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Nearer Heart's Desire: Theatre, Directing and the Process of Cultural Deconstruction and Reconstruction

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Nearer Heart's Desire: Theatre, Directing and the Process of Cultural Deconstruction and Reconstruction

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Dedication

“Ah Love! could thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits -- and then
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire!”

—Omar Khayyam

To my family—biological and chosen—for the support, encouragement, and lessons.

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Abstract

Nearer Heart's Desire: Theatre, Directing and the Process of Cultural Deconstruction and Reconstruction

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There are two great passions that run through my life: making theatre and examining how our society's culture impacts our lives. This pursuit stems from a desire to identify and change the inequities embedded in our culture. As an artist and activist, I create theatrical experiences that redefine familiar narratives and their contexts, providing opportunities to re-examine our prejudices and cultural beliefs. In this thesis, I will analyze selected productions I've directed while attending the University of Texas at Austin in order to define my process for making work engaged in cultural deconstruction and reconstruction.

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Introduction: Outside In

I had to argue for my bar mitzvah. My mother was raised by strict Marxists, and my father by quasi-assimilationists. There was no tradition of worship in my Jewish household. Yet at age 12, I sat my parents down and told them I wanted a bar mitzvah. They were naturally skeptical. It was never said explicitly, but the unspoken assumption was that I was in it for the party and presents. Gifts and attention were definitely part of the appeal for undergoing this rite of passage, but more compelling to me was the chance to take part in a practice that belonged to a culture that I was both a part of and apart from. Also, I wanted to perform for a large audience: the cornerstone of the bar mitzvah is singing a portion of religious text, then providing a public discourse on its meaning. It turns out that through the process of becoming a man I found the two great passions that would shape my adulthood: an examination of culture and a performance of that inquiry.

Sadly, for most of my early adult life, these passions remained separate from one another. As an undergraduate, I studied theatre and anthropology as separate disciplines. I used cultural anthropology as a tool to examine pressing cultural issues like immigration and gay rights, not theatre. When I graduated, these passions combined briefly in a short stint directing activist street theatre. They separated again once I took a full-time job at a queer community health center running HIV-prevention programs and later, qualitative research studies. This led to a year working with the Boston Public Health Commission

running their needle exchange and opioid overdose-prevention programs. I poured all my energy into these positions, utilizing my background in anthropology to fulfill my passion for social justice. This work was satisfying, but I was ignoring my artistic passions; I longed to bring these two aspects of my life together again.

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It is helpful here to take a step back in order to discuss what I mean exactly when I talk about culture. Schools of anthropology define "culture" differently: one of the earliest definitions within the discipline of ethnography comes from Edward Tylor who believed that, "Culture… is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."[1] A more recent definition comes from anthropologist Clifford Geertz who believed culture is, "…an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life."[2] I define culture as a collection of stories we tell each other in order to make sense of the world. These narratives form a web of meanings that we overlay on our experience in order to orient ourselves to the world around us. Culture is dynamic, always developing and

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[1] Tylor, 1

[2] Geertz, 89

changing as our stories develop. Sometimes this comes in the form of progress: my father's generation grew up believing marriage was between a man and a woman, today our culture holds that marriage can be between two people of any gender. Culture is also largely invisible to us. We go about our lives mostly unaware of the force it exerts. Theatre's great gift is to render culture's power visible, to concretize it temporarily in metaphor.

Theatre also offers alternatives to our current culture. We frequently go to the theatre in order to have visions of what might be possible conjured before our eyes. Ibsen's *A Doll House* made visible to audiences the misogyny embedded in 19th century life, and dared to imagine a woman walking away from her domestic obligations. *Angels in America* made visible the suffering during the HIV/AIDS crisis and had the chutzpah to imagine a gay man with AIDS cursing out God to a bunch of sympathetic (though hapless) angels. Through presenting new possibilities, theatre has the potential to engender utopian experiences among audiences. In his influential essay, "Entertainment and Utopia" film theorist Richard Dyer argues that many forms of entertainment provide us glimpses of utopia. Dyer does not believe that entertainment lays out a clear vision of utopian societies; he believes entertainment "presents what utopia would feel like, rather than how it would be organized."[3] Dyer singles out musicals for their utopian qualities, but I know that even radically experimental work is capable of producing such responses.

[3] Dyer, 177

I experienced the power of experimental theatre to engender utopic feelings at the age of 14. My high school drama teacher decided to lead a field trip to see *Brides of the Moon*, a new show by the ensemble theatre group, The Five Lesbian Brothers. The Brothers developed their work at the WOW Cafe, a downtown New York theatre run by queer women that provided an artistic home to many influential queer and female artists. The Brothers made unapologetically lesbian work that was explicit in its sexuality and featured ample nudity. This is content not normally associated with field trips, yet this excursion proved one of the most formative experiences of my life. It was important for many reasons: It was the first piece of theatre I saw that featured queer characters, queer performers and a queer audience. Most important though was the humor of the show.

I cannot concisely summarize the plot of *Brides of the Moon.* The play is an intentionally ridiculous lesbian sci-fi romp featuring crisscrossing timelines. The basic premise concerns a group of astronauts (the titular brides) who are being sent to the moon to service the men working on the lunar surface. After their rocket becomes stranded in space, the brides discover their latent queer sexuality in ways that are both liberating and hilarious. Like so much queer theatre, *Brides* excels at satirically using (and abusing) familiar tropes to comedic effect. For instance, a bright-eyed elementary school teacher on the rocket finds herself the most uninhibited occupant on the ship by the play's end. While I was not yet queer-identified, I understood implicitly that I was not straight, and I found myself laughing at in-jokes about queer culture and the inanity of heteronormative

culture, along with the rest of the audience. This laughter was different than any laughter I had experienced before. It was not directed at characters and their actions. During *Brides of the Moon* I, and the rest of the audience, were laughing at everyone who was straight enough to miss the joke. In this way our laughter built community and diminished, briefly, the force of a dominant culture on our lives. This is what utopia can feel like.

As I grew up, queerness and Jewishness were just two of the ways that I found myself outside of the prevailing heteronormative and Christian culture. By the time I was 12 I had developed obsessive-compulsive disorder, spending hours in an elaborate series of personal rituals that I believed were necessary to avoid catastrophe. Taken together, these personal differences allowed me to understand that I was not normal, a fact I thought about a lot. I also realized that the converse wasn't true: Seemingly normal people didn't think about being normal, they just went about their daily lives. I began to wonder why my experience was considered the aberration rather than the norm. What, in other words, makes "normal" people normal, and how might the definition of normal be changed?

