

THE LARAMIE PROJECT: THE SEARCH FOR A PERSONAL ACTING METHOD VIA  
THE PRINCIPLES OF CONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKI

by

MATTHEW V. HAMNER  
B.F.A. Auburn University, 1993

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of Theatre  
in the College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term  
2006

©2006MatthewV.Hamner

## ABSTRACT

Constantin Stanislavski developed a method for actors in bringing to life characters for the stage. Even though Stanislavski developed his theories in response to the stage climate of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many of his ideas remain relevant today. In this study, parts of his system were applied to the roles performed in Moisés Kaufman's The Laramie Project. Those roles were Moisés Kaufman, Jonas Slonaker, Doug Laws, Anonymous, Detective Robert DeBree, Governor Jim Geringer, Reverend Fred Phelps and Dennis Shepard. The purpose of this exploration was to create unique, believable characters and develop solutions for personal acting problems. Through this study, it was concluded that this method empowered me as I sought ways to personalize with the reality of the characters.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for their help with this project: Belinda Boyd, Mark Brotherton, Jim Brown, Charlotte V. Hamner, Letitia Vaughan and the cast and crew of The Laramie Project.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	v
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER TWO: CULTURAL ANALYSIS .....	3
CHAPTER THREE: STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS .....	8
CHAPTER FOUR: CHARACTER ANALYSIS .....	15
Given Circumstances .....	16
Past Present Future .....	16
The Magic If .....	17
Actions .....	18
Objectives .....	19
The Characters .....	20
CHAPTER FIVE: REHEARSAL .....	43
Plasticity of Motion .....	43
Communion .....	44
Improvisation .....	45
Appraisal of the Facts .....	47
Physical Characterization .....	48
Subtext .....	48
Adaptation .....	49

ActionsandObjectives .....	50
Director'sConcept .....	50
TheWarm-Up .....	52
CharacterRehearsals .....	54
TechnicalRehearsals .....	70
CHAPTERSIX:PERFORMANCE .....	71
CHAPTERSEVEN:CONCLUSION .....	74
LISTOFREFERENCES.....	78

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The ideas of Constantin Stanislavski have long been a resource for the actor in the creation of a character. His theories have influenced acting technique ever since they appeared in the early part of the twentieth century. Prior to this period, there was no comprehensive formula for this creative event except for the character positions popularized by the French theatre theorist, Francois Delsarte. Under his scheme, specific emotions were conveyed with calculated gestures. Even though this method was developed through the observation of people going through daily routines, it did not allow the actor to fully identify with his character. On the whole, acting in the nineteenth century remained an imitative practice.

With the advent of social science and its artistic neighbor, realism, the search for verisimilitude on the stage commenced. Influenced by the new movements, Stanislavski began his study of human nature and the ways of recreating it for the stage. In the beginning of his studies, C. S. imagined himself in the world of the play. He believed that a "daydream" would stimulate his senses and this in turn would help him feel the life of the characters. Included in this visual analysis were character interactions. However, he soon discovered that the best way to create a stage to begin the procedure on the stage. This method required him to relate with the actor through psychologically motivated behavior. In other words, the actor did not fully know the character until he felt it through psychological and physical reality.

In order for this way of creation to function at any level, C. S. espoused several conditions. One demand was that the actor's body and voice be flexible. The

other necessity was that the actor's imagination be well-developed. Another requisite was that the actor appreciate the social conditions of life. Still, another stipulation was that the actor know how to analyze the play in order to uncover the character's motives and corresponding actions. C. S. communicated those thoughts through a variety of books. The primary ones were An Actor Prepares, Building a Character, and Creating a Role.

Using these books as a guide along with An Actor's Handbook, I participated in the acting process. Through this artistic venture, I wanted to accomplish two goals. One intention was to create unique and believable characters. The other desire was to discover what aided my belief in the "acting moment." These objectives will serve me well as I pursue careers in both the professional fields of acting and theatre instruction.

Stanislavski's ideas were applied through the analyses, rehearsals and performances of Moisés Kaufman's The Laramie Project. The details of those experiences are reported in this paper. In Chapter One, I analyze the cultural influences of the play. In Chapter Two, I examine the structural elements of the play. In Chapter Three, I define each character. The characters are Moisés Kaufman, Jonas Slonaker, Doug Laws, Anonymous, Governor Jim Geringer, Rob DeBree, Reverend Fred Phelps and Dennis Shepard. In Chapter Four, I describe the rehearsal process. In Chapter Five, I recount what occurred during the performances. In Chapter Six, I explain what I learned about acting.

## CHAPTER TWO: CULTURAL ANALYSIS

Culture gives people strength; it provides a platform for collective experiences. It plays an undeniable role in shaping an individual's attitudes, actions and feelings. Stanislavski affirmed the importance of cultural analysis when he said, "The circumstances which make up a way of life [for a character] must be studied not only in the actual text but also in a variety of commentaries, pieces of literature, historical writings concerning the period, and so forth" (Creating a Role 17). For certain, his method requires that the actor study the society in which the character resides.

The Laramie Project is set in Wyoming. According to the book, Wyoming, this state remained unsettled for many years due to the weather, the mountains and the Native Americans. However, the abundance of fleece animals brought fur traders to the area. These early settlers were called mountain men not only because of the terrain in which they lived but also because of their ability to survive hazardous conditions. These rugged individuals did without decent food when the weather turned bad. A typical menu during these climatic changes consisted of dog, horse blood and insects. Only an individual with a strong mind and a strong disposition could subsist in these hazardous circumstances (Larson 9-11).

Along with the fur traders, the Mormons were another group that settled the Rocky-Mountain West. These pioneer travelers traveled to this isolated region in order to escape religious persecution. They found security in Utah and parts of Wyoming ("Latter-day Saints").

The Mormon's history is unique because they originally sanctioned polygamous marriages. This ritual was considered taboo in many communities and led to the lynching of their founder, Joseph Smith. In the end, the Mormons were forced to recant their position on marriage not only for their safety but also because the U.S. Congress ruled this event illegal ("Latter-day Saints").

While the Mormons were staking claim to the area, the rancher was providing sustenance for it. With the opening of the Union Pacific Railroad, the dissemination of the American Indian and the decline of the fur trade, ranching became an important industry in Wyoming. As well as being profitable, this lifestyle proved adventurous. Protecting livestock from horse thieves and fighting for new plots of land became active chores for the late nineteenth-century cowboy. Some of these cowboys allowed their cattle to roam on homesteaded land. This activity led to many battles over property rights. For the most part, ranching was an important part of early Wyoming society ("Wyoming, State").

These original settlers must have been tough, aggressive and independent. After all, how could they have survived their environment? What is more interesting is that these traits may still exist in the pioneers' descendants. According to the book, Losing Matt Shepard, Wyoming residents have at times displayed a rebellious attitude toward outsiders. For example, some automobiles have bumper stickers attached that read, "Welcome to Wyoming. Have a Nice Trip Home" or "I don't give a damn how you did it back home, this is Wyoming" (qtd. in Loffreda 61). Even more so, some local residents have been reluctant to amend their way of life. They complained when an anti-smoking ordinance was proposed. Smokers' rebellion against laws that prevent

them from smoking in public places is not unusual. However, one aggravated tobacco user said that the proponents of the new act should move to “communist China.” In another example, government officials demonstrated an oppositional attitude toward change when they rejected a bill that would have prohibited open alcohol containers in automobiles. Had they signed the bill, the state would have received millions of dollars in federal aid. It is possible that these actions were Old West philosophies struggling to adapt to present-day ideas (54).

Another condition that may encourage hostility toward strangers is based on the leasing out of their natural resources. Wyoming’s main source of income derives from the oil and mineral industries. These industries are controlled by international and national corporations. Due to their influence on the state’s legislature, these organizations keep taxes low on public owned lands on which the minerals exist. This infuriates local landowners because they feel like they are not receiving appropriate pay for the use of their lands. They also complain that these manufacturers have not created a significant source of jobs. The relationship with these outside forces is so unfavorable that some residents refer to themselves as colonists (36-37).

Another factor to consider in understanding Wyoming’s culture is the state’s economy. According to Loffreda’s data, salaries of Wyoming workers rank among the lowest in America. For every dollar earned, Wyoming workers make twenty-three cents less than the average American. Also, ten percent of Wyoming workers have three jobs or more because employers will only hire part-time in order to prevent paying benefits. These unfortunate conditions continue because high tech industries will not build in the area due to the low populace. Even during the technological boom of the nineties, the

state's economy remained weak. As a whole, these economic circumstances might have a negative effect on how the people of this area perceive life (38,40).

As described above, Wyoming has struggled with fresh points of view ever since the original settlers arrived. This conflict is prevalent in the play's text. For example, Jonas Slonaker implies that homosexuals are physically and psychologically abused due to their sexual orientation (Kaufman 33-34, 60). Doug Law explains that the Mormon religion does not tolerate homosexuality (35-36). Governor Jim Geringer remarks that the evidence is not clear on whether the Shepard murder was a hate crime (52). Rob DeBrees says that his friends rejected him after he became an advocate for gay rights (78). Belief systems are constantly challenged throughout the play.

Also, Old West images are present in the play. Here is one instance revealed through the words of Dennis Shepard as he describes his son's last moments:

First, he had the beautiful night sky and the same stars and moon that we used to see through a telescope. Then, he had the daylight and the sun to shine on him. And through it all he was breathing in the scent of pine trees from the snow range. He heard the wind, the ever-present Wyoming wind, for the last time. (84-85)

This passage reveals that the father and the son had an appreciation for nature. This is the type of gratitude that a cowboy might have had while sleeping under the stars at night.

When the historical and social background of Wyoming is presented alongside the events of the play, the story acquires poetic meaning and form. I begin to sense the ferocity of the characters. I begin to understand why they are so passionate about their feelings. I even begin to develop sympathetic feelings for some of the disagreeable

characters. Overall, the analysis of this cultural information helps me to appreciate these characters' lives.

After better achieving a better understanding of the play through a cultural analysis, the next step is to evaluate the play's structure. This is the medium through which the story will be expressed. I present my findings in Chapter Three.

## CHAPTER THREE: STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

Stanislavski revealed the importance of understanding the play's structure when he said the following:

We can dissect a play into its component parts, in order to understand its structure, to admire the harmony and combination of its various parts, its elegance, smoothness, logic of development, the scenic quality of its action, the inventiveness of exposition [...].

We can appreciate the originality of the playwright in contriving motives, reasons for precipitating actions, which in turn reveal the inner essence and human spirit of the play. (Creating \_\_\_\_\_ 17-18)

In short, structure reveals meaning. It is the medium through which the presentation occurs. It offers the actors some insight into the character's situation as well as the playwright's intentions.

Laramie is a play based on a real life event, the murder of Matthew Shepard and its impact on the community of Laramie, Wyoming. The text is nonfiction. It is derived from interviews, journals and other sources compiled by members of the Tectonic Theater Project.

Those Tectonic actors not only portray the characters they interviewed, but they also share their personal feelings about the event. In other words, they play the citizens of Laramie as well as themselves. Also, they speak directly to the audience rather than uphold the realistic tradition of the fourth wall. Furthermore, an narrator guides the action. This narrator introduces the characters of the play and describes past occurrences not portrayed on the stage. On the whole, the history is presented through an experimental format.

