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Almost, Maine: A Director's Journey

Adam S. Crandall

University of Tennessee - Knoxville, acrandal@utk.edu

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Question: *Choosing a Show*

When deciding on a play to direct, my main concern was finding a show that would be successful working through All Campus Theatre and with an entirely undergraduate cast and production team. So many times ACT productions have not reached their potential simply because the director did not pick an appropriate show for this situation. Therefore, I sought to find a show that was both challenging but doable for a group of undergraduates that also offered a large amount of opportunity for involvement. After seeing *Almost, Maine* done at another college, I realized it was the perfect show for ACT. Its minimalist set, multiple dynamic characters, and appropriate themes about love meshed perfectly with an undergraduate production.

Research: *The Director's Book*

After choosing my show, presenting to ACT, and obtaining a time slot in the Lab Theatre, I dove into researching the play and constructing my director's book through the guidance of Kate Buckley. I started by reading through the text multiple times and making notes of specific details about setting, characters, concepts, and other aspects of the play that I either did not understand or wanted to know more about.

I then began looking for images to help inspire both my design team and myself. This play is greatly affected by its location, so I took a lot of inspiration from small towns in Maine. It was hard to find a picture of Maine in winter without snow, so I wanted to create a setting that gave the feeling of being outside on a cold Maine night. Another very important aspect of the play is the influence of the Northern Lights, so I also researched different ways to portray this natural phenomenon. This combined with my desire to create a snowy landscape led me to the concept of a completely white stage. This would allow all the scenes to be rooted in the same place even though every scene takes place in a different part of town, and it would turn the stage into a giant cyc so that my lighting designer could paint the entire stage with the Northern Lights. I also wanted to express the feeling of this small, rural town through the music heard throughout the show, focusing on more folk-style instrumental tracks. Because the show is so contemporary and were given a limited budget, my only concern with costumes was making sure that each actor looked distinct from one scene to another, relying mostly on the actors' own wardrobes.

Begin Experiment: *Casting*

Casting this show became an interesting endeavor, because although the original production only had a cast of four, two males and two females, the play calls for nineteen characters. I wanted to find a delicate balance between giving enough actors the opportunity to participate without having too large of a cast for the space and making a technical nightmare. I decided to wait until seeing everyone audition before setting an exact number of roles I would cast.

It came down to finding people who I could see being versatile enough to play multiple distinct characters and that could be believable as couples. I also had to decide whether I would keep the same couples together in each scene or use different pairings throughout the show. After two days of auditions I decided to work with four men and four women, and I paired them off so that the audience would never see the same two people paired together twice in hopes that this would help make clear that the actors changed characters from scene to scene.

Experimenting: *Rehearsal*

After deciding on my eight actors, my stage manager and I created a rehearsal schedule, and the entire cast came together for our first read-through. We then entered a rehearsal period, rehearsing two scenes a night. This allowed me to work individually with the couples for each scene and allowed us to work without taking days off because actors could rest on days they did not have scenes.

My work with every scene started first with table work: reading and working through the text and exploring the scene in its most basic form. We then began getting on our feet and feeling out the blocking. I allowed a great amount of freedom and feedback during this process because I wanted the scenes to feel very natural and the actors to feel open to expressing their thoughts and ideas about character choices. We had the basic framework of each scene done by the end of our first rehearsal period, and after the holiday break I told everyone to be off book so that we could work on the scenes more freely. During this period I lost my stage manager due to family illness, so I had to learn how to play both director and stage manager during the rehearsal process.

Data: Tech/Shows

Once we were allowed into the actual performance space, we had our first build day. This comprised mostly of painting the stage with multiple coats of white paint, bordering the edges of the stage with fake snow, and building the porch railing we would use on one of the wings. Most of the set pieces for each scene I had procured from my family's home or from other production team members' personal possessions. We were able to finish all our set building on schedule within the first two full days in the space, and we were able to start technical rehearsals starting on our third day in the space.

The tech process was mostly comprised of working on transitions, because almost every scene stayed in the same lighting once my designer built the specific picture for each location. Most of the sound cues were also transitions, so we proceeded fairly quickly through the show. I worked together with both sound and lighting to find the best way to represent the mystical moments where the Northern Lights appeared on stage, combining a projection and a soundtrack to create the effect. This quick tech process left multiple days for tweaking the show and adjusting each scene to the performance, and it also let actors have time to get very comfortable with the order and pacing of the show. I also focused on fixing sight line issues due to the thrust-style stage. This was also the period where I finished designing the poster, formatted the programs, and began advertising both on social networks and on campus.

Once the actual performances started, the show was in a very good place and very little changes were made. One main issue that came up was the intermission. I initially wanted the actor playing Pete sitting on the bench the entire time, but when the lights came up on him opening night the audience thought it was just another scene. It was not clear until people started reluctantly getting up that it was intermission. We adjusted this scene and had the actor come out a couple of minutes into intermission. I chose not to give specific notes to the cast after the actual performances because we only had one weekend of shows and I wanted to give them the freedom to explore and not feel worried about doing something wrong.

Analysis: Reflection

This production succeeded in many ways. I was able to work together with my design team to make a cohesive look that told the story I wanted to tell while staying within our limited budget. We were able to create the wintry landscape of Almost, Maine on stage distinctly travel from one area of the town to another in each scene. My actors made great improvement from our initial rehearsals to our final product, and each of their characters became clearly distinguishable from one scene to another.

In retrospect, however, there are certain aspects of this process I would have either done differently or have learned from to try a different approach on future projects. Although I was very pleased with the results of my actors' work, I would have liked to have gone further. Each actor understood his or her own objective very clearly, but the couples in each scene did not always mesh together. It seemed as if both characters were only focused on their personal objectives and not acknowledging and truly interacting with the person in the scene with them. I believe part of this lack of depth is improper use of rehearsal time and lack of focus on character development during this period. The fact that the actors in this production were also my peers also hindered the process. Although it was very beneficial at times for all of us to be on the same playing field so that we could work together in discovering how scenes should work, it also made it difficult for me to keep my authority as director.

One factor that may have helped my actors was giving more notes. Once we entered the tech process I became so focused on all the technical pieces of the

production coming together that I stopped taking acting notes for each scene other than very basic mistakes or blocking issues. This helped make a very well oiled show design wise, but it created a large period of time where there was very little progress on the actual scenes themselves.

There were also certain pitfalls about the show that I was unable to avoid, such as the overuse of the Northern Lights effect. By having the projection appear at the end of every scene, the magic lost some of its power. Even though the script called for this effect at the end of every scene, it may have been wise to cut it out of some so that the audience would not get desensitized.

Conclusion: *Final Thoughts*

Overall, I would consider *Almost, Maine* a successful production. We were able to create the show I envisioned from the beginning without having to compromise my vision too greatly. We worked with a restricted budget to make a production that did not try to push farther than an undergraduate production is able to achieve. Through the hard work of the cast, crew, and the design team we were able to create a genuine piece of theatre. I learned a great deal about myself both as a director and as a person. I discovered I have the ability to create a successful production, but that I also have much more to learn about the process. I learned how to collaborate with and learn from my peers while working toward a common goal. As director, you must study and be familiar with all aspects of theatre because you are in charge of all the different pieces that form a production.