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The Fourth Level of Theatrical Awareness

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

Greg Scurria

Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Performance, 2007

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy, 2010

Major Director: Dr. Noreen C. Barnes

Director of Graduate Studies, Theatre

Virginia Commonwealth University

Richmond, VA

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Abstract

The Fourth Level of Theatrical Awareness

By Greg Scurria, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.
Virginia Commonwealth University, Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010

Major Director: Dr. Noreen C. Barnes, Director of Graduate Studies, Theatre Department

This text is a partial record and narrative of the production of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* that opened on May 1st 2009 for a three day run ending May 3rd 2009 and *Shel*, a collection of Shel Silverstein short plays and poems, which opened on September 18th for a three day run that ended September 20th. It also covers the work done by a small group on Yazmina Reza's *The God of Carnage* during the Spring of 2010. The text details the creative process of the two productions while also examining two hypotheses that grew out of that work. It will examine the heightened sense of ownership experienced while working on *Of Mice and Men* and the subsequent unsuccessful attempt to recreate that atmosphere during *Shel*. The other hypothesis involves the discovery of the fourth level of theatrical awareness and how it can be used to help actors. The fourth level of theatrical awareness exists outside of the traditional character based exploration of text. Students who examine the text using the fourth level attempt to view the play in its entirety without character bias. Actors using the fourth level look at shape, major themes of the play, and spatial awareness in order to analyze the play using a directorial eye. The possible applications of this work will be discussed as well as concerns about its use.

The attempts to apply this fourth level of theatrical awareness in *Shel* will be discussed, as well as the attempts to find practical applications for the fourth level while working with *The God of Carnage*. Finally, this paper will outline a plan for implementing the fourth level of theatrical awareness in a production and highlight other areas of exploration involving dramaturgical investigation. As a whole, it will trace the growth and transformation of these ideas and plot a plan to continue expanding on them in the future.

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Introduction

The decision to turn my attention from acting to directing did not occur because I had some unbelievable moment of self-realization. There was no great moment of epiphany. In fact, I didn't even really make the decision for myself. Jane Brody, my junior acting teacher, pulled me aside one day after our acting class and basically told me that I wasn't destined to be an actor. She told me that she had observed the way I worked and listened to the way I talked during class, and she thought that I should explore being a director instead. She said that the way I viewed both my own work and the work of others in class was with a critical directorial eye instead of an actor's eye. I took her advice to get into directing, and she was right. I do view the plays from a more holistic viewpoint. It was easier for me to view the play as a whole instead of only through the eyes of my character. The same analytical nature that caused my acting teachers to always chide me for being "in my head" served me well when working as a director. My interest in play structure and textual analysis came in handy when working as a director. I directed my first show, *Lovers and Other Strangers* by Joseph Bologna and Renee Taylor, the summer before my senior year of undergraduate work at Louisiana State University. I then directed *some girl(s)* by Neil LaBute that fall. In the spring, I secured a part in the LSU Outworks Festival, a festival of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender plays. My work in *Sexy Commie* was the first time I had tried acting since shifting my focus to directing. At first, I tried to turn off the "director" part of my brain because I had always been told to get out of my head while acting. Trying to act in the traditional way I had always been taught, I struggled mightily. Eventually, I had to give in and

admit that it was impossible for me to work on a play without dissecting it as a director. Over the weekend, I went home and analyzed the play the same way I had *Lovers and Other Strangers* and *some girl(s)*. I looked at more than just my character. I looked at the structure and pacing of the play. I looked at the relationships between the other character and how those relationships could shape their feelings towards me. I decided how my character fit into the greater construction of the play. I tried to determine the purpose of each scene, even those I wasn't in. I asked myself questions that went beyond the traditional character questions posed by Constantine Stanislavski. I was interested in the play as a whole, and this broader view helped me see my character's place in this new world. I immediately found myself more comfortable in rehearsals, and the director also noticed the change. Where I had before always tried to shut down the analytical part of my brain while acting, I now found that allowing that side to work overtime helped me out. After *Sexy Commie* closed, I directed David Lindsay-Abaire's *Rabbit Hole* the summer after my senior year. While working with the actors, I found myself asking them many of the same questions I asked while working on *Sexy Commie*. While I found it interesting that those questions helped them as well, I didn't pay much attention to it at the time. Once I arrived at VCU, I began to think about the way we teach students to act. I began to wonder if there was a way to use directorial theory to help actors. If we taught actors to ask the same questions that directors ask, could we help them be better prepared to work with bad directors? Could we help them become more self-sufficient? But before I had a chance to really flesh out these idea and figure out a way to explore them, another great opportunity presented itself.

Chapter One: *Of Mice and Men* Joining the Project

In February of my first year of grad school, Tony Giamichael and Zach Finch came to me and asked me to direct their production of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. Zach read the play his freshman year of college and had immediately decided that he wanted to play the part of Lenny. He asked Tony to be his George, and the two guys had proposed the production for the spring 2009 S.A.L.T. (Shafer Alliance Laboratory Theatre) season with Michael Sater as the director. After they had been approved by the S.A.L.T. board, Sater was forced to back out because of other commitments. I was Giamichael's TA in Audition Technique, and we had enjoyed working together on his monologues. We had a good chemistry and approached the work in a similar manner. He had an analytical approach to the text and liked to look at the piece as a whole instead of just his part. Because of this good working relationship, he asked me to read the script and see if I would want to direct the production. After reading the play and liking it, I set up a meeting with Giamichael, Finch, and stage manager Eric Arnold. I was a little nervous about working on a project that already had the main actors attached. I had never worked that way before wanted to make sure that I would have the kind of directorial control to which I had become accustomed. I wasn't worried about Giamichael having a big ego because I had created a good working relationship with him, but I wanted to meet with Finch and make sure that he was going to be willing to turn over control of the project he had started. I was also worried about having certain parts cast before the process began. In the past, I had gone into a

show “knowing” who I wanted for certain parts; this almost always changed by the end of the audition process.

The first time I laid eyes on Finch, however, that worry immediately vanished. He was the perfect physical fit for Lenny, and his personality seemed the right match as well. I started the meeting by laying out the ground rules I had created for this production: I had final say on casting, I had final say on blocking/acting decisions, and I had final say on technical decisions. They were completely willing to turn over all power to me. They just wanted to put on a good production; there were no egos in that room. I had gone in prepared for the worst and came out incredibly excited about the process. Because they had been so willing to turn over power, I made the decision to lean on Finch and Giamichael when working on the show. This decision was made partly because of the short time I had to prepare. I agreed to direct the show only weeks before we needed to start rehearsal. I usually take at least three months to live with and explore a script before making any major decisions about casting, technical elements, etc. I didn't have that luxury in this case; what I did have, however, was two guys who had been working with this script for much longer than I had. Giamichael had been working with the script for months; Finch had been dreaming about this production for merely three years. I knew that I could rely on their experience to help me make more informed decisions as long as they weren't expecting me to do so. Because I was able to lay down the ground rule that my word was law, I felt comfortable asking their advice with the knowledge that they would understand if I decided to go in another direction. I also felt comfortable going to them for help because they both had displayed a high artistic intelligence. Giamichael had shown a great theatrical instinct in his monologue work, and our conversations about *Of Mice and Men* had shown that he had a strong grasp on the subject matter. His intelligence, in matters both theatrical and non, was easy

to see. Finch, during our meeting, had told me why he wanted to do *Of Mice and Men*. I could tell that his reasons were very personal and well thought out. He had been a member of the Bachelor of Fine Arts program before being moved to Bachelor of Arts during his sophomore year. Shortly after being “demoted” (as he viewed it), he read *Of Mice and Men* and identified strongly with Lenny. He wanted the opportunity to show the world what he could do, and he had obviously done a great deal of exploration of the text before even deciding to propose the script. Since they had both been willing to turn over the artistic direction of the play, were both obviously invested in the production, had both done lots of research into *Of Mice and Men*, and had displayed a high theatrical intelligence, I felt comfortable asking for their advice on matter that would usually be strictly directorial matters. And it was a good thing I made this decision, because I almost immediately needed their help with the audition process.

Auditions and Casting

For this production, s with my other productions, I had actors audition with cold readings of sides from the play. Having George and Lenny already cast made the process much easier, but it was still a daunting task to find eight more actors. Because some of the characters don't have two person scenes, I was forced to use multi-person sides. This was something I had never done before, and it sometimes created a bit of a cluster on stage. There was a large turnout for the audition, and the process soon got long and repetitive. Here, I turned to Giamichael and Finch for help. I did not know a vast majority of the actors, and it sometimes became hard for me to keep everybody straight. Finch and Giamichael, along with stage manager Arnold, were able to help me keep track of the myriad actors. They also provided information about the different actor's habits (who was a hard worker, who had trouble memorizing lines, who was known for creating drama during the rehearsal process) and provided feedback on their readings. They could tell me who they felt chemistry with and with whom they had trouble connecting. In the end, I came out one actor short. I had two actors I liked but three roles I needed filled. I needed somebody to play Slim, Carlson, or Whit. Again, I turned to Finch and Giamichael for assistance. They put in calls to many different actors and found the perfect person to play Slim: Andrew Donnelly. This allowed me to slide the other two actors, who were weaker actors than Donnelly, into the less important parts. I ended up with the following cast: Tony Giamichael as George, Zach Finch as Lenny, Brian Gartland as The Boss, Taylor Brewerton as Curly, Laura

Murden as Curly's Wife, Andrew Donnelly as Slim, Joey Chahine as Carlson, Mychael Wooling as Crooks, Cooper Forsman as Candy, and Eric Popp as Whit.

Table Work

We started approaching the script the same way I approach every script: marking down beats. While this is a fairly tedious process (we read through the entire script and mark beats for the whole thing), I feel like it accomplishes a lot of things. First, it is important to understand how I define the term "beat." In this process, the beat is any change in the text. This can be a change of subject, a change in attitude, the introduction or interjection of a new character, or something as simple as a small pause being taken. Beats can be completely subjective, and they will change multiple times throughout the rehearsal process as the way the actors approach different scenes change. After we beat out an entire scene, all of the actors go through and individually name the beats. This name can be anything the actors want; it should be the embodiment of how they view the scene. In my work I have encountered a wide variety of beat names: the first line of the beat; a key word from the beat; song or movie titles; quotes from television, songs, or movies; a feeling evoked by the beat; an inside joke between actors; and even the occasional non-sequitur. This process allows them to personalize the beats. We then go around and share our names with the group. While this sometimes provides actors with a new perspective on a beat, it is mostly just fun to see what everybody came up with. Despite the ever-changing nature of the beats, I think it's important to set them at the very beginning of the rehearsal process for a few reasons.