According to Kaufman, the structure of Laramie was modeled after Bertolt Brecht's article, "Street Scene." In this essay, a witness describes a traffic accident to a group of people. This observer lacks an emotional connection to the accident because he was not a direct participant. Nonetheless, he reveals the essential events of the story to a group of people. A similar event occurs in Brecht's Epic theatre. Here, the actor does not completely identify with the role. He remains separate from the character. In turn, the audience does not experience an overwhelmingly emotional moment (Schoeps 45).

For Brecht, theatre was about educating people on social issues. He believed that the realistic theatre of the time did not do this because of its reliance on the inducement of emotions. He said, "A completely free and critical attitude of the viewer, bent on solutions of problems here on earth, is no basis for a catharsis" (qtd. 42). In order to turn this philosophy into theatrical reality, Brecht sought elements that inspired the audience's intellect. He called these devices, "estrangement effects" or in the German vernacular - *Verfremdungseffekte*. He placed these emotional-disrupters in the script, in the acting and in the production elements (43).

One convention that Brecht used as an estrangement effect was the episodic scene structure. In this format, the play unfolds over a long period of time; the locales vary from place to place; numerous characters tell the story and opposing lines of action develop throughout the play. With Brecht in control, these variables were used to direct the audience's intellectual sensibilities toward the social themes of the play (152).

Also, Brecht manipulated the text in order to create estrangement effects. For example, one of his characters once said, "Shame on you for going after women without

indecent thoughts" (qtd. 44). Furthermore, he blended familiar proverbs, Bible verses and the words of other playwrights with his own text. Using these textual arrangements, the social concerns of the story were emphasized (45).

Brecht also explored multiple identification scenarios for the purpose of making the audience realize the moral dilemma. Several Brecht plays contain multilayered characters. For example, in The Caucasian Chalk Circle, the characters perform a play that parallels the social conditions of their own existence. In another play, The Good Woman of Setzuan, a kind-hearted prostitute assumes the identity of a shareholder tobacco business owner. In The Flight of Lindbergh, the audience becomes a part of the play. They read the role of the main character (Moore, "Studying" par. 6, 7).

Brecht developed an unrealistic acting style in order to prevent character/actor identification. He had his actors perform broad gestures that did not reveal the character's personality but rather showed their social, cultural and political attitudes. These illustrative movements prevented his actors and subsequently, the audience from identifying with the characters' selfhood. As a result of these stylized actions, the social concerns of the play came to the forefront of the viewer's mind (par. 13, 14).

Brecht used technical elements in order to disenfranchise zealous feelings. For example, the fourth wall was disregarded. Music and lighting contradicted the underlying emotions of the scene. Pictures and words projected onto overhead screens enhanced the social ideas of the play. The light stage décor disjointed time and place. Collectively, these production values severed the audience from the emotional tendencies of realism and directed their attention toward the social topics espoused in the plays (Schoeps 45-46).

Several Brechtian ideas are also present in Laramie. For example, the play examines a cultural issue, the treatment of gays in society. This topic is revealed through a group of factors and the characters they portray. The actors as well as the characters describe how they feel about the events surrounding the murdered student, Matthew Shepard. Of course, the opinions of the actors and the characters vary, leaving the audience to decide who is right and who is wrong.

The Brechtian influence on Laramie is further felt in the use of the episodic scene structure. For example, multitudes of scenes occur over a period of a year and a half. These multiple scenes reveal numerous residents, many local establishments and several lines of action. These random moments have the potential to disrupt the emotional flow of the play.

The principles behind the Brechtian technical elements were also present in the original production of Laramie. For example, the set decoration was minimal. Only a few tables and chairs were used. Costumes and props were visible to the audience. The actors wore costumes that represented themselves, and then they donned clothing that suggested character. In addition, all costume changes and set-moving were done by the actors. In general, the production elements of the play prevented the audience from becoming so grounded in the emotional reality of the play that they overlooked the subject matter (19).

Above and beyond the adoption of Brechtian techniques in order to provoke an atmosphere of intellectual discussion, Kaufman also experiments with other nonrealistic elements. For the most part, his exploration focuses on time and place. For example, the play does not chronologically follow the events of history. As might be expected,

sequential order would be difficult to achieve since the play occurs both in the past and the present. The past occurs when a character is portrayed . The present occurs when a cast member comments on the situation. Moreover, it is difficult to discern when and where the scenes take place. In many scenes, only a general description of the setting is given. The only certainties are that the play occurs some time after the murder of Matthew Shepard and that the play occurs somewhere in Wyoming.

Also, Kaufman only allows his characters a few moments on stage. This provides a challenge for the actors as well as the audience. Both have a limited time to make an emotional connection with the character. In this way, the total story receives the focus rather than the individual personalities.

Even though Laramie contains many elements that disrupt the emotional environment, there are items that might be conducive in creating passionate moments. First of all, even though the play does not follow the type of chronological order that is found in other contemporary pieces, it does have a beginning, middle and end. Near the opening of the play, Kaufman expresses to the audience that the company is preparing for their trip to Laramie. In the middle of the play, more combative moments are introduced. Some of these events include Phelps' funeral demonstration, DeBree's interrogation and Shepard's court speech. Then, in the last moments of the play, the company members describe how it felt to say goodbye to the residents of Laramie. This review indicates that there is indeed an emotional arc to the play despite the fact that the scenes are chronologically unrelated.

Aside from colloquialisms, the language is naturalistic. There are not any textual manipulations designed to stylize the characters. What is more, the text is not fictional

but derived from real interviews. This knowledge of reality has the tendency to provoke emotional excitement in an audience.

Also, there was no evidence discovered to suggest that Kaufman had his actors use an unrealistic acting style. The actors identified with their characters and all of their emotional circumstances. To be exact, many of the cast members had become friends with the people they were portraying on stage. This unique scenario created an emotional attachment between the actors and the characters they were portraying (Loffreda 127).

In summary, my evaluation verifies that Laramie contains features which inspire both an emotional and a thought-provoking atmosphere. However, as an actor, I will approach my characters from a traditional perspective. In other words, I will strive to connect with my characters intellectually, physically and emotionally. The main reason for this choice is because the play is about individuals in relationship to society. Without conflicting personalities, the audience is not given a choice to discern right from wrong. For that reason, my characters must fight with all their souls for what they believe. I must have a real and emotional connection to them.

There will be challenges in the pursuit to create living and breathing characters. As stated before, some elements are missing from the play. Some scenes and character details are not fully revealed. These items help the actor feel the reality of the part. Therefore, I must use my imagination fully in order to fill in the missing parts.

Also, the Stanislavski acting technique will have to be altered. His technique relies on the character growing from scene to scene. This is not possible in Laramie.

since only a snapshot of each character's life is revealed. Overall, my imagination as well as my ability to discern human characteristics from the text will be tested.

In Chapter Four, I shift the focus of the analysis toward a character. Here is where the acting techniques of C. S. Comstock light. My goal is to discover the characters' motivations and actions within the given circumstances.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CHARACTER ANALYSIS

After studying the play, the next step is for the actor to identify with the character. At this point, the active techniques of the system connect the actor with the material in a personal way. This delicate connection requires the actor to discover the circumstances of the character, to analyze what he would do in those circumstances and to find a purpose for his behavior.

Stanislavski achieved these ideas through a process called scoring a role. With this device, the actor dissects the entire play into units. Within each unit, the actor finds a specific objective that the character wants to achieve. Within each objective, there are numerous actions that have to be fulfilled. Overall, C.S. believed that if the actor performed his character's objectives and their inherent actions with realistic detail, he would begin to feel his part (An Actor Prepares 33-51, Creating 56-62).

While developing his acting system, C.S. dealt with line ar plays. That means in these plays, the characters' lives developed in a chronological manner. Also, their behavior patterns were inspired through relationships with other characters. This type of integration did not appear in Laramie; therefore, adjustments were made.

In order to adapt to the random moments of the play, I did not score the entire script. Instead, I studied each character's moment as a separate unit. Otherwise, the process would have been extremely confusing. Furthermore, due to limited information in the text, I did not search for the character's super objective. The scene objective was sufficient in this regard.

Before the character analysis section is presented, I will define the fundamental elements of the method. These ideas will give my characters a base from which the rehearsals will build upon. The following terms will be defined: given circumstances, past-present-future, the magic if, actions and objectives.

### **Given Circumstances**

C.S. described the given circumstances in the following way:

It means the story of the play, the facts, events, epoch, time and place of action, conditions of life, the actors' and regisseur's (director's) interpretation, the *mis-en-scene*, the production, the sets, the costumes, the properties, lighting and sound effects—all the circumstances that are given to an actor to take into account as he creates his role. (An Actor Prepares 67)

The given circumstances are all of the information pertinent to the play that helps the actor to achieve a creative state. It gives the actor a foundation and places him in the middle of the action. In order to know the given circumstances of a character, questions that pertain to who, what, when and where are asked. The particular phrasing of these questions is determined by the actor and the play. The more specific these questions are answered, the greater knowledge the actor will have of the role (70-71).

### **Past Present Future**

C.S. made the following comments about the character's past, present and future:

The author wrote only what happens after the curtain is up. That is, so to speak, the present time of the play. But can the present exist without the

past? Try taking away all the antecedents from your own present. Imagine for a moment that you are sitting here preparing to become an actor but there was nothing in your past leading up to this present work. You did not prepare yourself even in the thought to become an actor, you never were in the theatre. Don't you feel that such a present would lose all value, that it would be like a plant without roots, doomed to wither and die? (Creating 160-161)

Some actors have called this process "emotional preparation" or "the moment before." This is where the actor imagines himself in the given circumstances and from there develops a playable action for the first moment of the scene. In this paper, this activity is represented by a character biography.

### The Magic If

C.S. said the following about the magic if:

From the moment of the appearance of [the Magic If] the actor passes from the plane of actual reality into the plane of another life, created and imagined by him.

In order to be emotionally involved in the imaginary world which the actor builds on the basis of a play, in order to be caught up in the action on the stage, he must believe in it.... This does not mean he should give himself up to anything like hallucination, ... quite the contrary.... He does not forget that he is surrounded by stage scenery and props.... He asks himself: But if this were real, how would I react? What would I do? .. And normally, naturally... this I facts as a lever to lift him into a world. .. of creativity. (An Actor's Handbook 94)

The magic if is another instrument that connects the actor with the imaginary world of the play. It helps him to believe in himself and at the same time believe in the given circumstances of the play. This belief is inspired through the question, "what would I do if I were in this situation?" The answer to this question provides the actor with specific actions. These actions along with their objectives ultimately express the conditions of the character.

