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Breaking Surface: Unearthing Meaning in Jenny Schwartz's "God's Ear"

Andrew Peters

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breaking surface

unearthing meaning
in Jenny Schwartz's
God's Ear

[OR

the messy history of one boy's
struggle with language
and his eventual awakening
to the collective intuitive power
of theatre-making
told in a hundred-some pages
with strange tangents
and a few potent words]

Andrew Peters
MFA Directing Thesis
Theatre School at DePaul U.
Final Draft: June 9, 2016

a table of contents

where andrew lists
chapters -
some with clever titles
and a few not so clever
(oh,
and page numbers)

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introduction

*in which,
andrew asks a question*

March 3, 2016.

I enter the office of Lisa Portes, Head of MFA Directing at The Theatre School at DePaul University, with an exuberant smile on my face – an anomaly!

I'm preparing to enter into a discussion with Portes and Damon Kiely, the Chair of Performance, to post-mortem my thesis production of Jenny Schwartz's *God's Ear*. Nearly a month after opening the show, the production has been a success for me. That success wasn't easily earned – I had pitched the play from Day 1 of my time at DePaul – but at it's end, I felt I had finally synthesized my instincts in theatre-making with years of intensive training.

At one point in our discussion, I ask Portes to share what she had approached me about days prior. In a random hallway bump-in, she had expressed an idea that would help me contextualize my growth. "Now that I've gotten to know you, I think I understand what you're trying to get at with your work. We'll talk later!" she exclaimed, before we parted ways.

Remembering back to that moment, Portes smiles.

"So, yeah! What I've learned about you is this: you don't trust language."

She goes on to explain the journey I've unknowingly gone through in my selection of plays in the past three years, and ties it to my own struggle to articulate myself. The journey checks out. In my first year, I connected to Rajiv Joseph's *Gruesome Playground Injuries* because of the shared intuitive love that the two characters have for one another. I tackled Noah Haidle's *Vigils* to investigate a Widow who couldn't express the language of grief; she instead manifests her feelings by locking the Soul of her husband in a box. I was intrigued by Václav Havel's *The Memo* because the protagonist, Gross, succumbs to endless amounts of office jargon in order to stand for basic human freedoms. And Holly Arsenault's *Undo* created a

fictional divorce ceremony – a ‘backwards wedding’ – which served as a woman’s confrontation with a nasty truth: Rachel could not tell Joe the amount of love she believed he deserved.

In these past productions, language serves as a major hurdle for the protagonists. Language in the plays I’m attracted to is suspect, and often fails people. These characters cannot easily sum up their desires or create change through direct, logical action. They fend off their mental blockades, or take shortcuts that end up creating bigger, messy obstacles.

Portes saw this trend, and saw it reflected in my own personal journey.

I listen intently. I nod. In my head, Andrew-Brain (the scrambled-egg-like, not-very-creatively-named term for my thought process) screams: “*Oh god, she’s exactly right.*”

I *do* struggle with language. I don’t trust definitions or labels. Words elude me – articulating a thought becomes a painful exercise for my brain. I often adhere too strictly to meaning, and can pinpoint when an idea I’m mulling over doesn’t quite fit the word I’m using to describe it. My workaround habit is tacking on less definite, open-ended phrases (“This is kind of...” “This might be...”) – the enemies of someone training to be a clearer, well-spoken leader.

On the surface, Portes pointed to a simple human problem – the need to discern meaning. Yet, her discovery spoke to a larger investigation. I am intrigued by messy human stories that can’t be told through realism alone. I seek truth through a more imaginative theatrical lens – one in which time, space, and reality work differently than what we experience in day-to-day life.

Rather than just writing a production notebook for *God’s Ear*, I desire to find a larger context for my three years in graduate school. I’m pursuing a stronger articulation of my theatre – the work that I want to pursue for years to come.

I liken my grad school journey to a lifelong scientific process. With each production here, I took each task and examined a specific play as a way of testing a theory about my relationship with theatre. And with each production, I discovered where I came closer to or farther away from a big, lingering question.

This is the question I'm pursuing:

How do I use theatricality* to find meaning?

**** and what is my definition of theatricality?***

God's Ear will be my primary focus in this investigation, but I will connect lessons learned from my four prior DePaul productions in order to answer this lingering question for myself. By the end of this dissertation, I will uncover a concrete – clearly defined - mission, and my role as a director in the 21st Century American Theatre.

i choose you, play
in which,
andrew falls in love with GOD'S EAR,
struggles to describe it,

April, 2009.

On a sunny Sunday afternoon, I drove to Howard Community College in Columbia, Maryland to see a play I had never heard of, produced by Rep Stage (the nation's only regional theatre-in-residence at a community college). I don't quite recall the reason for going – I had appreciated some of Rep's previous productions, and past mentors of mine at Towson University were on the production team. Perhaps it was blind curiosity. Perhaps it was fate.

That day, I experienced Jenny Schwartz's *God's Ear* for the first time. And, for the first time I remember, I completely understood a play's story through its rollercoaster of language – not through its story.

If someone had asked me to sum up the play in a few sentences, I would've struggled. We know a kid dies, and parents are grieving, but we don't hear about it for a long time! A G.I. Joe shows up! And the Tooth Fairy! And people sing songs! And there are epic, EPIC monologues!

But everything about it – from the words to the aural experience – were true. Not 'realism,' but truthful in its own unique form.

I had to figure the play out. The writer demanded my attention. I needed to see the words on the page, see everything that I heard but didn't pick up in a ninety-minute timespan. Soon after, I found the script at a local Barnes and Noble, and snatched it up. I read it, experienced it with a reader's imagination, and fell for its poetry.

The script stayed with me for years. I was too afraid to tackle it, but I knew there was this intangible quality about the writing that I yearned to stage. Having seen it, I also knew I wanted time away from the experience, wanting to purge the memories of that viewing from my brain in order to find my own discoveries in the text.

Once I was accepted into DePaul's MFA program, I was tasked with compiling a list of plays to produce for the second year. My first year in the program was a defining year for the Directing program – me and my colleague, Brian Balcom, would be the first to produce a fully designed show in our second year in the new Theatre School

building. Dubbed the “Healy Director’s Series,” this new production practicum fast-tracked us into the play selection process, and would be an early interaction with a full team of young undergraduate designers. It was also to be an early showcase for us as newer graduate directors – by that time, we will have only completed one or two smaller-scale studio productions.

God’s Ear was at the top of my list. I wasn’t yet thinking about a thesis show – this was a play that I knew defined me in some way I hadn’t yet figured out. This was a key example of my early habits and process – get excited about a project, dive in, and figure it out as I go.

Well, that habit didn’t quite cut it on pitch day.

September, 2013.

It’s the first quarter of my grad school career, and I had to bring six play choices to pitch in our Directing Seminar class. The class is an opportunity for all six directors in the program to come together as a ‘community of directors’ to discuss, question, and critique our processes.

I dove into the pitch process, and quickly learned that I was very ill-equipped to be discussing the plays. I started talking about *God’s Ear* and exclaimed my love for the play. I was stopped and asked for the synopsis of the play, and I struggled. I got lost in the strange details – the Tooth Fairy appearing to Mel, Ted going to the airport bar and meeting a mysterious woman – and I couldn’t connect the dots. I saw the faces in the room – many of them puzzled. I couldn’t figure out what was happening.

During my first few classes at DePaul, I learned that telling the story of the play in the first few sentences is crucial. If an audience (or, in this case, a producer) can’t follow the story, how will you confidently tell that story on stage with actors and a design team?

So, in that moment, I wasn’t quite sure how to accurately frame the story.

The other directors then chimed in with their responses. The basic sentiment? None of them could figure out what the story was. Those who knew the play knew I was grasping for air. But, they could sense that I had a palpable connection to the

play. When the time comes to narrow down the list for the next round of pitching, *God's Ear* made the cut (along with what would become the Healy project – *Vigils*).

For the second round, we were given a clearer guide for the pitching process. Diving in that first round, I had paid attention to Brian's delivery – he had a clearer sense of talking about plays than I did, and I had reconfigured my thought process to create more structure. Also, he did something that was completely alien to me at the time – he *relaxed*.

My failure to articulate *God's Ear* still dogged me, but I was adamant to fix my errors. I formulated my pitch around a tool prescribed to me in my Directing 1 course – the Six Questions (See Appendix A). These are six questions developed by Portes as a way to refine the focus of the production. In framing my stance on the play, I asked myself:

- What is the play about?
- What kind of play is it?
- What is the play's dramatic question?
- What is the spine of the play?
- What do you want the play to do to the audience?
- What is the cry of the play?

As I look back on those notes, my responses were not strong. I spent most of my first year working towards active voice in my writing, and having more viscerally engaging responses to these questions. My initial spine, for example, was “to build a bridge” – which somewhat connects to the parents, but isn't the most engaging idea to base around every single character. I also struggled with the “kind” of play – which seeks to find the style or genre of the piece. With some plays, the genre feels much easier to pinpoint – a tragedy or comedy. If I were to add on an adjective, I could find a clear focus for a production; a “revenge tragedy” will work for *Hamlet* in a different way than a “patriarchal tragedy” (as Brian and I discovered in our Directing 1 coursework). For this round of pitching, I settled on an overly-wordy answer – a “fractured family

epic.” It’d take me more time to get a clearer response to that question, though the focus on family would be an important discovery that would affect my later pitches.

The other big note I took from my first pitch was to focus less on the actual synopsis of *God’s Ear* and focus more on finding how the story functions in the world of the play. What I discovered was that the play is about a family being shattered by a tragic loss. This would be incredibly vital in my later analysis, but I didn’t connect it to my six questions from the outside. Instead, I started my second pitch with a personal story.

I discovered that I connected to *God’s Ear* not through the loss of a child, but through the radical change my family went through a few years prior. After 33 years of marriage, my mother separated from my father in 2010, and they divorced a year and a half later. While this event was not earth shattering, it did shatter the rules of family life. I can no longer appreciate holidays, family gatherings, or even my hometown.

So, as I prepared for the second round of Healy pitches, I started there.

This proved to be a tougher task than I planned for – I found myself getting much more emotional than I intended. I choked up over my words, and while I worked through it, I still couldn’t quite connect the pitch to the passion. Once again, my words failed me.

I found out a few weeks later that *Vigils* was the strongest choice of my Healy options. I was happy with that choice, but my heart still panged for *God’s Ear*. I let the play go for a while.

Fall 2014.

A year later, I had to put together a list of thesis play choices. This proved to be a bigger challenge than the Healy pitches. The thesis productions were now produced on the new Fullerton stage as part of the school’s Showcase series. This was a radical shift in the MFA Directing program – we now had to plan for bigger thesis shows, from a larger budget to plays with larger casts. There was no way in which a two- or three-person play could be produced on that stage.

I was urged to consider canonical writers, whose plays typically had larger ensembles. However, I had no real interest in tackling classics (past the Greeks,

which I didn't feel equipped to handle at that point in my training). I yearned for modern plays that balanced my love for spectacle with a clear story that I could grasp.

What I found myself challenged by, at that point, was actually finding scripts that I connected to. I did not enter the MFA program with the strongest connection to literary departments like other directors, nor the strongest background in play reading. I spent hours in the DePaul library and the Harold Washington Library in Downtown Chicago. I weeded out tons of plays due to a number of factors – my knowledge of the acting pool, the type of play, the cast size, the needs of the play, etc.

I came to Damon Kiely's office with a few options. I kept *God's Ear* on my list. Other plays included Julia Cho's *The Language Archive*, two adaptations of Calderon's *Life Is a Dream* (Sheila Callaghan's *Fever/Dream* and Nilo Cruz's more direct adaptation), and Laura Wade's *Alice in Wonderland* adaptation, *Alice*. At the top of my list? I was enthralled by Anne Washburn's *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play*. This became my number one option during the initial stages of my hunt, as I was drawn to the play's big question: *What is modern-day America's mythology?* The ensemble work, the musical elements, and the radical twists of the plot made the play an exciting challenge to me.

After I conferred with Kiely several times, we knocked a few options off of the list. *Alice* was deemed too reductive, which – after looking up the word because I couldn't totally deduce it's meaning – I agreed with. Out of the two *Life is a Dream* options, *Fever/Dream* fell by the wayside – the world of the play felt too similar to *The Memo*, which I was going to be working on later that year. The Cruz adaptation stayed, and Kiely was interested in the big fear the play sparked in me (questioning my own leadership capabilities). And while I made a case for producing it on the Fullerton stage, Kiely couldn't see *Language Archive* working out.

My options boiled down to *Mr. Burns*, *God's Ear*, and *Life is a Dream*. I dug this lineup – I could find exciting and challenging reasons for wanting to direct all of them as my thesis show. *Mr. Burns*, at the time, was my favorite option – partially because it was so new, and partially because I believed it would drum up a lot of excitement for the students. The other two options would be trickier to get both students and audiences on board with.

But, like the twists in *Mr. Burns*, I was in for a shock of my own.

I found out *Mr. Burns* was being produced at Theatre Wit later that year, and the rights were deemed not available for any other Chicago production.

It made little sense to me – the thesis show would, at minimum, be a year after the Wit production. Why were the rights held onto so closely? I couldn't get very much insight into the reasoning – I just had to accept it and find a replacement play to pitch.

Portes and Kiely prepare the directors for this instance. We're told to have many options, and not believe too strongly in one option. A number of factors could take a play out of contention – rights, the number of actors of color, budgeting restrictions... the list goes on.

Once again, pitching *God's Ear* became my number one priority.

November 7, 2014

Opening Night of *Vigils*.

I was out to dinner with Kiely, who was in charge of working with the second-year MFA directors on their thesis selections. After a round of options, I had narrowed my choices down to a few options. I was excited by Nilo Cruz's adaptation of Calderon's *Life Is A Dream*, and the central question concerning man's true nature. I replaced *Mr. Burns* with an old favorite of mine – José Rivera's *Marisol*. And then, my number one option still remained: Jenny Schwartz's *God's Ear*.

But Kiely was less than enthusiastic about my chances. He was brutally honest during this dinner meeting – I had not yet provided either him or Portes with the reasons to move forward with that option. I lacked precise clarity in my thoughts, and while I was getting better at talking about the play, he wasn't sure I could inspire confidence in Dean John Culbert or Dexter Bullard, Artistic Director of the Showcase Series, to produce it.

I felt an intense fire burn in my belly.

In that moment, my inner fighter kicked in, like a scrappy boxer looking to get a title shot after years of being knocked down to the mat. I wasn't angry at Kiely or even Portes – I was angry at myself. I knew the only person holding myself down was me,

and that I needed to improve. I needed to finally live up to this expectation I had of myself, despite my year-long struggle with my own thought process.

And in that moment, I gained a clarity I had sought for so long.

I proceeded to launch into a very passionate response. That play had been revelatory to me, and I believed in the language, the story, the experience. I also believed it was the type of theatre I wanted to define my career. I came to grad school to learn how to direct stories in a non-realistic form. I knew I needed to work towards it, and it wasn't the easiest story to tell, but I was absolutely up for the challenge.

His brow furrowed. He was surprised by my outburst, but also recognized the intense passion I had for the play. He knew I was in for a tough battle.

"You've got your work cut out for you, then."

I siphoned my rage from that meeting into furious rigor. I analyzed *God's Ear* with a more refined eye – I wouldn't settle for lackluster answers this time around. At the core of my pitch was the family story. Ted and Mel's separate journeys converge at the end, with Lanie acting as a catalyst for their reunion. Despite the heightened text, this is the story that I knew I could convey clearly.

The biggest question to tackle became the language itself. Why does this play require language to work a specific way? I recalled my reaction to hearing the language the very first time. It was impossible to pick up every word or understand every turn of phrase. But the language carried the emotion of the world. It all intuitively felt *necessary*.

It was the language of loss. A language that had no rhyme or reason.

This is when I started to figure out what this play was. It was the story of a family shattered by a tragic incident, which removed all logic and reason from their understanding of the world. Ted and Mel need each other to survive – and Lanie surely needs them, as the lone child in the family now – but cannot confront one another with the truth that screams out the entire play - HE IS GONE!

Language accumulates and piles on top of them because they are trying to find every conceivable way to express their son's death without saying those words. When those words finally arrive in the text, Mel and Ted are able to finally confront his death

together, as a unit. While we see them navigating this new world in separate journeys, it is Lanie who reminds Ted to come home, confront his wife, which in turn sparks her to finally let out all of her emotions in one wordless, breathtaking wail. Then, and only then, can the family find a new normal and put the world back together.

I felt as though I overcame a huge hurdle by uncovering the most basic way to describe the play – a family’s language of loss. It was time to craft my pitch for the faculty.

Brian Balcom and I were tasked with bringing in multimedia for each play, as this was the first time the design faculty would be sitting in on the thesis pitch meetings; it would give them a chance to see and hear our ideas past the words we use. I got to see a trial run of this idea in action in the early Directing Seminar classes as the two first-year MFA directors that year, Erin Kraft and Nathan Singh, created slideshows for their Healy Series pitches.

When Kiely gave us the task, I felt a surge of motivation. Before coming to school, I spent three years as a video editor for the in-house marketing wing of an automotive group, and edited clips as a side passion for my theatre company. This simple task was a fun diversion out of language – I had the opportunity to investigate the visual and aural life of these three plays.

I gathered my inspiration images, and found music that seemed appropriate to the text. I could have simply slapped some images to a sound file and gotten away with a very simple presentation of ideas, but I wanted to challenge myself. I was interested in arranging the images – and revealing them – in the way that the play tells its own story. I was basically creating a movie trailer – the ultimate tease into the world of my theoretical productions.

Wednesday, December 10, 2014.

I don’t remember much of my thesis pitch day, except for bits and pieces.

I remember the thirty minutes leading up to the meeting. I sat in a conference-style classroom on the fifth floor of Theatre School, a coffee mug at one side of me

and a water bottle at the other. I prepared the TV and classroom computer, setting them to the online copies of my video files. I went over my notes. And I sat in silence.

The time came. Culbert, Bullard, and Kiely were joined by members of the Design Faculty: Toy Delorio, Head of Sound Design; Christine Binder, Head of Lighting Design; Linda Buchanan, Head of Scenic Design; and Nan Cibula-Jenkins, Head of Costume Design. A year earlier, this room would have terrified me. But a year into the program, I was more relaxed around these people. Many of them I had now dealt with as my teachers, and nearly all of them I had spent time talking to in the hallways. The design faculty now knew me from my work on the Healy, and I had learned a lot from their input on the *Vigils* process.

Also, I held onto the most important things I had learned from my first year of pitching. I had to stay present in the room – not thinking of this as a grand speech for a much larger audience, but facilitate a conversation that engaged each individual. This challenged my performative past, but there were simple lessons I had to remind myself of – breathing, eye contact, not being afraid to take in each person or pose questions that could allow for responses.

I began the pitch session with my *God's Ear* discussion. I played the minute-long video, which narrated the visual journey of the play over a music box rendition of Satie's *Gymnopedie*: a child plunging into a deep pool of water; a fluorescent sign flashing out over a murky dockside river – SOMETHING STRANGE HAPPENED HERE; a man aimlessly drifting in a glossy airport; a woman stuck in bed stuck in sand; a woman covering up the torn sunny-day wallpaper of a house, revealing a wall of dark clouds; a man in a business suit holding an umbrella, submerged in water (and with a blurred-out face); a little girl navigating a strange, magical tunnel; a G.I. Joe action figure by a pool of water; a horde of broken G.I. Joe action figures arranged on a table; a scotch glass lit by a gross neon glow; two toy people balancing on a jigsaw puzzle that is missing one large piece in the middle; and finally, three pairs of feet sticking out from underneath bed covers, the feet in the middle belonging to a small child.

After sharing this, I spoke for a few minutes about the play. Strangely enough, I remember very little of this pitch. I've come up with several fun theories to describe

what happened – my favorite of which is that I blacked out and was possessed by a spirit of a much more articulate theatre ghost. In reality, I let my passion for the play speak through the story of the family I had begun to rigorously track over the course of my analysis. I described my love for the language and how Schwartz uses it to take an audience on a marathon of emotions – from belly laughs to brain-puzzling displays of wordplay to absolute, heart-tugging pain – until we see a family that has found itself back together. After speaking for a few minutes, I then presented my other two plays, and after the final presentation, we opened the floor for some general questions from the faculty.

Early on in the discussion, I was asked a question I had prepared pretty accurately for – how working on *God's Ear* would be different than working on *Vigils*. Both plays centered around loss. I assured the panel that the work would be very different. I learned some important lessons in tackling relationship work from my first shows, and in this process, I wanted to refine what I had failed to do in the previous productions. I wanted to find that right balance of giving the actors freedom to explore, while pushing them to higher stakes when the play demands it. The other important difference was the need to focus on language. As opposed to *Vigils*, this is a play where the style of the play directly influences the emotional journey the actors need to take, so I believed it was important to allow students the opportunities to train in this more outside-in approach to a play. This would be crucial for my own understanding of the plays that I want to work on in the future, and how I can communicate effectively with actors to guide them properly while allowing for a larger period of play.

The most interesting question came from Delorio. With acute precision, she honed in on my pitches and boiled them down in a way that amazed me in the moment.

“It sounds like there are three distinct pitches here - one from your intellect, one from your gut, and one from your heart. So, if you're going to spend a year working from one of those places, where do you want to be?”

Without hesitation, I landed the response.

“My heart.”

I walked out of that meeting with mixed emotions. On one hand, I believed I had finally connected my passionate response to *God's Ear* to a clear, reasoned pitch. I had no sense of how my pitch went over in the moment, but I did pay attention to the faces in the room. I could sense that they understood my intent with the piece in a way that I had not conveyed in previous pitches.

But my anxieties arose. I had worries about the other two plays. Nan Cibula-Jenkins and Dean Culbert both expressed a lack of interest in *Life is a Dream* based on having produced the play in the past (albeit a different adaptation). Despite my attempt to engage a new life into the discussion of the play, I was worried that their fears may be correct – it may be a challenge to make the piece as viscerally engaging as I saw in my vision. With *Marisol*, I expressed initial reactions to the timeliness of the text; I was interested in mining how it connected in a post-Occupy Wallstreet world. But the play did feel a bit dated – a product of the 1990s. It was an instinctive reaction – not one I could readily describe. I began to worry that it might be tougher for me to get behind it as time went on.

Did I focus too much on *God's Ear* that I would cost myself the opportunity to grow on a different play? Did I fall into a trap? Were my interests too narrowed?

In those weeks of waiting, I placed a lot of trust in the process. I had spent a full year working on my communication skills, and felt that I had made the case to the best of my abilities. If it was the right time for me to do this play, it would happen. If not, I would have to trust the reasons why.

Weeks later, I received word from Kiely and Portes. While Portes wasn't there for my pitch, she told me that I had finally gotten the pitch down, and that I made a convincing case.

