

SQUEAKY WHEEL:

THOMAS BERNHARD AND A PARTY FOR BORIS

or... How artistic genius may be forged on an anvil of relentless Hardship, with musings on the relationship between Theatre and War, and the historical indispensability of Troublemakers

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Abstract

Though productions of his plays are extremely rare in North America, Austrian Thomas Bernhard (1931-1989) is one of the pillars of the European repertory, especially in theatrically progressive Germany. His bellicose, radically composed comedies teem with a discontentment tempered by sophisticated humor and astonishingly realistic relationships, all within the framework of a vehement non-Realism. This document chronicles my research into geo-political events and societal elements that shaped Bernhard, and my inquiries into the subject matter and style of his play *A Party for Boris* (*Ein Fest für Boris*), which I have chosen to direct as my thesis production at York University.

Dedication

To my partner in life and art, William Bezek; to my great mentor, Adrian Hall; and especially to my father, Dr. Melvin Earnest, scholar of poetry and of history – anything I achieve is a reflection of your example and your tireless devotion.

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Introduction

The 2016-17 Theatre@York season theme, *Extraordinary Lives: Difference and Ability*, created a window for play selection that was both galvanizing and harrowingly narrow. Having spent some years as a freelance theater maker, I am well versed in the complex relationship between guest director and management, and I am accustomed to negotiating the distance between a theater's mission and my own artistic voice. This unusual theme, however, presented a challenge well beyond many I had faced before. I chose to keep an open mind and to view it as a test of my literacy.

In my view, Theater is an exploration and an analysis of Choice: a weighing of impulse and consequences, an opportunity to imagine ourselves in circumstances requiring difficult moral decisions. When presented with this season theme, my initial reaction was a slight panic: how can the most elementary functions of Drama proceed when the central character or figure in the play is dependent upon others and therefore not entirely free even to make choices? Who but the most hard-hearted in the audience would not make moral exceptions for a protagonist who is deaf or blind, without arms, in a wheelchair, *etc.*, which renders the point of the theatrical event utterly useless? How, in our particular moment in history, could people be anything but sympathetic toward a disabled person on the stage? And perhaps most importantly, what is there to be gained by young acting students pretending to be disabled? It seemed to me that what was being asked of me was in poor taste, or worse, like self-righteous exhibitionism.

As sometimes happens, the smoke cleared and solutions emerged. This theme clearly had to be handled in a metaphoric way. In order to suit the season and to maintain a modicum of political integrity, and also to produce something dramatically viable, it would be necessary to go into the vaults and search for stylized plays using some form of disability as a symbol. My

colleague in the Directing cohort, David di Giovanni, and I fretted for months, reading like mad and constantly weighing our ideas against each other's opinions. Then one day, way back in the crypt of my endless play lists, I found *Ein Fest für Boris* (*A Party for Boris*) by the brilliant, cantankerous Austrian, Thomas Bernhard (1931-1989).

Whereas some people fancy hiking or tanning on a beach in their time off, I spend mine trolling the web sites of great European theaters, analyzing their repertory schedules, discovering new (to me) playwrights and plays. I do not recall exactly when (probably in the 1990s) or where (most likely Germany) I came across *A Party for Boris*, but when the Executive Committee selected it from my list of four plays, I became very enthusiastic about an opportunity to work with it at last. This paper will discuss my entrance into the mad cosmos of Bernhard's first play, and it will document my work on our 2016 production of it at The Sandra Faire and Ivan Fecan Theatre at York University, Toronto.

Theatre in a Theater of War

Thomas Bernhard's homeland of Austria is in some respects ground zero for World War II. It is the birthplace of *Führer* Adolph Hitler (1889-1945), and therefore, it might seem logical that Austria was the first sovereign nation forcefully annexed by the Third Reich: in the *Anschluss* of 1938. Bernhard's vitriolic hatred of conservative, Catholic Austria is well documented, but in the late 1960s when he began to branch out from poetry and fiction to write his first play, *A Party for Boris*, what was the history and tradition of Austrian Theatre? What were the primary aspects of its relationship to the country at large? What was the shape of the theatrical arena Bernhard was entering? What impact did Bernhard's rearing in a post-war culture have on *A Party for Boris*? A discussion of Austrian Theatre and culture must, of historical necessity, emerge from a discussion of its parent nation, Germany.

In Wim Wenders's 2011 documentary *Pina*, his remarkable homage to choreographer and innovator Pina Bausch, the director recalls the poverty of post-WWII Germany in which he and Bausch had grown up. He noted how the country's widespread destitution created a psychological environment that was very "materialistic". Stepping back a moment from bourgeois capitalism's flippant definition of that term, we may more easily ponder Wenders' more philosophical one. Demoralized by the war and plunged once again into shame and economic devastation, Germans and other Europeans of the era might well have accepted a definition that required a capital M.

Materialism is a school of thought dating back to Epicurus and Lucretius (99-55 B.C.), and perhaps further, to the Carvaka School of Ancient India (ca. 600 B.C.). It is a belief that things such as spirit and consciousness are mere constructs, and that the only thing that can be proven to exist, finally, is matter. Though Germany responded to the devastating consequences

of two World Wars with a more Materialistic philosophy, Austria, oppositely, seemed to cling more tightly to its long and rich tradition of Romanticism. Its opulence, splendor, and magical thinking, chiefly in the form of Roman Catholicism, are the pillars of its unique culture. (Plott, *et al*, 204)

A. Austrian Catholicism.

This city of my fathers is in reality a terminal disease... with its archiepiscopal architecture and its mindless blend of National Socialism and Catholicism. ...[It is] a cemetery of fantasy and desire, beautiful on the surface but horrifying underneath. (Bernhard, 79)

Austria's very old Catholic tradition is perhaps among the reasons for its dynamic and at times uneasy relationship to Art and to Theatre. St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, first consecrated in 1147, is one of the tallest in the world – the current structure dates from 1433 and stands 446 feet (136 meters) high, reigning over the citizens of Vienna from the *Stephansplatz* (Stephen's Square). It is in fact very near to the exact geometrical center of that city, the capital of a country where, as Bernhard deadpanned bitterly in his memoir, *Gathering Evidence*, "Catholicism waved its brainless sceptre" both during and after the Nazi occupation. (13)

Under the Habsburg absolutism, Catholicism became a sort of national religion in Austria as Protestants were forced either to convert or flee during the Counter-Reformation, sometimes referred to as the Catholic Revival, ca.1545-1563. This tradition would grow stronger as the generations passed: an interchangeability of nationhood and religion that would fix Austria's cultural identity, indelibly stamping the symbols of that identity – its art works. (Beller, 64)

B. Art.

Of all of the great works created by Austrian artists, perhaps the most familiar are the beautiful, affirmative, some might say symmetrical works that reveal an uncomplicated relationship to a universe kept smart by a benevolent and loving authority. These works have come to represent Austria to the lay person and have earned an almost iconic status, as if, like the Eiffel Tower in France and the Coliseum in Rome, they were inanimate ambassadors for the culture. These works include the Enlightenment Era music of composers Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-91) and Joseph Haydn (1732-1809), the waltzes of Johann Strauß II (1825-99), and the canvases of Gustav Klimt (1862-1918). For much of its history, painting and especially music were the traditional arts of Austria, most likely because the articulation of a Romantic worldview is easier to achieve in the iconography of those media than in the bald-faced, decidedly earthbound “mirror up to nature” enterprise of the Theatre. Whether or not these works were created by true believers (Mozart and Haydn were Catholics) or by cynics appeasing an eager market (Strauss and Klimt were Jewish in a notoriously anti-Semitic country) no one can know for certain. (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, various)

It is not until the nineteenth century that a strong theatrical identity, a dissenting voice, begins to emerge in Austria. In his anthology, *Nineteenth Century German Plays*, Egon Schwarz opines:

The advent of Austrian playwrights in the early nineteenth century... permanently enriched the German stage... [Their] enormous dramatic talents... must be regarded as summits of stagecraft worthy of representing and continuing the great dramatic tradition of Germany.

(vii)

It is with Franz Grillparzer's (1791-1872) birth", Schwarz continues, "that Austrian writing spectacularly enters the realm of literature where it has occupied a special and disproportionately large place ever since." (vii)

Along with plays by Grillparzer, epic tales by Romantic dramatists like Johann Nestroy (1801–62) were most often produced in Vienna, followed in the next generation by the plays of Hermann Bahr (1863-1934), Arnolt Bronnen (1895-1959), Hugo Hofmannsthal (1874-1929), Arthur Schnitzler (1862-1931), and others. Moving further into the twentieth century, iconic Austrian director Max Reinhardt (1873-1943) would mentor theater makers Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), Erwin Piscator (1893-1966), and many others as *Intendant* (Artistic Director) of Berlin's *Deutsches Theater*, still one of that city's great artistic houses. Reinhardt would usher in new, scientific ways of approaching texts by rejecting Romanticism, creating works that were written in earthy language that common people could understand, and revealing all the machinery and inner workings of the stagecraft. These works, now referred to as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, used any and all artistic elements and rejected red velvet curtains, gas footlights, and all the trappings of the "affirmative" artworks typical of Austria and Europe at the time.

