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# The Assistant Director

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THE ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

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

By

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Richmond, Virginia

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## Acknowledgement

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# Abstract

## THE ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

By Stephanie R. Hanna, MFA

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2006

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

My thesis addresses the role of the assistant director within the realm of today's American theatre. I determine who the assistant director is in today's theatre, what qualities they need to possess, and how a director can use an assistant director most effectively. To come to these conclusions, I analyze my experiences as an assistant director and a director over the last four years, as well as conduct interviews with directors and assistant directors currently working in professional and academic.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The first four chapters of this work are comprised of reflections on my assistant directing and directing experiences from 2002 to 2006. This section could be read, or skipped over depending on the content you are looking for. I wrote these first four chapters for myself. I felt I needed to express my experiences on paper so that I might have a clearer look at them for reference to my conclusions, which is chapter five of this work. Chapter five is my attempt at beginning to define the role of the assistant director. I am doing this for assistant directors and directors alike. It is my hope to eventually write much more extensively on the subject of assistant directing so that directors and assistants will have a better understanding of their various roles and how they relate to the process of creating theatre.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Experience: The Virginia Renaissance Faire**

I worked as an actor for the Virginia Renaissance Faire (VARF) while I was still in high school. Previously, I had acted in all of my school's plays and talent shows and I knew I loved the stage. I decided that the theatre would be my chosen career path, but I wasn't sure of what job I wanted in the world of theatre. However, as a 17-year-old female, my clearest choices were limited to actor, dancer, or chorus member. When I was cast at the VARF I knew that I was finally on a more professional path to being involved with theatre. I was cast and assigned to the Revelers Guild for the run of the 1997 season. The Revelers Guild consisted of actors whose job it was to portray the common, lowly folk of the township. As an actor in this role, it is expected that you would spend a lot of time with the patrons who came to the VARF for that particular day. It is the Revelers' job to make sure that the patrons are having a good time at the Faire, as well as learning something about the time period and the way people lived their lives. The VARF promotes itself as an educational family activity, and therefore to remain an educational event, it is part of the actors' job to teach the patrons about historical events occurring during the late 1500's.

This was the first time that I had the chance to work with professional actors whose ages ranged from 16 to 65. This was also the first time I felt like I was a part of a real theatre company. I was instantly in awe of this theatre company, how it was organized,



and how the actors portraying all of the different social classes could entertain and educate the audience at the same time. Almost everyone involved with the Faire was working on a volunteer basis, yet they all seemed very professional and organized. Some of the cast and crewmembers were paid, but this was dependent on what function they were serving at the Faire. The official stage acts and the major management teams were those who were paid; all others, like me, were volunteers. At the time the VARF was owned by what is known as the Renaissance Entertainment Corporation (REC). They operate most of the Renaissance Fairs in this country.

The first few weeks of working for the VARF went by quickly. During this time they held what was called “Cast College” where the actors would learn all of the period styles information that we would need to know to create our characters for this town. Also, these classes would help teach us how to accurately portray them. Through the Cast College we learned what our day-to-day lives would have been like, and the dialect that corresponded to our class station. We also worked on our costume pieces, and learned songs and dances. We built our play area using the natural environment of brush, mud, and stones as our building materials. Most importantly, we learned about ourselves and each other during this process. All of these elements helped us to create characters that seemed complete and truly drawn from our own experiences that we had over the several weeks we worked, and together the spirit of the town started to take shape. The character I eventually developed was named Rachel Musgrave. She was the gravedigger’s wife. She had many interesting stories to tell about the dead or dying, and she always had some juicy

gossip to tell about those who were still alive. I played Rachel Musgrave for three seasons with the VARF.

As much as I enjoyed working at this Faire as an actor, my ultimate goal was to join the artistic staff as one of the directors. However, I would not get the chance to join this particular VARF because the budget that the REC had set aside for the Faire in Virginia had been miscalculated. The Faire was bankrupt by the end of the year 1999, and was closed. When I learned of this news I was devastated. I thought that my theatre career was over, and that I would never find work in this area again.

As is the case with many theatre groups, those people left behind by the old VARF owned by the REC felt as if they had lost part of their family when it closed. People in Virginia still wanted a Renaissance Faire, so in 2002 the VARF reopened under a new organization called, "Out of the Woodwork Productions" (OOTW). The OOTW artistic staff was comprised of actors who were left from the old VARF. This was a promising idea. However, in my opinion, having only actors as an artistic staff is what eventually caused the artistic downfall of this new VARF.

The first time I heard anything about the new VARF by OOTW productions was when I came home from school for my final summer break at Longwood College. My Mother showed me an advertisement in the local newspaper for the VARF that was currently being held that weekend in Fredericksburg, Virginia. I couldn't pass up the chance to go and see if it was really true. That weekend, I went to the Fredericksburg fair grounds and, sure enough, colorful tents and flags snapping in the wind greeted me at the opening gates. I was so excited to see that the VARF was back in the area. As I

approached the ticket tent I began to see the familiar faces of those who had participated in the old Faire run by REC. My heart pounded fervently as I hugged old friends, and chatted about the past. I started to realize that I could become involved with this group again, and get back into theatre outside of College. One of the first people I recognized was a woman named Cornelia Rutherford; she was an actress who had been in the Court Guild at the old VARF. I spoke with her and found out that she was the CEO of OOTW and the owner of this new VARF. I told her how interested I was in becoming part of this new group. I also informed her of my wish to be more than an actress in the Revelers guild. Cornelia introduced me to her daughter, Emily. Emily was the current director of VARF for the 2002 season. Emily and I became fast friends, and before I knew it I was hired as the assistant director for the remainder of the 2002 season.

At this point, the VARF was a touring show. It would run for 7 weekends in a row, touring around to different locations throughout Virginia. Cornelia would arrange for the Faire to be at state parks, fair grounds, large private property grounds, and anywhere else that was accessible to the public who would invite us for the weekend. Although touring was an exciting prospect for the cast and crew, it soon became tiresome. The reason VARF was a touring show was because the organization could not afford to buy a significant amount of land that the VARF would require to operate, and the only option left open was to be a touring faire. OOTW thought that this would be a wonderful idea for many reasons. We would have no permanent structures to build on any land; this would help to cut costs. Touring would help to spread our name around all of Virginia so that we could reach many new patrons. We discerned that the downside to VARF being a touring

group was that the patrons were unable or unwilling to drive across Virginia to attend a few hours at a Faire. Virginia is too large of a state to hold most of our audience, which is families, to that kind of obligation. Also, there must be lodging for the cast and crew; this can get very expensive for the company. Finally, the hardest part of the touring Faire was the set up and teardown of the Faire tents and stages every weekend. We had to rent at least 15 tents for every weekend that the Faire was open. The set up and tear down of these tents took hours, and required all of the cast and crew for help. Getting all of the cast and crew to help with this was not always possible, which made the set up and tear down take longer than expected. It was an exhausting process for everyone. This is because the typical Faire weekend started for the cast and crew on Friday afternoons. As soon as people got off of work they headed to the Faire site to begin the process of setting up these tents and preparing the grounds for patrons. The Faire then ran from 9am to 6pm Saturday and Sunday. On Sunday, after the closing of the gate the cast and crew would tear down the site. They were tired, and the last thing they wanted to do is tear down a Faire site, especially if it had been raining all weekend, the tents were soaking wet, and they were soaking wet, it was miserable. All of the tents, flags, signs, furniture, props, fencing, and other equipment had to be loaded into a rental truck, unloaded at someone's house, and if it was wet, taken out again, set up, and dried, repacked, and made ready for the next weekend's use. The rental truck had to be returned by Monday morning, and then rented again for the next weekend on Friday morning; this became another heavy expense for the company.

The 2002 season was my first look into how this VARF was structured. I found it to be less organized than the previous VARF, but I was new to being part of the artistic team. I was only an actor before this experience and for all I knew, this was how things were done. I decided that I would give it some time, after all it was a new Faire, and I thought surely they would have a permanent location by the next season, and if I stayed with this new company I would be in a more established position for future seasons and have possibilities of gaining status and payment. Like the old VARF this Faire was run on a volunteer basis. The only ones who were paid were the official stage acts. They had to be paid because touring around to different Renaissance Faires was their only income, and all other Faires would pay for them to perform. Most patrons who come to Renaissance Faires frequently will see the same group of performers doing the same stage acts all over the country.

This first year gave me a glimpse into what being an assistant director was like. I began to see the roles of the director and administrative staff very differently than I ever had as an actor. I began to understand what purpose each role had, and truly started to understand why each was needed. This first season was also a lot of hard work. I had to quickly establish a reputation for myself with this group. I was familiar with about half of the cast and crew coming into this project, but only in the sense that I recognized their faces from years ago; I did not remember their names. I knew that many people recognized me instantly, and would remember that I was just an actor in the Revelers Guild. Now that they would be taking direction from me, I was intimidated.

The 2002 season made me realize that directors have power because they say they do, and that is all that they have. This idea scared me. I began to think back to all the directors that I had worked with on previous shows. I tried to remember what gave them confidence in their ideas, and what or who gave them the authority to run the show as they saw fit. I did not have the guidance or perspective to answer these questions at that time. All I knew was that I was a 20-year-old female with authority and suddenly I had to tell professional actors, (some of whom had been doing this longer than I had been alive!) what to do.