I found the answer to this question when I started taking anthropology classes in college. I became fascinated with the power that culture has to dictate our experience of the world. This fascination with the power of culture, how it is transmitted, and how it

might be changed is central to my professional life. My work in and outside the arts has revolved around specific cultural inquiries. For my Bar Mitzvah it was, “What does it mean to be a man in a secular Jewish family?” When I was hired right out of college to direct activist street theatre promoting HIV-prevention among men who have sex with men it was, “How can theatre facilitate effective and non-judgmental interventions among men who have sex with men in public spaces?” When I decided to stop waiting for theatres to offer me productions, and instead to start staging plays in my backyard, the inquiry was, “What does homemade theatre offer in a field that relentlessly touts professionalism?” Each of these inquiries points to an inherently unresolved or inequitable aspect of our culture: areas of our cultural web that have ugly tangles or loose ends. Theatre reaches an extremely limited number of people when compared to TV, film or social media platforms. Given these limitations, I understand that my art alone is incapable of untangling or repairing the cultural ruptures my art addresses. Nor do I seek to provide answers to the cultural questions I am investigating in my work. Rather, I attempt to highlight the dissonances these cultural inquiries reveal. I believe that by illuminating these cultural conflicts and making them sensible to an audience, I can prompt reflection and action towards solutions.

Almost all of the 11 productions I have directed while pursuing an MFA in Directing at the University of Texas at Austin have cultural questions and a desire for cultural change at their heart. Among these 11 productions, *Gondal* by Kimberly Belflower;

Daniel/Rose written by myself, Hannah Kenah, Thom May, and Alice Stanley; *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare; and *The Tiny Banger* by Alice Stanley offer the strongest case studies in how theatre can investigate the ways culture defines our perceptions of equity and power. These projects also provide useful insights into what process is necessary to create this kind of work. In examining these productions, I will seek to answer the question of what cultural inquiry and theatre have to do with each other. This is a question I have been asked throughout my life. In college I used to describe this overlap of interests as "people studies." Currently, I often find myself tongue-tied when asked by producers how my past career in public health dovetails with my arts practice. I believe part of this confusion arises from the fluid definition of a director's job.

In a graduate directing class during my second year at the University of Texas at Austin (UT), my professor, KJ Sanchez, recalled a session at a TCG conference where several prominent directors tried to come up with a short description of what exactly directors do. They debated whether directors midwife a show or act more like carpenters, building a dramatic text into a four-dimensional experience. More metaphors were thrown around and argued, but hours later they were no closer in being able to agree on a description. Perhaps it is not surprising that I have difficulty tying my distinct passions together, when even great minds in the field struggle to describe what a director actually does. In this paper I will seek to answer what my interest in cultural analysis has to do with my arts practice, how my process embraces my interest in cultural analysis and

change, what process is needed to realize my vision for the theatre, and, finally, how I define my role as a director within this process.

Chapter One: *Gondal*

The first show I directed at UT was *Gondal,* by third year MFA playwright Kimberly Belflower. The play was started in Belflower's second year in the program, and developed in workshop with designer BP Houle, who provided Kimberly with visual research and inspirations throughout the writing process. I joined the project midway through the script's development. *Gondal*'s plot follows three storylines across two different eras: the Bronte siblings in Victorian England, several high school students in the contemporary Midwest, and a narrator figure named Kimberly Belflower whose location remains mysterious. Taken together these three storylines span over 100 years of history and juxtapose literal landscapes and interior ones. This epic scope is necessary to fully plumb the play's central question, "Where can I be wild?" This question is first uttered by Emily Bronte near the beginning of the play, then repeated by Kimberly Belflower, the character, and by extension, Kimberly Belflower the playwright. The blurring of character and playwright in *Gondal* mirrors the tangled cultural expectations of female artists, even in today's society. Women are still expected to prove their creative bonafides while simultaneously prioritizing marriage and childrearing over their wild creative endeavors.

Key to communicating the play's themes in production lay in the articulation, and collision, of its different aesthetics: a deeply poetic first-person confessional monologue,

a Victorian family drama, and a contemporary teen thriller. Each genre offered a different facet for interpretation of the overall theme. Their collision provided an exciting opportunity to examine the contradictions and inequities constraining the characters. Genre theorist Rick Altman believes that texts accumulate meaning through a process involving four parties: the author, their text, the audience and the audience's *interpretive community.* Altman defines an interpretive community as, "A *context* in which the text is to be interpreted; the interpretive community names the *intertexts* that will control the interpretation of a given text."[4] In Altman's model, interpretive communities represent cultures, or subcultures, whose values are applied to the process of interpretation. In discussing genre in Hollywood films, Altman argues that because genres contain widely accepted aesthetic rules and cultural associations, they have the power to supersede interpretive communities when it comes to how audiences interpret art. "A genre already provides a specific set of intertexts (the other films identified by the industry as belonging to the genre), and thus a self-contained equivalent of an interpretive community."[5] Altman sees genre as an interpretive community unto itself. Because genres are made up of popularly accepted associations and interpretations, they serve as a key to unlocking a text's meaning. From Altman's perspective, genre is more than just an aesthetic guide, it is an essential tool for the production and interpretation of cultural narratives. Genre therefore is also an essential tool for deconstructing culture.

[4] Altman, 4

[5] Altman, 4

The most important lesson I took away from *Gondal*'s design and rehearsal process, however, was understanding the limits of genre in cultural deconstruction. We had a strong basis from which to build our design; Kimberly, aided by her visual dramaturg BP Houle, amassed a large quantity of visual research when working on early drafts of the play. These images, supplemented by my own visual research, guided us toward a design concept that featured genre-specific costumes, props, media and sound design within a larger expressionistic set and lighting design. The Brontes were outfitted in traditional period costumes, including mourning capes and kid gloves. The moors were rendered fairly realistically through projection and sound design. The contemporary characters, inhabiting a "high school thriller," wore the kind of clothes found at Forever 21, which was contrasted with lurid neon colors in lighting and projection. We imagined these specific design worlds would remain separate within the world of the play until a big reveal in the second act would cause a stylistic collision.