## Actions

C.S. described the importance of the action in the following way:

An example: With what is Lady Macbeth occupied at the crucial point of her tragedy? The simple physical act of washing a gasp of blood off her hand.... In real life, as many of the great moments of emotion are signaled by some ordinary, small, natural movement. ... As a small physical act acquires an enormous inner meaning: the great tinner seeks an outlet in such an external act. The significance of physical acts in highly tragic or dramatic moments is... that the simpler they are, the easier it is to grasp them, the easier to allow them to lead you to your true objective.... By approaching emotion in this way, you avoid all forcing and your result is natural, intuitive and complete. (An Actor's Handbook 8)

Actions are the foundation of the C.S. system. Feelings are intangible and uncontrollable. But specific actions performed in a logical order will cause the actor to believe in the moment that he does them (An Actor Prepares 41, 62-64). An individual need look no further than his own body to understand this miracle. In order to digest a piece of food, the body undergoes several changes. First, it requires a series of functions to stimulate hunger. Then, in order to satisfy this natural urge, the person places food in his mouth and chews. After that, the esophagus aids in swallowing of the food. Then, the food is digested in the stomach. If a step is missed in this natural process, indigestion may occur.

The order that the body must have in the digestive process can be compared to the logic that the actor must have in his actions. If he misses an action, he will have a difficult time in believing in the moment. However, the rhythm of doing something in a logical manner propels him toward truth. Overall, an individual's very nature is one of sequential action and habitual pattern.

Of course, acting usually occurs in the presence of another actor; thus, verbal action is important in Stanislavski's technique. Here, the actor's goal is to use the words of the character in order to influence the other actor. He must convey to the other actor his feelings, thoughts and desires. This communication is achieved through a flexible voice and body. In general, communication is an action (Building a Character 115-126).

### Objectives

C.S. said the following about objectives:

Life, people, circumstances... constantly put up barriers... Each of these barriers presents us with the objective of getting through it. [...] Every objective must carry in itself the germs of action... You should not try to express the meaning of your objective in terms of an noun... but... always employ a verb.... [e.g. I wish or I wish to do] This objective engenders outbursts of desires for the purposes of creative inspiration.... It is important that an actor's objectives be in accordance with his capacities.... At first it is better to choose simple physical but attractive objectives.... Every physical objective will contain something of a psychological objective, they are indissolubly bound together. ... Do not try too hard to define the dividing line, ... go by your feelings always tipping the scale slightly in favor of the physical. (An Actor's Handbook 103)

There are two types of objectives. One objective aligns itself toward the physical while the other objective acclimates itself with the psychological. In each case, the objective aids the actor in feeling the part. It gives his actions a purpose (Creating 119-121). For example, if the objective is to open the door because the character wants to get the morning paper, there will be a certain way in which the action of opening the door is carried out. On the other hand, if the objective is to open the door because the character wants to see his girlfriend, the action of opening the door will have a different

specificity. Still, the quality of the objective and its inherent action depends upon the given circumstances (An Actor Prepares 42, 45).

## The Characters

### **Moisés Kaufman**

#### Defining the Given Circumstances

##### *How does he describe the play?*

The idea for The Laramie Project originated in my desire to learn more about why Matthew Shepard was murdered; about what happened that night; about the town of Laramie. The idea of listening to the citizen stalk really interested me. How is Laramie different from the rest of the country and how is it similar?

Shortly after the murder, I posed the question to my company, Tectonic Theater Project: What can we as theater artists do as a response to this incident? And, more concretely: Is there a medium that can contribute to the national dialogue on concurrent events?

These concerns fall squarely within Tectonic Theater Project's mission. Every project that we undertake as a company has two objectives: 1) to examine the subject matter at hand; and 2) to explore theatrical language and form. In an age when film and television are constantly redefining and refining their tools and devices, the theater has too often remained entrenched in the [nineteenth-century] tradition of formalism and naturalism. [...]

So in November 1998, four weeks after the murder of Matthew Shepard, nine members of Tectonic Theater Project and I traveled to Laramie Wyoming, to collect interviews that might become material for a play. Little did we know that we would devote two years of our lives to this project. We returned to Laramie six times over the course of the next year and a half and conducted over two hundred interviews. (Kaufman 11-12)

##### *Who is Moisés Kaufman?*

He is a founding member of the Tectonic Theater Project and the main playwright.

***What does he say?***

He says she is worried about the company trip to Wyoming. He says she does not know what chicken fried steak is. After spending a night in a Best Western, he says that he wants to stay in a Better Western.

***What do others say about him?***

One company member says that Moisés had called him to discuss the possibility of traveling to Wyoming. The company member says that Moisés had a quality of sadness to his voice.

***What is the scene title?***

The title of the scene is "Journal Entries."

***What is Kaufman doing?***

Moisés is planning the company's trip to Laramie. He describes the precautions that should be taken.

***When does the scene occur?***

The scene occurs right before the trip to Wyoming. It is six o'clock in the evening. Moisés has just finished speaking with his company.

***Where does the scene occur?***

The scene occurs in New York City. It occurs in his theatre office.

### ***Was there any supplemental information that would help the characterization?***

In Linda Rapp's article on the GLBTQ website, Kaufman mentions that he moved to California from Venezuela. He remarks that Venezuela was mostly a Catholic country; however, his family was Jewish. He states that he was gay and lived in an Orthodox Jewish community. In addition, after moving to Los Angeles, he became friends with many Latin-Americans. By and large, the article implies that Kaufman's artistic sensibilities were greatly influenced by his diverse cultural background.

The Tectonic Theater Project's homepage provides evidence that Kaufman was interested in multicultural themes. He had directed plays by Brecht, Beckett and Wilde. Besides Laramie, his play, Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde, also deals with homosexual identification within mainstream society.

In addition, I observed some pictures of Kaufman. He was moderately tall. He wore casual dress clothes. He seemed to be introspective, quiet and kind. He seemed to have a slow and weighted tempo. Overall, he had a sense of strength about him.

### **Past Present Future (Character Biography)**

#### ***What does my imagination add to the given circumstances?***

I am forty years of age. I was born in Venezuela; however, I grew up in the United States starting at the age of twelve. The only child of immigrant parents, I earned a college scholarship based on talent and minority status. Today, I work as a writer and director in Manhattan, New York. However, many projects take me away from the city.

I am an intellectual and an artist. I have great story told and influenced by my multicultural background. I have a passion for work and why people treat each other the way they do. Overall, I am a manager of people.

elling abilities that have been on to understand how people overall, I am an artistic

I am very concerned about the trip. Most of my company is going to risk bodily harm. Several precautions must be made. We must always keep in constant contact through cell phones. We should not go into areas that have not first been checked out through our liaison. Above all, we must be extremely kind and considerate when conducting an interview. All of these concerns need to be documented. They may be a good starting point for the play.

ay, and we could must always travel in pairs.

We should not go into

liaison. Above all, we must be

iew. All of these concerns need to be documented. They may be a good starting point for the play.

### **Magical-Actions**

#### ***What would I do if I were in this situation?***

I would record my thoughts. I would develop a list of items that needed to be done. I would celebrate the decision to go. I would try to grasp the magnitude of the situation.

tem that needed to be

d try to grasp the magnitude of the

### **Scene Objective**

#### ***What is my character's immediate goal?***

I must plan the perfect trip in order to keep everyone

safe.

## **Jonas Slonaker**

### **Defining the Given Circumstances**

#### ***How does he describe the play?***

Not applicable.

#### ***Who is Jonas Slonaker?***

Jonas is a gay man. He is forty-two years of age.

#### ***What does he say?***

He says that he met some people in a Denver bar who had discouraging words about Laramie. He says he met one man that loved Laramie. He says that people should live where they want to live. He says that the philosophy of live and let live is "crap." He says that the people of Laramie did not change despite the murder. He says no laws were passed to protect homosexuals.

#### ***What do others say about him?***

Not applicable.

#### ***What are the scene titles?***

The title of the first scene is "Easier Said Than Done." The title of the second scene is "Live and Let Live." The title of the third scene is "Epilogue."

#### ***What is Slonaker doing?***

In "Easier Said Than Done," Jonas describes how difficult it is to live in Laramie and how others relate to the town. In "Live and Let Live," he describes the life

philosophy of the area. In "Epilogue," he describes how the people of Laramie reacted to the murder and how they did not change their attitudes.

***When do the scenes occur?***

All the scenes occur in the morning and one year after the murder.

***Where do the scenes occur?***

All the scenes occur in Jonas' pasture.

***Was there any supplemental information that would help the characterization?***

There was none.

**Past Present Future (Character Biography)**

***What does my imagination add to the given circumstances?***

I grew up as a teenager in rural Illinois. My parents were dairy farmers. Every summer, I would visit my grandparents in Wyoming. They were ranchers. I loved riding the horses. It was a wonderful place to visit. As a young adult, I lived in Chicago for a few years. I went to a community college while living there. Later, I moved to Laramie and took over my grandparent's farm after they passed on. I have lived in Laramie for the past seven years. Currently, I am forty-two years old.

Life has been very difficult in Laramie. I have been threatened physically as well as verbally. I am extremely lonely. I have not felt comfortable in finding a companion in this area. I think it is scary as well as exciting that some people from New York have come to do a play about this situation. I feel very comfortable speaking with these

people. I must make sure they know exactly what it is like to live here. Maybe they can do something about this situation.

### **Magic If-Actions**

#### ***What would I do if I were in this situation?***

I would plead my case. I would yearn for better conditions. I would deride the people who have made my life difficult. I would ask for help.

### **Scene Objective**

#### ***What is my character's immediate goal?***

I must convince the interviewer that it is difficult to live in Laramie.

## **Doug Laws**

### **Defining the Given Circumstances**

#### ***How does he describe the play?***

Not applicable.

#### ***Who is Doug Laws?***

He is the Stake Ecclesiastical leader for the Mormon Church. He is a professor at the University of Wyoming. He is around fifty years of age.

#### ***What does he say?***

He says that the Mormons irritate people because of their strong religious beliefs. He says that the leaders of the Mormon Church have direct communication with God.

He says that God has set boundaries and that scripture proves these limitations. He says that marriages should be between a man and a woman.

***What do others say about him?***

Not applicable.

***What is the scene title?***

The title of the scene is "Lifestyle 1."

***What is Laws doing?***

He is defending Mormon theology.

***When does the scene occur?***

The scene occurs on a Tuesday evening.

***Where does the scene occur?***

The scene occurs in the Unitarian fellowship hall.

***Was there any supplemental information that would help the characterization?***

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' website says that they believe in modern-day prophets. These prophets have a special connection with God much like Moses did in the Old Testament. There is one prophet (president) that leads the church. He serves in that capacity until his death. This position is chosen from a group of members called the Apostles. This is an important governing body.

## **Past Present Future (Character Biography)**

### ***What does my imagination add to the given circumstances?***

I am fifty years old. I was born and reared in Utah. I received a master's degree from the University of Utah in religious studies. After college I took a job with the Mormon Church. I have been married for twenty-five years. I have six children from that relationship. My job transferred me to Wyoming four years ago.

There is a town hall meeting that is going to occur this evening. We are going to discuss how the religious community should get involved with this situation. My supervisor has instructed me to say that the church is not getting involved. I must be firm as well as delicate in explaining our position. I know several of the local pastors. Most of them are good guys. However, some of them have been quite unfair in their statements about this great institution of faith. I must defend the church's principles.