Emily, the director, was not really a director. As I look back on what she did for this Faire, I realize she was more of a stage manager than anything else. She was not helping these actors become better actors in their roles. She was mostly making sure that the daily schedule was completed, and that the shows ran smoothly. When I was hired, I helped her by attending shows and taking notes of my own observations. This way there were two of us to help corral the hundred plus actors, vendors, and animals, instead of just one person trying to do it all. I know I helped her out and thus helped the whole of the Faire. We needed a stage manager, or four. Having one would have been the only way Emily and I could have directed the cast as we needed to. The VARF was just too big for only two people to contain the chaos. It was a daunting season for me, but I couldn't wait for the 2003 season to start.

For me the 2003 season started off on a more organized path. I was involved with the initial production meetings, staff meetings, auditions, and Cast College. These elements helped to give me a more confident view of my position within the Faire. It also

helped me because I was now part of the artistic voice of the Faire; I was not just a “fill-in role” for last minute help. OOTW learned some good lessons in 2002 and now had the opportunity to invest in fixing the problems.

OOTW hired a new production manager, Pam Howard. Pam was great; she was organized and committed to the Faire. She also had experience in business management, something that our CEO, Cornelia desperately needed. A vendor coordinator was hired to find vendors and see to their needs. Emily, the former director, became pregnant and could no longer fulfill her duties as director. Cornelia decided that John Gurski would be the new director. John was our fight choreographer for the 2002 season and because he had the most professional theatre experience it made sense for him to move into the directing role. All of the other positions remained the same, and I remained the assistant director.

The Faire was in deep debt after 2002, but Cornelia was convinced we would be able to rebound this year, and she assured everyone that our locations would be better, our vendors would be happy, and the paid performers would be clamoring for a spot with us. However, as with many promises made by Cornelia, this one too would be broken. VARF was once again a touring show, but this time instead of seven different locations for seven weekends we had four locations for our seven weekend run. The last four weekends of the show would be in the same location, at the Virginia Bazaar. This was a relief to the cast and crew who had experienced the constant frustration of moving around last season. The price of admission stayed the same, and thus did not help bring in more patrons. Poor patron attendance is what made our vendors unhappy. The vendors had to pay a fee to participate with VARF. They had to set up their own structure, in most cases some sort of

period looking tent, they had to dress in period costumes, and sell their wares. If patrons didn't come to the Faire, the vendors were wasting their time and money sitting out in the hot sun or cold rain for a whole weekend. Cornelia never understood how all her rash decisions would filter down to all the other elements of the Faire. All these factors aside, OOTW could have made enough money for the 2003 season, still with debt, but no more debt. However, this was not to be the case. During the 2003 season it rained six out of the seven weekends of the run. This was devastating to the VARF, and it plunged the organization deeper into debt after this season.

I thought that surely there would be no 2004 season for this VARF. Cornelia was now in deep debt; little did anyone know how much. Later the artistic staff found out that she was taking out personal loans, and selling her belongings to keep the Faire alive. She believed so much in the potential of the Faire to succeed, but she was unable to step outside of that vision and look at the Faire from anyone else's point of view. She took out loan after loan, and at some point lost sight of the reality of the situation. By the end of the 2002 season most of our vendors told us that they would not return for another season. Half of the cast did not want to return, and Cornelia was over a hundred thousand dollars in debt.

I wanted to believe in Cornelia's vision too. I really believed that we could get OOTW out of this financial mess, but it was going to mean Cornelia stepping back and letting other people who had more business experience take over. At every production meeting, the artistic staff would try to help her see this, but she would not relent. This is when I realized this Faire would never succeed. This is also when I decided to apply to



graduate school. It was always my plan to go back to school to get my Master's degree; I knew this was the right time to start that process. I knew that the Faire could not continue on this path, and getting accepted to a graduate program would be the best excuse I could make to get out of the Faire with no hard feelings left behind. I was accepted by VCU and began classes in the spring of 2004. My experience in the 2003 season was very different than the year before. I had a new director, and thus a different vision of what the VARF was supposed to be. John Gurski was a fight choreographer, but had worked in professional theatre for a long time and had worked with some big name directors in DC. I believe he directed the show the same way many directors start their career. He molded his methods of directing from past directors with whom he had worked. He was such a change from Emily; Emily was more of a damage control director, and she let the Faire run itself on many occasions unsuccessfully. John took charge, told the cast and crew his expectations and helped to guide them through the process of Cast College to the closing weekend. The 2003 season taught me how to build a relationship with a director, and that it is vital to the success of the show that the director and assistant director have the same vision for success. I realized that a relationship must be built out of trust. The director must trust their assistant to carry out their artistic vision of a show, and the assistant must trust the director for guidance on the vision of the show. John and I developed this rather quickly; I attribute that to the situation that we were thrust into. We immediately had to deal with the chaos of the Faire and remain a professional front for all the cast and crew to see.

The performance aspect of the VARF was never a problem; the actors were always doing their job and were wonderful at it. Even though most of the actors who were hired for the show were not professional actors by trade, in fact, most of them had not done much theatre at all. Some had occasionally worked at community theatres, but not much more. VARF was unable to pay their actors, so it was hard to get professional actors to participate. John did a great job in training these people and coaching them during the rehearsals in order to get the quality of the shows to a professional performance level.

Season 2004 began with a harsh production meeting where everyone on the senior staff was going to be completely honest with Cornelia and each other about where they saw the VARF heading and what to do about the business at this point. This was a tough meeting, but it was necessary for everyone in the meeting to see the situation as it really was. John and I decided we were going to be a united front against Cornelia and her outrageous business ideas. We thought that it would be best to shut the Faire down for a few years and do a lot of fundraising to pay off debts and establish our name a bit more before going back to tackling the idea of a Renaissance Faire. Others decided, however, that they would go into this meeting to support Cornelia and her dreams of continuing the Faire. The meeting lasted for six hours. Cornelia's plan was finally decided on; she was the CEO and therefore she made the final decision. Now that I had been accepted into graduate school I knew that this would be my last season with the VARF. However, Cornelia did consent to some of the other ideas that people suggested to help out the Faire in its current state. We all decided that the Faire should remain in one location, and that the price of admission should be lowered to attract more patrons.

During the 2004 season John and I learned how to work together. I remember the exact moment where I felt as if John and I were working as a team. During the Cast College I somehow learned how to anticipate what John needed, and when he needed it. This was such a wonderful feeling of satisfaction when I realized what I was doing. It was at moments like these where I started to realize that the role of the assistant director must entail seeing above and beyond what the director can see, and anticipating the actions of others, especially the director, at all times. Each weekend I learned how to accomplish this result faster and faster without thinking about it. As I grew to meet John's expectations of me, he learned to interpret my actions as well. In turn, the better of an assistant director I became the more he trusted me with directorial tasks. As the weekends went on I began to learn more and more about John's vision of the Faire, and tried to help him maintain it.

At the end of the 2004 season the VARF made some profit, but still not enough to get Cornelia out of debt. At the closing production meeting for the 2004 season seven of the senior staff quit, including John and me. We all were frustrated with Cornelia and we honestly thought that if we quit the Faire it would force Cornelia into putting the show on hold while she searched for new staff. This would also give her time and perspective to see that while the Faire was on hold she could do some fundraising and grant writing.

Overall, working with the VARF was a wonderful experience, and I would not trade the lessons I learned in those years with OOTW for anything. It taught me many things. Not the least of which is how to run a business, as well as how not to run a business. But most of all, it taught me a lot about how to work best with other people and

their artistic visions of theatre. I believe that this is one of the most important things an assistant director can learn.

## CHAPTER 2

### Experience: *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*

During my first year at VCU I was granted the opportunity to assistant direct one of the main stage shows. It was decided that the show would be *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* by Steve Martin. Barry Bell, who at the time was a student in the Graduate theatre pedagogy program, would direct it. It was his last semester as a graduate student and this would be part of his thesis project. I first approached Barry about my desire to assist him with this show while I was helping him as his teaching assistant for an Introduction to Stage Performance class for non-theatre majors. I remember the incredible amount of anxiety I felt when I decided that I would ask him if I could be his assistant director for this show. As I look back on it now, it seems to me that asking Barry for this opportunity was the biggest stress I experienced throughout the entire run of the show. Being a new assistant director, I wasn't sure if asking a director to be their assistant was the right thing to do. After I asked Barry he told me that he had never really used an assistant director before, and he would need a few days to think about it. Around the same time, another student named Amy Lollo also asked Barry if she could be his assistant director. At the time, Amy was a senior undergraduate directing student. Barry had had her in some of his classes before, and as far as I knew they got along very well.

Over the next few days I felt as if I was walking on pins and needles waiting for a response from Barry. I have begun to realize in these times of uncertainty that I am at my

most vulnerable. Finally, one afternoon after class Barry approached me and told me that he had never used an assistant director before and he wasn't sure he really needed one for this show either. However, he said that because this was his thesis project, he was trying new directing techniques and he should take the opportunity to add the position of assistant director to the mix. Barry told me that I could be his assistant director if I was still interested and that he would also use Amy Lollo as a second assistant director. Barry imparted to me that he believed Amy, as an undergraduate directing student, needed some practical directing experience. Through this process she would learn experientially about directing rather than just theory, as in a classroom.