C. Politics

Centuries of vehement political turmoil have played a significant role in shaping the Austrian nation and its culture. A list of highlights would include, but would not be limited to, Celtic as well as Roman domination, constant invasions by the Huns, and 750 years of rule by the Habsburgs from Austria's early inception as a Duchy (1156) to Empire (1804) to the founding of the current republic (1918). Divided into pieces after World War II, Austria stood

mostly in the shadow of its big brother, Germany, and did not regain its full independence until 1955.

The fascist policies of the Nazi regime that would shape Thomas Bernhard so profoundly also had enormous influence on the Austrian Theatre in which he would one day play such a unique role. Naturally, Jewish artists were banned and in many cases imprisoned and executed during the 1930s and 40s. Artists like playwright Ödön von Horváth (1901-38) who had sought refuge from the Nazis in Vienna would be displaced once more and on the run after the *Anschluss*. Subordinating many of the state theaters to governmental control, Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Göbbels (1897-1945) attempted to end the centuries-old traditions and Romantic styles of these houses, which had been founded when Vienna was the seat of the powerful Austro-Hungarian Empire. (Rubin, *et al*, 52)

By the time Bernhard reached his teen years, around 1948, World War II had ended, and Vienna was divided into four occupation zones, as Berlin had been. When reconstruction began, with the largest population of poor and homeless that Austria had ever seen, a national restlessness pervaded.

Theatre played an important role when Austrians went searching for their identity after 1945. It was living proof of the collective psychological, emotional, and intellectual state. ...Theatres underlined the desire of Austrians to distance themselves from the Nazis. (Rubin, *et al*, 56)

Many in Austrian audiences hoped for a return to the elegant *Belle Epoque* of their childhoods with its Strauß operettas, others for a more Western-style democracy with family dramas and current issues, and still others, arguably a much smaller group, held true to the socialist ideals and working class Epic Theatre of the previous decades. The left-leaning theatres

catering to more liberal audiences, like Neues Theater in der Scala in Vienna, were denounced as Communist if they presented plays in any way critical of the government. (Ibid)

In the handful of years between the end of the War and Austria's independence, with the Cold War raging and the Berlin Wall dividing Europe and the world, Bernhard would emerge, along with his countryman Peter Handke (1942-), as the voice of a new and cynical generation in the Austrian conflict zone, or theater of war – a once resplendent wonderland now ransacked, a ghost nation at the foot of the Alps. The works of Bernhard and Handke would be marked by many aggressive characteristics, including absurdity, shame, black humor, satire, cruelty, anarchic form and language, and existentialist themes. Their Materialistic and disillusioned generation had risen from the rubble of the War in humiliated, broken communities that bore little resemblance to the gilded Europe of their ancestors. Comparisons of the two writers' neo-Absurdist works to those of Franz Kafka (1883-1924) are perhaps inevitable: like them, Kafka was born in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, wrote in German, and his quirky, harrowing prose documented Europe's identity crises in the aftermath of another global catastrophe, the First World War (1914-18).

Relentless unsentimentalism, and even cruelty in some instances, has a paradoxical humanizing effect that Kafka explored long before Bernhard was born. "We need books," explained Kafka to a friend, "that affect us like a bad accident. A book has to be the ax that breaks up the frozen sea within us." (Dowden, 8)

Like Kafka, Bernhard seems to utilize his post-War bleakness and isolation to explore a universal vulnerability, and like Brecht, his rejection of sentiment would render sympathy useless and in its place, encourage rational thought and reflection.

In the course of my oral defense session, committee member John Greyson suggested that I include in this document a paragraph discussing the work of *Aktionismus*, the Viennese Actionists, who were creating original performance works in Austria between 1960 and 1971. Contemporaries of Thomas Bernhard, the four chief leaders of this movement, Otto Muehl (1925-2013), Hermann Nitsch (1938-), Rudolf Schwarzkogler (1940-1969), and Günter Brus (1938-) had endured the harsh conditions in Austria during World War II as Bernhard had, and like him, they were looking for more aggressive ways to confront what they saw as the hypocrisy of their fellow countrymen. Perhaps inspired by the Happenings of Allan Kaprow in New York City in the late 1950s, the Actionists used their own bodies, usually in informal, non-traditional public settings, to create living works of art. Their preferred materials were human – semen, urine, feces, and blood. They smeared themselves with these and other materials, hoping to engage a public attempting to forget the horrors of the Nazi occupation and their own complicity in it. Often jailed for indecency, the Actionists were an important post-war voice in a shattered Europe. Their attention to the physical ravages of World War two were related to that of Bernhard's in *A Party for Boris*, and their courage and creativity would inspire many artists to initiate the Performance Art movement of the 1970s.

D. Austrian Culture from the Outside.

The elegant mystique of Bernhard's small country has enchanted the world, with celebrated exports as various as Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), apple strudel, and Arnold Schwarzenegger (1947-). The boorish world of New York City's commercial theater took a piece for itself when *The Sound of Music*, based on the true story of an Austrian family during WWII, premiered to great acclaim in 1959. The musical presented Broadway theater-goers and later, worldwide movie-goers of the 1950s and 60s, a particularly trite piece of Austrian drag: a wacky

nun questioning her faith leaves the convent to nanny seven adorable children in *dirndls* and *lederhosen*. She sings quaint “Austrian”-esque tunes as she leads the children over the Alps, a plucky Pied Piper fleeing the Nazis. From a terrifying story of a family’s brush with death, Americans Richard Rogers (1902-1979) and Oscar Hammerstein II (1895-1960) fashioned a formulaic love story that reinforced every cliché about Austria with its sugary plot and symmetrical score. In today’s unforgiving politically correct climate, the musical most likely would be condemned out of hand as “cultural appropriation” presuming, as it does, to present its froth in the guise of an Austrian travelogue.

A brief ten years after *The Sound of Music*, Thomas Bernhard would write his own play about Austria. Instead of a happy-go-lucky ingénue in a nun’s habit, his protagonist would be a monstrous, legless harpy, and instead of blonde children frolicking in matching costumes made from the drapes, his chorus would be a group of ranting gargoyles confined to wheelchairs. This grotesque parody of one of Roman Catholicism’s most treasured images, Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*, would earn international acclaim for its author and establish him as one of Europe’s most important living playwrights.

Thomas Bernhard

A. Biographical

Nicolaas Thomas Bernhard was born on 9 or 10 February 1931 (He always claimed to be uncertain.) in Heerlen, Netherlands as the world endured the Great Depression, the National Socialists had become the second largest political party in Germany, and Charlie Chaplin released his film, *City Lights*. 1931 was also the birth year of choreographer Alvin Ailey, authors Alice Munro, E.L. Doctorow, and Donald Barthelme, actors Gene Hackman and James Earl Jones, Russian leaders Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, and the Empire State Building. (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, various)

Bernhard's unwed mother, Herta Freumbichler, after allegedly being raped by German carpenter and petty criminal Alois Zuckerstätter, had been dispatched to a remote Dutch clinic to bear her illegitimate child. Bernhard's grandfather, noted Austrian author Johannes Freumbichler, was the dispatcher. Radical and freethinking as he was, Freumbichler apparently was not inured to the scrutiny of his neighbors, and the Netherlands was far enough from the prying eyes his grandson would spend an entire career trying to blacken. Bernhard never knew his father, and Zuckerstätter never acknowledged his son. (Dowden, 8)

Herta's child-rearing techniques betrayed dissatisfaction with her situation back at the family home in Henndorf, Austria, where she and her son moved in with her parents, Freumbichler and his mistress, Anna Bernhard. Herta's severe discipline and humiliating punishment of her son exacerbated what must have been an anxious atmosphere: living in relative poverty in a region where the rhetoric of revolution was ringing loudly through the air. The boy's chronic bed-wetting led her to hang his soiled sheets out the window for all to see, causing him to be ridiculed and bullied at school. She may not have been aware that she was

fanning the flames of an already pugnacious disposition, and magnifying her son's isolation.
(Franklin, 130)

At this time it was mandatory for Austrian boys to maintain membership in the *Deutsches Jungvolk*, which had been founded in 1928 as *Jungmannschaften* (Youth Teams). By 1938, when Austria was annexed to the Third Reich, boys were required to register with the Reich Youth Office in March of the year in which they would turn ten years old. Bernhard wrote of his misery many years later, how he was filled with loathing by “constantly singing the same brainless songs and marching down the same streets yelling my head off.” (Bernhard, 92)

In 1943, Herta convinced her family to send the rebellious and unruly twelve year-old to a boarding school in the nearby city of Salzburg. There he lived in what was essentially a Nazi home for boys, a “filthy, stinking dormitory”, where cacophonous American air raids and the sight of desperation and death were common. In his memoir, *Gathering Evidence*, Bernhard recalled:

On the way to the Gstättingasse I stepped on something soft lying on the pavement in front of the Bürgerspital Church. At first sight I took it to be a doll's hand, and so did my companions, but in fact it was the severed hand of a child. (quoted by Franklin, 130)