First, it really helps get the actors familiar with the text. Because it requires a higher level of attention than a regular read through (which I also do during the first rehearsal), the actors begin to get more comfortable and familiar with the text. They have to be more attentive, especially when they are not reading. Because anybody can call for a beat change at any time, and because they will be asked their opinion on any beat suggested during one of their scenes, they cannot tune out when they are not speaking. They are forced to actively listen to the other actor's lines, and I believe this helps them when we begin working on blocking. Secondly, the beats provide a nice backbone to the script. They give the show a structure and allow the actors to begin to see how the script ebbs and flows. They can see the speed of the script when beats occur either more or less frequently. They can begin to see times where the characters are uncertain or distressed because the rate of beats will increase. This can help the actors greatly with the tempo and pace of the play. While it does not have to dictate those things (since those questions must ultimately be answered by the actors during the exploration of the text), they can help when the tempo becomes a problem or when two actors have disagreements over the tempo. It also provides a laid-back, relaxed atmosphere for some community building within the cast at the beginning of the rehearsal process. I believe that the cast needs to be a cohesive unit, and these table work sessions provide a place that the actors can interact and bond without the stress that sometimes comes with working on blocking. I have found these sessions to be a good place for me to get a gauge of the different temperaments and attitudes of my cast. I have not always worked with actors I know well, and these sessions allow me to get to know them better while simultaneously seeing how they fit in with the rest of the cast. These sessions are often more leisurely paced and allow for some time to joke around. Again, I feel like they are vital in

creating a community atmosphere for the actors before we move on to the more stressful work of blocking.

Blocking and Rehearsal

It was during these blocking sessions that I first started to notice how Giamichael and Finch were different from the rest of the cast. While these sessions are always relaxed, the *Of Mice and Men* meetings tended to veer off-topic quickly. I believe this was mostly due to the makeup of the cast: nine men and one woman. The nine guys were all friends, and they were easily diverted off topic. Any time this would happen, I would let them explore whatever crazy topic had distracted them before guiding them back to the table work at hand. I noticed, however, that Giamichael and Finch were never the ones to divert the topic. And whenever I started to move the subject back to the work at hand, they were the first to jump behind me and encourage the group to focus. There was also a little resistance to the idea of beating out the entire play (it is a time-consuming process and some actors are resistant to it at first), but Giamichael was quick to vouch for the usefulness of the process. Because he was my student in Audition Technique, he had worked with the beats before, and he was quick to squash any complaints that sprouted up during the process. While I at first wrote this off to our previous working relationship, I had also previously worked with Taylor Brewerton and he was not nearly as vocal in defending the process. It was at this point that I really started to think about the level of commitment to the process that Giamichael and Finch showed.

They were more than just the lead actors in the play. They had wanted to do this play and written up the proposal for the S.A.L.T. board. They had been involved in the casting process. They were the first ones I went to with information on technical aspects of the production. When I met with sound designer Ian Tweedie, I brought them with me. This was partly because I valued their input and partly because I sensed their interest in the other areas of the production. They obviously had more invested in this process than the others, and that came through in the level of attention they paid to the details of the show.

Once we began blocking the show, I continued to notice the higher level of investment from Giamichael and Finch. This is not to say that the other actors were slacking off or lacking in some way. They were behaving just like actors from my previous shows. They came to rehearsal and did everything I would have expected from them. But Finch and Giamichael went the extra mile. Despite having the most lines by a wide margin, Giamichael was the first person off book in almost every scene. They brought more energy to every scene and were more willing to take risks and explore new areas. But all of this I could have written off as the enthusiasm of lead actors. It was not their acting that made me think they were working on a higher level than the rest of the cast; instead, it was how they behaved when they weren't acting that most caught my attention. Most of the cast spent their free time during rehearsal the way one would expect: they talked quietly, read, listened to music, or rested. They did not pay much attention to what was going on during the rehearsal when they weren't actively involved in the rehearsal process. This is nothing out of the ordinary; pretty much every actor I had worked with in the past behaved the same way. I was not angry with their behavior because that was exactly the way I had behaved when I was an undergraduate actor. But Finch and Giamichael behaved differently.

They were attentive to scenes they weren't in and always seemed to be watching with a critical eye.

I noticed this especially in Finch because of his character. Lenny spends much of his stage time in *Of Mice and Men* sitting silently at the back of the stage. There are long stretches where he sits quietly and allows the rest of the scene to flow around him. It would have been easy for Finch to tune out during these long periods of inaction, especially when we were working on a specific moment and repeated the same dialogue multiple times. Finch, however, always stayed engaged during this work. I was amazed during one rehearsal when, because stage manager Eric Arnold was absent, I got lost in the blocking of a scene. I knew we had changed the blocking, but I was unsure which version was the new and which was the old. Even the actors involved in the action, Tony Giamichael and Andrew Donnelly, were uncertain which version was the latest one. Finch, who was sitting on his bunk upstage through the whole section, quickly jumped in and informed us which was the correct blocking. It was at this point that I fully realized how closely he was following the work on other areas of the show.

Of Mice and Men was in rehearsal for six weeks, and at the end of week four we hit a rut. Everybody was off book and the entire show was blocked, but we were not quite ready to just move in to the final polishing phase of the rehearsal process. I was afraid the play would get stale during the week of run-throughs before starting tech rehearsal. We then had a run-through that went incredibly badly. Before giving notes, we took a ten minute break and I went outside to get some fresh air. I came back ready to give a "rally the troops" style speech, but I was shocked to find Giamichael already doing just that. He gathered the cast around and gave them his own pep talk about the importance of keeping the text fresh and alive. He talked to them about making new discoveries and not allowing their actions to become robotic or memorized. I

think it meant a lot more to the cast coming from another cast member instead of me because Giamichael was living those same mistakes. This was not me, as the director, scolding them for what they were doing wrong. Instead, Giamichael was able to talk to them in terms of “we.” Everything that they needed to improve on was also something that he was struggling with. This made the criticism easier to take, and I think therefore more effective as well. The following night’s rehearsal was worlds better, and the show was back on the upward swing.

Technical Rehearsals

Both guys also made tech rehearsals much easier. I run a pretty laid back rehearsal, and I have always encouraged the actors to ask me any questions they may have. I encourage them to stop if they are having trouble or need to ask about anything from character development to blocking. This only changed when we start doing actual run-throughs, and even then they are encouraged to ask questions in between scenes if they are having any problems. I believe that this creates a more open creative environment for the actors. I want them to view our work more as collaboration than as a dictatorship. For the most part, this system works well. I feel like the actors have more invested in their characters because they are allowed greater creative freedom. I have occasionally had actors who tried to take advantage of this freedom during the rehearsal process, but I have always been able to have a quiet word with them and get them back on track. At least, this usually works during the regular rehearsal process. Tech rehearsal, on the other hand, is an entirely different matter.

This tech process was different for me in a few ways. All of my previous directorial experience (other than my work on *Beauty and the Beast* at Warren Central High School where we had a technical director who took care of all those issues) had been working with the Renegade Shakespeare Company. Renegade Shakespeare was a small company I helped found

at LSU. Its goal was to provide new acting and directing opportunities for Louisiana State University students who weren't getting to work within the school system. I directed during our first year or two of operation, and we were a grass roots company. We had no sound equipment, no set pieces, no permanent performance space, and a \$200 budget for our shows. That budget had to include renting a performance space. Because of these restrictions, most of our technical elements were bare bones. The sound system was a boom box with a CD or iPod hooked up that I had to run myself. We only had the two lights, so we were never able to do anything more complicated than lights up, lights down. So I was unprepared for the technical requirements in *Of Mice and Men*.

This was the first time I had ever had to worry about things like sound cues or lighting cues. I had to set sound levels and work with my lighting designer to make sure all of the scenes looked right. It didn't help that I was not able to meet with my lighting designer until the week before tech. He was still hanging and focusing lights during the tech rehearsals. All of this led to a very long, drawn out tech process. I was a little frazzled by all of the new responsibilities I had, and to top it all off our set was still being built and painted during the day. With all of these distractions, the cast had a lot of down time. Because I had been encouraging them to talk during the rehearsal process, some of them took this down time as an opportunity to hold a conversation. This usually would not bother me, but it soon became a distraction while I was trying to hold a conversation with my designers and stage manager. Once I had asked them to be quiet, Finch and Giamichael stepped up and kept them in line. Again, I think the message had more impact because it came from their fellow cast members instead of from me. They were able to not sound like an authority figure while keeping the rest of the cast in line. This was an invaluable service as I worked to iron out all of our technical difficulties. When it came time for

the actual performance, Finch and Giamichael again stepped up and took a leadership role. They ran the warm-ups and made sure that everyone was in costume and ready for places at the beginning of the show. During one lackluster performance, Giamichael gathered the cast together at intermission and gave an inspirational speech to pick up the energy and commitment level. They also stayed after the shows to help clean the stage area and put up all the props and costumes.

The Reasons for the Difference in Attitude

Throughout the entire casting and rehearsal process, Finch and Giamichael behaved differently than any other actors I had worked with before. At first, I thought that their behavior was because they were the leads of the show. But the more I experienced it, the more I became convinced that there was something else at play. I started to think that their behavior was tied to the unique circumstances surrounding the proposal of the show. I began to think that they were more invested in the process because they helped propose and cast the show. They felt more responsible for the product being placed on stage, and I believe that feeling of responsibility helped push them above and beyond the normal behavior of actors. For all intents and purposes, they served as producers as well as performers. They had been a part of the process from the very beginning, and this extra responsibility really made them care about the entire production.

I began to look back at my own transition from actor to director and recognized some parallels. I was a hard working actor (if not a particularly good one), and I always felt like I put in a respectable amount of work for all of my characters. But when I started to work on my first directorial project (*Lovers and Other Strangers*) the amount of preparation I did grew exponentially. I suddenly felt much more responsible for the play as a whole. In the past, I was mostly concerned with how my part would go. My first concern as an actor had always been my

character and my scenes. I don't think this was a selfish thing; instead, it was how I was taught to approach my character work. I learned to do character analysis based solely on my character. My goal, or objective, became the central focus of all my work. I did little to no work on scenes that didn't involve me or characters with whom I didn't have interaction. I was effectively cutting out large areas of the play (since I was never the main character of a play or appeared in every scene) and ignoring them in my preparatory work. Because of this, I was often missing out on important information that could have helped shape my character. I was never taught to look at the greater shape or structure of the play as a whole.