I told Barry that I was still very interested in being his assistant director for this show and that I thought it was a wonderful idea to use Amy as a second assistant director. I believe that any experience the undergraduate students can have with the main stage productions will only help to enhance their careers as theatre artists. I was so excited to be an assistant for a new director. I was ready to show off my skills that I had learned while working with John at the VARF. I was also excited to be working on a show that was not set in the Renaissance; I was tired of classical work. Before coming to graduate school almost all of my theatre experiences were with Shakespeare, or some other type of classical piece.

So the process of getting the show into production began. Holding the auditions was the first order of business. I asked Barry if he would like my assistance with the audition process. He told me that he believed it would just be a waste of my time to sit

through the auditions. At the time I agreed with him, as I didn't know what I would have done anyway, but I thought it was at least appropriate for me to ask if he needed any help.

As I look back on the audition process now, I wish I could have been there. I think that watching the audition process would have helped me to see what Barry was looking for in the cast, and thus help me to better understand his vision of the show.

Before I knew it the show was cast. I was glad to see that Barry had cast a lot of graduate students. As a new graduate student myself, I felt closest to the other graduate students. I knew more about them and felt that I had the ability to direct them if Barry ever gave me a chance to work with some of the cast separately from the main rehearsals. I had not had any contact with the undergraduates yet, and I was unsure of their abilities. But I was so excited to begin to work on the show; most of these thoughts didn't surface until much later.

I read the script over and over again once I found out I was to be the assistant director for the show. I wanted to become familiar with the text in every way I could, also I believed it was my job to do so. At this point, as far as I could see, this was the most important part of my job as an assistant director. Also, I wasn't sure of what else I could do to aid in the process of rehearsals until Barry gave me some direction. When rehearsals began, Amy and I joined the first rehearsal with feelings of anticipation and excitement. I remember asking Amy if Barry had given her anything to work on for the show. She told me that he hadn't. I was a bit confused; I thought that surely one of us would be doing some type of dramaturgy work by now. I was under the impression that with two assistant directors one of us would act as a dramaturge and one of us as an acting/directing assistant.

Until the first meeting of all the cast and major technical heads, I did not find out that Barry already had a dramaturge for the show. Barry introduced me to Christy Leake; she was our dramaturge for the show. This is when I realized that my experiences with the VARF had colored my expectations of how other directors might do things. This is also when I began to understand that none of my experiences as an assistant director would ever be the same. This made me scared, and once again unsure of myself.

Since this was Barry's thesis project, he decided that for this show he wanted to try a new style of directing that he had been researching. On the first day of rehearsal the cast and crew sat around a big table to have the first read-through of the script. At this first meeting Barry told us that he was going to try a more British style of rehearsing and directing a show. He told us that this style would mean spending a little more time doing table work than most of us were used to. Also, we would have a longer rehearsal process than was probably necessary for this show. However, we were all very excited to have this new experience, and were ready to experiment together with Barry for this show.

Jo Bachman was our stage manager. Barry knew Jo from other undergraduate projects and other faculty members, and he trusted her completely. She was always an excellent stage manager; very organized, and not afraid to tell Barry what needed to be done. At the first rehearsal Jo made sure that the cast and crew received all of the necessary paper work, including the main schedule for rehearsals. When I received all this paper work from Jo I remember wondering where it all came from. Did Jo create it, or Barry? When did this happen? Was I supposed to be involved with this? After the rehearsal, I spoke with Jo about the schedule to make sure that I wasn't missing any of



these meetings, that for all I knew, I was supposed to be at. Jo told me she wasn't sure what I needed to do, and that I should talk to Barry about it. So I did. I went to Barry and asked him what meetings he wanted me to participate in. Barry seemed caught off guard by the question; he told me that he didn't think I needed to be at any of the production meetings, that he had already worked out most everything that needed to be done.

I'm sure that I could have attended any of these meetings if I had wanted to. But I didn't push to be at them either. I'm not saying that Barry told me not to be at the production meetings, but at the time I was intimidated by Barry and not sure what to do. He had so much directing experience and I really looked up to him. I wanted to help him in any way I could. I wanted to impress him. I was very new to being an assistant director and I was unsure of my decisions and myself as an artist. I now realize that I probably denied myself of a lot of valuable experience by not pushing Barry for my presence at these meetings.

The first week of rehearsals seemed to go extremely slowly. Amy and I spent this week at the table with Barry and the cast while they read the script over and over again. The first few times the cast read the script Barry told them not to act it out in any way; they should just read the script for the sake of hearing it and begin to think about their characters and their relationships to each other. Occasionally Barry would make comments on specific lines of the text to the cast. Also this was a prime time for Christy, our dramaturge, to help answer questions. We also added to her list of questions to solve.

During this week I took some of my own personal notes on what I believed was happening between characters and other ideas that often came in to my head when I heard

the script being read aloud. I noticed that Amy was doing the same thing. I never shared any of these thoughts with Barry, I was unsure of how to bring them up. To my knowledge Amy never shared her notes either.

During this week Amy and I often chatted about different characters and their concepts. We talked a lot about what we thought the set was going to look like. We talked about costumes and props. All the while neither of us were talking to Barry very much about any of these things. For all we knew these things had been decided already and our musings to each other were nothing but that. By the start of the second week, when the show started to get onto its feet, a tension began to build between Amy and me. We were still not really sure of our job descriptions as Barry's assistants. I think the tension started when Barry asked us to begin taking notes for him. It became a juvenile race to see if Amy or I would get to rehearsal first so that we could place our seat next to Barry. On one side of Barry would be one assistant director and on the other side of him would be Jo. I assumed that I would be his first assistant director and therefore would take notes for him. I am not sure why I assumed this, perhaps because I was a graduate student and Amy was not. Also I was under the impression that Amy was really only there to gain observational experience, and that she was still in the process of learning how to direct. I cannot speak of Amy's feelings on the matter, but I could tell she felt unused and left out of the artistic process. I still feel very badly about this; I wish I could go back and change things about the whole situation.

During the end of the second week of rehearsals Barry told us that he would like to use Amy as his blocking assistant and he wanted to use me as an acting assistant. This

helped to clear up our tasks as assistant directors, and we were able to let some of the tension go. I believe that Barry began to feel the tension between Amy and me, and made this decision.

This tactic worked out well for the next few rehearsals. Amy and Barry would sit together and work out the details of blocking the show. I made sure I stayed out of the way and let Amy and Barry decide what to do. This is not to say that I didn't take notes; I wrote down many instances where I thought that the blocking looked problematic, and where I thought it worked well.

After the blocking process was over I moved to sit next to Barry again. Barry and Jo would run the rehearsal and I went back to taking acting notes. Barry ran scene by scene until he believed it was time to move on. After each scene I would read back the notes to Barry and he would recall what he meant by them and relay them back to the cast. For the next week and a half this is how the rehearsal proceeded. Amy usually sat next to me. Sometimes I felt she got up enough courage to say things like, "that looks odd" or "I don't like that part." She would lean over to me and tell me her thoughts; I would then relay them to Barry. She was usually right in what she saw, and most of the time I would agree with her.

Eventually, we began the process of full runs of the show. Amy and I decided that we would take turns taking notes for Barry. This seemed to work out well, except on those nights where there were so many notes that neither Amy nor myself could keep up with Barry's mouth. The problem was that the closer and closer to tech rehearsals we got, the more detailed notes we would receive. Taking down notes word for word at a very fast

pace is extremely taxing. You must be able to hold them in your head while you are writing down the previous one. Many times you are holding up to four or five in your head. Soon, I figured out how to keep up with myself. I would write down key words on the next few line. This way I could catch up with myself in the next second without having to worry about missing what Barry was saying while concentrating on what I was writing down. The only problem with this strategy was that occasionally Barry would ask us if something on stage looked right. Of course we were mostly looking down at our papers for the entire rehearsal, so usually our input could only be about what we heard actors say, generally not what we saw actors do. Barry figured this problem out too. While one of us took the notes he would look to the other one of us to tell him whether or not something looked good.

During this stressful week before tech rehearsal the notes became too much for one person to handle. I suggested to Barry that one of us should take the tech notes/ideas, and the other person should take the regular actor notes. This worked well for the most part, except that Barry could never remember which one of us was recording the tech notes and which one of us was recording the acting notes. We decided that Amy would take the tech notes and I would take the acting notes. For this to work efficiently we moved Jo down another seat so that Amy could sit on one side of Barry and I could sit on the other side. Still, when Barry had a note he wanted us to take down he was so used to leaning over to only one side to whisper the note that he had trained his body to do so. I'm sure it was frustrating for Barry to retrain his brain to lean back and forth depending on what type of note he was giving, but it was the only way Amy or I was going to keep up with him.

Amy and I had to develop our own secret communication as well. Sometimes Barry wouldn't fully get out a note to one of us, but because the other was watching the scene we could relate to the other what Barry was trying to say. Amy and I would also take our own notes when we were not taking notes for Barry. We would share those with each other and if we both agreed on them, we would share them with Barry. Also sometimes Barry would forget to address problems that occurred in the previous rehearsal, and it was up to us to remember what still needed to be looked at. By the end of tech rehearsals Amy and I were in tune with each other's ideas and notes.

Tech rehearsals were hard. When the cast and crew finally got to work on the stage, we noticed that we were going to have many problems. The main issue had to do with the stairs on the stage. While Barry did want to have stairs, they created problems with the blocking. Much of the blocking had to be altered in small ways to accommodate the set. This is not unusual. Normally when a cast performs on a new set for the first time much adjusting must be done. The next major problem was that it seemed like a lot of work still needed to be done on the set. So much in fact that it looked as if there was no way the set would be done in time for opening. This, of course, made Barry extremely upset and nervous. The last thing a cast and crew want is a nervous director during tech rehearsals.

