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## The Collaborative Process in Directing A Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

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**THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS IN DIRECTING *A CAT ON A  
HOT TIN ROOF***

A Thesis Presented

by

JARED CULVERHOUSE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

September 2015

Department of Theater

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**THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS IN DIRECTING A CAT ON A  
*HOT TIN ROOF***

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JARED CULVERHOUSE

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# ABSTRACT

## REFLECTIONS ON THE CREATIVE PROCESS

SEPTEMBER 2015

JARED CULVERHOUSE, B.F.A. TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY AT SAN

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M.F.A UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Gina Kaufmann

With this thesis I will explore the many challenges that confront a leader on a creative project, the difficulties that prevent open communication, and the discoveries that I will use to serve myself on future projects. Through diligent notes during the multiple months that *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* took to produce, I was able to re-create what my experience was and how it benefitted me moving forward.

This thesis will document the entire process from play selection, through the final product including the response from the audience. Through this document I will try and highlight, how my own skills were tested, expanded, and seasoned throughout the process. In addition to the study of my own learning, this thesis will highlight the valuable advice that I received from instructors, as well as documenting the implementation of said advice in this university setting. In addition to looking at myself, I also will identify some things that I will be on the lookout for in future creative ventures, both from fellow collaborators, and from institutions.

Eventually when this process was in the books, I looked back on the experience fondly, and with a sense of pride. I was able to reflect in the post-mortem phase of the production, and identify room for growth, but above and beyond that identify where growth had occurred during the work, not only in this process, but also in my three-year journey at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

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# CHAPTER 1

## GOALS AND SELECTION

### Introduction

Collaboration is a word that gets a lot of vocal time in the world of theater, and in academic theater in particular. As I set out to explore what drew me to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, one of my major goals was to be more collaborative, and to stick by this goal no matter the reaction of others on the project. To me collaboration is the collective creative process, using everyone's input to make the best product possible. This gave me a chance to learn about the value of working in conjunction with others, to discover how it affects the final product positively or negatively, and to re-evaluate some older concepts that I had formulated during my time in theatre prior to heading to graduate school. There were plenty of challenges going into this production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, but none turned out to be more challenging or rewarding than this commitment to the collaborative process. Below are the benchmarks outlined by the department that I strived to achieve in my time here. These are the benchmarks I committed to when I entered this program, and these are the benchmarks that I diligently kept in mind during this thesis-process. Here they are as listed on the website prior to applying to the graduate program:

### Benchmarks



Each student must be able to demonstrate a satisfactory proficiency with regard to the following directorial responsibilities:

### **I. Action & Storytelling**

Identifying and illuminating “what happens” in the text and making it “happen in front of us” by creating a structure of information, impressions, images and ideas through the manipulation of all available theatrical elements.

### **II. Analysis & Conceptualization**

- Breaking down the text, understanding its dramaturgical structure and significance, how it works as a live event, and conceiving a vision for presentation of discoveries.

### **III. Organization & Preparation**

- Extrapolation and planning of the rehearsal process, the moment-to-moment life of the event, and the overall experience for actors and audience.

### **IV. Working with Collaborators**

- Exchanging images, ideas and intuitions with performers, designers and other members of the production team in a manner that enables those involved to contribute fully as creative partners.

### **V. Solicitation of Support**

- Enlisting the energy, resources, creativity and “buy-in”, of performers, production team, granting organizations and anyone else capable contributing to the success of the project.

### **VI. Expanding & Sharing Knowledge**

- Continuing to expand knowledge of the various theater arts, the Humanities, areas of specialization, and the world at large. Imparting an understanding of text, related material, process, and techniques in a clear, concise and repeatable manner.

## **VII. Networking & Marketing**

- Presentation of professional/artistic self for colleagues, employers, granting organizations and audience in various formats and settings including portfolios, interviews, letters, press and advertisements.

Many of those skills were successfully utilized on this production. Many of these were already prevalent in my work when I started here in the Fall of 2012, while others I have continued to develop over my time at the university. However, the one skill that really provided a challenge was *Working with Collaborators*. Enabling those involved in the creative process to contribute fully as creative partners seemed a simple concept in theory but proved very challenging in practice.