I also worked with the actors to create different styles of performance for each of the genres in *Gondal*'s narrative strands. Using a combination of visual research and movement-based exploration, we developed two distinct performance styles: a more realistic style in the contemporary teen world and a more stilted and stereotypically Victorian style for the Bronte storyline. Our first run-through revealed the limitations of this ap-

proach. The faux-historical style of acting in the Bronte world hampered the performances, draining any sense of urgency from their family conflict. Moreover, the juxtaposition of these styles lacked a sustained charge. Their separation during most of the play resulted in a predictable back-and-forth between narrative worlds; the genres had become too segregated within the production.

Using genre as a tool to examine our culture works largely because popular genres, such as "teen thriller" and "family drama" are so familiar to audiences. That familiarity has a downside too: it breeds boredom, quickly. Complications and subversions become necessary to sustain dramatic momentum and deepen meaning. Together, Belflower and I found moments for these complications in our production: the character Kimberly popped into the Bronte world to watch Emily and Charlotte fight on the moors; Emily appeared at a roller-skating rink to watch a birthday party. The intermixing of genres in these moments helped me realize how important it is for a director to actively complicate familiar forms rather than just utilizing them.

A piece of theatre that examines knotty cultural questions requires an appropriately robust artistic vision. To deconstruct culture an artist must also *simultaneously* reconstruct it in a new way. For instance, I sought to critique cultural norms about women needing rescue when I staged a scene in which Emily Bronte tenderly slow-danced with

Slenderman. This sequence derived a large part of its subversive power from the crossing-over of these two characters from their respective genres, creating something new and unexpected.

The process I used with the cast of *Gondal* to find genre-specific styles of acting lacked rigor and depth. During rehearsals we welcomed our actors into the work of new play dramaturgy, asking them to help develop the play's plot and characters. The conversations around genre, however, were largely siloed within *Gondal*'s design process. We never asked the actors how their characters fit within the tropes and aesthetic rules of certain genres. Nor did we ask the actors to research examples of the genres we were exploring. Had I brought the actors more fully into the exploration of culture and genre, our experiments in style might well have generated something more grounded and compelling. As I began to reflect on how actors could be more fully engaged in a production's cultural investigation, I found myself returning to an early directing experience which was also a cultural intervention.

Chapter Two: Solving Condom Colonialism

In 2004 and 2005, I was in charge of a performance project called *A Street Theatre Named Desire,* a partnership between LGBT healthcare provider Fenway Community Health Center and The Theatre Offensive, a radical queer theatre company. *Desire* was a safer-sex outreach initiative that ventured into "The Fens," Boston's notorious cruising park for men who have sex with men. The initiative featured short performances advocating safer sex, utilizing a sex-positive harm reduction-focused approach coupled with outreach activities such as distributing condoms and answering questions about safer sex. Our team included me, designer Eugene Tan, five performers, and a small group of outreach workers from Fenway. Our first year was an unmitigated disaster. Every Saturday night we would arrive in The Fens and be ignored by the "cruisers." Part of the problem lay in Fenway Health Center's inability to provide a sufficient number of outreach workers to engage with our target population. This problem was compounded by the fact that we siloed our outreach and safer-sex education, delegating these duties exclusively to Fenway volunteers rather than incorporating the performers. Instead, the performers worked exclusively on our skits, completely ignoring the larger mission of our initiative.

With these lessons in hand, the second year began auspiciously. By this time I was working at Fenway Health overseeing their safer-sex outreach initiatives. Eugene and I identified a strong group of outreach workers and performers who were happy to be ac-

tive participants in our outreach strategy. We trained our outreach workers and performers together in order to acclimate them to the unique challenges of engaging individuals in The Fens. Our initial series of forays returned mixed results: The increased number of "feet on the ground" did not seem to improve the rate of engagement with our population. Our skits would draw an audience but they would quickly disperse before we could engage them in conversation. Fortunately for us, a few cruisers felt sufficient affection for our performers that they were happy to discuss the project's shortcomings with them. Through these conversations three barriers to effective engagement became clear:

1. Many cruisers came to the Fens principally because the majority of the interactions between visitors were silent.
2. This silence was appealing because it created a space in which individuals did not have to worry about self-identifying as gay or being asked to disclose their HIV-status.
3. This silence also negated judgmental interactions about sexual proclivities.

Desire's goal was to facilitate conversations with men at risk for contracting STIs, this put us directly at odds with the community of men we were trying to reach. Silence can provide security against having to disclose stigmatizing personal information, but in the immortal words of ACT-UP, "Silence = Death" when it comes to queer men's health. Here then was a particularly tricky bit of cultural deconstruction and reconstruction. We

needed to negotiate the needs of the cruisers with our program's goal of providing resources and conversation about sexual health and wellness.

We went back to the drawing board and examined our assumptions and operating procedures. As an outreach methodology, harm-reduction seeks to suspend judgment. Its goal is to meet service-seekers where they are, and help identify ways to mitigate harm based on an individual's needs and circumstances. Reflecting on our approach, Eugene and I realized part of our problem lay in our condom-centric outreach strategy. We trained our volunteers and performers to approach cruisers and offer them packets of condoms and lubricant at their first point of contact. We realized that by showing up and literally pushing condoms into people's hands we were reinforcing stigma around condomless sex, all as part of an interaction we imagined to be judgment-free. We came to call this mindset *condom colonialism* and set about trying to reinvent our work.

The negative perceptions among the cruisers toward our outreach efforts were reinforced by the fact that we were only distributing condoms, lube and bottles of water. If our purpose was to promote dialogue about safer sex while supporting the community of cruisers in the Fens, then surely there were other items that were needed which we could distribute. We began asking the cruisers what they needed in the park that we could provide. In addition to condoms and water, we started to offer bug spray, sani-wipes, hand-

sanitizer, coffee and breath mints on our menu of distributed goods. We also adjusted our outreach encounters to begin with, “Hello, welcome to a *Street Theatre Named Desire,* I’m _______, can I get you anything? Water? Coffee? Bug Spray? Lube? Condoms?” This small textual adjustment resulted in dozens of in-depth conversations with men in the park including multiple referrals to services. We developed a loyal following of cruisers who would attend our skits and then hang out.

