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**Two-Faced: Bringing Two Roles to Life in Kurt Weill's *Street Scene***

Vincent Pelligrino

Thesis submitted to The College of Creative Arts  
at West Virginia University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Theatre - Acting

Lee Blair, Chair  
General Hambrick  
Dr. Jay Malarcher  
Cathy O'Dell

Morgantown, WV  
2015

Keywords: *Street Scene*, Kurt Weill, Vincent Pelligrino, acting, Harry Easter, Dick McGann

**ABSTRACT**

**Two-Faced: Bringing Two Roles to Life in Kurt Weill's *Street Scene***

**Vincent Pelligrino**

This thesis is the culmination of my process, rehearsal and performance of two roles in Kurt Weill's American opera *Street Scene*. This document serves to describe my process from casting to closing night. It is also a reflection of my work, and reveals information about my education in creating character, and the role of leadership in a large production. This is my process and romantic encounter with Kurt Weill's *Street Scene*.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To those special people who helped shape my education and maturity:

Jan Nelson Gompper, for solid undergraduate training and for encouraging me to follow my dreams.

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General Hambrick, for making me look good, and for your patience.

Cathy O’Dell, for being a beacon of light during the rehearsal process of *Street Scene*.

Bryce Britton, for entrusting me with two very different roles, and for your support during the casting process.

Margaret Dransfield and Caryn Crozier, my beautiful scene partners – thanks for the kisses.

And to my family, who have never questioned my place in the theatre, but have been encouraging, supportive and excited for my career; to my parents who have supported me and prayed for me, and to Erica Sorum for your daily inspiration.

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## INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

The journey to *Street Scene* in the spring of 2014 began when the play selection committee at West Virginia University had to find a production that was an “operetta”. It had to be something in which both music and theatre students could participate, and do their best work. The decision was made to produce *Street Scene*. This American classic began as a stage play, written by Elmer Rice. *Street Scene* debuted in 1929, played 601 performances and won the Pulitzer Prize.<sup>1</sup> A film adaptation was made in 1931, directed by King Vidor and starred Sylvia Sydney, William Collier, Jr., David Landau, Estelle Taylor, Walter Miller and Beulah Bondi. Elmer Rice did the script adaptation from stage to screen. The movie score was provided by Alfred Newman, who went on to score such films as *Broadway Melody of 1936*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the use of music in the film adaptation inspired Rice to adapt *Street Scene* into an opera. By 1947, he had done so with the help of German-born composer Kurt Weill and lyricist Langston Hughes, who is of African-American decent. The production team had become its own melting pot of culture as they brought the script into the 1940s. Superb in its artistry, the opera version of *Street Scene* played the Adelphi Theatre for 148 performances.<sup>3</sup> The production lives on in regional opera companies and musical theatre conservatories, and is respected for its blend of opera, jazz, blues, and American musical theatre styles. Researching the historical importance of the show as a piece of American theatre was important to me. As part of my process, I like to know who has played the role before me, so that I can bring more of myself to the role.

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<sup>1</sup> Bordman, 593

<sup>2</sup> “Street Scene (1931) – Overview – TCM.com”

<sup>3</sup> Bordman, 594

The play has one focal point - a New York City street that hosts a brownstone tenement for a melting pot of families of different cultures. Throughout the play, we are introduced to all of the characters, and as it plays out; we learn how their lives are intertwined through conflict. The three main families of the play are the Maurant family, who are Irish by decent; and the Kaplan family, who are Jewish with roots in Russia, and the Jones family who identify as American. There are many other families in the apartment including the Fiorentino family, a childless couple that merge the husband's Italian culture and the wife's German heritage, and the Olsen family, who are Swedish and who have a new baby to look after. Within these families are the children of these families including the young Willie Maurant who is always getting into trouble, Mae and Vincent Jones who are wild adolescents, Sam Kaplan who is a studious and emotional young man and Rose Maurant, who is longing for much more than her current world presents.

Many characters enter the street scene that do not live in the tenement. These characters include Harry Easter (Rose's boss), Steve Sankey (a milkman) and two quirky nursemaids from the better part of town. I played two similar but different roles in this production – Dick McGann who is Mae Jones' boyfriend and dance partner, and Harry Easter (Rose's married boss and suitor).

### AUDITIONS

Before the audition process for *Street Scene* even began, I knew that I wanted to be a part of it. The auditions for the first show of the season, *Seminar*, had taken place the previous semester, leaving only *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Street Scene* as potential thesis productions. Just a few months earlier, I performed *A Midsummer Night's*

*Dream* with Shakespeare in Detroit – playing the role of Peter Quince. I was excited by the idea of *Street Scene*, working with colleagues in the music department, working with new faculty Bryce Britton and maestro Marcello Cormio, and working on a piece I had never done before.