### **Selection Process**

The selection process for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was an uneventful one really. I was told that the department wanted to produce a show with a large cast, and one that was not contemporary. This wasn't the easiest task and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* wasn't my first choice either, I wanted to direct a Shakespeare play. Not really because of a huge interest, but because I had limited experience in proscenium spaces and I thought it would be a nice classical check, on a resume that was otherwise devoid of classical work. This idea was a no-go as the

department had already committed to a production of the *Merchant of Venice* that was going to be produced at the start of the 2014-15 academic year. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise, since I had much more artistic interest in Williams work versus Shakespeare's.

So I set out to search for a text that was worthy of the huge Rand stage, with a large cast to accommodate the students, and a script that would challenge me as a director. I read a bunch of different scripts and finally turned to one that I had actually written about in an essay to get into the program: Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. There are multiple versions of this script: an original one from 1953, another one from 1958, and then a rewrite from 1974. I wanted to use the one from 1974 because it was the most current and was how Williams had initially intended the play to live. I felt that the 1974 version of the play was darker, meaner, and more honest. Seeing the teeth of *Cat on full display* made me much more interested in the characters than earlier versions I had read or seen, including the very tame film version with Elizabeth Taylor and Paul Newman. I went back and looked at what I wrote about the script as an entry exam into the program, and came to the conclusion that I needed to do this play. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was the only play I suggested for my thesis, and the 1974 version was accepted by the committee and put into the season. The journey began.

Early on in my thesis proposal I identified perceived challenges to this piece of theater, which included presenting the play through a fresh lens without sacrificing Tennessee Williams' regional voice; working with undergraduate

actors who are asked to play iconic roles; and finally undertaking studious documentation of the process so I could later write an effective and accurate thesis. These perceived challenges paled in comparison to the actual difficulties that arose; the choices dealing with race and how it is portrayed on stage, maintaining an open forum for ideas and opinions, and the most difficult task of all-- deciding what voices to listen to and ultimately which ones offered no value to the production. These are the subjects that I will try and cover as I work through the production process, trying to identify the tools that I used to handle the problems, including but not limited to help from mentors, collaborators, and outside research.

## CHAPTER 2

### RACE AND INITIAL PREPARATION

#### Race in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

The concept of race was something that had to be re-evaluated throughout the process. The first look at it that I really got was working with Megan Lewis's class on a presentation on critical race theory. In looking at race in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, I discovered a review of an all-black cast that starred James Earl Jones and Terrence Howard, where the servants and their lack of agency spurred the reviewer to refer to them as ghosts.

*The play's African-American characters, Sookey and Lacey, two servants, function merely to support the business of the main action. In both the original stage and film versions, Sookey and Lacey are whisked quietly on and off, in and out of the frame, like ghosts without dimension or even the minstrelsy or the comic relief afforded by such actors as [Hattie McDaniel](#) decades earlier. (The original Broadway production also featured two unnamed blues musicians portrayed by singer-guitarist Browns McGhee and blind harmonica player [Sonny Terry](#).)*

*For the most part, in Williams's plays, African Americans are depicted as the curiously silent other lurking in the sidelines of servitude. Except in a few later (and lesser known) works, they are void of conflict or epiphany, either referenced with derogatory playfulness (as Amanda Wingfield does in *Glass Menagerie* when, intercepting her daughter's offer to serve dessert, insists "You be the lady this time and I'll be the darkey!") or absent altogether.*

This was the start of my being more cognizant of the fact that we do read bodies of color on stage as such and every decision has to be aware of that fact. Included in this concept of race was looking at casting some of our faculty members of color in the iconic roles of Big Daddy and Big Mama. Faculty as a whole shot this down. In hindsight it was a smart decision. My thoughts about

color-blind casting were borne out of a short-lived trend in New York in the early 00's that basically opened the floodgates on thoughtless colorblind casting. However the more I looked into it, the more that scholarship pointed to the problematic nature of assuming that an audience wouldn't look at bodies or read them a specific way. This concept of the audience's reception of race through the lens of how they read bodies on stage opened my eyes to the importance of clear choices, and reiterated that the easiest choices are oftentimes not the best. In the end we cast the show with two white faculty members, Milan Dragicevich and Julie Nelson, and they turned out to be powerful choices for the roles.