Our performers were instrumental in helping to identify the reasons behind *Desire*’s failing outreach strategies. They started the conversations with cruisers that provided us with the feedback necessary to understand what was wrong with our program. The performers were also instrumental in providing suggestions for how we could better serve the community of cruisers in the Fens. Just as actors often come up with the best staging or dramaturgical insights, they can also provide the most astute cultural analysis. I found myself returning to these insights while working on my second show at UT, *Daniel/Rose*, an original piece about neurodiversity and the theatre.

Chapter Three: *Daniel/Rose*

Daniel/Rose was born out of my interests in neurodiversity and how families respond to profound differences in their children. I was fascinated by the fact that both Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller had close family members who were cognitively atypical, and that each writer responded very differently to these family members in their life and art. The subject matter was also intensely personal given that I battled obsessive-compulsive disorder as an adolescent in an otherwise neurotypical family. After I learned that both the Miller and Williams archives were housed at the Harry Ransom Center on UT's campus, I began work on the project in earnest.

William's sister, Rose, was diagnosed with dementia praecox, today called schizophrenia, and later lobotomized. Scholars generally agree that Williams was haunted by guilt over his sister's fate, and that she served as a muse for much of his work. In his authoritative biography, *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh*, John Lahr writes, "[Williams's play] *Suddenly Last Summer* was a sort of autobiographical exorcism that worked through Williams's grief and guilt over his sister, Rose, as well as his anger at [his mother] Edwina for deciding to allow a bilateral prefrontal lobotomy to be performed on her without informing him in advance about the procedure–an omission for which Williams never forgave his mother."[6] This guilt also flows through *The Glass*

[6] Lahr, 357

Menagerie, an autobiographical play in which a family's ruin is caused by Tom, Williams's alter ego and namesake, abandoning his mother and sister. Tom's sister in *Menagerie* is not named Rose, but the word "rose" appears in *Menagerie*, as well as in all of Williams's major plays. Miller, by contrast, acted far more callously when his son Daniel was born with Down syndrome. Against the objections of his wife, Inge, he sent his infant son to an institution and didn't see him again for decades. These two stories of famous writers and their neurodiverse relatives provided an exciting opportunity to examine our complex cultural attitudes toward neurological difference.

The initial creative team included myself, as director and co-writer, co-writers Thom May and Hannah Kenah, and dramaturge/performer Katie Van Winkle. Later, MFA directing student Alice Stanley joined the project as another co-writer, bringing their own neurodiverse perspective. The team immersed ourselves in the dramatic writings of Williams and Miller, their biographies, and primary documents in the Harry Ransom Center. We also found inspiration in relevant chapters from Andrew Solomon's book *Far from the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search for Identity.* Our initial research focused on how families support, or fail to support, their cognitively different children. This focus changed after we realized there was a more specific cultural gap at play in Daniel and Rose's story: the American theater canon is rich in family dramas, but severely lacking in dramas that foreground the story of neurological atypical family members. The heat in

this project lay in creating a theatre piece that centered the stories of Daniel and Rose within their family dramas. Our work became about how to properly examine our theatrical past in order to imagine a more inclusive theatrical present.

Examining Rose's past was much easier than examining Daniel's. UT's Harry Ransom Center contained a treasure trove of documents by and about Rose Williams. The collection's holdings include letters written by Rose before and after her lobotomy, typing exercises from her school days, as well as drawings and receipts for purchases as well as limousine rides from later in her life. By contrast, there exists virtually no public information about Daniel Miller, save for one article in a 2009 issue of *Vanity Fair* and an article from a local New Jersey publication touting the admission of one Dan Miller into the Special Olympics Hall of Fame. I worried about how I could tell Daniel's story responsibly given the lack of biographical information about him. I felt the first step in understanding Daniel's story was to learn more about the experiences of individuals with Down syndrome and their families. I also hoped that through getting to know individuals within the Down syndrome community I might find a creative collaborator interested in working on *Daniel/Rose.*

In his devising class, Professor Kirk Lynn likes to say, "How you make is what you make, and who you make is how you make it," meaning the identities and experi-

ences of a work's authors define its creative process and therefore the work itself. I needed a neurodiverse cast in order to accurately portray the experiences of neurodiverse individuals on stage. We were fortunate to find a cast member who, like Rose, suffered from mental illness and had spent time in psychiatric institutions. Finding performers with intellectual disabilities, like Down syndrome, proved significantly harder. I met with Celia Hughes and Robert Pierson, two local artists and activists who make art with neurologically atypical individuals. Both Hughes and Pierson provided helpful insights into how best to structure creative processes for individuals with Down syndrome, but were unable to refer individuals to participate in our project. I found myself at a crossroads: I could continue *Daniel/Rose*'s development without the involvement of an actor/collaborator with Down syndrome, or I could stop the play's development entirely. I chose to continue the show's development, and did so in a way that directly acknowledged the difficulty we had in finding a collaborator with Down syndrome. Daniel was represented in the play as a series of absences: in one scene he was represented as an empty space on the stage, in another as the audience, in a third a shadow. This choice made visible the implicit erasure of neurodiverse individuals from the stage. It did not seek to solve the problem, but instead to help concretize for the audience an awareness of the problem.

While not an ideal solution, the choice to represent Daniel as an absence speaks to the value of art that troubles culture rather than offers solutions to inequalities. Not every

cultural gap has a solution that can be easily represented theatrically. Some cultural conflicts are so insidious it would be condescending to offer a solution within a two-hour running time. Before meaningful change can be enacted, stakeholders of the dominant culture must first fully understand the inequities we take for granted in our cultural status quo. The complexity of *Daniel/Rose*'s particular cultural knot, the lack of representation of neurodiverse individuals in American theatre, was reflected in our process and product. Making the difficulty of finding collaborators with Down syndrome visible through Daniel's conspicuous on-stage absence became an opportunity to draw attention to these larger inequalities.