Stephen D. Dowden, in his optimistically titled essay *Understanding Thomas Bernhard*, notes that it was during the Salzburg years when Bernhard most likely encountered for the first time “the twin evils of imbecility and native brutality” which he saw as the twin pillars of human nature. “The persecution of a crippled classmate and a laughingstock teacher, in particular, was a vividly recalled scene that will reappear with endless variations” throughout Bernhard's works.
(1) Bernhard notes in his memoir:

Observing them, I was able to study the community's inventiveness in devising fresh cruelties with which to torment its victims. I was also able to study the helplessness of the victims..., the increasing harm they suffered, their systemic destruction and annihilation... Every school... has its victims, and during my time at the grammar school the victims were the geography master and the architect's crippled son. (137)

The young Bernhard displayed an extraordinary facility for music as a private voice student, and his left-leaning grandfather encouraged him, entertaining dreams of his becoming a great violinist. Many critics, in fact, credit this early exposure to music with Bernhard's unique and sophisticated relationship to language and to rhythm. (Cousineau, 3) But his grandfather's dream would never be realized. The pressures of the boy's school in Salzburg, with its brazen violence amplified by nationalist rhetoric, would send Bernhard in another direction. Once again unable to find a community, he dropped out of school at age fifteen and apprenticed himself to a grocer named Karl Podlaha in "Salzburg's black spot" – the rather depressed Scherzhauserfeld housing project. (Bernhard, 156) Bernhard's meticulous nature and attention to detail quickly earned him the trust of Podlaha in the shop, and it appeared that the teenage boy had found a home at last.

More than any other detail of that time, Bernhard chronicles his fascination with the overt, even crass speech of the working poor who patronized the grocery store. He noted their unbuttoned candor, their irony, their bawdiness. This immersion in what was essentially a new mode of communication, far removed from the pretension and linguistic airs of Salzburg, undoubtedly informed the blunt verse of his poetry, novels, and plays.

“At first I could not understand the offensiveness of certain customers,” Bernhard writes. The “multi-edged remarks and turns of phrase” bewildered the angry adolescent who had forsaken his family and run away from home. “They spoke about things that were naturally not mentioned openly... in the city.” But it soon became clear to the brilliant boy, who must have been desperate for a clan to whom he could belong, that their language was “sensible and more appealing than the silent hypocrisy of others.” (Bernhard, 163-64)

It was most likely from his close interactions with many of the poverty-stricken customers in the low-income housing project, combined with long days working in the damp cellar of the grocer’s shop, that Bernhard contracted pleurisy, and then pneumonia in 1949. He was admitted to a hospital that winter with a life-threatening lung infection from which he would never truly recover and which would eventually take his life at age 57. (Franklin, 131) The helplessness and isolation of the chronically ill, and the bitter rage at the center of *A Party for Boris*, are apparent in this excerpt from Bernhard’s memoir, *Gathering Evidence*, in which he describes an episode from his illness:

Every half-hour a sister comes and lifts my hand, then drops it again...
...strange men in grey enter the bathroom carrying a closed zinc coffin.
They remove the lid and put a naked body inside, then replace the lid. I
realize that the person they are carrying past me... is the man from the
bed in front of mine. ...Suddenly the heavy wet washing hanging on a
line... falls on top of me. A few more inches and it would have fallen on
my face and smothered me... [The sister] starts stripping the bed, the bed
in which someone has just died. She throws the covers on the floor and

then lifts my hand again, as though waiting for me to die. ...*Now* I want to live. (215)

In fact, Bernhard had actually contracted an additional chronic disease while recovering at the hospital, tuberculosis, and he would be transferred to the Grafenhof sanitarium, thought by many to be the last stop for the terminally ill. While he was a patient there, a teenage boy suffering under the weight of a veritable death sentence, his beloved grandfather died.

Johannes Freumbichler (1881-1949) had been his idol and had essentially raised him. Bernhard would later refer to Freumbichler as his "*Lebensmensch*" (a primarily Austrian term for the most significant person in one's life, thought to have been coined by Bernhard himself). Freumbichler had been a writer of some note and had won the Austrian State Prize for Literature in 1937. He had bought Bernhard his first typewriter and encouraged his writing. Freumbichler's death seemed to reinforce Bernhard's sense of the world's absurdity and also, the absurdity of his and his grandfather's literary work. As a child, Bernhard had had a front row seat for the pitfalls of Freumbichler's literary career, and he came to believe that a writer "was inevitably driving his life into a human and philosophical cul-de-sac," toiling away at an essentially meaningless task with no apparent end. (Bernhard, 184) For some reason, perhaps out of listlessness, or rage, or grief, the young writer persevered.

After publishing his first stories while still a patient at Grafenhof, Bernhard met Hedwig Stavianicek (1894–1984). She was also a patient at the sanitarium and the soon-to-be widow of a successful Viennese physician. Their first conversation, ironically or poetically, had been about Bernhard's beautiful singing voice. More than thirty-seven years his senior, Stavianicek would become his patron, and he would move into her well-appointed home and do all of his writing there until her death thirty-four years later. This relationship, the nature of which has never been

absolutely confirmed, is clearly the model for *The Good Woman* and her much younger husband, Boris, in *A Party for Boris*: a married couple many years apart in age, both damaged, both helpless, both bitter. *The Good Woman* throws a birthday party for her worthless young spouse, and his death at the table sends her into manic, hysterical laughter.

In 1951, Bernhard would discharge himself from Grafenhof against doctors' advice, work as a journalist, quit, and enroll as an acting student at Salzburg's prestigious arts conservatory, the Mozarteum, only to drop out. Finally, with the support of Stavianicek, who had initially intended to support his career as a singer, Bernhard began to work on his first novel, *Frost*, published in 1963. It was one of many great successes that would earn him a long list of prizes and a unique place in European literary history.

B. Works

Thomas Bernhard... developed individualistic, highly iconoclastic techniques for theatricalizing the workings of the mind. (Londré, 465)

In her erudite article in *The New Yorker*, *The Art of Extinction: The bleak laughter of Thomas Bernhard*, Ruth Franklin connects the dots from a bellicose childhood in a violent state to an *oeuvre* that displays an “intensely pessimistic world view – remorseless fury at a callous universe, lack of faith in human relationships, [and] manic pursuit of aesthetic perfection.” (129) Much about his general tone and style would appear to have roots in the brutal hardships of his youth. Bernhard's canon, consisting of fifteen novels, two volumes of poetry, eighteen plays, and several memoirs, has been vilified and praised in equal measure, but has rarely been unprovocative.

Readers of Bernhard's prose, plays, and poetry will certainly perceive a rebellion, perhaps even a negationist impulse bordering on nihilism, in his relentless cascade of funny and

bitter words. His punctuationless verse, for those who have studied the ironclad rules of the German language, is absolute anarchy: a rejection of order, a brazen cultural affront. (It has been said that everything in the German language is either required or forbidden – no exceptions! This would include strict tenets like all nouns requiring capitalization, *etc.* Bernhard deliberately disobeys.) Some might read in his grammar and sentence structure a rejection of other types of dogma as well, including Catholicism, which appears to have been interchangeable in his mind with the Nazism of his childhood and adolescent nightmares. (Franklin, 131)

In his review of the first English edition of Bernhard's novel *Wittgenstein's Nephew*, author and critic John Updike characterizes Bernhard's unique syntax thusly:

[Bernhard, with his] italic emphases – like the blows of an impulsive fist – was a maestro of the music of the diatribe, its churning, its hammering, its omnivorous momentum, a music such that any note *not* of dispraise seems a discord and a momentary weakness of the artist's strength...

Even his typographical signature... shows hostility. (669)

It is not a stretch to see in the tone of Bernhard's plays a kinship with Beckett's barren worldview and end-of-the-line humor. Bernhard's wicked irony, in full flight in the following excerpt from *A Party for Boris*, contains a faint echo of the blind, immobile Hamm in Beckett's *Endgame* as The Good Woman, who is legless, taunts her housekeeper, Johanna:

...By the way yesterday you gave me
 another play in which a man appears
 who no longer has legs
 recently you seem to have taken a delight in giving me the sort of
 literature

in which cripples play a part
 sadistic
 but I forgive you
 we forgive each other
 After all you aren't
 really ill-intentioned
 you're ill-natured
 that little difference after the first syllable
 makes it possible for me to keep on putting up with you

Bernhard's final play, *Heldenplatz* (Heroes Square), which premiered on 4 November 1988 at Vienna's prestigious Burgtheater, could be considered the exclamation point on a lifelong narrative of dissatisfaction and dissent. Bernhard had been commissioned by the theater to write a play in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the *Anschluss*, during which exuberant crowds had greeted Hitler in the square. In the play, an old Jewish professor who had fled Vienna just before the *Anschluss* looks down onto the *Heldenplatz* from his apartment, realizing, as one line from the play states, that "There are more Nazis in Vienna now / than in thirty-eight." In despair, the old professor jumps out the window.