### **Casting the Servants**

As the show progressed and I prepared to cast the roles, including the roles of Sookey and Lacey, the two servant characters, the subject of race was mentioned multiple times, and there were some heated arguments about the choices that I made, most notably the racially charged decision to not cut the word "nigger" from the text, which is used in this line of Big Daddy's:

*"I quit school at ten years old an' went to work like a n----r in the field,"*

This was a choice that was debated by myself and the dramaturg assigned to the production, with both of us going through bouts of thinking one way was superior to the other. There were multiple concerns expressed from different sources that the audience would check out, and not be able to pay attention to the rest of the show after hearing that word.

With racist vandalism happening on the campus, and the explosion of police violence against citizens of color, this subject had some very heated, very appropriate emotions attached to it. This was all part of the process of making the final decision when it came to casting and also how to deal with the text. I was aware that we couldn't do the play inside of a vacuum and pretend that these other instances weren't happening, but I was also torn with the value of truth, with eliminating the potential origin of many of the modern race issues, by changing the representation of our history for this production. With all this in mind I had to decide how to audition and eventually cast the production.

### **Casting the Play**

The casting process for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was a smooth one. I wanted to get the servant characters in the production to represent both white and black bodies, making the way race was portrayed on the stage more of a class thing as opposed to a racial one. In hindsight this was naïve and I was just trying to avoid the subject, because I was scared that I might make the wrong choice and to be honest, because I am white, straight, and male. Being this trifecta of privilege I was very concerned that any decision I made would set me up for failure. There were so many opinions on what I should do, and so many of them were borne out of agendas other than what is best for the production. I tried to listen and be respectful of everyone's thoughts on the subject, and in the end decided to cast the show with different races representing the servant class. I cast three actresses to play the servant roles, one white actress, and then two black actresses. All three women knew one another and sang together at the

audition. I wanted to use this vocal sound to help build the soundscape of the home and set up the idea of the warm southern summer, since the audience would be entering from a brutal New England February. In addition to the story telling aspect, I thought that giving the performers in the roles more to do would make their characters have more value than the initial script provided. In theory this seemed like a good idea, to try and allow the servant class a moment to express their humanity within the walls of this estate, but it wasn't to be. Early on in the process one of the actresses dropped the production, leaving me with one black servant and one white servant: a very specific and unintended choice that I knew had to be remedied, I dragged out the inevitable conversation with the white actress as long as I could, but finally asked her to drop the show. She was excited about it, having her own concerns about that casting choice, other projects that offered more of a creative payoff, and various other commitments. Now we were down to one African-American actress in the role of Sookey, with the role of Lacey being delegated to an offstage voice. This was exactly the way that Tennessee Williams had dealt with the role of Lacey in the 74' remount and we were about to see how this played to a modern educated audience.

In terms of casting the rest of the roles we were lucky. I was able to find two young actors with the emotional depth and work ethic to fully encompass the roles of Brick and Maggie. Gooper and Mae were taken care of shortly after that, and Big Mama and Big Daddy were already going to be represented by faculty members. At the end of callbacks I felt that I was able to achieve a strong



company and one that the designers who showed up to auditions and the dramaturg could get behind.

## CHAPTER 3

### DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

#### Design Meetings

Directing theater is about wearing multiple hats at once. This is never more apparent than wrapping up your casting process, while simultaneously working on the design elements for the production.

The initial design process for *Cat* was a difficult one partly because of inherent, systemic problems with the current format for production at the university but also because of choices I made along the way that were unsuccessful. For this particular section I will focus on what I can change and take with me to other jobs at different venues. One thing I wish I would have done a better job with is coming in to the initial meeting with a more inspiring speech, and concrete research to get the design meeting started on the right track.