During the last tech day a major communication oversight took place. I knew it had to do with the "magical painting" at the end of the show. The painting on the wall is supposed to light up and change to a different painting that Picasso will paint in his future. Apparently, the crew did not realize how difficult this effect was going to be to pull off.

Close to the end of tech week the painting was still not ready for use. In front of the whole cast and crew, Barry had a screaming argument with Ron Keller, our head designer. This put Amy and me in a very awkward position. We had no idea what to do. The entire cast and crew were witnessing a very distressing situation right before the opening night of a show. It was like witnessing a car accident in slow motion, in which you think to yourself, “do something”, but you are frozen and can’t move or utter a word. It was over in less than two minutes, but those were a very long two minutes. I am not sure where the communication fell short, but by the end of tech everyone was angry and frustrated with the show. As I think about the situation now, I still don’t know what I should have done or could have done at that very moment.

Before the invitation dress rehearsal Ron and Barry openly apologized to each other in front of cast and crew. I think they realized that blowing up like that in front of students was wrong for them to have done. Opening night came and everything was tentatively ready to go. Barry told me how nervous he was that the elements of tech within the show had not been tested enough, I could tell that he was anxious to see if they all worked.

Looking back on the experience, the only thing I would have altered would have been the length of the rehearsal process. The cast picked up the flow of the text very quickly. I believe this was due to having many graduate students in the cast. They brought the undergraduate students up to a higher level of acting faster than anyone could have guessed. This show is supposed to be a comedy, and in directing comedy getting the cast not to “peak” too soon can be a problem. Having more experienced actors within the cast made this happen sooner than I believe Barry anticipated. If a comedy show “peaks” too

soon, the jokes aren't funny anymore, and the timing falls off. Even though I believe that the rehearsal process took too long, if it had been any shorter I don't believe we would have had much of a set.

However, my experiences with this show were mostly positive. First, I had a wonderful time working with Barry and all of the students in the show. I learned a lot from Barry about how to stage a show in a  $\frac{3}{4}$  thrust environment; which is a stage environment I had never worked on before. Second, my assistant directing experience with Barry gave me a lot of insights into how productions are run in an academic setting. I enjoyed being able to talk to the tech crew and learn more about how they operate as a group.

## CHAPTER 3

### Experience: *The Zoo Story*

I decided that I needed some experience using an assistant director myself while directing. This would help present the director's perspective on using an assistant. I took on the project of directing *The Zoo Story*. The semester before I decided to take on this play, I enrolled in Dr. Pettiford-Wates Problems in Stage Directing class. Our final project was to direct a section of *The Zoo Story*. We were allowed to use whatever theatrical devices we wanted to use. We could change the characters, the standard type of set which is normally used, the time period, and sounds. The only restraints we had on the final project was that we were allowed to use no more than ten light, and sound cues. Each member of the class was assigned about a ten-minute section of the text. Each director in the class had to cast their scene, rehearse it, and finally present it at the final showing in the Newdick theatre, where anyone from the public was allowed to attend. When we presented the scenes, they were presented in the running order of the text. It ended up being a really interesting show, because all of the directors' concepts, sets, technical plots, and character ideas were different. It turned out to be a wonderful show. It was an excellent last project for the graduate directors and a good educational project for the undergraduate student actors.

I learned a lot about directing from this class. We had many debates in class about whether the subject of directing could be taught or not. Finally we came to the conclusion



that directing in and of itself cannot be taught to someone who does not have the latent skill for the craft within them. I still believe this today. However, for those who possess the proclivity for the artistry you can learn many basic skills and techniques in a directing class. It was during this year that I realized that I wanted my thesis to be about assistant directing. I had so much fun doing this final project in the directing class that it became almost an obsession within me to need to direct the rest of the play while using my concept. I decided that I would direct the entirety of *The Zoo Story* at the start of the next school year. I would try to use the same cast, if they were willing, and I would use an assistant director to test some of my theories on assistant directing in hopes of answering some questions for this thesis. I also had to ask one of the faculty members to be my faculty advisor for this project. I asked Dr. Pettiford-Wates if she would do it because she was the instructor I had for the original conception of this project. I felt she would have been the only faculty member who knew what I was trying to do.

I believe part of the reason I felt so obsessed about this show was because I elected to direct the first section of the script for the original final project in the directing class. This made me feel as if I left something hanging, and I didn't answer the questions of the text I wanted to answer because I only did the first ten minutes of a very deep and complex script.

The concept that I had been working on for *The Zoo Story* involved using women in the roles of Peter and Jerry. I also set it in a time period closer to today. I was surprised that I didn't need to change much in the text to make the male roles into those that women could play. The only things I changed about the text were the pronouns. ("He" became

“she”, and “his” became “her”, but because Peter and Jerry are only talking back and forth to each other there aren't that many of them). Also, I found an element of chess playing within the script that, to my knowledge, has never been used before. Usually *The Zoo Story* is staged with two white men, one of whom sits on a park bench and eventually fights over the bench that Peter and Jerry both want, ending in the stabbing of Jerry and his subsequent death. These elements I kept in the story, I needed at least one bench for them to fight over and the stabbing and death of Jerry still occurs. I wanted to add the element of the characters' playing chess, so I added the typical New York park stone seats and table with the inlaid chessboard. I also added a tree to the set to give some different physical levels to the stage, and give the actors another place on which to play. I only changed two parts in the text to make it sound more updated, and I changed the mentioned salary of Peter to make it a more contemporary amount. I also changed Jerry's line about a “Mr. Barleycorn” to a “Mr. Jack Daniels”, figuring that more young people would get the joke that way.

I had previously cast Becca Bernard as Peter and Sarah Johnson as Jerry; I was hoping that they would be willing to participate in this extended version as well. I asked them and they were both excited to join the project. They expressed the same feelings about the final directing project that I had, and also wanted to finish the concept through the rest of the play.

I put in a request to the faculty to work on this special project. Then I began the paperwork for reserving spaces for rehearsals and the Newdick theatre for the dates of performance. The next task I needed to take on was deciding who I would use for an

assistant director. This became a harder decision than I had anticipated. I asked around to various graduate students whose opinion I trusted. Unfortunately, everyone I talked to was involved with their own projects for the semester. This is when I decided I needed to use a new graduate student who wasn't already involved in other commitments. Also, a first year graduate student would have an unbiased opinion about my work and me. The problem was I wanted to use someone whom I knew at least a little so that there would be no chance of us not working well together.

As Noreen's office assistant one of my jobs is to take prospective graduate students out to lunch to get to know them and give them information about the pedagogy program. So, I began to go over the list of new graduate students I had taken out to lunch when they were prospective graduate students. I remembered I had a very nice lunch with a student named Paul Wurth. For many reasons I thought that he would be perfect for the job of assistant director. First, I knew him well enough to ask for his help with this project, but not so much that I could anticipate his decisions. What I did know about him was that he was the type of guy who wanted to try new things, and experimenting with the role of the assistant director is new and to my knowledge has never been done before. Secondly, he is male. Making *The Zoo Story* feminine and having myself as a director, I wanted to make sure that a male could still see this show without having the original story of the text lost; this is where I hoped Paul's opinion would be of great value to me.

I asked Paul if he would be willing to be my assistant director. I told him everything I was planning on doing. I told him that this experience of directing *The Zoo Story* in a new way was only half of what I was trying to accomplish with this project. I

told him the other half had to do with his role as my assistant director. I would treat him differently in each rehearsal in order to see what tactics worked best. He agreed, and was excited to be part of this show and experiment.

I got to work on a rehearsal schedule and time table for myself in regards to the progress of the show. Because I had no stage manager many of the tasks they would normally do, I had to do. Occasionally, I would save specific tasks for Paul to handle. I wanted him to be as involved with the show as he could possibly be. My independent project request was approved and I moved into rehearsal mode.

We had our first meeting in the student lounge. I wanted to introduce Becca and Sarah to Paul, as well as read through the script and make any changes that seemed necessary, and finally, go over schedules to make sure we could all meet on the same times. This all worked out and it only took about two hours to complete. Becca and Sarah seemed to really like Paul; I was glad to see that they were going to get along well. I had many exercises planned for Paul and making sure that Becca and Sarah were comfortable with him was a big first step. Because Becca and Sarah were upperclassmen they had very busy schedules, as a result we worked out about three and a half weeks during which we could work together, and it totaled to be 14 rehearsals, including this first meeting. This made me extremely nervous. I was not sure we could get this show up in such a short amount of time and at the same time accomplish my goal with Paul. However, I was confident in my abilities as a director that it could get done. After all, the show is less than an hour long, and had hardly any technical aspects to worry about. Also because I had worked with Becca and Sarah before, the initial work I would normally have to do as a

director was mostly already done. I knew who Becca and Sarah were as people and as actors; I knew what they were and were not capable of doing in this time frame.

I was only worried about two things. First, in this play approximately 85% of the lines are spoken by one character, Jerry. This was a lot for her to memorize in such a short amount of time. But I thought she could do it, as Sarah is a very professional actor and good with staying on top of her work. The second thing this time table made me worry about was having enough time to work with Paul on my ideas about assistant directing. With such a short time table I would have to concentrate more on getting the show up and running than spending time experimenting with Paul as my assistant. In most professional settings this is the kind of time restraint a director and actors are under all the time, so I decided that I would try to make the most of it, and use what I had to my advantage. At this first meeting I asked the cast, especially Sarah, to begin to memorize their lines. I believe that most directors want this to be taken care of first; they like to get the lines into the actors' heads so they can feel free to work on the meaning of the text and how it translates onto the stage.