Then a miracle happened. During our third week of rehearsal, we met Tyler, an employee of the Down Home Ranch, a nearby residential program for individuals with Down syndrome. With Tyler's help, I was able to visit the Ranch and conduct a one-time theatre workshop with the residents. We also interviewed three of the workshop participants about their lives and experiences and incorporated an audio recording of this interview into the show. These interviewees saw the show in performance and offered us feedback. Had I decided to stop production entirely once I ran into casting difficulties, these interactions would never have happened. As development of the play continued after its 2017 workshop production, we were able to build on our relationship with Down Home Ranch in meaningful ways. Alice Stanley and I began weekly theatre workshops at

the Down Home Ranch in the spring of 2018. We would arrive, chat with the participants about their lives, then play theatre and improv games. We felt strongly that our charge was not to workshop the play during these sessions but rather to better know this community and learn what theatrical exploration and expression were most exciting and accessible to them. Through this process we also learned what cultural preconceptions we were bringing into our process. I discovered I had internalized the stereotype that adults with Down syndrome were still essentially children. I was often taken aback when they would discuss relationship problems or, like most neurotypical adults who do not work in theatre, expressed reservations about engaging in improv or theatre games.

My work at the Down Home Ranch was essential to the mission of *Daniel*/*Rose*. However, this work did not fit within common perceptions of a "director's craft," that focus on such elements as dramaturgy, working with actors on performance, finding concepts with designers, etc. Our workshops at Down Home did not directly result in content for the script. I did not cast from our workshop participants at the Down Home Ranch, nor did I intend to. These sessions were focused on community engagement and relationship building, two skills which I believe are just as important to a director's craft as dramaturgy and crafting performances. Developing a piece of theatre that engages deep cultural questions requires a director to engage with the communities affected by these cultural questions. This engagement is even more important if the director is not a member

of the communities being represented in their work. Artists do not create work in a vacuum. Directors need to engage with both the text of a theatrical production and the cultural context in which their production will occur. This dual attention to crafting text and context is a practice I have long been engaged with, thanks largely to my work in the public health sphere. *Street Theatre Named Desire* was the first of many projects I worked on with health care providers to bring messaging and outreach strategy into better alignment with the communities we were serving. Ironically, when I decided to leave Boston for the West Coast my intention was to leave my work in public health far behind me in order to focus on my artistic practice. Yet I found these same skill-sets at play almost immediately in my first theatrical projects in the Bay Area, producing and directing shows in my backyard.

Chapter Four: Homemade Theatre

In my experience, directors have the most mysterious career path of virtually all theatre disciplines. Actors take classes and audition, which provide opportunities for casting agents and directors to know their work. Playwrights have writers' groups, incubators, and fellowships to develop their craft and build their reputation. As I thought about how to build a career as a director, the way forward was far less certain, especially given my lack of financial resources to self-produce. In 2009, I moved to the Bay Area, hoping a change of location and the region's vibrant theatre scene would provide opportunities for me to make work. I quickly realized that my new home had the same scarcity of professional development opportunities for directors as my old home, and that I would need to build my network of collaborators from scratch. I had arrived in the promised land in order to create theatre, but with no resources or network, I had no idea how to proceed. Fortunately my neighbor, Philip Huang, started a grass roots movement: The International Home Theatre Festival, which charged artists with making work in their homes instead of waiting for institutional "gatekeepers" to open doors. He encouraged me to participate. When I explained that I wouldn't know what to produce or how to cast the production, Phillip cut me off, saying, "Just pick a date and everything will fall into place." I took his advice and chose April 10th, a date two months away, and started to panic.

I thought through the list of shows I had always wanted to direct and landed on *Uncle Vanya*. It had a manageable cast size and could be done with a simple set. That was the easy part. How to cast it, and how to entice a cast who could handle the text into performing in my backyard became the larger obstacle. The previous summer I took part in another production performed in a non-traditional venue as part of Cornerstone Theatre's summer institute. Cornerstone Theatre is a pioneer of community-based theatre. They employ a methodology for making drama that centers community participation in developing the script and putting non-actors and professional actors on stage together. Cornerstone Theatre's goal is to "create theatre with people who would normally not come together, for people who do not usually go to see theatre."[7] I saw this firsthand over the course of a month, as I and a group of 20 other theatre-makers joined members of the community in putting up a show in an abandoned mill near Eureka, California. It was a revelatory experience in many ways and hammered home for me the vital role of community-building in the artistic process. I began to think about my backyard show as more of a Cornerstone project, an opportunity to expand access to making theatre, for myself and also for my collaborators.

The driving question for my backyard show evolved from "How do I try to make a professional production in my backyard?" to "What have I always wanted to direct, and

[7] Lewis, 1

how can I do it beautifully with no resources other than the participation of anyone interested in taking part?" Throwing out the idea of gatekeepers liberated the work from preconceptions of professional process and product, providing an organic way of working and far more creative results. *Uncle Vanya* turned into *Armchair Vanya*, a 40-minute adaptation in which the embittered Russian characters were represented by found object puppets. My radically inclusive approach to bringing on collaborators paid off too. Coworkers at my retail job expressed interest and were cast. Several new friends from an improv class also found themselves involved. One day the performer playing Vanya brought his daughter to rehearsal after being unable to find childcare. She sat patiently while we worked, drawing pair after pair of eyes with her colored pencils. On break I drafted her into designing the eyes for the puppets. Our conceit was scrappy and goofy but we played it with real earnestness. We performed one show to a packed house that included friends, family, and random neighbors who saw our cheap printed flyers stuck to telephone polls. I had started a company whether I liked it or not.

In the coming years I began to expand my network and work with established companies, but the backyard work continued. Driving these pieces was the excitement of making something new and personal that was working outside the standard models of production. For the following year's festival I returned to the question, "What have I always wanted to do, and how can I do it for no money in my backyard with anyone who

wants to take part?” The result was *Backyard Dick*, a 70-minute version of *Moby-Dick* that ran for two nights, and was revived two months later after it became a minor sensation in the East Bay. My company grew too: my roommate Joel, who had the most mellifluous baritone this side of Morgan Freeman, provided voiceover; my old HR manager was our costume designer; a couple of local performers who saw *Vanya* joined the cast, and we brought on a composer as well as a set designer who constructed an inflatable whale out of garbage bags that was 8’ tall and 25’ long. On our opening night my second roommate’s boyfriend was in the audience wearing a suit. “Coming from work?” I inquired. “No,” he explained, “I’ve never been to the theatre before and thought I needed to dress up.” His comment demonstrated how deeply elitist theatre remains, as well as the difficulty of altering cultural associations between theatre and wealth. Still, my roommate’s boyfriend had attended his first play. By creating unique production accessible to anyone who wanted to take part as a collaborator or an audience member, I was able to re-imagine both the text and context of theatrical events.