At the first design meeting I was basically sat down in a room with a group of people who were waiting for me to tell them, how I saw the play. This didn't feel like processes that I have worked in before, because there is usually more conversation outside of the production meetings where this inspiration takes place. In my experience these meetings are kind of a check in, not a presentation venue. While admittedly I was a little annoyed that I was required to inspire other artists to do work that they should love to do, I still would go about it differently next time. Even if I risked over doing it a little and being repetitive it is still much

better than trying to come back after a room deals with uncomfortable silence. In the future I would prepare to talk about the play, my journey with it, my thoughts about it and what is imperative to the telling of the story.

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* offers up a lot in terms of design potential, despite the fact that the entire play is set in one room. Williams was noted as being proud of this play because it is Aristotelian in structure. This bedroom is part of a much larger house that was once the main house of a slave plantation. The Pollitt property is said to be 28,000 acres, an incredibly large property. For a frame of reference Central Park is 843 acres. Dealing with a space this large, but being confined to a bedroom, in a house with no locked doors, is central to the story telling of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. This friction between the openness of the property and the complete lack of privacy helps us to understand the pressures of being in this family, pressure from one family member to another, but also pressure from the societal circles that they run in. Brick and Maggie are essentially caged animals for this entire production: she refers to herself as a “cat”, and at one point the stage directions call for Brick to defend himself with a chair like a lion tamer. These images add to the animal-like quality of the characters and it was vital to have an overall finished design that reflected that.

### **Building a Creative Space**

To try and change the muddled feel of the first design meeting, I moved the following meeting to a different location, the graduate office. This change of venue spoke to the need to calm the unfocused nature of the first meeting, open up conversation and put the ball back in the court of the creative team, and

relieve the pressure of a poorly designed meeting room that served as our general design meeting locale.

One of the books that I read in preparing for this leadership role was *Creativity Inc.* by the CEO of Pixar, Ed Catmull. In it he outlines their company's need to restructure the venue where meetings take place, going on to describe what he considers a horrible space for inducing his collaborators to become their best creative selves, and identifies this space as a problem that the company had to change.

“For thirteen years we had a table in the large conference room at Pixar that we call West One. Though it was beautiful, I grew to hate this table. It was long and skinny, like one of those things you'd see in a comedy sketch about an old wealthy couple that sits down for dinner—one person at either end, a candelabra in the middle—and has to shout to make conversation.”

Excerpt From: Ed Catmull with Amy Wallace. “Creativity, Inc.” iBooks.

Catmull then goes on to basically describe the scenario that takes place in every production meeting at the University.

We'd hold regular meetings about our movies around that table—thirty of us facing off in two long lines, often with more people seated along the walls—and everyone was so spread out that it was difficult to communicate. For those unlucky enough to be seated at the far ends, ideas didn't flow because it was nearly impossible to make eye contact without craning your neck. Moreover, because it was important that the director and producer of the film in question be able to hear what everyone was saying, they had to be placed at the center of

the table. So did Pixar's creative leaders: John Lasseter, Pixar's creative officer, and me, and a handful of our most experienced directors, producers, and writers.

When it comes to creative inspiration, job titles and hierarchy are meaningless. That's what I believe. But unwittingly, we were allowing this table—and the resulting place card ritual—to send a different message. The closer you were seated to the middle of the table, it implied, the more important—the more central—you must be. And the farther away, the less likely you were to speak up-  
[...]

Excerpt From: Ed Catmull with Amy Wallace. "Creativity, Inc." iBooks.

<https://itun.es/us/LbgUR.1>

In the smaller more intimate venue of the graduate office, the only people present were the designers of the production and the assistant directors. There was no outer circle to feel left out, or act out. Everyone in the space could easily be involved and make eye contact with other team members in the space. Not having the production manager facilitating gave everyone a chance to freely explore ideas and more openly talk through things. By taking away the pressure of an overseer, we actually were able to have a process, where ideas flowed and were added to until they either were deemed not the best choice or had morphed into something completely different and more appropriate for our production.