The audition was combined for both shows so I sang “September Song”, a Kurt Weill song from the musical *Knickerbocker Holiday*, and I performed a monologue from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In the audition room there was a variety of faculty and staff, from the music department; Dr. Hope Koehler, Dr. William Koehler and Marcello Cormio, and from the theatre department Professor Jerry McGonigle (director of *Midsummer*), Professor Bryce Britton (director of *Street Scene*) and Professor General Hambrick (choreographer for *Street Scene*). Prior to entering the room, I was feeling very nervous, but once I entered the room and saw all these familiar faces, I was rather calm. On my audition form, I wrote down a variety of roles that I would like to be considered for including Sam Kaplan, Harry Easter, Dick McGann and Lippo Fiorentino. At this point, I had no attachment to any of these roles – I was truly open to doing any of them. After singing and doing my monologue, I left the room confidently. I knew that I had done my best, and the only thing left to do was wait to see the callback list.

The next day, I came back for *Street Scene* callbacks. In an unusual scheduling miracle, callbacks were held in the Lyell B. Clay theatre. It was a fantastic feeling to be on the same stage I had performed as the Emcee in *Cabaret* just one year prior. I felt comfortable and exhilarated. Before the callbacks even began, Bryce Britton made a few announcements and said “Seventy-five percent of you in this room cannot play these parts”. In a casual but serious manner, he told us about the complexity of the show, and



the vocal intensity required. This statement discouraged many people, but I only took it as a challenge. I knew I was meant to be there, and I was ready to fight for a role. The amount of theatre and music students there was enormous, because we all filled the stage. General Hambrick did his best to teach a simple movement combination to everyone. The combination was set to the overture of *Street Scene*, which combines unusual rhythms and notation to establish the cacophony of the city street. The movements were sharp, and General asked us to improvise and make big choices at the end of the combination, where we simply had to walk. Many people chose to walk like they were on their way to work, or lazily saunter. I decided to use this as an opportunity to make a huge choice, and run after an imaginary cab in the opposite direction everyone else had chosen to go. This choice got the attention of the director and choreographer, and turned out to be a good one. After many actors and singers were cut, General asked several people to stay for a more complicated dance call. I was one of those people, and I tried my best to pick up the movements, however they were taught very quickly. After this callback, I was asked to stay and sing for the roles of Harry Easter and Dick McGann. One of the advantages of being in the Clay Theatre was the chance to project without amplification. This was not a problem for me in the callback, and I sang to the back of the house just like I did in *Cabaret*. Being in this familiar space worked to my advantage. Again, I was not nervous in any way. Bryce pulled me aside to discuss possible casting. At this point, he knew I needed a role that would be substantial enough to be declared a ‘thesis role’, but he was unsure that I could play the lead role of Sam Kaplan. I left uncertain of what the casting would end up being, but I was certain there would be a place for me in *Street Scene*.

A few days passed, and I was asked to come to a private meeting with Dr. Hope and Dr. William Kohler, Bryce Britton and Maestro Marcello Cormio. This meeting caught me off guard, and I was completely unprepared for what was to come. Once we got into Dr. Hope's office, my nerves completely took over. This meeting was actually a test of my musical ability, and basically a voice lesson to see if I could sing the demanding tenor role of Sam Kaplan. A section of "Don't Forget the Lilac Bush" was chosen for me to sight-read and sing.

A spring with its flower we break  
And the lilac bush is ours, forever and a day  
And when you see the lilac bush,  
Bright in the morning air –  
Remember, always remember.

On the final 'remember' of this passage, it soars for eight counts on an A-flat 5. This note is at the absolute top of my bari-tenor range. This is a note that had never hit, unless I am singing in parts, and I usually would use my head voice to reach it comfortably. Marcello taught me the vocal part, and Dr. Hope worked on me, fixing my posture, and giving me advice for relaxation and proper vocal production. Working on it for about ten minutes, I finally hit the note and completely relaxed into it in full voice. This triggered something in me emotionally, and I had a complete emotional breakdown. Tears began welling up in my eyes, and a huge lump in my chest gave me the urge to release emotionally. I tried my best to hold back; but this only made it worse.

"I've never heard myself sing like that before." I said.

Dr. Hope reassured me that emotional breakthroughs happen to singers very often, and that this was completely normal. Just when I thought I had embarrassed myself enough by crying in front of these esteemed professors, they informed me that Doctoral

vocal student Caryn Crozier was coming in to sing with me! I excused myself to the bathroom to get myself together, and Bryce followed me in.

“You’re doing great” he said. Of course, this only triggered me even more. I took a moment to calm myself down, and I tried to breath deeply to relax myself. My heart was beating so fast. How could I have been so relaxed for the initial auditions and callbacks, and now be distraught? I re-entered Dr. Hope’s office, and Caryn was there, waiting for me. We sang together – our voices soaring in the high notes. The song is extremely emotional, and I began thinking about Sam Kaplan and the love he is about to lose. Suddenly, I found myself emotionally attached to this character and the challenge of playing this role. After we sang, we read a portion of Sam and Rose’s final scene together, and then I was excused and Caryn was asked to stay and sing some more. I left feeling emotionally drained. This experience came as such a surprise, and took me on an emotional rollercoaster. I began to wonder if there was a chance that I could actually play the role of Sam Kaplan. I questioned whether or not I could successfully sing those high notes, or if my vulnerability made me look unprofessional.