The premiere was met with unbridled outrage, including a statement from Chancellor Kurt Waldheim condemning the play as a "crude insult to the Austrian people" (Cousineau, 11), and a demand from Foreign Minister Alois Mock to shut down the production. Culture Minister Hilde Hawlicek refused. The night before the premiere, an anonymous donation of a truckload of horse manure was dumped onto the theater's front colonnade (Wise, 36), and according to Gitta Honegger, author of the Bernhard biography *The Making of an Austrian*, the audience response

on opening night was a vitriolic shouting match, a “dissonant ovation” that went on for forty-five minutes with cries of “Insolence!” and “God save Austria!” (202) Not surprisingly, *Heldenplatz* would become one of the Burgtheater’s greatest successes in the postwar years, playing to over 85,000 people during its initial run. (Wise, 36)

As with any writer of Bernhard’s brilliance and sophisticated level of craft, there are many diverse layers of expression. His lifetime of solitude and misanthropy afforded him a silent perch from which to view people, places, and things around him, and as such, he developed remarkable observation skills. As he notes in *Gathering Evidence*:

My grandfather had been right in his judgment of the world: it was indeed a cesspit, but one which engendered the most intricate and beautiful forms if one looked into it long enough, if one's eye was prepared for such strenuous and microscopic observation. (305)

The haiku-like simplicity of his description and his cunning cinematographer’s eye are evident in this excerpt from his poem, *The Inmates*. His impatience is tangible as the images fly past one by one:

The hunchback with the water pail,
the one with her braids all wild,
the nuntails white, the birds
black in the green scene,

the one with the index finger
on his bloody forehead,
the one with the yellow rope
who climbs the cherry tree,

the one in her black frock,
with the yellow pants,
the one with the girl’s face,
the one with the red rose,

the one with her hazelnut stick,

the one who is weeping,
 the one bleating like a goat,
 with the bowed legs...

In his will, Bernhard stopped just short of cursing his homeland and countrymen, to whom he had referred rather indelicately in his lifetime as “brutal and stupid people,” and as “6.5 million idiots and raving lunatics” living in a place where “everything is rotting away and falling apart.” (quoted by Wise, 1) He reserved his most potent venom for his last will and testament, published shortly after his death on 12 February 1989 at his mountain home in Gmunden, Austria. It forbade any of his works to be published, performed, or even recited in Austria, “including letters and scraps of paper”:

I emphasize expressly that I do not want to have anything to do with the Austrian state and that I reject in perpetuity not only all interference but any overtures in that regard by this Austrian state to associate itself with my person and my work for all time. (quoted by Franklin, 129)

His rage, his moral indignation (“The Viennese are Jew-haters and they will remain Jew-haters for all eternity,” one character states in *Heldenplatz*), his refusal to conform to the mores of what he appears to have looked on as a failed society, his singular humor, his immediate and pressing knowledge of his own mortality, his broken family of origin, and the immense scope of his loss all contribute to a complex persona and an astonishing body of work. His writing reveals cruelty and isolation with a candor that makes the middleclass uncomfortable, and perhaps most remarkably, considering its morose subject matter, it is improbably, hilariously funny. “All my life I have been a trouble-maker,” he said. “I am not the sort of person who leaves others in peace.” (quoted by Franklin, 132)

A Party for Boris

World Premiere: 29 June 1970, Schauspielhaus Hamburg, Germany
Directed by Claus Peymann

Characters: The Good Woman

Johanna

Boris

Thirteen (Ten in our production) Cripples

Two Servants

Two Attendants

Production History:

A Party for Boris has had no major English production anywhere in the world, and there have been no major productions of any of Bernhard's plays in North America at all. In fact, I can find no major production of *A Party for Boris* in any language between the 1970 Hamburg premiere and 2009, when a French-language production, directed by Denis Marleau of Montreal, was at the Festival d'Automne in Paris.

Synopsis:

The entirety of the play's action takes place "In The Good Woman's House", as the preface to the sole English edition of the play, published in a volume entitled *Histrionics*, informs us. In their forward to *A Party for Boris*, translators Peter Jansen and Kenneth J. Northcott note that it is the contrast between the play's "rich vein of humor... and the extremity of the situation that gives the play its extraordinary power." They also include Bernhard's cheeky epithet from Russian lyric poet Aleksandr Blok (1880-1921) – "Admittedly, first nights are usually intolerable examinations and a mockery of art." (1-5)

The First Prologue is essentially a long monologue given by The Good Woman, owner of what we assume to be a grand, old-world estate with “high windows and doors”, with intermittent interjections by her housekeeper, Johanna. In it, The Good Woman delivers Bernhard’s artful exposition, revealing various details of her dusty, solitary existence there and of her general discomfort (“I’m freezing... I can’t go to sleep... I’m suffocating”). We learn that she lost her husband and her legs many years ago in an automobile accident, built a “Home for Cripples” nearby, and then married one of its residents, Boris, a much younger man who also has no legs (we never learn why). Also in this scene, The Good Woman tries on many hats and pairs of gloves in preparation for a ball she will be attending. (7-25)

The Second Prologue begins “*After the ball*”. The Good Woman, “*in the costume of a queen*” is being wheeled around the room at great speed by Johanna. After complaining about how uncomfortable her costume was all night, and recapping some of the interactions she has had with several upper-level government officials over the course of the evening, the Good Woman realizes that Johanna has taken off her mask. “Put it back on again at once / That’s an order”, she says. Johanna exits and re-enters wearing “*a pig’s head*”: this is one of the more creative examples of The Good Woman’s sadism toward her. We learn that Johanna is also a sort of caretaker to The Good Woman and also to Boris, as she is ordered to “wash his neck / face and neck / Put on his robe”. When Johanna enters pushing Boris in his wheelchair, he is whimpering, and he barely speaks throughout the remainder of the scene, either screaming “Johannaaaaaaa” or answering The Good Woman’s questions by silently nodding his head Yes or No. The scene ends with The Good Woman “*screaming*” to Johanna, “Take off your mask / Take off your mask”. (25-42)

The final section, entitled *The Party*, begins mid-scene: we are at Boris's birthday party, with himself and The Good Woman dressed in matching whites. Johanna has been forced to sit in a wheelchair and pretend that she also has no legs. The guests are "thirteen legless cripples" all seated around the long table "eating, drinking, smoking, laughing" as they tell stories, sing drinking songs, insult each other, and call each other cruel names. They complain to The Good Woman about the size of their beds ("too short") and demand that she, as a trustee, take action. They sing songs and play with Boris's gifts. Finally, as they admit their fatigue and are all thanking The Good Woman for the wonderful party, someone shakes Boris and realizes that he has died silently at the table. Johanna screams, "He's dead / He's dead / Boris is dead" and runs out as all of the guests filter out severally. The final stage direction states, "*Hardly is The Good Woman alone with Boris's corpse when she bursts into horrible peals of laughter.*" (42-71)

Around the time of the play's premiere, Bernhard told a journalist from the newspaper *Der Spiegel*, "Death is my subject, because life is my subject, incomprehensible, unmistakable. We believe we have lived and are in fact dead." (26)

Themes:

In my reading of the play, Bernhard is working with themes of isolation and helplessness, as well as humankind's innate cruelty and fragility. He exaggerates to make his points, of course, but his notion that we are unable to really connect with one another is painfully clear. One of the play's more intimate relationships, between The Good Woman and Johanna, is one of master and servant, a sadistic series of tortures exacted to keep the line between them instead of gestures that might draw them closer. The relationship between The Good Woman and Boris barely exists – they hardly interact, and when they do, their communication more resembles a domineering mother and her son than husband and wife.

The play is certainly not about “living with a disability”. It was written in a moment before large populations became mindful of the Disabled, before public buildings were required by law to be accessible, and before the Paralympics, *etc.* It might be a somewhat anachronistic experience for the more literal-minded of our contemporary audiences, unless we make it abundantly clear in the design and in the acting that the leglessness is a metaphor, a symbol in a highly stylized play, not a political statement or plea for greater visibility for the Disabled community.

Production

A. A Study in Materialism

A Party for Boris could actually be said to be a splendid example of Materialism, as its specific physical requirements demand much more attention to space and the bodies within it than to conceptual thinking. The physical realities, in fact, *are* the story. Fifteen actors in wheelchairs would present even the most confident of choreographers with overwhelming challenges, but with an extraordinarily keen attention to space, gained by preparation that is intensely mathematical, I will be able to anticipate many of them.

Fact #1: The Good Woman is “legless and in a wheelchair”. In what seems almost a matter of principle, she demands that her servant, Johanna, treat her as a total invalid and attend to her tiniest need. This will require the actresses to develop a relationship that is believably 1) regular, and 2) co-dependent. When Johanna wheels her closer to the window or to her writing desk, it must appear that they have done this every day for many years. The actor playing Johanna must spend many hours rolling the other actor in the wheelchair, and I believe, because the two actors cast in these roles are essentially alone for the first two long scenes, the schedule will allow for them to spend a great deal of time working with me by themselves.

Fact #2: Boris is also “legless and in a wheelchair”. He too appears helpless, and fairly mute as well, speaking rarely and usually only when he is crying out like a child. Whatever Boris’s particular disability, it seems to have rendered him emotionally destitute. His will seems to be gone, and he seems to be pushed and pulled from one thing to another for the sake of appeasing the vanity of his much-older wife. The actor playing him, already limited to using only his upper body in his work, is further challenged because of this sense of the character’s impulses having been deadened by what – depression? Grief? We must decide together (but not

too specifically – in many situations it is best to leave enough space for the audience to fill in the blanks), and choose a movement vocabulary that will assist us in telling the story.