Once I started directing, however, I started to feel more responsible for the direction of the play as a whole (and with good reason, since it was now my responsibility). I noticed that Finch and Giamichael also seemed more interested in the play as a whole, and this led them to become more responsible during the rehearsal process. They were no longer worried mainly with their own scenes; they became more invested in other scenes as well. They also seemed to be approaching their characters from a slightly different angle than the other actors. They seemed to approach the work with more of a director's eye. They were looking at things like staging, pacing of scenes, transitions, and what I call play shape. Shape is basically the rise and fall of action throughout the play. This is an inclusive view of the play that views all of the scenes as interconnected pieces working towards creating a coherent whole. The first scene of *Of Mice and Men*, for example, exists mainly to provide background information, set the time and place of the play, and establish the relationship between George and Lenny. Within the scene, there are plenty of moments of heightened anger or emotion; but how do those fit into the shape of the play as a whole? George's anger over finding Lenny with the dead mouse would surely register on the shape of the scene, but it might not be a vital enough moment to be part of

the play as a whole. Therefore, it would be a mistake for Giamichael to play that moment at a ten. There will be moments later in the show where he needs to go higher than that moment. He needs to not only leave himself somewhere to go within that scene but also somewhere to go emotionally later in the play. I found Giamichael asking me questions about moments like this that reflected a more long term view of the piece. He was concerned with the entire arc of his character and the entire play.

Finch likewise showed an interest in the larger picture. The Lenny character spends a great deal of the play sitting in the bunkhouse while other people hold conversations around him. While Finch could have easily spent those long periods of inaction daydreaming, he always stayed engaged and interested in the rehearsal process. He was especially attentive to the way George interacted with the others, and he used George's feelings towards a character to help determine his own actions. The extra level of attention and commitment shown by these two actors made me start thinking; how can you get actors to invest this heavily in a production if they did not help conceive the project? Now, perhaps the best way to get people to invest more heavily in the piece is to work in a truly communal system. Allow everybody equal input in the different stages of preparation and they are more likely to fully commit to the play as a whole and not just their part. Unfortunately, most of the theatre world does not work in this manner. Also, there are plenty of theatre artists who would not enjoy working in this way. Would it be fair to exclude them from the creative process because they don't want to be more than actors? Of course not. I had long thought that actors were approaching plays from too narrow of a viewpoint. Since I made the transition to director, I was constantly amazed at how narrow the focus of the actors could be. This level of commitment was just another way that I believed approaching a script with more of a directorial eye could help actors. I wanted to find a way to

start exploring these ideas without completely abandoning the traditional actor/director relationship. I wanted to figure out how to help actors approach the play with an eye towards the whole, start to ask questions from a more holistic point of view, and try to instill the greater commitment that seemed to come from the sense of ownership felt by Finch and Giamichael. And I wanted to do all of these things without completely shifting to a communal form of theatre.

Chapter Two: *Shel* A New Idea

The idea for a way to attempt this came to me in the car on the way to Birmingham, Alabama for the Southeastern Theatre Conference in spring of 2009. I was riding in the car with Josh Chenard, Jenn Catton, and Ida Onyedike. Our conversation turned to our dream productions. What play would you direct if you had no restrictions placed on you? If you could do any play without having to worry about cast, design restrictions, or money issues, what would that be? As one of my picks, I mentioned that I would love to work on some of the short plays by Shel Silverstein. I had twice used his short play *The Best Daddy* for ten minute play festivals. I had directed it in the *Night of One-Acts* at Louisiana State University and for my Freshman Discovery Project at VCU. I loved that script and had enjoyed reading his other short works. Later in the 13-hour trip, Catton started talking about her thesis project, *Say Love*, and how her actors were working on creating their own pieces. I thought back on my idea for working on Shel Silverstein plays and mentioned that it would be fun to also take some of his poetry and creating theatrical pieces from them. As we discussed our favorite Shel Silverstein poems, I began to think about that extra level of commitment I had seen from Finch and Giamichael. I thought about trying to combine Silverstein's short plays and his poems as a way to explore both

that extra level of commitment and the possibility of using the directorial eye to grow as an actor. By the end of that car ride, the idea behind what would become known as *Shel* was almost fully formed. I wanted to pick some short plays and cast a small company of actors to work on them. I would direct those short plays like I would in a traditional play. In addition, each actor would choose a Silverstein poem and create their own theatrical piece based on that poem. They would act as the director and have complete creative control over that piece. I hoped to accomplish two things with this format. First of all, I wanted to see if any of the actors would step up and take a higher level of ownership of the show because they were also serving as director. Would that feeling of possession make them behave like Finch and Giamichael did during *Of Mice and Men*, or was that a unique experience? I hoped to see the actors step up and raise their level of commitment as a result of their heightened responsibility. Secondly, I wanted to see if their work as a director would change the way that they approached their acting. I hoped that while they were directing they would start to look at their pieces as a whole. Then, that point of view would hopefully start to change the way they looked at their own work as actors. While this didn't happen like I hoped it would, the idea behind it eventually became the basis for my four levels of actor awareness.

Casting Problems

I held auditions, and my company ended up being Nicole Carter, Ryan Asher, Jenny Hann, Brian Gartland, Tony Sanchez, and Taylor Brewerton. The company was going to work on the short plays as follows: Gartland and Carter in *The Best Daddy*; Asher and Gartland in *One Tennis Shoe*; Carter and Sanchez in *No Skronking*; Asher and Hann in *All Cotton*; Brewerton and Gartland in *Abandon All Hope*; Brewerton and Carter in *Click*; Hanna and Sanchez in both *Blind Willie and the Talking Dog* and *Wash and Dry*; and Brewerton and Asher in *The Lifeboat is Sinking*. In addition, each actor picked the following poem to devise/direct: Ryan Asher chose *Nobody*; Jenny Hann chose *Poison*; Taylor Brewerton chose *Clooney the Clown*; Brain Gartland chose *It's All the Same to the Clam*; Nicole Carter chose *Paul Bunyan*; and Tony Sanchez chose *The Two Generals*. I will now examine the problems that faced the cast as a whole before looking at each short play and poem individually.

The majority of my cast (Gartland, Asher, Carter, and Sanchez) were also cast in a production of *Cementville* with a first-time director. I didn't think this would be a problem, as they each assured me that they would be able to meet and do table work with me for the week our schedules overlapped and work on getting off book so we could really start to work after *Cementville* closed. Unfortunately, only half of this happened. While I was able to meet with

each pairing and do the usual table work, they did not do their part in working on memorizing lines. In fact, getting off book would be an ongoing problem throughout the whole process. The biggest problem, however, was the way *Cementville* affected them artistically. I want to make it clear that I have never actually had a conversation with the director about *Cementville* or his directorial process in that show. All of the information I have comes directly from my actors and therefore is obviously biased. Their stories, however, were similar enough and have been repeated by other people who worked on the show to the point that I feel comfortable talking about what went on in that show. I also know how I observed my actors behaving, and I believe this behavior was a direct reaction to *Cementville*. The experience was not a positive one for any of my actors. The director had, before the first rehearsal, blocked the entire show on his own. The actors were told exactly where to go at all times. They were not allowed any freedom of movement throughout the show. The cast felt unduly confined, and this started the friction between director and cast. In addition, they were not allowed any leeway to adlib or explore new moments. If an actor changed anything about the play without the director's permission, he would stop the rehearsal and make sure to change the moment back. The director continually criticized the actors without ever providing positive feedback or reinforcement. This created a very negative environment and affected my actors' attitudes. By the end of the run, every actor I talked to was just relieved to be done with the whole experience.

Dealing With Problems of Artistic Confidence

So this is the environment four of my actors were coming from when we started rehearsal. On top of that, the two actors who weren't a part of *Cementville* (Brewerton and Hann) were not working together in any of the short plays. That meant that every short play had at least one person who was a part of *Cementville*. As we started working on blocking, I could sense a lot of anger and resentment in my actors, especially Carter and Gartland. I was worried that their negative feelings would start to affect our rehearsal process. Both seemed to be unhappy with theatre because of their experience. I wanted to allow them to get those feelings out, so we spent some time early in the rehearsal process discussing everything that happened during the show. We discussed the problems they had with the way the director worked as well as how they could have handled the situation better. While it sounded like the director was not the easiest director to work with, it soon became apparent that Gartland, Carter, Asher and Sanchez could have conducted themselves better as well.

This was the first time he had ever directed. He had not even taken a directing class and was obviously not ready for all of the responsibility. He was overwhelmed by everything. Instead of trying to help him, his actors viewed it as weakness and rebelled against him. When confronted with less-than-ideal circumstance (like being presented with blocking before they've

had their first rehearsal), the actors took a confrontational view instead of trying to work within the framework of the play. These students want to go out and become professional actors, so we talked about how they would handle this situation in the professional world. Dictatorial directors can be found all over the place out in the real world, and an actor has to be able to perform at a high level in spite of the restrictions placed on them by the director. None of the actors were happy with their performance in *Cementville*; they allowed their problems with the director and his vision for the show to negatively affect their own work. I talked to them about the importance of becoming self-sufficient as an actor.

As we did table work and I asked them basic questions about character development, they began to realize that they had not done this work for *Cementville*. They had allowed their feelings about the director to affect the way they prepared as actors, and that lack of work had hurt their acting. I think that this realization helped them put behind some of the bitterness they felt about the *Cementville* experience. In addition, I worked hard to give them artistic freedom during the early part of the rehearsal process. During the first rehearsal where we put *The Best Daddy* on its feet, I asked Brian Gartland if he would improvise some funny lines during Carter's monologue. He turned to me with a look of shock on his face before rushing to me and giving me a big hug. "Thank you so much," he said. "I can't remember the last time I was able to improvise!" He had gotten so used to not being allowed artistic freedom that he was ecstatic to be given the slightest freedom. While it felt good to be the liberator of their artistic soul, there was a major downside as well. The actors were so used to being told exactly what to do and when to do it that they were afraid to make their own choices. Time and again I had to ask them to make bold choices without first checking with me that it was okay. This lack of confidence in themselves caused a major problem in each of the individual plays.