Later, I participated in the *Midsummer Night’s Dream* callbacks, reading for Peter Quince, Oberon and Demetrius. The casting was announced for both shows, and I found out I was to play the roles of Harry Easter and Dick McGann in *Street Scene*. Of course I was disappointed that I did not get cast as Sam Kaplan, but not because the role was popular or interesting, but because of the whole experience of singing and reading for the role, I had begun to fall in love with Sam and really wanted to play him. However, the roles I had turned out to be a very good experience for me, and there was a lot more work in the roles I was given. Later on, Bryce told me that there was a lot of debate if I could

physically play Sam or not. In the end, I know that the role was too vocally demanding for me and would have ruined my voice, but it was amazing to come so close to having this role of a lifetime.

### CONCEPT

Once rehearsals began, Bryce made it clear that table work would be an essential part of our process. First, Marcello was out of town for the first week of rehearsals; and second, there was a lot of ethnic diversity within the historical context of the show that required research. At first, the idea of doing table work felt good to me. This show was a huge undertaking, and required examination through text analysis and a historical lens. Unfortunately, there came a time when it became overindulgent. The very first thing we did as a cast at that very first rehearsal was read through the original stage play of *Street Scene* from 1929. This was beneficial to the entire cast to see how the characters were shaped into the musical.

The concept of our production was traditional to the show's history. This musical revival of *Street Scene* is from 1947, but Bryce wanted us to have cognitive dissonance, keeping our mind in both eras, 1929 (the original play) and 1947 (the opera). This kept the play timeless, but in an era 'back then'. The play takes place right before the Great Depression, and the opera takes place post World War II. These are two very different eras, but one can draw parallels to how people lived in New York in the microcosm of tenements. Regardless of the era, Bryce wanted the cast to keep the idea of 'the calm before the storm' in our minds. For the beginning of the play, he wanted us to capture the vintage spirit of youth and innocence, and by the end of the play, he wanted us to be in the midst of an earth shattering tragedy. This is how both aforementioned eras of time are

perceived. The set design was exactly what I expected for this show, a very simple practical set that looked like a New York street. The costume design by graduate student designer Cece Hill was historically accurate and specific to the 1940s, and really brought the characters to life. The lighting design by Professor Alan McEwen was dark and mysterious and set the tone for the tragic second half of the show. Overall, the concept of the show was true to how the show is usually done. We had no tricks up our sleeves – we were there to tell the story of the characters in *Street Scene*.

### **RESEARCH**

Both characters that I played in the show were not complicated, nor were they abstract in any way. They had clear objectives, obstacles and given circumstances. Understanding the period was important, but I felt like these characters came naturally, and extensive historical research was not necessary. The undergraduate training I received at Wisconsin Lutheran College taught me to rely on my instincts when creating character. Having a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre allowed me to have a broad vision of the world of theatre. This knowledge led to my curiosity about all aspects of a character, from their voice to their shirt collars. When I came to West Virginia University to begin my Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Acting, the training zoomed in on the actor training. While we studied a variety of acting styles during our three-year education at WVU, I continued to excel at musical theatre. The combined effort of studying Acting The Song with Professor Lee Blair, and the Meisner Technique with Professor Jerry McGonigle, allowed me to learn how to live truthfully within that musical world. Relying on my

instincts from my former training, and adding new insight from my current training, I was able to create truthful characters in *Street Scene* without doing extensive research.

I decided to research the context of these characters within the original Broadway production. Foster Hirsch's book *Kurt Weill on stage – from Berlin To Broadway* chronicles Weill's long career. The main chapter of my focus was chapter thirteen, entitled "Street Opera". *Street Scene* as an entire piece is a pastiche of different styles of music including opera, jazz, blues and musical theatre. Interestingly enough, both my roles were songs that fell into the 'musical theatre' category. While Kurt Weill was contemporary in his style, he still did not want to sell out to the style of the day, which included show stopping numbers from Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein. In order to ward off any chance for an ending pose, or button. Weill made sure that the lighter musical theatre songs were cut off with no chance for applause. For example, "Wrapped In a Ribbon and Tied in a Bow" gets abruptly broken up by Mr. Maurant's fuming entrance; and in "Wouldn't You Like To Be on Broadway", Harry Easter is cut off from getting applause as Rose begins a chorus of her aria "What Good Would the Moon Be". This was also due to the fact that original cast member Don Saxon performed the song so well that it received an audience reaction Weill did not want.<sup>4</sup> The exception to this rule is "Moon-Faced, Starry-Eyed". This song was intended to be a show stopping number, as it comes soon before intermission. "Moon-Faced, Starry-Eyed" is the only pop song in the show, and contains a rigorous street dance by Dick McGann and Mae Jones who have just come back from drinking and dancing all night long. Original cast member Danny

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<sup>4</sup> Hirsch, 265

Daniels played Dick, talked to Foster Hirsch about the experience with the choreographer:

It gave the show a lift at the spot it needed one. Anna [Sokolow] worked with us to make it look like street dancing – the style was expressive modern dancing...I told the costume designer, Lucinda Ballard, that the clothes she had for me made me look like a dancer, when I was playing a kid down the block. They let me wear what I had brought. (p. 266)

The original Mae Jones, played by Shiela Bond said: “I had no personal contact with Kurt Weill, who was at rehearsals but never said anything to us. We were a couple of kids with Anna, and we had no personal contact with people of that nature.” (p. 266) As a matter of fact, Weill did not even compose the orchestration for “Moon-Faced, Starry-Eyed”. It was completed by Ted Royal. Furthermore, Danny Daniels also said: “Perhaps Weill resented having to do a jazzy number. And that may be why, even though we sang, our song was never recorded for the original cast album. It was a double whammy. We were apparently the most expendable number in the show.” (p.266) Some of Daniels sentiments were relatable to my rehearsal process on *Street Scene*. Most of the attention of the director had to be given to principals in more operatic roles, and those people in smaller roles (especially trained actors) were not given as much direction. I was comfortable with the level of direction that I received because I know the roles were not out of my comfort zone in anyway, it was just a matter of making actable choices that would tell the story.

Hirsch also writes about the operatic principal characters only being concerned about their singing and not about acting. While the singers in our production were not trained actors, they had good intentions to act the roles as much as they sang them. Pertaining to my relationship with the cast, I did not feel like an outsider, in fact,

throughout the rehearsal process I became a leader in the cast. As a production that was meant to bring the School of Music and the School of Theatre and Dance together, *Street Scene* seemed like a logical choice. However, there were some missteps in the rehearsal process that led the production astray.

### **THE REHEARSAL PROCESS**

The rehearsal process began on September 2, 2014 with table work. As we read through the script repeatedly, I began writing notes about my characters based on these factors:

1. What the script says about me
2. What others say about me
3. What I think/say about myself

Bringing my characters into this context was an essential part of my character analysis – for this reason, the table work was necessary. Being one of the graduate students in the cast, voice coach Professor Laura Hitt had asked each of us to keep our ears open for voice notes. I began to notice American modernity in the language of the younger actors, and asked if I could address this to the whole cast in Laura’s absence. Bryce obliged, and I made the actors aware of lazy pronunciation on words like “won’t you” as “won-chu”, “alright” as “arright”, “this morning” as “smorning” and the word “To” as “tuh”. With these corrections (and more to be coached by Laura, of course) we began speaking with a clearer General American sound.



### **I AM THE CHILD WHISPERER**

With only three weeks left until opening, there were still a lot of pieces of the show that needed to be worked on. One major aspect of the show that needed special attention was the group of children. While they had been at most rehearsals, I felt as though they had been overlooked. My two roles in the show were important, but in general I felt underutilized as a graduate student. Watching the children's performance during rehearsal, I started missing the children I had coached over the past three summers at the Marquis Theatre in Northville Michigan. I took a great sense of pride in the system we had established to manage the children there – often in groups of forty or more. Compared to what I was used to, this small group of five children would be very easy to manage, and I had an overwhelming desire to help them. During a break I had a conversation with Bryce about taking on the responsibility of coaching the children. He was very open to the idea, and I began working with them a few days later.

The children had a major scene that involved a song and fight choreography, and a few other scenes interspersed throughout the whole play. In the arc of the script, their part was very minimal, but the definitely needed direction and coaching. Movement coach Jessica Bishop was the fight choreographer, and her assistant was Ryan Leach. These two had worked with the children to block the fight scene, while they were not available at every rehearsal, I was. While the children's parts were small, it was important that they felt as though they were vital to the ensemble, so I advocated that their scene had run time during company rehearsals.

Relying on the skills I had from my previous job, I organized the children by teaching them two call-and-repeat commands. In the first command, the instructor says the word “capiche”, and the children respond with “capache” and immediately have to silence themselves. This worked so well with the children – they love saying the word “capache”, and it was a perfect way to silence them and get their attention when they were distracted. The second is where the instructor says, “Hey kids”, and they children respond with “Hey what?” This was another way of securing their silence immediately. These are two very simple tools, but being able to get the attention of the children in the rehearsal room was half the battle. I also established myself as a leader to the children by playing some theatre games. This was a way for them to feel comfortable with me, and also to break out of their shells a bit. Some of the games we played included “Zip-zap-zop” and an improvisation game called “Freeze Frame”. I also let the children explore their characters with an improve sequence where they improvised the scene they had to act in the play and take their characters further than the script had. I also taught the children proper theatre etiquette such as only touching props that are for you, not touching or causing stage legs to move, and when to be ‘on deck’ for their cue.

As the rehearsal process came closer to technical rehearsals, the children’s scene became less of a priority. I would take the children outside into the hallway whenever possible to clean choreography. For a few days, we actually tried to get the child character of Willie to learn how to roller-skate with vintage roller-skates. I helped him skate around the rehearsal room (in elbow pads, knee pads and a helmet), and even stood by him in scenes to ensure his safety. He did his very best, but unfortunately the vintage skates had to be cut once we learned they would be hazardous on the set. The children

attended as many rehearsals as they could, and I acted as a liaison between the parents and the production team. I tried my best to make sure that the children were never kept too late, and that they always knew where they had to be. As the children's coach, I not only dealt with the children, I also had to manage the parents. They were all very nice, and I did my best to keep them happy despite late nights and scheduling confusion.

