with lights, the two most significant moments for sound will be the Tet Offensive in Act I and the struggle for understanding just prior to the beginning of the healing process in Act II. Additionally, the use of live singing during Act I will be important. Maryjo sings a variety of familiar songs that, as the author suggests, often communicate the subtext of the play (10). The live music also contributes to the mood as well as helps to set the play in a specific time and place—both of which are important to the story.

One final element of concern for the director is the ending of the play, when the women are at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. The Wall represents the time when the women are finally able to come to terms with their experiences. In terms of design, the Wall presents a challenge scenically in that the monument itself is directly referenced and interacted with by the characters. This suggests that there should be a something with which the actors can interact. So, the challenge will be to create a set piece that is able to suggest the elegance and scale of the actual monument in

Washington. At this early stage of production, the director could see this element being an actual set piece or perhaps projections. There are many potential problems to solve with either of these options. A third option would be to simply have no scenic representation of the monument, and instead place the Wall in the downstage area. That would allow the actors to remain visible and open while still creating the illusion of interacting with the Wall.

Furthermore, the entire Wall sequence itself presents a stylistic challenge. It is the desire of the director to ensure that the ending is perceived as a time of intense personal healing and not frivolously patriotic. In no way should there be a sense that the women feel like their service and experiences were “worth it” because they served their country. Instead, the overall sense should be that now, 20 years later, the women have finally been able to come to their own sense of individual meaning regarding their Vietnam experiences. In the end, the audience should be ennobled by the stories of naivety, sacrifice, struggle and healing they witness on the stage.

CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

A Piece of My Heart, by Shirley Lauro, was first professionally produced in 1991, at the Humana Festival of New American Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville. It went on to have its New York premiere on October 15 of that same year at the Union Square Theatre, produced by the Manhattan Theatre Club. Since then, it has had over 800 productions worldwide, including South Africa and Germany (www.shirleylauro.com).

Lauro's play is based on a book, *A Piece of My Heart*, written by Keith Walker in 1985. The book is a collection of interviews conducted by Walker over the course of two years with women who served in various capacities in Vietnam during the war. The stories of the women are presented as first person, stream of conscious narratives, as Walker strongly desired the stories to stand on their own, without embellishment or editing. When interviewing the women, he tape-recorded the session, typed up a transcript and returned it to the woman who was interviewed. The interviewee was then given the opportunity to approve the story or edit it as she saw fit. In this regard, Walker was very respectful of each woman's tale of Vietnam and how it affected her life. The stories in the book have a very immediate and intimate feel, as they are, in fact, the very words of the women spoken directly from their experiences.

This sense of immediacy and intimacy is preserved in Lauro's play through the way she chose to have her characters communicate. The words of the characters are not

so much dialogue as they are direct address. The characters seem to talk more to the audience than they do to each other. Just as in Walker's book, Lauro's characters seek to tell their stories—to share their experiences. The point of both pieces of literature isn't necessarily to push an agenda or celebrate an experience, but rather to simply acknowledge the sacrifices, hardships, loss and, indeed, joy of the many women who served in Vietnam.

Even though both works have a similar sense of immediacy and intimacy, there are differences. Since a book and a play are different storytelling mediums, this is to be expected. One notable difference is the kind of intimacy and immediacy each medium presents. For example, in the book, the women are remembering events that happened up to 15 years in the past. While there certainly is an immediacy present in their stories, it is tempered by time. That is not to say that the experiences are any less vivid or personal for the women. Indeed, in the introduction to his book Walker points out:

During many of the interviews there were long silences on the tapes. They are indicated in the book by a series of dots. But the dots can't possibly describe a moment when, at a dining room table late at night with tears welling in a woman's eyes, a sentence would drift away. (4)

So, even though the stories presented in the book are extremely personal and meaningful, simply reading them on a page isn't necessarily enough to fully communicate the depth of emotion of each woman both during and after her Vietnam tour.

It is in this area that the storytelling medium of theatre proves to be most effective. The dramatic form allows for a stronger sense of immediacy in storytelling.

As discussed in Chapter I, the women in the play have an urgent need to communicate their stories that goes beyond simple recitation of events. The dramatic form allows the women to *show* the audience their story, rather than simply tell it. The play is structured in such a way to present a dramatic arc, interweaving the stories of the women from the book in such a way to provide chronological continuity as well as to build dramatic tension. Whereas in the book each woman's story stands alone and the reader is able to draw connections between them, Lauro's play interweaves and condenses the twenty-six true stories from the book into the stories of six fictional women. In a sense, this makes the stories even more immediate and intimate, as they are unfolding in the here and now, in real time in front of the eyes of the audience.

Due to the condensed action of the play and the composite nature of the characters, the book does a much better job of providing a clearer, more complete picture of these women's experiences. This is to be expected considering the book presents over 300 pages of the detailed accounts of 26 women, whereas the play is just over 120 pages of lines delivered by just seven composite characters (six women plus one man). While Lauro did do a masterful job interweaving key themes and experiences of the women from Walker's book, some liberties were taken that perhaps paint a darker picture of how women were treated in Vietnam than the source material indicates.

It seems that Lauro spends an equal amount of time in her play showing the men in Vietnam being both gentlemanly and gracious as well as extremely sexually aggressive. One instance of the latter is when the character of Whiney is having a conversation with a G.I. named Bruce, where he uses a string of obscenities as he vents

his sexual frustration about Whitney being a “cock tease” (56). The other, more horrifying instance is when Maryjo alludes to and then admits to being raped by American Marines while stranded in the Vietnam wilderness. To be sure, Lauro does balance these negative moments with positive ones, showing the men being appreciative of what the women are doing for them and showing both men and women coexisting in platonic camaraderie amidst the unimaginable pressures of war.

Despite this, it is worth noting that there is very little in the book to indicate the men being as sexually aggressive as Lauro occasionally portrays them. In fact, the vast majority of the women in Walker’s book mention how the men in Vietnam were the ultimate gentlemen, going out of their way to treat the women with kindness and respect. The women account for this by saying that the men didn’t want to do anything to jeopardize the presence of the women; fearing that if they were to mistreat the women, the military would not allow the women to interact with the men. One exception to this is the instance that inspired the “cock tease” sequence above. Penni Evans, a Red Cross worker in Quang Tri, recounts the following occurrence regarding a man she met at a party in Vietnam: “he was drunk but very sincere when he said, ‘You are not doing us a bit of good. All you are doing is teasing us: ‘look but don’t touch.’ You are a bunch of cock-teasers, and you shouldn’t be here” (Walker 281). It is clear that Lauro used this example as inspiration for her play, however she presented it in a much more verbally violent manner than the original source indicates.

Similarly, Maryjo’s rape seems to be completely fabricated for the purposes of creating a more damaged, vulnerable and, therefore, interesting character. The substance

of Maryjo's character is drawn mainly from the accounts of Bobbi Jo Pettit, an entertainer, and Chris Noel, a D.J. for Armed Forces Radio. Neither of these women—nor any other women in the book—communicated any kind of rape situation. This is not to say that GIs in Vietnam did not rape American women, it merely illustrates some of the liberties Lauro has taken in crafting her play.

Besides these two instances (and a handful of smaller moments), Lauro is relatively true to her source material. Most of the characters in the play are based largely on the story of a corresponding woman from the book. This can be seen most clearly in the parallel experiences of the character Steele (the only African American in the play), who was based on Doris I. Allen (the only African American represented in the book); Leeann (the only Asian American in the play), who was based on Lily Lee Adams (the only Asian American in the book), and Maryjo, who was based mainly on Bobbi Jo Pettit. These three are the least composite of the characters, with their stories being pulled almost directly, verbatim, from Walker's book. The other characters are much more of a combination of a number of the original women. For example, the character of Sissy is largely based on the combined stories of Army nurses Karen Johnson Burnette and Donna Cull Peck (whom Walker interviewed simultaneously), with other details of her experiences pulled from the stories of at least six other women.

It is no doubt challenging to try and distill the harrowing, yet rich, experiences of 26 women into a concise dramatic form. Lauro achieved this feat by honing in on parallel experiences. That is, experiences that seem to be common to all of the women, including: their idealism before going to Vietnam; the harsh realities of wounded and

dying soldiers; the moments of camaraderie and friendship; and the hardships of returning home to a country largely ignorant of their experiences and, at best, ambivalent towards veterans or, at worst, hostile.

Reviews of the various productions of the play over the years are generally favorable, acknowledging the need to tell the story of the women who served in Vietnam. Despite its noble mission, the play is not without its faults.

Frank Rich of The New York Times wrote a review of the 1991 New York premiere that was particularly scathing. One of his significant points has to do with the nature of the characters. After acknowledging Lauro's source material, Rich goes on to say, "Though the playwright draws on the words of her actual subjects, her play seems synthetic, like an old-fashioned news-magazine round-up story with archetypal, if not composite characters speaking in souped-up quotes" (n.p.). Rich is quite accurate in his assessment in the "composite" nature of the characters. As already discussed, all of the women in the story were created using selected portions of the actual stories of American women in Vietnam documented in Walker's book. In some cases, Lauro's characters stay relatively close to the interviews in Walker's book, while others are certainly much more of an amalgamation of the stories of several women.

Rich's observation regarding the "archetypal" nature of the characters is also accurate. The women appear to have been written with a certain degree of stereotyping in mind—at least in their initial monologues. For example, Sissy is portrayed as a stereotypical rural, sheltered, young Midwesterner raised in a religious family and

“playing with dolls ‘til [she] was thirteen years old” (Lauro 15) and Whitney is the naïve rich girl from New England motivated by glamour.

Despite his obvious dislike of Lauro’s characterizations, Rich’s observations seem to be exactly what Lauro was trying to achieve—at least in part. She makes no pretense about the fact that the women are intended to be both composite characters and representative of their various disciplines and areas of geographic origin. In her suggestions in the beginning of the play script, Lauro states that there is something about the women that “looks alike,” and “in some way [they] all add up to one women as all tell the same experience” (10). Lauro also suggests that each character should “reflect specific disciplines they were in,” and the “regions they come from” (11). These bits of advice from the playwright suggest that Lauro made these specific choices regarding her characters that Rich so clearly found objectionable.

Rich’s other major criticism of Lauro’s play is how he had his “buttons pushed so cheaply,” (n.p) in terms of the cathartic ending of the play. Of the ending he says: “it allows Ms. Lauro at last to stir up the feelings of grief and anger that she has been chasing all night . . . [but] the feelings evaporated the moment I was back on the street.” He goes on to cite several aspects of the play that led to his negative response. In addition to the criticisms of the characters discussed above, he also suggests that “everything in this play is over-generalized to the point of blandness,” using the case of the single male actor portraying all the male roles in the play as an example.

The observations of Rich are not necessarily supported by other reviews of the play. For example, while James S. Torrens, who reviewed the same production for the

publication America, agrees “the play does suffer, especially at the end, from being a generic story without a particularly strong focus,” he also says that the end produces “an almost textbook catharsis” (40). Nathan Irwin, who reviewed a 2014 production of the play at the Corn Stock Theatre in Perioa, IL, agrees. About the play he says, “It is moving, appalling, frightening, redemptive and ultimately cathartic” (n.p.). Furthermore, he contradicts Rich’s assessment of the over-generalization of the play by saying, “. . . in the broad strokes of the production and in most of the individual elements the play shines.”

Yet not all of Irwin’s comments disagree with Rich’s review of that first production. He seems to corroborate Rich’s comments about the stereotypical nature of the characters, specifically calling the character of Sissy “a stereotypically sunny girl-next-door type.” He also says that the “trajectory of the character is easy to anticipate,” echoing similar comments from Rich’s review that suggest that the methods by which Lauro’s characters achieve their healing is predictable and mechanical.

One final aspect of the play that deserves consideration as it was mentioned in at least two reviews is the nature of the language. In his review of the 1991 Manhattan Theatre Club performance, Torrens explains that he felt the language of the play was somewhat lacking. “Wit, figurative statement, wider verbal resources—Shirley Lauro goes lean on these,” he says (40). He cites the gritty language of the G.I. who calls Whitney a “cock tease” as an example of the type of language the play could use more of. Debbie Jackson’s review of a 2009 production by American Century Theatre in Washington, D.C. supports Torrens’ comments. Jackson calls the play, “. . . a rather mild

depiction of the war and the volatile times” (n.p.). To be sure, especially compared with other plays about the Vietnam War, the language used in Lauro’s play is quite tame. Besides the one moment referred to by Torrens, Lauro uses surprisingly little coarse language. This is likely due mostly to the original source material of Walker’s book, wherein the women interviewed only rarely used coarse language of any kind.

Despite its shortcomings, *A Piece of My Heart* is unique among the body of Vietnam War drama in that it is the only play written about the experiences of women who served in the war. According to numerous sources, the actual number of women who served in Vietnam is not truly known. Estimates range from 5,000 to 50,000, as no clear records were kept. As Walker explains, “The fluctuating figures were due, in part, to the integration of the service records during those years (enlisted men and women became enlisted persons, obscuring the exact number of women)” (2). He goes on to suggest that, because U.S. policy at the time was that women were not supposed to be in life-threatening situations in war zones, and that there really was no place in Vietnam that was *not* a war zone, the government was unwilling to admit to the number of women actually serving in such dangerous places. This stance is further supported by the fact that there is no extant film footage of women serving in war zones (Palmer). This evidence suggests that Lauro’s play is indeed significant in that it tells the all but forgotten stories of a small demographic of military personnel in a heretofore unused storytelling medium: theatre.

Despite being the sole dramatic telling of the story of women in military service in Vietnam, *A Piece of My Heart* is not unique in its treatment of that conflict. In fact, it

was preceded by some relatively significant plays, such as David Rabe's "Vietnam Trilogy" consisting of *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* (1968), *Streamers* (1976) and *Sticks and Bones* (1969), and Emily Mann's *Still Life* (1980). Lauro's play deals with themes recurrent in all Vietnam War drama. According to Jeffery W. Fenn, who is borrowing terms from anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, these themes are the "tripartite pattern of separation, experience and re-integration," that is, "the transitional stage of induction into the army, the extra-cultural exposure overseas, and the attempts at re-integration into a society from which he has been alienated . . ." (2). First to be examined will be the theme of separation.

All of the characters in *A Piece of My Heart* volunteer to go to Vietnam in order to do their part in the war effort. In short, at the time of volunteering, the women each believed the American war myth. Hellman suggests, "the cornerstone of the American war myth is the Judeo-Christian ideal that 'so long as man keeps faith, God will be on his side and he, or at least his cause, will eventually triumph'" (Ballard-Reisch 136). The first phase of the above pattern, the transitional separation, begins to erode the women's faith in the myth. In the play, each character has her own initial (albeit idealistic and naïve) view of the war that reflects the American war myth. For example, Martha, a daughter of career military parents, enlists as a Navy nurse to ". . . serve my country and protect our men" (Lauro 14). This reflects one facet of the war myth, which suggests a sense of duty to do what is right. Each of the women's sense of the myth is soon challenged as they transition into their respective fields of duty in Vietnam. The

experience of Leeann, an Army nurse, exemplifies this transitional phase of separation and induction in a scene where she is forced to march:

LEEANN. *March?* I'm a nurse!

STEELE (*As OFFICER*). You're an *Army* nurse! And you are going to march! (Lauro 24)

And later:

LEEANN: Say captain—how come we're always pretending to march through the jungle full of punji sticks?

STEELE (*As OFFICER*). Because you will probably end up in the jungle, Miss Noo Yawk! In Vietnam! March!

LEEANN. Vietnam? Oh, no, ma'am. My recruiter said Hawaii!

STEELE (*As OFFICER*). Hawaii, Miss Noo Yawk? ... Well, you must have been slightly misinformed— (25)

Thus in the play, the effects of the women's induction into their new life in Vietnam and the erosion of their once noble and idealistic expectations emerge. This leads to the second phase of the pattern: their experience overseas.

In a 1993 article in The New York Times, Laura Palmer states that the nurses who went to Vietnam, "were as prepared for the war as the geese that fly into the engines of a 747" (n.p.). Another author wrote, "On a daily basis, the medical personnel in Vietnam . . . dealt with an unending stream of the bits and pieces of people coming across the tables to be put back together" (Van Devanter 154). Indeed, like most of the ill-trained men thrown into combat, the women who served were equally unprepared for what they

had to face. This is exemplified in many places in the play. Some of these include: being shot at while landing at the airfield, being on constant red alert at the hospital due to enemy attacks and the mass casualties the nurses had to deal with. After the initial shock of the first part of their lives in Vietnam, many of the women developed ways to cope with the stresses they endured. Vietnam Veteran Rose Sandeck reflects:

The way of dealing with the sheer amount of patients, the long hours in the hospital, was by putting up a wall, the emotional numbing we talk about. Each day I went in and the more I saw, the thicker this wall became . . . protecting me from what was going on. (Walker 11)

An experience unique to the women in Vietnam was the sexual double standard that followed them, i.e., that while sexual activities were expected of men, women were to abstain. Nurses of the armed forces and the Red Cross were to refrain from sexual relations, which was considered slanderous to the reputation of the women in these organizations (Saywell 251). Yet the women were also pressured to engage in social and sexual activities. Sandeck remembers that not going out to the officer's club after a 12-to-13 hour shift was problematic. "If you stayed back in your hooch by yourself or stayed and talked to a couple of other nurses," she said, "you were accused of being a lesbian, or you were accused of having an affair with one of the doctors" (Walker 10). This sexual contradiction is explored in the play through the experiences of Whitney, who does engage in a lesbian relationship in order to cope, and Maryjo, a USO entertainer, who was raped by a group of U.S. Marines. The horrors of the war—young soldiers with limbs blown off, Vietnamese children mutilated, death and danger all

around, coupled with the sexual double standard endured by the women in the play—paint a vivid picture of the experience of these women in Vietnam. Maryjo’s line near the end of Act I is indicative of the shattering of the American war myth as well as the attitude that many veterans, men and women, carried with them as they left Southeast Asia. She says, “Whole place is so unreal it doesn’t matter—no consequences—nothing matters” (Lauro 62).