At our next meeting we began to get the show up on its feet. As a director I make sure I take the time to do some rough preliminary blocking before the rehearsal. In terms of their movements this helps to give me a frame of reference as to what I am looking for from each character. If the blocking needs to change, then I will deal with it when it occurs. It helps to have a blueprint of what you are trying to accomplish. We roughly blocked about 25% of the script during the first day. I knew that much of this blocking would have to change, especially once we decided on our props and character business. I

made sure that Paul sat close to me; I often asked him what he thought about the choices I was making. He would give a safe yet honest response. He would say, “it looks good”, or “well, it’s probably going to change when we get the props.” I told Paul that I wanted him to always be honest with me. I believe that he always was.

The next few rehearsals went along in the same routine until we finished blocking the show. As a director, I always abhor the blocking process of rehearsals. I just want to get right into the meat of the play and work. Occasionally I would ask for Paul’s suggestion on a section of blocking. I usually asked this of him when I noticed he seemed to be drifting off, or when I honestly needed a suggestion. He was always very observant, he was tuned right into what I was trying to accomplish by each movement.

As the next week was fast approaching I had separate meetings with Paul. I talked to him about the props that we needed to buy, sections of the script with which I was unhappy, decisions on music, the making of publicity posters, the making of a program, and various other little things that always need to get done that usually get overlooked. Paul helped me with almost all of these tasks. I asked him if he could start working on a publicity poster. He said that he would work on it as soon as possible. I also asked him if he would help me put together the opening music for the show. He said he would help me with that too. It was so nice to have someone around to help me with all these little tasks. It made me more relaxed. I didn’t feel like I was going to become lost in the show and never get anything accomplished. I suppose if I had a stage manager as well a lot of these tasks could have been designated to them. Finally, I asked Paul if he would send an email to Dr. T asking her when she would like to come see a rehearsal. I thought it would be a

good idea for her to come see one of the rehearsals and give me some feedback on what she thought.

As the rehearsal process went on I focused more and more attention on working with Paul. I had him do warm-up exercises with Becca and Sarah. I told him to focus on using some Meisner techniques in the warm-ups because of all the listening that was required from Becca and Sarah in doing this piece. I had many purposes in everything I asked Paul to do. By asking him to do a particular exercise with them I was able to judge the level of theatre training Paul had. I was also able to see how he worked with students as a leader and teacher. I could see that he was feeling judged while I watched him. I could prepare myself for the rest of the rehearsal while he was working with the actors. At the same time Becca and Sarah got their warm-up and we could all move on.

I wish I had more time to work on this project with Paul. I wish I had the opportunity to let him run a rehearsal. I wish I had the chance to let him work on minor acting coaching sessions with Becca and Sarah. However, just like with most theatre experiences, we never had the time to do everything we wanted to do. Considering all this, there is nothing I would have changed or taken out. I just wish I could have added more to the experience. My job was done now. Nothing could be changed or added this late in the process, so now I had to concern myself with the business of technical rehearsals and make sure all of the final ideas came to fruition.

Before I knew it, it was tech day. I worked with Andy Waters, our Newdick technical head, and Paul kept Becca and Sarah on track without my having to shout back and forth to keep everyone on the same page. The technical rehearsal only took one day to

set up, since there are not many technical cues in this play. Andy agreed to come back for one more test run of the tech cues before the invited dress rehearsal.

The IDR went very well. A handful of people showed up, but I suppose that is usually how the invited dress rehearsals are. Paul was there with me, and we both watched the show in terror and excitement, as I imagine all directors do.

On opening night I bought Becca, Sarah, and Paul little animal shaped chocolates as a token of my appreciation for all their hard work. I was so glad to have explored the concept I had conceived so long ago. I was also glad that I had the chance to add in the extra opportunity of having an assistant director. It was such a valuable experience for me; I believe it was for Paul as well.

I had directed in the past, but I had never used an assistant director. Although I had been an assistant director myself, I could see the position very differently from the other side now. I felt that now I could truly be a better assistant director. I learned what a director wants in an assistant director. I learned that a director could either be a teacher to the assistant or a dictator. Similar to a stage manager, I learned that an assistant will always know more about what situation the show is in than the director, and they probably should. I learned that a director and an assistant director must trust each other before any work will ever get done.



## CHAPTER 4

### Experience: *Three Sisters*

Right about the time I submitted my paperwork for approval of *The Zoo Story* directing project. I was asked by Lorri Lindberg to help out with a guest artist that was teaching a week-long workshop on Acting For the Camera. Lorri told me that all she needed was for someone to be the camera person while this guest artist worked with the undergraduate students. This guest artists name was Casey Biggs. I told her that I would be more than happy to help out in anyway I could. I had no idea who Casey Biggs was. I decided that I should read his biography if I was going to be working with him for an entire week. The biographies of all of the guest artists are always posted outside of the student lounge. After I read it I was so impressed by how much work he had done, and, of course, much more excited to help Lorri with this workshop.

I went to the workshop and ran the video recorder for three out of the five sessions he held. During this workshop I watched and listened to Casey. The students were so enthralled by him; he was an excellent teacher and director. On the last day of the workshop the undergraduate students were pleading with him to come back next year to be a guest director for a main stage show. Casey told the class that he had spoken to David Leong about the possibilities of doing this. I knew this was my chance to ask him if I could be his assistant director for this show next year.

As the students said goodbye to Casey on the last day of the workshop, I packed up the video equipment and ran the same question over and over again in my head. “Should you ask him if you could be his assistant?” I waited around until all the students had gone, and I finally gathered up the courage to ask him. I approached him and told him that I enjoyed this week and the chance to work with him; I told him I hoped he was pleased with my limited camera experience. He said that I did a fine job operating the camera, and that it was a pleasure to work with me. Next he asked me what I wanted to do when I graduated. I was dumbfounded by the question; I froze. It was as if someone was speaking a foreign language to me. I stammered and said, well, I’m not really sure yet, I’ll get back to you. Then I asked him if he was really considering coming back next year to direct. He said he was, but it was still very far in the future for him, and he wouldn’t be sure for a few more months. I told him that I would love to be his assistant director if he did come back to direct a main stage show. Just then Lorri came over to us; it was then that I realized she had been listening to our whole conversation. Lorri told Casey that I had assistant directed for Barry and that she loved working with me when I was her T.A. for her senior classes. I’m sure at this point my face was twelve shades of red. Casey was impressed and said that he would like it if I were his assistant for a main stage show. But, all of this would depend on if he were able to come back to Richmond. I thanked Casey and Lorri for the wonderful week of hard work, and left. I think I replayed this conversation over and over in my head for a month after it happened. I was so excited at the possibilities of working with Casey Biggs.

Many long months passed, but I never forgot the conversation that I had with Casey. When the shows for the year were announced and I found out that Casey was definitely coming back to VCU, I was so excited I couldn't sleep. I asked Lorri for Casey's email address so that I could contact him. I was sure that he had forgotten about our conversation and me. I thought he probably talks to so many new people everyday, why would he remember our two-minute conversation? I emailed him the very next day. I'm sure it was an awkward email to receive. Someone that you barely knew for a few minutes emailing you out of the blue to ask them if they were still interested in working with you. I waited for a response from Casey for two weeks, and got no answer. So I talked to Lorri again, and asked her for his phone number so I could call him. She told me that she was having problems getting him to respond to his email as well. At this time Lorri also informed me that an undergraduate student named Katie Musser was also going to assistant direct this show. I was taken aback by this, and was immediately worried that the same thing that had happened with Amy Lollo was going to happen with Katie. I decided to let it go, talk to Casey, and see what he wanted to do. I decided that I would not let what had happened between Amy and me happen between Katie and me. The next day I decided to call him. This was even more terrifying to me, but at least I knew I would get my questions answered faster than by email. I made a list of everything I wanted to ask him. I placed it in front of me as I called him. The first time I called I got no answer, so I left a message for him that attempted to remind him of who I was, and asked him if he would call me back.

Meanwhile, I thought I should do some work on my own to preempt any questions or thoughts Casey might have. The show that Casey was supposed to direct was *Three Sisters*, by Anton Chekhov. I never had any experience with Chekhov, so I went to the library to check out his plays and any other information I could find that I thought would be useful. I also looked to the Internet for recent productions of this show that had been produced in other locations. I found some dramaturgy websites for the show, and I found a lot of history on Chekhov.

The next day, Casey called me. I finally got to ask him all of my questions about working with him. First, I made sure that he remembered who I was. He said that he was worried because he hadn't heard from me and was afraid that I didn't want to do it anymore. I told him that I had been worried too because I hadn't been able to get in contact with him. I told him about the emails I had tried to send him; he told me I had been using the wrong address. He gave me the correct one and I told him I would resend all of the emails to the correct address. In the meantime, I asked him what I could be doing to help him out for the show until he was in the area. He told me that I could start doing some basic dramaturgy work and start to create a study packet for the cast. I was happy that he gave me some work to do. I also informed him of what Lorri had told me about Katie Musser. He seemed confused; he asked me why he needed two assistant directors. I told him that I thought she would be there to help in any other way he needed her to. He said she could be my assistant, if I wanted her, and that he only need one assistant for himself. I wasn't really sure what to do with this information about Katie, so I decided I would just wait until Casey was in town to ask him more questions.