Once we got closer to technical rehearsals, I had to focus on my own track in the show, so the responsibility of wrangling the children was handed off to backstage crew. The children quickly learned their tracks in the show and knew exactly where they needed to be, and when they needed to be there (probably better than the crew).

Overall, by coaching the children I learned that the best thing you can do with children is keep things simple. Be clear, concise and to the point. Give them clear objectives and goals; don't make any last minute changes to their blocking and keep them focused. Most of all, they just need your attention. They need to have time to play, but they also need time to be worked through the challenge of rehearsal. I love working with children, and I am happy I had the opportunity to do so on *Street Scene*. The children, their parents, and the production staff all appreciated my efforts. The children gave me hugs and hand-written notes; and one of the moms bought me a pannettone cake. Movement coach Professor Jessica Bishop commented in one rehearsal: "You really ARE the child whisperer."

#### **DICK MCGANN**

After the announcement that *Street Scene* would be the operetta to be performed in fall 2014, I began researching video clips on YouTube. The first clip I found was from the 1989 English National Opera production; and it was a clip of "Moon-faced, Starry-

eyed” performed by Caroline O’Conner and Philip Gould. After watching the clip and being mesmerized by the characters and their amazing dancing ability, I knew this role had to be on my radar. Ironically, on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, I sent Maggie Dransfield a message with a link to this video. “I want this to be us next semester”. Her reply: “That was a damn good dance.”

I openly admit that I am not a dancer. To me, a true dancer is someone who has had extensive dance training, and knows the technique and discipline required of dancers. However, I do have ability in dance that goes above and beyond the average pedestrian. For this reason, I refer to myself as ‘an excellent mover’. In the world of musical theatre auditions, I always find myself going to the ‘mover’ audition rather than the ‘dancer’ calls. Continuing study in dance is certainly on my to-do list so that I can call myself a true triple-threat performer. Until then, I am happily an ‘excellent mover’. When I found out I was cast in the role of Dick McGann, a role requiring a true dancer, I was thrilled for the challenge and also very nervous. To my benefit, however, there were no other dances in the show, which meant that choreographer Professor General Hambrick had all of his focus on Maggie and me. It was a relief to have the focus of General, and to be working with Maggie who I loved and trusted, and whom I knew would be patient with me. My July 3<sup>rd</sup> wish had come true.

On September 4<sup>th</sup> Maggie, General and I met for our first choreography rehearsal on “Moon-faced, Starry-eyed”. We got right to work, wasting no time. The beginning of the choreography was challenging, but not impossible for me. While Maggie and I were dancing in sync, we were still separate. The test of my endurance came in the partnering sections. General was tough on us, but only because he expected the best. In these

rehearsals I always felt like I was fighting to keep up because I did not want to disappoint General, and because I knew I could do it. I had to reach deep within myself to find the athleticism required of me for this dance, and the artistry to make it look good. In these private dance rehearsals, there was a sense of ease. Working with Maggie and General came very naturally. There was plenty of time to focus on us, without having the entire cast watching us work. When I was on stage with Maggie, I always felt a sense of trust. Having the same actor training allowed us to speak the same language, and respond to each other truthfully. I never felt unsafe on stage with Maggie, I knew she always had my back. This show was also the first time I had a stage kiss with not one, but two actresses. Both women made feel very comfortable with this, and were very professional. The kiss with Maggie always came right after we finished dancing for three to four minutes, and we were always gasping for air. I completely trusted her to get through this part of the scene with no problem.

As we began to work with Laura Hitt on dialects, we listened to sound samples from James Cagney and Thelma Ritter. To separate the two characters I was going to play, I decided to begin by creating two very distinct voices. With Dick McGann, I began to think of his lightness, his youth and socioeconomic status. He was a barfly, a man of the streets and the night. I decided that he should have the unique New York sound – a heavy dialect with a comedic tone. In my imagination, I pictured McGann being about twenty-two years old, not quite ready for the real world and still stuck in between his youth and adulthood. While his name is of Irish heritage, I pictured that he lived on the Lower East Side. Being Irish, he would have been a Catholic, but after Saturday masses, he went straight to the dance clubs. The most important things to him are having fun, jazz

music and liquor, kissing Mae Jones, hanging out with his buddies, and dancing. Drawing on some historical inspiration from my own family, I imagined that he worked with his father and uncles at a produce market – loading and unloading trucks, and then hawking tomatoes, okra and corn. Since he dropped out of high school, he had to go straight to work, but he uses whatever time he has to have fun. McGann loves Mae Jones because she is on his level of promiscuity, fun and brashness. I imagined that they met dancing at a club on 42<sup>nd</sup> street, and have been hanging out ever since. They are not getting into a serious relationship. Mae and Dick just like to dance together, kiss and sneak around trying to find a place to hook up.