The third and final phase of Gennep’s pattern is re-integration to society. It is this phase that most of the early Vietnam War drama concerns itself with. For Lauro’s play, nearly the entire second half of the play is dedicated to this theme. As Richard G. Scharine explains, several factors inhibited the veterans’ re-integration in society (127). One is that the veteran was likely to be a scapegoat for anti-war protesters. Another is that the veteran was unlikely to have assistance with re-integrating. The government did not have the veteran’s resources it does today. Still another is that success in re-integration often meant the concealment of one’s Vietnam service. All of these themes are explored in the experiences of Lauro’s women: Leeann burns her uniform, medals and all, to avoid being a target to anti-war protesters; Leeann and Martha flit from job to job, unable to cope with peacetime society; and Leeann actively hides her Vietnam service record while job hunting. As with Emily Mann’s *Still Life*, the failure of Lauro’s characters to have meaningful relationships is illustrated through Maryjo and Whitney moving from man to man, unable to come to terms with their experiences. Alcoholism, drug use, depression, suicide attempts—all of these are typical of the estimated 500,000-700,000 Vietnam veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress (a disorder that was not

diagnosed until 1980, according to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs) and all of these are part of the experience of the women of *A Piece of My Heart*. It is here that most of the plays written shortly after the Vietnam War end, with the veterans left unable to cope.

Yet *A Piece of My Heart* goes a step further. In the final scenes of the play, the women are seen coming to terms with their experiences, rebuilding their relationships and lives mainly through the help of support groups, veteran's centers and political engagement. The hopeful ending of the play suggests a healing process much different from the Vietnam drama written in the late 1960s through the early 1980s. To be sure, Lauro's play, first performed in 1991, reflects a sea change in the cultural connection between America and the Vietnam War. For a decade following the war, people did not want to talk about it. But eventually, the silence was broken. *A Piece of My Heart* reflects that new era of dialogue and healing.

A Piece of My Heart is significant to the canon of dramatic literature in that it is the only play written about women's experiences while serving in the Vietnam War in different capacities. The play itself follows many of the themes characteristic of Vietnam War drama. It shows the transitional phase of separation and induction into a new cultural paradigm, it provides a glimpse into the horrific experiences the women had to endure and it illuminates some of the difficulties representative of all Vietnam veterans in re-integrating themselves into a peacetime culture. Finally, *A Piece of My Heart* differs from these plays in one key area: its suggestion of a hopeful and promising future for veterans through support groups and open dialogue.

CHAPTER III

JOURNAL

April 23, 2014

This morning was the first production meeting for *A Piece of My Heart*. I articulated my concept ideas for the show. First and foremost, I feel that the show is not necessarily anti- or pro-war. I think that it is very much the story of the women: how they go on an emotional journey from their pre-war idealism, through the horrors of the Vietnam War, to coming back to America and learning to deal with their experiences, to finally achieving some semblance of healing at the end. The visual metaphor I shared was that of a beautiful picture frame. The beauty of this frame represents the idealism of the women before the war. It symbolizes their desire to serve their country, to contribute positively to the war effort and to help American soldiers. While in Vietnam, their beautiful frame is shattered by their experiences. The blood, death, horror, stress and the sexual double standard all contribute to this shattering. They return to America with these shattered frames and no idea how to put them back together. Through their experiences in America—drug and alcohol abuse, employment transiency and relationship issues—they attempt to repair their shattered selves. Yet many of the methods are unhealthy and lead to only temporary fixes. It is through the building of the Vietnam War Memorial, support groups and rap sessions that they are finally able to

repair their frames. Yet, the repair is not perfect. There are gaps, missing pieces and shards that remain, representing the fact that Vietnam has scarred them forever.

In terms of design elements, I articulated that the show is presentational and that the actors need to have a direct relationship with the audience. This should affect certain design elements. I see the show as a cacophony of light and sound, with lesser emphasis placed on set and costumes. Indeed, the costumes need to be simple and easily changeable in a rapid, smooth fashion. There is a sense of momentum to the story—particularly to the first act. The events of the play are outside of the control of the characters. They are merely bystanders swept up in the horror.

One item of particular importance to me is the ending. I think the ending has the potential to be very powerful, yet I also think it can be a trap. I told the team that I do not want the ending to be “cheesily patriotic.” That is, I do not want the experiences of the characters to be reduced to simple patriotism; to a sense that it was all “worth it” because they served their country. Instead, it should resonate with the themes of healing, of coming to terms, of moving on as best as they can.

The design team seemed receptive and enthusiastic about the show. Not surprisingly, the graduate students, Sound Designer Luke Walchuck and Scene Designer Anna Alex, had a number of clarification questions that illuminated the discussion. The undergraduates, Light Designer Tierra Anderson and Costume Designer Amber Kuennen, had no questions. This is consistent with my previous experience with undergrads.

April 30, 2014

Our second meeting was quite fruitful. Since we began our production process a bit behind schedule, we are accelerating the design process to some degree. To this end, Alex brought a number of good research and ideas to the table. Thus far, her design is focusing on the back wall and floor of the set. This is entirely appropriate considering the deep thrust configuration of the playing space. Alex brought images of bamboo, jungle foliage, sandbags and stained concrete, as well as some thumbnail sketches. All of which are evocative of the mood and environment I envision.

Other design fields had less to contribute at this point, which is appropriate. Kuennen brought in some images of period costumes, articulating the differences between the different occupations of the women in the story; for example, the differences between an Army nurse, a Navy nurse and a Red Cross worker. Walchuck shared that he was busy identifying the songs that are mentioned in the script. Anderson seemed the most underprepared due to the fact that this is her first lighting design project. We (the project advisors David McCarl and Paul Hustoles and myself) encouraged her to bring some source images to the next meeting that illustrate her ideas. We advised her to choose images for their quality of light, rather than specific historical imagery, as would be appropriate for a set or costume designer.

May 6, 2014

Today Alex and I met to discuss set options. We discussed ideas for the back wall, including camouflage netting in various states of distress, utilizing the back wall

and using green foliage for the first act. At this point (pending approval of the design team as a whole) we decided to have a large “curtain” made of camouflage netting and jungle-like foliage as the backdrop for the first act. For Act II the foliage would go away, and the existing netting would be replaced by netting that is more distressed.

We spent a good deal of time also discussing the look of the platforms and patterns of movement. One issue that we intend to bring to the production meeting is the possibility of plank benches placed on the top platform for use during the two airplane sequences in Act I. We’d like these benches to then disappear for Act II.

Finally, we discussed ways to implement the Vietnam Memorial Wall at the end of the play. Alex brought in a number of sketches, including free-standing framework meant to suggest the shape of the wall and smaller, triangular units that could be used to suggest the tapered end of the wall. After much discussion, we decided to eliminate any scenic element that would attempt to suggest the grandeur and elegance of the monument. We felt that any effort to capture the stateliness and sophisticated simplicity of the wall would be pointless. Instead, we plan on leaving the visualizing of the wall up to the skill and direction of the actors and the audience’s imagination.

May 8, 2014

Our third production meeting was quite productive. Alex shared her white model of the set. The team had a great discussion regarding the challenges yet to solve. For example, we discussed escape stairs on the right and left of the set structure, how to solve the problem of dropping the Act I camo netting backdrop to reveal the Act II backdrop

and paint treatments. Alex plans on having draftings to Technical Director Jim Johnson very soon. Kuennen presented several sketches for three of the characters in the play. Major concerns at this point are how to facilitate the costume changes rapidly onstage and creating a unified look for Maryjo's backup singers. Anderson presented some wonderful lighting research. I was very pleased with what she brought to the table today, considering her apparent lack of preparation for the last meeting. It seems to me that, as her first lighting design, she was simply unsure of how to proceed. Judging from what she brought today, I think she is on the right track. She has a good sense of what the various lighting looks in the show could be in terms of the isolation and "cacophony" of lights I suggested at the concept meeting. Walchuck also presented some useful sound ideas, including examples of what the clave sticks could sound like and a great example of a contemporary Vietnamese anti-war vocalist that was quite haunting. Finally, we briefly discussed budget, but it became quickly apparent that we weren't ready to take that step yet. We set a goal to have budget numbers in by next week. Production Stage Manager William Roberts will send out a reminder email early next week. We also decided Alex would set up a Dropbox folder in order to facilitate communication over the summer, as most of the team will be gone.

August 22, 2014

The summer wasn't as productive as I had hoped in terms of communication amongst the design team but still many things were accomplished. The Dropbox that Alex set up proved to be quite helpful early in the summer—particularly for scenic and

costume design. Alex promptly submitted draftings and elevations of the scene design, followed shortly thereafter by a large number of costume designs and a costume plot from Kuennen. While it was wonderful to see all of this work early on, the Dropbox remained very quiet for the rest of the summer. Nonetheless, it gave me plenty of time to review and ruminate on the designs as they stood at that time.

My initial response to Alex's design work was very favorable. Everything that we had discussed was in the design. She seemed to be in an excellent place in terms of progress at the beginning of the summer, which put her in a great place when the school year began.

I was impressed with the quality and quantity of costume renderings from Kuennen. She uploaded 68 separate renderings to the Dropbox. On the one hand, it was marvelous to see that kind of attention to detail—she had a separate drawing for even the smallest of costume changes. On the other hand, many of the costume changes could have been communicated in written form (for example, simply writing on a rendering that a Santa hat would be added for the Christmas scene), rather than creating a whole new rendering showing the character in the same costume with a Santa hat. However, seeing the number of drawings helped to illuminate to me just how full of change and transition this play really is. It also suggested to me that we needed to simplify the costume changes, something I communicated to Kuennen via email.

I spent some time this summer trying to locate a woman who had served in Vietnam during the war in order to see if she might be able to visit with the cast. Public Relations Director Mike Lagerquist was able to provide me with the contact information

of Tom McLaughlin, a local Vietnam Veteran. McLaughlin was very helpful in directing me to other avenues of inquiry in finding someone. He himself said that he used to know of at least one woman who was a nurse in Vietnam but he had lost contact with her. He told me he would do some digging and see what he could find out. In the meantime I contacted the Vietnam Women's Memorial Foundation—a national organization—to see if they could help me. I received a prompt response from them indicating that there were at least three women nearby who would be willing to talk with the cast. While this was promising at the time, it has so far yielded nothing. Fortunately, McLaughlin's inquiries led to a woman named Jody Wallschlaeger, who was a nurse in Vietnam from 1966-1967, to call me. We had a nice conversation and she agreed to come at talk to the cast on September 2. McLaughlin may also join us on that night.

After a long summer “off,” we had our first production meeting of the new academic year this morning. Things seem to be where they need to be. As expected, the set design is good. Alex will be working with Technical Director Jim Johnson on construction details very shortly. The sound design is progressing, with Sound Designer Luke Walchuck communicating that he is in a good place, but he desires an individual meeting with me to talk about specifics. He is concerned that he might be over designing the show, as there are a lot of opportunities for sound reinforcement. Even though Anderson had little to say during the meeting, I do know that the light plot is hung (she was able to accomplish this by working the her advisor, Steve Smith, over the summer). Right now, she is waiting on me to make specific blocking choices. Kuennen seemed the most tentative during the meeting. The designs are all there, she is just unsure how to

simplify and streamline them. Following the meeting, we were able to meet and go through some of the characters and eliminate costume elements that seemed like they might be too complicated or slow down the rhythm of the play. One of the biggest changes we decided on was eliminating and simplifying the costumes of the American Men during Act 2. Over the course of a few short pages of text, the actor changes character several times. Kuennen's original designs would have inhibited the smooth transition of character.

My biggest concern at this point in terms of design is the swift change-over of the seating configuration in the Andreas Theatre. I directed in this first slot last year with *Sky Girls*, and it took a solid week to see that space properly configured. This proved very problematic. Johnson assured me during the meeting that it would get done in a timely fashion but I have my doubts.

August 25, 2014

Auditions are tonight. Along with *A Piece of My Heart*, auditions for *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* will be held. The department held it's regular majors' meeting today, and at that meeting Director Paul J. Hustoles mentioned that he will be casting approximately 35 people for *Beauty*, and Director Heather Hamilton said she needs 15 people for *Mockingbird*. This made me quite nervous, considering that about 50 people would be essentially removed from the possibility of being cast in my show. As a studio show, *Heart* is of a lower priority than the mainstage shows. However, past experience has proven that both Hamilton and Hustoles are

willing to negotiate with casting choices to ensure that the studio shows get quality actors.

In addition to this issue, I have three other main concerns as I head into auditions, all of them having to do with the specific requirements of particular characters. Two of these issues have to do with race. The character of Steele is African American. While we do have a pool of black actors at Minnesota State Mankato, it is a small pool. Fortunately, Hamilton needs African Americans for *Mockingbird* as well, so hopefully that will bring some out to audition. However, this also means that Hamilton and I may be in competition for particular actors, depending on how many show up to audition.

The other character of diversity I need is an Asian to play the role of Leeann. As I mentioned in Chapter I, the actress that plays Leeann, a half-Chinese, half-Italian New Yorker, will also need to play the role of Bien, a Vietnamese housekeeper. Unlike black actors, we have very few Asian actors to speak of. I have spoken to Hustoles, my advisor, about this issue. At his urging, I emailed an Asian dance major in the hopes that she might consider auditioning. She responded, indicating that she is interested but is concerned about the time commitment. To help her in her decision, I emailed her the tentative rehearsal schedule for the show and I also encouraged her to audition regardless of her concerns for scheduling. I told her that if, following the audition, I thought I could use her, we could chat about schedule at that time. I haven't heard from her since and I hope that she does, indeed, come to audition. It might be quite interesting to take advantage of her dance skills during the Bien sequences. There are some interesting possibilities there.

My last concern has to do with the character of Maryjo, who needs to be able to play guitar. More than that, she needs to have the confidence and charisma of an entertainer. My plan for tonight is to have a guitar available if anyone would like to play as part of her audition. I am also planning on holding a special callback for those women that indicate they can play guitar.

Auditions are over and they went well. I am very pleased and excited about the cast that I have. As I expected, Hustoles and Hamilton were very willing to negotiate and this allowed me to get a very exciting cast. The process of the auditions went very smoothly. One thing that I've learned about the audition process is to limit my taking of notes. I used to agonize over each and every auditionee and try to write down everything I could in order to remember what they did. This time, I simply jotted down lists of actor names next to the characters I thought they could play. I also made sure I wrote down several alternatives in the event that I was unable to get my first choice due to the preference of the directors of the other shows.

To address my concerns articulated above; I was very easily able to cast the role of Steele. There were only a handful of African-American actors that auditioned but, luckily, one of them was absolutely perfect for the role. Jessica Staples, a freshman BFA, seems to have been born to play this role. Similarly, the role of Maryjo was quite easy to fill. I did hold a callback for four women that indicated that they could play guitar. One of them really couldn't but the other three were good. I ended up casting Claire Clauson, a sophomore BFA. Her guitar skills are good enough for the needs of the show and she has a delightful, "spunky" charisma that I think will be good for the character. The thing

to work on for her will be her sex appeal. Maryjo needs to be sexy as well as energetic and fun.

Finally, the issue of the character of Leeann turned out to be quite enlightening. Unfortunately, the dancer I emailed did not audition. There were only two other Asian women who auditioned, neither of them seemed to have the experience nor the confidence to embody the role as I saw it. I ended up casting freshman Isabella Barberena in the role. She has a thin build, with an olive complexion and could certainly pass for a half-Chinese, half-Italian character. The real problem, though, is portraying the role of Bien. When all of the directors finally met at the end of the night to discuss casting, we had the opportunity to explore the possible problems of this casting choice. Hamilton expressed concern regarding the potential for offense by having a white actor playing an Asian character. The term she used for this is “yellow face,” which harkens back to the 19th century minstrel show where a white performer would paint his face black to portray a black character. I suggested that perhaps I could simply list the role of Leeann as “TBA,” and then seek out a suitable actor. This seemed reasonable to me considering if we were unable to find a black actor for a role, we certainly wouldn’t cast a white one. Instead, we would probably recruit a black actor. Hustoles didn’t seem to feel that this was necessary seeing as how we made a good faith effort to recruit Asian actors where we could (as exemplified by the email I sent to the dancer, and by the fact that Hustoles encouraged a theatre major of Asian descent to audition). Furthermore, the show has a truncated rehearsal time which could be exacerbated by the hunt for an Asian actor. The topic was debated until we decided that casting Barberena was our best

option, with the understanding that the Bien sequences will need to be handled with care and sensitivity. Hamilton suggested a program note may be a good idea. I'm not sure what a note such as this would say but it is something to consider.

Besides the issue of Leeann, the rest of the casting went very well. Senior BFA actor Kendra Verhage was cast in the role of Martha, the strong woman of military upbringing. I think Verhage will be wonderful in the role. Transfer student, Alex Blesi, was cast as the feminine and outgoing Sissy. While I think this role may present a challenge to Blesi in terms of its muliebrity, I think she will be able to portray the maturity necessary for the second act where Sissy's child is affected by Agent Orange Disease. The prim-and-proper Whitney went to junior Rachel Howard, with whom I've worked before. I think she has the poise needed for the role and she has a strong work ethic that will be necessary for a show in this time frame. I am a bit concerned about her tendency to overact but I think she is coachable. Finally, I cast Zach Bolland, a senior, as the American Men. I had some reservations considering I've had him in class and he seemed a bit unreliable, but he has a good look for the role and Hustoles had positive things to say about him regarding his work in *Hairspray* this summer.