This changing of the venue could be seen as trivial, but as a true mid-career professional going to a graduate program to learn, I didn't need to discover how to research a script and make strong choices. If I hadn't been making strong choices, then I wouldn't have been working enough to be a mid-

career professional. The next step for me as a director was really looking at what it meant to be a leader of a creative group, how to best set that group up for success, and then look at the resulting production to identify what did help and what didn't. So something as simple as moving a meeting to get all the designers in a better creative headspace, was something that required very little effort and yielded a positive result.

### **Starting Gate**

After finding the appropriate space for creative discussions, we were able to get down to brass tacks from a design perspective, and the set was the first thing that needed to be addressed. The set designer introduced the idea that the whole play be set in a cotton field, which to be honest was an idea that I wasn't super excited about, but still I kept quiet and let it play itself out just in case there was something there that might serve the final design. Truthfully, the way that the Pollitt's money was earned is something that is probably all too often white-washed, but if that becomes the motivating factor for choices that are made, then the play has become a vehicle for an agenda, and as a story-teller I am trying to do everything but that. After we moved on from a cotton field and settled on a more realistic bedroom, we had a tedious discussion about the need for doors, which I felt were important. There were entire scenes that used the doors as a way of keeping someone out, there were knocks on doors that interrupted action, and there was that sense of false privacy that these doors created. All these reasons made it imperative to me that we have doors on the set.

The question that kept being posed in multiple discussions was why do we “need” doors? This same question can always be answered with you don’t really “need” anything by definition of the word need. After a point this line of questioning started to feel like a toddler saying “why” to everything you say, to the point of frustration. All plays can be done with nothing but an empty stage; however, that is not why I attended a graduate program. I wasn’t interested about learning how do more with less. My personal needs and goals as a student and as an artist were to work on something large and grand with a big cast on a proscenium stage. This was something that both myself, and Gina Kaufmann, my graduate advisor, identified during the selection process as important. I remained patient throughout this process, but later had to dig my heels in to get what the show needed.

This door issue was the perfect opportunity to try out a more collaborative approach, at the end of one meeting I asked all the designers to think on the “door” question and to bring their ideas and opinions with them into the next meeting before the final design due date. This openness didn’t sit well with everyone involved in the process, but I knew that it was the right thing to do. This was definitely the first time that being collaborative caused anger and hurt feelings amongst certain members of the design team. I was told that I had insulted members by allowing others into their process and that my moves were amateur and childish. In another incarnation of myself as an artist I might have had a more hot-tempered reaction, but I was trying to understand how difficult change can be, and asked myself would this explosive reaction to being called

amateur help the production? Since the answer was no, I just listened patiently and insisted on a candid, collaborative process regardless of any one person's difficulties. This was the right decision, the set ultimately leaned towards something more realistic, but with walls that were see-through. This commitment to realism, with a little bit of wistfulness was right in line with what I thought best served the play. Allowing for the audience to see the story and with a tasteful hint of the lack of privacy that Maggie and Brick suffer was just the right balance. The final product was very successful: it was a beautiful stage picture that allowed the actors to interact with it, while not stealing focus from the audience. Overall the commitment to collaboration and staying the course paid dividends in the final product.

### **Additional Design Elements**

Once we got the gist of the space our production would be living in, and the set was finalized, the costumes, lights, and props all really fell into place. In terms of sound there were some conversations to be had. One idea I kept coming back to was using live music, as opposed to recorded tracks, for transitions and pre-show.

I had specific reasons for wanting to go this route. I had been listening to blues music from the region and didn't think that it provided the right soundscape for the play. For one, oftentimes the music seemed to have a comic smile-through-the-pain type of sound that wasn't really the same flavor as the play that I had read, proposed, and wanted to see done. It often sounded like a soundtrack to a buddy comedy or a movie where the two lead characters were animals with



celebrity voices going on an adventure. This was surprising because the mood the music elicited was often very different than the much more serious lyrical content. Since the actual music from the region wasn't serving the script, I thought we should make our own. First of all, this script is 2 ½ hours long just reading it at a table, so when we invite an audience in to watch it, we have to set them up for the type of evening they are going to have. I thought that a nice bluesy, yet classical sound invited them to relax and enjoy a longer nicer meal to consume than providing them with a Chili's style ninety minutes door-to-door experience.