In the world of the play, Dick's objective is to sleep with Mae, that is his overall simple action in the scene and in the dancing. To do this, he charms her, flirts with her, teases her, and in turn she teases him. The dance to "Moon-Faced Starry-Eyed" played out this objective, and in the end, Mae gives in and Dick wins. In the world of the character, I believe that Dick has no objective except for what is happening in the moment, have fun, run around and make money so that he can spend it. He is not ready for what is to come with economic decline or global warfare, and yet he is the spirit of this era, and the exact personification of the director's concept of 'the calm before the storm'.

### **HARRY EASTER**

Harry Easter is the complete opposite of Dick McGann. I wanted to make sure that he was not only physically different, but vocally and mentally from McGann as well. First, Harry Easter is a married man, which automatically puts him in a compromising position with his relationship to Rose. Easter is also gainfully employed as a real estate

office manager. Having money, he dresses nicer and takes Rose out for a presumably expensive dinner and dancing. While it seems like Easter has everything he could want, he still does not have Rose. He wants Rose to be his girl in the city. He has no intention of leaving his wife, but he wants someone on the side. Rose is younger than Easter, and she is definitely more vulnerable. Easter believes that he can convince Rose to do anything. As a personal backstory for Easter, I imagined that he has gone down this path many times before. Getting girls is easy. Wine them, dine them and it's only a matter of time. Easter has connections to get these girls into Broadway shows, he's also in a position of power over Rose in the office. While it seems easy to seduce Rose, there are many obstacles that stand in Easter's way, her father, her vulnerability, her guilt, her love for Sam, her parent's broken marriage and his own marriage. While Easter could be looked at as a villain, I wanted to give him some likeable qualities. His temperament is easy going and insightful but can be boastful. He is in his thirties, with a little extra weight around his middle because he enjoys the finer things in life – nights out on the town, dinners at Sardi's and Broadway shows.

In order to find separate physicality for Easter and McGann, I worked with acting coach Cathy O'Dell and choreographer General Hambrick. We took about an hour before one rehearsal to try some different things with each character. I discovered that McGann is very grounded, fast paced and his movement is almost like doing the Jitterbug. He walks with a confidence in himself, yet he's young and slouchy at times. With Easter, I found that he was centered from his stomach – his proud chin leads him. He also walks with a confidence, but he is slower, more refined and looms about. We also did some Michael Chekhov exercises with Cathy. I found McGann's physicality to be more of a

‘wring’ gesture, or an ‘embrace’. Easter’s physicality is more aggressive like a ‘punch’ or a ‘slam’, but there are moments of ‘embrace’ as he seduces Rose in “Wouldn’t You Like To Be On Broadway”.

Caryn Crozier played the role of Rose. She is a classically trained singer, and has had actor training. Caryn is a friend of mine, and I felt comfortable in the scenes with her. It was more of a challenge for me to find the motivation to be sexually advancing toward Caryn, because I do not have that kind of relationship with her. The sense of ease that I felt with Maggie, I did not feel with Caryn. This could have been for a variety of different reasons. Physically, Maggie and I had become very close while learning the dance, and there was a lot of physical touch involved between the two of us. Caryn and I remained standoffish throughout the rehearsal process. There were moments when I felt like Caryn was responding to what I was giving her physically, but there were also moments when I felt alienated. Regardless, I always felt safe with her on stage, but as an actor it made me have to work much harder to pursue my objective as Harry Easter.

Once we started blocking scenes for both of my characters, I felt relieved. I finally felt like I was getting the attention I wanted from the director. Being a minor role in a huge ensemble piece is difficult because the focus was constantly on other principle characters. I knew this lack of attention was not the fault of the director, but I still felt left out. The Mae/Dick dance was finally coming together, and we had worked extensively with the choreographer in our own separate rehearsals. I felt great about the choreography, but I was lacking the stamina to do this performance on repeat. I began doing more cardio training in order to keep up at rehearsals.



On my own, I found a lot of great physical life for Easter – his voice is lower, he had a belly forward physical center, and he really came to life as a character – the word I used to define him was, ‘slimy’. One note that Bryce gave me that I really liked was to control Rose with my voice rather than my body. This gave me a new tactic to use as I seduced her. A recurring note that Bryce gave me about Easter was to watch out for hand and wrist tension. This has been a constant problem of mine throughout my graduate education. I also came up with the idea of smoking for Easter, as something to do during Rose’s song “What Good Would The Moon Be”. I have always loved using props whenever possible. The smoking gave me something physical to do when I couldn’t work on Rose, and was incorporated in other Easter moments as a way to show being aloof or careless.