August 26, 2014

We had our first meeting as a cast tonight. Alex was in attendance and she presented the scene design to the cast. We then went over the rehearsal schedule, discussed dramaturgical things (I encouraged the cast to read the book [A Piece of My Heart](#) by Keith Walker, visit the Vietnam Women's Memorial website, read books by

authors such as Tim O'Brien, and view TV shows such as *Tour of Duty* and *China Beach*), discussed the concept of the show and discussed the issue of the character of Leeann. I made it clear to the cast that I am in no way intending to offend people by casting a white woman in an Asian role. Instead, I wanted to cast the best actors possible for the given roles. With that said, I articulated our need to treat the character of Bien carefully. Since Leeann is half-Italian, having an Italian-looking actor play the role is not too big of a concern, even if the character is half-Asian, as ethnic heritage can manifest itself to varying degrees depending on the individual. However, Bien is Vietnamese. The playwright has written the role in a stereotypical way in that she speaks broken English. It will be a challenge to effectively convey Bien as a native Vietnamese character with an actress that is clearly white. A related concern that I shared with the cast was that I do not want this play to be about race and casting choices. I want it to be about the women in the story. Certainly race plays into their stories but it is not the central theme of the play.

Once we got to the actual read through, another concern was raised, once again having to do with Barberena. Even though read throughs are not intended to be acting rehearsals per se, it is not uncommon for actors to begin experimenting with choices at this initial rehearsal—particularly with vocal choices. This was the case for this rehearsal as well. However, Barberena, who is not a theatre major, stood in stark contrast with the rest of the cast in that there was very little acting coming from her. Her reading was tense, monotone and robotic. I'm hoping that the quality of her reading was due to nerves, or perhaps it was her first time actually reading the script.

The other cast members did well. I was particularly impressed with Bolland, who was really experimenting with vocal options. This is fitting considering that he is required to play over a dozen different characters during the course of the play.

August 27, 2014

Our production meeting this morning went well. I always get a little nervous when all departments report that things are going well because I feel like we are missing something. I especially feel this way during this process since we have such a short time to mount the show. At any rate, things seem to be progressing well, as no major issues were brought up. I am still concerned with getting the Andreas seating properly configured. It was decided that we could hold our first blocking rehearsal tonight in the Ted Paul Theatre if needed. The other big concern is integrating the prop and costume elements.

I also had an advising meeting with Hustoles today. We discussed two main issues, the first being blocking in the deep thrust configuration. Hustoles gave me some useful pointers, including making sure that I am moving around the house, viewing the show from multiple angles. He suggested that for blocking I could start with a more or less proscenium point of view and then adjust as the process moves along. He also advised that I make sure that the audience is seeing at least one face at all times. Finally, he cautioned me to be aware of over-blocking the show, which I feel like would be a major trap for me to fall into.

The other topic of discussion was, again, the issue of the Asian character. It had been weighing on me since auditions, so it was good to have an individual conversation with Hustoles about it. He allayed many of my concerns by pointing out the theatrical nature of the show in that all actors play multiple roles. This is the key difference between the roles of Leeann and Steele. The fact that Barberena will be playing several characters diminishes the potential for offense when she becomes Bien. Furthermore, it is important to remember the author's intent. Lauro intended for the women to be individual, yet somehow all alike. While they tell individual stories, the stories are overlapped and intertwined in a theatrical manner that, in a way, tells the story of all women who served in Vietnam. As I mentioned in a previous entry, I do not want the casting choices in terms of race to overshadow the real intent of the play—to tell these stories that need to be told.

We were on our feet tonight for rehearsal to begin blocking. Surprisingly, we were able to be in the Andreas. Johnson was able to get a crew together to clear out a space that adequately allows for an effective blocking rehearsal. For this I was very grateful.

We stumbled through the blocking of most of Act 1. This was one of the most challenging blocking rehearsals I have had just in terms of muscling through the text and trying to make good blocking decisions. I can tell already that I am falling into the trap of overblocking. I think the difficulty is the movement implied in the text. Since the actors are constantly changing characters and location in the context of the story, I felt as if I had to keep them moving around the stage. Towards the end of rehearsal I recognized

the trap and began to pull back. I also began to focus only on the characters that were currently speaking. For example, if a particular sequence only involved Martha and Whitney, I told the other actors to simply stay in their current locations and be quiet. My intention is to finesse the blocking of the background characters once we revisit the scenes at a later date. The metaphor that comes to mind regarding my blocking style for this show has to do with a life drawing class I took during my undergraduate education. When drawing from life it is important to very quickly sketch out the basic form of the figure. Ideally, one should have the basic dimensions sketched in less than a minute. My blocking tonight was like that basic sketch—very fast and very basic. In life drawing, each pass one makes over the initial sketch adds more and more detail. Eventually, the artist takes out their eraser and removes excess lines and smudges, and uses their pencil to add dimension and shading, while using the eraser to add highlights and further detail. This is how I am viewing my blocking process.

I told the cast that, since this was a blocking rehearsal, I was not necessarily concerned about acting yet. Of course, being actors, they couldn't help but continue to experiment with their characters as we were working. It was good to see this experimentation. I did offer suggestions here and there, as time allowed.

My concerns regarding Barberena are growing. While all the other actors were experimenting, she continued to be quite wooden and uninteresting. She took no risks and there was no dimension to her character at all. Perhaps because she is a freshman and this is her first college show she is nervous. I really hope that once we start working particular sequences and I have a chance to coach her, things will change.

August 28, 2014

We did not finish Act 1 last night but we were able to do so tonight, along with Act 2. Rehearsal tonight was much the same as last night, with the exception that I paid more attention to overblocking. We blocked the Bien sequence tonight and I think we were able to achieve the first step in treating the character carefully. The script indicates that Bien should be moving around from area to area interacting with various characters. Instead of this, I have initially blocked the sequence in a more theatrical fashion. I have Bien standing on the lower central platform, with the other characters arrayed around her at varying distances. Instead of the characters engaging in direct, face-to-face conversation, all lines are delivered out to the house. I think this is certainly in line with the theatrical style of the play (especially considering the inherent presentationalism and rapid shift in characters and location). It also removes the need for Bien to move. This was a concern for me considering the stereotypical way in which a Vietnamese housekeeper might move. Having Bien be still, eliminates the potential offense of having a white woman “walk like an Asian,” and it also assists in avoiding the trap of overblocking the show.

The stillness during the Bien sequence also inspired me to use this technique at other points in the play. As I read the play I saw so much movement with the characters. It occurred to me that, instead of trying to replicate that kind of movement on stage, why not leave the visualization up to the audience? So, instead of trying to block a complicated sequence of the nurses scurrying around tending an unending stream of G.I. bodies, I planted the actors in one place and let the words paint the picture. Presumably,

these moments will be reinforced with supporting lights and sound to assist in evoking the chaotic movement in the minds of the audience. I think it has the potential to be quite powerful.

My concerns about Barberena have not gone away. She seems to be very inhibited during rehearsal. She stands in stark contrast to the rest of the cast who, even though we are only blocking, are continually experimenting vocally and physically. I took my concerns to Verhage, a senior and very accomplished actor. I know it may be inappropriate to talk about one actor to another; but Verhage is quite mature, being nearly 10 years older than most of the rest of the cast. I also trust her discretion. We discussed Barberena and brainstormed ways in which we might encourage her and contribute to her growth as an actor. As part of our discussion, I looked at Barberena's audition sheet and was stunned to see that she did not write down a single thing in the "Acting Experience" area. In hindsight, I should have read her sheet much more closely. Perhaps this is her first show ever. In that case, there is a lot of work to be done.

Verhage said that she would make a point to make Barberena feel welcome, since perhaps the fact that this is all new to her is contributing to her performance during rehearsal. She also said that, when time allows, she would casually see if Barberena might want to work on a scene or two, in the hopes that by working one-on-one she might become more comfortable. In short, Verhage volunteered to be a peer mentor for Barberena. This delighted me. Since tomorrow is the first working rehearsal, I am hoping that diving into some acting will help with Barberena. I have to make a point to

give her special coaching. Perhaps this means meeting with her outside of rehearsal from time to time.

Finally, I want to mention that Lighting Designer Anderson has attended both blocking rehearsals. I have been excited to have her. This is an incredibly complex show and the fact that Anderson is attending rehearsals at this early stage is encouraging. She has taken many notes and we have been conversing as time allows regarding lighting choices.

August 29, 2014

Tonight's rehearsal went very well. We reviewed the previously established blocking and began to clean things up and add some nuance. I was pleased to note that Barberena made some progress tonight. While she is not up to the level of the rest of the cast, she did make some choices and took direction from me relatively well. There is still much work to be done but I was encouraged that at least some progress was made. I think she is still quite inhibited, which will need to be addressed, and her volume and projection will need work.

I've noted some other issues that need addressing for other cast members as well. The biggest is the issue of over-acting. It seems to me that many of the actors are trying too hard to emote everything. While the play certainly deals with significant things, and each word is written by the playwright for a purpose, giving weight to every single line would be quite cumbersome. This seems to be a particular issue for Verhage, Howard and Blesi. I encouraged them all to strive for simplicity. Specifically, I think Verhage

needs to work on naturalizing her dialogue. She has a tendency to sound like a professional orator when she speaks. Howard tends toward the melodramatic. Blesi simply overacts both vocally and physically. She is very animated with her gestures. I've encouraged them all to pull back and simplify.

This is interesting in contrast with Barberena, who is very much underplaying everything. Clauson has a similar challenge, except that, because she is naturally an upbeat and positive person, it is more challenging for her to find the darker, more personal parts of her character. Lockett is doing well with the character of Steele. Challenges so far include a choppy delivery style and finding the innate humor in the character.

September 1, 2014

We worked most of the second half of Act 2 tonight. I was very pleased upon arriving at rehearsal to see that all of the platforms were constructed and ready to be acted on. Johnson has done some fine work in a very timely fashion. Having the platforms at this early time will be absolutely instrumental in being able to finalize my blocking decisions.

One of the biggest challenges of tonight's rehearsal was the blocking of the Tet sequence. Contrary to the stillness I like so much in earlier sequences of the show, I feel like the Tet sequence requires more animation. In an effort to suggest the chaos the nurses experience in triaging mass casualties, we experimented with the three actors in the scene moving the benches to various locations as if they were litters carrying

wounded soldiers. In order to achieve the sense of chaos we need to strictly choreograph the movements of the benches with the sequence of the lines. This became quite challenging since the actors were not entirely off book, so attaining precision in these movements was problematic. It became quickly apparent to me that this particular scene was going to take a lot of rehearsal in order to reach the desired outcome.

Over the weekend I was doing some informal research regarding sexual assaults during the Vietnam War as it pertained to American women. I was inspired to do this while thinking about the character of Maryjo who, in the world of the play, was raped by American servicemen. I found this interesting considering there were no instances of sexual assault reported by the women interviewed in Walker's book. As I mentioned in Chapter II, most of the women talked about how respectful the G.I.s were. Not surprisingly, there seemed to be a lot of sexual assaults committed by American servicemen during the war but most of it was directed towards native Vietnamese women. The information is incomplete, however, because it is suspected that most instances of rape were either not reported or not investigated appropriately by the military. I found one article online that was particularly enlightening wherein the author, Nick Turse, discussed the content of his book entitled Kill Anything that Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam. While the article itself was interesting, the author included a quote from award-winning Minnesota author Tim O'Brien, a veteran of Vietnam. In his book The Things They Carried O'Brien says:

A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from

doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil. (68-69)

After mulling over O'Brien's words, I reached two conclusions. One is that the war story of *A Piece of My Heart* differs from O'Brien's assumption of what a war story is. I think that he is specifically addressing the war stories that talk about heroic acts and sacrifices that soldiers made in combat situations. *A Piece of My Heart* does not treat its characters in such a way. There is no heroism; there is only survival and coping. Additionally, *A Piece of My Heart* is an uplifting story because we are able to see the emotional and psychological wounds of the characters begin to heal. The play does not glorify war, which is what I think is the point of O'Brien's quote.

Second, the words "obscenity" and "evil" resonated with me in terms of the Tet sequence in the play. I shared this quote with the actors while we were rehearsing tonight, drawing their attention to these words specifically. I think it is difficult to imagine the horror of seeing such egregious wounds on young men. For some reason I feel like the words "obscene" and "evil" are much more evocative from an acting standpoint than "bloody" or "horrible." "Obscene" connotes something that is beyond horrible. Something obscene goes against goodness and morality. I think this concept is

illustrated in Sissy's line at the end of the Tet sequence: "We are defiling something—something holy is being transgressed here . . ." (74).

September 2, 2014

Tonight we had the honor to talk with Jody Wallschlaeger, a veteran of Vietnam. She was a wonderful and gracious woman who was delighted to be able to share her experience as an Army nurse.

The first thing that struck me about her story was how very similar it was to the stories presented in the play. There were several moments where actors actually gasped aloud because what Wallschlaeger was telling seemed to come directly from the script. For example, she talked about enlisting because the Army would pay for her nursing school, which is exactly why Leeann enlisted. She talked about enlisting with a girlfriend and piling in a car and driving down to Ft. Sam Houston, which is precisely what happens in the play with Sissy and Leeann.

The second thing that I found fascinating was the number of positive things Wallschlaeger had to say about her experience. She did not focus on the things like the horrors and challenges she experienced, but rather on the fond memories and the life-long relationships she made. While she certainly touched on some of her difficulties, such as her time spent in the venereal disease ward, she did not comment much on what it was like to deal with the mass casualties that came in. I found this somewhat disappointing for two reasons: that so much of Act 1 of the play deals with the women caring for dying soldiers and for my own curiosity. While I tried to get her to elaborate more on the

casualties, the only information she divulged had to do with the eyes of wounded and dying soldiers begging for her to save them. She intimated that that memory has haunted her through the intervening years. It seemed inappropriate to try and dig for more information from her.

Following our conversation with Wallshclaegeer, we had a brief rehearsal where we reviewed the Tet sequence, which I still feel needs finessing, and went on to finish the act. It was quite interesting to see the effect Wallschlaeger's talk had on the cast. It seemed to immediately affect the ending sequence of boarding the plane. Suddenly, what had previously been a rather emotionally flat moment became beautifully complex. I think the fact that Wallschlaeger communicated so many positive memories of her relationships in Vietnam affected how the actors approached the moment when their characters left the country. Maryjo's line, "Best year of my life—worst year of my life" (82) and Steele's line, "Such a sisterhood, brotherhood, comradeship. Like no other place—no other time on earth" (83) took on new meaning.

The actors continue to make progress. Blesi is actively working on her self-identified habituals of adding an extraneous "squeak" to the ends of lines and controlling her sometimes "rubbery" physicality. I've pointed these things out to her and she quickly agreed that she knows they are challenges. It was nice to see her take steps to control these things almost instantly. Howard continues to have a tendency to over-emote. I told her that I feel like she has a good sense of interpretation—she is able to process the text and make specific choices based on analysis—but the execution tends to be overly complex and to lack nuance. I continue to identify moments like this when I see them,

and she has been quite good about working to simplify her performance. Barberena is making progress little by little. I think she has a challenge with memorization, which then impacts her confidence. She and I set up a meeting for tomorrow to work on some of her monologues.

September 3, 2014

The production meeting this morning was very productive. Unlike the last one where I was feeling a bit nervous about the ambiguity of where each department was in the process, this meeting felt very specific. We had some real and immediate issues before us and took steps to solve the problems. One of the more significant concerns is the complexity of the costume and prop integration. Alex and I were able to meet the previous day and went through the props list and cut a number of items. At the meeting, I discussed doing a similar thing with costumes. Kuennen plans to attend rehearsal on Friday where we can explore this more. There were also a number of issues regarding the duffle bags. One had to do with the uniformity of the color as they are all similar in style, but differ widely in shades of green. This concern was quickly dismissed at the urging of the faculty advisors and in combination with the research Alex did. She discovered that it was quite common for these duffle bags to be recycled through the military system, meaning that one new recruit may be issued a brand-new, pristine bag where another was given a faded and worn one.

I had my weekly meeting with Hustoles today and it went well. We discussed concerns with blocking and actor coaching. He encouraged me to get the actors thinking

about the other characters they have to play as soon as possible. I mentioned using some of the technique I learned in the Advanced Acting Techniques course, e.g. physical and psychological centers. He advised that I begin by talking about rhythm. He said that simply telling actors to create characters faster and/or slower than their habitual rhythm could yield more immediate and effective results. The reason for this is that simply making a character be “faster” will automatically affect not only how the character moves, but also how they speak and, likely, their posture. I found this suggestion valuable and incorporated it in to my rehearsal that night.

I also had the opportunity to work one-on-one with Barberena today. I discovered that while she did have some theatre experience in high school (mostly as a chorus member), this is her first time in a more significant role. She is not a theatre major, nor does she have any real theatre training. This is intimidating and exciting at the same time. We spent most of our hour working on her opening monologue. I gave her some real basic information on how to “beat” out her monologue and encouraged her to look for things like adjectives that might affect the interpretation of the line. We also discussed the possibility of her working more closely with Verhage, in that Verhage might be able to give her some tips and tricks to aid in memorization, text analysis and acting technique. Barberena was quite interested in this.