This sort of communication is hard between assistant director and director, especially when the director is working on many other projects and is trying to foresee what help they are going to need from their assistant in a few months. But, after this phone call, and I receiving the correct email address, good communication between us was no longer a problem. Now, he knew I was still interested in working with him, and we both could look forward to beginning the project.

I went back to work on researching the play and Chekhov's life until the day that Casey arrived in town for the auditions.

### **The Casting**

The day he arrived in Richmond I was so excited. I asked him if he would like for me to sit in on the auditions. He said that he would, and that he would trust my opinion of the students with whom I had worked, or seen in other shows. I also wanted to share with him all of the research I had done on the show and I wanted to get to know Casey as a person. I wanted to know how he directed, how he worked with assistant directors, what his concept was for this show, and what ideas he had formulating in his head about the show. He said that we would go out to dinner later and talk about all of that information.

I believe knowing all of these things as an assistant director is very important. The assistant director must be able to tune into what the director sees; they must be able to lead the show if they need to, while always keeping in mind how the director sees the show. If an assistant director is a very perceptive person, which I think they need to be, this will

take at least a week of working with the director to learn who they are, and how they are seeing the show in their head. I think this is also because at this early point they are still trying to figure it out for themselves. Until the show is cast and they know the actors with whom they will be working, it is sometimes hard to get into very deep character analysis outside of the text. If the actor is good they will bring levels to the characters that the director will then use to enhance what they already wanted from that particular character.

The audition process began, which took hours, but finally the first round of auditions was over. Casey had a large stack of resumes he wanted to call back for the second round. Gary Hopper was also casting from this audition for his show *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, which would be the final show of the school year. As often happens, many of the same people were called back for both shows. But Gary's second audition would require them to sing and dance. Coordinating who would go to the audition for Casey or who would go to the audition for Gary became tricky. Both sides ended up doing a lot of waiting for each other to finish with a particular student. Finally it was down to the last round of auditions. The night before, Casey and I went over each audition sheet and he decided who he thought should try out for what role. Then he wanted me to pick out sections in the script that represented the characters, copy enough for all the auditioners, and at the auditions they would read that section of text and Casey would direct them. The problem was that once again, Gary and Casey wanted many of the same people. So, we had to decide what to do if Gary got a particular student that we wanted, who would take the role of that student, and then who could we use in the role they were filling, and so on, and so on.

At the final audition is where the real chaos began. Our stage manager was sick with mononucleosis, and his assistant was trying to corral everyone by herself. I saw that she needed help. On Casey's instruction, I went out to the lobby and announced to the mass of people the procedure for the final auditions. I could tell that the students were so nervous; they all were so anxious to please Casey. During this round of auditions Casey tested their knowledge of the script, character, and found out if they were able to take direction from him. These elements seemed to be the most important to him, as I would imagine they are to any director. Finally it was over, but not completely, since we still needed to wait for Gary's auditions to end so we could see whom he had decided to cast. We had to make sure that no student was cast in both shows. As it turned out, Casey and Gary did want some of the same people, so it was decided that the cast list would not go up the next day as it normally does. Gary and Casey would sit down with David the next day to hash out the final casting details. When this meeting was over, everyone was happy, and the cast list went up for the students to see.

During the audition process Casey relied on me for many things, most of which was keeping track of who certain students were, keeping all the paper work organized and together. He also wanted my opinion when it came to assessing different students acting abilities, and ease at taking direction. Next, he asked me to cast four other roles using the first year students. They would be the company member roles of house servants and musicians. I felt so appreciated that he asked me to do this; and I felt that he really trusted my opinion to cast these extra roles. After watching the auditions and working with some of the first year students on Freshman Discovery Projects, I knew whom I wanted to cast.

Finally, I made sure that all of the cast members received the study guide for *Three Sisters* that I made for them. I was really proud of myself for making this study guide for the show, and I was happy the way the auditions turned out. It was at times chaotic, but I think that in an academic setting where two shows are trying to be cast at the same time, it can't be anything but that.

### **The Process**

We would start rehearsals for the show a week before winter break was over. We needed to get a jump on the rehearsal process otherwise we would have only had four weeks, which included one week for technical rehearsals. For a show written by Chekhov, Casey wanted at least five weeks of rehearsal, four for acting, and one for tech. I agreed with him on this decision; Chekhov is challenging, even for professional actors. The students had all of winter break to work on their study guides, read, and learn about their characters, the play, and Chekhov; I just hoped it would show. Also during the winter break, I contacted Katie Musser. I updated her on the status of the show and when our first day of rehearsal would be. She was just as excited to begin rehearsals as I was.

The first day of rehearsals Casey introduced all of the crew to the cast, and had the cast introduce themselves. He talked to the cast about his directing experience, and then he talked to the cast about the reasons he had for wanting to do this show. He told the cast that some of the faculty did not want him to do this show. They said that it was too hard for college students to pull off successfully. Casey told the faculty that was the reason he



thought the students needed to do it. He believes that an acting student needs to be challenged. That is why they are here paying money to the school. He wanted the students to work on hard pieces now because when they get out into the professional world of acting they would be expected to know how to do this kind of stuff.

After about an hour of his talking to the cast and crew, we began the first read-through of the script. It was wonderful to hear the script aloud. As many in the cast said, to hear it read aloud is a very different script than when you read it by yourself. The reading was a little shaky, as the first reading usually is, as various names, and places that the characters talk about are very foreign to the American tongue. Casey gave John Deboer, our vocal coach, a list of names and places that the cast would need help learning how to pronounce. John said he would work on the list and have the correct pronunciations for the next rehearsal. After the first reading was over Casey told the cast what the schedule was going to be for the rest of the run. Our assistant stage manager handed out copies of the tentative schedule to everyone. Casey said that he wanted to spend at least the next four rehearsals at the table reading the script and working on pronunciation and character analysis.

After rehearsal Casey and I talked at length about the characters and how he saw the actors fitting into their roles. He expressed to me what he had observed from different actors; their habits and other issues he noticed. From his notes I could tell that one of his main complaints was about the actors' vocal training and enunciation. As his assistant I made note of this so that I could anticipate any problems that might occur later within rehearsals. Also he told me that he would be relying on me not just as an assistant director,

but also as a dramaturge. I was never told why *Three Sisters* did not have an official dramaturge. I think Casey was used to having his assistant director do some of the dramaturgical work. Casey also told me that he had been digging around in a lot of research before he came to direct the show. I decided that I was going to need some help to keep all of these various tasks in order. So, I put Katie Musser in charge of researching some things that came up in the script that we had questions about. I knew it wasn't worth trying to keep Casey and myself organized and do research at the same time; Katie would be a big help as far as this was concerned.

The next few evenings of rehearsals went according to plan. Casey worked through the script line by line with the actors, asking them questions and clarifying answers. This process was extremely tedious for the actors even though it was incredibly helpful to them. I believe what Casey was trying to do was make them so anxious to get the show on its feet that they would bring the amount of energy up to the level the show needed it to be at. During these few days at the table Katie and I provided dramaturgical research to the cast and Casey as it related to their lines and character histories. It was very helpful to each situation in the script, and I was glad that Katie was there to help me with this.

Meanwhile, during this first week Casey had meetings with Andrew Wallace and his assistant for discussions on the progress of the set construction. He also had a short meeting with Heather Hogg for costume design ideas. I asked Casey if he wanted me to attend these meetings with him. He told me that he wanted me to know everything he knew. I began to realize that he wanted me there because I helped to give him some

stability back to the core of the show, and I was someone he trusted to bounce ideas off of. At these small crew meetings Casey would rely on me for reference of when something would take place in the show, or who says a particular line. This made me feel important and taught me a lot about how the other technical aspects of the theatre work.

The second week Casey decided that the show was ready to get on its feet. The cast was thrilled. Over this week Casey roughly blocked the whole show. He asked me to find out when the cast would be in some rehearsal corsets, shoes, and jackets. Also, he wanted cast members to start setting up appointments with John Deboer for vocal coaching. I made sure they were getting rehearsal costume pieces for the next week, and began to set up meetings for cast members with John.

Casey and I started to work closely together when we began running sections of the show. Casey would have me take notes for him, and after the section was over he would take them and read them back to the cast while explaining what they meant. This went on for about a week and a half. Eventually, I was able to anticipate where Casey wanted to make a note. It became second nature to me; it was so easy to anticipate what he wanted to tell an actor. We would be watching a scene and I would see an actor do something that we had said not to do, they did it wrong, or oddly, and I would make the note without Casey having to say anything. Sometimes he would just shift in his chair and I knew exactly what it meant and I would start writing. I started to find it amazing that I could anticipate his actions, and recognize what they meant. Sometimes he would lean over to me like he was giving me a note to write down and all he would say was, “that was wrong.” He trusted me enough to translate those three words into what he needed to say

back to the actor later without his having to think about it. Sometimes he would say, “I don’t know, what should I say about that?” And it would be up to me to articulate to the actor what I believed could help them next time. I soon realized that many of these times if Casey had stopped and thought about it for a minute, he could have come up with something to say; but that was not what he was trying to do. First of all, he was trying to make sure I felt ownership of this play. Secondly, he was teaching me how to be a better director. Lastly, most of the time Casey didn’t have the opportunity to stop and think about a note he wanted to give an actor without missing the next important moment in the scene. All these reasons worked out to both of our advantages.