Chapter Five: *The Merchant of Venice*

In 2016, shortly after beginning classes at the University of Texas at Austin, I needed to pitch a production for consideration in the Department of Theatre and Dance's upcoming season. I was overwhelmed by possible titles. To narrow the field of options I modified my backyard theatre questions and asked myself, "What show have I always wanted to direct that might benefit most from the resources available at UT?" I landed on William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice,* a play that was already on my mind.

In the midst of the 2016 election, I noticed some surprising affinities between Hillary Clinton and Shylock, the Jewish money-lender at the heart of Shakespeare's play. Both of these figures were reviled by powerful men in their societies, much of this animosity seemed to derive from the skill both of these figures practiced in their respective fields. Both Shylock and Hillary Clinton were also seeking to break through glass ceilings within their professions. After Donald Trump's presidential victory the themes of the play became even more resonant. Anti-semitism, misogyny, and xenophobia were now visible in our society in ways that I had never experienced before. I saw an opportunity to reimagine Shylock for our contemporary moment, and in rethinking an archetypically anti-semitic character, provide an opportunity for audiences to reconsider their own default assumptions about Jews and Judaism.

The Merchant of Venice is a stylistically eclectic play with a complex plot, and several elements that are deeply problematic for contemporary audiences. The titular character, Antonio, is an anti-Semitic merchant who borrows money from Shylock in order to finance his best friend (and possible lover), Bassanio's attempt to woo Portia, a wealthy heiress. In order to buy Antonio's favor, Shylock proposes a loan without interest. When Antonio declines the offer, Shylock adds an additional stipulation: Failure to pay back the loan will entitle Shylock to a pound of Antonio's flesh. Antonio agrees, Bassanio takes the money and sails to Belmont, where he successfully completes an elaborate test in order to win Portia's hand in marriage. Moments later he is called back to Venice to attend a trial that will determine whether Shylock can claim Antonio's pound of flesh. Not only is Shylock upset that Antonio defaulted on his loan, some of Antonio's friends helped Shylock's daughter Jessica to run away from home. Portia, suspicious of her husband's reaction to the news about his friend, disguises herself as a judge in order to intervene in Antonio's case. During the trial Portia exonerates Antonio and orders Shylock to convert to Christianity and give away the majority of his wealth. The play ends, as all Shakespearean comedies do, with a reconciliation of the couples and marriage.

I have been attracted and repulsed by *Merchant* since I first saw a production directed by Andre Serban at the American Repertory Theatre in 1997. Serban's production

emphasized the fairytale elements of the story, and completely abdicated any critical reading of the play's anti-Semitic content. His production's Shylock was so shifty and untrustworthy that I found myself rooting for Portia in the courtroom scene. Still, I was struck by the play's central question of what happens when marginalized people use the systems of power that oppress them in order to gain power. I was also taken by the play's variety of styles and tone which lend themselves to cultural deconstruction and reconstruction.

I worked on my production of *The Merchant of Venice* for two years, moving the project from pitch, to a workshop, and then to a final production. The amount of time I spent working on this production makes it difficult to concisely describe the production process. In this section, I will organize my analysis around how I dealt with three major concerns about the script, and how I resolved each of these concerns in production.

1) The play is widely considered anti-Semitic. Preeminent Shakespeare scholar Harold Bloom writes (in language that is itself problematic) that, "One would have to be blind, deaf and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare's grand, equivocal comedy *The Merchant of Venice* is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work."[8]
2) The overt anti-Semitism in Venice, and Portia's formalized courtship, make updating the play to a contemporary setting difficult.

[8] Bloom, 171

3) The script is tonally uneven. This is most apparent in the lighthearted and comedic fifth act, which confers a happy ending on the characters who have just destroyed Shylock's life.

Despite these challenges, I entered the production process believing that through deconstructing and reconstructing the play's text and context, it was possible to unlock the text's beauty and transform its anti-Semitic elements into an examination of prejudice.

I cannot deny *Merchant*'s complex relationship to anti-Semitism. By the time Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice,* Jews had been banned from England for almost 300 years.[9] Elizabethan stages featured plenty of Jewish characters, all of them cartoonish antagonists. In the words of scholar James Shapiro, Elizabethan audiences found themselves, "entertained by catalogues of Jewish villainy."[10] To these audiences, Shylock must have seemed shockingly sympathetic and multi-dimensional. Here was a character who was able to articulate, with great eloquence, the pain and suffering he experienced at the hands of Christians. His "Hath not a Jew Eyes?" speech is one of the most compelling arguments against prejudice ever written. Shylock also has notable anti-Semitic qualities: he seems more concerned about money than anything else (including his daughter), until he becomes obsessed with taking a pound of Antonio's flesh. Shylock's single-minded insistence on obtaining his pound of flesh evokes the Jewish blood libel, medieval rumors that Jews drank Christian blood, which intern were used to justify atrocities against the

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[9] Shapiro, 46

[10] Shapiro, 92

Jewish people. Re-envisioning *Merchant* as a play about anti-Semitism required me to address these problems head-on.

The first step in this process was reconceiving the character of Shylock himself. Over the centuries, Shylock has been depicted as a specific anti-Semitic caricature: a scheming hook-nosed man. Returning to the similarities I observed between Shylock and Hillary Clinton, I decided to change Shylock from a male character to a female one. Imagining Shylock as a single mother and business owner disrupted our familiar, stereotypical associations with the character and increased the audience's sympathy towards her. The choice added an additional layer of contemporary resonance: Shylock in my production was not just a Jew in a Christian world, she was a woman in a man's world too.

Shylock is the only Jewish character in *The Merchant of* Venice, and therefore he (or she) invariably comes to stand in for all Jews in the minds of an audience.[11] This is especially problematic once Shylock begins seeking bloody vengeance against Antonio. Without additional Jewish perspectives in the play, it's possible to interpret Shylock's actions as representative of all Jewish beliefs and culture. In response to this problem, I added a small group of Venetian Jewish characters to my production. This group acted as

[11] I am intentionally excluding Tubal, an associate of Shylock's who enters in Act I Scene III to deliver a few lines of exposition, and Shylock's daughter Jessica, who's marries a Christian in order to leave the Jewish faith.

a chorus who looked to Shylock for help and guidance, but also disagreed with Shylock at various points in the play. For instance, in the courtroom scene, some of Portia's lines demanding that Shylock show mercy to Antonio were re-attributed to this Jewish chorus. When Shylock refused to accept these pleas from members of her own community, the other Jewish characters abandoned her in disgust.