Working the first half of Act 2 tonight went very smoothly. In fact, we were able to work through it all once and then go back and run the entire portion for continuity purposes. The actors found it very beneficial to do this, as it helped to solidify the often confusing sequences in their mind. I also found it helpful in getting a better idea of

pacing. For example, I coached Verhage and Howard to have their good-bye scene linger a bit in order to help communicate the ties of friendship made by the women. However, seeing it in context helped me realize that the moment had a negative impact on pacing.

The actors continue to make progress. The issues I mentioned in my last entry continue to be problematic but changes are slowly being made. I spoke to Verhage tonight about assisting Barberena and she was amenable to the idea. The two of them immediately began discussing times when they could get together.

I want to take a moment to mention how impressed I am with the work of Bolland. I was apprehensive about casting him because of his reputation as being a bit unfocused, however, he has certainly proven himself with his work on this show. I've seen him working in practice rooms on the characterizations of his various characters. He has shown great imagination in rehearsal in coming up with very interesting physical and vocal choices that clearly differentiate the different characters. His choices are actually quite complex, combining vocal choices with rhythm, physical centers and idiosyncratic character qualities. It is quite fascinating to watch him. Now the challenge becomes ensuring that the women are able to successfully distinguish their characters in a way that is consistent with what Bolland is doing.

September 4, 2014

Tonight we worked the second half of Act 2. The rehearsal was much more challenging than I had expected. The blocking that was originally established seemed to be much less effective than I had imagined. As rehearsals progress I am noticing how

often I am bringing the action fairly far downstage, which isn't the most ideal stage positioning in the deep thrust configuration. This becomes particularly problematic during scenes like the group "therapy" session where all of the women are seated telling their stories of Vietnam. The general composition is fairly static which means that certain portions of the audience (particularly house left and right) are seeing the backs of heads for a rather long time. I ended up moving the entire composition further upstage, but it is not ideal. I'm hoping that clearly directing the focus of the audience to the one person who is speaking at a given time, will help minimize the effect of seeing the backs of people's heads. I am directing the focus by having the person who is in focus standing while the others are clearly giving focus through their eyes and body positions. Furthermore, I have coached each actor to be sure to find a moment or two during their monologue to open up to each side of the house in turn. After we had worked this sequence several times, I feel like we achieved a degree of success.

The Wall sequence was also challenging tonight and I ended up completely redoing the blocking we had established. It is very important to me that the show end on a powerful note, and I wanted to support this with a dynamic sequence of blocking and a strong ending composition. I was pleased with the result. Movement was kept to a minimum and I directed the actors to stay in a very presentational mode and to be relatively still. I think the compositions are going to work well. Now, we have to focus on dealing with the acting.

I was pleased by some of the choices actors were making tonight. Verhage, Clauson and Howard all took the idea of rhythm and applied it to some of the other

characters they play. I think some adjustment is still necessary but it was certainly a strong start. Staples needs a bit more work in order to separate her other characters from her main one. As of now, everything seems as if it is just another version of Steele. I encouraged her to play more with rhythm and to make some stronger choices. She took the direction well and applied it immediately, making some subtle changes to the character in question. It was a good start but still needs finessing.

The “rap group” sequence was a very interesting one in terms of actor coaching. As a group, we had an enlightening discussion regarding the issue of how immediate the past experiences are to the women. We established that the events that they are talking about are between 12-15 years in the past, yet they speak of them with such intensity, emotion and pain that they seem to have happened the day before. Often times when people talk about past events—even traumatic ones—there is a distance to the recounting. There is still emotion but its pain may have dulled somewhat over time. This is not the case with these characters. I was delighted that Staples spoke up, talking about research she had done into post-traumatic stress disorder and how certain things, such as a word or sound, can trigger an immediate, visceral and highly emotional recollection of past events. We concluded that this is where the women in the play are coming from. The events they are recounting may be 15 years old but the memories are no less real; the emotion is no less intense.

We also did a bit of text analysis discussing the way the playwright had arranged the individual monologues. Clearly, the intensity builds with each story told, peaking first with the violent outburst of Leeann, followed by a contrastingly quiet moment with

Martha that builds to the true climax of the sequence. This brief analysis was helpful in placing each of the women on a specific level which, taken together, creates the rising action of this small segment of the play.

Finally, Leeann's outburst is going to take a lot of work. Barberena was able to achieve some nice intensity in terms of her voice and face, but her body was stiff and lifeless. This most certainly stems from her lack of experience, simple ignorance on how to achieve these things and her strong inhibitions. I attempted to coach her, encouraging her to just commit and go for it, even though it might feel odd. I gave her suggestions as to what she could do, such as kick the bench, beat the floor, beat her chest or tear at her clothes. She tried these things, but they were very weak and lacked commitment. She is meeting with Verhage tomorrow to work a few scenes, so I may visit their rehearsal and, with Verhage's help, work on this sequence. It is a very important element in the overall emotional arc of the script.

September 5, 2014

Tonight's rehearsal was very challenging and quite discouraging. Up until this point I had been feeling pretty good about how the process was progressing even though I knew there was a lot of work to be done. Tonight's rehearsal showed in a very real way just how much work we need to do. One good element of tonight's run of Act 1 was that, even though this was not the designer's run, all of the designers were present. Anderson has been attending rehearsals quite regularly but for the others this was their first time. Watching the rehearsal proved to be quite illuminating to them as they, like me, could see

first hand the amount of work needed in a short time to get the show ready for performance.

Tonight was the first night that we tried to fully integrate props, including the large military duffle bags the characters are supposed to carry when they are on stage. I really like the effect of the bags, it helps to communicate the transient nature of the women's lives while in Vietnam, but it was very challenging to figure out where the bags need to be at various points in the play. Even more complicated was the integration of the props. Even though Alex and I have cut many of the props, there are still a number of them that are necessary for the storytelling. Figuring out how to integrate them meant that we had to stop often in order to determine where they need to be preset on stage, who was going to carry them to where they needed to be and how they were to be struck. This process became laborious, especially when coupled with the general stop-and-go that needed to happen to work certain sequences and transitions in order to solidify blocking and acting choices.

Another challenge was the integration of the live music. Even though Walchuck and I have met several times to discuss the music it seemed that we both had slightly different ideas about how to work the music seamlessly into the scene. This meant that we had to stop and work with Clauson and the other actors as well in order to establish how best to accomplish our goals. To be sure, it was valuable and necessary to do this, but it was also time consuming and frustrating. Contributing to the frustration was the fact that Clauson was still quite uncomfortable with a number of the chord progressions,

which meant that even though we worked the scenes, much is dependant on her preparedness.

Finally, the rehearsal was beneficial for Kuennen to watch because she got to see how quick the transitions between characters actually are. Hopefully, this will lead her to make some bold decisions regarding simplifying her complex costume design. On a discouraging note regarding Kuennen: she informed me tonight that she may be unable to attend rehearsals both on Monday (the designer run) and Tuesday due to a work conflict. She asked if I was OK with it and I replied that I was more concerned what her advisor would say about her being absent from the designer run. I told her that I was pleased with the fact that she was at tonight's rehearsal but the complexity of the design and its integration concerns me. I need her there as much as possible.

In addition to the technical elements I've discussed, I still have many concerns about the acting. One of the biggest is the problem of memorization. Most of the actors are reasonably off-book but the challenge is memorizing the sequence of events in conjunction with the lines. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that all of our rehearsals thus far have needed frequent stops in order to work things. This makes it difficult for the actors to fix the sequence of events in their heads.

Barberena is concerning me greatly. She was able to meet with Verhage today and work some things but I did not see much of an improvement in her acting tonight. Of all the actors, she is the least off-book, which means that she is unable to really act because she is too busy recalling lines. Other problems with her include: a lack of active listening (she seems very disengaged), a lack of vocal and physical expression (only

during rare sequences does she show signs of making acting choices) and a lack of projection (she is consistently hard to hear). I have a feeling I am going to be selective about what I choose to focus on, as there is no way I can successfully address all of these issues in the time allotted in order to bring her up to the level of some of the others.

There remain challenges with other actors as well. First, Staples is not exhibiting a strong enough contrast between characters. That is, all of her “extra” characters are very similar to Steele. I really like what she’s doing with Steele but I need to see a stronger distinction between the others. Howard is having similar issues, although I can see the choices she is making to distinguish her characters, they just need to be more consistent. In addition to progressing with the guitar, Clauson needs to show a “sexier” Maryjo. Right now she is playing “cute,” but it seems to me that Maryjo needs to have the sex appeal of a ‘60s pop musician. Related to this, I feel that she needs to be more of a performer during her concert sequence.

As we were reaching the end of the rehearsal, the actors were visibly fatigued and getting quite grumpy. Even though we didn’t complete the act, I felt it prudent to end the rehearsal. Before we parted ways, I talked to them and tried to be encouraging, praising their successes and emphasizing that even though tonight’s rehearsal was exhausting, much progress was made. This is a complicated show and requires much work.

September 7, 2014

Tonight’s rehearsal went much more smoothly than Friday’s. I think the weekend helped people to recharge a bit and come at the show fresh. We finished working Act 1

and then moved to Act 2. All in all, things went well. For some reason the sequence of events in Act 2 is easier for the actors to remember, so I got a good sense of pacing, at least for this act, from tonight's rehearsal. For the most part, the actors did well. We are still working on differentiating characters but it is progressing. I'm pleased to say that I could clearly see an improvement in the quality of Barberena's work tonight. Her work with Verhage is paying off. While I don't think she will reach the level of some of her castmates in the short time we have left, it was good to see some improvement.

We ended our scheduled rehearsal a bit earlier than expected so we used the remaining time to work a couple of sequences mainly for the sake of lines but also for pacing and detail. We worked the beginning of the Wall sequence, the first mass casualty sequence, and the first plane sequence. It was good to do this in preparation for our first run through of the entire play scheduled for tomorrow night.

Once again I was pleased to see almost the entire design team present for the rehearsal. Kuennen was busy scribbling down notes pertaining to costume. Alex and I worked on integrating more props and Anderson was playing with lighting effects. It is amazing how the addition of simple stage lighting can affect the quality of the actors' performances.

My last issue of note is that I contacted the local ROTC to arrange for someone to come visit rehearsal in order to show the actors how to properly salute, stand, army crawl and hold a sidearm. The person was scheduled to come tonight but didn't show up. I plan to call them in the morning to hopefully reschedule in a timely manner.

September 8, 2014

Tonight's rehearsal was the designer run and the first time we've run the entire show in continuity. All in all it went well. I was pleased to note that the challenge of the complex arrangement of events was surmounted tonight by the actors. Since the play does change time and location frequently, it's been challenging for the actors to keep things straight in their mind. Fortunately, it went rather smoothly tonight. We are still dealing with many issues but one of the most prominent from tonight's run was the integration of the live music. I feel like perhaps Walchuck and I haven't been communicating as effectively as we should have been. I think he had some expectations of how certain scenes would play out and I had others and we never really met on the same page. Tonight's rehearsal highlighted those areas where we need to come together and solve the problems. Having said that, we found ourselves in agreement over things like the pacing and rhythm of many of the songs. It also became evident that Clauson has a tendency to play nearly all of her songs with the same rhythm. This creates a very stagnant musical atmosphere. It seems to me that the playwright has suggested certain songs for very particular reasons—they underscore, highlight and contribute to the dramatic action. This means that, just like the structure of dramatic language, the music needs to have rises and falls, tension and release, and needs to work with the text. For example, the concert sequence, where Maryjo is singing her "signature song" as part of a concert to entertain the troops, is coming across as lackluster and, frankly, boring. It is hard to believe that Maryjo is a vivacious and enthusiastic performer when the rhythm of the song ("These Boots and Made for Walking") is pedestrian and similar to some of her

slower numbers. To further complicate the sequence, Clauson is singing the song very “prettily.” That is, she is using vibrato and creating an almost “classical” sound, when the song seems to require something grittier and darker with more sex appeal. This is just one example we had this evening with the music. There were many more—to the point that Walchuck and I decided that we would use the first part of rehearsal tomorrow as a music rehearsal. I understand now that this type of thing should have happened much earlier in the process.

Another frustration this evening has to do with the difficulty in getting someone from the ROTC here on campus to come over to help teach the actors how to move like they are in the military. We made arrangements to have someone visit rehearsal last night, which didn’t happen (the person forgot about the appointment), so we rescheduled for tonight. No one showed up again. I was very discouraged by this, as they were arranging for a female ROTC member to come. I thought this would be fitting considering the content of the play. Fortunately, Johnson, the technical director, has vast military experience having served in the U.S. Army. He has agreed to come tomorrow night to teach the cast how to stand, salute, march, crawl and hold a sidearm.

While I was pleased, overall, with the actors tonight, there is still much work to do. Barberena continues to improve under the tutelage of Verhage but there is still room to grow. She and I plan to meet on Wednesday to work some of her more emotionally intense moments. Despite the difficulties with Clauson’s singing and guitar playing, she made some good improvement during the second act. Her character was still reading quite childlike and youthful in Act 2, where I feel like she needs to be more disturbed,

beaten down and troubled. We identified the sequence where she begins confessing to the audience about her drinking and her cycle of abusive relationships as the real beginning to the character's downward spiral. During that sequence she finally exhibited some qualities that communicate this self-destructive spiral. Physically she changed how she stood, seeming more grounded and heavy. She is working on changing her habitual feet placement (she tends to point her toes inward, which communicates youth and innocence). She also darkened her voice, which added to her maturity.

As far as blocking goes, I find that I am very happy with many of the stage pictures, particularly during the second act. However, there are still several moments where the blocking feels messy and awkward. It seems that there are moments where sightlines will be an issue as well. I still have much work to do in terms of cleaning up the blocking.

Finally, Hustoles visited the first part of rehearsal tonight. Due to his rehearsal schedule, we were unable to chat about what he saw. I am looking forward to his suggestions and advice, particularly as they pertain to blocking and actor coaching.

September 9, 2014

We began work tonight with a music rehearsal. We ran through all of the songs that the ensemble sings. It was very helpful in tightening up cues, determining proper rhythm and clarifying confusing parts. The rehearsal was certainly beneficial for the actors, but also for Walchuck and I. We were able to finally get on the same page

regarding the music. We both acknowledge that we should have had better communication with each other throughout the process.

The second stage of rehearsal tonight was special military training from Johnson. Johnson, who was a Captain in the Army, gave a brief workshop on how to stand (at attention, parade rest and at ease), march, crawl and about face. He also gave special instructions to Staples on how to properly hold a pistol. The cast was receptive to his instruction and I thanked him for his help.

Following all of this, we ran the whole show. The results of Johnson's instructions were almost immediately evident in the performance of the actors. The military sequences were much cleaner, crisper and formal. This provided a nice contrast to the more civilian sequences of the play, thus creating an additional level of dynamism within the work. To be sure the military movements need practice and refinement, but the groundwork is now laid.

Besides the integration of the military movements there was little of great significance to comment on tonight. I continue to make small blocking adjustments as I view the show from different parts of the house. The actors continue to progress. I've made an appointment to work with Barberena tomorrow on her two "break down" scenes. She has improved, but there certainly is more to be done.

September 10, 2014

This morning was the last production meeting. Nothing too significant was brought up, as most of the designers have been attending rehearsals lately. My biggest

concern as of now is the integration of the costume elements. Kuennen continues to modify the costume plot—as she should—to account for changes. I’ve asked that, beginning tonight, actors bring some hats and shirts to rehearsal to simulate the costume changes they might have.

Hustoles and I had our weekly advising meeting today as well. He was able to share with me his observations from visiting my rehearsal two nights ago. He had a number of specific notes for individual actors, mainly having to do with their own idiosyncratic habituals that tend to creep in to their performances. These notes were helpful as they reinforced many of my own observations. He commented on how he felt like the style of the show seemed to be successful thus far. One of the most significant notes he gave was regarding the ensemble nature of the show. It *is* an ensemble show. He felt that there wasn’t the appropriate amount of support from the actors in the “background” of a scene. That is to say, no matter what is going on in the show, whether an actor is in focus or not, there must be a level of engagement on the part of all the actors. This is especially true for this show, considering the play is literally written, at times, as if it is the story of one woman told by many.

I had an opportunity to work with Barberena today. I know that one of my challenges as a director is communicating effectively with actors. I really felt this today with Barberena. We made some progress working on both her “kill him” sequence (where she attacks a Vietnamese boy) and her breakdown during the “rap” session. Both of these sequences are very complicated and would be challenging for an experienced actor. I think one of my strengths as a director is text analysis, so I tried to break down

the text for her in an attempt to get her to connect more with it. I'm not sure how well it worked. She indicated that she understood what I was saying, but I'm not sure if she knew how to best manifest it. I also tried to get her to let go of her inhibitions and to really "dive in" to the role. Her work seemed better by the time we were done. I just hope that it translates into progress on stage.

At the beginning of rehearsal tonight I talked to the cast about some of the notes I received from Hustoles, including the notion of breathing and ensemble work. I also told them to be more precise with the military movements. As we ran the show I could see these notes manifesting, which was good. I think I need to keep encouraging the actors to enhance and refine these elements as rehearsals progress.

We began some minimal costume integration tonight with rehearsal costume pieces. It was not very successful, especially since Kuennen was not there to guide the actors or note when things were wrong. By the time we got to the middle of the show, no one was really trying any more with the rehearsal pieces, which was probably due to lack of instruction from Kuennen and me. The exception to this was Bolland, who worked hard to mimic show conditions with his costume changes. If he didn't have a costume piece handy, he mimed the change in order to get a feel for the timing of things. Once again, I've been very impressed with his work ethic and how dedicated he is to the show.