In Act Two, tragedy strikes when Mrs. Maurant is caught with the milkman. Her husband goes on a rampage, and ends up killing both his wife and her lover. During this commotion, the entire chorus comes on stage, and there is a flurry of confusion and overlapping dialogue as an ambulance rushes to rescue those who have been murdered. Just before this all happens, Harry Easter arrives to escort Rose to a funeral of a fellow co-worker. A few pages later after the shooting, Rose returns to the house and the chorus begins singing “The Lament”. In the script, there is no mention that Easter returns *with* Rose – in fact, the scene takes place in real time, and not enough time has passed to have gone to the funeral and returned. Due to vocal needs, Bryce said I would be joining in “the lament” with the rest of the chorus. To justify our arrival back at the house so soon, Caryn Crozier (Rose) and I decided that she had forgotten to get a gift to bring the family of the deceased. This justified our being there at the time of the song. Rose then gets

swept up into the chaos of ‘the lament’, as the crowd sings: “Who’s she? Her daughter, poor thing her mother’s dead! Who killed her? Her husband! About another man? I don’t know!”

At this point, there is no point for Easter to be in this scene. In fact, it just makes it awkward for him. Rose gets swept up into Sam’s arms, and Easter knows no one in the crowd. It became my mission to justify why I was in this scene because I did not want to be there only because they needed my singing voice. At the end of the song, the crowd dissolves and goes offstage. I created the imaginary circumstance that my wife and daughter also happened to be in the crowd. Allison Chester decided to play this role for me, and one of the children agreed to pose as our daughter. This gave me so much to work off of, seeing my wife in the crowd and leaving Rose behind, and walking back home with my wife and daughter. All of this detail added another layer for Easter’s story. Now, after this great tragedy, I believe Easter will change his ways because he sees where lies and infidelity lead. In the ‘He Loved Her Too’ section, I was able to find Easter’s point of view. As the crowd sings: “No, he oughtn’t have done it. He loved her, he loved her; and yet he killed her. Now she is dead – she is dead where the window is broken!”

Easter became fired up about sending Frank Maurant to the electric chair. All of this detail helped to make me more than just a voice in the crowd.

### **PHYSICAL AND VOCAL CHALLENGES**

Everything was going well with my two parts, and I was not getting very many notes. At first, this worried me, but then I realized that the focus of the team had to be elsewhere with principal characters. In my former training at Wisconsin Lutheran

College, Professor Jan Nelson Gompper taught me a very valuable lesson that has stuck with me as an actor. She taught me that if you do not get a note, it means whatever you are doing is working. When she would give me notes, they would often times be “just be better next time.” This taught me to figure out what the problem was and how to fix it myself. It taught me to police myself for bad habits, and to try lots of different things to see what works and what does not. Professor Lee Blair also gives this standpoint and allows the actor to work on his or her own, only shaping their performance with notes if necessary.

There were a few specific areas that I received notes about. Vocal coach Laura Hitt wanted me to watch out for ending consonants, especially d’s and t’s. She also advocated for linking vowel-initiated words to ending consonants. Overall, she was looking for more vocal energy in any speaking parts. During the early rehearsals, it was still uncertain whether or not we would be using microphones in the production. While I do not know what was said or decided in the production meetings, I do know that the School of Music would have preferred to perform unamplified. Before the official decision was made, we had a music rehearsal in the Lyell B. Clay theatre where we sang from the score to listen to our sound in the space. After this rehearsal, the decision was made to use amplification. This decision affected vocal production, and Laura Hitt began shaping her vocal notes to help actors use their voice with amplification, instead of acoustically.

Meanwhile, the dance in “Moon-Faced, Starry-Eyed” was getting better and better each day, and my stamina was growing. With each rehearsal, we kept making each moment more specific. General had a really great conversation with Maggie and me. He

told us that he wanted us to look like dancers rather than actors who move. He also said that this kind of dance was his specialty, and that he wanted to be proud of the work that we do. This inspired me to do the best that I could – disappointing General was not acceptable for me, and from then on I decided I needed to strive for perfection.

### **CREW VIEW AND NOTES ON LEADERSHIP**

By October 16<sup>th</sup>, we made it to Crew View. Traditionally, this is the first time that the crew gets to see the show in its entirety. For the most part, the show was ready to be viewed – however, there were still some scenes in Act Two that had gone untouched. I felt confident about my scenes, but I knew there were still some kinks that needed to be worked out. We did the best that we could that night, and we all sat down for a note session. Among other negative comments, director Bryce Britton remarked that “[the show] was stupid”, and “[the show] sucked.” These words were cutting, and silenced everyone in the cast including undergrads, graduate students and faculty. The morale of the cast was already low at this point, and this was the last straw. Thankfully, Laura Hitt and Cathy O’Dell were present for this rehearsal, and gave some reinforcing notes. Laura Hitt was on *fire*, and the way she delivered her notes was with no lack of passion. Her positive energy and beautiful spirit filtered through her, and was completely refreshing after Bryce’s negativity. Filled with confusion and a sort of sadness, I asked Bryce if I could meet with him the next day. I was feeling truly hurt by his comments – I have never responded well to negative reinforcement, and I wanted to talk to him privately on behalf of the cast. When I went to speak with him the next day, I asked why he chose to use those words, and he defended his point of view to the hilt. He also mentioned that the cast had not done their work – and that they didn’t bring to the table the level that he had

expected. I am not sure what Mr. Britton was quite expecting. Our cast was comprised of children under the age of 11, undergraduate theatre students (mostly freshman and sophomores), music students and two graduate theatre students, not to mention the opening remark he made that seventy-five percent of us could not live up to the vocal demands of the show. Speaking as someone who was on the inside, we needed a leader. We needed someone to guide us through the process, to show us the way. This was a very mixed ensemble of folks; and we needed all the encouragement we could get. Unfortunately, I think this was too big of a task for Mr. Britton on his first assignment at West Virginia University. He delegated his responsibilities as much as he could, he relied heavily on his team of Cathy O’Dell, General Hambrick, Jessica Bishop and Laura Hitt. [I am not commenting on musical direction, because I believe Marcello Cormio had a handle on his responsibilities as Maestro, and he put together the best show he could.]