The Lifeboat is Sinking

To start, it's important to note that two of the short plays didn't make it into performance. Rehearsals ran nightly from 6:00 to 10:00, but that was broken down into two two-hour rehearsal blocks. One play would meet from 6:00 to 8:00 and another would meet from 8:00 to 10:00. We met six days a week (taking Thursdays off because I had to teach Speech 121 at night), which meant that each play got two rehearsals a week for the first two weeks. Because none of the plays were longer than 15 minutes, we could really dig into the text quickly. *The Lifeboat Is Sinking* ran into trouble right from the beginning. We met for our first rehearsal and did a rough run-through just to allow the actors to feel the action of the play in their body. In the piece, a husband and wife are sitting on their bed and the wife is creating a hypothetical situation: they are on a lifeboat with their daughter and his mother, and one member of the party must be thrown overboard to save the others. The wife browbeats the husband the entire play to throw his mother overboard. She threatens the hypothetical safety of herself and their child, constantly reminding him that his mother is old and feeble. She even tries to influence his decision by accusing his mother of eating the last biscuits and drinking the last of the clean water. When he finally gives in and mimes throwing his mother overboard, the wife (after very briefly consoling him) starts the game over to try and make him decide between herself and their daughter.

Because the wife is constantly berating the husband, Ryan Asher was having trouble finding different tactics and levels. She was playing the character as one note, and the scene soon became repetitive. Both actors also struggled with the confinement placed on them by the bed. Because the bed served as the “lifeboat,” they were not allowed to use any other part of the stage. They had a difficult time finding different physical pictures while staying out of the “water.” Asher seemed timid and refused to make choices for herself. I believe this was a byproduct of her *Cementville* experience, but it severely slowed the rehearsal process. During the two hour rehearsal, we were only able to do a read through and one rough run through. We hadn’t even started to set blocking or make definitive acting choices. On the day we were next scheduled to meet, Asher fell sick and couldn’t be at rehearsal. She did not let me know she was ill, however, and Brewerton and I sat and waited for an hour for her to show up. This was where I began to wonder if my responsibility hypothesis was faulty. Asher was late for rehearsal multiple times, and she was easily distracted during the rehearsal process. At first I gave her some leeway on the assumption that she was overreacting after the oppressive rehearsal process in *Cementville*, but by the end of the process I came to the conclusion that allowing her to direct her own piece had little or no affect on her level of commitment to the project. This is not meant to disparage her work, as I was very happy with everything she did on stage. But I did not see any extra feeling of ownership or any of the behavior I saw with Finch and Giamichael in *Of Mice and Men*.

After having to cancel their second rehearsal, Taylor Brewerton went to Chicago. This was probably the biggest blow to my responsibility hypothesis. Brewerton was moving to Chicago two weeks after *Shel* closed, and he decided that he had to visit Chicago and look for an apartment. Unfortunately, he decided to do this during our second week of rehearsal. He did not

tell me about this at auditions, and he only gave me a few days notice before he left. While *Click* had already met three times and *Abandon All Hope* had met twice, *The Lifeboat is Sinking* only had the one rehearsal before Brewerton left for Chicago. On top of that, it was the most difficult piece to block. While Brewerton was away, I sat down with Asher to talk about the fate of *The Lifeboat is Sinking*. Asher really wanted to continue working on it because she felt like it was a challenging part for her. She really liked the script and the challenge of discovering the different levels and working around the challenges of the blocking. Unfortunately, I didn't think we had time to do all the work required to get the piece to a performance level. In the end, Asher asked if she and Brewerton could meet on their own, get off book, and put together some basic blocking. I told her that if they could get that together over the weekend, I would be more than happy to keep the piece in the show. At that point, I thought that maybe Asher was taking a greater level of ownership of her piece, and I really hoped that they would follow through on that idea and start to behave in the manner I thought the actors would. She did not. After the weekend, Asher and Brewerton approached me and told me they had not been able to work at all over the weekend. Because they were still not close to off book and we had not even begun blocking, I had to cut the piece from the show.

Wash and Dry and Blind Willie and the Talking Dog

The other piece that got dropped from *Shel* was *Wash and Dry* with Jenny Hann and Tony Sanchez. Sanchez and Hann were also both in *Blind Willie and the Talking Dog*. Because they were working together on two plays, we would do the two back to back on rehearsal nights. After the first read through, they both took an immediate liking to *Blind Willie and the Talking Dog*. *Wash and Dry* was obviously their second favorite, and as a result we would always work on *Blind Willie and the Talking Dog* first. The majority of the time and energy would go to *Blind Willie and the Talking Dog*, and *Wash and Dry* would never receive the same amount of attention. *Blind Willie and the Talking Dog* also required Sanchez to write music for the songs in the piece, and we would usually spend at least part of the rehearsal working on that music. They worked much harder on their *Blind Willie and the Talking Dog* lines and character development. Then, towards the end of the second week, Sanchez ran into some personal problems (which I will talk address during the *No Skronking* section) and had to leave a rehearsal early.

By the time the third week came around, they were still not off book. In fact, they didn't even really know how the scene was supposed to grow and change. The scene, which dealt with a woman dropping her clothes off at what she think is a dry cleaners but is really a "watch and dry" run by a blackmailer. The woman is angry when she realized that her clothes have not

been washed, but when she threatens to call the police she is blackmailed based on the contents of her laundry bag. She agrees to bring in a load of laundry every week to be “watched” to keep her secrets (including an affair and drug use) safe. The piece was very circular as the characters had the same argument multiple times before the man finally uses his blackmail trump card, and the actors were having trouble keeping the different sections straight. We would often get to the end of one argument circle and they would try to start it over instead of moving on to the next part of the play.

It soon became clear that the level of commitment wasn't there for *Wash and Dry* that existed for *Blind Willie and the Talking Dog*. After a particularly bad rehearsal at the beginning of our third week, I sat Hann and Sanchez down and asked them what they wanted to do about our problems. This time, Hann was the one who suggested we cut the piece. She said that they were both having trouble with the scene and had not found characters with whom they were comfortable. Because *Wash and Dry* had so obviously taken a back seat, we came to the group decision to pull *Wash and Dry* and put all of our attention towards *Blind Willie and the Talking Dog*. I was of two minds when it came to this decision. While it was obviously the right decision to make, I couldn't decide if it was a sign of greater commitment or lesser. While they obviously had not given *Wash and Dry* the proper attention, I thought that the decision to cut the piece could have been a sign that they were thinking of the well being of the project as a whole instead of only worrying about their own work. In all my previous work, I had never seen an actor offer to cut their part for the good of the show. When asked about their decision, both said that they didn't feel they would be able to get the piece up to performance standard and didn't want to embarrass themselves or me by performing a subpar piece. While neither one seemed to be making the decision because they felt a greater sense of ownership of the piece (especially

since neither one had started working on their directing piece), it was good to see them take ownership of their own shortcomings and make the decision to cut the piece on their own.

No Skronking

After those two, the play that gave me the most trouble was *No Skronking* with Nicole Carter and Tony Sanchez. Unbeknownst to me, Carter and Sanchez were dating at the beginning of the rehearsal process. I had been burned in the past when two actors were dating; I cast them as the romantic leads not realizing they had recently secretly started dating, and the spark I saw in the audition was never the same once their relationship became public. When Carter and Sanchez casually mentioned their relationship (they believed I already knew), I became worried about the possible repercussions. At first, things were fine. *No Skronking* is the story of a man, a coffee shop, and a mysterious sign. The man, while eating in a greasy spoon diner, becomes obsessed with finding out what exactly the “No Skronking” sign bans. He continues to pester his waitress about possible meaning for the phrase, but she refuses to budge. If he was a skronker, he would already know it, and if he finds out what it is he will only be tempted to try. After the man loses his temper, the waitress realizes that he is a skronker and runs him out of her restraint. Thankfully, Carter and Sanchez did not need to show any romantic interest in each other, and I thought I had dodged a bullet with my unintentional casting blunder. About halfway through the rehearsal month, however, Carter and Sanchez broke up. While it was a fairly amicable split (they remained friends and there was no anger), Sanchez was very upset about it and it ended up affecting his work in rehearsals. He went into a noticeable funk, and it was very difficult to get

him to work during *No Skronking* rehearsals. I believe that this also affected his work in *Wash and Dry* and contributed greatly to his eventual decision to drop the piece.

Sanchez was also feeling a little overwhelmed with the amount of work he was being asked to do. When I cast Sanchez as Blind Willie, I first found out if he could play any musical instruments. He said he could play the guitar, which was important because of the amount of music present in the play. He didn't tell me, however, how good he was on the guitar. After seeing how strong *Blind Willie and the Talking Dog* was going to be and discovering how talented Sanchez was on the guitar, I talked to him about providing all the scene change music for the show. I really liked the idea of having the Blind Willie character run throughout the whole production and then ending the show with *Blind Willie and the Talking Dog*. I have always been a huge fan of using live music in theatre. A large part of the appeal of theatre is the undeniably special connection that exists between the audience and the performers. There is something magical about watching live performance, and live music only adds to the appeal of live theatre. I also felt that the live music and the repetition of the Blind Willie character would help to make the disparate parts of *Shel* feel more like a cohesive single production. With what ended up being thirteen different performance pieces in *Shel*, I was afraid that the play would feel disjointed or disorganized. By using Sanchez's live music, we were able to make the scene transitions still feel like part of the play. This allowed us to create a more natural flow to the piece. Sanchez was very excited about this idea and did a great job finding the perfect song for each scenic transition. But it did give him a lot of extra work. I gave him complete freedom to pick whatever song he wanted (he received a sound design credit), and he went through a lot of different songs before settling on the final score. He then had to learn much of the music since he didn't just pick songs he already knew.

This extra work load, combined with the breakup, really put a lot of stress on Sanchez and his work in *No Skronking* suffered. His character became very one note, and he stopped using different tactics. I knew that he was frustrated and disappointed with his work, and I tried to help him through the rough patch. I gave them both secrets to hold within the scene, and that really forced them to keep a part of themselves hidden. Sanchez stayed after that rehearsal to talk to me. He apologized for how distracted he had been and promised to rededicate himself to his work. Of all the actors, Sanchez came the closest to actually achieving the higher level of commitment I hoped to accomplish with this project. And even with him, I don't believe this was achieved because he was also working as a director (which I will discuss more later in this paper). Instead, I think the thing that pushed him to that new level was the designation as sound designer. It was at that point that I really saw him rededicate himself and take ownership of his pieces. Whether this renewed interest was a byproduct of his increased responsibility or because he had finally gotten over his breakup, I'm not sure.