September 11, 2014

At the suggestion of Hustoles, I took some time today to go through the script and "score" each scene in terms of pacing. I used the generic terms of "fast, slow and

medium” to indicate the general pacing of a scene. I then typed up the document and distributed it to the actors tonight. I told them that this is a very general pacing guideline and that just because a scene is “slow” doesn’t necessarily mean that the entire sequence is slow. In other words, there should still be dynamism of pacing within the parameters of whatever “slow” means. I also said that the document represented a gut reaction on my part as to what the pacing should be. It could certainly change as we continue to work. The cast seemed to appreciate the handout and I think it helped their work.

In addition to the pacing, we talked more about breathing at the beginning of rehearsal and how I need to see more of it on stage. We also chatted about the need to naturalize things, both in terms of line delivery and physicalization of the characters. There are many moments that seem contrived rather than natural. One of the reasons for this, I think, is the presentational nature of the play. The actors need to clearly differentiate between the events happening in the dramatic mode (the here and now; the representational) and the storytelling mode (the presentational moments). Often times these happen very quickly—one line is presentational followed immediately by representational and back again. It is a challenge but it is something that makes the show dynamic.

Kuennen was at rehearsal tonight and took some time to talk with each actor about his or her costume changes. I was glad to see her doing this in preparation for the coming first dress rehearsal. Johnson gave me permission to tell the cast that he has offered to be a resource for PTSD, as he suffers from it. I was happy to see that many of

the actors were chatting with him while Kuennen was talking to others about costume things.

Tonight's rehearsal was our light/sound tech. Overall things went smoothly. The major issue with lighting was not so much general looks and mood (although, there were a couple that needed work) but rather with cross fading between areas as the characters talk. Many of the transitions were cumbersome and obvious. Anderson was quick to notice these and we would discuss the precise timing that I desired for a particular moment. In general I told her that the preceding cue can stay up while the new cue is fading in. Once the new cue is up and the actor is speaking the previous cue can artistically fade out. I tried to be as specific as I could. Yet there were other instances where I think Anderson wanted specificity from me, but I couldn't articulate what I wanted in those kinds of terms. For example, during the Bruce and Whitney scene I felt that the mood created by the lighting was at odds with the mood of the scene. I simply told her that it needed to feel more menacing with the potential for violence. She asked what colors I wanted and I told her I didn't know, all I can say is that I want a different mood. To her credit, she didn't press the issue. Instead, she took the note and we moved on. I look forward to see what she will create.

The sound was much less refined tonight than the lights. Walchuck told me at the beginning that not all of the cues were ready. Many of the cues he had programmed were simply skeleton cues—placeholders for the actual cues that will come tomorrow. In general, I liked what I was hearing, however, it was interesting to note that it seemed like all of the sound was coming from one area. During a conversation with Walchuck and

his sound advisor, George Grubb, I learned that it was due to the fact that I was sitting in the house left section and was only hearing the sounds coming from the speakers on that side. So, Walchuck's challenge now is to figure out the acoustics and physics of the room and make adjustments to the speakers so that people on the sides of the house can hear sounds coming from all of the speakers.

The acting portion of the rehearsal went well. The cast is coming along and is continuing to improve with each night. There is still a tendency to internalize too much, as evidenced during the therapy scene tonight. It was very dull and lifeless. During notes I used this moment as an illustration of how we need to naturalize the sequence (perhaps by adding things like autistic gestures) and to support each other in the spirit of the ensemble.

September 12, 2014

First tech was tonight. Things are progressing well. The sound cues still aren't finished, but Walchuck is working hard and getting them done. The things I am hearing so far are all quite good. There are still some issues with heavy sound localization but he is still working on that. I like that Walchuck is experimenting with a lot of sounds and songs to reinforce various sequences. I also like that he is very easy to work with in that he takes my input well and makes the process a true collaboration.

The same is also true for working with Anderson. I know she has been working very hard at her design. There are still issues with timing and certain looks on stage but

to her credit, Anderson is approaching the work with a very positive attitude. I'm really enjoying working with her.

The actors continue to do well. Verhage has been working with Barberena and the improvement really shows. Notes to the actors tend to be nit-picky kinds of things mainly focused on refining and clarifying the choices that the actors have made. We continue to finesse transitions and pacing as well. There is still a great need to naturalize but, interestingly, there are moments when the actors naturalize too much. For example, the therapy scene tonight seemed like a very vocal church service because actors were verbally and physically responding to things in a manner that lacked subtlety. I encouraged them to tone it back and to find a happy medium from what was happening last night.

September 13, 2014

Tonight was full tech. Things are looking and sounding good. All of the sound cues are programmed and Walchuck continues to tweak his design. I really like his choice to have a soundscape during the time the women are in Vietnam in order to make that time in their lives different from when they are back in the U.S. The problem now is that the soundscape is too obtrusive; too obvious. He is working on finessing it to account for this.

The set is looking very nice. Alex has distressed the Act 2 drop even more to provide a stronger contrast with the netting of Act 1. One challenge with this additional distress is that the black velour curtain along the upstage wall is much more visible. This

is not ideal because I like the idea of creating the illusion of a vast empty void behind the netting. The curtain is simply too obvious especially when viewed with light on it. Alex and Johnson are going to try to stretch the curtain in order to get rid of the folds that naturally occur in the hopes of achieving the desired effect. Additional camouflage netting has been added underneath the platforms behind the slatted wood, which provides more texture. This also looks great in conjunction with Anderson lighting, as she has placed some instruments under there as well.

The actors continue to do well. We are continually refining and solidifying things like the pacing, the ensemble support and naturalizing. While watching the sequence where Clauson becomes Danielle, Sissy's daughter, I recalled something that I learned during my first production as a graduate student, *A Plague of Angels*, in 2013. One of the characters in that show was a young child. The advice given to me by my then-advisor, Heather Hamilton, as to how to get an adult to be more credible as a child, was to strive for a sense of innocence rather than have the actor attempt to talk in a "young" voice. I gave her the note and we'll see how it changes tomorrow.

I've mentioned a number of times how Barberena has improved over the course of the rehearsal process. While I have met with her individually a couple of times, much of the credit of her improvement goes to Verhage who has really taken her under her wing and worked with her a lot. Part of me feels like, by passing off the coaching of Barberena to Verhage, I am shirking my duties as a director. This is especially true considering the educational environment we are in where the director is a teacher as well as a theatre artist and because I've always felt that effectively communicating with

actors is an area I can improve in. However, I also feel like a director's job is managing his work force and part of that aspect of management is delegating the work. In this case I have delegated much of the coaching of Barberena to Verhage. Not surprisingly, she has been able to work wonders with Barberena. I am very grateful to Verhage for the work she has done. While Barberena still has much room to grow (especially during the more emotional sequences), her improvement is noteworthy and, therefore, I think of it as a success.

Having just mentioned my perceived shortcomings in terms of communicating with actors, I did have two successes this evening in that regard. After giving notes both Blesi and Howard talked to me about specific notes I had given them. Howard was concerned about how I've been telling her to naturalize things more because she always appears to be "thinking" on stage. That is to say, I can see her working as an actor where, ideally, the actor should appear to effortlessly embody a character. After some discussion, she hit upon the idea of internalizing less and thinking "outward." She seemed to connect with this idea and hopefully it will manifest itself positively tomorrow. Similarly, Blesi was having trouble with naturalizing her opening monologue while still maintaining dynamism. I applied some text analysis to her monologue in an effort to illuminate for her the dynamism inherent to the piece. For example, I tried to articulate to her three main modes of storytelling. That is, there is the dramatic mode, where the action happens in real time and characters talk to each other; there is the epic mode where time is compressed and parts of the story are glossed over and suggested rather than explicitly stated; and there is the descriptive mode where time is expanded and slowed

down in order to communicate specific descriptions of things. I explained that recognizing these modes can give clues as to interpretation. For example, the epic mode might suggest a faster pace while the descriptive mode a slower. This seemed to resonate with her.

Finally, we realized tonight that the dimensions of the floor of the set are wrong. There should be 42 inches of space from the front of the seats to the beginning of the acting space. We found that the downstage edge was much less than this. Somehow the dimensions got off. Luckily, for this set it is an easy fix for the designer. Alex plans on simply painting over the downstage edge by about 10 inches in order to get thing to where they need to be.

September 14, 2014

I was very apprehensive going into the first dress rehearsal tonight due to what I perceived as a lack of communication from the costume department. However, it went much more smoothly than I anticipated. There were certainly problems—especially with the actors onstage trying to incorporate their changes for the first time—but they all seem quite solvable. Kuennen and I communicated the entire evening about things that were working and things that needed improvement. I am confident that tomorrow night will be even better.

Sound and lights continue to progress. Tonight the sound still seemed strangely localized at times and was quite soft. Last night things tended to be loud so I think Walchuck simply over compensated for that. Anderson continues to adjust her lights and

things are looking good. She was able to achieve a stark, cold, isolated look for the Bruce and Whitney scene, which I think effectively captures the desired mood.

I am a little frustrated with Johnson and his lack of willingness to creatively solve problems. He told me he worked on pulling the black drop (mentioned in my previous entry) taut. He said he did what he could but it didn't really work. He also indicated that in order to make it better, it would require two days of work because both camouflage netting drops would need to be removed and the black curtain re-hung. I find myself wanting to trust the judgment and assessment of my technical director but I have a hard time doing that in the case of Johnson. Having worked with him over the summer, I found him very eager to produce results quickly but not necessarily in the best or most efficient way. He seems to want to get things done quickly at the cost of quality. After talking with him, I consulted Alex and we brainstormed at least two ways to pull the curtain taut that would not involve completely dismantling and reassembling the backdrops. I wish that Johnson would explore more options before definitively saying that something cannot be done.

Furthermore, I am frustrated with the way the technical direction has been going in rehearsals. We knew from early on that, because of his PTSD, Johnson would not be able to attend technical rehearsals for this show. I absolutely understand this limitation and in no way begrudge Johnson for taking care of himself in this way. However, I was also told that Grubb would be sitting in on rehearsals in Johnson's stead. This has not happened. The one rehearsal Grubb was at was in his capacity as an advisor to Walchuck. Other than that, there has been no technical director presence at the

rehearsals. In a typical tech week process the technical director would be present at all rehearsals and able to assess the notes that need to be done. This isn't happening as effectively as it could because Alex is now assuming both the scene design and technical direction roles at rehearsal and Johnson has little context for the notes he is given.

I haven't mentioned stage management much in my journals. It is worth noting that William Roberts is doing well as the Production Stage Manager. This is a very complicated show in terms of calling cues but he has been doing a good job. We ran one sequence after rehearsal tonight in order to clarify precisely how I wanted the cues called. I did have to speak with him tonight about laughing inappropriately during rehearsal. He has a tendency to giggle to himself when an actor makes a mistake with a line and this can be very distracting, particularly since the tech table is in the house and close to the stage where the actors can clearly hear him.

This type of distraction is particularly problematic to the younger actors such as Barberena. She continues to do good things but she is easily tripped up by unexpected complications. Things like going up on a line or an unexpected costume malfunction cause her to lose her momentum and fall out of the moment. I addressed this tonight during notes and encouraged her to trust herself. I also applied this concept of trust to her work during the emotional moments. I publically praised her progress and stressed how much she has grown. I hope this helps to give her the confidence she needs to execute the difficult sections in a more committed and natural fashion.

Howard asked specifically about the "thinking" thing we discussed during notes last night. I told her I could see noticeable improvement and encouraged her to keep

doing what she's doing because it's working. I do enjoy working with Howard. She has a lot of room to grow as an actor but her work ethic is wonderful and her ability to take and process notes is good. She is very pleasant to work with.

Finally, I changed the blocking of the Tet sequence after rehearsal. It occurred to me while watching it this evening that it wasn't as chaotic as I had hoped. So, I altered the blocking to include rotating the benches 90 degrees at one point during the sequence. I was delighted that it took much less work than I thought it would for the actors to adjust to this new blocking. The effect of the change is threefold. One, it forces the actors to rotate their bodies as they are placing the benches, thus minimizing the challenge of having at least one actor talking while facing directly upstage. Two, it creates a stronger sense of chaos and movement that supports the mood of the scene. Three, it helps to suggest an almost cinematic feel of the audience actually rotating around a room, which further contributes to the chaos of the moment.

September 15, 2014

Tonight was the second dress rehearsal. Hustoles was there to provide feedback. Unfortunately, due to his rehearsal schedule for *Beauty and the Beast*, he was only able to stay for Act 1. Despite this, he provided one key observation that, at the time was quite disheartening but, upon reflection, was extremely valuable.

During the intermission break Hustoles and I talked about what he had seen. His first comments honestly struck me quite hard. He said that he thought the biggest challenge was with the lighting choices. He felt that the lights were too shiny and

sparkly. He got the impression of *The Little Mermaid* or some sort of bright musical theatre experience rather than a play about Vietnam. While he knew that there was camouflage netting on stage, never once did he actually see it as camo netting because the lights altered its appearance so much. He suggested that I examine what it is I want the lights to communicate and adjust accordingly.

His comments sent me (and Anderson) into a state of panic. I think we were both under the impression that the changes that would need to be made to the lights were significant and would take a huge amount of work. This especially alarmed Anderson, who had spent hours and hours of time working on the lights for the show.

It was interesting to note that, after Hustoles made his comment, all I could see during Act 2 was how the lights did, indeed, turn the camouflage netting into something else. I saw glittering stars, cooling volcanic rock, bright foil and seaweed. Not once did it look like camouflage netting. This realization forced me to reevaluate how the lights contribute to the story being told and if they are indeed right for the play. By the end of the show I was convinced that Hustoles's observation was valid and that I had made an error in judgment regarding the implementation of the lights. The bigger question I have to answer is: how did I miss it? And furthermore: how can I avoid this kind of misstep in the future?

Hustoles and I met later in the night to discuss other notes. Curiously, not once did he even mention the lighting. I suspect he feels that he said enough and that I will figure out a way to correct it, or choose not to. Most of the rest of his notes were not surprising me as they dealt with things that I had already talked to the actors about, such

as Howard's tendency to swallow lines and Staples's lack of control in terms of her pacing and clarity. One additional note that I found helpful was how he felt the action/reaction reflexes of the actors needed to feel more visceral—especially in the case of the Tet sequence. Overall he felt there needed to be a stronger sense of verisimilitude in the reactions to things like explosions and gunfire. He also suggested I give the actors the note to vocalize for the audience members behind them. Since we are in the deep thrust simply being able to hear the actors is important.

September 16, 2014

I've been doing a lot of reflecting on Hustoles's comments from last night. I feel like I need to figure out why I didn't see what he saw. I've reached a couple of conclusions. First, I think it is a question of context. Hustoles came to see the show with a fresh set of eyes. He knew it was a show about Vietnam and therefore the lights immediately took him out of the world of the play. I've been working on the show for several weeks. During that time Anderson has been to nearly every rehearsal. She began working on the lights as quickly as she was able. Therefore I've seen the lights slowly evolve over time. It is like when a person loses weight; if you see the person every day you hardly notice the weight loss, whereas if you suddenly see the person after a time of absence, the weight loss is quite evident. I was like the former while Hustoles was the latter.

Secondly, I think I was seduced by how "cool" the lights looked. I would suggest that Anderson was as well. We had all sorts of fancy, color-changing lights at our

disposal and a wonderfully textured backdrop that looked incredible under those lights. The lesson learned here is that just because we *can* do something “cool” with the lights doesn’t mean we *should*. As I learned in my Advance Directing class two years ago, selectivity is the key.

Finally, I learned the importance of sticking to my central concept. Through a conversation with Alex, I recalled what I had said during the original concept meeting for this show: that I saw textures like camo netting, sandbags and corrugated metal. In other words, I saw something very military; very Vietnam. Last night’s lights did not reflect that original idea. That is not to say that the concept statement is some sort of sacred ideal that cannot evolve or change. In fact, I think a concept statement should be flexible enough to encompass the ideas of the design team, yet it needs to be strong enough to be a unifying element. In this case, the lights deviated too far from the look and feel of the rest of the design elements so as to seem as if they belonged in a different show.

With lights on our mind, Anderson and I met for a couple hours this afternoon to go through the lighting looks. The solutions to our problems weren’t as hard to implement as we first thought. Anderson hung a few extra instruments to provide front light for the camo netting and then we simply lowered the intensity of the color of the lights on the backdrop. We were able to make adjustments to the entirety of Act 1, but we had to guess for Act 2 because we were unable to lower the Act 1 drop to reveal the Act 2 drop. Anderson made her changes based on the levels we set for Act 1. In the spirit of selectivity, I decided to still use the lights to make that netting disappear during

certain sequences, such as Tet (where the angry red light with show through), the concert sequence and the final sequence of the play when the women are at the Wall.

Tonight was student preview. We had a small crowd of maybe 30 people. I think the idea behind the lighting adjustments worked but there were some problems. The first was that the front lighting on the netting was way too bright. Second, because of how quickly Anderson had to reprogram things, mistakes were made. For example, the front light for the netting turned on bright as day during the Act 1 blackout.

The actors did well tonight. This was easily the best Barerena has done with both of her character's breakdown moments. Even though it lacks finesse and nuance, it was good to see how much she has grown. Howard continued to do a lot of swallowing of lines. Staples still needed to slow down and enunciate. Clauson needed to be sexier. Everyone needed to actively listen more and be more of an ensemble.

September 17, 2014

I had my last meeting with Hustoles this morning. We spent some time talking about the lighting issue and the questions it brought up about my ability as a director. After explaining how I felt and some of the conclusions I'd drawn, he used the term "objective eye" to describe the good director's ability to essentially see the show as an audience member. This allows the director to make decisions for the production based on what's best for the show, not necessarily what's "cool." In the end, I think this is a very valuable lesson to have learned—especially as I will immediately move forward into a production of *Our Town* next week.