## **Magic if-Actions**

### ***What would I do if I were in this situation?***

I would degrade the weak philosophy of the other religion. I would promote my religion. I would stir up the other preachers.

## **Scene Objective**

### ***What is my character's immediate goal?***

I must defend the doctrine of the church.

## **Anonymous**

### **Defining the Given Circumstances**

#### ***How does he describe the play?***

Not applicable.

#### ***Who is Anonymous?***

He is a friend of Aaron McKinney. He works for the rail roads.

#### ***What does he say?***

He says Aaron was a good kid and that he liked Aaron. He says she was shocked that Aaron would commit a heinous crime. He says that Aaron had an illegitimate child. He says that Aaron lived in a trailer on the outskirts of town. He says Aaron was a scared kid just trying to fit in.

#### ***What do others say about him?***

Not applicable.

#### ***What is the scene title?***

The title of the scene is "McKinney and Henderson."

#### ***What is Anonymous doing?***

He is defending Aaron.

#### ***When does the scene occur?***

The scene occurs in the late evening.

***Where does the scene occur?***

The scene occurs in the dark. The scene occurs outside a favorite tavern.

***Was there any supplemental information that would help the characterization?***

There was none.

**Past Present Future (Character Biography)**

***What does my imagination add to the given circumstances?***

My name is Bob McKenzie. I am twenty-six years old. I was born and reared in Laramie. I was one of four kids. I grew up in poverty. After high school, I took various manual labor jobs. Currently, I work for the railroad.

I do not want anybody to know that I support Aaron. Several of my co-workers have made unkind remarks about him. I might lose my job if they knew I liked him. However, I feel sorry for the kid. Those guys from New York approached me the other day and asked if I would share my thoughts. I told them I would think about it. By accident, I saw them again at the bar. I saw the locals making fun of Aaron. I need to see them.

**Magic if-Actions**

***What would I do if I were in this situation?***

I would plead Aaron's case. I would downplay his violent qualities. I would charm the interviewers.

## **Scene Objective**

### ***What is my character's immediate goal?***

I must convince the interviewer that Aaron was a good kid.

## **Governor Jim Geringer**

### **Defining the Given Circumstances**

#### ***How does he describe the play?***

Not applicable.

#### ***Who is Governor Jim Geringer?***

He is forty-five years of age. He is a Republican. He is up for re-election.

#### ***What does he say?***

He says he is disturbed by the murder of Matthew Shepard. He says the citizens of Wyoming should make sure that one group does not receive special rights over another group. He says more information is needed to determine if the Shepard incident was a hate crime.

#### ***What do others say about him?***

A reporter says she has not pushed for hate crime legislation.

#### ***What is the scene title?***

The title of the scene is "The Gem City of the Plains."

### ***What is Geringer doing?***

He is talking to the local and national media about the murder investigation.

### ***When does the scene occur?***

The scene occurs three days after the discovery of Matthew Shepard.

### ***Where does the scene occur?***

The scene occurs on the steps of the capital.

### ***Was there any supplemental information that would help the characterization?***

Jim Geringer was born in Wheatland, Wyoming. He was raised on a family farm. He spent time working for the Air Force and NASA. After that, he went back to raising cattle. He and his wife had five children. His family continued to run the farm after he entered politics. Before becoming Governor of Wyoming, he served in the state senate for six years ([National Governors Association](#)).

### **Past Present Future (Character Biography)**

#### ***What does my imagination add to the given circumstances?***

I was born and reared in Wyoming. I was one of ten children. My parents were farmers. I remember every morning having to get up and feed the cows and chickens prior to school. Despite those chores and the ones I had after school, I still had time to socialize.

In high school, I was class president and valedictorian. After that, I left home for adventure. I received my education at the Air Force Academy and later went to work for NASA. Despite enjoying those fields, I still had a yearning to raise cattle. So, I bought

my family's sold farmland and went into the cattle-trade business. After I built up a lucrative business, I entered politics.

I have just come from a staff meeting. During that meeting, we discussed how to deal with this situation. The main topics of conversation were the murder investigation, police control and media access. I am very concerned with the fallout of this heinous crime. I need to remain calm while discussing this delicate situation.

### **Magical Actions**

#### ***What would I do if I were in this situation?***

I would condemn the violent act. I would encourage the masses. I would measure my speech.

### **Scene Objective**

#### ***What is my character's immediate goal?***

I must control the media.

## **Detective Rob DeBree**

### **Defining the Given Circumstances**

#### ***How does he describe the play?***

Not applicable.

#### ***Who is Rob DeBree?***

He is a detective for the Albany County Sheriff's department. He is around forty years of age.

### ***What does he say?***

He says he was disturbed by the injuries that Matthew sustained. He says that he wants to make sure that McKinney and Henderson do not get away with murder. He says that he learned that gay people live in fear. He says that it is wrong that people have to live in fear. He says he lost friends after he became an advocate of gay rights. He says he is not bothered by losing friends. He believes that defending the position of homosexuals is the ethical choice.

### ***What do others say about him?***

Not applicable.

### ***What are the scene titles?***

The title of the first scene is "Seeing Matthew." The title of the second scene is "Angels in America."

### ***What is Deb doing?***

In "Seeing Matthew," he describes the details of the investigation. In "Angels in America" he explains what he learned from the experience.

### ***When do the scenes occur?***

The first scene occurs about a year and a half after the murder. The second scene occurs during the trial of Aaron McKinney. A recess break has occurred.

### **Where do the scenes occur?**

The first scene occurs in his office. The second scene occurs in the courtroom lobby.

### **Was there any supplemental information that would help the characterization?**

The fierce devotion of DeBree to the case of Matthew Shepard is revealed in Loffreda's Losing Matt Shepard. This book describes DeBree's environment, his physical nature and his emotional connection to the case. Loffreda describes her initial encounter with DeBree:

Rob [...] looksexactlylikeaWyomingcop,aproudlyprofessional, toughlybuiltmanwhospendshistimeoffishingandhunting.[...]Atfirst glance,thedécorwouldsuittheassumptionsofthelaziestout-of-towner: theantleredheadofabuckadornsonewall,andawell-seasonedsaddle liesonthefloor.[...]Butlookaround,andyou'llseethemore complicatedtruthaboutRob.Carefullydrawnchartsandtimelineshang onbulletinboards,detailingopencases,andthephotographs ofmurder victims[...]YoucanseeinthesethingsbothRob'smeticulous investigativediligenceandintense,abiding sympathyhefeelsforthe victimsofthemurdersitishislottounderstand.(145)

The interview further describes why DeBree was emotionally connected to Matthew. He held Matthew's hand in the hospital. He developed a closer relationship with Mr. and Mrs. Shepard. The evidence overwhelmingly proved that Matthew had been tortured. Also, DeBree learned that homosexualsweremistreated. In general, the interview reveals how DeBree was disturbed by the whole investigation (145-161).

## **Past Present Future (Character Biography)**

### ***What does my imagination add to the given circumstances?***

I was born and reared in Wyoming. I have a younger brother and a younger sister. My dad was a police officer, and my mother was a special education teacher. I went to college and received a degree in criminal sociology. After school, I became involved in law enforcement with the intent on becoming a detective.

I was leery at first when I heard that this theatre company wanted to interview me. However, after learning about their perspective, I have changed my mind. I believe that people need to know the viciousness of the crime. They need to know that Matthew was tortured because he was a gay man.

## **Magical Actions**

### ***What would I do if I were in this situation?***

I would educate the interviewer. I would drive my point home.

## **Scene Objective**

### ***What is my character's immediate goal?***

I must convince the interviewer that Matthew Shepard was viciously murdered and that homosexuals need protection.

## **Fred Phelps**

### **Defining the Given Circumstances**

#### ***How does he describe the play?***

Not applicable.

#### ***Who is Fred Phelps?***

He is a minister from Kansas. He is in his sixties.

#### ***What does he say?***

He says that God is wrathful. He says that God hates homosexuals. He says that the homosexual lifestyle is silly. He says that he has been ordained to tell the people of their sins.

#### ***What do others say about him?***

A group of protesters expect him to be loud and aggressive.

#### ***What is the scene title?***

The title of the scene is "Snow."

#### ***What is Phelps doing?***

He is protesting.

#### ***When does the scene occur?***

The scene occurs during the funeral of Matthew Shepard.

**Where does the scene occur?**

The scene occurs somewhere outside the church.

**Was there any supplemental information that would help the characterization?**

In a letter to the editor of The Topeka Capital-Journal Online, Mark Phelps said the following about his father:

I believe in God and the Bible, and my father's behavior doesn't fit the description of behavior that would show in the life of one who loves God; behavior characteristics such as Love, Joy, Peace, Long suffering, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, Self-control. Instead, my father's behavior characterizes, I believe, Hate, Outbursts of Wrath, Contention, Jealousy, Vengefulness, Misery, Harshness, and Selfish ambition. He mis-states the truth about his own behavior, about others, about the Bible, with apparent ease and regularity. He behaves with viciousness the likes of which I have never seen. He accepts no genuine accountability in his life and is subject to no one. His lifestyle betrays the sacred trust of what a pastor, husband, father and grandfather should be. I suppose if a comparison were made between the life of Jesus Christ and my father, there would not be much to compare. He can seem very intimidating. He can use foul language and come across with a booming voice to the community, but the truth is, like the Wizard of Oz, when Toto pulls the curtain back, instead of this big powerful individual, it's only a small, pathetic old man.

In addition, I observed some pictures of Phelps. He carried banners that degraded gays and lesbians. He had children carry these signs. He was always wearing a hat of some kind. It was usually a cowboy hat. He was a tall, gangly man with wide tense shoulders. His facial features were distinct, and his eyes were penetrating.

## **Past Present Future (Character Biography)**

### ***What does my imagination add to the given circumstances?***

I was born in rural Mississippi. My father was very demanding. He was an alcoholic. I was the youngest of four children. My family attended a Pentecostal Baptist Church. Out of guilt, I obeyed my father's every wish. My father was emotionally and physically abusive.

I worked at Kmart for four years prior to seminary. After seminary, my father died. Next, I established my own church and took law classes at a local college. Today, I lead a small Baptist church. Our goal is to stop putting sin in the name of Jesus Christ. Homosexuality is one of those sins.

Today, my group has traveled to Laramie where we plan to protest the funeral of Matthew Shepard. The media has made his image into a glorious one. It is the wrong image to follow because it will lead people to hell. Shepard is not a martyr but a sinner. He is a sinner that brought this wrath upon himself. He is a deviant that resided with deviants.

## **Magical Actions**

### ***What would I do if I were in this situation?***

I would incite the crowd. I would defend myself. I would harass the opposition.

## **Scene Objective**

### ***What is my character's immediate goal?***

I must change the "hearts and minds" of the people.

## **Dennis Shepard**

### **Defining the Given Circumstances**

#### ***How does he describe the play?***

Not applicable.

#### ***Who is Dennis Shepard?***

He is the father of Matthew Shepard. He is in his forties. He is a native of Wyoming.