God's Ear would be my thesis production, and I'd be tackling it in the winter quarter of the next year.

trial run

*in which,
andrew tests the play
in a readthrough
and in a lab setting*

Spring, 2015

Once *God's Ear* was approved, I wanted to take some time to explore the play before I even thought about this specific production. Coming off of my pitch, I had some theories about the play that I wanted to refine. I needed answers that my analytical tools weren't providing me in the moment.

For example, I had experienced – as an audience member and as a reader – the way the language builds. But in order for me to get underneath the language as a director, I needed to understand the mechanics. I needed to hear voices behind the language, and I needed to test a question – why is accumulation of language important in this world?

This desire posed a challenge – I would not have the opportunity to cast the play until November, and the initial design meetings would take place towards the end of the winter quarter the year prior. While I had my second-year Spring Studio to focus on, I knew I needed to utilize the resources around me in order to get some answers. Doing so now would unlock certain obstacles that I felt were still clouding my brain.

I decided I needed to have some sort of casual read-through of the play. I learn things by listening that I would not be able to see on the page – listening activates my attention in a much different way than reading. I had to plan this very specifically, however – I would not use actors who were going to be in the acting company

Thanks to the year and a half I had already spent at DePaul, I realized I could ask the actors in my MFA class. They would be out of the casting pool after the fall quarter, and I trusted that they would help me uncover the language without trying to 'prove' anything to me as a director. Three of the eight available were free – LaNora Hayden, Charles Johnston, and Bernard Gilbert. To fill out the other four roles, I asked two alumni actors who graduated a year prior – David Giannini and Tiffany Ogglesby –

and rounded out the cast with the assistant director from *Undo*, Siri Collins, and one of my assigned assistants on *God's Ear*, Abbie O'Donnell.

I held the read two weeks prior to the end of Spring Quarter. It proved to be incredibly helpful, as the biggest thing I learned was one of the simplest – the text did not work properly if actors took time to pause in between the lines. David, who read for Ted, was attempting to find subtext between the lines during the first Act 1 scene with Mel, and the scene felt sluggish. Something felt off. Then, LaNora (reading for Mel) encountered the long monologue that I would personally refer to as the “wedding vows” – Mel’s long list of terms, clichés, and images that builds for pages. Never having encountered it before, LaNora learned the rhythm of it in the moment – I watched as her emotions opened up in that moment organically.

This was a helpful observation. If the actors allowed the music of the language to guide them, the relationships and emotions were much easier to access. I took the note.

The text is also, admittedly, very, very different from most slice-of-life plays. When the strangeness of the language and the ‘nonsense’ is embraced, the text succeeds. When actors try to find truth in every detail, the text becomes confusing. An audience could easily try to wrap their heads around everything spoken, so I had to watch out for that trap, especially as we tried to discern what details mattered and how we’d have to follow the family’s journey.

I recorded this reading, and would listen to it several times over the course of that summer. I was not concerned with the specific voices I was hearing – this was my specific way of ‘reading’ the play early on. Experiencing it audibly allowed me to imagine moments and make discoveries I wouldn’t otherwise notice by simply reading the text on the page.

Another opportunity to tackle the text happened through our Directing II curriculum, thanks to the timing of the thesis announcements. Directing II is a three-quarter investigation of various performance tools, and is an opportunity for the second-year MFA directors to work with second-year BFA actors who are preparing to

adjust to the Acting Company demands. It's a class that is a teaching tool for both the directors and the young actors.

The class was taught by Professor Lisa Portes. She designed the third quarter around Anne Bogart's Viewpoints training – the technique for (1) training performers; (2) building ensemble; and (3) creating movement” on stage with “names given to certain principles of movement through time and space” (Bogart, 7-8). During the second half of the quarter, Brian and I were told we would introduce the students to our two thesis plays – *God's Ear* and Moliere's *The Misanthrope*. Portes split the class in half, and assigned three actors to me. I would need to pick out a short, ten-minute scene from the text to study and apply the training.

Thanks to the play's structure, I had a conundrum. The play's structure is very unique – it's broken into scenes for the first half, but Schwartz only does this in order to give framing for certain moments where we follow Mel's journey or Ted's journey. By the second 'act', the play swirls and all seven of the actors enter in and out of the piece freely.

My only clear options with three actors were the two scenes between Mel and Lanie. The Tooth Fairy shows up at a point in both scenes, but in this exercise, I would have to determine how and when the Tooth Fairy appeared. My gut response was to have the Tooth Fairy present throughout.

The other issue that arose was that the implied gender of the roles would need to be switched for the exercise to work. I was assigned to work with one female actress (Dyllan Miller) and two male actors (Arie Thompson and Nosakhare Cash-O'Bannon), but the text specifies that Mel, Lanie, and Tooth Fairy are all played by women. How would I work Arie and Nosakhare into the scene?

A lightbulb moment occurred to me. There was a major conflict that I desired to know about between Mel and Lanie - we learn in the text that Mel was applying sunblock to Lanie at the time of Sam's near-drowning. In their early interactions, there's a lot of implied anger and resentment towards childhood, and Lanie's needs in general. I wanted Lanie to be thought of as the daughter, but what if she had the appearance of a boy? What if, for this exploration, Mel were to constantly see Sam in Lanie?

This idea excited me greatly. I loved Arie's willingness to play, and so I wanted him to tackle Lanie. Dyllan struck me as an extremely intelligent actress, capable of understanding and adapting to the play's style very quickly. I decided she would help me explore Mel's journey. Rounding out the scene would be Nosa as the Tooth Fairy. Nosa brought smart thoughts into our class discussions, so I believed he could help me discover something new about one of the quirkiest characters in the play.

The three actors were assigned the play during one class session, and would come in the following class prepared to start an initial Viewpoints exploration of the play. I came in that day ready to share my enthusiasm of the play with the actors, but was dismayed at their relatively low energy. I recounted the day in my class logbook for Portes, and while I attributed the unprepared energy in the room to their fatigue (possibly from their intro rehearsals), she explained that they were likely very uncertain about the text. She reminded me that it is not an easy play to understand on one read, and that it would require a lot of work to get them to viscerally understand what the world of the play. We'd have to understand it in pieces.

The four of us spent early class explorations working open viewpoint sessions to uncover the themes of the play. We started with basic grid work, with the three actors moving about the space and vocally responding to a simple prompt: "When I think about *God's Ear*, I see _____" or "I hear _____." I described my observations:

...The words of this world tend to feel 'heavy', which I expected initially. It's a world of loss, so there's a sense of emptiness and being stuck. However, I was interested in the strange, playful words that would slip in and provide us a contrast. "Tooth Fairy" "Action Figures"... there was something really fascinating that came out of exploring "Tooth Fairy" versus "Pill Bottles" or "Drowning". There was this lovely moment where all three were back at the wall, reaching high into the vertical space, until Dyllan eventually turned and extended that reach out 'downstage'. And when she almost could get away, Nosa appeared and blocked her, and you could only see her arms sliding down his shoulders and arms. It was a really halting image.

In our exploration of family, I think it was helpful to explore the roles first before even digging into the characters. The idea of “mother” gives some clear starting ideas (nurturing, scolding...) that the actors could find quickly in their physical exploration. When we explored a simple criteria - that the son was in the room - that’s when the play actually dropped in. Arie made this really intriguing choice (when he was in the world of the daughter) and kept his focus on the door to the room’s closet. The son was trapped behind a door; no one would dare go and open it, but the focus in the room became this tug of war between the desire to open it, and the need to keep up the exercise between the three in the room. That’ll be important to think about as we work on more compositions in the future (Peters, Class Log, Directing II, April 25, 2015).

The family exploration became vital to our understanding of the play, and a beautiful narrative question appeared to me – “How does a family of four function without the fourth?” It became a trend I saw in our physical work – the three actors always believed that there was a fourth somewhere in the space, and would constantly create a spatial relationship with a presence that was not visible. I started to understand how the play creates a tangible connection to a deceased child – his shadow looms over the family’s entire world.

The exercise that really connected us as a group to the text was our exploration of the physical and aural world. For this assignment, we had to create a two-minute composition that utilized props, light, architecture, and music. We could create it anywhere in the building, and we had to have a clear story we were telling –without actors. The actors and I excitedly rushed around the building, letting our intuitive sense of the play guide us. We realized after some time that we needed a place where we could control water, and one of the actors suggested the very sterile, clean studio dressing room sink.

I was fascinated. Our framing for the piece was a sink filling, and then draining. We pooled a resource of objects we brought that reminded us of the play. Dyllan brought a small pillbox with a cute saying on it (and filled with bright, colorful pills – clearly invested in Mel), Nosa brought a coat hanger (thinking of Ted’s suit), Arie brought red string (inspired by Lanie’s playfulness), and I brought three action figures (that reminded me of Sam). We also brought music, and ironically Arie brought in the same song I used in my pitch video – Satie’s *Gymnopedie*. That became the song we would play through the two minutes. We spent the class figuring out how the objects would be set up in the space, how we would use lights and sound, how and where our audience would experience the piece, and who would manipulate what objects over time.

By the end of our class session, we created a composition that I detailed as follows:

-Audience enters, gathers close to the sink. No lights or sound other than the natural light in the room. Sink is dripping water but mostly empty, filled with pills and the bit of yarn tied to the action figure. The drain is closed.

-Arie plays the music. Dyllan turns the sink on. Water begins filling the sink. Incrementally, Nosa brings up the lights little by little.

-When sink is mostly full (about a minute passes), Dyllan turns off the sink. The yarn moves along the water, and the pills cloud the water.

-At a point in the music (about a minute and a half in) we drain the sink. The water gets sucked down, streaking the white of the sink with the dissolved residue of the pills and pulling the yarn in. The lights stop raising. The music has also gone out.

-We let that sit for a moment. Then, using a bit of yarn we've strung up over the mobile, we yank the action figure into the sink in a quick thud. In his broken arm socket, we've placed more pills, and so they spill out.

-A moment in the stillness. Then, lights out (Peters, Class Log, Directing II, May 6, 2015).

Our presentation was very evocative of the play's shifts in tone. The initial discovery of the world, for our peers, allowed them to be pulled into the long duration of the moment, and discover the intricacies of the world in their own time. For example, Brian Balcom remarked that he believed the pills that were in the sink were candy, until he noticed that they were actually marked as antidepressants. This allowed the layers of the space to unfold naturally for each person. From there, there was a quick, sudden conclusion – the action figure crashing into the sink.

Our group then shifted focus to the next project – staging one full scene from the play. I choose to tackle Act 1, Scene 5 – Lanie and Mel burying action figures in the snow. In preparation to stage the scene, we were given free reign to utilize any of the exercises and tools mentioned in The Viewpoints Book. I chose to start exploring character via the Character Hot Seat exercise (Bogart, 128-130) – a process of allowing actors to generate written and physical responses to their character. From there, we explored a physical composition exercise – giving the actors a limited amount of time to create a five minute piece that contained a checklist of criteria they needed to include. Keeping with our family theme, I asked the actors to create a piece titled “The Story of Sam” and included items that we had discussed both from the text and from the words that they thought of when they thought of the play. Their checklist included between three to six lines of text (that could be repeated, used out of order, or broken up as necessary), a moment of laughter, three moments of song, a toy, an accident, and a sound from an unexpected source (among a few other items). The team was encouraged to utilize all of the spatial and time Viewpoints that they had learned up until that point.

Both the character work and the composition unlocked a violence to Mel and Lanie's relationship that I hadn't quite seen on the page. Lanie's connection to Sam's death was clear in my initial read:

MEL. When my son was in the lake, I was putting sunblock on my daughter.

At least I was trying.

She was stubborn and difficult.

You know how she gets. (86-87)

However, our tableaux and compositions unlocked a new dynamic in their relationship. Throughout both Scene 3 and Scene 5, Mel walks a fine line between wanting to protect Lanie, and wanting to strangle her. She acknowledges throughout the text how difficult Lanie is, but desires to protect her. Not having a child myself, it was a fascinating and scary discovery. What if your lone child was a reminder of your greatest failure?

For our final classes, we staged the scene, and my first priority was to find the perfect space in the building to stage the scene. Rather than use a rehearsal room, I was drawn to one of my favorite spots in the Theatre School building - the fourth floor terrace. The terrace has two walls and a ledge overlooking Racine Drive, with an incredible view of Chicago's skyline. Specifically, I was intrigued by the height of the walls, and the ability to use the terrance on the fifth floor to create a vast difference in levels. I placed Nosa up on that fifth floor and provided him with a megaphone – this interpretation of the Tooth Fairy now acted as a referee, occasionally having to stop the action of the scene to warn Mel when she was going over the line, and giving advice when needed. Meanwhile, we staged the burying of the figures on a wide rectangular structure that contained plants and dirt. I borrowed a number of small toys from props, which gave us an endless supply of items for Arie to toss around and Dyllan to try to bury. The tension of the scene became about whether Arie would join her in the task, or rebel in order to keep Sam's spirit alive.

Rehearsing this was a test-drive of how I'd work on the play. The Viewpoints exploration gave us immediate access to a physical vocabulary that we could use in staging the scene. Meanwhile, the actors learned the tricky way that the text worked. Arie had to constantly drive the scene as Lanie, while Dyllan learned that Mel worked to stabilize and suppress Lanie's tactics. Each shift in the language marked a shift in the scene, which we learned when we broke the scene down into smaller chunks and named each chunk. To help the actors figure out each moment, we developed a vocabulary based on a boxing match. One moment, Lanie would lure Mel in for a big jab, and the next moment might be Mel hitting a cheap shot that required the Tooth Fairy to step in and stop the fight. This helped me utilize the beat-by-beat work I did in my first year of text analysis, while merging my interest in a more physical approach to scenework.

Our work on this scene – and the entire quarter of Directing II – heavily influenced the approach I wanted to use in rehearsing the play. I was so inspired by the work that I decided to schedule Viewpoints training and composition work into the early portions of our rehearsal process. Without realizing it, I would hold onto many of the lessons from that class, taking our discoveries and expanding on them in both design and rehearsal.

the look and the feel

*in which,
andrew starts working
with some savvy student designers
towards the design concepts
on GOD'S EAR
and comes to an important decision*

What I learned on both *Vigils* and my elevated studio production (*The Memo*) was that the design process here allows us opportunities to learn more about the play before we even focus on getting actors. While we are expected to come into the first rehearsal with analysis done and a first speech prepared, having a bit of 'dream time' in this stage is crucial. Discussions with designers helped me weed out the ideas that are just sensational, and cement the tangible ideas that support the play.

Preparing for *God's Ear*, I had a strong sense of the family's story at the top of the play. I was warned, however, that this text would be very tricky for young designers not experienced with more abstract plays. Portes mentioned to me early on that it would be very easy to overdesign this play, instead of allowing the language to drive the action and story.

So, how do we approach a play that encourages theatricality but demands restraint? I started with three focal goals in mind:

1. Create enough meaning to translate the story, but avoid adding too many details that would complicate the play's beauty

When asked about why I thought this play was beautiful, I had to reiterate that this play expresses itself differently than any play I have ever come across. It is a world where rules – both in language and in logic – are broken constantly. Language accumulates over time, characters appear from out of nowhere, songs are sung. I reiterated that it had to be theatre versus any other form – the language drives the emotional journey that the characters take. This is hard to necessarily understand just

from reading the text, but having heard the play out loud, I believed in its stylistic choices and the effect the story could have when delivered to an audience.

However, not every detail mentioned in the play can be shown on stage.

2. Support the language of the play, but avoid overshadowing it

The text provides very few stage directions, and the poetic language rejects any naturalistic approach – meaning that even though Mel may be at “home,” we are not seeing a slice of her daily routine. Plus, with more theatrical characters appearing (The Tooth Fairy, G.I. Joe), the play suggests big moments of theatricality. But the danger of creating spectacle would endanger the simplicity the text brings. In listening to the play several times, I believed that the biggest feat of theatricality we needed to create is getting an audience to understand the story by sitting back and embracing the words.

3. Overcome the unique challenge of the Fullerton space

When asked “Why should this show be produced in the Fullerton theater?” I believed there was an untapped beauty in the space. I had been in the Fullerton my first year, assisting Phyllis Griffin (Voice and Speech Faculty Member) on John Guare’s *A Free Man of Color*. What I immediately noticed was that the space was designed as a strange hybrid of a proscenium theater and a thrust. While the upstage space was expansive, the strongest focal point of the stage was on the configurable downstage thrust (that allowed for both a raised stage to match the upstage deck, or the removal of the stage to allow for a different level closer to the audience). When designers utilized just the thrust space, the upstage space felt like an empty vacuum behind it. When directors would utilize more of the upstage area, the action of the play would get lost. It is a space that somehow demands both intimacy and expansiveness.

God’s Ear, to me, felt perfect for the space. I believed the intimacy of the thrust could bring the audience closer to the family’s story. Meanwhile, the vast playing space would be a perfect backdrop to create a powerful visual metaphor. I had a clear

sense of how I saw bodies in space, and it required the Fullerton stage's size and depth. While I didn't quite know how to achieve this goal, I knew our team – and this play – could bring out the Fullerton's best qualities.

All of these goals were intuitive guideposts as I prepared my first production meeting speech. Thankfully, I was able to draw upon my preparation for the thesis pitch, and I had a resource to play for the team – the one-minute “pitch trailer” I made for Dean Culbert and the design faculty. I sent the stage manager, Alexa Santiago, the link to a Google Drive folder I saved that contained that video, as well as all of the inspiration images I pulled. The most interesting picture, to me, was the photo of a dark body of water, and above it, a neon-emblazoned sign that read ‘SOMETHING STRANGE HAPPENED HERE.’ There was something about that image that clicked to me – it's a world in which we see flashing signs that something is off, even if we aren't given every detail.

I also had done analysis inspired by Elinor Fuch's “Visit to a Small Planet.” I noted the way that we experienced locations in this world – never through specific details, but by suggestions. At one point, Ted and Lenora are in a lounge, we're told, but time feels endless in these moments – they are never interrupted by others, there's no telling if they stand or sit, and we only get the sense that they are drinking from the looseness in their language. Then, the play shifts into a nebulous space where characters come and go freely, though we get no sense of where they are physically rooted. They inhabit a strange space that I had no vocabulary for, at the moment.

The strongest takeaway from my Fuchs analysis was an understanding of how people moved in this world. In *God's Ear*, people move almost as if they are moving through nebulous space, each person in the family representing their own orbit. Mel and Ted seem on separate orbits from each other for so much of the play, circling around one another but never truly being in sync with one another. It's in this work that I understood Lanie's role in the play – she works to bring the parents back together, getting them aligned. Meanwhile, Guy and Lenora are agents who pull Ted farther away from Mel, Flight Attendant exists as a bridge between Ted's two ‘worlds’ (home

and away), and G.I. Joe and Tooth Fairy appear from above and below Mel's world in order to attempt to stabilize her. In my head, this analysis is incredibly abstract, but it helped me understand the story, and I would keep this in my back pocket. It would come into play much later in our design process.

I felt incredibly relaxed at my first design meeting, despite my usual excited, caffeinated tendencies. I wanted to ask questions of the team and get their initial reactions to the play, but also allow ourselves some 'dream time'. I wanted us to come together to share images of what the play evoked, and I'd need more than just the first production meeting to do that.

I learned about the team quickly after that meeting. The lighting designer, Anthony Forchielli, had worked with me previously as the assistant lighting designer on *Vigils*. During one technical rehearsal, he had to sub in for Toria Gibson (the lighting designer) for an evening, and I appreciated his ability to think and work quickly. During that first production meeting, he chimed in with smart observations; he understood that his work would be integral in helping us track the movement in the world of this play. Connor Ciesil, the sound designer, spoke to his initial intrigue in how sound worked in the play; he had some very thoughtful questions about how the songs in this world differed from those in musicals.

I spent time early in the process getting to know Jake Ives, the scenic designer, and Meg Burke, the costume designer. In that first meeting, I could see them processing the visuals that I shared with them in my video presentation. From seeing their work in previous productions, I knew they were both incredibly gifted in their use of color and creativity. Jake's work on *Phantom Tollbooth* and *Video Galaxy* from the previous season proved he knew how to utilize and transform a large playing space. In seeing Meg's work on *The Day John Henry Came To School*, I appreciated the pops of color she gave to every single ensemble member, as well as her intricate attention to detail. I believed their aesthetics would be very harmonious with mine. Throughout the process, I opened up many opportunities to meet with them and share thoughts about the play, since their work would be due first.

In the first two production meetings, I worked towards letting the team bring ideas to the table. Portes, my thesis advisor, gave me many notes on how I could help

the designers elaborate on these ideas and coax them out. However, she guided me towards what would be the most important element to focus on in the early meetings. She mentioned that this play needed a clear container - a unit design that would bring the multiple settings into focus. In Jake's design, we would have to agree upon a world that would give us fluidity and transformation, but allow the play's language and abstract style to register with an audience. She pushed me to find the clear metaphor for the world.

I struggled with this container for months. I think I intuitively understood what Portes meant by the word 'container', but I couldn't quite decide what that word meant for this play. In my Fuchs analysis and my visual research, I began following three distinct paths. On the first, I worked to understand the 'home shattered by the dark void of loss' statement that I had worked into my pitch. I could clearly understand how the family and their home existed in a void that wasn't a representation of reality. As the play moves away from literal playing spaces, it moves into a more abstract space in the second act where bodies move through the space freely, and where Ted and Mel orbit each other until they finally come together and confront one another. I felt as though I could see the bodies moving through a void of space, but didn't quite know the way to define that as a scenic metaphor. My second path centered on Sam and the playful child's world. I was drawn to forts, playgrounds, and other children's play spaces. Portes noted a trend in the images I found on this thread; I was finding forts that evoked a clear connection to a 21st-century home, but had bold geometric shapes and pops of color. These images helped me understand how I wanted to use the space. I wanted to utilize levels and areas on the space to shift us from the world of the home to Ted's places of escape, such as the lounge or the airport. The third thread I was connected to was the lake. I couldn't escape this image, because it was the location tied to Sam's accident. I also have a strong personal affinity to water, since I grew up on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, relatively close to the Atlantic Ocean. I understand the allure and fear that a large body of water can create. I wasn't quite sure how to tie that into the world of design, but the lake kept a strong presence in my research and in our initial design discussions.

During the last weeks of the Spring 2015 quarter, Jake and I spent a good deal of time mulling over inspiration images and finding what ideas connected us to *God's Ear*. The first idea he brought to our meetings was a video of a kinetic wave sculpture. He connected this to the feeling of being underwater, and likened the family in *God's Ear* to being under the surface of a lake. This excited the room, and even Tim Combs, the Technical Director of the Theatre School and faculty member, was incredibly receptive to the idea. We discussed a multitude of ways that we could make this work, and Jake wanted this to be the primary focus of his design. Under that would be a mostly sparse playing space. While I loved the idea of the wave, I became concerned about what the actual stage would look like. I maintained the intuitive hunch from my work in *Directing II* that architecture was very important to this world. I kept attempting to get a sense of what structures would be in the space and how we could move towards some of the objects I illustrated in the images of the forts.