Anderson and I met this afternoon. We went through every cue in the show to make sure that the added front light wasn't showing up in the wrong places and to make any final adjustment to the lights. As we were going through the cues it occurred to me that I should have brought some of the lighting effects from the Tet sequence in Act 1 into the flashbacks sequence of Act 2. This would have been a subtle way to reinforce the power that Veitnam had on the women even years after their time there was done. Plus, it would have worked well with the sound that was already present in the scene.

Tonight was opening night. It was great just to sit back and enjoy the show. Although, as director, it is difficult to fully sit back. I was quite troubled at how many cues were awkwardly executed tonight. Most of them were relatively minor in that most audience members weren't going to notice them (such as a light cue going too soon). However there were others that were very noticeable, like the microphone going live in the middle of a person's line. Roberts has been doing a good job as the PSM in general, but the cue-calling has been problematic throughout the tech process.

I felt that the actors did a good job tonight. The energy was high and things went pretty smoothly. I don't feel like the true ensemble was present yet, but perhaps that will come as performances progress.

Individually speaking, Howard definitely improved in terms of the swallowing of her lines. She was much clearer and easier to understand. Staples worked on slowing down but at the cost of pacing and timing. She also tended to "ham up" her funny parts. This was great fun for the audience, I think, but not necessarily a choice that is in line with the intention of the playwright. Granted, Steele does have a strong sense of humor

but I feel like it is reflected in the text and doesn't require a lot of extra embellishment. Clauson tried to get sexier but improvement was limited. The character still seems too "sweet" and lacks the appropriate energy and "pizzazz" associated with an entertainer. I think that part of Clauson's challenge is that she is too concerned about correctly playing her guitar chords that she is unable to sing strongly or make strong character choices. Barberena's performance was good even though she started to fall back into some of her old rhythmic vocal patterns. I suspect this was due to nerves. However, her breakdown sequences went as well as they did last night.

The audience response to the show was quite favorable. Not only did people seem to enjoy the performances overall but they really enjoyed the story. I like to do stories that people find meaningful. I received some complimentary feedback from several people who were either veterans or were associated with someone who had served in Vietnam. Despite the challenges the final production had, it was good to hear that the performance had a powerful impact on people.

CHAPTER IV

POST-PRODUCTION ANALYSIS

This chapter will focus on the post-production analysis of Matthew Caron's direction of *A Piece of My Heart*. The show was well received by its audience, garnering a number of affirming letters and comments. Of particular interest were the comments from either Vietnam veterans or people who recalled the specific era of American history. Their comments on the quality of the production and the poignancy of the story resonated strongly with the director's desire to direct a piece of theatre that had significance and could emotionally connect with people. Despite its successes, as a student of directing it is important to examine the final product not only from the eye of a fresh audience member but also with the critical eye of one who wishes to improve and grow as a theatre craftsperson and artist. To this end, each production element will be analyzed and commented upon in order to illuminate areas in which the director can improve and where he can take pride in a job well done.

First to be addressed will be the success of the overall style of the show. As articulated in Chapter I, the director felt that the key element in determining the style of the show was its presentational nature. Most of the lines delivered by the actors are in direct address to the audience. The presentationalism is then punctuated by vignettes in a more representational mode. Very little work was needed on the part of the director to make this style work, as it was inherent to the text. However, the director did find

difficulty in clearly and cleanly differentiating between the two styles in performance. The challenge was to help the actors to identify which parts of the text were representational and which were presentational, and then to get them to differentiate between the two modes in a consistent fashion. Often times this was relatively easy, as many of the characters have monologues that they deliver directly to the audience followed by clear representational scenes with other characters. However, there were times when the two modes were so tightly interwoven that it was difficult to clearly distinguish between them in terms of performance. For example, the sequence where Sissy and Leeann were talking about providing urine samples is mostly representational but there was one line in the midst of it that was to be presentational.

What tended to happen in rehearsal and performance was that the actor would not effectively clarify the differences in mode. Generally speaking, the presentational mode tended to dominate. What this ultimately meant for the final performance was that the representational moments lacked the immediacy of the “here and now” for the character. That is, actors seemed disconnected from the present moment at times because of the dominance of the direct address, which was more about retelling past events or narrating. The director could have aided the actors more in executing these differences in mode by paying closer attention to when they were happening and then coaching the actors on how better to move from one mode to the other. Furthermore, encouraging the actors to more fully commit to the distinction between modes would have been helpful.

All told, though, the overall style of the play worked well. The direct-address nature of the play forced the audience to take more of an active stake in the lives of the

characters and in the events that affected them. The presentational nature of the play—the de-emphasis of the fourth wall—helped to make the audience a very real part of the emotional content; drawing them more fully into the story.

Connected to the execution of the style of the show was the execution of the overall director's concept. As alluded to in Chapter I, the director strongly desired the show to simply tell the story of the women without, necessarily, making a political statement about the nature of war. This was perhaps a naïve approach in that the play so clearly demonstrates how catastrophic war is to its participants, even years after the conflict has ended. This is especially true in the case of the Vietnam War where so few resources were available to help veterans returning home at the time and because of the public opinion of the conflict. Because of the experiences portrayed in the story, the nature of the storytelling and the fact that war was so much in the forefront of the collective consciousness of contemporary Americans, an anti-war message cannot help but be conveyed. From the point of view of a director's objective, this result was very much in line with his intent—even if he didn't fully articulate it initially.

One aspect of the production process that proved to be especially challenging in terms of the director's objective was the execution of the concept as manifested in the visual design of the show. At the initial concept meeting the director made it clear that Vietnam was central to the play. In terms of the look of the show he stated that he saw things like sandbags, corrugated metal and camouflage netting—things that evoke the military presence in Vietnam. The scene designer, Anna Alex, largely honored this original idea by providing sand bags and camouflage netting, while adding the additional

element of bamboo. In theory, all of this worked very well. In practice, however, it became apparent that the director lost sight of some of these evocative elements in that they became eclipsed by other design elements; specifically lighting. It wasn't until project advisor Paul J. Hustoles attended a late-in-the-process rehearsal that the error had been observed. The details of this event are discussed in Chapter III. Hustoles's comments revealed a number of things to the director. First, it revealed the need for the director to have an objective eye throughout the rehearsal process. A director must recognize that even though he may see the show over and over at rehearsals, the audience will only see it once. The audience only gets one chance to process the choices the design team has made, therefore the choices must make sense in the context of the show. It is the director's job to keep his eyes "fresh" and determine the level of success of all elements as he sees them unfold in the rehearsal process.

Second, part of the process of maintaining the objective eye is adherence to the intended concept of the show. There are two aspects to this. The first is that the director needs to have flexibility when it comes to the show's concept. Because of the collaborative nature of theatre it is natural for the concept to change and evolve over time. Secondly, the director must be aware of the evolution of the concept while simultaneously evaluating whether or not the choices being made on stage remain true to it. In other words, the director's objective eye must be tightly bound to what he wants to communicate—to the show's concept, however it has evolved. In order to do this, the director should revisit his original notes and ideas about the show, should be sure to re-read production meeting reports and should constantly be appraising the validity of

design choices in light of the concept. It is easy to get swept away by an impressive lighting effect, for example, and forget to ask the question if it is right for the show or not. In the case of this show, the end product supported the director's concept, even though it took a rough tech-week to make it happen.

Directing a show in the deep thrust configuration of the Andreas Theatre was a new experience for the director. Much of his pre-Minnesota State Mankato experience was directing in a proscenium, so the deep thrust was a welcomed challenge. The obvious difficulty with this configuration was ensuring that all sections of the audience could see the face of at least one actor at all times. To a certain degree, the presentational nature of the show helped with this because actors could easily direct their lines to each section of the house when in the direct address mode. This happened many times during the show, particularly during the characters' longer monologues.

Stage positioning became a critical aspect during the representational moments of the play. There were times when the director desired the action to be downstage, such as during the Red Cross training sequence with Whitney, in order to achieve some dynamism in staging. Yet this particular moment wasn't as successful as it could have been because the action was brought too far downstage to the point of almost alienating the far house left and right sections of the audience.

A Piece of My Heart is very much an ensemble show. There is no one main character and, since the stories of the women are so interconnected, it is important for the actors to support each other in an ensemble kind of way. This production achieved varying degrees of success in this regard. There were moments when the ensemble was

very strong and others where it clearly needed more work. In general, it appears as if the moments when all of the characters were participating in a scene, the essence of the ensemble was present. Whereas, when more isolated scenes were happening with characters present in the background but not explicitly part of the action, the ensemble fell flat.

It is no surprise that the more active the characters were in the action of a specific scene the more engaged the actors were. As an example of this, consider the sequence in Act 2 where the Man asks the question, “What is wrong with you?” to the collective group of women. Here, each woman in the ensemble has the chance to communicate what that question means to her character and, in the broader sense, what it meant to all veterans—men and women—upon returning home from the war. Everyone in the cast was involved in this scene. The focus was intended to be simultaneously on all characters. Because of the strong involvement of the characters, the actors had an easier time being engaged themselves, thus strengthening the ensemble.

Conversely, there were other moments where individual scenes would be taking place and the supporting actors were merely spectating rather than being engaged in the scene. A good example of this was during Act 1, when Whitney as the Head Nurse was leading Martha around the ward. Rachel Howard (as Whitney) and Kendra Verhage (as Martha) were very much engaged in the scene, as the action was centered on them. The remainder of the ensemble was filling supportive roles in the background, observing the action. Unfortunately, this is what they appeared to be doing—observing—rather than *witnessing* and *connecting* to the action. Perhaps this could have been solved, in part,

with stronger active listening from the background actors, as well as with subtle physical indicators, such as gestures borne of the moment, to reinforce their more passive, yet still supportive, engagement in the action. Another factor was likely the inexperience of some of the actors who were filling background roles. Some of the younger actors probably had little idea of what the term “actively listening” meant, much less how to do it. The director could have taken more time to coach the actors to be more present in the moment which may have helped achieve a higher degree of ensemble.

The lack of connection to the moment was not unique to the inexperienced actors; it manifested itself several times throughout the play in both the newer actors as well as the veteran ones. One prime example of this was the Tet sequence. While the director was able to achieve an appropriate level of chaos and movement during the scene, there was a lack of visceral verisimilitude in terms of the actors reacting to the sounds of gunfire and explosions. One thing that was common in film footage recorded live in combat situations from the period is the sense of one’s life being very much in danger. Every explosion in this footage was reacted to by the people in the situation in a way that communicated the absolute peril of the moment. For the Tet sequence in the play, this level of life and death was never fully achieved. Certainly, there was a sense of danger and the stakes were high, but it could have been more so.

One thing that may have helped this was a closer collaboration between the actors and the sound design. The sound cues during that sequence were quite rich and evocative but the actors did not fully connect to them. Ideally, in such a scene the actors should be reacting appropriately to the relative proximity of the explosions, as manifested in the

volume of such cues. That is to say, the closer the explosion is, the more life-threatening it is, therefore the reaction should be more immediate and visceral. Perhaps taking the time for the actors to simply sit and listen to the cues would have helped. Furthermore, working the scene with no lines and having the actors simply react to the sounds may have helped as well. If this latter exercise were repeated then the actors would have become very familiar with the sound cues and could have better incorporated high-stakes reactions in conjunction with their lines and movement.

Despite some perceived shortcomings in the overall ensemble, there were many successes on an individual level with the actors. The cast was made up of actors with a wide range of experience levels. On the one end, Verhage was a 28-year-old senior BFA candidate with a number of shows under her belt—including professional work. On the other end was Isabella Barberena, a freshman who had not declared a major, with her only theatrical experience being chorus roles in high school musicals. All other cast members fell somewhere in between on this spectrum. This wide spread of abilities provided many challenges and opportunities for the director.

Verhage (Martha), being the most mature and experienced of the cast members, was a delight to work with. She is an incredibly hard worker and brought wonderful, intuitive ideas and choices to each rehearsal. In the opinion of the director, her dedication and experience had a tendency to raise the quality of the work of the other actors. Verhage's training was also valuable in that she was able to portray a variety of characters with relative ease. The doctor, Sissy's mother and the sergeant were all clearly distinct characters from Martha. However, the distinctions between characters became

less clear when she was portraying Leeann's friend and Jane, Whitney's companion. Both of these characters were quite similar to Martha. As Jane, Verhage chose to use a slower rhythm compared to Martha. This worked in theory, but in performance it was difficult to note, perhaps because the scene was much slower in pacing that it simply seemed like it was Martha, just at a slower pace. Another challenge that Verhage struggled with was her naturally stentorian vocal quality. The good thing about this was that it was never difficult to hear her on stage—even over the din and roar of the sounds of war. The challenge was naturalizing her vocal choices. Overall she met this challenge and conquered it but in comparison to some of the other, more natural-sounding actors, her vocal quality was noticeably different.

One of the best things about having Verhage in the cast was her ability to assist Barberena. The director took time to work with Barberena individually but didn't seem to be achieving the kinds of results he had hoped. So, he delegated some of the individual coaching of Barberena to Verhage. This proved to be a very productive pairing. Verhage was able to use her experience to aid a fellow actor and Barberena was able to learn directly some of the "tricks of the trade" from an accomplished and skilled performer. Once Verhage began working with Barberena, the director observed significant improvement.

Working with Barberena in the role of Leeann was one of the greatest challenges of the show in terms of acting. However, it was also one of the greatest successes. To be honest, the director was very impressed by Barberena's initial audition. It seemed to be nuanced yet simple and very evocative. When rehearsals began, however, her lack of

skill and experience became quite evident. This was especially challenging considering Leeann has the two of the biggest emotional breakdowns in the play. It was important to the director to have those moments filled with verisimilitude and emotion and, initially, Barberena struggled greatly. One of her roadblocks in this regard was her inhibitions. Since she had never performed a role such as this and had very little stage experience, the idea of fully committing to a moment was foreign to her. She was unable to “let herself go” and really commit physically and emotionally to these sequences. This was evident in one-on-one coaching sessions where she would frequently break character as she was leading up to the moment of heightened emotion. Her breakthrough came after she was able to work through these sequences under the tutelage of Verhage. The end product was far ahead of where she had begun. She was able to more fully commit to the moment and achieve a degree of emotion that was appropriate for the scene. Despite this growth, she was not able to achieve full credibility. One of the reasons for this was that even though she did well at the particular moment of the breakdown, the moments immediately before and after were lacking. For example, during Leeann’s breakdown in Act 2 there was a lack of commitment leading up to the point where she fell on the floor and started beating it. She seemed to suddenly be on the floor with sufficient emotional charge but with no real lead-up into it. Mainly this had to do with the physical execution of the moment. Vocally she was just fine, but there was little tension and commitment physically.

Barberena dealt with vocal struggles as well. The biggest one early on in the rehearsal process was her pacing. Presumably, she had trouble committing her lines to

memory and this manifested itself in a consistently choppy and slow delivery. This challenge was mostly rectified through her coaching sessions with Verhage and through discussions of character with the director. Not surprisingly, Barberena had very little knowledge about how to analyze a character. Once it was brought to her attention that Leeann, as a young, hip New Yorker, would probably speak at a rather fast rate, Barberena was able to find a way to achieve this vocal nuance. Another vocal issue she struggled with was simply being heard. Once again, due to a lack of experience and training, she did not really know how to properly support her breath in order to get force behind her voice. While she was able to improve through coaching and individual work, in performance her voice still seemed strained and underpowered compared to the other performers.

Having enumerated a number of challenges that Barberena had to overcome, it is important to discuss some successes. One of her finest moments on stage was following the Tet sequence when Leeann talks about the wounded 18-year-old soldier calling for his mommy. Barberena's performance at that moment was heart-wrenchingly honest and impressively poignant. It was a good example of where her commitment to the moment manifested itself in a powerful performance.

Another inexperienced actor, Jessica Staples (Steele), similarly achieved a number of successes while also exhibiting areas for improvement. Contrary to Barberena, Staples had had some training in acting and some collegiate acting experience, having been in *Hairspray* this past summer. So, she had a firmer foundation upon which to develop her skills. Staples proved to be a very studious actor, conducting

research into her character as well as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). She was also a very contentious actor, continually asking questions in order to improve her performance and to be sure that she effectively contributed to the director's vision of the show.

In addition to these qualities, Staples also brought some good acting skills to the production. Her robust vocal quality meant that there was never difficulty in hearing her—no matter how loud the sound cues were. Physically, she was able to swiftly incorporate the crisp, military movements and posture that her character would have had. She also integrated the fact that Steele suffered a serious back injury into her performance by making strong physical choices that affected how the character walked.

Even though Staples demonstrated a strong vocal attack on the character, the clarity of the words suffered due to the speed of her delivery. Despite repeated notes and suggestions (such as doing vocal warm-ups), her rate of delivery continued to be inconsistent. At some rehearsals the rate was so fast that she could hardly be understood. During the next rehearsal she would overcompensate and while she could be clearly understood, the rate and pacing of the scene would suffer. While she made progress in vocal control, it seems a habitual problem that further training and experience will help to rectify.

In terms of her overall performance, the director was pleased. Staples is a smart actor and was able to make choices about her character based on text analysis. She successfully portrayed the humor that character had even in dire situations. Steele is one of the few characters with legitimately funny lines and Staples was able to provide the

occasional comic relief that was necessary for such a serious show. One sequence in the play that simultaneously vexed and pleased the director was when Steele pulled the gun after being run down by an enemy motorcycle. At this moment, Staples effectively used tension and breath control to communicate the danger of the situation while concurrently showing the powerful need for Steele to get out of Vietnam. Part of the problem with the sequence was pacing. The pacing was wonderful for the gun sequence, but the following moment—when Steele communicates her need to get out of Vietnam—seemed to lack the same sense of immediacy. It was encumbered due to awkward pauses and pacing choices.