Reattributing lines and unconventional casting were just two of the ways I changed the play's relationship to Judaism. My intention with this production was to re-appropriate *Merchant* as fully as possible from a Christian perspective to a Jewish one. To accomplish this goal, I worked with dramaturg Cecelia Raker, herself an observant Jew, on incorporating elements of Jewish culture and language into my production. Our work resulted in a number of moments where the Jewish perspective took center stage, including:

- Shylock performing the Jewish Blessing Over the Children on Jessica.
- One of Shylock's Jewish supporters admonished her in Hebrew to show mercy to Antonio, in accordance with Talmudic teachings.
- Ending the production not with Gratiano's declaration of fidelity to his wife, Narissa, but with Jessica saying the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead. It was the first time many of our audience members had ever experienced a Jewish prayer.

Shifting the play's context was just as important to me as revising its text. Staging *Merchant* in a contemporary setting was essential to achieving this goal. I felt an updated setting would give the production an immediacy that would upend commonly held assumptions, voiced by many of the undergraduate students I talked with, that Shakespeare was stuffy and inaccessible. I also felt a contemporary-set production would provide audiences an opportunity to reflect on the similarities between Shakespeare's text and the rise of White Nationalism after Donald Trump's election. Yet as I mentioned earlier, there were significant challenges to updating the production. Setting the play's action in modern-day America required that I translate several of the text's archaic plot points into contemporary life. At the outset I had assumed the trickiest of these translations would be Portia's elaborate courtship process. However, the design team and I decided to set Portia's storyline within a Bachelorette-style reality TV show, complete with a crew using live-feed cameras. Portia's elaborate courtship scenes worked perfectly within a reality-TV setting. The live-feed projections served as a useful complication of the play's context, situating the production as distinctly 21st century, and asking the audience to choose where to look: a three-dimensional portrayal on the stage or a two-dimensional projection above. The updated setting worked in the Venice scenes too. Current events had demonstrated, tragically, that overt displays of anti-Semitism are not a thing of the past.

The cast became active participants in shaping how their characters translated into contemporary culture. Bella Medina and Savannah Cole, who played Portia and Narissa,

defined their characters within the world of *The Real Housewives* and *The Bachelorette*. Ryan Cruz, who played Antonio sought inspiration in the entitlement of white gay men of an "older generation." Zach Henry found his inspiration for Lancelot, Shylock's Christian servant, in depictions of angry white working-class men in popular culture. Through our combined efforts we were able to reconstruct the play in ways that were uncomfortably familiar to the audience.

The cast proved equally helpful in tackling the third major problem for the production- the wild tonal variations within the play. We transformed these stylistic differences into a larger comment on genre and character type. Each of the play's main characters inhabited distinct generic worlds: Portia lived in a romantic comedy, Antonio a romantic thriller, and Shylock a tragedy. These genres mapped comfortably onto the kinds of contemporary narratives which frequently feature each of these character types: the beautiful single woman, the repressed gay man, and the religious "other." Working with the cast to identify these genres turned one of the play's stylistic difficulties into an examination on how women, gay men, and religious minorities are commonly represented today.

Our choice to set Portia's storyline within a reality TV show also provided a solution to the tonal problems of the last act. During the play's first half, I staged frequent squabbles between Portia and the producer of the reality show within the play. Once Bas-

sanio successfully won Portia's hand, she took over the producer's role. This meant that in the final act Portia turned the cameras on her husband, forcing him to pledge his fidelity to her. Portia's use of producorial power against her husband complicated the unambiguously happy nature of the play's finale. It also highlighted the production's theme of how oppression is perpetuated: first by perpetrators, then by their victims.

The most painful conflict associated with the production occurred weeks before opening, when a gunman killed 11 Jewish worshippers at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Weeks earlier Cecelia Raker and I organized a panel of Jewish speakers to talk with the cast and answer their questions about Judaism and anti-Semitism. One of the speakers had been adamant that anti-Semitism, while still alive and well, no longer manifested in ways that endangered Jews' personal safety. It was a contentious statement, but Cecelia and I grew up in safe environments and agreed with his assessment. After the shooting, this was clearly no longer the case. What would my production mean in the wake of these events? Would the cast feel uncomfortable performing this incendiary play at this moment? I set aside time at our next rehearsal to discuss the recent events. The whole cast, Jew and Gentile alike, felt it was necessary to continue working on the production in the wake of this tragedy. We understood that the nature of our work was to shine a light on the darkest impulses running through our society, and to dare the audience to look at itself. This was a charge we took seriously.

Chapter Six: Making Work when the World Is on Fire

It's taken a long time for me to believe that art can be a meaningful reaction to current events. I only felt comfortable transitioning from a career in public health to theatre once Barack Obama was elected. As an idealist graduating college during George W. Bush's administration, I was convinced that our democracy and the LGBTQ community were in peril. I felt that I needed to focus my energy on fighting the administration's homophobic policies. This lead to my work serving the LGBT community through education, outreach, and research. I did not enter the public health field solely because of this outsized idealism, but this idealism was a strong driver of my commitment to the field. Once Barack Obama was elected president, I found myself living in the progressive fantasy that the country was moving in a straight line toward capital-P Progress. Sure, structural inequalities were still very much in play, but demographic shifts had finally moved us onto an irreversible path forward. Then Donald Trump won the 2016 election.

For weeks after the election I considered dropping out of grad school. If the George W. Bush administration was evil enough to drive me away from theatre toward more direct action, how could I not take similar action under a president who was demonstrably far worse? What good was it making art when Nazis were in the White House? What good was it making theatre at all? If *Hamilton*- a brilliant work of cultural reconstruction seen by hundreds of thousands and listened to by millions more- couldn't thwart

the rise of the alt-right, what was the value in making my art? I could find no answer to this question. There is no iteration of my work that conceivably makes a dent in the Trump administration, let alone even bigger existential threats like climate change.