#### ***What does he say?***

He says his son was a winner. He says Matt was his hero. He says he wondered how Matt would have changed the world had he lived. He says Matt loved nature. He says he shared nature with Matt. He says his grief was lessened with the knowledge that Matt had God with him. He adds that he was proud of his son and that he will never forgive McKinney. He says that in the name of Matthew, the death penalty will not be pursued.

#### ***What are the scene titles?***

The title of the scene is "Dennis Shepard's Statement."

#### ***What is Shepard doing?***

He is speaking to the court about his son and the tragic circumstances.

#### ***When does the scene occur?***

It occurs before the sentencing of the suspects.

***Where does the scene occur?***

It occurs in the courthouse.

***Was there any supplemental information that would help the characterization?***

There was none.

**Past Present Future (Character Biography)**

***What does my imagination add to the given circumstances?***

I was born in Oklahoma, the older of two children. My mother was a homemaker, and my father was a civil engineer. I lived in a middle class neighborhood, attended college and received a business degree. I married my college sweetheart, and we moved to Wyoming. This occurred after I received a job in the oil industry. I have four children. One of them was Matthew.

Matthew was brash but also lovable and charming. I had limited conversations about his homosexuality. I was never ashamed that my son was gay, but I also had a difficult time relating to him. In order to alleviate this strain, I took him fishing on occasions. I got to know that Matthew enjoyed nature as much as I did. However, I wish I had spent more time with him.

This experience has been the most difficult thing I have ever gone through. I doubt I will go through anything this difficult ever again. The family and I have done a lot of "soul-searching" during this time. We have decided that we must do everything we can to make sure Matthew did not die in vain; therefore, we will not seek the death penalty.

### **Magicif-Actions**

#### ***Whatwouldldoiflwereinthissituation?***

Iwouldmaintainmycomposure.IwouldglorifyMatthew .Iwouldthreaten  
McKinney.Iwould“letMcKinneyoffthehook.”

### **SceneObjective**

#### ***Whatismycharacter’simmediategoal?***

ImustmakeastandforMatthew’ssoul.

## CHAPTER FIVE: REHEARSAL

After a preliminary study of the characters, the next step is to rehearse the play. At this point in the acting process, the actor transforms his image of the character into a physical being. This event occurs in the presence of other actors and with the support of the director. During this collaborative experience, the director guides the actor on where to place his focus. What deserves concentration in the scene varies according to the impressions of the artists and the demands of the play.

Interpretations of the play and character are expanded during rehearsals. Unlike other cases where material is reviewed and then tested, the performance project continues to develop as more information is introduced. This common practice occurred during Laramie rehearsals. New character details as well as other fine points about the Stanislavski system emerged. Those terms were Plasticity of Motion, Communion, Improvisation, Appraisal of the Facts, Physical Characterization, Subtext, Adaptation and Actions and Objectives.<sup>1</sup>

### Plasticity of Motion

C. S. ascribed to the notion that a agile body aided the actor in character expression. To that end, he studied the human anatomy. From those studies, he

---

<sup>1</sup> These terms are defined so the actor can compare and contrast the work of Stanislavski to the exploration that occurred during rehearsals. Even though some of these ideas were not consciously applied to character development, their influence was felt throughout the process.

developed exercises that borrowed elements from acrobatics, gymnastics and dance. For example, he used tumbling in order to teach the actor how to reach for an emotional moment without strain. Another exercise consisted of the actor working at the ballet bar. The aim here was to elongate the actor's muscles in order to expand his range of motion. Still, another exercise had the actor imagine that mercury was moving through his body. The purpose of this exercise was twofold. One intention was to teach the actor movement efficiency. The other function was to help the actor develop a connection between the inner image and its external expression. All in all, C.S. recognized the importance of movement training in preparation for character creation (Building 36-81).

### **Communion**

C.S. had a thorough understanding of the communication process. He said that people were always in communion with something. For example, right now as you read this paper, you are thinking about something. It may be that you are fascinated with what you are reading, or it may be that you are concerned with what you are going to eat for lunch. In any case, something holds your attention.

C.S. incorporated this human experience into his acting method. He said that actors should direct their attention toward the objects of the play. These objects could be either real or imagined as long as they connected the actor to the world of the play. However, the main focus of attention should be on the actors. He said, "If actors really meant to hold the attention of a large audience they must make every effort to

maintain an uninterrupted exchange of feelings, thoughts and actions among themselves" (An Actor Prepares 197).

C.S. introduced this concept through an exercise where two actors faced each other. In this relationship, they concentrated on each other's physical presence as well as each other's internal presence. For the physical focus, they chose a body part to observe and react to. For the internal exploration, they "sensed" each other through their eyes. Through these activities, a connection was created.

C.S. advocated the participation of the body in the communication event. He demonstrated the body's importance to the communication process by binding an actor to a chair. In this position, the actor could not move; he could not speak; he could barely hear. Then, he was instructed to communicate what he was feeling. After going through this ordeal, the actor realized the importance of physical expression. Without his limbs, he was helpless in expressing his inner images. In summary, C.S. established the idea of communion in the acting process (193-222).

### **Improvisation**

C.S. used improvisation to teach his method. Early on, he discovered that excessive table-work stunted the actor's creative functions, but improvisation "[gave] a freshness and an immediacy to a performance." In other words, improvisation stimulated the actor's imagination and simultaneously provided a physical outlet (An Actor's Handbook 78).

In order to achieve the full benefit of improvisation, C.S. said that the actor must "[place] into action all the casual desires and objectives that well up inside [him]." That

meanstheactormustacknowledgeallofhisimpulses.These impulsesandtheir accompanyingfeelingsareinfluencedbytheperformingspace,theactor'sattitude,the otheractorsandthecharacter'scircumstances.Allof theseobjectsinformtherealityof themoment(Creating 96).

C.S.describedan improvisationheparticipatedin during rehearsalfor Griboyedov'sWoefromWit.Beforebeginningtheimprovisation,hejustifiedhis character'spresenceattherehearsalspace.Accordingto theplay,hischaracterwasa loverofart.Therefore,itwaseasytobelievethathis characterwouldspendtimeatthe MoscowArtTheatre.Afterthisvalidation,C.S.began tointeractwithanactorthat irritatedhim.Fortunewouldhaveitthatthecharacteralsointeractswithsomeonewho irritateshim.Stanislavskirecognizedthismomentasafusionofthecharacter'sfeelings withtheactor'sfeelings.

As theimprovisationproceeded,C.S.greetedhisfellow actorwiththe mannerismsofhischaracter.Thisgreetingfeltfalse becauseitwasinspiredbyan intellectualinterpretationratherthananaturalstimulus.Inordertoovercomethis unmotivatedandmanufacturedbehavior,hewaiteduntiltheotheractor"moved"him. ThisapproachfreedC.S.fromhiscontrivedmovements.Henowhadtheconfidenceto allowthemomenttohappen.Afterawhile,theotheractor'sbehaviorbecameso repulsivetoC.S.thathebegantonaturallyexternalizehisfeelings.

Stanislavski'sexperimentwithimprovisationcontinuedwithanotheractor.Once again,hewasbotheredbytheactor'sbehavior.Thisparticularactorwantedtodiscuss whatC.S.calleda"stupidtheme."However,insteadof respondingtotheactorinthe wayhemighthavedoneinreallife,hereactedinthe wayhischaracterwould.Inother

words, instead of scolding the actor, C.S. placated him. In this example, the outward expression of the character was shaped by the play's given circumstances; however, the stimulus for the movement came from Stanislavski's relationship with the other actor (Creating 96-101).

### **Appraisal of the Facts**

The appraisal of the facts is an emotional analysis of the material. It advances the connection between the actor and the given circumstances. In this type of analysis the actor asks questions about the character's situation. These questions begin with the keyword why. The fundamental questions are why is the character saying these lines, and why is the character behaving this way. These questions compel the actor to dig deeper into the meaning of the role. They inspire him to ask other questions, which eventually lead him to a better appreciation of the part (Creating 34-43, 181-183).

The questions and their answers originate from the actor's point of view. In turn, this personal analysis aids the actor in feeling the part. That means that the actor begins to empathize with the character's situation. C.S. noted that empathy was important to the creation process. He said, "The actor may feel the situation of the person in a part so keenly... he actually put himself in the place of that person." Moreover, this empathy depends upon the actor's experience and imagination. The more varied these human qualities are, the easier it is for the actor to establish an original and meaningful connection with the character (An Actor's Handbook 56).

## Physical Characterization

Achieving physical transformation was an essential element of the C.S. system. He demonstrated how a character could appear in his body by making a simple physical adjustment. For example, he acquired the quality of slyness when he squinted one eye and opened wide the other. Also, he demonstrated how the whole body could be intuitively informed by one physical adjustment. That means that other parts of his body, such as his arms and legs, developed a new posture in response to his intentional adjustment. This effect occurred after he adjusted his upper lip to make his face look like an Englishman with "rodent-like front teeth."

C.S. said that during this transformation something happened to his psychology that he could not fully explain, but in some fashion his "inner faculties responded to the external image" that he had technically created. In other words, he began to have a different attitude toward his environment (Building \_\_\_ 8-9).

## Subtext

The subtext is the meaning beneath the words. It determines how an actor phrases a line. It reveals true feelings. For example, an individual may say they are doing well; however, in actuality they may be feeling terrible. In this situation, the subtext might read, "I really hate my life." On the other hand, the individual may say they are doing well and actually mean it. Still, the actor needs to specify the subtext because different varieties of satisfaction exist. For certain, winning the lottery generates a different pleasure than drinking flavored coffee.

Also, the prepared subtext of a line changes according to the moment. For example, if a stage prop unexpectedly drops on the floor while a character is speaking, his subtext adapts to that falling object. In addition, the specificity of the adjustment depends upon character. For example, the character might not want to be interrupted so when the object falls she continues to talk but now in a forcible manner. On the other hand, the character might be easily startled so when the object drops, he stops speaking and jumps. All in all, the subtext not only incorporates the character's perspective but also the immediate stage events (Building 113-115).

### **Adaptation**

Adaptation occurs in life. Whether it is the adjustment to a new job or to a new friend, adaptation is prevalent. C. S. recognized this natural occurrence and applied it to his acting philosophies. He said that adaptation requires an actor to be aware of the other actors on stage as well as to the environment of the play. After all, one not only responds to live objects but to inanimate objects as well. For example, a cluttered room and a sparse room would make different impressions on the actor. However, when dealing with other actors, C. S. said that the actor must be ready to change tactics in order to get his point across. The greater the obstacle that the actor encounters, the more precise he must be with his tactics. For example, an actor that must frighten another actor must have some good scare tactics at his disposal. Otherwise, the dramatic tension in the scene is weakened. On the whole, adaptation steers the actor toward enacting truthful behavior on the stage (An Actor Prepares 223-243).

### Actions and Objectives

C.S. realized that a purpose-filled action in response to the given circumstances of the play created organic behavior on the stage. He demonstrated this phenomenon by tricking his students into performing actions without their knowledge of the exercise. In one example, he invited an actress onto the stage to do a scene. However, she (in her own right) had to wait while he pretended to go through his notes. He then informed her that she had just participated in a scene. He explained that her simple objective and its inherent action created real behavior in her. In this classroom analogy, the circumstances involved an amateur acting student waiting to do a scene with a master teacher (35-36).