One of the requirements for the character of Maryjo was that she had to be a skilled guitarist. Unfortunately there were very few women who auditioned that could play guitar. Claire Clauson, a neophyte guitarist, was cast in the role. As someone who was relatively new to playing the guitar, Clauson had some challenges in executing her role. Even though sound designer, Luke Walchuck, simplified the guitar chord progressions to better match the level of Clauson's skill, she still had difficulty executing the songs. She was so concerned about getting the chords right that it impeded her ability to achieve a fully nuanced performance. This was exemplified in the "Deep in the Heart of Texas" sequence, where she had difficulty maintaining the rhythm of the song and, therefore, did not sing optimally. Related to this was the quality of the performance of the "Boots Are Made For Walking" sequence. Clauson played the song just fine but the sequence was lacking. In part, this was likely due to her level of confidence in playing it, which impacted the performance. Yet there was also the issue of the "sex appeal" of the

character. Clauson naturally reads as being very sweet and innocent, which works well for the first part of the play. However, once she takes the stage in Vietnam, the audience has to see her as a performer, as someone sexy that the troops can be attracted to sexually. This is especially important considering the arc of the character, since she was eventually raped by American soldiers and discusses how the troops “project” their sexual fantasies on her.

Despite some challenges in performance, there were moments when Clauson really shined. One such moment is the very end of the play. Whenever Clauson was able to forego the guitar and sing *a capella* she was wonderful. Her simple rendition of “America the Beautiful” at the end of the Wall sequence was a fitting and emotional end to the play. Additionally, she was able to achieve an effectively nuanced performance that provided a powerful juxtaposition to the previous sequence of being raped when she sang “Fairest Lord Jesus” without the aid of her guitar.

There were moments during her “straight” sequences (without singing) that worked very well, too. For example, during Act 2 when Maryjo is in a split scene with Whitney expounding on the string of relationship issues the women are having, Clauson was able to portray a disturbed, confused and broken older version of Maryjo that was quite good. Her interpretation of Sissy’s child, Danielle, was also quite nice. In this case, Clauson’s natural penchant for innocence contributed to a credible performance of a child affected by Agent Orange disease.

It is always wonderful to see student actors improve over time. The best case for this in the cast was Howard (Whitney). The director had the opportunity to work with

her in his production of *Sky Girls* in the fall of 2013. At that time, the director identified several habituals that were a challenge for Howard. The most significant of which was her difficulty in maintaining eye contact. For this production, Howard seemed to have gained control over this habitual mannerism, as it was a minimal problem in rehearsal. More significant was Howard's tendency to overact. She is a smart actor who is able to analyze text, reach conclusions and implement strong choices. However, these choices tended to be overly dramatic and to lack credibility. One of the best things about working with Howard is the way in which she takes direction. Through a couple of specific notes regarding her overacting, she was able to make corrections and ended up with a much more subtle, layered character.

Another success of Howard's was in her achievement of a series distinctive characters that were clearly different from her "base" character of Whitney. In particular, her head nurse was quite memorable and very different from Whitney in vocal quality, physicality and rhythm.

Another actor that exhibited much maturity and discipline, as well as growth, was Alex Blesi, who played Sissy. Blesi proved to be an incredibly smart, intuitive and creative actor. She was very dedicated to the role and the show, mentioning several times that she wanted to perform the role in such a way as to bring honor to the women of whom that story was about. To that end, she worked very hard in terms of making choices about her character, conducting research and using her instructors as resources. For example, in order to better portray the physical effects of Agent Orange disease on

Sissy, Blesi sought the advice and coaching of her movement instructor. This type of initiative is impressive and speaks to Blesi's work ethic.

Even with such tools at her disposal, she did still have some challenges to overcome. One of her most significant issues was breath support. Blesi tends to be a rather shallow breather, which inhibited her ability to produce the type of robust sound necessary for projection. This became a problem in rehearsal and performance when she was required to project over the sounds of war. While she was able to do so with moderate success, her voice sounded strained and thin.

The final actor to be discussed is Zach Bolland, who played the American Men. His role was particularly challenging in that he had to play over fourteen discreet characters through the course of the play, from 18-year-old soldiers, to upper-middle aged parents. Despite some trepidation with casting Bolland due to a somewhat less-than-positive reputation, Bolland tackled his role with vigor and proved to be an exceptionally hard worker with a multitude of creative ideas. He was a very conscientious actor—always testing and trying new ideas and seeking the feedback of the director in order to better his performance.

In performance, the choices he made to distinguish his characters were clear and strong. While, at times, there was some inconsistency (e.g., the soldier that takes the picture of Sissy differed in vocal quality from the soldier that later gives her the picture—even though they are supposed to be the same character), overall his end product was quite good. Vocal, physical and rhythmic choices were made in a variety of combinations that allowed him to successfully portray all of the required characters.

Simply doing this in and of itself is a feat of acting but the fact that Bolland was able to do it quickly was impressive. For example, near the beginning of Act 2, Bolland needed to portray seven characters in the span of a few short pages. He was able to do so credibly and seamlessly.

Having discussed the performance aspects of the show, the design and technical elements will now be addressed, beginning with the scenic design by Anna Alex. As a whole, the scenic design was successful. The upstage platforms allowed the director many opportunities to exploit the use of levels and planes in blocking. The open playing space in the downstage area was ideal for the style of the show. When needed, it was able to become specific locations such as an airfield, a field hospital or the back of the truck, while being able to retain a certain level of ambiguity that contributed to the presentational nature of the play. The camouflage netting backdrop was certainly evocative of Vietnam, or, at least, military. The use of a different, more distressed, backdrop for Act 2 worked very well to evoke the sense of brokenness of the women as they returned to the United States. Other textures used in the set—wood, bamboo, erosion netting and burlap sandbags—contributed to the military ambiance of the show, which supported the direct connection the women had to the war in Act 1, and suggested its haunting presence in Act 2.

Despite its clear strengths, there were a number of ways in which the set may have been improved upon. For example, perhaps instead of making the platforms so square and blocky it may have been interesting to use more dynamic angles. The squareness of the set was a deliberate choice intended to call to mind a sense of military rigidity

and formality, yet placing platforms at an angle still may have evoked a sense of these military qualities, while simultaneously suggesting that chaos and conflict are what is in store for the women. A more askew set would certainly have worked for Act 2 in further supporting the turmoil the women experience at that point.

One other detail that may have made the set stronger would have been the addition of more distressing to mirror the backdrop for Act 2. The textures present in the scene design already evoked a gritty, dirty reality. Taking it a step further, by dirtying up the platforms, benches and floor, may have added another layer of richness to the scenery.

As expressed in Chapter III, the costume design was a source of much consternation during the rehearsal process. However, it ended up working quite well. Costume Designer Amber Kuennen helped the director to achieve his goal of costume changes that were quick and streamlined combined with designs that suggested something about each of the women in the story. The costumes certainly evoked the time period in which the play was set, while also communicating to the audience the various professions of the women. It was important for the audience to identify each woman with their profession, since the job they were performing in Vietnam directly affected their experience there as well as contributed to their problems back in the U.S.

As always, even with successful designs, there are things that could be improved. In performance, the simple costume changes worked relatively well in that they achieved the desired effect of supporting the character changes of the actors. However, they could have been better. The main thing that would have helped in this situation was more fully

integrating costuming elements earlier in the process. Doing this would have helped acclimate the actors to their costume pieces and, therefore, assist in making those changes smoother and more elegant. This would also have helped the actors with essential movement issues since walking and standing in combat boots is much different than in street shoes.

As with the scene design, the costumes could have benefited from some distressing. As it was, all of the costumes—even the fatigues—were very clean and neat looking. This was fine for the start of the play, but once they were in Vietnam dirt, filth and distress may have been appropriate. This distress could easily have been carried through into the second act as a symbol of the “innocence” that Vietnam took from them as well as a suggestion of how American society of the time viewed returning veterans.

The lighting design of Tierra Anderson ended up working quite well despite some very substantial obstacles late in the rehearsal process. The design choices were able to support the mood of the various scenes and contribute to the story being told. The camouflage netting was nearly always lit in order to communicate the physical presence of Vietnam in Act 1 and its psychological presence in Act 2. However, specific choices were made at times to make the netting disappear through the clever use of lights. Two such places where this technique was used were Maryjo’s concert scene in Act 1 and the Wall sequence of Act 2. In both of these cases color and the angle of the lights were used in such a way as to completely alter and disguise the look of the camouflage netting; changing it into something beautiful and decidedly un-military.

There were only two real issues with the realized lighting design. First, there was an issue of finesse. Because of the changes made in the eleventh hour there was little time to refine the final choices. Because of that, some of the looks ended up seeming flat and dull, particularly as they related to the camouflage backdrop. Had there been more time to experiment and play (especially since this was Anderson's first realized design) perhaps some more elegant and sophisticated solutions could have been found. Second, perhaps the lighting was over-designed to a certain degree. Certainly, the script calls for many light cues and requires some very complicated sequences (e.g., the Tet sequence). The director also suggested in early production meetings that he sees the show as a cacophony of light and sound. Even so, perhaps there were moments when the lighting design could have been simplified in order to provide a stronger contrast to the moments when the lights needed to be complicated and obvious. For example, perhaps there did not need to be light transitions for every character during the slower, more personal monologue moments.

Just as the lighting design choices helped to provide a very rich environment, so did Walchuck's sound design. Both lights and sound provided the bridge between the play and the audience's imagination. An obvious strength of the sound design choices was its success in providing sound reinforcement in the form of explosions, gunfire, helicopters and general ambience during the Vietnam sequences. Another was the quality of the period microphone that was used live during the performance. What might have made both of these elements even stronger would have been earlier integration into the play itself. As discussed previously in this chapter, integrating the sounds of the Tet

sequence with the actors earlier would have helped their performances. Likewise, integrating the microphone earlier could have minimized some of the difficulties encountered with it in performance in terms of volume and cue timing. In general, the overall volume of the cues was limited due to the projection capabilities of the actors. Both Walchuck and the director desired the sounds of war and chaos to be much louder but this proved to absolutely overwhelm the voices of the actors. Therefore, the total volume of the show was reduced.

Another, less obvious, success of the sound design was Walchuck's use of silence. The first act was quite busy with a literal cacophony of sound from the moment the women landed in Vietnam to the moment they left. Contrast that with the relative silence of the second act. This silence was then punctuated with sounds only as they related to the women's memories of Vietnam. This was a very successful choice.

Walchuck also found himself fulfilling the role of music director as well as sound designer. In hindsight, it may have been wise to enlist the help of someone more used to coaching singers, yet Walchuck did an admirable job despite this. The main focus of his work was with Clauson, who had the bulk of the singing in the show. As already discussed, she had her own challenges with the combination of singing and playing the guitar simultaneously. Walchuck attempted to ease her burden by transposing all the songs into the same key in order to simplify the chord progressions she would have to learn. Additionally, Walchuck's coaching certainly helped Clauson manage some of the technical challenges she faced in terms of guitar playing technique.

The last production element to be discussed here is stage management.

Production Stage Manager William Roberts did an admirable job with his very first production stage management project. There were instances of talking at inappropriate times or saying awkward things but these seemed to be borne of a certain level of maturity as a PSM rather than any sort of malicious or inappropriate intent. Despite these moments, Roberts performed his rehearsal duties well. However, he had some difficulties in performance. This was a complicated show in terms of light and sound cues, to be sure. As such, Roberts struggled with consistency in calling the cues. One night a cue would be perfect, the next it was late. While the audience may not notice miscalling light cue, miscalling a cue for the live microphone was quite obvious. These types of errors were unfortunate as they decreased the verisimilitude and affected the audience's willing suspension of disbelief. Presumably Roberts will learn from the challenges he had with this show and use them to grow as he moves on to his next.

In conclusion, *A Piece of My Heart* was, not surprisingly, a valuable learning experience. With every show he directs, the director feels his confidence grow in areas of actor coaching and designer communication. The most valuable lesson taken from this production process has to do with the idea of successfully communicating the director's intent to the audience. The director must maintain an objective eye in all things—from design to acting to the calling of cues—in order to ensure that the audience is receiving the message or the idea the director wishes to convey.

CHAPTER V

PROCESS DEVELOPMENT

Prior to entrance into the Masters of Fine Arts program at Minnesota State University, Mankato, the director's experience included over ten years of teaching and directing theatre at the college level. This experience provided the director with a strong foundation upon which to build further knowledge and practice of the craft of directing for the theatre. This experience also gave the director a renewed view on the importance of learning and how to apply diverse knowledge and techniques to the project at hand. This chapter will illuminate how the variety of classes, projects and assistantship duties has contributed to the growth of Matthew Caron as a craftsman and artist.

The most immediately applicable of these experiences are those that are directly connected to directing for the theatre. Caron directed *A Plague of Angels* as his minor project in April of 2013. This project gave him a good picture of a cohesive and skilled design team and what such an entity can create on stage with a limited budget and resources. The process also clarified some areas wherein the director could improve, such as with the coaching of actors and identifying and working on problem areas of production earlier. Similar lessons were learned during the direction of Caron's major project, *Sky Girls*, in September of 2013. For this show, the director was able to build on the lessons learned previously and further exercise his coaching and communication

skills. This production provided the director with the further challenge of presenting the show in the corner stage configuration. This was a particularly exciting challenge as prior to that Caron had only directed on a thrust and on a proscenium stage.

Usually at Minnesota State Mankato, graduate students in the directing program have the chance to direct three fully realized productions as part of their curricular work. Because of a number of different factors, Caron had the opportunity to direct four additional pieces.

The first two of these were a pair of one-act plays presented as part of an evening called *Maverick Musings*. Each of the plays presented for this event were written by Minnesota State Mankato playwriting students and directed by one of the three MFA directing candidates. Caron directed *Three Months* by Jake Sullivan and *The Girl* by Joshua Helgeson. This project gave him a number of good experiences. First, it allowed him the chance to work with new plays and their writers. This was not the first time Caron had directed new work or worked with a playwright, however, it was not something that he was used to doing. Therefore, having the opportunity to do so in this setting forced Caron to think more carefully about things like honoring the playwright's intent. Knowing that the playwright was going to see the work added a strong desire to present the work in a way that would achieve what the playwright desired as well as communicating the director's intent. Second, since there were six separate plays presented as part of an evening of theatre, the director gained a new perspective on communicating with designers. Not only did *Maverick Musings* make use of three separate directors, it also utilized two different costume designers, while having just one

designer for each area of scenic, lighting and sound. This forced the director to exercise his communication skills in new ways in order to coordinate with fellow directors and the design team to create some sort of cohesion amidst so many varying elements.

The second extra production Caron had the opportunity to direct (and incidentally scene design as well) was the professional production of *Boeing Boeing* in June of 2014 as part of the 48th season of Highland Summer Theatre. This challenged the director in many ways. First and foremost was the rehearsal schedule of a summer stock show. Caron was used to a typical rehearsal schedule, which allows for 4-6 weeks of rehearsal before the show sees an audience. *Boeing* had six days. Because of this, the director had to learn how to make decisions quickly and efficiently both in terms of design and performance, and to manage his time well. The second challenge had to do with the fact that Caron had never directed a farce before. So, *Boeing* gave him the chance to experiment with that highly popular theatrical genre. Finally, the show was presented in a corner configuration, which the director again found challenging. However, directing *Sky Girls* in a similar configuration gave him the necessary experience to make better blocking, composition and movement choices.

The third extra production is *Our Town*, which is currently in rehearsal as this chapter is being written. It is to be presented on the Ted Paul stage and will no doubt provide Caron with additional lessons to learn and opportunities for growth.

The Advanced Directing classes offered the director an opportunity to direct a number of smaller projects. Caron directed two very different scenes as part of his first Advanced Directing class: *Rashomon* and *Agnes of God*. *Rashomon* allowed him the

opportunity to experiment with creating multiple locations and characters within the bounds of limited resources. *Agnes of God* allowed him the chance to apply various composition and picturization techniques in a very simple setting. In his second Advanced Directing class he directed cuttings from *Playing with Fire: After Frankenstein* and *The Women of Lockerbie*. Caron used these scenes as an opportunity to further apply composition and picturization techniques, as well as to further work on actor coaching. The scenes for both classes resulted in almost immediate critical feedback from classmates and the instructors, which was invaluable.

Finally, in the area of directing, the Director/Designer Communication Seminar class provided specific insight into ways in which directors and designers can best work together. It also gave the director a chance to get his feet wet, so to speak, applying design choices from varying design areas to a specific concept as presented by another director.

Closely tied to this was the Design for Directors series of classes that the MFA directing candidate was required to take. At the writing of this document, the director has taken the Costume, Scene and Lighting Design courses, and is currently enrolled in the Sound Design course. Each of these courses provided the director with essential insight into how to better communicate with the designers of various fields. Not only did the director get the opportunity to create designs of his own but also gained a greater appreciation for the type of work each designer does. Each of these courses illuminated the similarities of the design fields while also showing how vastly different they are. Furthermore, the courses provided the director with the evaluative tools needed to

critically assess the value of a design based on the show's concept and director's objective.

The Dramaturgy class provided the director with necessary research tools directly relating to a chosen script. This class helped to illuminate the breadth and depth of information regarding the world of a play at the disposal of a director. It further enhanced the communication skills of the director in that it forced him to take a sizable volume of knowledge and narrow it down to the critical information and then to present that information in a variety of ways, including an actor packet and an in-class presentation.