Admittedly, I struggled in these early meetings to articulate what exactly needed to be in the space. Part of this was working on a play that gave no specific scenic clues, and part of this was having worked previously with two designers who started early with specific ideas. Jake, on the other hand, had a more intuitive design process. I appreciated his ability to think big in the 'dream' stage, but I wasn't sure how to guide Jake to concrete ideas. Was this because the play was more difficult to design, or was this due to my lack of clarity? Whatever the reason, I was challenged to use this process to focus more and more on a confident, specific articulation of ideas.

Eventually, we worked through some tangible ideas, though by the time the first draft was due, there were way too many scenic elements. In addition to the kinetic wave, Jake had come up with two more big elements that he wanted to incorporate into the design – a raked stage, separate from the upstage deck, and a large movable wall that represented the home. He drew these out, but didn't present them as a model, which scared me. Looking back, I wondered if this was due to his hesitancy to present these ideas, or if it was due to him being stuck in how to present them all as one cohesive idea.

Additionally, I found out from Portes that Jake was speaking to his advisor about needing more specificity, which surprised me at the time. I had thought I was allowing

a lot of room for ideas but asking the right questions about the needs of the play. What I realized, however, was that I was stuck in those three major paths (the ‘shattered home’, the fort, and the lake). I needed to decide on one path.

Portes reminded me to go back to Anne Bogart’s A Director Prepares, and reread the chapter on ‘Violence.’ In this moment, I needed to make a violent, specific choice – find the right path to help Jake, and cut the elements that didn’t make that path clear.

So, as I’ve done many times, I reread it. I was moved by Bogart’s response to the act of a decision. “Only when something has been decided can the work truly begin” (45). Our design process was at an impasse, so I needed to buckle down and make a choice in order to propel the rest of the team. Under great stress to find clarity, I began breaking down what objects were unnecessary

I knew any sort of wall or home structure was unnecessary, and the text would make it clear that this family had been shattered. I also knew the importance of an open playing space, where location could be alluded to, but not directly seen. The text would need to help guide us from moment to moment, and too many elements would detract from the beauty of the language. It was easy for me to recognize these intuitions, but what was the one key phrase or idea that bound all of these design elements together?

In order to refine our ideas, we had to spend a lot of time together as a design team. We’d need to hold many design meetings outside of our eight scheduled production meetings.

There were a number of design meetings that we held outside of our production meetings. In the Fall 2015 quarter, these meetings were institutionalized on our schedule; the designers and I met in one of the fifth floor conference room nearly every Tuesday to check in and further our ideas, without the stress of the production meeting constraints. Two of these meetings were especially pivotal in our process, both of them helping bring together our design.

The first revelation came from a longer meeting where the team met to discuss the play scene by scene. My main focus was for us to “map” each scene – this was an

exercise that Portes had co-opted from Carlos Murillo, Head of Playwriting. We would break each scene (or section) of the play down visually and aurally, with each designer contributing images that related to their specific field. Since the tool was provided to me second-hand, I wasn't entirely sure how to best use it, but it forced us to move between macro- and micro-analysis. We needed to think how each smaller scene and sequence worked within the whole, and what design elements would help us transform the space from moment to moment.

It was at this meeting where Jake brought his first whiteboard model of the space (see Appendix B). In a model box of the Fullerton space, he had cut out the thrust in the Fullerton space, and in its place was a deck with a compound rake – from upstage right to downstage left. It sat in the void of the Fullerton deck like an island. Behind it was a large empty wall that swept up from the bottom of the theatre space to the top of the model. He would explain that was to be a backdrop, though he wasn't quite set on its shape. The third object he placed in the box was a circular, wavelike structure that he would call the portal. This would arch around the proscenium of the space and create the illusion that the playing space was underwater.

With this model, we began to see that the open nature of the playing space was needed, and we made some decisions on how to use the deck to give us the transformative quality we needed. We decided to implement multiple traps on the deck, granting us opportunities for actors and props to appear and disappear at will. We could also utilize the sides of the theatre, the aisles, and the playing space around the deck. Also, after seeing miniature figurines on the set, I realized how I could create strong visual compositions with the various levels and depth of the deck.

Throughout all of this, I was terrified at the prospect of the rake. I had never worked on a raked stage before, and I had limited experience seeing rakes work in action. I also had many reservations doing this on my thesis show, knowing the level of challenge I would have dealing with the actual content of the work. However, I listened closely to his reasoning. Since we saw this family in rupture from the beginning of the play, Jake wanted to create a world that was always off-center and off-balance.

Despite the fear, I believed his intuition and reasoning was smart. I followed my gut to keep the rake. I trusted Jake's choice, and I believed I could challenge myself to do something bold with the theater space. I spoke to a few faculty members and other MFA directors about working on raked stages, and I gained more knowledge about what I would need to do to make actors comfortable working on a dynamic playing space.

Another takeaway from that meeting was based on a discussion on time. Anthony posed a question - "How does time work in this play?" It took me a moment to respond. I remembered my analysis, but I couldn't think of the way to put the words into a clear sentence.

So, I illustrated a diagram on the whiteboard.

I drew one large circle, and three smaller circles inside of it. On each of these circles, I drew arrows indicating a clockwise rotation. I explained that the large circle was something I was describing as "mourning time." This is not time that moves forward in a way we experience in day-to-day life. Mourning time is liquid, somehow being somewhere between. Two days or two months could pass in the time it takes Mel to talk to Ted in Scene 1. But it feels as though this time is static and that nothing can really move forward – it's cyclical. The smaller circles represent the three family members. They move in their own times – though they are not in-sync. Ted will always come and go from his home, Mel will always be at home, and Lanie will always be six – UNLESS – something drastic needs to happen to either break the family (Ted choosing to leave his family) or bring them back together (Lanie getting Ted to come back home to confront Mel). After Ted returns home, time is able to normalize for the family. In that last moment – where I could see all three of them in bed together – we would witness a scene that is the closest to real life. Time would finally normalize and all three would move forward, out of mourning time's endless cycle.

The second pivotal design meeting was set outside of the normal meeting hours. As we were working through the mapping exercise in the previous meeting, we hit a major wall, as the entire design team was struggling to find the world of the play. This, coupled with my hesitancy to decide on the right words to rally the team around, forced us into a high priority meeting with one of our major scenic deadlines looming.

During this session, Connor was speaking about the way he envisioned sound working in this space. He was using words such as ‘reverberating’ and ‘echoing’ – words that tied clearly to the image of being underwater. Hearing him use these terms sparked a moment of clarity. I realized that the entire design team was attracted to the idea of being underwater, and this could be the metaphor that united the design elements. If the major event of the play was Sam’s near-drowning, what would happen if the family could not leave this event? What if the lake was ever-present, and what if the lake itself was the dark void of loss that shattered the family in the first place? I halted the talk for a moment, turned to Jake, and said, “So, we should just basically tell everyone this world is underwater, right?”

It made sense to me. I was trying to put a term to this world, and was grasping for the right concept to rally everyone behind. Portes had coached me to move towards the “abstracted fort” idea, but it seemed that Jake’s design was betraying that a bit. For such a long time, I was wrapped around how to negotiate the scenic design that I forgot that lights and sound played an important part in creating the world. When describing sound to Connor, I remarked that sound resonates in this world differently than some of the acoustic guitar music he played for me in passing. He brought me samples like a song from the *True Detective* soundtrack, which - as moody as it was, didn’t fit. It felt like a piece you’d hear in a gritty piece of realism. But once he played a few tracks that used bells and simple percussive backings, everything made sense to me. Bells work in this world. The notes resonate differently than, say, an acoustic guitar, because the sound reverberates. The words in *God’s Ear* have a similar effect. The “Sit down” / “Tell me” exchanges between Ted and Mel echo multiple times throughout the play (31, 78). The final time, we hear the “He’s gone.” and it lands like a thud (88). That sticks in our head.

It almost feels as if the sonic world of this play exists underwater, bubbling up to the surface. So, deciding that the physical world is the bottom of the lake somehow made total sense.

From that moment on, it was the first time that our design team felt unified. We felt like we understood the world of this play. I remarked, “Oh, hey, I guess that *is* the

image on our poster, after all!” as a self-deprecating jab at myself. I had been fighting the lake, one of my strongest points of inspiration, instead of embracing it head-on.

All of our ideas began to find a cohesive center. We decided the raked stage would function like the bottom of the lake, and Jake reflected this with a reflective blue floor treatment and an addition to the back of the deck that vaguely resembled the crest of a wave. We had to negotiate a few times on the size of that wave, in order to not allude to an ocean, but that addition gave the deck metaphoric beauty. The backdrop, meanwhile, was changed to be a curved drop that would border the upstage space, framing the deck. It would be painted similar to one of our key inspiration images – the deep, dark blue of a body of water looking up towards the light of the surface.

Our final touches would be to add six cubes that could be pulled out of the traps, and used for various needs – as furniture pieces, as architectural elements, and as storage for props we absolutely needed. These cubes would give us opportunities to seat actors or create shapes needed to tell the story. I also was excited, as they could help me create the ending moment I was starting to envision – the family falling to sleep together in bed. Additionally, we collaborated with Anthony to see if we could light the cubes from within, as we were excited by some of the images we found of late-night lounges with glowing neon furniture. I was excited by the potential of these cubes; along with the traps, they were simple enough gestures to fill my need for playful, transformative architecture in the space.

The final big alteration we made after this choice was in regards to the portal over the playing space. Rather than this being a moving structure, it would be a static arch that would be made of blue fabrics. Anthony became integral in these discussions, as we began to discuss the ways we could light this structure to illustrate water-like movement.

These discussions moved us towards clarity as a team, and moved Jake towards a more realized scenic design. He drafted and modified his model, and by the time he presented his design in a production meeting, we were seeing a visually dynamic, powerful scenic design. While I didn’t quite know how every scene would look, he had given me a strong container to work within, and I felt a great freedom to experiment with the space.

Speaking about the space as an abstracted lake suddenly awoke my articulation about the play's story, too. Portes noticed that my articulation of the family's journey clarified. I found a new spine for the piece – breaking surface. As I saw it, Ted and Mel were plunged into the deep depths of Sam's loss at the beginning of the play, and spent the entire play attempting to find surface in some way. When Lanie attempts to 'rescue' Ted, he then swims back to Mel and they realize they must come together as a unit in order to break the surface of grief.

Throughout the whole design process, Meg had a consistently strong grasp of how costumes worked in this world (See Appendix C). The people in this world should look real in contrast to the abstracted space we were creating around them, and we only needed to create one look for each character rather than have multiple costumes or major changes. She wanted to root the parents in more muted colors, and give them a few items that they could remove if needed as the play proceeded. For Mel, Meg brought many images of upper-middle-class mothers at home, and she was inspired by soft, comfortable cotton fabrics.. She saw Mel wearing large, comfortable looking sweater and sweatpants. Similarly, she saw Ted in a very simple business suit, colored in simple greys and a light-blue button up shirt. As his journey progressed, he could loosen his tie, remove his coat, and generally make his business attire look more unkempt.

In comparison to the parents, Lanie was inspired by many images of bright, colorful children's clothing. Based on my work in Directing II and my previous intuitions about Lanie, I saw her as adventurous and bold, possibly wanting to wear a piece of clothing that reminded her of her brother. I also wanted to evoke the sense that Lanie was on an expedition. Meg eventually settled on the idea of a bright, puffy vest over a long-sleeved kids dress, with tights and playful-looking rain boots. For the moments where Mel and Lanie are outside, we'd add a scarf and a knit hat. Lanie's hat was particularly fun to collaborate on, as we both were inspired by children's animal hats; we picked out a few options as the process went on, until we finally settled on a delightful cat hat with long tassels.

With Lenora, Guy, and the Flight Attendant, we hoped to evoke characters who were rooted in realistic human beings, but who evoked a bit of fantasy. Since Ted finds himself in bars, lounges, and airports, these characters seem to be a bit more colorful than the world inside the house. We also wanted to somehow evoke the sense of the mythical Underworld, based on the song Lenora and Guy sing together. I imagined Lenora to be the antithesis of Mel – mysterious, alluring, a figment of fantasy that pulls Ted’s focus when he is at his most vulnerable moment. Based on the text, we also knew Lenora describes herself as “an independent woman of what used to be the nineties” (61). Her appearance is important to her; she takes care to appear confident, classy, and sophisticated (despite her inner ‘trainwreck’).

I shared a painting with Meg that depicted a woman smoking at a bar; Meg took notice of the woman’s distinct features and the way the smoke surrounded her, and began thinking of what kind of outfit would best serve this woman. Eventually, her design for Lenora was based around an expensive-looking dress and a long necklace. At first, the dress was to be black – alluding to the stereotype of a seductress in a little black dress. This would change in time to a red dress, as Meg would use that color as our palette for the characters in Ted’s journey.

I relayed to Meg a vision of Lenora’s first moment (31) – Lenora walking on stage with a cigarette, and the cigarette leaving an endless trail of smoke as she sang. It was partially based on the painting I shared with her, and partially another instinct about Lenora’s relationship to the “Underworld” that I was starting to see. I wasn’t quite sure if she was imaginary or a figment of Ted’s imagination, but I thought she should be a bit otherworldly in this first moment. The endless smoke was exciting to me – it made me think Lenora could be from the literal underworld! Meg asked our prop shop coordinator, Amy Peter, to see how we could achieve this. We decided an additional fur coat would be needed for Lenora’s song, and a contraption would be set up to pump smoke through the coat’s sleeve.

Guy, meanwhile, was pretty easy to describe. He is the kind of loudmouth who’d regularly find himself at a local dive bar. I also saw him to be a shell of Ted, which gave Meg a sense of Guy’s social status. We decided that Guy should be, similar to Ted, a man with a family, but who was attempting to mask his family life by investing

his time in beer and sports. Since DePaul is relatively close to a number of sports bars and pubs, I remarked that we'd probably find Guy at a happy hour in Wrigleyville during a late-afternoon Cubs game. Meg's immediate response was that she wanted to put Guy in a local sports jersey. I loved that. Overtop of his jersey, he'd be in a frumpy, nondescript jacket, and underneath, he'd wear khakis and loafers. I also noted that Meg drew Guy with a Tall Boy beer in hand, which was a great touch (and an idea I'd use later when we worked in the rehearsal room with props).

The Flight Attendant was fun for us to collaborate on, as Meg pulled a number of different photos of flight attendants from the past and present. I was drawn to the bright colors of the seventies, and Meg found a few very bold looking photos where the attendants were dressed in pops of orange and purple.

Since the Flight Attendant needed to clearly be a man dressing as a woman (as the text mentions she is a transvestite flight attendant), we determined a few guidelines that would be necessary to make this clear. We agreed that this design should live between an actual flight attendant outfit and a drag queen ensemble. Specifically, we wanted the Flight Attendant to have accentuated features, which Meg believed we could achieve with appropriate amounts of padding. When it came to his wig and makeup, we were inspired by drag queen culture – specifically, our knowledge of pop culture influenced designs from *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

Talking about the Flight Attendant became tricky later in the process, as Meg had concerns about the scenes with Ted. I had to be sensitive in these discussions, given that I myself am a heterosexual white male; I did not want to veer the play or the character in a negative direction. I wanted it to be clear that this character wasn't a trans woman, but a man dressing in women's clothing, and who is referred to as a woman. Admittedly, I did not have the biggest knowledge on trans culture, but I wanted to be respectful and not lead the play into a discussion of a topic that it doesn't necessarily touch upon. All we are given is that this is a man in women's clothing; there is no value judgment made on her by Ted. She acts as a parental figure to him, sometimes going so far as to pistol whip him in order to slap him out of his anxiety. I didn't want the discussion of their interactions to boil into a discussion on trans violence. Thankfully, an email from Myron Elliott, DePaul's costume shop manager,

helped assail our fears. He explained that the character could just be boiled down to transvestism, and parlayed some information that was helpful to the two of us.

Despite her fears, Meg found confidence in her design for the Flight Attendant. Similarly to Lenora, the Attendant's color scheme changed to red, so as to both connect to the theme of Ted's Underworld journey, and to root Flight Attendant in a color that would be a little more modern. Meg's advisor, Nan Cibula-Jenkins (Head of Costume Design), argued that it would likely be difficult to find a suit jacket and skirt in dark purple or orange. The Flight Attendant's accessories were another wonderful feature of the design – she would wear a pillbox hat and a bright scarf, which were nods to some of our vintage photos. Finally, Meg noted the need for a prominent wig, which would be a nod to the drag queen inspirations.

Meg was able to flex her creative muscles on the designs for G.I. Joe and Tooth Fairy. For G.I. Joe, we were presented with a huge challenge, since that actor would have to double as the Flight Attendant as well. This was the only character that would require a costume change, and it needed to be quick – the Flight Attendant has about two pages to change from the Flight Attendant (after the “Ladies and Gentlemen” song) into the G.I. Joe for his first entrance in Act 2 (68). Given these needs, we knew certain elements of the G.I. Joe costume would need to be designed with speed and layering in mind.

I had the most fun finding inspiration for G.I. Joe, as I grew up inundated with toys as a kid. My brother grew up in the eighties, and I inherited a number of his smaller G.I. Joe figures. These were highly articulated 5-inch figurines designed after the popular *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* cartoon series, and I wanted our G.I. Joe to have more of a resemblance to the ridiculous of the 80s designs than of the more realistic-looking 12-inch, fabric-clothed figurines. I intuited this based on some of G.I. Joe's speech patterns – he speaks to Mel as though he's reciting a PSA that would play at the end of the cartoon. “Knowing is half the battle!” was the cartoon statement engrained in my brain since childhood, so his “To be all that you can be / Or not to be all that you can be” speech really reminded me of those memories (72). I wanted to

see how we could give him that cartoonish element, and make him a big surprise late in the play.

We latched onto one cartoon character's design early in the process – Roadblock, a chiseled, no-nonsense soldier – and Meg developed an idea that would be pivotal in achieving our quick change needs. She decided she wanted to create a full body suit that the actor could slip into, which would allow us to make the G.I. Joe look more like a toy. The suit, she described, would have muscles built into it, and would mimic the articulation of the 5-inch toys – even going so far as having articulated joints built in around the leg, hip, and elbow regions.

Meanwhile, the Tooth Fairy became our biggest challenge from the inspiration front. Since the character is based on a figment of childhood imagination that didn't have a clear, defining representation in modern culture (like, say, Santa Claus), we had to decide upon what aspects of her costume would make her clear to the audience.

From the outset, I believed Tooth Fairy to be tied to an idea of the afterlife, as she mentions that she gives the teeth “back to God” (72). Rather than focus on her being a figment of a Christian heaven, I thought of a more ethereal Tooth Fairy. I came up with the term “celestial mother” to describe her, as I believed that she was the type of fairy that children would imagine being birthed from a star. This choice was total intuition, but at the core, I believed her to be an eternal motherly presence.

As opposed to the other characters in *God's Ear*, Meg and I decided to research the Tooth Fairy from other productions. We noticed a major trend stemming from the original Vineyard production, which cast an older actress in the Tooth Fairy role. Many Tooth Fairy iterations had a ‘funky’, realistic look to them – bright colored wigs, obvious costume store wings, sweaters, etc. I understood these designs, but we both believed in creating a unique Tooth Fairy. We brought a ton of inspiration images to the table. I veered away from the “funky” fairy looks of past productions, and also veered Meg away from some images that looked a bit on the scarier side.

Meg opted to give Tooth Fairy a rather large (almost Disney Princess-esque) gown, and a silver, glistening wig to denote an ethereal beauty. Meg tied Tooth Fairy's dress to the colors of the set – hues of purple, blue, and pink – and envisioned the

Tooth Fairy to constantly sparkle – from glittering makeup to shiny fabrics on her dress. Meg also pitched that her dress would have lights embedded in them. I loved the playfulness of this idea, and I asked that the actress would be able to turn the lights on and off manually; I believed this would be a fun gesture for Tooth Fairy's Scene 1 song.

Once we had our scenic and costume designs decided, I began spending more time with Anthony and Connor on their design thoughts. During our scene 'mapping' work, I spent time describing the mood of each moment, and Anthony left a number of images into our Google Drive folder in response. He also was able to illustrate ideas once he had a picture of Jake's scenic design model.

Anthony and Jake collaborated almost instantly once the idea of the static 'portal' was decided upon. It would be a prominent feature of the set, and Anthony believed we could use L.E.D. lights to make the portal change colors whenever we wanted it. This intrigued me. The two then brought a really interesting idea up in a later design meeting. They wanted to make a scaled mock-up of the fabric portal, and see how lights could change the appearance. Jake, along with the scenic shop, made the portal a few weeks prior to our first rehearsal. He handed it off to Anthony, who invited myself, Jake, Meg, Connor, and Alexa to the light lab the week prior to auditions.

The light lab session was absolutely breathtaking. With just some simple color rotations, Anthony transformed the portal mock-up – which was three different colors of fabric, stitched together in a fragmented pattern – in a matter of mere seconds. When he made it red, the portal glowed ominously. Under green light, it shimmered.

To this day, I still remember the sheer goosebumps I had when we all sat in that light lab. I asked Anthony at the end of that meeting if we could possibly recreate this presentation during our first day of rehearsals. He enthusiastically agreed, and we set it in our first-day schedule. Allowing the actors the chance to see the light lab was important to me as a method of connecting our team together on that first day. I'm not sure if any designers have done that before or after, but I felt confident that they'd have the same reaction I did to Jake and Anthony's pet project.

I knew sound might be one of the trickier elements to weave into the world of this play. Too much sound might distract from the language. But I could hear sound somehow in this world, and I believed it to be necessary to help the audience distinguish that this play wasn't realism. And then came the matter of the songs. We were given sheet music in the Samuel French script for the actors, but I wasn't quite sure if these songs needed to be sung acapella or not. How could we navigate these questions?

Thankfully, I got an early heads up about Connor's abilities as a designer. Brian Balcom, my 3rd-year MFA colleague, had worked with Connor during his ESP show and raved about his ability to compose music. So, when the two of us discussed the play for the first time, I asked him about the potential of composing music for the songs. We considered them respites from the journey of the family – interludes that are mostly playful, but may have some connection to the event of the scene that precedes them. For example, the song Flight Attendant sings at the end of Act 1 – “Please Remain Calm” – happens after Ted has finally admitted the desire for Lenora is “just / sex” (67). I saw the moment as an attempt to weather the turbulent storm that Ted was experiencing emotionally – as well as speak to Lenora's constant questions about being a trainwreck. The Flight Attendant riffs in the style of an in-flight announcement – “If the airplane should suddenly descend / or the wings should fall off / please remain calm” (68). So, I knew we'd need to play with music for these songs early in the process, and see how if they could support what the actors were doing while not overshadowing the language.