In another demonstration of his method, he told the same student that she would be removed from the class if she did not find a jewel that was hidden on the stage. The gullible actress taking this as a serious threat began to truly search for the ornament. She was so consumed with the action and the reason for doing it that she did not notice her interesting and truthful behavior (38-40).

### Director's Concept

A central part of rehearsals dealt with the inherent Brechtian conventions. Past productions may have presented Laramie without any changes to the original script, while other theatres may have altered the playwright's original designs. My director, Belinda Boyd chose a balance between the two. In order to attain a harmonious

relationship between the play's original conventions and the audience's theatrical values, script adjustments were performed.

One modification eliminated the role of the narrator and his continuous character introductions. This removal allowed for a more continuous flow of action. That means that the alienation factor was lessened. Also, the actor testimonies were deleted. Boyd realized that there was sufficient dialogue in place for the audience to recognize that this was a play about actors and characters. In other words, the "Street Scene" effect remained. Also, scenes were edited and deleted. This choice reduced the number of locales and lessened the possibility for audience confusion.

Boyd complimented the script changes with familiar staging practices. For example, Boyd had the characters address each other rather than the audience. This decision returned the fourth wall convention of the realistic theatre. Moreover, it enhanced the emotional connections among the cast. Still, Boyd allowed some scenes to remain in their original direct address style. Placing actors in the audience gave these scenes a physical realization. In addition, Brechtian practices such as the slide show and actor-visibility remained intact. All in all, this production adjusted to the audience's naturalistic sensibilities without totally disregarding the nonrealistic structure.

The thematic questions of the play justified the above changes. The questions were how did this tragic event affect those involved, what did this experience teach them and more directly, how did they interpret this experience?

The Tectonic actors answered those questions by creating a nontraditional play. Instead of following a realistic format where actors disappear into characters, they

created a play where the actors explain their feelings about the situation. For all intents and purposes, they personalized the information in a way that suited their artistic needs.

Boyd recognized this personal fusion not only on a conceptual level but also on a practical level. Upon gathering for the first time, the director told the cast the importance of expanding their physical acting skills. The basis for this statement was that within the play each actor must perform numerous characters and shift from role to role very quickly. With these conditions present, the actor should be able to promptly access an array of physical traits.

Another reason for the cast to have a receptive body was that a deep bond had occurred between the members of the acting company and the residents of the town. These relationships had to be embodied on the stage. In order for all these conditions to occur, the director introduced a sequence of exercises that the cast performed every night before rehearsal. Here is a brief explanation of those exercises.

### **The Warm-Up**

The first part of the warm-up focused on the individual actor. It began with the actor lying on the floor. In this supine position, the director guided the actor in performing a series of free-flowing isolations, organic sounds and deep breathing techniques. The purpose of these activities was to teach movement efficiency as well as physical and vocal expansion.

After exploring their own physical instrument, the cast was instructed to rise to their feet. Since the body tends to press against gravity and this pushing can generate tension, the cast was taught to stand efficiently. The director encouraged this process

by instructing the actors to breathe deeply and release their muscles while rising to a standing position. The common phrase used by the director was "find the relief" in the moment.

Next, the cast was invited to explore the rehearsal space while spontaneously changing directions and manners of walking. For example, the actors might move to the left while only walking on their heels. This part of the warm-up had two goals. One purpose was to develop space awareness. After all, the actors would be performing on a multilevel platform. The other aim was to prepare the actors for the multiple characters they would be portraying.

Next, each actor approached a partner and made physical contact. The two actors melded with each other while moving in different directions. The flow, shape and pattern of the movement depended upon each actor's ability to sense the weight and breath of the other. This section of the warm-up served in creating the type of ensemble that the script demanded.

The final phase in this group exercise was for an actor to follow the energy of another. One actor placed his hand in the air and moved it randomly around the space. The partner then followed the direction of the hand. This process required the partner to involve his whole body. Then, the actors changed tasks with each other. The follower became the leader, and the leader became the follower. After a while, the actors became so skilled at this exchange of energies that no one knew who was following and who was leading. This exercise further developed the communication levels between the actors. The warm-up concluded after the director instructed the actors to find a natural stopping point.

## Character Rehearsals

An organic approach to the material continued during the initial week of blocking. Movement patterns were not predetermined but rather developed through improvisation. With scripts in hands, the cast moved when, where and how they wanted. This rehearsal technique allowed the actors to incorporate their own movements. This was important because a forced blocking plan might have created a layer of artificial action. Even more so this method preserved the connections that the warm-up had developed.

After blocking the play, character development became the focus. Each actor had specific issues that needed to be resolved in order for their character to take shape. These challenges varied with each actor and with each character. For example, one role may have needed further development in regard to the internal aspects while another role may have needed further development in regard to the external features. My issues in character development are revealed in the following order: Moisés Kaufman, Jonas Slonaker, Doug Laws, Anonymous, Detective Rob DeBree, Governor Jim Geringer, Reverend Fred Phelps and Dennis Shepard.

### **Moisés Kaufman**

The first role to embody was Moisés Kaufman. Kaufman was the director, main playwright and founder of the theatre company. He appears at the beginning of the play and speaks about the company's upcoming trip to Laramie.

The first issue to resolve concerned the setting. The text offered little information on when or where the scene occurred, so the locale had to be created. After considerable thought, the director decided Kaufman had recently finished listening to

sometapedinterviewsandnowhewasrecordinghithoughts.Thesethoughtsdealtwiththeimpendingtour.ThisdirectorialideainspiredmyimaginationtobelievethatKaufmanwasinhisNewYorktheatreoffice.Also,Idecidedthatthetimewasaroundfiveo'clockonaFridayevening.

Anotherchallengeconcernedtheemotionalstateofthecharacter.Thedirectorsaidmyconnectiontothetextwaslimited.ThisstatementmeantthatIneededtoreasonwhymycharacterwasspeaking.Withthedirector'sassistance,IeterminedthatKaufmanwasexcitedaboutcreatingtheplay;however,hewasalsofrightenedaboutplacinghiscompanyinanunstableituation.Thisinformationhelpedmepersonalizethetext.

WhileKaufman'scircumstanceswerebeingdeveloped,hisphysicaltraitswerealsobeingformed.ThedirectorandIwantedtofindawalkthatwasdifferentfrommyown.ShesuggestedItakelongerstridesandplacemyweightmoretowardstheinsidesofmyfeet.Thisphysicaladjustmenteliminatedmyhabitof“bouncing”whileIwalked.Thisnewwayofmovingmademefeelconfident.

Alongwithdevelopingthephysicallifeofthecharacter,Ialsohadtoreevaluatemyspeech.IwaspronouncingsomewordswithaSouthernregionalism.However,aftersomedaysofpractice,Iovercame thisissueandcreatedacharacterthatspokewithastandardaccent.

## **Jonas Slonaker**

Jonas Slonaker wasthenextcharacter to create. Hewas a homosexual who lived in Laramie. During his interview, he speaks about his daily struggles.

Once again, the director and I had to define the setting. After careful deliberation, we determined that Jonas was walking in a field. This new idea inspired my imagination. I visualized a sunny afternoon. I fancied that the grass was “lumpy” and that there were “snowcapped” mountains in the background. In turn, these images made me feel “free.” They transformed my movement into this space. I now walked with longer strides. Overall, these new circumstances helped me believe in the moment.

During another physical exploration, the director remarked that I had been using my arms too frequently. In order to combat this habit and create a new form of expression, she suggested I concentrate on my legs. This physical variation was difficult since it was an unfamiliar movement. Still, I searched for how my legs might express what I was feeling. I would push my hips forward when I felt defiant. I would shuffle my legs back and forth when I felt frustrated. I would place my weight on one leg when I felt disappointment.

After many days of practice, I developed a variety of mannerisms with my legs. The characterization was completed with the addition of a high-pitched voice. This vocal change along with the lower body adjustment made me feel young and effeminate.

While creating the external form of the character, the director assisted me in developing the character’s emotional state. At the beginning of rehearsals, my character lacked the anger and frustration that the circumstances implied. In order to stimulate turmoil in me, the director asked me to consider what it might feel like if I lived in an area where I received verbal and physical abuse due to my sexual orientation. This proposition disgusted me.

In order to advance this feeling, I thought about what it would be like to live under these conditions. I imagined that I would stay at home more often. I imagined that whenever I went out I would cautiously observe my surroundings. Some days, I could envision myself avoiding confrontational moments. On other occasions, I could see myself facing the enemy head on. Overall, I thought about how lonely this type of existence would be.

With this review, a certain amount of empathy developed for Jonas. However, there were individual lines that needed justification. One line read, "And there would be times I would go down to Denver and [...] people would ask where I was from and I'd say, Laramie, Wyoming" (Kaufman 33-34). According to a directorial note, this experience in a Denver bar had embarrassed Jonas. Yet his general description did not help me understand the moment. Therefore, I needed to appraise the situation. An example of that analysis follows in the paragraphs below.

Jonas went to Denver in search of friends. He spent the whole morning preparing for the occasion. He bought some new clothes, and he cleaned his car. He made the trip to Denver.

After having a drink at the bar, he worked up his courage to talk to the man sitting at the other end. The conversation was pleasant until Jonas was asked where he lived. After Jonas told the stranger that Laramie was his home, the man laughed. He could not believe that Jonas would live in a town filled with "rednecks." Jonas casually agreed with him.

Jonas spoke with some other people. Once again the conversation of residence came up, and once again, the strangers could not understand how Jonas could live in such an area. Jonas felt embarrassed and a little bit angry.

This imagined story based on the facts of the play drew me closer to Jonas. I too, have had my hometown ridiculed. I have even had my state criticized. On some occasions, I have agreed with the comments of others, but on other occasions, I have disagreed with the comments of others. Overall, I have experienced a variety of criticisms about my hometown.

The above analysis helped me clarify Jonas' shame. Moreover, the analysis inspired me to not only imagine the details of the situation but to also search for my own relative experiences. All in all, the combination of my imagination, experiences and the play's circumstances helped me acquire a personal connection to the line.

After finding a personal connection to the line, I started its meaning in verbal terms. I chose the phrase, "Geez, it was so uncomfortable to tell these people I was from Laramie." This was the subtext for the line.

Another director's note stated that I should display excitement when Jonas describes the individual who loved Laramie. Once again, I needed to imagine the circumstances that brought Jonas to this particular joy.

I decided that Jonas had taken another trip to Denver. However, this time he went to a different bar, and this time he was apprehensive about the situation. He even considered lying about where he lived. Fortunately, he met a guy whose I deemed trustworthy. When the "hometown question" was asked, Jonas told the truth.

Surprisingly, the man was thrilled that Jonas lived in Laramie. Both men spent several

minutes talking about Laramie. They both discovered that they knew the same landmarks. This thrilled Jonas; a friend was discovered.

By imagining the above scenario, the line acquired emotional clarity. I felt a quality of happiness that inspired the subtext, "You can not believe how wonderful this place makes me feel!"

The last director's note stated that Jonas should be disappointed when he says, "But it's easier said than done, of course" (34). In order for me to comprehend the sadness that Jonas might have felt during that moment, I studied the whole passage.