Click and Abandon All Hope

Click and *Abandon All Hope* were both a challenge for the same reason: Taylor Brewerton going to Chicago for four days in the middle of the rehearsal process. *Click* was probably slightly less affected because it was the longest piece. While that seems counterintuitive, Nicole Carter was able to work on her lines while Brewerton was in Chicago, and when he came back we were able to really work hard on getting the correct shape, pace, and tone for the piece. In *Click*, a man sits and plays Russian roulette while his girlfriend tries to relax and take a bath. His desperate cries for attention escalate as he questions whether there is a live bullet in the gun or not. The audience soon learns that this is a common occurrence, but this time the game has changed. Has she changed out the blank for a real bullet, or is she only bluffing? The play ends with her challenging him to sit down and continue playing the game despite the fact that he no longer knows whether the bullet in the gun is a blank or a live round. The constant change of power is subtle until she takes control at the very end. This was the longest play, and their arguments tend to bend end on themselves and end up being circular. So both actors used their time apart to really work on memorizing their lines. This was vital for this scene because pace was so important. Carter spends the entire show in the bathtub, and Brewerton spends a good deal of the show sitting on his chair. Without much movement or

blocking, the pacing became even more important. The use of silence was vital, especially at the end when Brewerton realizes that he is no longer in control.

This was the scene where we got the closest to using the directorial eye. So much of the scene is based on the subtext of their conversation. As we worked, they started to have the same argument over and over again. This made sense, because they are using the same words repeatedly, but it made the piece feel repetitive and boring. One night, I had them go through the piece together and name each of their arguments. They had to identify where each argument began, where it ended, what it was really about, and who won that argument. Each time, the new argument had to be different than the previous one. This forced them to create new tactics and really look at the progression of the show as a whole. They couldn't use this tactic early in the scene because it was one of the stronger ones, and it would make the next section look weak. They had to grow the scene slowly in order to have it peak at the right time. In the end, this work really made a difference, and *Click* became probably the strongest piece in the whole show. They did a good job of structuring the play in a way that kept the arguments fresh and interesting. I did not really ask them to apply their own work directing the devised pieces because neither student really started working on their piece until tech week (a problem I will discuss later in this paper). But it surely helped them to take a step back from their character needs and look at the structure of the play as a whole. Brewerton especially benefited from this work. Because he spends the majority of the piece in control, he tended to fall into a one-note character. Working with the idea of shape, we were able to find the places where he needed to slow down so that the tension in the scene would not build too high.

Abandon All Hope was not as successful, however. Unlike in *Click*, Brian Gartland was not able to really work on his lines while Brewerton was out of town. *Abandon All Hope* is the

story of two close friends who come upon a doorway with the sign, “Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter Here.” One friend, Gartland, want to go through the door regardless of the consequences while the other friend, Brewerton, is understandably cautious. Their argument quickly degenerates into a discussion about Gartland’s life falling apart. Because so much of the scene involved the two characters arguing over each other and cutting each other off, it was very difficult for Gartland to run his lines during Brewerton’s absence. Because of this, we spent the majority of our rehearsal time after Brewerton’s return trying to get them off book and set in their blocking. I had a big problem with them wandering aimlessly since the stage was bare for this scene. They seemed a little out of sorts without scenery, and started to just wander around the stage as they argued. I tried to set some concrete blocking, but their unfamiliarity with the text made it hard to get them to repeat their blocking from one run to the next. They could basically only focus on either the blocking or their lines. When they got their lines right, they quickly lost any semblance of blocking and reverted back to aimless wandering. When they worked hard to get the blocking right, there would be long pauses as they went up on lines. Because of these problems, we spent a majority of one of our rehearsals doing nothing other than running the lines over and over again. We did a couple of speed-throughs and then ran the scene without blocking. When we finally got them comfortably off book, I had to work hard to break them of their bad blocking habits and have them move with purpose and direction. We had to have them walk through the scene without acting and just get the blocking of the scene in their body. After doing this a couple of times, we did the scene with acting and I stopped them any time they didn’t follow the assigned blocking. I was not happy having to do this, because I really believe that blocking should come organically out of scene work.

Ideally, I allow my actors to do the scene however they want and then we will set the blocking based on what works for them. I consider the blocking a living entity and am always open to changes in the blocking if a certain movement stops working for the actor. Even in performance, I only want to set the blocking in stone if there is a specific reason to do so. For example, if an actor needs to be in place for a lighting cue, I will make sure they get there. Likewise, if they need to be in place for a physical moment (like the fight in *Of Mice and Men*) or to accommodate a certain moment (like in *Of Mice and Men* when Curly's Wife needs to go unseen through part of a scene, I had to set Finch's and Giamichael's blocking in such a way that they would have their backed turn to the door). But every time I turned Brewerton and Gartland loose, they just ended up walking around the stage in circles. I think the lack of some concrete landmark on stage hurt them and that the nature of the text did as well. Because most of the text is some kind of argument, the two actors spent most of it advancing or retreating. When Brewerton was on the offensive verbally, he would advance and Gartland would retreat. Then, when the tables turned and Gartland went on the offensive, the opposite would happen. Both seemed scared to stand still and have a conversation. Because of this, I had to force them to follow blocking I came up with. Both seemed thankful to have some order imposed on the scene.

Once the blocking was done, I had to deal with the fact that both were pretty much just yelling at each other for the entire scene. We worked to format the scene in a way that had levels and actual different tactics. I also had to remind them that they were supposed to be friends, and even male friends have to actually like each other at some level. This helped add some level to the scene and made it more interesting. Ideally, I would have liked to allow them to find these things on their own, but Brewerton's absence and the line problems had left us short on time.

While the final product ended up being something I was proud of, I was very unhappy with the way we got there. Not only did we not get to use the directorial eye to try and help them expand their acting, I wasn't even able to work in my usual manner. My directing style is very community oriented and based on an open communication between actors and myself. I like to allow my actors the time and freedom to try as many different things as they want, and only after they have explored different moments do we set acting choices and blocking to prepare for the final performances. Even if we don't end up using the choices they make, I like to think that the actors are more likely to be invested in what we ultimately decide on because they feel a part of the creative process. Here, I had to cut out most of that exploration time in order to get the play to performance level in time for opening.

The Best Daddy

The Best Daddy was a very frustrating experience. In retrospect, I blame myself for most of the failure. Because I had worked on the piece twice in the past, I felt comfortable putting it on the backburner. With the time crunch I experienced, I gave most of my attention to the other pieces because I felt like I already knew what was needed to make *The Best Daddy* work. What I didn't take into account, however, was that the actors had not worked on the piece before. It did not matter that I knew every line of the play if the actors were unfamiliar with the text! By the time I realized that I had been neglecting *The Best Daddy*, it was too late to really do what I wanted with it. Instead, we again had to focus on setting the blocking and getting everybody off book. Much like what happened with *Abandon All Hope*, I had to hand the actors more than I wanted. While Brian Gartland ended up changing the direction of the scene from my original vision, we were still rushing to get in under the time limit. In *The Best Daddy*, a father takes his little daughter out to see her birthday present a Shetland pony. The only problem is that he killed it earlier that day because it bit him. After seeing how upset the dead pony makes her, the dad tries to tell her it's not the dead pony after all! After claiming it's her dead sister somehow doesn't make her feel better, he claims it's the motorbike she always wanted.

In the previous two incarnations of the play, the dad had acted as if he was genuinely surprised that his daughter was upset; and the whole play became about him trying to backtrack and find something that will actually make her happy. Gartland decided instead to play the entire play like one long, elaborate practical joke. This worked well and really created a sense of ambiguity at the end; was there really a motorbike under the blanket or was it still a dead pony? So while I was happy with the final product, there wasn't much time to do the in-depth work I wanted. I take the failure of this one on my own shoulders. I let my familiarity with the script allow me to put it on the backburner while I worried about the other plays. Of course, my familiarity with the script had no bearing on their familiarity or comfort level. I assumed I would be able to throw it together quickly, but that wasn't true or fair to my actors. They really stepped it up at the end to get the performance up to performance level.

One Tennis Shoe and All Cotton

One Tennis Shoe and *All Cotton* were by far the easiest pieces to work on. These received the most rehearsal time and the most attention from the actors. These were the first pieces the actors were off book for, and that made a huge difference. With *One Tennis Shoe*, we continually vacillated between really stressing the surroundings and throwing that idea out completely. *One Tennis Shoe* sees a couple out to dinner at a nice restaurant. The husband has brought his wife there to confront her with an uncomfortable fact: she is becoming a bag lady. Though she fights it at first, she has to admit it is true when she is confronted with the contents (a bowl of cooked oatmeal, a hubcap, a picture frame, chicken bones and one tennis shoe) of her bag. Some days, we wanted to really acknowledge the other people in the restaurant and how that would change their behavior while fighting. Other times, I allowed them to forget the setting and just go all out with their argument. We made the decision early on to really focus on the setting and try to acknowledge the other diners. While that worked well at first, it soon became apparent that this approach was restricting the actor's ability to explore all of the levels during the argument. So we threw that idea out the window and allowed them to fully explore the argument and the many different tactics they could use. In the end, we added the other

diner's back to the scene, but we did not stay grounded in that reality the entire scene. During the height of the argument, I gave them carte blanche to go all out. Then, at the end of the scene, when they came down from the argument, they once again acknowledged the other diners.

All Cotton was the piece that caused Ryan Asher a great deal of trouble. Her character tried to return a shirt that had shrunk in the wash despite a no shrinkage promise. When the store refuses to refund her money, Asher's character places a curse on the entire store. Asher had a lot of trouble with how crazy her character should be. Did she honestly believe that she was a witch, or was this just a scare tactic? Or was she actually a witch? It was hard for Asher to find the right balance between crazy and sane. She also struggled with not playing the end of the scene at the beginning. She was entering the scene already armed with the knowledge that her attempt to return the shirt would fail, and she would be forced to resort to magic. She also didn't receive much help from Jenny Hann, who struggled to find her voice as the straight character.

To help her, we sat down and mapped out the shape of the scene. I showed her how the scene needed to build and grow in order to make the big reveal moment (when she casts her "spell") have the maximum effect. This was the most effective use of the directorial eye. I got her to take a step back from thinking about her character and instead look at the play as a whole. She realized how she needed to shape the arc of her character in order to create the most effective story. At this point, I would have loved to try and apply her work as the director of her devised poetry piece, but I couldn't because she had not started working on it yet.

The Devised Poetry Pieces

This was the biggest problem with the devised pieces; they did not start working on them nearly early enough. Ryan Asher changed her poem right before tech week and put together *Nobody* during a tech rehearsal. Taylor Brewerton's *Clooney the Clown*, while incredibly entertaining, consisted almost entirely of Brian Gartland improvising a bad clown routine. Gartland's *It's All the Same to the Clam* was also conceived and directed during a tech rehearsal. Nicole Carter's *Paul Bunyan* was the same way, and she was even still making changes to the piece before the first performance. Jenny Hann actually worked on her *Poison* for a few weeks, but in the chaos around the rehearsal process, I never really found time to apply her work to her acting. She was just good enough in both *Blind Willie and the Talking Dog* and *All Cotton* that I never got a chance to really work with her in depth. By the time she started working on her devised piece, I had my hands full with all of the problems in the other plays and ended up neglecting her work a little bit because it was already good. I really should have set up a more rigid schedule for their work, but I wanted them to have complete artistic freedom with their devised piece. This balancing act was the biggest problem with these pieces. I was unable to find the right balance between structure and art with the devised pieces, and they suffered as a

result. I wanted to see if any of them would rise to the occasion and take on the extra responsibility that comes with directing. Would they rise to that extra level like Finch and Giamichael did with *Of Mice and Men*? Unfortunately, the answer was no. Hann, the only one that really did any extra work on her devised piece, showed no sign of heightened ownership in any other part of the process.