As a southern man, the idea of feeding someone when they come to your home is customary and true to my personal narrative. I consider any theater that I am working in to be a home that I, and the rest of the team, have created, and when we invite the audience in, we should take care in what we are offering them to consume. This care involves their experience from the moment they set foot into our collective space. It concerns how they are set up to watch this particular piece of theater, allowing them to fully experience and absorb the piece of theater we are about to share with them.

The inclusion of live guitar worked nicely because it did invite everyone to relax and not be in too much of a hurry. Still it was not without concerns, some were worried about us using a Jewish, white student to play the blues; as opposed to a black student or hired professional. I was personally a little fed up with people being offended at this point, but in hindsight I understand that these decisions do matter and that a meticulous nature is required to direct a show of

this magnitude. In the end Ben Finn played all originally composed blues music; this alleviated the concern, and provided a student with an opportunity to share a talent, and be involved with an additional piece of theater. In a perfect world I would have loved to have been able to have someone play blues guitar who read as black; however, that person didn't materialize in a search that required a student willing to work for free. Not to mention this search took place in the Pioneer Valley, an area that has some racial diversity, but very little compared to other regions.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE REHEARAL PROCESS

#### The Right Course of Action

While the set was being agreed upon, and the music was beginning to take shape, we were simultaneously getting started with rehearsals. The rehearsal process was smooth for the most part; I was blessed with two talented and dedicated assistant directors, who helped immensely in getting such a big project up and going. One of the great feats in leadership is being able to delegate jobs to collaborators who will be successful and still feel creatively stimulated. Christie Pellegrini was able to spend time working with our children's chorus, while Mac Leslie provided support with the musical element of the show. This dividing of responsibility allowed us to operate more efficiently, and keep everyone creatively involved. I also benefitted from Gil McCauley coming in before even the first design run to give feedback, but oftentimes just to be a presence in the space. The inclusion of two faculty actors gave the show a sense of legitimacy; besides there is no other space where I feel more at home than in a rehearsal room working on a play. Both professional actors came in prepared and ready to work, which set a high standard that the rest of the cast gladly rose to.

Early on in the process I had a meeting with Judyie Al Bilali and we discussed a series of events and possible resources to further along the process. She mentioned a documentary *Bookers Place* by Raymond De Felitta that I should watch I did so, and found it to be a profound look at the quality of life of

blacks in Southern Mississippi in the 50's. They were the forgotten servant class in the fifties, especially in rural America. There were clear class lines drawn and there was a public presentation versus a private reality that were very different narratives.

In addition, Judiye suggested that I re-watch the film with my advisor, Gil McCauley. I did, and that viewing allowed Gil and me to have a candid discussion about race in the production. I shared with him some of my fears about editing out words that might be offensive, and he listened and gave advice. "You do you," was Gil's advice that stuck with me most. I really found value in that advice: it is so simple but true as well. You can't be other people or live in their opinions; you have to answer to yourself. In the end that is what I did.

In that same meeting with Judiye about the production she used the phrase, "the heinous crimes of a bloodline." When I heard this phrase it felt like someone thrown cold water in my face. This was the answer to "What is this play about for you?" A question I think all directors struggle with and fear never finding the honest answer to. I was appalled that it was so easy and sitting there in front of me the whole time, but also weirdly elated at the idea being so clearly articulated. It was the answer to the question that had plagued me ever since I picked up the script seven years prior, the itch I couldn't scratch, literally music to my ears.

I had been challenged by a graduate committee member of mine early on for using the phrase "due diligence" when referring to making a final decision on cutting the offensive language/dealing with race. At the time I had no answer to

give: I knew I wasn't done exploring yet but I didn't have the words to describe what was missing in terms of making my final decision.

The missing element that I couldn't put my finger on was the personal connection to the material. Not the easy answer that I could give anyone: I am from the South so I feel connected to the location, or I like American realism so I feel connected to the genre, but the honest one. I finally had an answer that was as true as this play, the answer that said what was real even if I hadn't wanted to admit it to myself.