Once again I worried about Katie and the amount of learning she was getting out of this. I took part of Tuesday nights off because I had a class. She took off on Monday nights for a class as well. During the times when I wasn’t there, Casey would use her the same way he had been using me; she would take notes and keep him organized. But even on those nights I was gone it was only for a maximum of two hours. We never had any tension like there had been between Amy and me; I think this was because Casey treated Katie as my assistant and not his. This kept our job descriptions separate, and we didn’t feel as if we were in competition for the same job.

When we got closer to the tech rehearsals, I decided that I would use the same technique I discovered while working with Amy on *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*. I would have Katie sit on the other side of Casey and he would give her tech notes, and I would sit on the other side of Casey and take actor notes. Now, instead of me taking the notes on large pieces of paper for Casey to look at and relay back to the cast, I put each actor on

small sheets of paper so that I could hand each actor their own set of individual notes. If they had questions about the notes, they could come to see either Casey or myself. This system worked out well, and Casey adapted to it well; it also saved my hand and memory. As usual, the closer we came to the end of the rehearsal process the more notes there were, and the more detailed the notes became. Katie was a great deal of help when it came to this. We continued this routine all the way through the days of tech. Katie and Casey would meet with the tech crews after a run and go over tech notes, and I would go over to the actors and work with them on their notes. This helped to get us all out of rehearsal sooner rather than each group waiting specifically for Casey to give them notes; it sped up the process significantly.

Soon it was opening night; Casey had planned to leave early the next morning, and he would not see any of the other shows. At first I was shocked; I had never experienced a director leaving and not coming back after opening night. He asked me to set up a meeting with the cast in the middle of the next week to do a speed line-through so that they wouldn't lose the pace of the show over the three day break in the run. I suppose I looked nervous or shocked because he looked at me and told me that it was up to me and the stage manager to keep the show together after he was gone. I really enjoyed that feeling of responsibility he placed on me, even though it was scary. Although, I soon got used to it, and I was happy for that extra trust he placed in me. All I had to do now was to watch the shows, take little notes, and make sure none of the actors drastically changed anything. Occasionally I would remind an actor to watch their diction or remember a gesture, but the work was done, the show was up and running, and it turned out beautifully.

The biggest thing I learned while working with Casey was trust; he allowed himself to trust me, he gave me important tasks to do, and thus let me learn. He put his absolute trust in my decisions and in me. It always made me nervous because I didn't want to disappoint him, the cast, or myself. It was the best assistant directing experience I had ever had, and it made me crave more.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **The Assistant Director**

#### **Who is the assistant director?**

As the position of the assistant director stands now, it means many things to many different people. Assistants and directors are stumbling in the dark on their first assignments trying to figure out how to deal with each other. It is my hope that eventually there will be more standardization of the role of assistant director. I do not mean that I want the position of assistant director to only perform specific tasks laid out in this thesis. There will be many tasks an assistant director will have to take on; each assisting experience will be as different as the next. Just as there are many types of directing methods and directors, so too should the assistants feel as if they have their own method of working in the theatre. As it is now, there are no books, no guidelines, nor hints of any kind about who the assistant director is, and therefore no help to these artists on how their role can be best fulfilled.

I believe one of the main problems in defining the assistant director's role is that those in the field don't define it for themselves. When it comes to the practicality of the role, the director defines them. If the director needs them to do a certain task, that becomes their job. A director would never be defined this way; directors have carved out a role for themselves, and so must the assistant. The next step in this process would be matching a director with an assistant. If a director likes assistants who do certain tasks but not others

then that director will need to seek out that type of assistant. A valuable assistant who would like to get more jobs would then be encouraged to be as malleable as possible so that they might work with as many directors as they can. I believe an assistant director should be flexible, but it should be the same type of flexibility a director has with the cast or crew. Assistant directors should consider themselves artists; as of right now I don't think they do. They consider their jobs as assistants to be a step up from a secretary, even though I believe that being a secretary is one of their jobs, however, it is not the only one.

Many directors consider assistant directors to be apprentices of directing, and that eventually the assistant director will learn enough to begin directing shows and having assistants of their own. I tend to agree with this thought, although there are self-claimed assistant directors out there who have no other desire than to assist directors, and never want to be actual directors. I think that most assistants eventually want to be directors in their own right. Most directors working today started out as assistant directors, learned from the directors they worked with, developed their own style and ventured out on their own when the opportunity presented itself. I think that learning how to be an assistant director prepares the future director for most circumstances that they will encounter when they begin to direct. This is why it is so important for the assistant to appreciate every assisting experience they have no matter what happens with the actual production.

I believe directing cannot be taught to someone who does not have the latent proclivity for the skill. Teaching someone how to be an assistant director would be just as challenging. An assistant director must be someone who holds the skills for both directing and the ability to direct through someone else's eyes. In my view this makes assistant



directing harder than directing. Usually directors are given power to direct a show by whoever hired them to do so. Each director will use this power in different ways, but this is what gives them the right to choose a concept they want for the show. Assistants have power though too, usually it is granted by the director, or whoever hired them, and then it is filtered through the director. However, they cannot ever show it unless or until the director asks them to do so. They must be ready at all times to access their full amount of authority and power. I have had to do this many times. Once, while working with Casey Biggs on a late night tech rehearsal of *Three Sisters*, I noticed that Casey was running out of energy, and he just did not have the will to get everyone's attention. All he had to do was look in my direction, so subtly that, I'm sure no one else ever noticed it, but I knew what that look meant. I raised my voice louder than anyone in the cast had ever heard me speak and told everyone to settle down and focus their attention on Casey. This worked out well because, as Casey's assistant, I knew that Casey was a real take charge type of person, so my energy needed to be subdued but focused, and in this way I could bring it out, if and when I needed to. Another time I took charge of the situation was when I assisted for Barry Bell on *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*. Barry asked me to work with two actors on a scene that he was having problems making look right. I immediately had to put on my directing/acting coach hat and work with these two actors while maintaining what Barry's idea of the scene should be.

In both instances I, as the assistant director, had to be given the power to act. Sometimes it comes in the form of a look, sometimes in the form of words, but the cue must always come from the director.

I believe assistants must be behind and above the director at all times. I picture them hovering behind a director like a little guardian angel ready to swoop down on any problems, fix them before the director notices, and return silently back to their place. They must be a guardian angel to the director and the show. As an assistant, you must support the director in their artistic decisions no matter what choice you would have made. You must be behind the director and never steal their spotlight. An assistant must also be above the director at the same time to survey all the aspects of the show, and to anticipate where problems may occur. At the same time ready in a position to take charge if needed.

### **What are the qualities of an assistant director?**

Some of the most obvious qualities that an assistant director needs to have are: good organizational skills, strong concentration, sensitivity, tact, ability to control their ego, a good artistic eye, flexibility, the ability to anticipate, and most importantly the ability to multitask. Almost every director is going to want their assistants to have all of these qualities. An assistant director must have the ability to stay organized, not only for themselves but also for the director as well. Assistants need to be able to concentrate during a five-hour blocking session. There will always be those moments when the director comes to you quietly and says, "I don't know what to do with this scene." An assistant needs to be sensitive to the play; it will always help the director if the assistant can act as a mini-audience. Also, an assistant must learn how to be sensitive to situations occurring on stage that the director may not be sensitive to. This will help the director to coach the actors when they are struggling. When an assistant is giving comments to the

director, or if they are allowed, to the cast, they need to make sure they are given in a tactful way as to not stir up any unnecessary doubts or mistrust between the director and the assistant. Assistant directors must be able to put their own artistic ideas and ego to the side and not let the director's decision to not use their ideas upset them. This is where the good artistic eye comes in. Assistants need to know what looks good and what doesn't look good. There is nothing worse than an assistant director who has no opinion; they should always have an opinion but they should never express it unless asked by the director. Then they must implement the rules of tact and sensitivity. Flexibility is a necessary component of the assistant director's job, and like the stage manager, assistants need to be ready for any contingency. Sometimes a director will want to change the style of rehearsal for an evening and have the assistant do warm-up exercises with the cast, or have the assistant sit in the back of the theater and take notes on words that cannot be understood. The assistant must always be ready for anything that comes their way. The assistant director must be able to think ahead of the director, and never assume what a director is trying to accomplish; usually after getting to know the director's way of working it becomes easier to anticipate their actions. Anticipation, if used correctly and tactfully can also save the director from a whirlwind of headaches. Obviously, all these skills require the ability to multitask. An assistant must be able to be anywhere and everywhere a director needs them to be.

Sometimes the show may dictate the qualities a director will want in an assistant. If a director is about to start work on a musical, they will be looking for an assistant who can assist as a liaison between the music director and themselves, someone who has a good

ear, good movement training, and can deal with a lot of actors at one time. On the other hand, if a director is beginning work on a small four-person period drama, the director is going to be looking for an assistant who can help them with the intimacy of the scenes, has good acting coaching skills, is a good blocker, and, if there is no dramaturge, can do some dramaturgical research on the text.

Overall, I have found that what the director wants most from an assistant is a shoulder, someone they know they can talk to if things aren't going right with the show. Not every director will allow themselves to trust an assistant in that way, but it should be the assistant's job to try to build trust with the director.