In our early chats, I described hearing things almost echo-like in this world. If we hear anything, I explained, it rings out in this hollow void. I tied that to the way language lands in this world. Words echo, reverberate, and resonate. I believed that anything we hear in the play (such as a flight attendant's bell or the G.I. Joe theme to introduce those two characters) carries a similar quality.

Connor's initial concept for the play as a whole was hearing the family as a song. He believed in hearing three distinct 'tones' that would represent the three family members. While I wasn't initially sure how this would work, he composed a song that

ended up becoming the music that introduced the audience into the play. In this song, there were three distinct instruments – a bass line that provided a constant plodding beat, a piano melody that musically mimicked some of Mel’s language patterns, and a playful bell ringing on every other off-beat that represented Lanie’s intermittent appearances.

As we got closer to auditions, Connor developed sound ‘sketches’ that he’d work with once we had actors. As a benefit to the acting company, he also provided sound files for the audition process – piano melodies that gave the actors the notes they needed for the songs they’d be auditioning with. Having those gave me an early sense of the potential rhythms that the songs would add to the play, and how those moments might sound in between the larger exchanges of language.

Since we had decided to bring the whole team into the Light Lab during our first rehearsal, I thought it’d also be a nice touch to bring them to the Sound Lab to hear Connor’s initial song ideas. Connor approved of this and was extra excited to share his work. I also wanted to hear everything in the lab, thanks it’s wonderful acoustics.

With all the initial concepts set, the team prepared diligently for first rehearsal. We had a strong sense of the world of *God’s Ear*, after a long and arduous design process. Thankfully, the world of the lake was calling us. Now, we’d just need the actors to make the world complete.

filling the shoes

*in which,
andrew figures out the roles
and casts the show*

October, 2015.

As I prepared for auditions, I worked with the assistant directors and stage managers to pull the most appropriate sides. I determined that I needed to see the actors tackling both the text and the music. The former was the most important guideline – I would need to determine who would be able to dive into the complex text and fearlessly experiment with how to stage it. The music was a secondary concern. Five of the seven roles had their own songs, and I needed actors who could help me uncover what was underneath each of them. While the play isn't a musical, I needed to see which actors could tell a story with the songs, and who would be comfortable to carry a tune.

I chose to offer five 'tracks' for the actors to choose. Two tracks were designed for the male actors in the pool – one with two Ted sides to prepare, and one with a Flight attendant side and a Guy side. For the females, I chose three tracks – two sides for Mel, two sides for Lanie, and a track for Lenora and Tooth Fairy. All of the sides were short scenes or snippets of text that would clock in at under 90 seconds. In addition to choosing which two sides to perform, all actors would be required to prepare one of the five songs I chose; the males would choose from either Guy or Flight Attendant's songs, and the females would choose between a song from the Tooth Fairy, Lenora, or Lanie. They were given freedom to mix and match as they pleased; an actress could choose to read the Lenora/Tooth Fairy sides and perform the Lanie song, for example.

I decided to work with a reader for the audition room. In many auditions at the Theatre School, students would pair up with partners in their audition groups at their own discretion. I did this for *Vigils* the previous year, and while it gave me an opportunity to see early pairings, I found it difficult to see every actor equally. Some of

the sides showcased certain actors better than others. Brian had more experience with readers in auditions, and had utilized this form for his Healy production auditions. Since this was my second time having a first-round audition process, I wanted the opportunity to see which audition process worked best for me. Leea Ayers, an MFA actress in my class, was interested in assisting me as reader, and I appreciated her work ethic and her willingness to listen as a scene partner. I believed she would be a stellar, helpful reader – someone whose presence would calm and encourage the actors.

November 22, 2015.

Audition day arrived, and it was a treat to hear so many actors tackle the text for the first time. One big struggle I had throughout the day was balancing time – I had basically asked actors to prepare three pieces, and while they were all short enough to allow room to work with them individually, I was still finding myself running close to the time limit each round. During the first group, I went over by about ten minutes, and I had to adjust my work accordingly in the following groups. It meant that I would have to make some judgment calls – I couldn't work with every actor, and I had to determine which actors were worth investigating.

It became very clear who prepared, and I noticed some standouts right off the bat. Of the male actors, there were two very clear frontrunners for Ted. A terrific second year MFA actor auditioned early in the day, and brought specificity and emotional stakes to the text. His connectedness made me lean forward that day. The other was a fourth-year BFA actor, Sam Krey. I could sense, from his audition, that he wanted the role; he brought a fire to Ted that moved me. Having seen his work earlier in the quarter, I also was impressed with his capacity to show genuine love on stage – something vital to understanding Ted.

A second-year MFA actress, Mélisa Breiner-Sanders, brought an impassioned, amusing read to Mel. She understood the character very clearly – someone who carried pain, but who attempted to control and mask it at every turn. She was also incredibly clear in distinguishing her actions towards her child from her actions towards her husband.

I was also interested in a few other actresses – including third-year Marjorie (Margie) Muller. Margie was highly specific with text and showed a range of emotions. I believed she would be a strong option for Mel.

I was a bit dismayed that only one actress read for Lanie's sides. I knew I would need to call back a few actresses who didn't initially read for the role. I gathered my notes on Lanie, and called back three other BFA actresses whom I felt would be strong contenders for the role. Among them was Dyllan Miller, whom I had previously worked with in Directing II, but whom I hadn't seen perform as Lanie.

The trickiest role to narrow down was the Tooth Fairy. At the time of auditions, I believed the role offered me the most flexibility in casting, but I also knew I needed someone who could balance humor with grace. I called back two fourth-year BFA actresses and a second year MFA actress.

Finding a definitive Lenora proved to be tricky in the first set of auditions, but I anticipated that from the outset. Two standouts were Julia Atkin, a third-year BFA, and a second-year MFA. Both brought impressive humor and timing to their initial reads, and I thought Julia in particular was smart to pick up on how the text picked up in tempo; out of all the reads, she had the clearest understanding of the whirlwind that Lenora could be. I also had a curious hunch about Margie, and wanted to see her read for a few roles, so I slotted her in for a Lenora callback as well.

There were a few clear contenders for the Flight Attendant. One particular fourth year BFA knocked his Flight Attendant audition out of the park. It was the one of the strongest reads all day, and I was impressed by his confidence in the role. The other actor, Jack Disselhorst, made some smart choices in his read. I knew Jack from his work in the fall quarter of Directing II; he was a wonderful collaborator, and he had a presence that fit the world of the play. The real test would be in callbacks, where I knew I would need to see how both of them handled the Flight Attendant's other role – G.I. Joe.

I didn't end up calling back anyone for Guy, but had a few strong options in mind. Two fourth year BFA actors, one of which was Brian Healy, gave confident voices to Guy; alternatively, a third year BFA had impeccable comic timing. Since I

needed to focus on casting the family first, I opted to give myself more time for those roles and trust that I could make a more definitive decision on Guy after callbacks.

Looking back, I recognize I never quite got the hang of callbacks at the Theatre School. I could have been more selective in my choices, and narrowed down roles to less actors. I wanted to give more actors an opportunity to be in the room and to fight for the roles.

While my intentions were good, I quickly learned that time was going to be my worst enemy. I couldn't give every pairing the time I wanted, and I realized midway through that I likely had called back more people than I should have. While I value giving actors the chance to audition, I was reminded after this that I need to be more thorough in narrowing down actors after generals.

The actor who did prove the most in callbacks was Sam Krey. I sensed passion in Sam's work, and his choices in every scene – across the board – were exciting. He also carried a certain guardedness as Ted, which made a lot of sense.

Meanwhile, Mélisa was by and far the most nimble with the needs of the text. In working with the Lanie scenes, she understood Mel's quickly shifting tactics to get her daughter to be quiet.

I didn't initially pair Sam and Mélisa together, but asked the two to come back and read together on a whim. I had a gut feeling – Sam was younger than Mélisa, but I felt that he could be perceived as an equal. This was important to understand Ted and Mel's relationship – Mel drives much of the first act, but Ted needs to balance the love for his wife with a clear, deliberate need to leave his home for long periods of time.

The two had stellar chemistry. After seeing them read together, I knew they could push each other as partners, and find an incredible capacity for love. I believed I could make a strong case to get both of them in casting.

Dyllan, meanwhile, stood out the most as Lanie. Compared to the other three actresses, Dyllan understood how intelligent Lanie was, and that she is not just a six-year-old – she can see the great strain that Sam's death has on her parents, and is actively working to understand this new world. Lanie needs to be a catalyst for change

in Ted and Mel's struggle. Dyllan was the person who I felt could fight for this change, and get her dad to come home.

Jack Disselhorst excelled as the G.I. Joe. He brought a clear distinction between how GI Joe and Flight Attendant function in the play. However, I was hesitant to give up on others. In a phone call after the callbacks, I asked Portes about the role, and she responded with an important question.

"Which role – G.I. Joe or Flight Attendant – is more important in the play?"

I knew the answer was G.I. Joe. And of the three options, Jack was the best choice to confidently portray both characters.

I was torn in my choice for Lenora. Some actors seemed to have a natural connection to the character – demanding Ted's attention, and playing well to the humor of the play. But what I felt was lacking was the sense that Lenora was a 'trainwreck'. Julia prepared extremely well for her callback side, and read with Sam. Knowing that Sam was my strong first choice for Ted, I was excited by the prospect of Julia as Lenora. This was a role that would be new to Julia, but based on her past work in Lab, I knew she'd be the right person to balance Lenora's eccentricities. Her choices in the callback also convinced me that she could handle the sensuality of the role while still creating a safe working environment with her partner. Margie was the biggest surprise, because of all of the options, she understood the power dynamic between Lenora and Ted. She also believably worked to keep Ted's attention, and proved herself to be adept at embodying a wide array of 'types'.

For Tooth Fairy, I was at a crossroads. I felt that all three actresses called back for the role did fine work in the callbacks, but I didn't feel a convincing pull in any direction. I also carried a hunch from my work with Connor on the songs – the Tooth Fairy would have to be an incredibly confident singer.

Then, I had a strange instinct. I had been excited by Margie Muller's versatility, and her ability to adapt as both Mel and Lenora. She carried a unique presence, and based on past work in Directing II, I knew she was a wonderful collaborator. Plus, she had a wonderfully hilarious take on Tooth Fairy's song during auditions. What if she was the person who could unlock the role?

I realized I had a fun, but untested pairing on my hands with Jack and Margie. Yet, knowing the two of them, I believed they had potential to be both funny and moving as the Tooth Fairy and G.I. Joe. As two actors who I connected with in Lab, I figured they would be assets in the creation process.

The final choice was Guy, but I believed Brian Healy would be a great option. I balanced that decision on a few factors. I had worked with Brian on my spring studio the previous year, and he proved to be one of the big surprises on that show. He is the sweetest, most down-to-earth person, but has a knack for understanding guys who – on the surface – are total jerks. Guy needed to be someone who could, at any given moment, bully Ted and then immediately befriend him. Brian could, on a whim, suddenly be loud and abrasive, yet still win an audience over. I knew he would be a great, unexpected choice and believed he would have a wonderful opportunity to shine in the role.

When I spoke to Kiely asking him for advice, he gave me a powerful, yet simple bit of wisdom:

“Get the best people for the job.”

I was excited to walk into the casting session with seven of the best, and I was even more thrilled when all seven of those choices were cemented in the casting session. I knew I had my ideal team. I was Nick Fury assembling the Avengers – a squad of superhero actors who were going to bring this beast of a play to life.

groundwork

*in which,
the team digs into the text
and builds a physical vocabulary*

How do you use a single week of rehearsal prior to an entire month of winter intercession?

That was the question I asked myself when I first looked over my rehearsal schedule for *God's Ear*. We were given one week of eight hour rehearsals at the top of December before leaving for the remainder of the month. When classes resumed in January, we would have an additional four weeks of rehearsal before going into a two-week long tech.

My experience the previous winter on *The Memo* prepared me for how the winter intercession would affect the process. With a long break, it would be up to the actors to remember anything we worked on in December. Plus, with only one week, I knew it would be pointless to try staging the show, as it might be difficult for any of us to remember the work we started.

I started to plan for the first week. My goal would be to focus on the text and ensemble and character building. With this particular text, tablework would be tricky. It does not provide the same sense of given circumstances or facts that you could determine from a play grounded in realism. The text is much more oblique – meaning the actors would probably have a harder time dissecting the text in one week. I knew that I'd want to take a more outside-in approach to working on the play, while learning about how the text and events accumulate over time (especially for the family at the center).

Thankfully, my experience in the Viewpoints lab was very positive, and this play adapted well to that ensemble training. I determined that I wanted to take certain pieces from that class and utilize the tool as best I could in the first week. Compositions were vital in our early rehearsals, as well as the character "hot seat" exercises.

I came up with two goals:

- (1) – Prepare and dissect the text for a “performed music stand reading” by the final day of intercession rehearsals
- (2) – Develop material and a sense of the physical world through Viewpoints exercises, culminating in a few actor-generated composition exercises built around relationships and the family’s journey.

The first goal was planned almost as if I were preparing for a staged reading of the play. In the minimal rehearsal time, we examined the structure of the language – how certain moments built, what key events we were building towards, and examining big questions in the text. By the end of the week, I wanted to get the actors on their feet, connected with the text, and allow us to hear the text more clearly.

The Viewpoints work was set for the afternoons – it would allow the actors to work physically during the latter portions of the day, and start building their sense of intuitive discovery. With the five days, I would use only a few tools from The Viewpoints Book while working on *God’s Ear*. In addition to exploring the world of the play via open viewpoints sessions, I wrote up a few compositions to keep for the later rehearsals, and bookmarked the character ‘Hot Seat’ exercise.

I get this palpable rush of excitement during the first rehearsal. I tend to get there pretty early in order to get my seat at the table in order, and so I can take in the energy of the room. Watching the stage managers, actors, and designers file in for that first time, I feel this palpable anticipation for the work we’re about to embark on. This process was no exception. As the team filed in, they all took in the big green Fullerton rehearsal room, some of them for their first time at DePaul. I asked the dramaturgs, Lauren Quinlan and Yasmin Mitchel, to supply us with some inspiration photos based on words we’ve used in the design process; these photos lined the wall at the back of the playing space. The actors absorbed these images for the first time, and once everyone had arrived, we kicked off the rehearsal process.

After a round of introductions, I spoke to why I chose the play. I crafted this talk very similarly to my pitch and my first design meeting presentation, but I was able to simplify and keep my statements briefer. I was finding comfort in my passion for the

play, and now that we had a clear vision guiding the design (the abstracted lake), I was able to freely think about the journey of the family through this lens. The metaphor of 'breaking surface' provided me with a clear frame to which I could sum up the oblique text we were about to read through.

This time around, I also did something I hadn't yet done in a process before. I took the time to speak to what I was working on with this production – specifically, bettering my communication in the room. I permitted myself the opportunity to unapologetically state that I wanted to grow through the work I'd do with the team, and permitted the actors the chance to help me achieve that goal. I immediately was received with support from the actors in the room – not only because this was my thesis, but because they knew that I wanted to speak more clearly in order to help their work as well.

I broke the traditional order I have for first rehearsals by moving right into designer presentations before the first read. As opposed to past productions, I wanted the actors to experience the visual and aural world of this play first before reading the text, so they could begin to imagine the space they would be in. This choice also empowered the designers a bit more, as many of them were used to sitting through the reading first before presenting their work. As a result, all four designers showed a lot of confidence and their lively personalities through their presentations. Jake's model wowed the room, and he piggybacked off of the words I had used in my opening remarks to help unpack the physical world of the play we would be exploring. Meg then described her costume concepts for each character, passing along the final renderings she had finished over the fall quarter finals week. Her concepts for the Tooth Fairy and G.I. Joe provided the room with excitement and a sense of how playful and strange the play gets. Both Margie and Jack expressed their immediate excitement about playing roles that have such an immediate visual presence.

Then, we took a mini-field trip, which took the actors by surprise. Many of them had not yet stepped into the light or sound labs before. Guiding them through their light and sound presentations, Anthony and Connor welcomed the team into their lab spaces, which bonded the designers with the actors in a way I hadn't seen before at DePaul.

Anthony presented his general sketches of various scenes, noting how we would use lights to guide focus in this expansive playing space. He then showed the mockup of the light-changing portal, which earned a very big “Ooooooooooh!” from the group. Connor, meanwhile, presented his drafts of the song underscorings and the main ‘theme’ he was going to thread through various moments of the show. The sound lab provided everyone the chance to hear the sounds much closer to how they would sound in the theater; the lab is designed to support a more encompassing surround-sound experience.

These design presentations ignited the cast as they read the play together for the first time. As I listened to the voices, I immediately knew I had gathered the right cast for this piece. Everyone enjoyed the language and playfulness, while looking out for the pain that Sam’s death caused Ted and Mel. Dyllan, as Lanie, initially leaned very heavily into six-year old goofiness; I gave her the room to explore this in the first read, knowing we’d likely scale back by the end of this week in order to hear the text.

After our read, the dramaturgs presented the actor packet to the team and explained the role of the back wall in the rehearsal room. This would be an open-source inspiration wall, allowing the entire team to add to the initial photos. It would be a great source of physical and emotional inspiration the entire time we rehearsed in that room. Meanwhile, the actor packet was a really expansive endeavor – pages on pages of various stories of parents dealing with grief, information on various roles and turns of phrases in the play, and information about the playwright and initial production process. Lauren presented the team with a Google document link, and allowed the actors the opportunity to email her to add to this document with any additional questions or information. She also made clear her plan for later in the process – she’d be returning in January to provide us with an activity based on actors creating soundtracks for their characters that investigated rhythm, mood, and journey.

Our tablework throughout the week was focused on investigating the patterns, rhythms, and accumulation of language, as well as highlighting the events and shifts of each scene. We only had a few very concrete givens, so I opted to spend most of my time pointing the team towards the clear moments where language seems to shift. What we found was a clear correlation to moments where a character makes a

comment referring to Sam or a child growing up. I also used the spine I was working with – ‘breaking the surface’ – to guide actors towards whether or not they were helping Ted and Mel move towards the surface (overcoming grief together), or if they were forcing them to sink deeper and deeper into the lake. If characters tended to make shifts from an unclear event, we would investigate the cause. We also used that time to figure out who was driving which scene, and when that driver might change. Finally, we started pinpointing moments of repetition and moments of suspect wordplay. Sometimes, these would require us to pinpoint the moment but keep it marked for a later time – certain ideas I wanted to keep tabled for when we examined the play on our feet.

The idea I kept at the foreground – from day one – was that both Mel and Ted were the protagonists of the play. In my initial analysis, I had put forth two versions of the dramatic structure, in which each respective parent drove the action. The text fights this analysis however. While Mel seems to be driving much of the action in the first half, Ted drives the later half. I would refine this until I realized that the couple – as a unit – needed to function as a protagonist, and the play would only work if we examined the ways they splintered off into their separate spaces – Mel at home, Ted away – until the two make the decision to reunite and accept their new family of three.

Before coming into that first week, I determined that the status quo starts not from the first scene, but from the prologue. From the first line - “He’s in a coma.” – we establish a family of four still intact, though facing immediate danger. After Lanie’s song and as Scene 1 begins (10-11), there is a radical shift, and suddenly the rules and world of the play are established. To me, that first song needed to contain the shift in the world (Sam’s death), even though death isn’t actually mentioned until a few pages into Scene 1. That was the inciting incident as I initially read it. From there, I read both Mel and Ted having specific turning points. Mel’s was somewhere at the end of Scene 5; I initially believed it was Mel changing the end of the story she tells Lanie (53). Ted’s was in his scene with Lenora (55-67), which aligned closer with what where Portes would typically teach us to search for the turning point (the exact middle of the play based on page numbers). While it wasn’t quite the middle, I believed Ted’s choice to not run off with Lenora was pivotal, and it had something to do with either his

line “But now I can see it’s just... / Sex.” (67) or his response Flight Attendant’s following song - “I’m uncomfortable sitting in an exit row” (68). The ‘Oh Shit/Yay’ moment, as Portes calls it, was a bit tougher to pinpoint, because it typically applies to an action the protagonist does, and is the point of no return leading to the climax (also usually driven by the protagonist). I decided that Ted crying in front of Lanie was my ‘Oh Yay’ moment, because after that moment, Ted returns home to confront Mel directly (86). Meanwhile, the climax was incredibly clear – Mel’s large wail, described in a single stage direction as “Mel wails again, longer and louder” (92). I viewed it as the big release that Mel needs to let out – a wail of grief and rage, attempting to communicate everything that Mel has tried to convey throughout the entire play. Ted also needs to receive it – I believed his choice to receive it face-to-face was equally important for his journey, and cements his decision to stay at home.

Our tablework was used to test this structure, and I was blessed to have a smart ensemble of actors who had strong intuitive judgment. The best discovery in this work was the key moments where Sam felt present in the text. Every time a dead child is mentioned, we could feel the deliberate shift in tension that followed. Every person Ted interacts with – from the Tooth Fairy to Guy to Lenora – mentions having lost a child, which was an important pattern to establish. We parsed the text for these moments, and marked how they would change the text that followed. In most cases, they would lead to an escalation in argument or stakes. For example, when Ted mentions the woman on the flight in Scene 1 and Mel responds with the mention of ‘everyone having a dead son’, she loses her focus on Ted (15-16).

We also used the tablework to break the text into chunks of action based on the shifts in language, or based on the entrance of a new character. I found this was much easier to accomplish than in past projects I worked on, partly because I cobbled together various text analysis techniques from my TTS courses. I could investigate Schwartz’s language using a couple of different tools – from moment-to-moment beat work I gleaned from *Directing 1* to the pinpointing of events that shifted the entire ‘room’ that I learned in Kiely’s Chekhov class. I even found moments where I could employ tools from Kiely’s Greek class. I found the back-and-forth wordplay

reminiscent of Greek stichomythia, where characters would quickly listen and twist each other's words or logic in quick, rapid fashion.

Our time at the table was incredibly fruitful, and I felt – at the time – that I had finally found a productive way to use the time. Having a clear goal – to lead to a refined read of the play on our final December rehearsal – helped me organize my time more efficiently. I did preface the work, however, by stating an important belief I had about this particular play. I knew that we wouldn't be able to answer every question by that Friday, and some scenes would require us to test the text on our feet. Because of this, I made sure to hold onto the important questions we posed in the room, while tactfully tabling questions or thoughts that might lead us down unhelpful paths.

The text did present an obstacle for some of the actors in our ensemble, especially those who had previously dealt with plays that gave them clearer given circumstances or stakes. Early on, Margie brought a list of questions about who this Tooth Fairy was. I also carried an important piece of information from Portes, who advised me that Margie had already played a number of mother figures and should not do so again. I took this info and Margie's initial questions about Tooth Fairy and gave her the freedom to explore who her particular Tooth Fairy was. In this text, I could only point her to a few givens from both the text and from our dramaturg's findings – the Tooth Fairy mythos had existed for at least three thousand years, and the Tooth Fairy was always imaginary. Instead of focusing right away on givens, I asked her to use the initial tablework to discover what roles she might play in each scene. This was a tool I discovered during my work on *The Memo*; with playful text, I could allow the actor to determine a role he or she may have with his/her scene partner(s). In this instance, I saw a multitude of roles Tooth Fairy could have – she might be a referee to Mel in Scene 5, or a confidant in the second half of the play.