Fact #3: Thirteen party guests are also “legless and in wheelchairs”. The stage of the FFT is fortunately large enough to accommodate such a population, which requires much more square footage than do human bodies on two simple feet. The scenery will have to accommodate their entrances somehow, with ramps, open doorways, *etc.*, though it should be noted that these entrances do not need to occur before the audience. They may, but the playwright calls for the lights to come up on the guests already in place at the party. I will need to explore the meanings and ramifications of each option and weigh them all against the time they require to complete before making a decision.

In a gesture that seems to echo the last supper of Jesus Christ and his disciples, these thirteen “cripples” (only ten in our production, due to budget and available actors) sit at a table with Boris in, one may assume, the formal dining room of The Good Woman’s house where the play takes place. This imagery has been used countless times in the theater – one famous example is Brecht’s use of it in *The Threepenny Opera (Die Dreigroschenoper)*: MacHeath and his gang celebrate his wedding to Polly Peachum with a supper in a barn (another religious symbol, a reference to the Nativity). In that play, and in others making a gesture toward this ancient Christian tableau, the characters are seated together in a line on the upstage side of the table. Part of this is practical – the audience must see everyone in the play, and the only way to achieve that in a long, static scene is to bend reality and seat them all facing the audience rather than seating everyone around a table, as is done in life. Interestingly, this was most assuredly the same impulse that inspired Leonardo da Vinci’s portrait *The Last Supper* – a utilitarian concession to a medium in two dimensions that has become iconic.

Fact #4: The majority of the playing time of *A Party for Boris* takes place at a party in which people in wheelchairs are seated at a table. The obvious acting challenge is to hold the audience's eye and attention for that prolonged scene while moving only from the torso upwards, and this will be especially challenging in a theater as large as York's FFT. It would probably be safe to assume that none of our young actors has ever acted a role on the stage using only their upper body, and it will present as many or more challenges than the mask work in their acting classes – how to isolate body parts and systems, how to gesture in ways that are not germane to them, how to make historically unused body parts more expressive, *etc.* Also, the realities of the play's physical world will demand a dynamism from the performers that will probably be new for the most of them, and its heightened style will require more energy and physical commitment than most of them have known before.

B. Style

Bernhard writes anarchically without capital letters or punctuation, and his gleeful disrespect is a clue to me and to the performers that we are not doing standard boulevard stuff, that we should think subversively and paint in an Expressionistic style.

The play might be deemed “Neo-Absurdism”, owing to its non-Realistic characters, structure, and language, and the fact that its form makes no attempt to resemble real life. This is not to say that its *content* does the same – indeed, many if not all of the play's relationships are fundamentally based in reality, but their *form*, their Expressionistic articulation, is highly stylized. It will be necessary to explore how to scale the acting, how large the theatrical gestures can be without distorting the play's meanings and calling attention to themselves. I will need to lead and encourage the actors to discover the upper limits of the work – the actors in this program tend

toward smaller, more internal choices – and I will need to create an environment where this approach is not only safe but expected of all of us.

Certainly there are opportunities to further stylize the play’s realities, to “deconstruct” them, but why? What could be gained by taking a piece, a terribly interesting and unique one, and obscuring its cohesion with added tricks and gimmicks? Not much, I would argue. I do not consider myself a conservative artist by any measure, but one must develop a sense for when he is a creator and when he is an interpreter. In directing *A Party For Boris*, though I have agency over sound, motion, rhythm, and other elements, I am an interpreter. I am charged with rendering someone else’s ideas. My goal is to realize the play as it exists presently, in all its rage and humor and absurdity, but to do it in such a way that is extremely personal for myself and all the other artists. Only then will it become a piece of art valuable to our own time.

C. Design

I am encouraging myself and our designers to freely associate, allowing poetic imagery, rather than literal devices, to inform their work. We all acknowledge the need to tell the story of the splendor/wealth of The Good Woman’s house, and are currently identifying the best ways to do that. I am leading them more toward a less-is-more approach, as I and the audience should be more concerned with the interaction of the characters than we are with visuals, especially in a play in which the language is so stylized, and the traffic of so many wheelchairs requires open space.

In the first two Prologues, The Good Woman is alone with Johanna (Boris joins them late in the Second Prologue), trying on costume elements and sorting letters. I believe there is value in somehow isolating these scenes, obscuring the reality of the house until the later party scene. This stems from an instinct I have about grabbing and keeping the audience’s attention – that one

of the most valuable tools we have is surprise. The house may be quite grand in one way or another, but if we delay a full reveal and let the audience believe the play will be one kind of event (intimate, claustrophobic), and then surprise them by opening up their window into the house and the world of the production, it may generate in them, approximately halfway through, a renewed wave of interest and participation in the story.

There are several ways we could go about this, one being to hang a black scrim across a downstage batten. This will allow us very tight control over what is revealed behind it, as well as providing a visual filter to create a remove between the audience and the action. The impact of this scrim will be greatest when it is taken away, as the audience will perceive that they are in the actual room with the actors for the first time.

In the absence of a scrim, another technique we might use to achieve this goal is with very specific and angled lighting. This is, of course, a much more basic system, but could achieve the same end in extremely detailed hands and lots of technical rehearsal.

Conclusion

I strive to create an environment in which my colleagues and I are empowered to reveal the most personal truths of ourselves, thereby creating a singular, unrepeatably theatrical event. The most essential conversation in the realm of Materialism, a conversation about the human body, is at the core of the event we will make with *A Party for Boris*, and my visceral responses to the play have already begun to find translation as I communicate with designers and several of the actors.

Ultimately I must marry the bitter comedy and absurd rage of Thomas Bernhard's play with my own instincts as a storyteller, constantly mining the text for what is human, leaving space for the audience to navigate their places in it and walls for them to write upon, and all within the larger conversation about the limits of the human body. It calls for experiments in intimacy, examining the realities of bodies in various proximities and the effects of each, so that real and profound responses in the audience can be provoked. My love and respect for Dance will be an essential foundation in this exploration, though it will be challenged in ways I cannot predict by the reality of thirteen wheelchairs on the stage!

As I write this in the summer of 2016, the Austrian supreme court has ordered a repeat presidential election, the result of a lawsuit brought by the far right candidate alleging "voting irregularities" in the recent election won handily by the Green Party candidate. It appears that the struggle of alternative voices to be heard in Austria – the ancient and austere theater of war – goes on. Though Bernhard was never known to have a penchant for glee, Austria's never-ending conflicts and societal unease might at least have made her brilliant, sadistic son crack a smile.

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Epilogue

Our production of *A Party for Boris* was more compelling than I imagined it would be. This was not, primarily, due to any extraordinary level of skill or technical proficiency, but to a spirit that seemed to pervade, a sense of adventure and fun in which most of our audiences appeared eager to participate. This spirit, called “joy” by one of my colleagues in the MFA cohort, covered many of our artistic sins, thankfully, but also provided a window of invitation into a strange world for an audience not necessarily accustomed to more stylized theatre work. I am pleased for this opportunity to reflect on some achievements, challenges, and areas where my efforts fell short as director of the production, so that my understanding of what we made might be more complete, and so that future artistic explorations might be sharper and more dynamic.

My thoughts around Materialism proved central to our understanding of the play and our relationship to each other in it. Because scene designer Yasaman Nouri and I agreed to shrink the width of the set due to budgetary restraints and in order to achieve a higher degree of intimacy in the actor-audience relationship, space had to be carefully allotted to each actor and each action. We discovered that after this adjustment, the main table would have been so disproportionately long that the servants would not have been able to move around it with any ease, so this was adjusted as well. In one of several decisions that proved quite controversial with our Technical/Production staff, I requested that we move the table closer to the curtain line for the party scene, an adjustment of about twelve inches. Though our lighting department had to adjust the focus on a few of the side booms (lighting trees), there were no other negative consequences to this decision, and it put the audience closer to the action, something I believe is vital to a theatrical event.

The Materialistic thought that we, of necessity, engaged in, was a highly physical and intellectual process with which most of our young student actors were unfamiliar. It was akin to the technical rigor of the violinist or the figurative painter, a strict and demanding set of physical realities that had to be achieved in order for the abstract ideas and relationships to proceed with any clarity. These realities included, for example, absolute synchronicity within the ensemble in dances and in choral speaking, the timing and sharing of space that were required to cut and serve thirteen pieces of cake in a fixed amount of time, the difference in one's attention to space while wearing an eight-inch heel, or a twelve-inch heel, lip-synching, *etc.* (I noticed that the actors were more motivated to achieve these physical feats when audiences were present, which was frustrating at times, but which sharpened my resolve to run a tight ship.) Materialism dictated nearly every choice I made, and in a conversation about the human body, even a symbolist conversation, this was quite proper.