### **What do they do and how do they do it?**

The assistant director will never have the same job twice, even if they are working with the same director on the same show. Every show will be different and put different tasks in the assistant's lap. What the assistant director does depends on what the director needs from them. Some directors want the assistant to take notes for them, on the other hand, some directors don't want their assistant taking notes, and they think it's a waste of their time. Other directors want their assistants listening for missed words or watching blocking, while others leave that job up to the stage manager or the stage manager's assistant. No matter what task the director asks of the assistant director, it is their job to carry it out fully and make it the most important thing they have to do.

A director needs an assistant's help to get the smaller details of a show out of the way for them. Sometimes just being another ear to listen to an actor when they don't

understand a note can make all the difference in the show moving forward or not. Other times a director may ask an assistant to write down something that they want them to remind them of later. Sometimes those really little things can make a world of difference to a director's peace of mind. Nothing an assistant works on is unimportant; most of the time these little things become the most important parts of the show. The little moments in the show that the director usually needs the most concentration from the assistant on are usually the really great moments that tell the audience what the play is about.

The only constant pattern I have ever found in assisting directing is that my tasks will change after a period of time once the director has begun to trust me. The tasks I will be given will have less to do with secretary type work and more about helping the director realize the vision of the show. There are two more reasons for this other than the director's beginning to trust their assistant. During the first week of rehearsals for a show, the director's focus is in attempting to bring everyone together to work out the basics of the text and show. So, naturally, an assistant's job in the early stages of a rehearsal is going to be more about organizing everyone rather than assisting with the artistry. The second reason an assistant's job begins to change is that, as an assistant works closely with a director, they will begin to see the play through the director's eyes, and start to see what the director wants the show to be. Once the director begins to trust their assistant, the assistant will have many opportunities to do these new, more demanding tasks. Some of these tasks will include working with actors individually, going to production meetings for the director, running a rehearsal when a director needs to be away, and many other unpredictable circumstances or events.

I believe one of the biggest tasks and functions of the assistant director is to keep the director honest to the production. An assistant can do this in many ways. The biggest way an assistant keeps a director honest is by just plain being there at every rehearsal and at every meeting. A director always has the right to change a show to whatever they want whenever they want to. However, having an assistant with whom a director can bounce ideas off of makes their decisions feel more definite and thus makes the director more confident. Many directors will never admit they have any doubts about their concepts, but they wouldn't be human if they didn't. Directors who have had the chance to work with good assistant directors feel more confident in their choices. This is because either they convince themselves they have confidence, they have directed shows for years and could never be wrong, or because they gain confidence from an assistant whom they trust. Either way, a director will never admit to any of it, as they shouldn't. Assistants must understand that the director needs to have an overwhelming sense of their own skills and confidence in those skills, validation or not.

### **When is an assistant director needed?**

My first and only answer to this question is always! I believe that a director can never hurt a show by using an assistant. An assistant director whom the director can trust fully will be that extra set of eyes that the show needs to attain its full potential for an audience. This fact will always be true, whether the show is big or small.

Some directors believe that having an assistant in rehearsal of a small intimate drama will ruin the closeness of the piece. I do not agree with this statement at all. First, I

believe that actors are either good or they're not. If they can create the intimacy with three people watching, then they should be able to do it with four. Sometimes a director will get lost in these close intimate pieces and the piece will never be fully realized for an audience. Using an assistant that the director trusts helps the director keep a distance from the piece because they can ask the assistant for their thoughts. Secondly, if directors never let assistants work on small shows, when they become directors themselves they will not have had the experience of working on one in the past, and usually new directors' first shows are the small intimate ones.

I also believe an assistant director is needed for every show in case something happens to the director. What happens if the director gets sick or is in a car accident? Usually the show is cancelled or picked up by another director. I do agree that another director should take over in a situation like this, but, depending on how far along the run of the rehearsals are, it could be very disruptive to the show's original intent. This is where the assistant director comes in. In a standard four week run, if the director is unable to continue during the first two weeks a replacement director should be found. They should then work with the current assistant director to finish the show using its original concept. If the director cannot continue during the last two weeks of a rehearsal run then, depending on the size of the show and the level of experience the particular assistant has, the assistant director should take over the show and see it to its fruition.

### **Who does the assistant director work with?**

The answer to this question depends on the size of the show and size of the company the assistant is working with. Assistant directors should work with almost everyone involved in the production of a show. An assistant will be the director's voice on many occasions, and they need to be informed with what is going on in each department. They can only do this by staying informed with what is happening in all aspects of the show's progress from the first introduction to the text to the production. I believe that an assistant should at least know the names of all the heads of the technical departments and the names of the cast members. It would only benefit the assistant to really try to get to know the people in all these departments. This is useful for many reasons, as directors will always try to remember everyone's name, but it is not always possible. Assistants should be there for the director when they need a quick reminder of the costume designer's name. Secondly, assistants will often be asked by the director to attend production meetings for them; knowing the names of the technical heads will help every assistant when addressing them with a problem. Lastly, if the assistant takes the time to get to know the people with whom they are working, perhaps they will even be able to anticipate where problems may arise.

Generally, the people with whom an assistant director will work closest are the director, the actors, and the stage manager.



**“Assistant director” versus “assistant to the director”?**

In my view, the term “assistant director” implies that this person is helping the director to direct the show. They observe the artistic and technical elements and assist the director in the creation of the show using the director’s concept. “Assistant to the director” implies that you are assisting the director, but not with the directing of a production. This title implies that this person will be doing secretarial type work for the director and thus the production.

I believe that a distinction between these two terms must be made. I think that both positions have value within the theatre; however, it can become confusing to the individuals who obtain these titles and do not have a clear definition to go along with them. I believe this is most prevalent in academic theatre, where usually two assistant directors are used for the larger productions. One should be the assistant director and one should be the assistant to the director. In academic theatre the students need safe boundaries in which to work. If the theatre structure does not set up these boundaries and definitions for the students or professionals, there will be animosity and contention between these two individuals each competing for who gets to sit next to the director.

In the professional theatre I believe that both of these positions are necessary as well. However, in my opinion, I believe that an assistant to the director position would only be necessary if the production is very large. Meaning, a musical, complex technical elements, or a cast larger than ten.

### **How a director should use an assistant director?**

A director should use an assistant director in a way that will best benefit the production they are currently working on, while at the same time, helping the assistant director learn about more about directing. Usually new assistant directors, or those looking to be assistants, are newly graduating college students. Students receiving a BA, BFA, MA, or MFA in theatre with an interest in directing will be most suited for the job. If a director is directing in an academic setting the director should seek out those students who are upper-classmen and have the highest interest in pursuing a career as a director upon graduation. If a director does work with a newly graduated theatre student it is important to talk to them about how things worked in their school. This way a director can explain to them the differences in professional theatre without getting frustrated with them the first time they don't understand how something works. As a general rule it is always a good idea to talk to assistant directors about their other experiences whether they are coming from school or not. Each theatre company will also run shows differently, and each director they've experienced has different expectations from them. This conversation helps the director and the assistant develop a launching pad for what they will expect from one another.

Another factor for the director to consider while choosing an assistant is personality. A director should spend some time, even if it is only a few minutes, getting to know their assistant as a person. This will help to develop the assistant's expectations of the director, and help them learn how the director works as a person. These are the ways

an assistant learns how to anticipate and predict what a director will need at any given moment during a rehearsal.

A director should find an assistant to whom they can extend trust. This will help the production in many ways. First, it will allow the director a second pair of eyes to turn to when they need a suggestion or comment. It will allow the director the opportunity to have the assistant work with actors who may struggle with notes or the direction of a scene. It will foster a calmer rehearsal space because they will be able to take care of the little tasks that always seem to get in the way of the creative process, especially the closer and closer the tech day comes. Finding an assistant a director can trust will do all these things and more for the production.

The assistant director should be the one person a director can always turn to and ask them if something looks right or not. I would also say that a director should often ask that of an assistant, even if the director believes a moment to be working. This will help gauge the clarity of the assistant's artistic sensitivity and keep them attuned to what is happening. Also the director can gauge whether or not the assistant is beginning to see the production as the director is seeing it. Knowing where the assistant's vision is in relation to where the director's vision of the production is will tell the director if they can let an assistant work with individual actors or not. If a relationship is going very well, a director may even feel comfortable enough to take a rehearsal night off and let the assistant do a basic run of the show.

Finally, during tech days the assistant will be the greatest asset a director can have. They will be at the director's side ready to do anything the director needs them to do.

After opening night the director usually leaves the show, it is now in the hands of the cast to keep the director's concept of the show alive, and up to the stage manager to make sure the show goes off without a hitch. I think this is also where the director can leave the show not just in the hands of the stage manager, but also those of the assistant director. I believe the assistant should keep coming back to the show to watch its progress and give updates to the director and small notes to the cast if major character intensions are being changed. Yes, it is the stage manager's job to run the show, but the stage manager is not necessarily looking for character intension or anticipating a reaction to a line. The stage manager and assistant director should work together during the performances to make sure the show is what the director intended it to be.

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Works Consulted

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## VITA

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Stephanie taught Acting I for theatre performance majors and two Public Speaking courses at Virginia Commonwealth University. She also served as a teacher's assistant for Introduction to Stage Performance taught by Barry Bell, and two Acting Styles courses taught by Lorri Lindberg. She also worked with Dr. Noreen C. Barnes, director of Graduate Studies, Department of Theatre at Virginia Commonwealth University, for two years as her assistant.