In the prior sentence, Jonas says, "I mean, imagine if more gay people stayed in small towns" (34). This line means that Jonas dreams of living with people who share his values. He wishes to live where persecution does not exist. I played the action, to yearn. However, he knows the reality of the situation. He understands the daily struggle that a gay man would encounter in this place. I played the action, to surrender.

The playing of these two juxtaposed actions created dissatisfaction in me. It was similar to the sudden displeasure that a sports fan experiences when a great play is called back due to a penalty, or to the abrupt sadness that an individual feels when he or she gets rejected for a date. Taken as a whole, this "roller coaster effect" helped me feel the sadness in the line. This new perception led me to choose the subtext, "God! It's tough here!"

## Doug Laws

The next character to give form to was Doug Laws. He was the Stake Ecclesiastical leader for the Mormon Church in Wyoming. Also, he was a professor at the University of Wyoming. During his appearance, Laws speaks about the strict rules of the Mormon sect.

After reading the scene, I imagined that it occurred in Law's school office. However, after a few rehearsals, the director decided that this place was not best; conflict was absent from the scene. In an inspired moment, the director improved the scene's stagnancy by combining several scenes into one. Now, instead of speaking to an interviewer, Laws was at a town meeting attempting to sway the opinion of three other religious leaders. I decided the time was seven o'clock on a Tuesday evening. This new locale changed the overall dramatic nature of the scene.

This unique setting inspired relationships between the four actors. Ryan Jones, who played a Catholic priest, scolded me for not participating in the rally that supported Matthew Shepard. Likewise, Keston John, who played a Unitarian minister, mocked my beliefs. On the other hand, Allan Gallant, who played a Baptist minister, gained support from my presence. On the whole, each actor adapted to the other actors in order to get their objectives across.

The other issue to resolve was the physical presence of Laws. Fortunately, the answer came when I chose the action, to drive my point home. By playing this forceful action, I unwittingly spoke the text with a staccato rhythm and simultaneously, punched the air with my hands. I was not aware of this unique vocal pattern and movement until the director informed me. She thought this new gesture would be an excellent way to

express the character physically. Hence, time was spent on incorporating this physicality into the rest of the speech. I also accessed the lower part of my vocal range in order to give the character some maturity. These physical traits created the external form of the character.

On another rehearsal day, I learned the importance of phrasing. The director said that I should accentuate the word, "think," in the phrase, "We don't think that it [prayer] happened and some folks wrote it in the Bible" (35). In this sentence, I originally thought Law was referring to prayer in the way I perceive it. That is to say I believe that God listens, and then, an event occurs that confirms the prayer was received. However, after further investigating the Mormon religion, I discovered that Mormons selectively choose prophets who have a special relationship with God (The Church of Jesus Christ). This information, along with the new line phrasing, changed the interpretation of the line. Now, I knew that Law was stressing the word not only to defend his faith but also to criticize the religion of others.

## **Anonymous**

The role of Anonymous furnished me with another interesting character to craft. The text states that he was Aaron McKinney's friend. In this scene, Anonymous defends Aaron. He implies that McKinney acted irrationally because he was immature.

I did not identify the scene's locale until rehearsal began in the performance space. In this new environment, I noticed that the preceding scene was blocked in the center of the stage. This area represented a bar where the citizens spoke harshly about

the suspects. On the other hand, Anonymous' scene was placed on the outer edge of the stage.

By seeing these two contrasting stage positions and studying the given circumstances, I imagined that Anonymous had been in the bar. However, he kept quiet because the crowd was anti-McKinney. So to protect himself, Anonymous spoke with the company members outside. I decided that it was cold, dark and late.

The main challenge with this role concerned the character's physicality. The director had me experiment with a variety of physical attributes. She proposed that I use my chest resonance. She challenged me at every rehearsal to find my lowest note. This required persistence and patience due to my tenor voice. But soon my efforts paid off, and my lower notes took shape. This richer resonance inspired the rest of my body to take on a lumbering quality. My shoulders became strong and active. I sensed aggressiveness and power in my hips and legs. I started to fold my arms in front of me in order to convey strength. Overall, these physical adjustments made me feel like a heavy and powerful individual.

## **Rob DeBree**

The process of bringing Detective Rob DeBree to life required an insight into his world. He appears twice in the play. In the first scene, DeBree explains the details of the murder investigation. In the second scene, he explains what he had learned from his investigation.

Once again, the scene's locale was not apparent. However, after a couple of rehearsal weeks, I decided that the first scene occurred in DeBree's office while the

seconds scene occurred in the lobby of the courtroom during the sentencing of McKinney. Both scenes occurred late in the afternoon around four o'clock. At the beginning of rehearsals, I thought I knew what motivated DeBree. However, my superficial understanding of the role was revealed when the director noted that my presentation lacked emotion. In order to help me find the character's proper state of mind, the director informed me that DeBree was educating the interviewer about the investigative process. This direction guided me toward a playable action; however, I did not know the motivation for this action. This situation called for an appraisal of the given circumstances.

What follows are the facts that surrounded DeBree's situation. He spent one and a half years on the case and during that time only took a few days rest. Several reasons explain his tenacious behavior. One reason was that he thought this job was a noble calling. He said that every detective should be emotionally connected to the murder victims. In order to develop this attachment, DeBree placed their family photographs on his desk. Another reason for his unyielding energy was that he saw the battered body of Matthew Shepard. He said that in a lot of his years of observing victims he had never seen anything as gruesome as what was done to Matthew. Another reason for his relentlessness was based on his closer relationship with the Shepard family. Every day he saw and felt their pain. He wanted to bring them relief. Another reason was guilt. Prior to the murder, he had told some homosexual jokes. Now, he recognized his insensitivity. For all these reasons, DeBree had an intense desire to make sure that Matthew's abusers were brought to justice (Loffreda 145-160).

This desire is embedded in the play's text. In both scenes, Debree attempts to educate the interviewer that there was no doubt that Matthew was murdered by McKinney and Henderson. He wants the interviewer to understand the horror of the situation--Matthew was tortured, and gays live in fear. All in all, this was the psychological motivation that the character needed.

Even with this knowledge, my character was not totally convincing. Part of the problem was solved when the blocking changed from sitting to standing. This active position energized my body. The remainder of the problem was corrected using another action. Besides educating the interviewer, the directors said I should attack the situation. Through her body energy, she tried to impress upon me the emotional fire beneath the phrases, "So you do a lot of studying, you spend hours and hours and hours. You study and study and study[...]" (Kaufman 55). This action-oriented approach helped me unlock the feelings of the character.

During another rehearsal, an interesting finger gesture began to develop. This movement occurred on the word "tight" in the phrase, "I wanted it so tight that there was no way [the suspects] were going to get [away with murder]" (55). In this instance, a connection between the character's desire, the gesture and the word occurred. That is to say, all of Debree's energy was summarized in that one word. This gesture became a key physical trait.

The characterization was further developed by reviewing the film, Insomnia. It starred a detective played by Al Pacino. Pacino's detective was a seasoned veteran who could not sleep because he was disturbed by a murder case. Immediately, I

recognized the similarities between that character and mine. After all, DeBree was also a seasoned detective, was haunted by images and was physically exhausted.

I did not consciously practice any Pacino gesture. The film simply made an impression on my senses that carried over into rehearsals. Soon, I was moving in a way that I had not moved before. I was sighing vocally, rubbing the back of my head and cocking my neck forward. I began to project the qualities of tiredness, frustration and danger.

## **Governor Jim Geringer**

Governor Jim Geringer was a challenging role. He was the Governor of Wyoming. In the play, he appears at a press conference to update the media on the details of the investigation.

This setting was easy to determine since it was not a company interview. Instead it was derived from an actual press conference or a combination of press conferences in which Geringer participated. I decided that this press conference occurred on Monday at noon, three days after the injured Matthew was discovered.

In order to communicate the inner part of the role, I decided that Geringer's objective was to take control of the press conference in order to reassure the public. After all, the public needed a strong figure during this horrific occasion. I learned that the portrayal of that intention was clear; however, there was no obstacle present. I had been ignoring the reporter who was shoving a microphone into my face. Thus, in order to create conflict, the director instructed me to allow the actress, who played the reporter, to offend me. The director encouraged me to "breathe her in," "notice her

eyes”and“listentoherwords.”Throughcoaching,the directorsupportedmein communicatingfullywithmyscenepartner.

Geringer’sphysicalformwasalsoinspiredthroughobserva tion.Ioriginally developedhischaracterizationfromobservingstillphoto graphsofthereal-lifeGeringer. However,Iwantedamovingimagesolsearchedforafi lmaactorthatremindedmeof Geringer.Ichosetheactor-politician,FredThompson .

Thompsonhada“downtoearth”essencethatIthought wouldworkfortherole. However,afterrehearsingwiththatimageafewtimes, thedirectorsaiditwasnot appropriate.ShethoughtGeringershouldbedistinct withhisspeechandstronginhis physicalstature.Thompson’simagedidnotcreatethatt ypeofphysicalresponsein me.Therefore,sheadvisedmetoobservetheactortha tplayedGeringerinthefilm versionandtousehimasanexampleformyphysicaldepicti on.Afterstudyingthat actor,Iwasabletobringaqualityofeloquenceand strengthtotherolethathadbeen previouslymissing([TheLaramieProject](#) ).

## **ReverendFredPhelps**

TheReverendFredPhelpswasafunroletoportraydue tohisoutrageous behavior.PhelpswasaministerofanindependentBap tistchurchlocatedinTopeka, Kansas.Heandhisfollowerstraveledthecountryprotest ingagainstsubjectsthatthey consideredsinful.Intheplay,hepreachesagainsthomo sexuality.

ThePhelps’scenewastakenfromanactualeventthatocturr ed.Phelps traveledtoMatthewShepard’sfuneralwhereheattemp tedtocauseariot.Intheend,

his plan was somewhat limited by the police. His group was forced to stand behind a protected barricade. It was a dreary morning, and snow was falling (Loffreda 22).

Of all the characters I portrayed, Phelps required the least amount of rehearsal. Without significant study of the role, I already understood his physical essence. I not only recognized his “backwoods” preacher style, but I also felt the distinctiveness of his actions. His behavior reeked with impulsivity and forcefulness. I can only guess this understanding came from my personal experiences of observing and knowing rural preachers. Moreover, after doing research on Phelps’ life, I began to understand the specific emotional and psychological scars that drove this man’s actions.

Since the justification of the character was full, the major consideration during rehearsal was given to the blocking. At first, the director and I experimented with having Phelps begin on the top platform and work his way down to the protesters. The resulting arrangement was awkward for me as well as for the other cast members. The solution to this predicament was to have Phelps start on the stage floor and move to the top platform during his tirade. Then, to end the scene, Phelps’ opposition would confront him on the platform and turn their backs. This move, along with their angel wings, would block his view.

To sum up, the scene played very well every time it was rehearsed. There was always some strong emotion present. For that reason, there was no need for any major discussion or advanced exploration.