My preliminary concerns about the problems of the wheelchairs turned out to be of no real consequence. Unlike the wheelchairs we so often see today in the street, the footprint of our engineered wheelchairs was quite narrow, about the same as a standard parlor chair. When fitted with four smart wheels – casters that swivel and move in any direction – this made the movement of them easy and efficient. There were issues in the engineering that challenged us: out of a strong sense of caution that I have learned is fundamental to Theatre@York, each wheelchair was constructed with what was called a “kick plate”, a panel in the front of the chair masking the actors' lower legs. This panel slanted inward from the top, reinforcing the illusion that the actors had no legs, and it could be kicked forward if they felt they were in danger, allowing them to put their feet down and stop the chair from rolling. However, because of the sight lines in the Faire-Fecan Theatre (many seats are below the stage level), and because of the

angle of the lighting, we discovered that having the front panel slant inward served no real purpose, and that it was better visually to have this kick plate straight up and down throughout. All agreed that this was both safer for the company and better for the design.

A primary reason why it was decided to build these chairs instead of locating and altering existing wheelchairs was so that we could have them in rehearsal earlier and learn how to use them properly. As sometimes happens though, there were delays in the scenic and prop shops, and we did not have the complete set of wheelchairs until the night before first preview. Luckily, our company was not given to panic or to complaining, and we made the adjustments quickly, safely, and efficiently.

Nouri and I had envisioned a box of windows for a set, something like Hannibal Lecter's cage inside a larger, repurposed room in *The Silence of the Lambs*, or like the tall glass barriers in prison visitation rooms or banks. The idea was about confinement, but combined with the torture of being able to see what you cannot have. We accepted budgetary defeat early on – plexi-glass was just too expensive, we were told – but we were assured that clear film, used to winterize homes in the winter months, would serve just as well for a fraction of the cost. This proved not to be true, and we were informed via email, without seeing any tests or having any conversations about alternative plans, that the window element had been cut and that the production would proceed with empty frames where the windows would have been. This was more than discouraging to be sure, as the windows were our chief scenic element, but we regrouped around what options remained for us. It became clear to me that any masking curtains we had discussed would have to be removed so that at the very least, we could achieve the 'cage within a room' idea. The set functioned well, towering over the tiny Oksana as the Good Woman, delineating with its grand scale the station and character of the inhabitant, permitting

glimpses of people on their way in and out of the formal yet isolated room. I grew very fond of the absolute honesty created by the lack of black masking and the exposure of the theater's brick wall: we never asked the audience to believe that we were anywhere but in a theatre telling a story. I even liked the Exit signs that glowed red throughout the performance and did their own type of work to inform the audience that they were looking at a type of mirror (real life writ large), not a fantasy.

One of our most successful design elements was lighting. Scarlett Larry worked aggressively and artfully with ideas she pulled from Film Noir, which in turn had been pulled from German Expressionism by Billy Wilder, *et al.* The lighting was elegant and astonishing, and our process working together was pleasantly efficient.

The costumes by Jamin Daniel were wonderfully faithful to his renderings. We struggled to land on a makeup style that was bold but that did not draw attention to itself, and I believe we achieved it with Jamin's 'silent movie/vaudeville' style. The wig situation proved far more challenging. As an extension of our conversation about the human body and physical differences, each of the sixteen actors in the play wore at least one wig. Most of these were pulled from stock and restyled, which required many hours of skilled work, and our Costume crew struggled to keep up. Their persistence was inspiring, and they achieved a wonderful design. I even grew to love the cheaper wigs without the lace fronts that were so obviously wigs – perhaps these people were all bald, suffering from terrible illnesses, chemo-therapy survivors? It was an eerie look that served us well. If given a second chance, I would be in closer contact with the costume department. I realized that I had grown used to the typical professional model, including a production meeting every week to stay in touch, and that this style of building a production via

email was not ideal for me, especially after rehearsals had begun and so much new information was circulating every day.

Dan Wood's sound design was eclectic and dynamic, a central and indispensable element in the production. I believe his work, which was mostly composed of obscure sounds and radical reworkings of familiar things, was very successful, as was our collaboration on a production that was on completely new ground for him as a designer. He kept the audience on their toes by consistently offering them sound environments that tended to work against or even upend the reality of the various moments (screeching whales when Boris called from offstage, for example). A highlight of the production, the *a cappella* choral rendering of *The Song About the Wagtail*, was written by one of our actors, Siena Dolinski, to lyrics by the playwright. It seemed to be effortless for her, though of course it was not, and I was very proud that she had been so motivated to do all of that extra work in service of the production, and that what she made was so lovely. The moment when the company sang this song to a stuffed raven was very striking – sad and strange, like so much of life – and it was one of my favorite moments of the evening.

Any discussion of our production must include commentary on its central element – the performance of Oksana Sirju as the ironically named Good Woman. Her sharp wit made her a clear choice for the role, and though she is very young and did not possess the kind of cultural and/or historical experience and reference points to draw upon in order to build the character, she did extraordinary amounts of homework and preparation. Knowing that she would need a hand from me, during the summer I suggested she explore other versions of the 'forgotten older lady' archetype that exist in media forms accessible to her – Bette Davis in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, and Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard* were two that I suggested, monsters created by cruel fate and lost beauty/sexual allure. Oksana discovered others on her own and

studied them as well. These gave her a place to begin, and I was delighted to see her incorporate these influences into her gestures, her movement, and the diction and cadence of her speech.

It is difficult working with dramatic text that has been translated, especially when it has gone from German to English. As a translator myself, I am aware that German tends to be quite formal and is constructed with long sentences adhering to strict rules. English, by contrast, is the language of commerce and empire. It is more efficient, more egalitarian, more plastic. Bernhard's refusal to follow punctuation and capitalization rules made this even more challenging for Oksana, who was encountering very odd sentence structures, fractious thoughts laid out in a rough sort of verse, but with no real form. It was like watching a young lady herd a thousand live rats in an ice rink. Breathless and very anxious most days, she galloped through her text, fiercely battling its oddness while simultaneously pulling it closer to her, and trying to stay rooted in a form of comedy that seemed mostly foreign.

If I had the entire process to do over again, knowing what I know now, I would have taken at least the entire first week to rehearse with Oksana alone, and I would have worked even more meticulously, with each and every thought under the microscope, until she formed her phrasing in the first two scenes brick by brick. I do think there was value in letting her swing at it, and keep swinging at it, as I continually reached down to pick her up again, reassure her, and point our work forward, but I might attempt some different ratio of these two techniques next time.

To be sure, Oksana had a very heavy load to carry, essentially performing an hour-long monologue that formed the entire first act, but she amazed all of us with her stamina and commitment. She acknowledged her great responsibility and met it with courage. I am very grateful for her work.

The central relationship of the Good Woman and Johanna (Emma Gibbs) was one thing I believe we succeeded in creating with originality and truth. Drawing upon the information about the relationship in the text, and with the advantage of these two young women being close friends in real life as well as roommates, we were able to achieve a crucial level of intimacy – a routine system to the way Johanna put hats and gloves on the Good Woman, the Good Woman's complete lack of protocol or tact, their physical attention to each other, *i.e.* the way the Good Woman shifted from screaming into the microphone when Johanna was offstage to a more poised, pseudo-friendly air when she returned, *etc.* For these and various other reasons, the two actors were successful in presenting a history and a routine in the relationship that was believable.

Because of the structure of the play, I figured I would have a large amount of time to work with the two actors alone, and we took full advantage of this. Emma rolled Oksana around for what seemed like many miles in the rehearsal wheelchair, struggling to do Oksana's bidding in a tight space and in very high heels. The physical realities, like the Good Woman's helplessness and the extremity of her orders and instructions, did much to help the two of them understand the relationship, as did the fact that Johanna, though on stage for nearly the entire night, hardly speaks at all.

As Johanna, Emma had to explore levels of subtlety in a very large theatre (very difficult) and then modulate to a higher level of sophisticated clowning as she played most of Prologue Two in a pig mask. She was mostly successful – the dark background combined with white light and her fair complexion and blond wig helped to make her more prominent on the stage and to highlight her gestures, some of which were as small as a head tilt, *etc.* In the First Prologue, I believe that Emma probably could have done more movement to express her character's inner life and emotional responses to things, but she knew that she was on a fine line. She showed

remarkable instincts for the subtlety of her character, using utter stillness and silence to help us see the outrageousness of the Good Woman in greater relief. I agreed to let her err on the side of “less is more”, as both of us acknowledged that the play was primarily about the Good Woman and not about Johanna.

When I occasionally saw Emma’s frustration at having few lines, and at the extraordinary reserve of patience this non-traditional role was demanding of her, I believe what I was feeling was guilt. I allowed myself to pity her for playing what she might be perceiving as a thankless maid’s role, and I did not push her as hard as I might have otherwise. Also, a relative of hers, as well as a close family friend, both died during our rehearsal process, and she was visibly distraught for much of the time. Somehow, I would challenge myself to be more stern and less emotional if I had this to do again.