This answer was my personal connection to lying that takes place within a family structure, and why I was so instantly connected to it. I had seen it first hand, and understood it in my bones, that familiarity was why I felt I instantly "got" the play. I immediately sat down and wrote the directors note, hoping that the audience could see in one evening what it took me years to discover.

The director's note was as follows:

***"Everything that is casts a shadow."***

***- Neil Gaiman***

**"I have been wrestling with the script of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* for years now basically trying to identify what it is to me as a theatre practitioner. I was instantly drawn to the play the first time I read it, and I've spent the rest of the time since then trying to figure out why the script was**

so appealing to me. As artists we are oftentimes drawn to difficult subject matter that speaks to us on a personal level, and *Cat* was no exception to this dictum. In first trying to identify this pull towards the Williams classic, I jumped on the idea of mendacity—the lying and the liars—as it is so eloquently introduced in the text. On further exploration, it was obvious that the Politts are a family of liars. In continuing down this path, it was the lies that were told “for” someone’s benefit that were the most familiar the jokes about Brick’s serious addiction to alcohol, the laughter at the horrible treatment Big Daddy shows towards Big Momma in front of their children, and so on.

They reminded me of lies told in my own home, lies that covered up alcohol abuse, physical abuse of women and children, and sins so dark and buried it seemed like they never existed. The real heart of the matter, though, is not the lies but the heinous crimes of a bloodline they conceal. Real truth is mined from the secrets that the lies protect, secrets that run deep and are a part of the fabric of the Pollitt’s house, their land, their family, and even their country. Williams sets his story on the old Ochello-Straw plantation, by definition a place that was built on the backs of slave labor, a fact we as a county are still trying to fully digest.

Wrestling with the uncomfortable unspoken truths is where the heart of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* lies. This is a play that refuses to live in the black and the white of right and wrong, but instead choses to live in the grey. Tennessee Williams show us characters that are ugly and beautiful,

**powerful and weak, and outspoken while being deathly afraid to say what they mean.**

**Williams has been quoted as saying that Big Daddy is the best character he wrote because it was the only time he was able to capture, “ crude eloquence.” *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* truly celebrates the light and the shadow, which have to both exist for us to be three dimensional humans, for us to be something that is.**

Uncovering this connection reinvigorated an already robust personal process. The other thing this discovery did was make concrete the decision to present the script warts and all, and to not cut anything from it, offensive language or otherwise. Up until this point I was very wishy-washy on the subject, but after hearing that phrase I had a firm commitment not to make cuts. Keeping the “heinous” was vital to telling the story and the way that the Pollitt family’s fortune was attained was important. There was no mistake in the fact that Big Daddy was dying from cancer: his way of life and the way of life that he represented was also terminally ill. This story had to be presented truthfully, painfully, and honestly, I think as a team accomplished that with this production.

## CHAPTER 5

### TECH AND PERFORMANCE

#### Technical Rehearsals and Previews

As the rehearsal process came to an end, we prepared to move into technical integration: there were minor tweaks with lighting color, costume additions, sound tinkering, and timing of cues. All these tweaks took a little longer because we were working with students in some key positions. Still everyone did a quality job, and the show was prepared to open for previews because of it.

The most important changes came in the directing realm during this time. My initial idea of having each act start and end with a tableau and music wasn't reading. Also I had the servant Sookee singing a song at the top of the show, but her voice wasn't dynamic enough to warrant the choice and it wasn't setting her or the production up for success. I enjoyed both of these things a lot, and it hurt to cut them. Even though it wasn't comfortable to self-edit, it was nice to have a preview performance where I could take the time to self evaluate.

Oftentimes I find the hardest thing to do is stick to your guns, when they require you to check yourself. In this case doing what was right meant editing my own ideas, a painful but necessary step to a better production. Many times people don't do this, and I have certainly seen and been the person that doesn't live up to their own standard for others. In this instance I was able to be honest with myself and move towards the best production possible. In the past I might have forced those things onto the audience.