Theatre Research was a class that helped to further hone the director's communication skills, particularly as they relate to writing. It also provided some valuable insight into the greater world of academia in two ways. First, the particular topic being researched would inevitably lead to a number of scholarly articles. These articles were useful not only for the information they contained but also for the insight they provided into the academic world, i.e., what kinds of articles were being written and accepted by various publications. Second, one of the requirements of the course was to submit a paper to a scholarly journal. This experience, in essence, de-mystified an otherwise intimidating process for fledgling scholars.

The Theatre History sequence of courses gave the director further information on the place of theatre in the broader spectrum of the history of the art form. While much of the factual information was review, certainly there were many instances of new and valuable concepts arising, especially as they relate to the cultural context in which plays

were written. New information learned during Theatre History I included that of non-Western drama, such as the theatre of Japan and India. The format of the Theatre History II class was valuable in that it gave graduate students the chance to lead discussion groups. This helped to exercise teaching muscles as well as to provide small group leadership opportunities.

Similarly, Theatre Theory and Criticism offered the chance to delve into the historical theories of the art form. It supplied even more context into the cultural paradigm in which various plays were written. It also gave the director additional tools with which to analyze drama through understanding the chronology and development of varied theatrical theories. The structure of the class allowed the director to engage in intellectual discussion regarding these theories with his peers and further honed his communication skills as an artist and a teacher.

The performance classes, in general, gave the director further tools in communicating with and coaching actors. Theatre Speech II was a good refresher course in the capabilities and nuances of the human voice. New concepts, such as the vocal qualities, were techniques that the director could add to his toolbox in order to coach actors to achieve vocal variety and dynamism in performance. The in-class performances also served as a good way to exemplify these techniques and reminded the director of the thrills and anxieties of public performance.

The Advanced Acting Techniques class built on this concept but with the added complexity of very specific acting techniques, such as the psychological centers and masking. The techniques learned in this class had immediate and clear value to any

director (indeed, some were used in the direction of *A Piece of My Heart*), as they can be used to achieve a varied and engaging performance from the willing actor. The opportunity to teach a specific technique in the class was beneficial in further sharpening teaching and communication skills. Furthermore, the required book reports expanded the director's horizons in terms of the variety of literature available for use as an actor.

Stage Dialects 1 and 2 were classes that had immediate application in the director's project work (to varying degrees of success), with the Irish dialect in *Plague*, the southern in *Sky Girls* and the many dialects in *Boeing Boeing*. The International Phonetic Alphabet is an invaluable tool to the director. Learning it in the courses was mostly review, however, new and more correct applications were unquestionably learned. Applying techniques learned in other classes, such as the vocal qualities from Theatre Speech and Advanced Acting Techniques, demonstrated the variety that can be achieved in dialect performance.

The Theatre Management class was probably one of the most valuable courses taken at Minnesota State Mankato simply because so much of its content was quite new to the director. While many theatre artists perhaps don't like to think of the business side of the art, the truth is that without some sort of money and management skills, a theatre may not survive. This course provided the director with many opportunities to utilize skills heretofore unused in any other class, including budgeting, money management and issues of public relations. Furthermore, the required presentations allowed the director to exercise some creativity while simultaneously improving communication skills.

The range of work conducted for the Department of Theatre & Dance through the director's graduate assistantship also provided additional and unique insights into the art form as a whole. Working in the scene shop presented opportunities for improving skills in building set pieces, time management and team leadership. Each show worked on illuminated new and varied techniques for making scene design a practical reality. The translation of design from a theoretical communication tool into a functional and workable instrument for illustrating and supporting dramatic action is an essential element for directors to understand.

Working for Public Relations also broadened the director's horizons. Writing short dramaturgical notes for publication on the department website for each show allowed him to further exercise the research techniques learned in class and to put them into practical use. The opportunity to design posters also further enhanced his designer's eye in terms of a different type of visual communication. It also allowed him the chance to work with directors in a slightly different capacity—namely, how to best present their show to the public in a way that will garner immediate interest through the visual medium of the poster. Finally, the graduate assistantship helped to attune the director to the needs of front-of-house personnel, especially as they relate to how directorial choices may impact the theatre patrons' experience. For example, informing the appropriate people regarding the use of the house for entrances and exits in the Andreas Theatre.

In a similar way, working in the Box Office has given the director an additional perspective on front-of-house matters. Not only has it provided insight in to the business side of the theatre experience, but it also was an exercise in customer service. Ultimately,

the audience is an essential part of the theatre equation, so serving them at the Box Office helps to understand them. Of course, serving as a box office manager also helped with the director's leadership skills.

Finally, since the director's goal is to work in the field of academic theatre, teaching courses for the department has been an invaluable experience. He has had the opportunity to teach both the Fundamentals of Directing class and the Play Analysis class. Coming from a background in teaching in higher education already gave Caron an edge—particularly in terms of the Fundamentals of Directing class. This class was quite similar as far as content goes to other courses taught at other institutions. What was absolutely new to him was managing a course with over 40 students. Caron has always felt that his classroom management skills needed honing and this particular class gave him the chance to do just that. Furthermore, it forced him to manage his time more efficiently in order to prepare for class and grade materials in a timely manner. A directing class is always nice to teach during a time in which one is actually directing a show. In this way, teaching the concepts to students helps the director to better model good directorial habits when in production, while also serving as a nice refresher.

Play Analysis was a new course for Caron. As such, it required much more preparation than the directing class. While analyzing plays is a significant part of a director's job, teaching in a formal and accessible way was a new challenge. Not only did the course give the director a chance to get further teaching experience but it also helped him to learn more about play analysis as well. Often times teaching something is the best way to learn it. Such was the case with Play Analysis. While teaching about

analysis, the director noted an immediate change in terms of how he approached the analysis of his own course work as a student, his production work and his analysis of the work of others.

The final thing that remains for the finalization of his degree is for the director to complete an internship. As of the writing of this document, he has completed several applications for various professional internships in the Twin Cities region. He is very much looking forward to this last step in his education in that the internship will undoubtedly provide unique insight into the professional world of theatre that will supplement his already substantial education at Minnesota State Mankato.

In summary, without a doubt the practical and theoretical educational opportunities at Minnesota State Mankato have been invaluable to the development of Matthew Caron as a director and an educator. The coursework reinforced and supported existing knowledge, as well as broadened his experience through new and varied information and techniques. The project work and assistantship duties allowed for specialized application of theoretical knowledge through practical endeavors. The overall experience at Minnesota State, Mankato has been challenging, rewarding, and above all, educational.

APPENDIX A

REHEARSAL SCHEDULE

A PIECE OF MY HEART



Rehearsal Schedule

~Schedule is subject to change. Please check your email and the callboard regularly for possible changes~

Week	Date	Time	Who	What
1	Tues, Aug 26	6:30 pm	All Call	Read Through/Table Work
	Wed, Aug 27	6:30 pm	All Call	Block Act 1
	Thurs, Aug 28	6:30 pm	All Call	Block Act 2
	Fri, Aug 29	6:30 pm (off book)	All Call	Work p. 13-48
2	Sun, Aug 31	No Rehearsal	-	-
	Mon, Sep 1	6:30 pm	All Call	Work p. 48-84
	Tues, Sep 2	6:30 pm	All Call	Special Guest
	Wed, Sep 3	6:30 pm	All Call	Work p. 85-104
	Thurs, Sep 4	6:30 pm	All Call	Work p. 104-124
	Fri, Sep 5	6:30 pm	All Call	Run Act 1
3	Sun, Sep 7	6:30 pm	All Call	Run Act 2
	Mon, Sep 8	6:30 pm	All Call	Run Show—Designer Run
	Tues, Sep 9	6:30 pm	All Call	Publicity Photo Call; Run Show
	Wed, Sep 10	6:30 pm	All Call	Run Show
	Thurs, Sep 11	*6:00 (crew) 6:30 (cast)	All Call	Light/Sound Tech
	Fri, Sep 12	*6:00 (crew) 6:30 (cast)	All Call	First Tech
	Sat, Sep 13	*6:00 (crew) 6:30 (cast)	All Call	Run with Tech
4	Sun, Sep 14	*Call: 6:00 (crew) 6:30 (cast) Showtime: 7:30	All Call	First Dress
	Mon, Sep 15	*Call: 6:00 (crew) 6:30 (cast) Showtime: 7:30	All Call	Full Run
	Tues, Sep 16	*Call: 6:00 (crew) 6:30 (cast) Showtime: 7:30	All Call	Full Run Majors' / ASL Preview
	Wed, Sep 17	*Call: 6:00 (crew) 6:30 (cast) Showtime: 7:30	All Call	Opening Night!
	Thurs, Sep 18	*Call 6:00 (crew) 6:30 (cast) Showtime: 7:30	All Call	Performance Production Photo Call
	Fri, Sep 19	*Call 6:00 (crew) 6:30 (cast) Showtime: 7:30	All Call	Performance
	Sat, Sep 20	*Call 6:00 (crew) 6:30 (cast) Showtime: 7:30	All Call	Closing Night Strike

* Call times may be adjusted as needed

APPENDIX B

POSTER

507-389-6661 MSUTheatre.com



A PIECE OF MY HEART

BY SHIRLEY LAURO

The emotional story of six women's experiences with the Vietnam War

7:30 p.m. Sept. 17-20, 2014
Andreas Theatre

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On the Mainstage
**Disney's
Beauty and the Beast**
Oct. 2-4 & 9-12

Theatre & Dance
MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY, MANKATO

On the Mainstage
To Kill a Mockingbird
Oct 16-19 & 23-26

APPENDIX C

PROGRAM

A PIECE OF MY HEART
BY SHIRLEY LAURO

The emotional story of six women's experiences with the Vietnam War

7:30 p.m., Sept. 17-20, 2014
Andreas Theatre

Theatre & Dance
MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY, MANIKATO

Theatre & Dance Faculty and Staff

George Grubb

Technical Director /Sound Design

Heather E. Hamilton

Acting and Directing

Paul J. Hustoles

Chair, Acting and Directing

Julie Kerr-Berry

Director of Dance

Mike Lagerquist

Public Relations Director

Bonnie Malterer

Business and Office Manager

David McCarl

Costume Design

John David Paul

Scene Design

Catherine Schmeal-Swope

Costumer

Steven Smith

Lighting Design

Daniel Stark

Dance Technique & Composition

Nick Wayne

Musical Director

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Theatre & Dance

MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY, MANIKATO

On the Mainstage

Disney's Beauty and the Beast

Oct. 2-5 & 9-12, 2014

Music by Alan Menken, lyrics by Howard Ashman & Tim Rice, book by Linda Woolverton.

Sponsored by *Enventis & Enventis Foundation*

To Kill A Mockingbird

Oct. 16-19 & 23-26, 2014

Adapted by Christopher Sergel.

From the novel by Harper Lee.

Our Town

Nov. 6-8 & 13-16, 2014

By Thornton Wilder

Assassins

Jan. 29-Feb. 1 & Feb. 4-8, 2015

Book by John Weidman, music and lyrics

by Stephen Sondheim,

based on an idea by Charles Gilbert, Jr.

Next in the Studio

Gabriel

Nov. 19-22, 2014

By Moira Buffini

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Call or stop by the box office in the lobby of the Earley Center for

Performing Arts

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A Piece of My Heart

By Shirley Lauro

Telling a universal story

A Piece of My Heart is a drama inspired by the stories collected by Keith Walker in his book of the same name. The book, published in 1985, was the first to collect and share the experiences of women who served in various capacities in the Vietnam War. Reflecting many of the stories in the book, the action of the play spans a 20-year time period, showing the evolution of the women from their idealistic, pre-war selves in the 1960s, through their trials and sufferings during and immediately following the war (where many of them suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD), to a time of healing in the 1980s.

While no official records were kept of how many women served in Vietnam, the Vietnam Women's Memorial estimates that nearly 10,000 women in uniform actually served in-country during the conflict. It is unknown how many civilian women (such as Red Cross and USO workers) served.

Even though this play tells the stories of six individual women, it is really the story of all women who served in Vietnam. The play intertwines and layers the individual stories in order to create the sense that, while each woman has a unique tale to tell, they are all inextricably connected.

—**Matthew Caron**

Cast

Martha**Kendra Verhage**
Maryjo**Claire Clauson**
Sissy**Alex Blesi**
Whitney**Rachel Howard**
Lecann**Isabella Barberena**
Steele.....**Jessica Staples**
The American Men.....**Zach Bolland**

Setting

A 20-year period before, during and after the Vietnam War.

There will be a 15-minute intermission.

Special Thanks

Kristina Boyce and Minnesota State University ROTC
Peter Bloedel and Bethany Lutheran College
Jody Wallschlager
Tom McLaughlin

Faculty Advisors

Paul J. Hustoles
David McCarl

Production Staff

Director
Matthew Caron

Scene Design
Anna Warda Alex

Costume Design
Amber Kuennen

Lighting Design
Tierra Anderson

Sound Design
Luke Walchuk

Production Stage Manager
William Roberts

Technical Director
James Johnson

Assistant Stage Manager
Jon Mecum

Sound Board Operator
Blake Bruns

Light Board Operator
Henry Anderson

A Piece of My Heart is presented through special arrangements with Samuel French, Inc.
235 Park Avenue South, Fifth Floor
New York, NY 10003

APPENDIX D

PRODUCTION PHOTOGRAPHS



The women react to their first day on the job in Vietnam.



Maryjo (Claire Clauson) sings her signature song for the troops.



Sissy (Alex Blessi) mourns over a dead soldier.



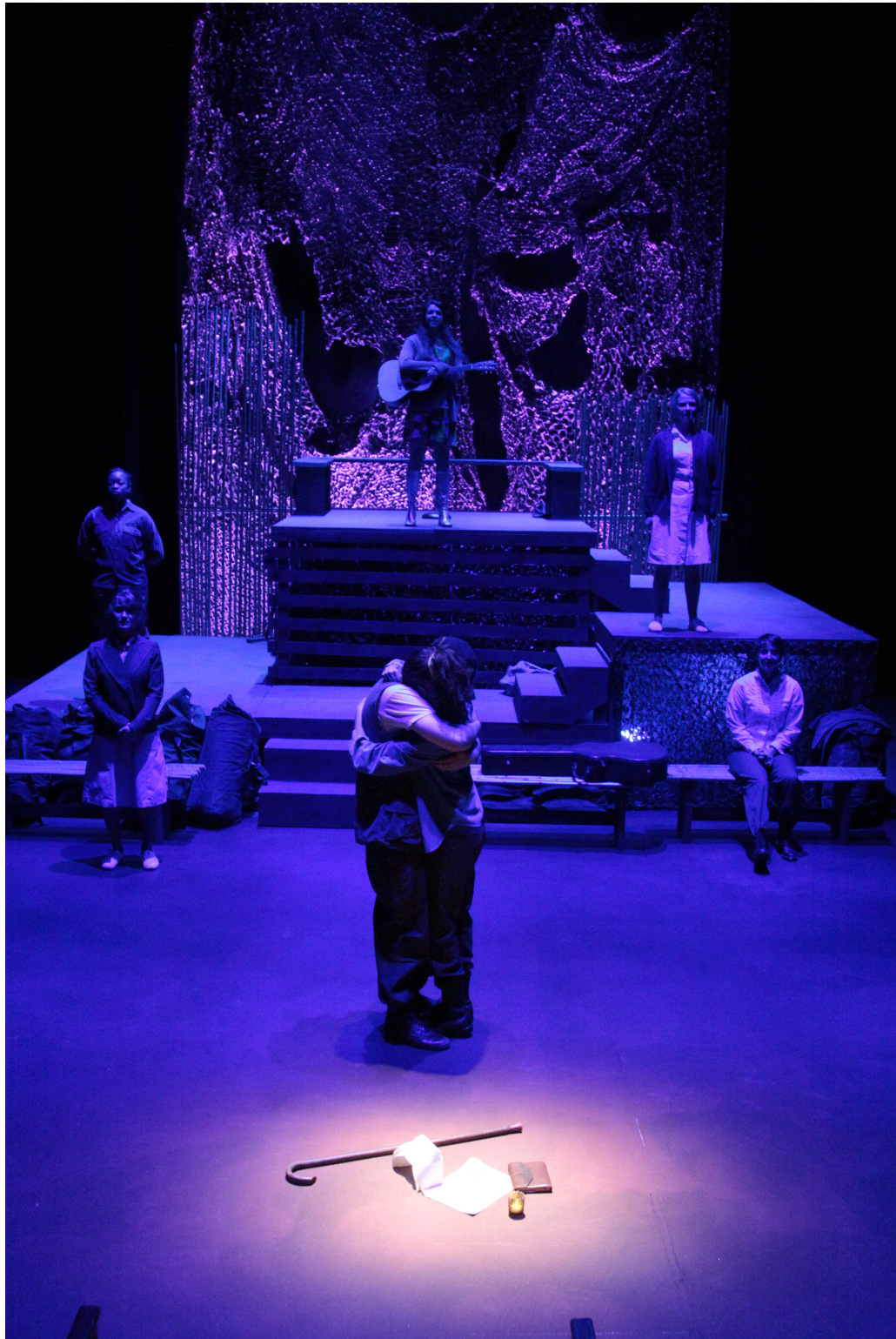
A soldier (Zach Bolland) waves goodbye to the women as they board the plane for home.



The women wonder why they are having trouble adjusting to civilian life.



Flashbacks and PTSD impede the ability of the women cope with their experiences.



Finally, at the dedication of the Wall in Washington, D.C., does the healing begin.

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