Similarly, other actors in the ensemble - especially Sam Krey - liked to use the time to talk out their givens or relationship. Others sat back a bit, wanting to examine the play from a more outside-in approach. In order to balance this, I was receptive to any questions the actors had, but I would usually tell them to hold onto their

discoveries for later in the process, as well as the Viewpoints work we would be digging into on the afternoons.

Due to the work I did in Directing II, I felt incredibly confident in structuring five days worth of Viewpoints work with the ensemble. My goal was to work in specific phases: building the ensemble's physical awareness; dropping in the Viewpoint tools; generating physical responses to the prevalent themes of the play; investigating character through the 'hot seat' exercise; and developing compositions in small groups of actors to unlock further thematic patterns.

First, we focused on group listening and response by having the group walk around the movement room and drop into soft focus. Soft focus is defined in The Viewpoints Book as "the physical state in which we allow the eyes to soften and relax... to listen and gather information in new and more sensitized ways" (31). The ensemble's first task was to simply listen to the other bodies in the space, keeping their awareness on every other person.

From there, we would review and explore the Viewpoint terms and create our physical vocabulary. We explored the time and space viewpoints – tempo, duration, kinesthetic response, spatial relationship, gesture and architecture (The Viewpoints Book, Chapter 5)– and established the importance of extremes. For instance, after introducing the different levels of tempo, I tasked the group to only shift between extreme tempos, with 1 being 'extremely slow' and 10 being 'extremely rapid' (The Viewpoints Book, 36-39).

This phase would build towards Lane Work and Open Viewpoints (The Viewpoints Book, 68-70, 71-73), giving the group the freedom to explore movement in relationship to each other without concern about character or text. I started this work in groups of three and four utilizing one directional lanes (along long depth of our movement room), and eventually introduced the room to the full square grid.

The next phase would build upon the Viewpoints by establishing a theme for the actors to respond to. In the interest of time, I compiled a list of a few words based on words I had heard in our initial feedback to the play. This allowed them to physically

investigate their intellectual and emotional responses; of note, I was interested in words like ‘family’, ‘grief’, ‘drowning’, and ‘childhood.’

I would then give them a character ‘Hot Seat’ exercise (The Viewpoints Book, 128-130). This was a departure from the purely physical work; in this, they would first write answers to a prompt in twenty minutes. This was structured in a first-person perspective, answering “I’m (name), I’m ____ years old, I’m from ____ ...” and eventually leading to responses on their fears, likes and dislikes, and their most revealing actions and lines of dialogue in the play. During the second half of the exercise, they developed a physical score for their character, charting a number of specific gestures and movement patterns in relationship to the Viewpoints we reviewed. They’d then sit one by one in the center of the room, presenting the entire exercise to the rest of the team, who would listen and feedback to each other with their observations. Anne Bogart describes the necessity of both the writing and the physical generation of ideas – she mentions the need to “stress to the company...to approach the work from two very different angles: (1) from the head by doing text work, discussion... and (2) from their intuition, dreams, and impressions” (128). By mixing written words with physical action, I believed the actors would find some truth to the characters that I wouldn’t have discovered in my analysis.

Finally, I developed a number of compositions (The Viewpoints Book, Chapter 11) that I assigned to small groups in the final sessions. I drafted a handout that described a specific thematic focus for each group (Ted’s journey, Mel’s journey, the ‘family of four’, and the afterlife), and a specific list of tasks they had to achieve. These lists contained a number of random creative tasks (like “a moment of flight” or “a sound from an unexpected source”) and tasks forcing them to quickly pick specific pieces from the text (like “three to six pieces of text from the play” that could be repeated or broken up as needed). They were given a finite amount of time to prepare this, and we would present these to each other and discuss our findings as a whole.

I was struck by how imaginative this particular ensemble was, and how invested they were in these afternoon sessions. The Viewpoints work was, in ways, more helpful to this play than the tablework; it empowered the actors to test the intuitive

sides of their brains without a fear of perfecting the text. Also, it was the perfect way to utilize our initial December rehearsals. The previous years, in both my assistant role on Phyllis Griffin's *Free Man of Color* and my own 'elevated' studio production of Havel's *The Memo*, I witnessed how the winter took a toll on the actors. Spending many eight hour December days in rehearsal, I observed how energy and interest could diminish as actors got closer to the Christmas/New Years break. However, with only one week, and the opportunity to blend time at the table with physical activities, I felt that the actors were energized whenever we moved into the movement room for Viewpoints work. This kept the morale up when we had to take those discoveries back to the table the next day.

It helped having two actors who I had worked with in exploring Viewpoints in Directing II - Dyllan and Margie. Thanks to their past work in class, they fearlessly explored the improvisations while not overpowering the less-physically-inclined actors. The others adapted well though, and I was constantly impressed with the ensemble's growth as a unit. They quickly developed moments of group decision, and Assistant Directors Allegra Larson and Abbie O'Donnell fervently jotted down the most striking visual moments that we witnessed.

A few moments in those open sessions stuck out to me. During an open Viewpoint improvisation where we began blending some of our character work, we discovered an intriguing relationship between the female characters. Dyllan, as Lanie, began interacting with both the Margie and Lenora in times of 'need' – usually moments where moments where Mélisa would keep distance. Suddenly, Lenora and Tooth Fairy both took on motherly roles – which unlocked both Tooth Fairy's role as Lanie's confidant, and Lenora's obsession with the baby she didn't end up having. The three men then explored a primal improvisation where both Jack and Brian discovered the ways to influence Sam. This informed me of Ted's need to find his response to Sam's death as a father – either mask his grief or let it release in a rage.

I held onto one moment from our Lane Work ([The Viewpoints Book](#), 68-70) that I really wanted to integrate into our staging somehow. During one session, I had four actors spread out in four distinct vertical lanes. They were given five options – they could either run, jump, lay down, stop, or walk along their lane, responding to the

actions of the other three. During this sequence, two of the actors in the center lanes ended up laying down at the same time. They retained this in a moment of stillness. The actors on the outsides, both of them at the far end of the lane, began slowly walking downstage. As they maintained a slow, steady pace, the central actors quickly jumped to their feet. As the outside actors reached the front, the central actors – in a split second moment of agreement – began walking backwards. This entire sequence is hard for me to articulate on paper, but the effect of it was breathtaking, and somehow felt absolutely within the world of the play to me. I sketched out the movement pattern and put it in my notebook to refer to at a later time.

The character work was vital in helping the actors start to think about the creative life of these eight characters. Of note:

- Mélisa found a tense relationship with sleep – she found that Mel rarely slept, but would occasionally sleep in Sam’s bed. She also believed Mel increasingly disliked any mention of God. For her gesture, she began folding laundry and changed tempo and duration – finding a moment where the folding held for a few seconds, then rapidly sped up. Finally, she found many swirling floor patterns where she circled herself, and investigated a tension in the vertical space (the floor and the sky/heaven).
- Jack found how much the Flight Attendant (which he named Valerie Valentine!) truly loved her job, and how dedicated she was in trying to save every single passenger. Jack used the oxygen mask as his gesture to both demonstrate a procedure as well as regain his own mental composure. Finally, he took pleasure in dressing up for the job – putting on her eyelashes, buttoning up her jacket, and pushing up her pads.
- Julia uncovered Lenora’s high functioning, addictive personality – stemming from her intense need to be noticed and loved. She played with duration and tempo in bar related actions – a slow drag of a cigarette, quick-then-slow scans and winks to men at the bar, a series of rapid liquor shots. Her inner life gesture was the most telling – despite her outward appearance, she believed Lenora was slowly drowning and grasping for air.

- Margie determined the Tooth Fairy was from the “Left Part of the Ether” and lost track of her age some time a thousand or three years prior. While she commits to her job of taking children’s teeth, she did not know the purpose for the teeth – but the job allows her opportunities to watch and study human beings. This would lead to her biggest dream – the desire to have actual human contact. Her physical life was extremely expressive and fun, but underneath, she found the Tooth Fairy’s patient and focused observation skills.
- Brian – in complete contrast to his own sweet personality – found a crude, boastful Guy. His gestures varied from taking an extremely long piss outside a bar to the repetition of grabbing and adjusting his crotch. He tied his outward show of indulgence to his inner need to be loved; his biggest fear was that he just wanted to be someone to be proud of.
- Sam thought Ted carried one of his son’s action figures with him at all times after his death. His Ted valued safety above all else, and was addicted to having no addictions; he thought his job was likely incredibly mundane. His physical pattern was attempting to forge a straight path, but faltering and falling, before pulling himself back up and trying again. He also felt like his suit was choking him, which he represented by slow, intense pulls at his neck and tie.
- Dyllan presented entirely in character as a six-year-old, which amused the entire group. She loved being weird and different from her other friends, but enjoyed observing the world around her and drawing every strange fact she came across. She also uncovered her admiration of her brother, and mimicked him in some of her actions.

The composition work was spread out over two days. On the Thursday, I split the cast into two groups – one with Jack, Margie, and Mélisa; the other with Brian, Dyllan, Julia, and Sam. I gave them one prompt, containing the same tasks and entitled “The Story of Sam.” The former group created a piece that put Sam at the forefront of an epic tall-tale. He hopped out of his mother’s womb, was immediately showered with love, and then – in a tragic moment, the world stopped. He drifted away from his mother, descending into the ether. Meanwhile, the latter group created a

vastly different piece – one that painted Sam in a much more negative light. In their vision, Sam was a trickster, leading his sister on devious adventures and getting himself into trouble. This fascinated the group – hardly any of us had considered the possibility of Sam being a trouble child (or even an adventurous one).

On the second day, I dropped my plan to create two sets of compositions (due to time), and just split the groups up once. For Brian, Jack, Julia, and Margie, I asked them to create a composition entitled “The Afterlife” – I wanted them to investigate both the “underworld” and “heaven.” Giving them access to the ‘perfect’ architecture in the building, the group created an incredibly immersive piece. Jack was our guide, answering our questions about the afterlife as they brought us down the Theatre School’s yellow stairwell. He also gave us all a penny as our admission to the underworld. When we reached the bottom, we waited for a long period of time amongst Julia and Jack, who aimlessly looked up the entire time and repeated the same phrase. Finally, Margie appeared at the top of the stairs, singing down to us, “The clouds have silver linings!” Jack appeared, opening the lobby doors and bringing us to the Fullerton’s backstage elevator. As we got on the elevator, we paid our pennies, and the minute the elevator doors closed, Jack, Julia, and Brian immediately cowered to the ground in intense prayer. We reached the top, where Margie awaited us with a smile, and the whole cycle repeated again. Their whole presentation was incredibly inventive, and a perfect realization of *God’s Ear’s* playful text.

Mélisa, Sam, and Dyllan created a composition called “Family of Four” – broken into three chapters – Morning, Playtime, and Bedtime. In their room, they placed four beds, and began and ended the piece sleeping on the beds. They woke at different tempos, with Lanie rising quickly and excitedly, and Mel rising extremely slow. From there, they attempted to go about their business, and Ted attempted to play a game with Lanie that was immediately broken once Mel stopped it. As they went to bed, Mel and Ted split paths, with Ted leaving the room and Mel curling in a fetal position in the fourth unused bed. As opposed to the playfulness of the previous composition, the family’s story left an emotional mark on the group.

The composition work proved how creative the group was, and all seven of the actors brought smart ideas to their work. Getting to observe the groups occasionally, I

noticed two separate styles of working. Sam, Dyllan, Brian and Julia were prone to spending a lot of time talking out ideas, while Margie, Jack, and Mélisa jumped to their feet early. Despite my worry about those actors who planned out everything ahead of time, they managed to work more effectively on their feet in the second round of compositions. Eventually, the actors got better at agreeing to each other's ideas readily.

Past tablework and Viewpoints, I scheduled two additional blocks of time around vocal work. On day two, Mark Elliott – TTS's Musical Theatre teacher and the Musical Director on the show – dropped in during our first two hours in order to work with the actors on their songs. Five of the seven actors had songs in the show, and Elliott's goal was to get them acquainted with the song's structure and notes. Thankfully, the actors I cast in those roles (Dyllan, Jack, Margie, Brian, and Julia) were all relatively quick learners.

Connor attended this music rehearsal, and it was during a talk between the three of us where Elliott explained his belief of the songs – that they needed to derive from the actors first and foremost. Connor and I agreed that this would be vital as Connor moved forward designing the songs, so he listened intently to the work Elliott did with the actors. Yet, I noticed a bit of an initial concern Elliott had – he seemed to believe the songs could function on their own, not needing any backing music. I wouldn't act on this concern yet, but I noted it for later once Connor would actually have the backing tracks to play for the actors.

On our fourth day of December rehearsals, Phil Timberlake – Voice and Speech faculty member and the show's Vocal Coach – took the cast down to the Fullerton space. He used this time to get the cast acquainted with the theater itself, and had them bring chunks of text they could readily speak. This was useful for the actors – many of which had not yet performed on that stage – as they quickly discovered how tricky the space was. Due to the Fullerton's balcony, and the vast upstage playing area, the actors needed to expend much more energy projecting their lines than they would in a classroom setting. A trick he used was teaching actors to “point and shoot” their text. This was a simple physical technique where the actors would deliver their

dialogue to specific points, and physically turn at specific moments rather than moving their head and speaking all at once. They would demonstrate this and take turns sitting in different areas of the theater, which allowed them to hear the way sound worked both on stage and out in the audience. It was highly revelatory for all of them, and Timberlake encouraged them to practice this work throughout the time we were in the Fullerton rehearsal room.

I was thankful to have Timberlake on our team; I had assisted him in the 2014-2015 season when he was the Theatre School's Chair of Performance. Seeing him at work, I learned a few valuable lessons on how sound can communicate story. Additionally, he helped us understand how to use the intense emotional content of the play as a tool for performance. He told the actors point blank that crying was absolutely okay in this play, but that working through the weeping could lead to powerful discoveries. He related a story about a famous actress who was effective at this, explaining how she would actively fight through the tears to deliver engaging performances. I hadn't heard this myself, so I was excited to keep this story in mind as we learned how the text accumulated towards Mel's climactic wail.

Additionally, Timberlake's work allowed me to test a few staging ideas out in the Fullerton. During his work with Jack and Margie, I asked him if we could place the two actors out in the two corner aisles. He obliged, and we placed Jack at the bottom of one aisle, and Margie at the other. We placed Mel at the center of the stage, and Jack and Margie delivered some text from Act 2 (during a moment where Tooth Fairy and G.I. Joe recall Sam and Lanie's relationship to their parents). Timberlake demonstrated the ways Jack and Margie could face Mel, but pivot and change their facing in order to be seen by both the center and side audience seats. This experimentation was striking and I held onto that bit of staging for later – it gave me a clear first idea for how to compose that moment.

Timberlake met with me briefly after his work with the actors, and we conferred on our notes. He let me know that for the most part, the actors were adapting well to the space. He did point out the few people who had certain vocal habits to watch out for. In particular, Julia tended to struggle with projecting in a larger space. Meanwhile, Sam sometimes kept his voice stuck in a particular range and pitch, which cut off his

vocal expressivity. He had worked with both actors in classes, so he knew of these challenges from the outset. He mentioned that he would offer advice for them to aid in their vocal work throughout the process, as well as giving me a few tips on how to address any concerns with those actors.

As a treat to the cast on the last day of our intercession rehearsals, I offered up the option for the group to have lunch together prior to our final readthrough. I felt a strong connection to this cast that I hadn't experienced with my past productions here, so I felt very comfortable getting to spend time with them outside of the context of rehearsals. It was also a great way for us to bond after a week of rehearsals, and before we were to head into the larger block of rehearsal time.

Our readthrough that afternoon was a powerful experience. Having explored the accumulation of the text, and having found revelatory character work through the Viewpoints work, I could hear and sense the actors' connection to the play. By the time we got to the second act, many of the actors were in tears, and in particular, I sensed that Mélisa already had a sense of where her journey may take her. Her connection to her deceased son was already tangible.

Dyllan also found a powerful personal connection to Lanie by the end of the week. During the read, I could sense her beginning to find emotional layers in Lanie's journey. She had a very tearful response to the second half – which I didn't expect at the time. In retrospect, I appreciated having such an emotionally available actress in the role (who could also find authentic joy and maturity in a six-year-old), though in my head, I never quite saw Lanie as someone who cried in the play. I let a little bit of Timberlake's advice sink in from my meeting with him – “Encourage actors to work through the crying.” I thought this could be useful, though I didn't know if it was the right choice for the whole play. In order to highlight Mel's wail at the end of the piece, I had a hunch I would need to pull back Dyllan from that choice if she stuck to it.

I knew Sam's emotional journey with Ted was challenging. This didn't surprise me – he was much younger than Ted. In particular, I noted that the Ted/Lenora scene was tricky. It was a very long scene, and both actors were in their early twenties, farther from the age and experience of that relationship.

Admittedly, I had never structured a first week of rehearsal like this before. Upon hearing the text this final time, I could tangibly feel the ensemble's connection to the play. This was rewarding, and I was excited about where January would lead us once we put the play on its feet. I would have gladly put that reading up on stage and presented it, but I knew the more difficult journey would be connecting the words to a fuller theatrical realization.

In a month, we'd explore why *God's Ear* needed to be a play and not just poetic text.

building the play

*in which,
the actors rehearse
refine
and get the play into their bodies*

January 3, 2016

We returned to rehearsals on a Sunday, and dove right into staging the Prologue and Scene 1 with Mélisa and Sam. From the beginning of the process, I knew staging *God's Ear* would be more challenging than most plays I had encountered. There are very few indicators of location due to the play's form; certain scenes in Act One are labeled "in the airport" or "at home," but even within that frame, rules are broken. We are told from the beginning, "Ted comes and goes" (11). There's no indication of what that means in production, but the play requires an established rules about the space – otherwise, the audience will not pick up on where Mel and Ted are in the first half. In this early work, we needed to determine what was 'home' and what it meant to 'come and go' from home.

Jake's design was intended to give us flexibility in the staging process, since I was not entirely sure how every scene would look in the space. He provided us with six cubes to be used however we saw fit, as well as the traps that could open up and give us additional opportunities for entrances, storage, and location placement. I asked Assistant Directors Abbie and Allegra to help me keep track of these tools – they would become integral in helping us shape the space from scene to scene.

Working on the prologue was fairly simple; Mel started on stage, and Ted would eventually join her. There were a few clear givens in this moment – the two of them were at a hospital, and their son was currently in a coma after his near-drowning accident. Mel speaks short, sporadic sentences here -

He's in a coma.

He's hooked up to a respirator.

He has a pulse.

He has brain damage.

Due to lack of...

Extensive brain damage.

Due to lack of... (7)

She goes on for a page until Ted finally interjects with a quick, “Oxygen?” (8). On the page, it feels like a very intimate moment between two parents grasping at one another for support after a tragic event. Mel is adamant that she be the one to save her child; as she details everything the doctors said to her, she stands firm as she tells Ted, “I told them, / Take my reflexes, / I told them, “Give him my reflexes” (9). Ted offers his support, but holds out his belief that their son is special enough to survive this. His final statement in the moment, “I’m here,” is met with an unintended dismissal from Mel (10).

After reading through the prologue again, I reiterated the story of the moment to them. Since this is the audience’s first experience with the words and relationship, I knew we would need to keep the moment incredibly simple. I wanted the stage to start as a blank slate – just two people in space, speaking the text. However, we needed to establish the way the language works in this play – people speaking at, not to, one another.

In day-to-day life, we speak with each other by making eye contact and focusing in on the other person. This is reiterated regularly in the acting training at DePaul, which excels at Meisner and Stanislavski-centric training that develops actors’ listening skills. But Jenny’s play defies this. Characters speak words that don’t always land with their partners, and often phrases are misheard or misinterpreted. In a world where a family is striving to connect after a tragic loss, I knew we would need to create a few rules that helped reinforce this.

During our prologue work, we agreed upon our first rule - for most of the play, Ted and Mel would not face each other as they spoke. The actors knew this would be a challenge, but enthusiastically explored this. In order to help them develop their relationships early in the process, we read scenes a few times where Sam and Mélisa could face each other.

This was one of the first of many major intuitive decisions in this process, but it was based on me knowing the text well. Mel speaks early in the play about not seeing Ted clearly,

Are you my husband?
I can't tell.
It's dark in here.
And I'm floating around.
And my mind is empty.
And my body is empty.
And my soul...
Do I *have* a soul? (11)

By the end of the play, when Ted finally 'comes home' and confronts Mel, I believed this moment would have to be the moment where we broke this rule and the two of them would face each other for the longest period of time we'd see in the play. So, I knew we were going to have to build the anticipation for their eventual faceoff. How could two actors keep focus on one another throughout the entire journey while not being able to actually take one another in as a scene partner?

In the prologue, we established this by having both actors face out to the audience. Mélisa began the play on stage, while Sam would appear at some point prior to his first line. This wasn't necessarily in the text either, but I believed it was important that we started the play just taking in Mel, not knowing who she was speaking to until Ted reveals himself. To explain this, I extracted a piece of Sam and Mélisa's agreed backstory – that Ted was not present for the actual accident, and that he had arrived at the hospital later to find Mel. During the initial weeks of rehearsal, Sam entered from offstage before he spoke, but this would be simplified over time and he would simply stand facing upstage and turn before delivering his first line.

This first bit of exploration was fruitful. Mélisa and Sam carried their chemistry from auditions and tablework into the staging, and managed to listen to each other despite our theatrical rule. Another surprise was their work ethic. Both actors came to

the first day of staging completely off-book for the prologue. I had not encountered this during my time at the Theatre School, but having four weeks of intercession made this possible. I knew Mélisa was excited by the role, and her experience as an equity actress likely informed her choice to come prepared. I learned that Sam was equally driven to work, though he didn't have as much of the play under his belt at this point in the process. I wasn't necessarily asking them to be off-book for the first pass on each scene, but they went above the usual work I see from the students, which informed me that the play motivated and excited them. I made it clear that they could keep their book close by, but inside, I was ecstatic.

Compared to the prologue, Scene 1 proved to be a much larger challenge for us to stage.

Of the first act scenes, it's the longest at 20 pages, and it establishes the new 'life' that this family has been leading. In between the Prologue and Scene 1, Sam has passed away. No one directly says this until much later in the play, but both Mel and Ted make it very clear from the clues they drop. Early on and unprovoked, Mel randomly says to Ted, "Why does everyone you meet have a dead son?" (15). The moment completely shifts the moment, and suddenly, the two speak more distantly to one other, and Ted is no longer at home – he's in "baggage claim" (16).