## **Audience Response**

Above I identified some of the challenges that arose during the design and rehearsal process for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. In this section I want to talk about how the audience received the production, what I took away from the process-related ideas and how they translated into production/product.

The show was a success for me, partly because the acting was so phenomenal, and I can take some credit for that. I believe that, entering this program, one of my biggest strengths was acting coaching, and it paid off during this process, as well as in my three years at UMass. I didn't have too much trouble getting the performances to where they needed to be, and was able to exhibit patience in allowing actors to find their way. The most important structure that I was able to build was one that allowed for mistakes to be made and learned from, as opposed to being afraid of doing something wrong. This freedom to explore and not get it right worked because we had a cast that was so dedicated to doing a great job. Without that commitment from the performers, this would have been a very different process.

For the most part there were no clear objections to the portrayal of race on stage outside of the opinions that were voiced earlier in the process. At one performance in particular I sat next to two African American women who were watching the show. During the speech where Big Daddy uses the offensive language, I heard an audible grunt come from them at the use of the n-word. I was terrified that the two patrons would be offended and not able to concentrate on the show. Minutes later they were both laughing at Big Daddy mocking Big

Momma, at his portrayal of her sashaying her fat body around. I felt justified that as a community of artists we had built a world where the use of that word was an unfortunate but important and valid part of its existence. I felt justified that the grunt happened, because it meant that that word would continue to have a deep effect on this country, an effect that hopefully would lead to some frank conversations about race and ultimately class structure. Even though some of the research, and my colleagues' and mentors' opinions were different than mine, I felt comfortable with the way in which race was presented in this production. Different choices could and hopefully will have a forum to be made in the future, but the choices made for the 2015 production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* at the University of Massachusetts Amherst are ones that I stand behind.

The design elements worked together beautifully. They were harmonious and I take some responsibility for that in keeping an open forum for communication. The live music was successful and added a lot to the feel of the production. Above and beyond that, there were some designers who exhibited real commitment to excellence. That commitment shone through in their work.

The production was a success and I feel that anyone who watched it can agree with that, it was a real treat to be a part of it and exhibited some of the best attributes the theater department has to offer.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Finally I was able to listen to many of the notes that I was given over the course of the show, and use them effectively. I cut songs that I desperately wanted to keep and I cut frozen pictures that I thought were beautiful, because they weren't telling the story in the best way possible. I noted how much this hurt to do, and felt an instant understanding and forgiveness for some of the reactions I got when I forced others to stay that collaborative course.

Change is very hard, and in this instance practicing what I was preaching was easier said than done. I know that there were some differing opinions on whether this removal after previews was good idea or not. In the end I did what I thought was best for the success of this production at this time. I could have made different decisions and might in the future if I was to ever work on this script again, but ultimately the decisions worked for this production.

It was a production that I felt the University could be proud of because it was received well by the audience of young people (who are certainly not Tennessee Williams target audience), it highlighted the work of four of the graduating MFA cohort, and it showcased some of the strongest young actors in the Pioneer Valley holding their own with two veteran performers.

There are lots of things I will take away from this process of working on *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, but none more important than the rules that I will use to gauge my process in the future. Always ask if this is what's best for the production, and

if it isn't, than you have to put it aside. Take all advice at face value, but remember to ask if the person's motivation in telling you their thoughts is based in the success of the production or an outside agenda. Finally, don't be afraid to make a mistake, and try to build an artistic environment where mistakes are welcomed in the design process and the rehearsal process. If you can effectively create a space, mistakes can happen: I used the wrong direction as a barometer for the right direction to travel in. That created a situation where creativity was not only nurtured, but also allowed to flourish.

Giving myself the freedom to live in a space that didn't serve right or wrong and only served the needs of the community really freed me from some old habits, that didn't make the best theater. As I leave this graduate program and go back out into the job market, I am armed with this knowledge. Giving over to the fact that being a leader of a team in a creative process is a situation like no other: there are multiple facets to contend with, personalities, insecurities, egos, motivations, and all other human messiness wrapped in the hyper-dramatic packaging of the artist. Understanding the value of mistakes and the quality of your space is potentially the most important thing, among so many that I learned in this three-year experience.

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