Exploring the Reasons It Didn't Work

I think this project failed to create an extra sense of ownership or allow me to explore the ways that directing ideas can be used in acting for two main reasons: size and time. This project was way too large in scope to really do what I wanted to do. Ideally, I should have picked a small, two-person play and worked closely and intensely on that text. It probably would have been smart to work on a one-act. Then, I could allow those two actors to direct something that would be part of the final product. This smaller size would have given me considerably more time with the actors and proved a much easier undertaking. While I was happy with the final product on *Shel*, there were far too many moving parts for me to focus on any one to the degree I probably should have. With the single shorter piece, we could have really analyzed the text from a director's point of view and worked to change the way they looked at the work. Instead, most of my time was spent trying to organize and manage all of the different pieces involved in *Shel*.

In the end, I allowed my love of Shel Silverstein's work to overwhelm my good sense. I had so much trouble narrowing down the short plays I wanted to work on. I'm actually very thankful that *The Lifeboat is Sinking* and *Wash and Dry* ended up getting cut. The show ended up running close to two hours with a ten minute intermission, and adding those two plays in as well

would have made the show way too long. What I probably should have done (and would have done in a professional environment) was cut a couple of the other pieces to get the show down to roughly an hour and a half. But I didn't want to take away more opportunities for the students to work. Despite their problems, every actor was committed to the process and worked hard on their pieces. I didn't want to continue to cut their parts. The second problem was the time we had to work. We only had a month of rehearsal, and the first half week of that time was devoted to table work while part of my cast was tied up with *Cementville*. Coming out of that show, I think we would have still been able to get done the things I wanted to if we could have gotten right to business working hard on the script. Instead, I spent a good deal of time trying to rebuild the artistic vitality of most of my cast. They came to me timid, artistically drained, and bitter. While I could have forced them to immediately start working on *Shel*, I knew that I would not be able to get much out of them until they got past their negative *Cementville* experience. So I spent even more time as a sympathetic ear to their complaints and allowing them to take baby steps back to artistic freedom. It took time for them to begin making bold character and blocking choices after being told so much not to try and create anything on their own. It took me close to half the rehearsal time to get everybody to a place where they were refreshed artistically and excited to work together to create art, and as soon as they got there Carter and Sanchez broke up and Brewerton took off to Chicago.

This again cost me valuable rehearsal time. In addition to forcing me to drop *The Lifeboat is Sinking*, it set back *Click* and *Abandon All Hope* to the point that we were mostly scrambling to make sure everybody knew their lines even up to the dress rehearsals. This kept me from working as thoroughly with the actors as I would have liked. We were so rushed working on the plays that I didn't have time to ask the actors to work on their pieces from a directorial

perspective. Originally, I had hoped to get each piece to close to performance level and then asking each actor to analyze their plays with a director's eye to see if that opened up any new doors. I didn't want to completely change the way they approached their work by introducing the directorial viewpoint from the very beginning. Because I don't believe that this viewpoint should take the place of traditional character analysis or development. It should serve as a compliment to whatever work the actor already does to prepare for a role. Unfortunately, I ran out of time and was unable to do this with them. If I had known how pressed for time I would end up being, I would have asked them to do it from the very beginning and just taken the chance that it would overwhelm them or negatively affect their work. As it worked out, my own preservation instinct kicked in when I realized how pressed for time we were; and I devoted all of my time to making sure the play we would be presenting was something I could be proud of.

Despite the fact that this was supposed to be part of my thesis project, I found myself behaving more and more only as a director the closer we got to opening night. My director mind overwhelmed my teacher mind and prioritized the theatrical event over any kind of academic study of the event. If I had to make a decision between introducing new ideas and sacrificing the quality or the performance or working in a more traditional manner but presenting a final product that met my standards, I picked the second one every time. It didn't help that the tech week was a mad rush. With so many moving pieces involved with a thirteen piece show, I had no time to pay attention to anything other than getting all of the set changes and transitions to work. In the end, I was not able to learn much about this part of my hypothesis during this production.

Examining the Increased Sense of Ownership

I did, however, learn quite a bit about the other part of my idea. The actors did not at all respond to the extra responsibility of directing like I hoped they would. I thought that the extra responsibility and sense of ownership shown by Zach Finch and Tony Giamichael in *Of Mice and Men* happened because they felt more responsible for the production of the show. They proposed the show to S.A.L.T. and were consulted on many of the decisions usually made solely by the director. I believed that allowing the actors in *Shel* to direct their own little piece of the show (in the form of their devised poetry pieces) would have the same effect. In many cases, however, the opposite was true.

Almost all of the actors struggled mightily with lines, whereas Giamichael had always been one of the first off book despite having by far the most lines in every scene. In *The Best Daddy*, I still wasn't confident that Brian Gartland and Nicole Carter knew their lines as well as they should have on opening night. Ryan Asher was consistently late to rehearsals. On the Saturday of tech week, we were supposed to start rehearsal at noon. Asher showed up shortly after noon without having eaten lunch and asked if she could run to get some food. The actors would often visit the Shafer Street Cafeteria right next door to the Shafer Street Playhouse where

we held rehearsal, so I told her it was okay to run and get some food. I just asked her to hurry so we could get started soon. Instead of walking next door to the Cafeteria, she went to a sit down pizza place a few blocks away with her boyfriend. She didn't get back until roughly forty-five minutes later. The whole tech rehearsal had to wait for her, and she wasn't answering her cell phone. Nobody knew where she was or how long she would be gone. This is not the action of somebody who has stepped up to take a larger leadership role in response to greater responsibility. I wonder if part of my mistake was telling the actors that they would be directing part of the show before I even held auditions.

When Finch and Giamichael asked me to take over *Of Mice and Men*, they agreed to turn over complete creative control. Therefore, when I asked them to remain a part of the creative process they were receiving extra responsibility they did not expect. Likewise, the only actor in *Shel* who really stepped up and took extra responsibility was Tony Sanchez, and that really started only after I asked him to do the sound design for the show. I had hoped that allowing the actors to direct their own devised piece would make them feel an extra level of ownership, but instead they viewed it as just part of their job once they got cast. If I had not told them about that part of the process at first, would they have viewed it as more of a special responsibility and therefore taken it more seriously? Because for the most part, they did not take their devised pieces very seriously. Even Sanchez, who really stepped up to do the sound design, neglected his devised piece so badly we ended up dropping it from the show. Did his extra responsibility in other areas of the play contribute to this neglect? I don't know, but it seems a definite possibility. If I were to do it over again, I would not tell them about that part of the project until the second week of rehearsal.

I would also set a more definite schedule for when they needed to have their idea and start holding their rehearsals. Other than Jenny Hann, they all waited until the last minute to start work on their devised poetry piece. This showed a lower level of commitment than I would have expected while also restricting the work I could do with them on the short plays. I had hoped to parallel their work as directors with the work they were doing as actors in the short plays. This is difficult to do, though, when most of them only started working on their devised pieces the week before the show started. Once again, the time crunch kept me from doing the work I wanted to do. I think if I had given the devised pieces as an assignment after rehearsals started, there would have been a higher sense of urgency. Regardless of the root of the problem, allowing them to direct their own devised poetry pieces did absolutely nothing to raise the level of commitment to or feeling of ownership of the play. Even though they were getting to direct a part of the play themselves, it still wasn't their project. They did not play any part in developing the idea. They were not a part of the proposal process, and they had no special connection to the material before we started rehearsals.

Whereas Finch and Giamichael felt a special connection to *Of Mice and Men* because of their preexisting special relationship to the material, I was completely unable to recreate that feeling with *Shel*. While I was able to come close to recreating it with Tony Sanchez's work as the sound designer and his work creating a soundtrack for the play, that feeling of ownership did not transfer to his acting in any discernable way. All of his newfound devotion went into the music and may have even taken some of his focus away from working on *Wash and Dry*. The extra energy he devoted to the sound design may have ultimately contributed to dropping *Wash and Dry* from the play. In the end, I don't know that it is possible to artificially recreate the circumstances that led to Finch's and Giamichael's tremendous devotion and ownership of *Of*

Mice and Men. It might be necessary to allow the actors to participate in the actual selection and planning of the play in order to get this result. But while this part of my hypothesis had failed miserably, I still had faith that a director's eye could be used to help actors. I wasn't ready to give up on that part just yet.

Chapter Three: *The God of Carnage* The Four Levels of Theatrical Awareness

To try and expand on this idea, I asked fellow graduate students Anna Kurtz, Jeremy Hilgert, and Kerry McGee to textually explore Yazmina Reza's *The God of Carnage*. We used the text only for a workshop class, but once again time got in the way. Hilgert got a part in the VCU Mainstage production of *The Who's Tommy* and McGee received a paying role in the Richmond Shakespeare Company production of *Othello*. So, instead of producing it, we met and discussed how we would approach the piece as directors and how that information would help broaden the horizons for our actors. It was through this work that I came up with the four levels of theatrical awareness. The four levels are as follows:

Level 1: The lowest level. At this point, the actor cares only about himself. The focus is turned inward instead of out towards the partner or target. This level is seen mostly in beginning actors. They are more concerned with their own actions than anything else.

Level 2: Here, the actor starts to turn his attention towards his or her partner. The focus moves from just your character to an awareness of the character and the scenes the actor is involved. While he does not yet quite understand how to make this attention translate

into strong acting, he at least starts to look to his partner for help instead of trying to draw from only his own feelings or emotions. Things like other relationships, setting, etc. do not play a role at this level.

Level 3: At this level, the actor takes in all the relevant character information to inform their acting decisions. The focus moves to the character's role in the entire show, not just his scenes. He starts to work on the character arc and journey. At this point, the actor is able to fully integrate things such as objective, moment before, magic if, and humor to create a fully formed character. At this level, an actor should be fully comfortable with the character's history and aware of all of the interconnection relationships involved in the play. This is usually the level to which actors aspire. The entire focus on this level, however, is still on the character. Actors are often taught to focus only on things that directly affect their character. When I was taught how to do character analysis, anything that didn't directly relate to my character was completely ignored. I think that this is a mistake; there are things to be gained by asking the actor to widen his view and look at the entire play.