As we began working on this scene, we went through the sections we had established in tablework, noting the biggest changes in the language. This process allowed us to investigate a big mystery of the scene – where was Ted at any given moment? The stage directions give that 'Ted comes and goes' rule, and we knew Mel was always at home. We didn't know, however, where the two were at any given moment. Were these big shifts in time? The shifts, on the page, seemed as though they are intended to disorient the audience, which makes sense – Mel seems constantly disoriented throughout the entire scene.

We established ideas that helped give the actors a sense of location and time. Since Mel was at home, we set two cubes downstage that would be her home 'base.' We agreed that the downstage third of the playing space would be considered Mel and Ted's home, and that Ted had more freedom to leave and return to the space than Mel. For most of this first scene, the two cubes acted as a bench or couch. In

order to give Mélisa activities to do that rooted her to the house, we brainstormed various chores that she would be doing while she spoke to Ted. She improvised various activities, and one of the clearest ideas she came up with was folding laundry. Since it was an action that could transform in tempo and duration over a long length of time, we kept it as one of our base activities.

A few pages in, there is a clear indicator for where Ted is located. In one moment, Mel asks where Ted is, and Ted responds, “Baggage claim” (16). As the scene progresses, he seems to be getting closer and closer to boarding a plane. In our tablework, we deduced that most of his flights are business trips, though this becomes less and less clear after Scene 1 when he first ‘sees’ Lenora. So, we determined Ted’s pattern around the perimeter of the stage, creating a rule that he had the freedom to enter Mel’s home space and leave at will. When he left, he would journey upstage. This began our next rule – the two of them speaking as if they are on the phone with one another. This was a simple shift in facing – they would face out to the corners of the space, away from one another.

While Scene 1 took a long time to stage, it allowed us time to explore the exact moments when Ted leaves ‘home’ and what he is responding to. Usually, it would be based on Mel’s refusal to console him; her refusal was then tied to something he said that might either remind her he isn’t home, or an ill attempt at a joke or consolation.

We also used that time to determine Mel’s actions at home. Since she was rooted in one place for the entire scene, Mélisa experimented with simple tasks she could do to represent her time at home. We took a few of the actions she explored in her character composition, including folding and sorting laundry and drinking water. We added vitamins as well for a moment where Ted was home – she sorted vitamins and passed them along to Ted. Since we had the traps taped out, we determined moments where Mélisa could step into the trap and utilize the deck floor as a kitchen counter.

When we added Margie to scene one, we were faced with a conundrum. The Tooth Fairy enters, summoned by Mel (18). She then appears – breaking the rules of the world by injecting an imaginary character. Tooth Fairy stays on stage for a long period of time before her first song after Mel’s list of phrases. We decided Tooth Fairy

would appear in the far upstage, running onstage at the mention of her name. From there, she stood on stage, observing the conversation between Ted and Mel until she was forced to sing by Mel, “And the fat lady will sing / with bells on” (24).

The songs in Scene 1 were our first opportunities to see how the songs would help break the tensions of the moments before. Lanie’s first song was a song of discovery – Lanie seeing the outside world and noticing how empty it was, but still attempting to make a game out of it (10). Margie used Tooth Fairy’s song as a fun song-and-dance number, and I encouraged her initial impulse to make it a flashy performance. It changed the mood of the scene, and introduced an element of surprise that felt intuitively right.

Lanie’s introduction at the end of Scene 1 (31) also marks a major event. It kick starts one of the biggest pieces of repeated text in the play – the “Sit down / Tell me” exchange that will eventually lead to the revelation, “He’s gone” (88). In our tablework, we found these brief exchanges to feel like flashbacks to the moment Ted told Mel of Sam’s death. So, when Lanie appears on stage, we initially decided she is a sudden, shocking reminder of that memory to Mel. It breaks the last opportunity Mel has in Scene 1 to remind herself (and Ted) of the love in their marriage, which in turn sends Ted into his following scenes on the plane, in the bar, and in the lounge.

Lenora’s song – following that exchange – kickstarted Ted’s journey away from home (31). The first day we staged that song, we discovered that she was not directly singing it to the family, but to the audience. This would be a pattern we would repeat with other songs in the play, and Julia discovered a powerful button to the end of the scene. On her last word, she quickly turned her head to spot Ted, immediately drawing his focus away from Mel. As she exited the stage after her song, Sam decided he’d head upstage to try to follow her, which allowed him to land far upstage by the end of the scene so that he’d be able to stay on stage but not be part of the Mel and Lanie scene that proceeded.

As I worked on Ted and Mel’s Act 1 scenes independently, I found myself experimenting with staging and relationship work depending on the characters in the scenes. For Ted’s scenes with Guy and Lenora, I utilized improv to help Sam gain a sense of perspective on the two more ‘realistic’ supporting characters. Brian and Sam

worked a series of improvs that let them explore how they might have met at the bar and what conversations they might've had that led up into that first line. For Lenora and Ted, we actually put them on an imaginary dinner date that might've led to them going to the lounge for more late night drinks. Both of these improv-driven processes informed the journey of the scenes. I began to see how the two men – who didn't know each other at all – alternated in confiding in one another and getting into childish arguments. These improvs proved useful to Sam, allowing him to test theories or ideas he had about Ted without getting him too in his head. Scene 6 (with Lenora) became a much more challenging scene due to its length. While we initially found the risk and danger of Ted being on a date with a woman other than his wife, it was trickier for the team to figure out the reasoning behind every shift in the scene. Was it just playful banter? What were Lenora's needs? We found ourselves asking a lot of questions. Eventually, the scene became a game for Lenora, focusing Ted's attention towards her alone and extinguishing all thoughts about his family.

I gave a bit more structure to the Mel and Lanie scenes, after attempting to return to some of the work I employed in *Directing II*. In a first pass at Scene 2, I asked the actors to try composing a scenic composition – a series of ten tableaux that represented the pivotal moments of the scene. Dyllan and Mélisa gave this a shot, but it proved to be less helpful for this particular duo. When checking in with them after our rehearsal that day, Mélisa mentioned that she wasn't particularly motivated by the tableau work. While I had hoped to continue the Viewpoints thread with staging, I also didn't want to push that exercise on the actors knowing that it might not be useful to either of them. I dropped that particular tool for the purposes of finding a more organic way of staging the Mel/Lanie sequences.

Scene 5 was more successful because of a special set of 'guests' that joined the world. During our design process, I remarked about wanting one of our stage traps to contain an endless pit of action figures. This was tied to Scene 3, where Mel steps on an action figure and says, "They're everywhere. / Underfoot" (37). I always envisioned an endless supply of action figures all around her home – stuck in every single nook and cranny. But with this design, I wanted her discovery to land at a single point, where she'd open up a trap to reveal that the action figures were literally under

her feet the entire time, pressing up from the imaginary floorboards. For this to work, I made a personal donation to TTS's props department to assist with the moment. I actually owned about a hundred-some action figures – a mix of assorted superhero action figures that I regularly played with as a child. At 29, I had no use for these anymore, but my mother had kept them all boxed up in her attic. Amy Peter, the head of props at TTS, helped set up the shipping for this, which saved her and Jake a ton of time and money in the process. I also felt these would be the perfect toys that a young ten-year-old boy might own.

Oh, how I felt like a complete nerd once they arrived at The Theatre School!

The toys arrived on that day of staging Scene 5, and when Assistant Stage Manager Danny Fender opened the box of toys, the actors all flocked to check them out. It was both heartening to me as well as terrifying; I allowed them to peer into my childhood. They all readily connected in my contribution, and they could clearly see my personal investment to the piece (without me needing to express it in words). We came up with a fun cast ritual that day. Each actor chose an action figure to keep in their cubby space, and those figures became personal mascots for the cast, representing their superheroic spirit.

The figures became a big part of that scene, where Mel and Lanie go outside to bury action figures. We determined that the two would sit at the downstage edge of the deck – which acted like a sort of front porch – and would toss the figures into the pit below. The action became a symbolic gesture of burying, without the need for any sort of shovel. We also discovered a pivotal moment that became Mel's turning point – the discovery of one particular toy, strongly connected to Sam, that Mel refused to bury. Mélisa made a brilliant choice early on to use the figure as a way to mend her relationship with Lanie after she yells at her daughter; she tells the story in the voice of the G.I. Joe, manipulating the figure like a puppet. We decided we wanted that toy to be the actual G.I. Joe that reappears later as an actual character. So, when Mel makes the choice to let go of that toy, Mélisa would drop it onto the trap we had designed for Jack located on the downstage floor. This was a completely ensemble constructed moment that helped add a clear event which we'd later pay off when Jack, as the G.I. Joe, would burst out from the ground.

We concluded that first week of staging by staging Scene 3, which was complicated thanks to two moments happening simultaneously on stage. At this point, Ted boards his plane, and interacts with the Flight Attendant. We also see more interwoven moments with Mel, Lanie, and Tooth Fairy, all on stage from the previous scene. In order to properly chart the action in this scene, I had to revisit where Mel and Lanie landed in the scene prior, and figure out where they would place themselves in relation to Ted. We experimented with ways we could introduce an airline chair (represented by a cube) into the world. Since I had wanted to keep Ted on stage at the end of Scene 1, the easiest solution was for him to move the cubes and transform them into the seats on the plane. Over the course of the scene, we then decided we wanted to create the sense that Ted was on numerous flights, being guided by the Flight Attendant. We played with the initial idea of Flight Attendant

We developed a simple way to do this, as Sam could slide the two up the deck in one quick motion, and Jack could push Sam around the deck by pushing the cube around. As they created the pattern of a flight on the central portion of the stage, Mel and Lanie would speak their lines from the outer perimeter of the playing space (seated at the stage right edge of the deck). However, a later discussion with Jake would cause us to revise the plan for Ted and Flight Attendant – the sliding would scratch up the paint on the deck. We would later simplify the idea, with Ted only moving one of the two on-stage cubes, and Flight Attendant lifting Ted onto his feet and hauling him downstage onto the other cube. We'd amend this action several times in our rehearsal process to find the best way to accommodate the idea of the flight pattern into their scene.

This would be a shining example of how we balanced our staging ideas with the needs of the text and designs. While we allowed ourselves the freedom to explore and use physical movement to playfully suggest the passing of time or a change of location, we had to adjust how much movement was needed before taking away from the fluidity of the text or the parameters of the design. Jack was especially great at offering various theatrical solutions to our problem

Scene 3 also contained a moment – a pistol whip - that we were able to safely create in the room, but would lead to a bigger problem later in our process. While I

initially put in a request for combat support in my pitch documents, I never followed up to determine if we were getting anyone in to help with the two moments of stage violence that were referred to in the script. On *Vigils*, I had a larger fight written into the play, so the school hired Chuck Coyl to come in as my combat coordinator and develop the all-out brawl between Widow and Soul. However, *God's Ear's* quick combat-specific moments didn't call for anything elaborate, and when I didn't receive word about any support, I figured that we'd be on our own with support.

This was a mistake I didn't know I was making.

Thankfully, I thought, I had someone on the cast who had been specializing in stage combat. Sam Krey had assisted on various studio productions as a fight coordinator, thanks to his mentorship under TTS combat teacher Nick Sandys. I assumed this could be an opportunity to let him come up with safe solutions for both the pistol whip (which he'd be the recipient of as Ted) and the slaps between Mel and Lanie. While Sam did a fine job in working on these moments in our early rehearsals, I'd find out much later that this was an error in our production protocol.

We were struck by a plague of strange injuries throughout the four weeks of rehearsal, which forced me to think on the fly a number of days. During our first week of staging in January, Sam fell victim to a stomach virus for a few days, so I kept him out of the room and focused my attention on Mel and Lanie's scenes during that time. Then, in week five, both Mélisa and Dyllan strained their backs outside of rehearsals. Neither of them were quite sure what caused the injuries, but they were enough of a concern to limit their actions for a few days at a time. Mélisa's injury may have been stress related, as it heightened one day as we were about to head into tech. They were able to work in the room, but had to avoid too many extraneous movements. This was a challenge given their transitions which required them to lift and move our cubes. Knowing that Mélisa and Sam would be on stage for the entire show, as well as Dyllan being on stage for a good deal after Scene 1, I was concerned about how their health would hold up over the tech process. Plus, I was advised that the raked stage would put physical strain on the actor's bodies over time. Thankfully, the stage

management team kept the room safe and helped me keep tabs on everybody as we worked, looking out for both morale and health.

Our work in these early rehearsals, while always incredibly productive, wasn't without its share of interpersonal obstacles. The accumulation of language and style of the play tested our actors constantly. While that was a challenge I prepared for from the outset, a new problem crept up on our process that I didn't quite envision happening. The actors playing the family developed tense relations with each other over the course of five rehearsal weeks.

In week one, I first noticed that Mélisa and Sam had vastly different processes. Mélisa desired to learn more through working the scene on its feet, not wanting to talk too much about this particular play. She believed that this play had to be approached more from an outside-in approach, since the language was so unlike most realistic plays. While I appreciated and even shared this view, I could see that some of the other actors needed a different amount of attention. Sam had many more questions and liked to talk out the scene prior to working on it. While we tried this early on, it would eventually create some tensions as rehearsals passed.

Their tensions (respectful as they were) came to a head one day in Week Four. As we worked to refine Act 1 Scene 1, Sam asked a few questions of Mélisa about their backstory. Sam is an actor who needs to talk out the scene before diving into the work; I could see this was challenging Mélisa, as she wanted to examine this text from a less analytical perspective. Mélisa is also incredibly direct and outspoken, and she was not hesitant to state her opinions. So, the moment Sam asked the question and the two of them negotiated, the rehearsal came to a crashing halt. We had to then sit as a trio and examine the style of the play and how we needed to work on the scenes. Compared to how we had been working leading up to this, I was thrust into a stressful position. I could sense that this talk could completely derail the work we had done, and affect their work in the rehearsal room. Furthermore, I was also worried this would be similar to other instances I had experienced in the past that had led me to shut down and lose my handle on the room. However, I managed to play a cool-headed mediator in the moment. I struck a deal with the two of them – I would answer any and all questions outside of our rehearsal time to please Sam, and we would use the

rehearsal time in the room to experiment with the scenes as needed. As we went on break and the actors left the room, I struggled to let go of tension, fearing the worst. However, I was assured from the Assistant Directors and Stage Managers that I managed to ease the tensions between Sam and Mélisa and focus them in on the work itself. I was pleased to hear that outside perspective.

Midway through our process, we were invited to come into the scenic shop to see the raked deck. The TD team had given us a mock 8' by 8' rake to test out in our rehearsal room, but stepping onto the actual stage was surreal. The actors were incredibly excited to experience the deck – many of them not having worked on a raked stage until now. We also realized how expansive the stage was, despite it being a much narrower stage than the usual stage on the Fullerton. Many of the actors immediately picked up on the number of ways they could create tension through spatial relationship on this structure. Additionally, we were able to test out the height of the traps, and determine how easy or difficult it would be to step in and out of each one. This saved us a lot of discovery time in tech, as the actors could start to plan how they'd interact with those entrances and exits. This was another successful way the design and tech team was able to collaborate with our actors, and bring the team closer together.

By the time we began running bigger chunks and sections of the show, I began to see some of the challenges of the minimalist approach. While we only dealt with a few cubes and props in the show, I found that we had to track where the cubes would end up from scene to scene. While we had access to six total, I had a hard time justifying getting all six on stage as we moved into Act 2, and not every cube had the same function. We only were able to outfit two cubes with lights, though all of them could have hinged lids and open up for storing any props. I knew that those two lit cubes would be pivotal later on – I believed that they could be another tool for us to distinguish location. For example, the scene with Lenora and Ted in the lounge was designed to use the cube lights in some fashion, based on my inspirations of neon 2 A.M. lounges. Only having access to two cubes that lit, it became a task to know

where those two cubes would move around the space, and I tasked Assistant Directors, Abbie and Allegra, to help me keep track of them throughout the process. The goal would be to see if we could, in fact, get all six organically introduced on stage to create the final image of a 'bed' on stage.

As we began putting together Act 2, I realized quickly how different that act was from Act 1. From my analysis, I knew that Act 2 was less concrete in location; the characters began to orbit one another and the supporting characters seem to pop in and out sporadically, without any sort of indication of Ted or Mel being in a specific location. The family seemed to orbit this space, and the other characters joined and left as needed to help drive them to their eventual confrontation.

This guided certain decisions I made early on regarding entrances, exits, and general placement of actors on stage, but I found many opportunities to allow the actors to help set their own pathways. Everyone chipped in to solve certain problems that came up. When Mel and Ted stayed on stage during the scenes that they weren't part of, they helped establish a rule where they would station themselves upstage center, facing upstage away from the action. This allowed them to listen, but appear distant from the action.

Act 2 eventually introduces a moment where the family faces a barrage of jokes from the supporting characters (77-78). In this moment, I could clearly see the two parents in the center of the playing space, being bombarded from all sides. We negotiated the best positions for each character, and determined that Tooth Fairy and Flight Attendant should somehow appear from the audience aisles while Guy and Lenora should reappear from their individual traps. Upstage of all of this would be Lanie, attempting to call out and grab the attention of her parents. By this point, we had established the various entrances, but this was the first time that all of the actors appeared on stage together. It took us a few drafts of this scene to nail down the timing of the scene on its feet; the goal, I determined, was to understand how the scene pushed Mel's repetition of "I give up" into her saying, "I quit." It also had to launch Lanie's monologue, which Dyllan and I began to interpret as a message to her family to stay strong and remind them not to quit. This would eventually drive her into

action towards the back portion of the play, where she'd become a major catalyst to their reunion.

Ted and Mel's final confrontation was very clear to me. After the chaos of the 'jokes' section, the later scenes - marked in the script as "slower, full of air" (91-93) - felt much more still, with pointed intent behind each sentence they spoke. That final confrontation needed to be a clear moment of Ted coming home and facing his wife. In our spatial vocabulary, this meant this would be the moment where they finally stood face to face and took each other in. As the scene progressed, we found a few specific moments where Ted would move closer to her. We vocally eased our way into the wails that Mel delivers, and Mélisa challenged herself to keep the scene active the entire way through. Having to finally see her primary scene partner was helpful, as she felt a load of emotional release when she could actually confront him at the end.

The scene between Ted and Lanie that preceded that moment became much tougher for us. It took us a few drafts of the scene to determine where Lanie reappeared and how she could possibly catch Ted by surprise. From there, the two share a very intimate scene, but as opposed to the scenes between Mel and Ted, we hadn't set any sort of rules with the way Ted and Lanie interacted. As a result, Sam would typically move toward Lanie right from the top of the scene. With minimal objects on stage, we were somehow challenged with our staging of the scene. We all knew what worked best at the end of the scene – an image of Ted hunched over, crying, and Lanie holding him in her arms, thus justifying "You did shrink" (86).

In rehearsing this, I also hit a bit of a snag with Dyllan – who, I didn't realize – was more sensitive to touch than her castmates. During one rehearsal, Sam grabbed her arms in a way that shook her, and she was emotionally detached the rest of the rehearsal. She shot Alexa an email requesting to meet with her and I, and we met prior to the next rehearsal in order to hear her out. We didn't realize that we neglected to talk out the boundaries of that scene / improvisation, and Dyllan needed to have that conversation. This was a new issue to come across. At The Theatre School, we had begun a new set of 'Intimate Touch' guidelines for rehearsing scenes where contact needed to be negotiated between performers. Through our prior understanding, this was to be used in situations where the contact was more romantic

or sexual; I had never considered a familial relationship to be something that needed to be negotiated. But – in as much explanation as was needed – she had specific personal history that I was unaware of, and that she was learning to properly communicate to those she worked with. After listening to her, I apologized for not attending to her specific needs, and we agreed to check in in future moments of staging.

The ideal ending I envisioned, with the six cubes, ended up changing drastically after that first day we staged it. Rather than just seeing Mel and Ted together in bed for that final moment, we believed it was important to see Lanie in bed with them, and envision it as a full family's reunion. During the course of the final Tooth Fairy/G.I. Joe song, we negotiated how the two of them could bring a few items of bedding on stage – a comforter and two pillows – and how the family could help set the cubes up to create the bed structure. After an initial attempt at this, the idea was way too busy. I made a choice in order to simplify our ending – we would simply use the floor of the stage and not worry about the cubes. It was a simpler gesture to have the

When I went back through and tracked the movement of the cubes, I came to a revelatory thought that gave a symbolic meaning to the cubes. During week four of rehearsals, I decided that we would only need four cubes – not the original six. The four cubes would represent the idea of a family of four that always needed to be present, even when there were only three bodies representing the family on stage. We didn't make this idea obvious, but we crafted a moment towards the end of the play (during Lanie's Act 2 song, prior to Ted/Mel's final confrontation) where the G.I. Joe and Tooth Fairy would ceremoniously 'bury' one of the cubes in the downstage traps. This became a respectful funeral for Sam, and when it was refined, it carried a powerful image in combination with Dyllan's soulful rendition of that song.

More and more specific moments became refined during our second and third passes of each scene. Finding these moments as an ensemble was incredibly freeing – they were not ideas I would have thought of without having the actors, and they were clearly driven from the creative work that we did in that first week of ensemble

building. I wondered if these moments would help clarify the story, but kept a reminder in the back of my head that I might have to cut them if they were too much.

Once we had run longer chunks of the play, I also got to see which scenes needed more time in the second half of our rehearsal process. We'd work on Scenes 1 and 3 several times in order to simplify our staging ideas, but the scene that proved most challenging from the acting perspective was the Lenora/Ted scene (Scene 6). As opposed to Scene 1, this is a long two-person scene that doesn't make any major location shifts, requiring the two actors to stay in the relatively same positions for a long period of time. Julia and Sam also needed a lot of time to figure out how to properly drive the scene, since they start the scene in a drunk stupor, and have to navigate a lot of tricky banter that is not always responded to in the moment. My big fear was that the scene would drag on, since it was difficult to find organic ways to change up the staging in the initial passes. Julia and Sam understood this concern as well, and they came in to every rehearsal finding ways to shift the focus. Their physical life (Lenora leaning towards and away from Ted as they sat, who initiated each kiss, etc.) became just as intricate as the verbal shifts they were learning to navigate.

Simplifying became a big trend in our later rehearsals. After running Act 1, I was able to see that the simpler movements carried more weight and allowed us to hear the text more clearly. I had learned from my past work that too much movement muddied up the storytelling, and could risk the danger of feeling too 'staged'. In the world of this play, I wasn't looking for realistic, everyday movement, but I did need every physical change to carry some sort of meaning. Any extraneous shift needed to be tied to an event in the story.

I was glad I had worked Viewpoints into our early rehearsals, as the actors were readily able to adapt to the spatial vocabulary and apply their training to the text. It was a more explorative staging process than many of them had experienced in their work at DePaul thus far, but they were imaginative and willing to bring ideas at every point. It also helped us problem solve, as much of my approach to staging this play was more intuitive than other plays where I could vaguely see how each scene would look from the outset.