This direction of this show was a lesson in leadership for me. The following are ideas and rules that I intend to put into practice, based on observations made by faculty leaders during the rehearsal process of *Street Scene*. I call these “Notes on leadership” or “Future lessons to myself”.

- Don’t be vulgar – have tact.
- Be on time.
- Be on *fire*.
- Be confident and in charge.
- Don’t be too friendly – take control.
- *Earn* respect.
- Don’t be walked over.
- You don’t have to be cool. (This is a lesson that I learned from acting teacher Larry Moss’ book *The Intent to Live*. The official quote goes like this: “For fuck’s sake, be hot! Be mad! Be witty! Be loving! Be heartfelt! Be sunny! Be fiercely cold! But, Jesus, don’t be *cool!*”)
- You don’t have to be funny.
- Don’t be self-deprecating.

- Know more than your assistant.
- Don't waste time.
- Know scene numbers and refer to them.
- Don't talk to adults like they are children; don't talk to children like they are adults.
- Know the show better than everyone else.

During one of the final dress rehearsals, a cast member had a shirt on that said "John 15 – Be the difference." I looked up this chapter of the Bible, and to put it into a summary I will quote verse 17: "This is my command: Love each other." (John 15:17) From then on, I decided to approach the rest of the process with positivity, dignity and respect for my cast, the team and the show. I spread as much positivity as I could. I hugged cast members, I encouraged them and I tried to set a good example by my own behavior. By raising my own morale, others raised theirs.

### PERFORMANCES

*Street Scene* was set for only four performances in the Lyell B. Clay theatre. We opened on October 23, 2014. I was happy to find out that I had my very own dressing room - the energy was great backstage, and we had a wonderful show. The dance sequence as Dick McGann was great! Maggie and I had put in some extra rehearsal on the set, and we felt very comfortable with what we were doing. On the second night, I felt some 'second show slump'. The dance went ok, but it did not have the same energy as opening night. Cathy O'Dell gave me some great compliments. She was truly an uplifting part of the rehearsal process. My parents attended our third show, which felt lower energy than the first two. It felt like there were split seconds of the "Moon faced, Starry eyed" dance that were not together – very picky, split seconds. After this performance, we had the traditional event of photo call. No one likes photo call, but it is a necessary evil to

document the production. If it were up to me, photo call would be part of tech week because once the show is open; no one wants to stay after a performance to take staged photos. In the future, I will advocate for taking photos during tech week.

By the final show, I felt completely relaxed into the track and confident with the show as a whole. I had a good conversation with my parents over breakfast about the plot and its concept. My mother disapproved of the tossing babies gag in the nannie's song, but she said she really felt like she was in New York.

Our final show was a good one. It went well, and everything felt great. After the curtain fell, I turned to Maggie and gave her a kiss on the cheek and a huge hug. Then, General hugged both of us at the same time! I told Maggie I could not have done this without her. Her patience in working with me, allowed me to be a better dancer.

### **REFLECTION**

There were a lot of times during this process when I felt like giving up. There were a lot of times during this process when I felt angry, sad, annoyed, tired and upset. I could write about those, but I choose not to do so. As a matter of fact, as I look back and reflect upon this process it really was not that bad. No one died and no one got hurt, but I will say that this process was not fun. At the heart of everything, theatre is supposed to be fun. It is hard work, it is long nights, it is failures and successes; but what we do as theatre practitioners is unmistakably 'fun', and that is why we do it. Looking back, I cannot say it was one thing or another that made the process 'not fun', but it was the culmination of a lot of unfortunate events that led the cast to lose their morale, and their hope for a good show. I fear that this process did not unite the School of Music and the School of Theatre and Dance, and I fear that this production made students wary of ever

participating in operettas in the future. I will say that this process opened me up to a new level as a performer, as a dancer and as a leader. This show, and these roles were a good fit for me as a thesis role. The work I did to create these roles and perform them was a combination of my previous training from Wisconsin Lutheran College, and my training here at West Virginia University. With the help of General Hambrick I have become a dancer. From lessons with my acting faculty I have become better at responding to behavior. From voice training, I have become aware of my bad habits, and other peoples' bad habits. I have taken valuable notes on leadership; and I have discovered my skill with children, and learned a lesson in spreading positivity with grace. I will walk away from this process with a grateful spirit knowing that I did the best that I could to put on the best show possible.



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