Level 4: I think of this as the directorial level of theatrical awareness. At this level, the actor takes into account all parts of the play. He is no longer only concerned with his character. Instead of worrying about his character arc, he is worried about the overall arc of the show. Instead of worrying about his character's dream or goal, he asks the bigger question of the theme of the entire play. What is the play trying to accomplish, and how does his character serve or hinder this goal? What is the tone of the play? Does his character fit that tone or is he supposed to be in opposition? This level encourages the actor to step out of his character-centric viewpoint and look at the play as a cohesive

whole. The actor is analyzing not only his character but also his character's place in the form of the play.

Application to Rehearsal: Shape

In my experience, actors are told not to worry about this level of awareness. I know that in my own work as an undergraduate actor, I was always told to get out of my head and stop worrying about these questions. My teachers tried in vain to narrow my focus my attention only on my character. But I was inevitably drawn to the larger picture. That is not to say that my inability to focus solely on my character is something we should encourage in our actors; indeed, it was ultimately my downfall as an actor. It is not healthy for actors to spend too much time in level four. If they pull too far back too often, they are in danger of losing sight of their unique character. The fact that I was inevitably drawn to this level was a sign that I was meant to be a director instead of an actor. So while it is unhealthy to spend too much time in this realm, I would argue that is also unhealthy to deny actors access. Ideally, actors would be trained to reside on the third level of theatrical awareness, but they should also have the ability to poke their heads up into the fourth level. The fourth level of awareness is often most helpful when the actor runs into a dead end. At times of great confusion or frustration, it would greatly benefit the actor to have the necessary training so he could take a step back and look at the bigger picture. In my work with actors, I have often found that these dead ends occur because the actor has lost

sight of the greater direction of the play. This occurs often early in plays when the actors want to go to a higher emotional level; this decision often causes trouble later in the show when they need to top their previous emotional level. If they have already reached a ten, where can they go later in the play?

This can also be seen in monologue work. While working with a student on a monologue form Neil Labute's *Reasons to be Pretty*, he started with a huge outpouring of emotion. The entire monologue was based around the character telling his girlfriend how much he wanted her back. Because he started out at a ten, he had nowhere to grow the monologue. His constant attempts to top himself led to a static monologue that lacked different tactics. He was living only in the moment and not taking into account what was needed for the rest of the monologue to work. I sat him down, and we mapped the shape of the monologue. Mapping the shape is one of the directorial tools that my group and I decided would be helpful for actors trying to enter the fourth level of theatrical awareness. Mapping is a very simple process. We started by breaking the monologue down into beats so we have the smallest possible units to work with. Then, with each beat we decide if it is moving up, moving down, or staying at the same level in comparison to the beat before it. So if from beat one to beat two the emotional intensity rises, we move the line upward. If a moment is extended over several beats, then the line will stay on a plateau. When the energy moves in a downward direction (usually through a change of topic or use of humor that breaks the tension), the line follows accordingly. As we move from beat to beat, we create an actual physical map of the scene on a piece of paper. It resembles a line graph, and it allows the actor to see the ebb and flow of a scene. In this particular case, he was able to see how the energy and tension needed to grow over the course of the monologue. To accommodate

this growth, he needed to start the monologue at a lower level. If he started at the same high level, he left herself nowhere to grow.

This same shaping can be applied to an entire show. Every show has its own shape, and it's important for the director (and the actors) to understand what purpose each serves in the overall shape. For example, comedic relief scenes in dramatic pieces often fall on the downward part of the graph because they provide a break in the building tension of the show. In *Rabbit Hole*, the brief flirtation between Howie and Becca helps lower the tension so that their subsequent fight has more dramatic impact. This does not mean that the downward trending scenes are less important; they just serve a different purpose. A play that consisted of nothing but upward movement would soon become nigh-unbearable. Finding the shape of the play can often help actors understand their scenes. Where does this scene fall on the graph of the play, and what does that say about the scene? What is this scene supposed to accomplish? If you can answer that question, you can then ask the following question: what acting choices can I make that will best accomplish this goal? This provides the actors with another way to approach their scenes and gives them another tool in their tool belt.

Application to Rehearsal: Major Themes

The first thing our group talked about that we thought would be helpful was major themes. Before rehearsal even starts, we believe that it is important for the individual actors to decide what the major themes of the show are both for their character and for the show as a whole. We all came up with the same basic themes for *The God of Carnage*, but each of us had a slightly different focus. This focus was partially influenced by our character and partially influenced by our own individual styles of working. We each wrote our own miniature director's concept. This is a helpful tool for an actor because it forces them to decide what they want to accomplish with the show. In our work, we each shared our director's concept and discussed how they differed from each other. Ideally, this is how you would be able to work in a professional production. Each actor would present their concept, and after they have presented the director would discuss his vision and how the actor's individual ideas fit into the greater design. Even if the director does not work this way, I believe that the individual director's concept can be a useful tool for the actor. It provides them with an overview of the whole play, and any time they get lost or cannot decide what their next action should be, they can return to the concept statement for clarification.

It can also be helpful when working with difficult directors. Many of the complaints I hear from actors who have had a bad experience with a director is that they don't believe in the director's vision or that vision isn't clear. It can be helpful for the actor to return to his own personal goals in order to clarify the direction they want their character to go. The places where their own vision differs from the director's vision can be very frustrating for the actor. Their director's statement can help them vocalize their vision when they have a disagreement with the director. It will allow the actor to present his side of the argument with more clarity and reason. In the end, the director has the final say; but the director's statement can be a vital tool for the actor. It might be most helpful when working with an absent director.

In my junior year of undergrad, I was in a production of *The Tempest* as Antonio. This director's vision was centered completely around Caliban. He believed that *The Tempest* should be an allegory for the evils of European colonialism, and all of his attention was focused on the relationship between Prospero and Caliban. Caliban became a sympathetic character who had been unjustly removed from his rightful place as the leader of the island. Regardless of my feelings about this interpretation of the play, Caliban's new status as the protagonist of the play put me in a very difficult spot. Antonio, as the usurping brother of Prospero, is supposed to be the foil to Prospero's protagonist. The stranded royal party has no interactions with Caliban, and with Caliban as the focal point of the play we quickly became superfluous. I struggled mightily with finding a character and a purpose within this vision of the play. Writing my own director's statement for that show would have been immensely helpful. I felt lost because I wasn't getting direction and felt purposeless. If I could have approached my part with my own vision that also made my character worthwhile, I feel like my performance would have been much better. But this was a tool I wasn't given in any of my acting classes. I didn't have the skills to take that step

back, look at the larger structure of the play, and make a more informed decision about the direction of my character. Being able to step into that fourth level of awareness would have saved me a lot of frustration and anger during that production.

Two Concerns about the Fourth Level of Theatrical Awareness

The one question we had about this idea that we were not able to address adequately in our work was whether or not the seep of character into the director's statement would be a problem. Each of us found that our own viewpoint slowly asserted itself when we were writing our director's statement. This makes sense because all of our character work was focused on our own character. If you are unable to keep that character's viewpoint from seeping into the analysis, would that cause a problem during the production? If each actor writes a director's statement that is (consciously or unconsciously) biased towards their own character, would that make it difficult for the character's that are more secondary to subjugate their view for the greater good of the play? In our work it wasn't a problem, but we are all graduate students who have experience working in a communal manner. Would younger actors, who might not be as willing to sacrifice their own vision for the greater good, be tempted to go into business for themselves when their director's vision doesn't match the direction of the show? So I think it is important to make sure the young actors understand that their director's statement exists as a tool to help them when they are having trouble or working with a difficult director. It cannot become the only vision of the play because they do not have final say in the creative process.

This leads to another problem we ran into working with the idea of the fourth level of awareness. Like other background/character work, it is not helpful to stay in this fourth level of awareness all the time. While I think it is important to allow the actors to explore that level, that sort of awareness could become detrimental during an actual performance. While I believe that this method can help an actor create a more well rounded character, during performances it would be important to only inhabit the third level of awareness. Because during a performance the actor must embody the character, worrying about fourth level things would only hinder that ability. Therefore, we decided that it would be important to train the actors to turn off this higher level of awareness during performances. Thankfully, students are already trained to do this with their other background and analysis work. I was often told to take all of the background work and character analysis, learn it completely, and then throw it away when I walked on stage. The same would need to be done with this work, but there was some worry that this would be difficult to do. Because we are asking the actors to step out of character and look at the play from a completely different vantage point, there was some worry that they would have trouble stepping back down from the fourth level to the third level of awareness. But I really believe that the actors can apply the same kind of work they use when doing background work and character development to learn all they can from this fourth level work and then let it go for the actual performance.

Application to Rehearsal: Spatial Awareness

We also believed that it would be beneficial for the actor to look more at spatial relationships while working. In my acting training, I was taught to “explore the space” any time I moved into a new performance area. This involves getting comfortable with the physical stage area. I think it would be helpful for the actors to go a step further and start becoming aware of their spatial relationship with the other actors, the scenery, and any large props on stage. When directing, I often have the most trouble getting actors to be aware of their spatial relationship. I can’t even count how many times I have had to stop actors because they are standing either way too close or way too far away from each other. If you can get the actors to start thinking about stage composition and stage pictures, this can save lots of time during the rehearsal process. It can also provide actors with a serious leg up in the audition process. During cold readings, spatial relationship is often the first things actors forget about. In cold readings, the actors almost always migrate to each other and stand uncomfortably close. If we could make the actors become more aware of the stage picture, specifically what makes a dynamic and interesting stage picture, they would be less inclined to fall into this trap. With *The God of Carnage*, we came up with a few exercises that could help the actors become aware of those relationships.

The first one we called the “Lord of the Flies Exercise.” In this exercise, two progressively larger boxes are taped onto the floor with a dot at the very center. Whoever is in control at the beginning of the scene starts at the center of the boxes. The other actors must place themselves in the other two boxes in a way that makes an interesting stage picture. Then, as the control of the scene changes the person in the center of the boxes also changes. The actors must feel when the control is changing hands and change their spatial relationship accordingly. They cannot allow themselves to bunch up, and there cannot be more than one person at the center of the boxes. The person in the middle has to be aware of when their space is being challenged and then decide to either cede the center area peacefully or fight to hold onto it depending on the text. This exercise forces the actors to really pay attention to their physical relationships and spacing. Because they are confined to the smaller area of the two boxes, they must be hyper aware of their distance from one another. When they move to the larger set, it is their job to continue to use that hyper-awareness to feel when they are too close or too far away from the other actors.