Our final week was spent refining out the rough spots prior to tech. During one rehearsal, we spent the first hour and a half in the Sound Lab with Connor, reviewing his updates to the songs he worked on. Elliott attended this meeting, hoping to listen to the music Connor created and giving the actors advice on how to incorporate this new music into their work. However, Connor and Elliott had a clear difference in opinion on the music. I listened to Elliott's reasoning; too much complexity in the music would over-encumber the language, which I completely understood. Yet, I didn't want to cut off all of the work Connor had been doing without hearing the work in tech. I listened out for Elliott's concerns and met with Connor the next morning, where I checked in with him. He addressed that he was thrown that night because of Elliott's point of view, especially given that Elliott was faculty. I reiterated that I wanted him to continue the work on the music. While I did take Elliott's advice seriously, the two of us agreed that we would go into our technical rehearsals with a plan. Connor would strip down some of the more elaborate songs to a simpler underscoring (that let the actors dictate more of the tempo), and he would come into tech with a Plan A (music) and Plan B (no music). We'd try Plan A first, and if it didn't work out after attempting to land it in the room, we'd cut the song and stick with Plan B. Connor sent me his new drafts of the songs, which we were able to integrate into a run during the end of that final rehearsal week.

The actors, meanwhile, were in various states of concern as we headed into tech. Spirits were mostly high, though I could see the stress levels rising for certain actors. Mélisa was increasingly on edge – her back was giving her lots of pain, so her responses in the room were a bit sharper. I didn't take this sharpness personally, and I was very sensitive to her injury. I continued to challenge myself to give her clearer notes as the process went on. Thankfully, since she was a fellow MFA, we had an unspoken understanding that our collaboration was helping us both – her with my articulation of thought, and me with notes reminding her to keep moments active and not slip into a strictly emotional response in her work.

Margie asked to meet one day early that week, and she was in crisis mode. She had felt like she still wasn't quite sure who she was in the play, and how she was keeping active during moments where she stayed on stage to listen to Mel and Lanie. From my perspective, she wasn't in a place to worry about, but I knew I had to attend to her concern and ease her worries. The two of us went through her journey from top to bottom, clarifying scene by scene what Tooth Fairy was attempting to achieve. From there, we came up with a plan for this week. She wanted to try bringing an activity or two into some of the scenes, and I allowed her the chance to make a list of props she might use. Stage Management pulled the items, and in our runs that week, Margie explored various combinations of props. The one that stood out was a Kodak disposable camera. She injected a new life into her role during the run where she introduced the camera; during her first entrance, she slid on, saw Mel, and immediately snapped a fun photo of Mel. She continued to see where in the play she might snap photos, and I noticed three moments in particular where the action stood out – her entrance (18), the barrage of jokes after the group exclaims, "Smile! You're on Candid Camera!" (78), and the final moment prior to Tooth Fairy's exit (94). Both Margie and I were proud of this discovery – it unlocked something that was incredibly poetic about Tooth Fairy's role in the world. It was also an idea that excited the designers in our designer run – I realized the flash from the camera could be an incredibly theatrical moment, and Connor and Anthony both wanted to brainstorm how to support that moment in the following weeks.

I received a troubling email a few days prior to tech. Patrice Egleston, the head of Movement and the Movement Director on the show, noticed a note in a rehearsal report about our Act Two slap. I promptly realized our mistake of not having a fight choreographer.

I was promptly chewed out via email, which – while absolutely frustrating – was somewhat deserved. I looked back at my original pitch documents and noticed that I did, in fact, ask for a fight choreographer, but that was never decided upon. I would later discover this was due to factors I was unaware of (Egleston either didn't receive the request, or missed the specifics). Because I never followed up, the issue was

forgotten. But I should have followed up and secured someone outside of the production to come in and assist. While Sam was training under Nick Sandys, Egleston did not believe he was at the level of properly assisting on a mainstage. Despite my views on the matter (Sam was incredibly thorough and safe in his dealings with his castmates), I drafted an apology email, which Portes commended me for in a later reply. While I did explain my initial process of sending a request form in, I recognized my error and respectfully apologized. I also worked with Egleston to get her into rehearsal before we went into tech.

So, in addition to Egleston coming in the week prior to tech to help us work on the raked stage, she spent time looking at the pistol whip and slap to make sure they were being done in a safe manner. While the pistol whip was in good shape, the slap was a much different story. Mélisa and Dyllan began to struggle with the steps, and the stress of the moment was causing Dyllan to become extremely nervous and Mélisa to become increasingly frustrated. Egleston adjusted the slap to clarify what both actors needed to do, and while this gave Sam, Alexa, and I a clear set of guidelines to look out for in fight call, this wouldn't alleviate the anxiety both actors had about the moment.

Portes attended our final run prior to tech, which was a bit stressful for me. Based on previous productions, I knew that advisor notes might reveal a glaring error in the production, or point me towards a major flaw in our work. The thing I was able to pick up in that run was that the pacing dropped after Scene 1, and didn't correct find it's way until the end of the show. In order for the slower scenes to land at the end of the play, the actors would need to get more comfortable picking up cues. That meant I had to remind each actor to drive the language and carry the energy throughout the entire play.

Portes's notes left me a bit dismayed at my work, though they ended up being very simple, big notes that I could work on during my time in tech. Mainly, her big note was directed towards Mel's journey. She felt Mélisa was much too composed at this stage, and I would need to point her to the way Mel keeps unraveling through her speech. She gave me a few other notes about certain moments that either got lost or

were unclear, and I figured out how I could properly address those when the team got into the space.

Despite these notes, the actors were incredibly excited to get into the space. I was, too. I believed the space would be revelatory for the team, and would help us further refine the work we did in five weeks in our trusty green rehearsal room. As I stepped out of that room on that final Thursday evening, I knew I'd be in for a long, arduous technical process. But I held out faith. I believed in this entire team, and knew we'd work hard to make this play come to life.

into the space

*in which,
the team bring the work into the fullerton*

I can't describe the exhilaration the entire team felt on that first moment our team stepped into the fully-realized Fullerton space. Seeing Jake's design transform the Fullerton space, I was amazed at how different the space looked from previous designs. The scenic world left an immediate impression. Once Anthony began adding lights to it, I was absolutely breathless.

I didn't have much time to sit around and admire it. We had a lot to accomplish over the course of two weeks.

After a round of introductions for the entire team, I explained our plan for the weekend. We'd start with a few afternoon hours of spacing rehearsal, as well as Egleston working with the team on our rake, and then we'd begin our technical rehearsal in the evening. As Egleston gave them tools to handle sitting and standing on this structure, Anthony was able to prepare his initial cues, which saved us some time later in the night.

Egleston also took time to review the revised moments of stage combat. Now that we had the opportunity to review from multiple sides, Sam and I were able to check the sightlines to see how everything looked. While the actors expressed a need to get used to how the rake affected their timing, they seemed to get down the slaps well in rehearsal. We followed that work with a bit of spacing rehearsal, which gave the actors the opportunity to learn how the raked stage would affect their movement and determine their timing from their various entrances.

Once we started the cueing, I was a bit surprised to find that nearly every design advisor was present. From my memory of *Vigils*, I assumed that the advisors came later in the weekend. In this situation, Portes was also out of town and wasn't able to attend. However, she contacted Michael Osinski (MFA Directing, '14) to attend her in stead, acting as somewhat of a 'big brother' type advisor for me in the room. I was thankful to have him there. He was one of the two third-year directors in my first year,

and I admired his wisdom. He had a strong grasp on crafting striking worlds with designers, so he was a great eye for the work we were doing on *God's Ear*.

I was admittedly a bit thrown by the advisors all being there, as I knew I needed that first evening to establish my vocabulary with the design team. I was also attempting to be incredibly specific with the framing (beginning-to-end punctuations) from moment to moment), but my initial interactions erred on the side of vague notes. Michael dropped in a few key pieces advice – only speak when I absolutely needed to, and start immediately from the most specific note I could give. This reminder became helpful as I got more comfortable with the team, and keeping myself to task on specificity helped the designers trust me more.

At the Theatre School, the sound and lighting design students do the bulk of their work during tech. Writing cues takes time, and in my Healy project (*Vigils*), I began to learn how to use that time more effectively. I found ways I could give notes to the actors and utilize our repeated runs to rehearse various notes I had held onto from the past week. I could also utilize that time to adjust spacing, placement, and facing now that I could see the actors from every audience angle.

We spent a good chunk of time working on the initial cues, which seemed pretty normal on the first day. Connor's composed "theme" for the play worked really well to bring the audience into the world of the play. Anthony, listening intently to the music, asked to have some time to cue in an idea to support. He began crafting an elaborate first sequence, flashing the lights that lit the trap squares in time with the slow rhythm of the music. He took a while in trying to correctly time out the sequence, and Christine Binder, Head of Lighting Design, suggested I allow him the opportunity to work on it overnight and see the results tomorrow. I took the advice – I trusted that Anthony would be able to spend time in the morning refining the sequence.

Thankfully, this hunch was correct. When I came in the next day, Anthony's support of that first sequence was impressively detailed, and I was shocked by how polished the pre-show sequence was. Connor even came up with an idea later in the week to enhance it, recording Mélisa's wail and embedding it at the end of the sequence before Anthony's lights cut to black. Then, after a beat in the darkness, the lights popped up to reveal Mel, center, who immediately launched into the text. It was

nothing I ever imagined, but I realized how much fun Anthony and Connor were having as a team. I felt at ease for the rest of the day, knowing I was in good hands with the design team.

I started to get into a groove with the two of them, as well as occasionally checking in with Jake, who diligently stayed nearby in order to work out any scenic issues. He became a big help when we needed to retrieve the cubes for the first time, and he took thorough notes on ways he could assist the look and feel of the massive raked deck.

When we reached Scene 5, I was immediately forced to alter a major staging plan. While the idea of throwing the action figures off the edge of the deck was exciting, the figures created too much of a ‘thud’ on the lower stage floor. It became distracting when we ran the scene, so I held for a moment and checked with Jake to see what options we might have in order to retain the idea. Rather than throw them off the side, we agreed, we’d instead have Mel and Lanie sit in the two downstage traps and toss the figures into the traps, giving the feel of tossing them into an endless void. The TD team assisted this idea the next night, installing carpeting that could cushion the sound of the action figures hitting the floor.

During our first days of cueing, I had a few initial fears lingering about lights and sound. Not having been used to there being sound underneath the play, I was worried that many of Connor’s cues would be distracting as underscoring, or that we wouldn’t hear the text. While I held onto that fear and stayed patient to hear more, I did have to make notes with him when certain moments that sounded to my ear too ominous for the scene.

However, what I did respond well to without question was the music underneath the songs. We tried the first two songs – Lanie’s and Tooth Fairy’s – with the music. I was hesitant about the latter, but Connor snuck in the track before we ran the scene, and it activated Margie in the moment in an exciting way. Toy would later remark that it was a sneaky move of him, but I was actually okay with him doing that in the moment. When I saw how Margie adjusted to the moment, and how playful the song became, I realized that I wanted to go forward with the underscoring of the songs. We made sure to provide the tracks to the actors before we got to each one in tech, in

order to give them some preparation time backstage. While Connor and I had to adjust certain aspects of the music (levels and simplicity of sound), the music was needed to match the rest of the design world he was creating. As we moved towards the end of the play, Connor and I did agree that the final two songs – Lanie’s second song (91) and the Tooth Fairy/G.I. Joe lullaby (93-94) – were best served with no music underneath. This managed to support Connor’s revised concept – that the ‘lake’ represented resonant sound through most of the play, and we hear less and less of it as the family finds their way to the surface of their grief. Allowing the audience to just hear the actor’s voices for the final songs did feel like the right choice.

Musical Director Mark Elliott stopped by and spoke to me about his concerns with the music under the songs. This put me in an awkward position – do I trust a faculty advisor who has way more professional experience? Or do I move forward with Connor’s vision, even if it challenges the actors who have been working without it? While I respected Elliott and valued the work he did, I knew that I wanted to stick to Connor’s vision. After seeing the way the music enlivened Margie in that first song of hers, I knew that it felt right for the audible world we were creating. Without them, the songs feel too close to the scenes that are surrounding them, and we needed to establish each song as a particular respite from the world of the family.

It was tough for the cast to get used to the scenic cubes at first, partially because two of the actors that interacted with them the most (Mélisa and Dyllan) were still working through their injuries early in the week. We spent time working through the transitions along with Assistant Stage Manager, Danny Fender and the run crew, but we made sure to give both actors ample time to rest off stage during periods they weren’t needed. As we got closer to a full run of the show, we eased both of them into lifting so that they’d be prepared to integrate them back into their work.

The stress, meanwhile, continued to take a toll on Mélisa. She was quick to vocalize concerns she had throughout the tech process. I tried to balance giving her helpful responses with needing to mind the time of the designers, but at times it was incredibly frustrating. It didn’t necessarily sour my working relationship with her,

though; I chalked it up to the stress we both had about the show, and neither of us blew up during the course of the tech process.

Costumes were added by the end of that first weekend, and I was pleasantly impressed with Meg's vibrant choices. There were only two things I had concerns about. I wasn't completely sold on Lenora's first dress choice, as I don't think it matched the bold look of her sketches. Meg believed she could find a better choice, though needed some time to cycle through some options. I also had some reservations about the Tooth Fairy, though the adjustment ended up being simple adjustment in the amount of makeup she was given. Her initial makeup design made her look too alien; I yearned to see more of Margie's actual face. Jen Moore, the makeup consultant, found a healthy balance the next evening. Meg herself had a number of smaller items she brought to my attention. They weren't things that I personally caught, but nearly all of her notes I agreed with and gave her complete permission to swap.

The Saturday of our second weekend fast approached us, and we needed to present a full run to the design faculty in a run that TTS called "DTAD" (Design Tech Advisor Dress). Despite being a nearly 95 minute show, We had barely made it to the last three or four scenes by the time that DTAD run arrived. Thankfully, we were told we were in an okay place given the amount of cues we had worked in, and that we'd definitely be able to finish the show by that Sunday. We presented what we had, and I let the faculty and our guest audience know that they weren't seeing a totally complete product.

The attendance for this DTAD run was a little larger than usual, as we included the cast of *The Merchant of Venice*, second year MFA Director Erin Kraft's elevated studio production. This added some supportive audience members for what was our first audience run. Also in attendance were all of the design/tech faculty heads, Portes, Timberlake, the costume shop assistants, and Dean John Culbert.

Due to the amount of staff and crew that attend this run, DTAD is incredibly stressful, even knowing we still had a full day of tech and a final dress prior to our first

preview. The run was somewhat of a mess, though not completely a trainwreck. I could feel the tired energy of the cast waning after such a long process, as well. Thankfully, they got the first taste of an audience thanks to some of their peers being in attendance; this allowed them to get a first sense of how humor would help the work they were doing, though this lesson would be discovered a few runs later.

The post-DTAD production meeting was held out in the lobby after the design run. I had experience sitting in on this meeting during both assistant directing roles at TTS, but having to sit front and center for the meeting on my own thesis added a whole layer of pressure. Dean Culbert started with some compliments about the work the team put in, but gave his biggest note – that the play seemed to be functioning in the small individual sections, and not serving a larger connective arc. He encouraged us to use the remaining time to think about how we build the production to be the sum of its parts, rather than letting the parts derail the story.

I listened and responded to the other notes, though my head was wrapped in immediate fear. Had we overdesigned the show? Had I done too much analysis with the play and smothered it to the point of not letting the poetry breathe? I was awake all night, not satisfied with the work I had done. Typically, I'm hard on myself at this point in the process, but the added pressure of this being my thesis unknowingly set in. Thankfully, we at least had one final day to work out some kinks before returning on Tuesday for the last string of runs. We finished cueing through the show by the end of that Sunday, and we performed one final run before heading towards our second and last dark night.

Additionally, Portes emailed Sam, Mélisa, and me that Sunday evening. After our DTAD meeting, she wanted the three of us to use the dark night and subsequent runs to revisit Mel and Ted's needs and objectives, scene by scene. Moment to moment, both actors could determine whether or not they attain or miss that thing they desire, and drive the next choice until they eventually get what they want. She stressed their objectives needed to be "clear and simple" – very difficult to obtain in a play like this (personal correspondence, February 7, 2016). I would need to use the next few runs to test our work.

I attempted to trust in the work we had all done, but at this point, I felt too far in the process to see the work objectively. Fear was setting in, big time.

letting go

*in which,
the final product emerges
and andrew builds trust
despite immense fear*

February 9, 2016.

In one of my less-than-glamorous grad student moments, I spent an hour of a Tuesday afternoon sitting on my bathroom floor, paralyzed in fear.

The Monday prior was our second dark day, and with one more run prior to previews, I found myself extremely paranoid about how the play was progressing. Part of me was still being hard on myself after Saturday's DTAD run, while another part of me was battling the usual fear I have of my work.

Thankfully, I was able to speak to Portes that day.

The best way to describe this chat – which many previous MFA directors have had at this point in their thesis process, I've heard – is the “talking off the ledge” speech. When we're nearly ready to throw ourselves off a building rather than present our work to an audience, we have to be reminded of our commitment to leadership. It's terrifying, yet it's often the point when we need to be reminded that we've made it this far, and that hope isn't lost. In this instance, Portes heard me out, through tears and tense self-deprecation, and stated the very obvious thing I needed to do.

“Take your blame off of yourself, and put that focus on the play.”

I breathed. She was absolutely right, and I remembered to trust the work we've done so far, and trust the play.

So, what did the play need in the final push to opening?

One big fear coming out of Sunday was that Dyllan was going rogue. While she was finding a lovely emotional attachment to her big monologue, she restrained less and less coming out of that moment, and was nearly sobbing in the moment leading up to the slap. I had explained in the past that if she does that, Mel's slap moment feels too dangerously out of place. I tried to diagnose the problem by pointing Dyllan towards her final song and seeing if she would use the scenes prior to that to fight for

that result. But – for reasons I couldn't understand in the moment - this backfired. She leaned even further into her monologue emotionally, doubling my concerns about that slap moment as she now had lost control. I feared I couldn't reign her in, and this would negatively impact Mel and Ted's story. I wasn't sure she was paying mind to that story, and was too invested in her own journey. How could I attend to her work as Lanie while also reminding her of how her moments impact the journey Mel and Ted take?

Portes suggest that in this moment, I needed to give Dyllan one specific outlet for her emotions, but make sure it's clear why. Dyllan was correctly noting that Lanie says, prior to the big monologue, "I'm crying" (78). However, if she does that through the entire second act, she doesn't push Mel to give her a reason to slap her, which creates the problems I was noticing. Portes suggested that, in this context, her moment to cry needed to be restricted to the very top of her monologue. I felt like I was forced into negotiating, but it was the only option I had to get this actor back on my side. I brainstormed ways I could address this with her, and set up a meeting with Dyllan prior to our Tuesday run.

We spoke over at the nearby Starbucks, and it was a positive conversation (despite my fears of our working relationship going sour). Dyllan was happy that I was a gracious listener, and when the time came, I convinced her that we needed the emotion she was finding at the top of the monologue. But, if there was a shift – a clear moment where Lanie realizes she can make change to help save her family – then we could figure out the right way to approach the moments leading up to the slap. I pointed her to the text and posited a question – what if Lanie really stood her ground when she starts telling the Tooth Fairy the story of her birth? And what if she did it in order to keep Sam's memory in tact? When Mel replies that "Lake's don't boil," Lanie needed to demand her Mother listen to her, in whatever form comes from a child that talks back to a parent (83). From Mel's reaction onward, it would then become Lanie's prerogative to find Ted and have him come home.

While Dyllan still struggled with the slap moment (which I'd later learn was due to her anxieties of actually being hit in the moment – a fear which I couldn't do anything about without her trusting in the exact, safely rehearsed steps that Egleston

prescribed to her), she embraced the final moments and helped tell the story that we needed to tell. I couldn't do much at that point to heal the tensions that I could still visibly see between her and Mélisa, but they were at least both working towards a common goal.

Meanwhile, Portes, as the production advisor, had helped remind myself, Sam, and Mélisa to check back in with Mel and Ted's major objectives. For me specifically, she pointed me back towards an "EKG chart" of the play from both Ted and Mel's perspectives. This is a visual tool we receive way back in our first year, as a way to find the 'heartbeat' of the play. When do characters get closer or farther away from what they want? By looking at it more visually, I could see what major moments absolutely have to have the biggest impact on the characters. I had done this way far back in the process, but I had done it for the family as a whole. Examining the two parents individually, I was able to see how one moment that Ted causes might have a rippling effect on Mel. I paid mind to the events that pushed either of them farther away from confronting Sam's death, or pulled them closer together.

I walked into the Fullerton that Tuesday night with a gameplan. I would keep my eye out for the ways each scene built upon the previous scene – both from the acting and design perspectives. My goal was to see where the actors needed to drive the story or where the play needed to breathe, since we had spent so much of our tech time building the individual pieces. I was going to use Tuesday's run to listen more attentively to the story than I had in the past few design-oriented evenings.

Thankfully, both Sam and Mélisa had used that day off to reflect on their objectives as well, and the storytelling became much more cohesive, starting from their work in Act 1 Scene 1. Suddenly, these moments felt less individual, and part of a bigger flow. Once Scene 1 clicked, the rest of the play began clicking. I started to see the show breathing, and it really started from the trust in my cast.

Julia also made a pivotal discovery that Tuesday. She ignited the Ted/Lenora scene with a new fire, and rode a non-stop rollercoaster of emotions and playfulness. She was in her head much less – she noted this afterwards, but I could see it clearly

based on months of observation. This was exactly what her scene needed, and her driving that scene allowed me to see Ted's attempts to control the situation.

There was an excitement, but also a nervousness from the cast during our notes session. We were all excited about the way that Tuesday run went, but now we had to test our work with two preview audiences. I pointed to the specific adjustments that we made to get us to this point, and found a few places where each actor could continue to refine.

I sent Portes a text message after our run. I thanked her for her talk on the phone Tuesday morning and let her know I felt much more at ease than when we spoke that afternoon.

During that chat, I was also reminded that previews were where most directors really want to cower away from their work. Witnessing Wednesday's preview, a huge question arose that I hadn't considered during the two weeks of tech. Did I – unintentionally – direct the playfulness and humor out of the piece?

The first preview audience was tough to gauge. In fact, three older audience members walked out towards the tail end of Scene 1. In my last few years directing, I had rarely witnessed an audience member leave. This was completely new to me. Year One MFA Andrew would have frozen in horror. But Year 3 Andrew shrugged it off. In fact, I remember actually feeling my first sense of pride. I caused a reaction! Now, granted, I wanted to know why those people left, but I actually didn't take it as personally as I thought I would. I instead tried to diagnose what might've made that happen, especially in Scene 1.