The ensemble of party guests threw themselves into the “dancing” sequences at the table with gusto, growing very frustrated if any errors occurred as we worked hard to achieve virtuosity. With repetition and high standards, I believe they achieved it. Several of them nailed the highly theatrical and physical acting style of the piece – a heightened, non-psychological type of clowning that was quite animalistic, very large, dynamic and angular in the gesturing, and not attempting to be ‘real’. Others achieved a close miss of the style, and still others settled on something related to caricature which, considering the level of skill those actors possessed at the time, and their lack of familiarity with comic Absurdism, functioned appropriately enough for the context of the production. Every director knows that he cannot dictate acting choices or perform things for the actors, but that he must be persistent, sometimes insistent, until the ideal version of things materializes. I believe that I pushed the young performers in our ensemble out of Naturalism until I reached the end of productivity, and I am proud of what they achieved.

It can be very challenging in the Theatre to present heightened, non-realistic work, as people tend to come in knowing what they like and liking what they know, but if it can be framed and presented in such a way that they are willing to go along with you, great things can happen. All in all, it is entirely worth it to introduce stylized concepts to artists, craftspeople, and audiences, so that we might keep our grasp on the Theatre's most cherished element: the audience's imagination. Though the production was difficult in every way, I believe its oddness served as a squeaky wheel, like the noisy, unconventional career of its author. The play re-contextualizes our experience and starts us thinking about our physical realities and differences, exaggerating movement and shape to make its points. With elaborately unreal diction, it asks us to ponder again things we thought we already understood: things like loneliness, isolation, the rarity of love, the haves and the have-nots, and the heartbreaking fragility of our bodies.

The squeaky wheel on a car, or a grocery cart, or a wagon, is the one that requires investigation, the one that invites, sometimes even demands attention. Our work on *A Party for Boris*, though much of it is infused with pure fun, has hopefully done a measure of this with its subject matter as well.

Journal Entries

19 June 2016

Late-night Skype with Paul Lampert about how important it is to “get these young people excited about the play”, with references to the first design meeting last week (I Skyped in.). The kids seem to have responded very well to my technique of treating them as equals. Paul seemed to bristle at my revealing to them that I hadn’t, in fact, “chosen” the play, *per se*, as the thematic and casting requirements had made my title options very few, and that *A Party for Boris*, chosen by the faculty, was actually third on a list of four plays I submitted (in descending order of my interest). I believe I was correct to be honest with everyone and to give them an unvarnished view of what it’s like trying to make many people happy at once. (You have to do this in order to have a career, of course.)

12 August 2016

Skype with Yasaman this AM. The costing meetings have had to be done in fits and starts due to scheduling. Yasaman informs that the plexi-glass is pretty much impossible (budget) and that Production staff suggests instead a type of strong, clear film used to weatherproof windows in the winter. I concede for several reasons, including: A) Yasaman says her parents have used the stuff and that it looks good, and B) I’m weary of more conversation and have many other conflicts in the technical departments that need resolution. We have decided to remove the plug for the orchestra pit and to move the audience closer to the stage. Also, we have decreased the width of the US wall for sightlines and budget (primarily for budget) and will have the minimal width to get 13 people in wheelchairs abreast on the stage with room to get around the long table.

Skype with Jamin – more detailed drawings, etc. He says Sylvia (Shop manager) wants to build more than one garment. Great! So they’ll build the Queen costume and the loungewear for

Good Woman and Boris for the First Prologue. He asked if I wanted him to worry about the width of the Queen costume (we're doing it Marie Antoinette-style, with pannier). No, said I. Make it so we can hook them onto both sides of her wheelchair, like saddlebags.

I am enjoying watching these young artists encounter German Expressionism, via Film Noir, for the first time.

16 August 2016

Impromptu Skype with Teresa (design advisor), her request. She doesn't realize that Yasaman and I have been communicating and working together all summer, Skyping usually once a week for three months. Teresa is feeling the heat from her colleagues on the staff/faculty about our projections idea (Lots of high-pitched discussion about why they were never told that we wanted projections. Simple answer: they never asked what I wanted.) I was nearly to the point of cutting them, but we think front projecting will be more possible. It could be fun. Stay tuned.

My idea for projections is abstract. Thinking about *A Party for Boris* as a study in the freedom and imprisonment of the human body, we discussed images of wild animals running, like the glorious footage of herds of zebras or bison you see in National Geographic specials. These images, projected on upstage walls behind the set, or on a cyc, could underscore the "immobility", to use Bernhard's word, of *The Good Woman* and the others. I am thinking of it as some kind of Jungian, subterranean dreamscape as a counterpoint to the hard realities of the people in the wheelchairs and their stumps.

20 September 2016

First meeting: lovely speech by Ines discussing the season, my talk, design presentations (incredibly well received), followed by a reading of the party scene. I decided not to read the

entire play due to time constraints, and also because most of the first act is a monologue – not terribly interesting at a first read! I had a brief meeting before the large assembly to speak to the actors about the subject matter – of course there have been issues with people having political problems with portraying disabled people on the stage. This is precisely what David and I were worried about when we first learned about this season theme! Anyway, the actress who requested a special meeting with me to discuss this has no problem portraying a deaf person in THREE SISTERS. I asked her how that was different from portraying a person without legs. She had no answer except to say that she had been studying ASL for several years. “But you’re not any more deaf than you are legless,” I said. No real reply.

I really just want to have conversations about being human. I am politically engaged in my personal life, but have no time for it in Art. Audiences must not depend on me to tell them how to think and what to feel, but must make up their own minds. An actress in Cleveland once said to me, “I always assume that the audience is smarter than I am.” This is a thought that I treasure and work from every time. It seems especially valuable here, as we are in the context of a season about *Disability*, and have been given a play to work on that deals with it sideways, or “slant”, as Emily Dickinson would say.

Some genuine laughs from the practicum students for the reading of the party scene. Encouraging! I have no idea how students, and audiences, here will react to Bernhard. I am told over and over that this is nothing like what is usually produced at York.

21 September 2016

As I am frantically running to make copies for our first real rehearsal, my phone rings: Ines. Very unusual to receive calls here, as most all of my colleagues know that I don’t have a proper international calling plan – last year it proved very expensive and not worth the cost. Ines

told me that someone had told her that I had been insensitive the night before around the issue of an actor's dyslexia. Absolutely false. The story: an actor raised her hand before we went into the general assembly and asked if new scripts would be printed for everyone. Suddenly nervous that the actors hadn't been given scripts, I asked if they had. Yes, they replied. Relieved, I said that if people needed another script, fine with me, but if they didn't, I would suggest not using so much additional paper (the new version would be double-spaced and therefore twice as long). There was no mention of the word dyslexia, and nearly all of the actors indicated that they didn't need another script. This somehow got turned into me ignoring someone's dyslexia. I am very troubled by the way many in this generation of young people are constructing their identities around disorders, both real and imagined, and how they assume knowledge of these disorders, and how they expect the rest of the world to adapt around these identities. The world is a tough place, and these kids are in for lots of heartache if they don't accept that they too must make adjustments to exist in it.

22 September 2016

After hearing all summer that there is no video projector to use for our production, it is very disconcerting to attend the first company meeting for BORIS, as well as a presentation the following day about Ableism, both utilizing a large, perfectly well-functioning projector in the FFT. Also disconcerting to have been convinced that there were not enough students to build and run projections, then being introduced by name to at least 25 kids who are on our "crew" and seeing the audience full of other kids who, I am told, "are all working on your show." Doing what?

28 September 2016

Oksana is allowing herself to have fun. Huzzah! She seems to be getting out from under the terror of having to speak for an hour, essentially by herself. On the sections where she's more solid on the lines, she really plays – lots of dynamics, distinctions in emotional states (which here are more like variations of rage), and artful modulations between these. It is clear that our primary goal now is to get her off-book completely. I will assign one of my assistants to run lines with her as often as possible.

13 October 2016

I redistributed all of the lines of the actor who quit, and adjusted the blocking. This will not be a problem for us. My only regret is that these young students have been given the signal that whenever things get tough, or when things are not going as you expected them to, it's OK to just quit. Abandon your responsibilities. Go back on your word. Very sad.

On a better note, another great conversation with Kat and Meredith, my very smart and dedicated assistants. They're learning a lot and ask great questions. I'm lucky to have them and am enjoying watching them have so much fun.

Two of my MFA colleagues have asked to attend our rehearsals, saying they'd like to watch me work and get a sense of how I run the rehearsals. Theresa and Taliesin have both attended.

Two of our tables had been painted an unfortunate shade of orange-brown. As these pieces were white in the model, I always assumed they'd be white. They took them back and are repainting.

Very interesting discussion with Jonathan (playing Boris) about his relationship to Good Woman. His choice had been a Naturalistic sort of squirming in the first scene with her. I encouraged him to dial back. Why not try putting on a good face for her, maybe the same one

you put on every day? We both noted that he doesn't give her anything at all, no approval, no sex, no nothing. I encouraged Jonathan to keep his head still more, as the extraneous movement was confusing and blurred the sense of the exchanges. Much discussion with Jonathan about how he is essentially being tortured by GW, held prisoner, in a way, and what that feels like. He will try to put on a smile for her when he sees her – touching and fun (the plight of the 'kept boy').