In my time at UT, I've learned that directing work I care about is not an indulgence, even in the face of existential threats. Making theatre is an act of faith that art can work miracles in circuitous but profound ways. In a 2016 essay for *The Guardian*, writer Rebecca Solnit observes that mass social movements and large-scale political change arise because artists and scholars spread ideas that have the potential to change the world. In reflecting on the origins of the Arab Spring, Solnit writes that "a comic book about Martin Luther King and civil disobedience was translated into Arabic and widely distributed in Egypt shortly before the uprising." Furthermore, "Tunisian hip-hop artist El Général was, along with Bouazizi, an instigator of the uprising, and other musicians played roles in articulating the outrage and inspiring the crowds."[12] Solnit's essay also addressed the importance of art that seeks to change cultural narratives and perceptions:

> Changing the story isn't enough in itself, but it has often been foundational to real changes. Making an injury visible and public is usually the first step in remedying it, and political change often follows culture, as what was long tolerated is seen to

[12] IBID

> be intolerable, or what was overlooked becomes obvious. Which means that every conflict is in part a battle over the story we tell, or who tells and who is heard.[13]

A piece of theatre may not be able to bring down dictators, but Solnit shows that making art is still a vital part of how societies change, frequently for the better.

I've also realized that there are important goals that theatre can achieve more powerfully than large-scale cultural change. Art has the power to make life, in all its pain and confusion, livable. I think about the miracle of laughing with the queer audience at *Brides of the Moon,* finding a sense of queer community for the first time. I think about the Jewish audience members who came up to me after my production of *Merchant,* to describe the catharsis they felt watching Jessica's recitation of the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, weeks after the most deadly anti-Semitic attack in US history. I think about the young women who ran up to Kimberly Belflower after *Gondal* to thank her for writing a play that put them onstage in ways that spoke directly to their experience. These are moments of personal revelation that are just as real and important as a revolution. Art may not be able to prevent authoritarianism, but it may be the key to surviving under an authoritarian leader.

[13] IBID

Chapter Seven: *The Tiny Banger*

Directing Alice Stanley's *The Tiny Banger* was a master class in exploring the potential of theatre to change minds, open hearts, and provide catharsis. It served as a useful process template for making work that reconstructs culture. Alice began writing the piece as an exercise in Steven Dietz's *Story* course, and together we developed it over six months. The piece is a theatre/film hybrid that uses Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp character and film aesthetic to explore issues of homelessness and addiction in contemporary cities. Borrowing from the plot of Chaplin's *The Kid*, we follow homeless protagonist Dope Fiend as he tries to raise his child, The Tiny Banger, as a single parent on the streets of Austin. *Banger* begins in a wordless world in which the main characters' dialogue is projected as silent film title cards and their actions exist within a slapstick vernacular. As the play continues and the city imposes a regime of citations and aggressive policing against the homeless population, the silent world of the play is stripped away and the characters inhabit a world of gritty realism.

Alice and I were committed to making a piece that rewrote the prevailing narratives around homelessness. Alice chose to situate the first part of the play within a silent film genre in order to endear the characters to the audience in a way that would short-circuit their existing implicit biases. We were both interested in showing how pernicious stereotypes painting the homeless as dangerous lead to cycles of poverty that perpetuate

homelessness, as well as challenging the accepted behavior for what constitutes being an ally to the homeless.

In order to represent this community accurately and justly, Alice began a process of workshops and readings with members of the Austin homeless community. When our show was selected by Trinity Street Players for production we brought on a community dramaturg, Pirate Joe, an individual experiencing homelessness who advised us throughout the process. We held open rehearsals where members of the homeless community could drop in, get snacks, watch our work and give us feedback. We coupled our production with a robust community engagement strategy designed to bring a mix of housed and homeless audiences together at Trinity Street in order to see the play and start conversations. We also partnered with two other organizations to present *Banger* at homeless resource centers. This community engagement work affected the text and context of the production in ways Alice and I found thrilling. The open rehearsals, in particular, shifted the context of the whole process rather than just the product. These rehearsals allowed the actors and myself to critically examine our own false narratives around homelessness and to be more attentive to the pitfalls of our characterization.

Our process on *The Tiny Banger* also empowered the actors to create the silent-film influenced physicality used in the play. Actors watched *The Kid*, chose a one minute

sequence of the film to embody, then taught that sequence silently to the other members of the cast. This generated a commonly shared vocabulary of gestures and physicalities (duck walks, double takes, etc) which were then applied to the contemporary scenarios in *Banger*. This process rendered our movement work as an equal division of labor between the cast and the director. Because much of the play's cultural reconstruction derives from repurposing Chaplin's movement, the cast had a strong investment in the work of untangling our cultural narratives around homelessness.

Conclusion

The process of creating *The Tiny Banger* nicely encapsulates the best practices for making theatre that troubles and re-imagines cultural inequities. Once an unresolved issue or question within our culture has been identified, the creative team should find the genres that best resonate with this question and speak to our larger culture. Communities represented by the project should be invited as early as possible into every step of the development process. Communities and the creative team should work together to envision not just a new piece of theatre, but a new context (form, engagement, or location) in which that piece of theatre can live. Designers and actors need to be equally invested in the cultural exploration of the piece and its cultural reconstruction. Through this process we can make work that creates the small but important miracles of mending the oppressive narratives in our culture and creating temporary communities that can experience catharsis.

Within my process, I see the director's role as an activist rather than a midwife or carpenter. My job is to identify the ways in which culture is intersecting in problematic ways with various communities (my own or others), and then seek to address those harmful cultural narratives through a theatrical intervention. Like an activist, getting buy-in from multiple constituencies (audiences, performers, designers), and inspiring them to join me in my process, is an essential part of my work. This vision of a director's role melds my passions for cultural inquiry, theatre-making, and community engagement.

I am now almost three times the age I was when I sat down for my first Hebrew lesson, leaving yet another period of schooling. When I had my Bar Mitzvah in May of 1995 it looked nothing like the bar and bat mitzvahs of my friends who went to conservative synagogues. I read from the Torah, but my speech was about Jewish stereotypes through history, not my Torah reading. We did not sing traditional songs in Hebrew; rather, my mom arranged a series of songs that she found personally significant: Bob Dylan's "Forever Young," Joni Mitchell's "The Circle Game." The ceremony was not held in a synagogue but on the banks of the Charles River. In my most nascent moment of cultural inquiry and the performance of that inquiry was also the impulse to reconstruct something new from the familiar. I became an adult in the eyes of my culture while engaging in a process of cultural deconstruction and reconstruction. It is only fitting that this should then become my life's work.

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