My biggest note was Ted and Mel's relationship felt a little off in that run. The barbs and jabs they threw at each other felt crueler, more painful. Mélisa and Sam were absolutely listening and responding to one another, but their relationship took a darker turn. Was this why it was harder for this first audience to commit to them?

When I brought this up to the two of them, they both remarked that they could feel it, too. I asked them the most basic of questions – Where's the love? – and figured that was enough to help them remember that they need to fight to keep the other person's love, not shatter it.

In another general note, I attempted to point out the humor of the play by praising the moments where I heard the audience responding. I didn't want to express to the cast that they hadn't been finding humor – as many of them knew it was there. So, I expressed how the audience that evening reminded me how 'playful' the text was, and that I got to hear new moments again for the first time. I permitted the cast to attend to the text's playfulness even more, and to utilize the tools Phil had prescribed early in our process – banter, wordplay, etc.

I also nearly made a monumental mistake during previews. I had been concerned about Lanie's big speech, and where she was placed on stage. Visually, it was the best spot to let her pull everyone's focus. But I noticed two flaws. One, she was in a strange position thanks to our portal structure, so the lights felt darker on her than I believed they needed to be. Two, I lost her vocally, and I was horrified when I realized she was in the deadest spot in the space – the spot right where the proscenium ends. I was reminded of one of the productions I saw in the previous year, where the bulk of action on stage was placed in that very spot, and how – even sitting in a neutral center row spot – I lost so much of what was going on because of how the theater space swallowed the sound there. I became anxious and wanted to move Dyllan in that moment, and I spent some time after the preview discussing with her and Anthony about a possible change. But after making it and leaving the theater, I realized I would've made a huge gaff – it would've affected a major staging moment that happens after that, which is dependent on Lanie having her cube placed right where it needs to be. If she moved it upstage or downstage for her speech, we'd have to make another set of changes, which could quite possibly cause Anthony a whole load of problems.

I contacted both of them the next morning informing them that I had thought over the decision, and requested them not to make the change. I apologized for the time we spent the following evening, but I followed up with Anthony to see if there were any solutions that could help assist us in that moment. He mentioned to me that he would try something to help brighten up Lanie on that upstage position.

Thanks to the big note about embracing the playfulness of the play, I could sense more of an audience connection to the play during our second preview. The actors were discovering more moments of humor, and trusting the flow of the language more. What the team learned that preview was that the more trust the actors had in the ‘musicality’ of the piece, the more it just seemed to work as an experience. They were uncovering the same discovery I had about the play way back in my “trial read” the previous summer!

Anthony and Connor also made two small but pivotal changes that seemed to alleviate my concerns towards the end of the play. Anthony had gotten Lanie brighter for her big moment, and suddenly I could focus in on her again. Connor, meanwhile, had listened out for the audience response tonight and helped me key into one moment towards the end where the drone underneath the scene felt more ominous than hopeful. He made a simple adjustment, and the scene felt stronger in the whole. I was still unsure how sound on the whole was affecting our journey – I couldn’t hear or experience the play as a fresh experience at this point. So, I opted to throw my willpower into trust and patience. We needed to present what we had.

I will admit one major flaw I had prior to this process – one that concerned me all the way up to opening night.

I was not the most adept at that final ‘rally the troops’ note session.

I’ve learned over the course of my time at DePaul that I wear my anxieties on my sleeve. I’m always noticing the flaws in my work, and while I work until the very end to improve them, I have a tough time masking my fears. In the past, this clearly passed to the actors on opening night, and didn’t give them the confidence they needed to succeed.

I knew, no matter what, that this final note session was crucial. Despite all the stress I had put on myself, I needed to prepare myself. This was not about me anymore. This was about the play.

Say less, trust more.

Take the weight off of myself.

Breathe.

Smile.

Empower the team.

It was time.

I used the notes session to rally the team one more time before opening. I reminded them of the work we put in to embrace this play, and how it both challenged us and brought out our strongest work as an ensemble. I pointed out the lesson I learned about the musicality of the piece, specifically pointed to adjustments made that preview that felt the most clear they had ever been. But the most important note I had to give was really a reminder of ownership. They knew this play. They knew its beauty, its power, its playfulness. They were in charge of driving it for the next two weekends. I thanked them for all of their hard work and told them I knew, from day one, this group of people was the right group. This wasn't about being my thesis. It was about a family.

I brought back the statements of my first-day speech – the same words I had spent hours refining. I didn't belabor these words too much – I just dropped them in organically.

I felt a swell in the room. A connection. Despite the tensions that might have built between some of the actors, despite the challenges many of them faced in grappling with the text...

I felt their hearts. And I was legitimately proud to have them on this rollercoaster ride with me.

I sat in the balcony on opening night. I'll gladly admit this was out of reservations – I didn't want to see the audience for this performance, knowing many of my peers would be there. But I had also come to discover how much fun the show was to watch from the balcony. From day one at The Theatre School, I came to loathe that balcony! After first seeing *Our Town* that first year, I was appalled at how disconnected I felt from the action on stage. I felt cut off from the actors and from intimate moments, and as a result, I had a hard time accessing the beauty of Thornton Wilder's words. Remembering that experience, I – subconsciously? – must have set a mission for

myself. I yearned to direct a Showcase show that would be enhanced – not hindered – from the balcony seats.

It was a combination of factors: the actor's mindfulness of projection and language; the group's adherence to spacing that dated back to our Viewpoints work; and the designers' careful carving of the Fullerton space, from the composition of the stage to the carefully constructed focus of the costumes, lights and sounds.

Whatever the reasons, as I watched the show on opening night, something clicked. Having a supportive audience certainly helped the actors, but they also seemed to hit every note in the music of the language. The humor landed. The stakes rose. The story of the language was clear.

As the show ended, I swelled with pride. Not in my own work, but in that I experienced the play from a fresh perspective. I was proud of the actors, the designers, the students who put so much time into achieving this ambitious production. I was correct in what I said that previous night – this show was not mine, it was the entire team's. And it showed! I hadn't, up until that moment, been so confident about a play on opening night. But, from day one, it was a piece of theatre I believed in, and the team had finally demonstrated its beauty.

I walked out into the Fullerton lobby, reeling, not knowing what the response would be. Portes and Kiely immediately grabbed me, beaming with pride. The only word I could use to describe the feeling?

Catharsis.

I spent three years breaking down my own strengths and weaknesses, confronting my work from every angle. Through it all, I was pushed to be more specific, to speak more clearly, to make more definitive choices. I was constantly frustrated, ready to walk away many times, not sure why I had even been chosen for this spot on the MFA roster.

But like Mel and Ted, I had to stop blaming myself and confront the truths head on. And I had to really trust others outside of myself in order to effectively lead.

After years of thinking about *God's Ear*, wondering if I could tackle such a strange, beautiful play, I could let it go. It's a play that will stick with me for a very long

time – it's connected to the most important lessons I learned at my time at DePaul.
But, as with any play, there comes a time where you let it go.

And I allowed *God's Ear* to finally go to sleep.

Well, until I want to direct it again.

(We'll see about that).

so, what next

*in which,
andrew reflects
discovers goals for the future
and answers his big question*

Upon finishing my final studio (Denis O'Hare and Lisa Peterson's *An Iliad*), I had enough time away from *God's Ear* to gain valuable perspective on my time at DePaul. Both *Iliad* and *God's Ear* were huge successes for me, after a string of shows where I faced a lot of artistic and personal struggles. My entire reason for coming to graduate school was based on gaining confidence in myself as a director – a feeling I had lost during my time as a way-too-young artistic director in Baltimore. How would I look back at my journey through *God's Ear*, as well as the rest of my education?

I'm stealing this idea from Facebook in-jokes, as strange as it sounds. Let's break down my three year MFA journey using my prescribed directing tools (See Appendix A). Dramatic Structure powers – Activate!!

Status Quo: Andrew arrives to The Theatre School at DePaul at 26. He is relatively young as a director, having about five years of producing and directing under his belt, and a starting background as an actor. He is driven by spectacle and the 'event' of theatre, but lacks analytical tools or a sense of how to discuss relationship-driven work with actors. He's essentially a novice.

Dramatic Question: Will Andrew seize clarity in his directorial voice?

Inciting Incident A: Andrew fails to properly make the case for the plays he is most passionate about.

(I could make the case that my Inciting Incident happened a bit later, if we specifically hone in on my rehearsal and production history. Here is the alternate. I think it still works.)

Inciting Incident B: Andrew gets feedback on his first production, *Gruesome Playground Injuries*. Actors rail on him for his communication and articulation of thoughts.

Rising Action: Andrew focuses his work towards relationship and given circumstances. He practices his active language in rehearsal and analysis. He fails to find the right words to guide actors to stakes.

Turning Point A: Andrew happens upon an unintentional success – his work with two supporting characters in his second-year spring studio, *Undo*, which is attributed to a more hands-off approach. MFA Director Kelvin Wong gives him the best piece of advice he'll ever receive.

“Say less, trust more.”

(As I've discovered, this journey doesn't totally adhere to your structure, Lisa Portes! It requires a second turning point.)

Turning Point B: Andrew finds success in two second-year courses – Greeks and Directing II. He finds his strengths in guiding actors to more physically-active work, and also unearths tools to help him do this without micromanaging the actors' processes.

Falling Action: Andrew rigorously tests his intuitive eye and throws himself into the violence of specificity, decision-making, and trust. Thanks, Anne Bogart!

OH HELL YES: Andrew successfully leads the team through his thesis production!

(This is a shocker, I know! You would think my thesis show would be the climax of my journey at DePaul! However, this makes for a more compelling moment of recognition:)

Climax: Andrew synthesizes his grad school lessons on his final studio, *An Iliad*. He completely flips his process working on a one-actor play that

requires clear storytelling, a coach-like guidance through the process with a game MFA actor, and a less prominent approach to theatricality and design.

New Status Quo: Andrew leaves graduate school, a clearer mission in mind and successful lessons under his belt. He looks to a bit of an unknown future as a freelance director, but leaves confidently growing as an artist.

Oh, and he's aware of his habit of saying "kinda" and thinks he has cut it out from his vocabulary.

(Kind of.)

And now, the moment we've all been waiting for.

Andrew will...

FINALLY ANSWER HIS BURNING QUESTION!

Hey Andrew Peters!

How (and why) do you use theatricality to define meaning?

(Really, this is asking me what is my mission. Which I've struggled to do for years. So! Here goes.)

My theatre inspires wonder and connects our curiosity to our hearts. I champion heartfelt stories of human beings within strange, bizarre worlds – worlds with striking visual theatricality and heightened poetic language. These stories inspire wonder – not through ways we recognize, but through the discovery and transformation of a metaphor.

Through the audience's imagination, theatre transforms a story in front of our very eyes. We see the mundane, we hear the everyday, and suddenly – in one flash – the world shifts. We hear or see a world that creates wonder. The mundane becomes the mythical. The everyday becomes the imaginary. The real

becomes the unreal. After that shift, the audience is in charge of making the final, most important transformation – making the mythical/creative/imaginary world personal.

I believe in transformation, in the mind's ability to process meaning in the make-believe. We do it from birth via fairy tales, via illustrations, via myths. Only in theatre can we do it on a live canvas, and experience it in person with others around us.

I value the unknown. This all tracks back to my childhood, when I spent countless hours reading comic books or playing games that got me out of boring Salisbury, Maryland and thrust me into larger-than-life journeys. I learned that when I traveled, when I thrust myself into the unknowns, I gained new insights and perspectives. My journey is reflected in the journey I take with my imagination. So, I desire to thrust audiences into the unknown, into plays and worlds they may not recognize, to see how that journey collides with their own understanding of life.

Above all else, theatricality is my artistic language. It provides me a highly visual, metaphoric conversation with each play – whether it's a guiding force behind the play's characters, lessons, or story. Heightened theatricality is the power of transformation – of making magic out of the ordinary. My work caters to the mind's ability to process meaning in the make-believe. Only in theatre can we do it on a live canvas, and experience it in person with others around us.

The intuitions I had with *God's Ear* were leading me to these guiding principals. Unearthing success in my vision, I now head towards a career where I will test and evolve this hypothesis. It's not an easy path – intuitive decision making, I've learned, is frustrating, terrifying, and hard to articulate every step of the way. It may lead to messy processes, to countless restless nights, to a continual personal struggle with confidence.

But, I have found clarity.

It's time to put this theory to test.

It's time for me to let my artistic language emerge, loud and clear.

bibliography

*in which,
andrew properly lists his sources
for the greater academic good*

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appendix a

*a directing analysis
cheat sheet
as designed by Lisa Portes,
Head of MFA Directing at TTS*

DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

Status Quo

Inciting Incident

Rising Action

Turning Point

Falling Action

"Oh Shit!" / "Oh Yay!" Moment

Climax

New Status Quo

THE SIX QUESTIONS

1. What is the play about?
2. What kind of play is it?
3. What is the dramatic question of the play?

4. What is the spine of the play?

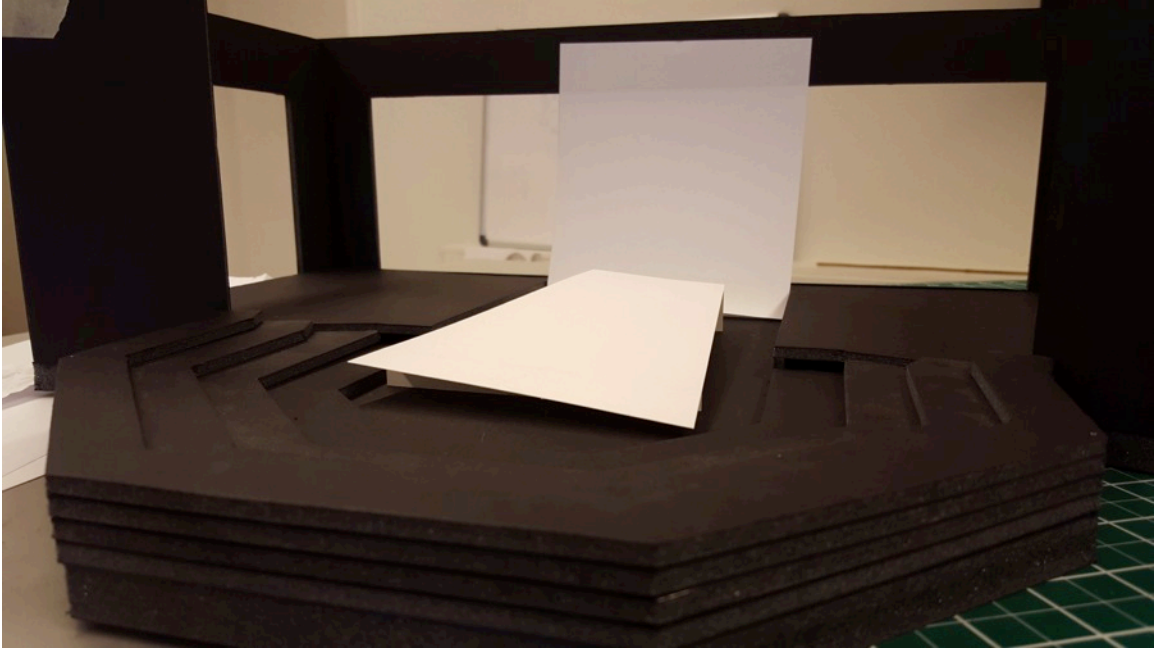
5. What do you want your production to do to the audience?

6. What is the cry of the play?

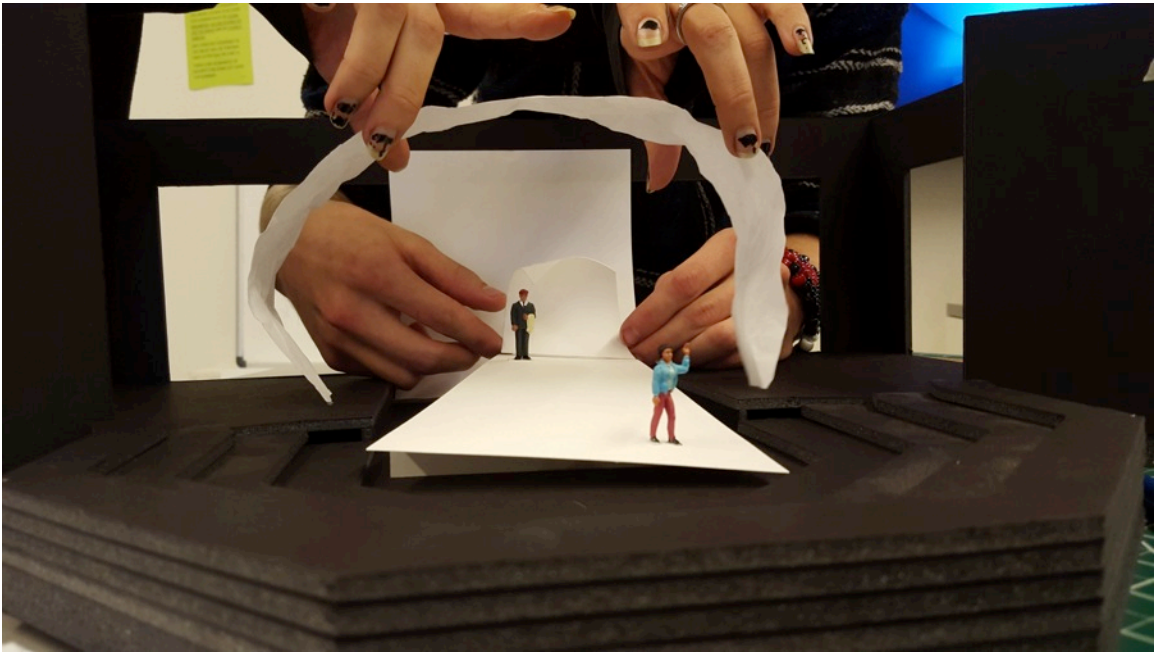
appendix b
photos of the scenic design process
via Jake Ives



Initial Scenic Sketch (Drawing by Jake Ives)



Initial "White Board" Model (Model by Jakes Ives, Photo by Andrew Peters)



Initial "White Board" Model (Model by Jakes Ives, Photo by Andrew Peters)



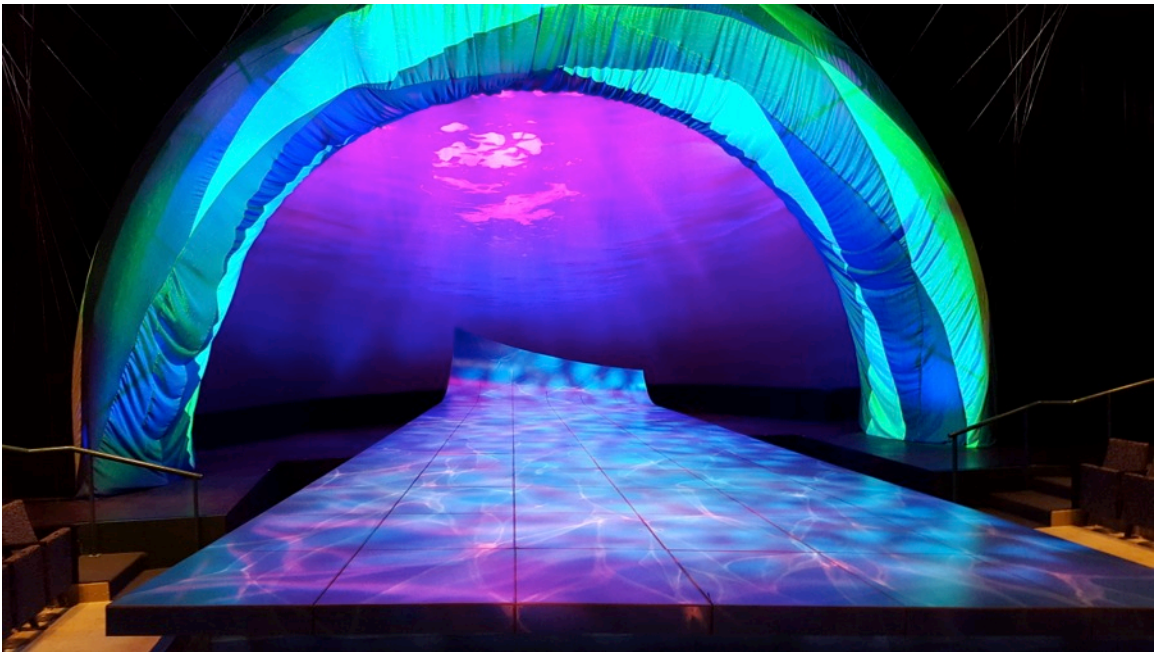
Rough Draft Model (Model by Jakes Ives, Photo by Andrew Peters)



Revised Model (Model by Jakes Ives, Photo by Andrew Peters)



Portal Mockup (Portal design by Jakes Ives, Lighting by Anthony Forchielli, Photo by Andrew Peters)



Final Scenic Design (Scenic design by Jakes Ives, Lighting by Anthony Forchielli, Photo by Andrew Peters)

appendix c

*photos of the costume design process
via Meg Burke*



Ted



Mel



Lanie



Flight Attendant



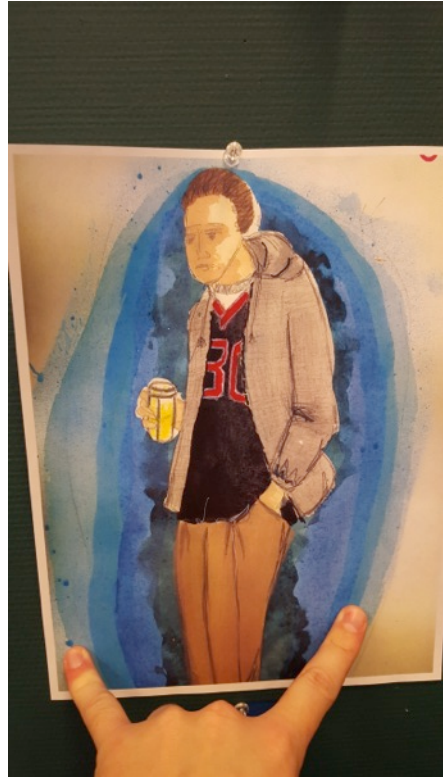
G.I. Joe



Tooth Fairy



Lenora



Guy

appendix d
production photos via Michael Brosilow



Lanie (Dyllan Miller)



Tooth Fairy (Marjorie Muller), Mel (Mélisa Breiner-Sanders), Ted (Sam Krey)



Ted (Sam Krey), Lenora (Julia Atkin)



Mel (Mélisa Breiner-Sanders), Lanie (Dyllan Miller)



Tooth Fairy (Marjorie Muller), Mel (Mélisa Breiner-Sanders), G.I. Joe (Jack Disselhorst)



Guy (Brian Healy), Ted (Sam Krey), Lanie (Dyllan Miller), Mel (Mélisa Breiner-Sanders), Lenora (Julia Atkin)



Mel (Mélisa Breiner Sanders), Ted (Sam Krey)