19 October 2016

I'm surprised that in our 5th week of rehearsal, when these actors have had their scripts since last spring, several of them are still not off-book. There is no logical excuse for this, no way to explain it away. Lampert, after attending a few rehearsals, suggests that I am responsible for them not knowing the text, as I haven't sufficiently explained to the actors what they're doing, and so the consequence of their being lost is that they can't learn the lines. I absolutely reject this theory. They are all native English speakers. They have had their scripts since last spring. At this late date, there is no reason why they couldn't have studied their roles more thoroughly. There is no reason why they couldn't have asked me questions to clarify any misunderstandings. They, in fact, do understand what they're doing. But they are overcommitted in classwork, and many of them are not used to the extraordinary effort required to play a role in an actual play instead of a 5- or 10-minute scene in an acting class. If I could design a curriculum for an acting conservatory, it would definitely include many productions so that students could begin early to develop the stamina, focus, and integrity required to be in a play.

All this being said, if everyone can work harder and meet their responsibilities in the production, I believe it will be fun and provocative. I'm excited to see it.

I had been told previously that we must use the black legs for masking, because Yasaman included them in her renderings and for that reason the issue is frozen. No room to make changes,

no exceptions. But I have just learned that the issue of striking the black legs is not off the table after all. Theresa had said that because they were in Yasaman's model that we absolutely had to use them. This turned out to be untrue, thankfully. I don't know where the miscommunication happened between Yasaman and me, but having no masking was always in our plans from the start.

The Head of Props has been forbidden to come in and watch a run-through. Strange, and silly. Her many questions about every note in the rehearsal reports could be answered in an instant if she were to come and watch. I've never seen this kind of thing before – a Prop designer who just waits for a shopping list, no creative input at all, no participation with the rest of the design team.

25 October 2016

Tonight one of the TD's came by rehearsal to inform us that the plastic wrap doesn't work after all, and that we will be cutting it. I knew it wouldn't work, though they assured us it was a viable option. I wish we had trusted ourselves and designed a different set.

Oksana called *Line* more times tonight than she did last week. ?? Meredith, one of my assistants, assures me that this is purely a confidence issue, that Oksana doesn't trust herself. Meredith would know – she has been assigned to run lines with Oksana regularly, and she does so most every day.

I recognized early that Oksana would have to stand on her own in this large role. I have been there for her every step of the way, but I cannot do it for her. I made her responsible early on for keeping the ball in the air, holding the audience's attention on her own, and I'm waiting for her to know the text better so she can be truly free. Her problem, I believe, is not that she misunderstands or isn't capable (she is exceptionally intelligent), but that she is spending

valuable effort searching for lines. I spend much time stopping her and asking for clarification in her phrasing, but when she is searching for lines, she cannot concentrate on sense in her delivery. This is typical for all actors. What is atypical is the immensity of the line load. I will keep pushing Oksana and keep encouraging her. Meredith will continue running lines with her.

1 November 2016

First day in the theater. Our outsized style finally makes sense to these young actors. I can see them having fun opening up their focus and settling into a style they've maybe believed was a little silly or not "real". I have asked that they test the upper limit of the style and go as far over the top as they can. This, of course, causes lots of laughter from everyone, but it seems to be breaking some ice and creating a relationship to the play that is less estranged. It's good to see this happening.

Interestingly, one actor in particular resists taking his notes and participating in the play as we are making it. He seems to make every choice with an imperative to be different from everyone else, to the detriment of the ensemble. I give him stern notes ("Is your character a moron? That's what's reading."), and he claims to understand and agrees, but then makes the same choices over again. He frequently makes errors in the dance sequences, which are built on absolute ensemble and precision. I have taken him aside and asked that he try to sleep better at night (he frequently comes in bleary-eyed and very, very tired), and he has assured me that he would.

I rehearse the dances relentlessly. We begin every day with a run of each of the dances and with a sing-through of Siena's lovely choral song. I am trying to impress on the actors that the Material world matters! Most of their program here is about the abstract elements of acting,

“hooking up”, *etc.*, but this play is demanding less of that and more intellectual rigor and physical precision. Interesting problems for all of us.

I was very impressed with the way they learned the song, though. Usually, there is at least one in a cast who demands to see printed music, incorrectly believing that they cannot sing without it. But this company learned this piece by ear, and very efficiently too. Siena set it on them like a pro (a very generous, good-natured pro), and we sang it for a few weeks until it settled into the bones. Then, feeling confident that they knew it well enough to make adjustments, I came in with a variation on the theme, which we added on as a second ‘movement’. I broke down the parts in the first, adding them in one at a time. The piece now has the feel of a major choral work, though it’s very simple. Very happy with what it’s becoming, and the emotional quality it adds to our oddity of a play (acknowledgment/discussion of death).

Another actor (not Oksana) is still having line problems. I have assigned Kat, my other assistant, to run lines with him.

10 November 2016

Our time in the space is considerably less than is reflected in the department schedules. We are not allowed into the theater until exactly 6PM. Until then, we all stand in a crowded hallway as there is not enough seating for the thirty+ artists working on this production. When the 30 of us are marshaled in, we must wait for 15 minutes for lighting and soundboards to be turned on and warm up. The extensive props and furniture must be put into place. All of this takes around 30 minutes. When breaks are taken, we are all required to leave the room (again, this is around 30 people, and it doesn’t happen quickly) – the break begins AFTER the last of us exits the doorway (it always takes more than 5 minutes to get all of us out, and then more than

five minutes to get all of us back in again). We must end rehearsal 30 minutes early every night in order for the staff to turn off the boards and clean up.

After requiring me to give up a portion of the stage for two ASL interpreters, to take our already short time to create additional lighting and sound plots for one relaxed performance, to adjust our curtain call (already extremely complicated due to 13 wheelchairs on the stage and a 20-foot table right up against the curtain line) so that our designers can take calls, I find out last night at 11PM that my production will begin with a smudging ceremony by a First Nations elder. I don't object to the ceremony, of course, but could not word have come to us sooner?

Terrific run last night. The students are all amazed that tech has been so efficient, but this has been pretty standard from my point of view.

As Johanna, Emma has found a great thing since we put the mic on her. She is now speaking in what the Bible refers to as "a still, small voice". We spoke at length about Johanna's place in the life of Jesus Christ – following him, supporting him, then, with several other women, discovering his empty tomb. Emma has kept her movement simple and efficient, truly deferential and all about servitude, and now with this quiet-but-amplified voice, she really seems other-worldly, like a saint.

Appendix A: World Events Leading Up To The 1970 Premiere of *A Party for Boris*

1968

- February 18 Vietnam War: 543 Americans killed as of this date, 2547 wounded.
- April 4 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.
- May 6 "Bloody Monday" marks one of the most violent days of the Parisian student revolt as five thousand students march through the Latin Quarter.
- June 3 Andy Warhol is shot outside his New York City loft by Valerie Solanis.
- June 4/5 Senator Robert Kennedy is assassinated in Los Angeles.
- July 20 First International Special Olympic Games, Chicago.
- August 20 The Soviet Union invades Czechoslovakia with over 200,000 Warsaw Pact troops, putting an end to the Prague Spring.
- September 29 30th anniversary of Neville Chamberlain's Munich agreement ceding Czechoslovakia's *Sudetenland* to Hitler.
- October 31 President Lyndon Johnson halts US bombing in North Vietnam.
- December 21 The launch of Apollo 8 begins the first US mission to orbit the Moon.

1969

- January 2 *To be Young, Gifted & Black* by Lorraine Hansberry premieres in NYC.
- February 4 Al-Fatah-leader Yasser Arafat officially takes over as chairman of PLO.
- March 17 Golda Meir becomes the fourth prime minister of Israel.
- April 30 US troops in Vietnam peak at 543,000. 33,000+ have already been killed.
- May 11 The Monty Python comedy troupe forms.
- May 23 The Who release their rock opera *Tommy*.
- June 6 General Franco closes the Gibraltar border with Spain.
- June 22 The polluted Cuyahoga River in Cleveland, Ohio catches fire.
- June 28 In NYC's Greenwich Village, The Stonewall Rebellion begins a worldwide Gay Rights movement.

- July 11 David Bowie releases *Space Oddity*, supposedly inspired by the imminent Moon landing.
- July 20 Apollo 11 Astronauts Neil Armstrong and Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin make the first successful landing of a manned vehicle on the Moon.
- August 8, 10 Actress Sharon Tate and six others are brutally murdered in Los Angeles; cult leader Charles Manson and his followers are later convicted of the crimes.
- August 12 In Northern Ireland the Protestant group Apprentice Boys lead a parade that ignites riots in Londonderry, commencing a bloody period known as The Troubles.
- August 15 The Woodstock Music and Art Fair opens in Upstate New York.
- October The Nobel Prize in Literature is awarded to Irish writer, Samuel Beckett.

1970

- January 4 10-15,000 are killed and many more injured in a 7.1 earthquake in China.
- April 10 Paul McCartney announces the breakup of The Beatles.
- April 22 Millions participate in the first Earth Day, initially proposed by peace activist John McConnell.
- May 4 Four students protesting the US invasion of Cambodia are killed by National Guard soldiers at Kent State University in Ohio.
- May 31 A 7.9 earthquake strikes Peru, killing up to 70,000, injuring many more.
- June 29 *A Party for Boris* premieres to ecstatic reviews in Germany at Schauspielhaus Hamburg.

(Wood, *et al*, various)