We also thought it would be beneficial for them to do what I was taught as the “Snapshots” exercise. Here, the actors must take a scene and present the story in a series of snapshots: staged static pictures. They must use only shape and spatial relationship to tell the story. This again forces them to become more aware of their spacing and how that can be used to tell the story more clearly. It forces the actors to decide how to tell the story in a purely visual form. They start to think about different ways they can communicate different moments or emotions using only their bodies. It also helps them work on creating dynamic stage pictures. Thinking of each scene as a snapshot will lead them to make more dynamic physical choices, and those dynamic physical choices lead to dynamic acting choices as well. It forces most actors out of their comfort zone (acting) and into a new performance focus (the physical realm). And if

the actor is comfortable with physical work, the snapshots exercise can help them communicate certain things more clearly than they could just with words.

While we did not get to actually perform *The God of Carnage* because of the time constraints placed on all of us, this process was very helpful. Kurtz, Hilgert, and McGee helped me take the ideas I had wanted to implement during *Shel* and really format them into a cohesive idea. They helped me come up with the four levels of actor awareness and create some exercises that could help actors poke their head through the barrier into the fourth level. They also helped to point out some possible problems with this new level of awareness. In the end, we all agreed that it would be helpful for the actors to be able to take a step back and take a more long-term view of the play from time to time. This extra perspective can really help the actor understand his character's role in the play as a whole. Understand the shape of the entire play, the story arc and not just the character arc, can help when the actor hits a wall.

Chapter Four

Where to Go From Here: Future Project

I am by no means done with exploring the idea of the fourth level of theatrical awareness. In both *Shel* and the *The God of Carnage* project, my biggest enemy was time. When I next get a chance to delve deeper into this idea, I will make some changes to my methodology. I will work on a short (between 30 and 45 minute) one act play with only two characters. I will try to provide between five and weeks of rehearsal time. The entire first week will be devoted to beating the play, mapping both the character and story arcs of the play, writing their own director's statements and then comparing them to each other's and my own, and do some of the exercise I have talked about in this paper. I will ask them to start by looking at the play from a fourth level perspective and try to get a feeling for the play as a whole. Then, we would move into the more traditional rehearsal process. We would spend the second week doing run-throughs of the play and setting the basic blocking. After they are comfortable with the basic blocking of the play and have found a comfort level for their characters, I would ask them to start incorporating the work we did in the first week into the play. We would sit down and pinpoint the areas with which we feel the least comfortable. For these trouble areas, we would go back

and look at the mapping we did in the first week and try to discover if there is anything there that can help us break through the problems. Is this section of the play moving upward, downward, or staying on the same level? How does this section serve the greater purpose of the production? Is there something in our individual director's statements that changes the way we view this moment? Could part of the problem be that the beats have changed and new moments need to happen?

After analyzing these questions, we would go back into the rehearsal process with a new game plan. We would continue the traditional rehearsal process while trying to apply our new knowledge and viewpoint to the work. If that fixes the problem, we would move on to the next section that is causing us trouble. If it doesn't fix the problem, we would go back to the analysis and try to see if there was anything we missed. After working through the trouble areas, we would go back and run through the play as a whole. After the run-through, we would analyze how the changes we made affected other parts of the show. Did the changes we made ultimately help us tell the story we wanted to tell, or did they just muddle up the message further. Invariably, I am certain that the changes we made would cause other problems in different areas of the play. We would then address those new areas that needed the attention. After this, we would hopefully be able to talk about the fourth level material during the rehearsal process instead of having to stop and go do table work. I want to keep the two areas separate at first until they are more comfortable with using the directorial eye. I know that it might be difficult at first for them to step back and take off the character mask to view the play with an analytical eye, so I want to let them get comfortable with that process before asking them to switch freely between the two view points. Ideally, by the end of the third or beginning of the fourth week of rehearsal,

we would be able to completely integrate the directorial questions with the traditional actor questions I usually ask during the rehearsal process.

During the actual performances, I would not ask them at any time to think in the fourth level out of fear that they would lose sight of their character arc. While the character arc will have hopefully changed because of the larger story arc, I want them to be able to focus fully on their character during performance. After the show closes, we would sit down to do a complete debriefing on the process. I would ask them to be honest and tell me exactly what they found helpful and what they found negatively affected their work. I would like to imagine that during the rehearsal process we would have tweaked my existing exercise and possibly added some new exercises as well. I would ask them to grade how successful they thought they were in using the fourth level to shape the choices their character made. Finally, I would ask them for suggestions on how to make the process better. What did they feel was useful and what did they feel was unnecessary. I would then take these suggestions to refine my rehearsal process for future projects.

Dramaturgical Applications

In this future project, I will also use dramaturgical information to help the actors explore the fourth level of theatrical awareness. In Dr. Noreen C. Barnes' Dramaturgy class, I have learned the usefulness of dramaturgical study. Because I am asking the actors to look at the script as a single cohesive unit, it will be important for them to have any relevant contextual information. This information would allow them to better understand the world of the play. While I would most likely employ a dramaturge to do most of the research, I would also ask each of my actors to pick one area of interest to explore. I want them to understand the amount of effort that goes into dramaturgical research. This would give them an appreciation of the work being done by the dramaturge and the director. Having to do some of the work themselves would make them more attentive during the analysis. They are more likely to take the work seriously when they had to do some of the research themselves. While the areas we research would differ depending on the play, the outline of dramaturgical research I did for *The God of Carnage* provides a good example of dramaturgical research.

The dramaturgical research for *The God of Carnage* would start with a biography of playwright Yazmina Reza. Specifically, I would look at her play *Art* because of the parallels

between the two plays. Both deal with the breakdown of social norms, and the artwork in *The God of Carnage* is very important. Next would be a biography of Reza's frequent collaborator and translator, Christopher Hampton. A list of previous productions of the play along with the critical response to those plays would be important. Different ways to throw up onstage would need to be researched. How can we get the vomit into her mouth? What should we use for the vomit that will be easy to clean up? What can we use that won't harm the books or the suit? How have other productions of this show pulled this off? Much of the play deals with the gender roles in the marriages, so it would be vital that the actors understand the gender roles and relationships in Paris. How are those beliefs and views different than the ones in America? Dentistry would need to be used in order to understand the damage done to the young Vallon boy's mouth. A recipe for clafoutis would need to be found, and it would probably be even more helpful to actually make the dessert. The art books on Veronique's coffee table (Kokoschka, Foujita, and *The People of the Tundra*) would all need to be researched, as would the artist mentioned by Annette, Francis Bacon. Because *The God of Carnage* is a French play, the bulk of the dramaturgical research would involve identifying Parisian places, literature, and institutions. The actors would need to understand all of the references.

This dramaturgical information would be invaluable during the first section of the rehearsal process. In order to understand the shape and themes of the play, the actors must be able to place the production in its specific time and place. In order to write their director's statements, they would need to understand the cultural message behind the play. What did the play mean in its original context? Dramaturgical research would provide the groundwork for our exploration of the fourth level of theatrical awareness. It would be important for the actors to have all of the relevant dramaturgical information when he or she hits a wall. When the actors

get stuck, they will return to the dramaturgical information to try and discover a new angle to view the piece. This work will hopefully encourage the actors to become more proactive and take a greater ownership of their work. Because they will be involved in the actual research, they should be more likely to take initiative and do their own research when they encounter something with which they are not familiar. Instead of sitting back and waiting for someone else to explain what they don't understand, I hope that this emphasis on dramaturgy will encourage them to do that work on their own.

Conclusion

In the end, the main thing I have taken away from these three products is my theorized existence of the four levels of theatrical existence. So far in my training, I have only ever seen acting teachers work towards the third level of awareness. I believe that there is great untapped benefit to be gained by exploring the fourth level of awareness and the use of the directorial eye for actors. I believe that the exercises I have identified, as well as extensive table and dramaturgical work, can help create more well rounded and versatile actors. My actors will, after working in this method, be artistically independent when working with an absent or subpar director. Even when working with a good director, however, this work can still be applied to create a more nuanced character that fits into the greater structure of the play. While I was unfortunately unable to recreate the higher level of commitment I found with Tony Giamichael and Zach Finch while working on *Of Mice and Men*, I have not completely given up on being able to find it again. I just think that I would have to involve the actors from the very beginning of the creative process. If I were able to direct my theoretical one-act, I would start by finding two actors with whom I wanted to work. Together, we would find a text we wanted to perform. We would create all of the technical ideas together to help them feel more like producers instead

of just actors. Maybe this, along with their increased directorial duties, would be enough to have them take that ownership of the play. At the very least, this should make them invest more heavily in the idea of the fourth level of theatrical awareness. Because they have been involved from day one, I believe they will be more willing to try the different techniques. Despite all of the trials and tribulations I faced with these projects, I can honestly say that I am proud of everything that I put on stage during my career here at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Appendix A: *Of Mice and Men*



From L to R: Cooper Foresman, Tony Giamichael, Eric Popp



From L to R: Laura Murden, Zach Finch, Giamichael



From L to R: Joey Chahine, Forseman, Andrew Donnelly, Taylor Brewerton



L to R: Forseman, Giamichael, Brian Gartland, Murden, Finch



L to R: Murden, Finch



L to R: Murden, Brewerton



Brian Gartland



L to R: Finch, Giamichael

Appendix B: *Shel*



L to R: Jenny Hann, Tony Sanchez. *Blind Willie and the Talking Dog*



L to R: Nicole Carter, Brewerton. *Click*



L to R: Brewerton, Ryan Asher, Carter, Hann, Sanchez. *It's All the Same to the Clam*



L to R: Gartland, Brewerton. *Abandon All Hope*



L to R: Hann, Asher. *All Cotton*



L to R: Gartland, Sanchez. *Clooney the Clown*



L to R: Carter, Sanchez. *No Skronking*



L to R: Asher, Carter. *Poison*



L to R: Asher, Gartland. *One Tennis Shoe*



L to R: Sanchez, Hann. *Nobody*



L to R: Sanchez, Carter, Hann, Asher. *Paul Bunyan*



L to R: Carter, Gartland. *The Best Daddy*

VITA

Greg Scurria was born October 7, 1984 in New Orleans, Louisiana, but attended high school in Vicksburg, Mississippi. He received his Bachelor of Arts Degree in Theatre with a Performance Concentration and a minor in Political Science from Louisiana State University in 2007. He is a teacher, director, dramaturge, and occasional actor. His pedagogical interests lean towards dramatic literature, script analysis, directing, and acting coaching.