## Dennis Shepard

I felt a tremendous amount of responsibility while developing the role of Dennis Shepard. Shepard was the father of Matthew. In his testimonial, Shepard reveals his love for his son. Also, he tells the court that the death penalty would not be pursued against McKinney. I imagined that the scene occurred at nine o'clock on a Tuesday morning.

From the initial reading, Shepard was the one character that I empathized with the most. It was one of those moments in an actor's life when you say to yourself I am doing more than acting. I am doing justice for the common man by telling the public his heartache. Furthermore, I was going through some personal changes in my own life. I was thirty-three years old and beginning to see life from a different perspective. I was beginning to have feelings about having children. This was a unique feeling for me especially since I was single. On the whole, my situation, coupled with the situation that Shepard faced, inspired my feelings and attracted me to the role.

With this goal in mind, I strove to reveal a genuine person rather than create a superfluous character. I kept the rehearsal simple. I did not create any external traits for Shepard. My own person gave the impression of a father. This was confirmed later through some photographs of the production. Also, I did not read the speech outside of the rehearsal. I wanted it to sound as if I were reading it for the first time. In essence, my method for creation was to concentrate on the images in the text.

For the first few rehearsals, the director allowed me to do the speech anyway I wanted. This freedom helped me find the passion of the speech. For example, one day, I moved away from the podium and toward the actor who played McKinney. I then

proceeded to attack him with my speech. This movement was so nly an experimental choice, but later it helped me feel the moment when I had to be stationary.

In another rehearsal, the director asked me to highlight the major points of the speech. Before this instruction, I was blending moments together. But this technique gave the speech variety. Another time, the director said that “I really needed to let McKinney have it” when I told him to remember to Matthew. This direction gave an emotional climax to the piece.

Also, I received direction on where to focus while reading the statement. I had been looking toward the audience, but the director wanted me to focus on the court. She stated that some of the inspiration for the speech would come from the actors in the court. Thus, every rehearsal I would find a different actor with whom to share the speech. One of my favorite actresses to share the dialogue with was Shannon Beeby. She always gave me the moment of total support. After I learned to truly see all the cast members in the court, the speech became poignant.

One challenge that arose during the latter part of rehearsal was that my speech had become superficial. I had begun to overplay the emotions. This led to moments of “sniffing.” This action was distracting for those watching rehearsal. The director instructed me that it was better to read the speech without any emotion than to read the speech with false emotion. After a few rehearsals, I was able to quit the artificial pathos and solely concentrate on the images whether they moved me or not.

The director also challenged me to play the dignity in the character. At times, I had allowed the anger and sadness of the scene to distract me from the heart of the speech. The director suggested that I watch the actor who played the part in the movie.

She said he played the scene with great dignity and calmness. I followed her suggestion and thought the images from the film helped immensely.

### Technical Rehearsals

After five weeks of deliberate mental study as well as physical application, it was time for technical rehearsals. In order to have good performances, the cast had to adapt to the acoustics of the theatre, the dimensions of the performance space and the various costume and prop changes. The challenge with the acoustics was that we had to have a natural volume level and still be heard. This was made more difficult due to the sound of the air conditioning. I overcame this by focusing on my resonance and articulation. The cast also had to deal with the various stage levels. To maneuver around these new levels and still remain on cue, I had to lengthen my stride and pick up my tempo. The biggest challenge for me and probably the rest of the cast was in dealing with the costumes and the props. In order for these elements of the play to function properly, we had to figure out where to place our props and costumes. In addition, we had to learn how to change costumes very quickly and sometimes in the dark. When we were available we would assist each other with changing costumes. After continuous rehearsal, the cast adjusted to these technical but key elements of the show. It was time for performance.

## CHAPTER SIX: PERFORMANCE

The University of Central Florida's Conservatory Theatre production of The Laramie Project opened on Thursday, Oct 9, 2003 and closed on Sunday, October 19. There were a total of eight performances. During this limited run, audiences were attentive, gracious and inspirational. The cast and crew likewise approached each evening with professionalism, respect and humility. All things considered, every show was a challenging and exhilarating experience.

Prior to each performance the cast would go through their warm-up that we learned on the very first day. Overtime, this warm-up had become more than just a series of technical exercises. It was now felt as a ritual of friendship and celebration. It helped to spiritually rejuvenate the cast from the tedium of the day as well as prepare us for the emotional experience of the play.

After that, each actor would go about preparing themselves in his own way. This preparation consisted of chatting with each other, setting costumes and props, putting on makeup and participating in individual warm-ups. The latter was a great concern for me as it had been for all prior shows. During this warm-up, I would play whole scenes with all of the blocking included. Also, I would walk the whole stage attempting to charge my body. Overall, I wanted to feel the roles physically. Then, I would be able to proceed with assurance.

One of my fellow cast members, Ryan Jones, was also an advocate of these personal warm-ups. He had a unique way of readying for a play as many actors do. He would call out the name of Laramie as if he were channeling some spirit. I observed

him during this exercise, and I could see his facial expression take on different shades. This calling was helping him to access images. I am not sure what he was imagining, but he had found a simple warm-up that assisted him in connecting to the play.

Oftentimes during these individual warm-ups, Ryan and I would speak a few words to each other. We would talk about the events of the day as well as philosophies about acting. Amidst one of our conversations, he sincerely congratulated me on the fine job I had done with the play. I respected Ryan as an actor and a person, so I found this comment to be quite satisfying. However, being my inquisitive and sometimes unconfident self, I wanted to know why I deserved this comment. Remarkably, he said, "You worked hard not to work hard." True, I thought that to myself. Very true! I had attempted to not let unnecessary tensions disrupt the experiences of the play.

As with all plays, certain scenes develop into favorites. This experience was no exception to that rule. I grew to love Rob Coll as the "grungy," Matt Galloway. He had such an earthiness to him that it was quite charming to watch. There was Allan Gallant as the "lonely," Harry Woods. I enjoyed his presence. There was Shannon Beeby as the "quirky" minister's wife. Shannon was appealing as this old eccentric lady. Jen Sosnick was very good as the "aggressive codger," Marge Murray. She was neat to watch every night as she attacked the role with fervor. Jenny Ashman was sympathetic as Catherine Connolly. You could sense the sweetness in the character. Keston Johnson played well in many roles. His Andrew Gomez was appealing and frightening at the same time. Jen Morrison was confident and humble as the police officer, Reggie Fluty. And of course, Ryan Jones was tremendous as the "local yokel," Doc O'Connor. He

was aggressive, charming and off-balanced. Night after night many unique personalities were revealed on the stage.

In regard to my characters, my three favorite roles were Fred Phelps, Dennis Shepard and Jonas Slonaker. As Phelps I got to rant and rave with an electronic megaphone. It was quite fun to see the audience cover their ears. Not to mention, the rage on the stage was at a fever pitch every night. I was so delighted to observe the effect I had on Shannon Beebe every night. It was also so frightening as she came at me with hurt and vengeance in her eyes. In opposition, the court scene where Dennis Shepard speaks about his son was filled with love. I could sense the cast members giving it their all. I could sense the audience hurting. I felt burdened "to get it right." And then, the final scene as Jonas Slonaker was an emotional moment. I stood there sensing the whole movement of the play in the character's final words when he wonders if Shepard died in vain.

I would like to briefly speak of one performance. It was a single performance in which the cast and crew applauded my efforts. I was not sure what they were talking about. I was not even emotionally charged that evening. I remember saying to myself prior to the performance that I was just going to go out and execute my movements without any judgment. If I did something and it felt wrong, I would simply acknowledge it and move on. This honest approach gave my characters a humanity that the audience appreciated.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

Stanislavski's influence on the play-making process was noted throughout this project. His theories not only aided in the analysis of the play but also with the physical embodiment of the characters. All in all, his methods of psychological actions served as an invaluable guide during these rehearsals.

Using Stanislavski's method for the creation of characters is commonplace in the world of theatre. An idea such as the character's motivation tossed about rehearsals as if there were never any alternative. This second-hand information has become so ingrained that some actors have never read or truly understood the original works. They have simply digested the material by participating either in a amateur, educational or professional theatre.

It was a product of that routine and did not realize the essence of the technique. I learned how to ask the Five W's (who, what, when, where and why) for every character. I learned how to break the scene into beats (smaller units) and to score each beat with an action. I learned how to write down my subtext (the meaning) for each line. I learned that it was important to know the moment before and to write a character biography to aid in that process. I learned that every character must want something from the other character and in order to achieve that goal, my tactics (the way of pursuing my objective) might have to change. However, amidst the actor's jargon that would become all too familiar in the years to come, the "heart" of the method was lost.

This project has taught me that the above information was never meant to provide the actor with an intellectual understanding of the role but rather was intended to help him make a special connection with the character. This bond was achieved through various stimuli and culminated in an organic action. Some factors that incited and shaped this action were 1) the actor's personality and his acknowledgment of the moment 2) the character's needs and desires 3) the image of the play 4) the physical traits of the role and 5) the actor's relationship to the other actors. All of those elements and others helped me make my characters come alive on the stage.

The director also assisted me in recognizing the predicaments of the characters. Through the use of her imagination and experiences she informed me of what it might have been like to have lived in their circumstances. She encouraged me to develop my own ideas about the characters and their situations. She had memories in ways different from my own physical reality. Finally, she had me connect physically and imaginatively with my scene partners in order to complete the reality of the roles. Sometimes these tactics worked, and at other times, they did not. I have some possible explanations for these inconsistencies.

First of all, I place most of my energy into the jaw, neck and shoulders. This tension prevents me from experiencing a full range of emotions. Also, my awareness of breath needs further attention. My inability to "drop the breath in" the lower regions of the body limits my emotional impulses. In conjunction with these lifelong tensions, I struggle with expressing my frailties to other people. This issue not only bleeds over into how I portray characters, but also how I manage acting techniques.

As mentioned earlier, Stanislavski wanted actors to create characters that were inspired not from an intellectual perspective but from a reality-based perspective. In other words, he realized that our natural responses were much more interesting and alive than our prearranged character movements. What I mean by prearranged character movements is that the actions are not inspired by the moment. Of course, an actor can make a mental note of his actions prior to doing the scene but the nuances of those actions and the ones not yet created are determined in the moment.

As a professional actor I have become obsessed with moment-to-moment work or as I like to call it, "dropping into the zone." The irony is that I have discovered that this infatuation has actually limited my ability to exist in the "here and now" of the scene. I have realized that at this time in my development as an actor it is impossible for me to be totally enraptured with all of the given circumstances. I get distracted with things such as "am I really good enough" or is "this method working" or "am I really feeling it." I even find myself dropping out when the given circumstances of the scene fail to excite me.

I have discovered that the best way to work when one of these "bad actor" conditions occur is for me to acknowledge it rather than deny it. Otherwise, the lie will build in my head and distract me further from the role. Besides, the audience feels what is going on inside of me whether I reveal it or not. Therefore, it is best that I relieve my consciousness of the duty to "get it right."

How do I go about making this happen? Well, I believe it takes courage. This philosophical approach will allow my natural impulses to create life on the stage. I once heard a story about a young but well-respected actor at his school. He had the "guts"

to stop the play after a prop error occurred. Instead of faltering under the psychological pressure to keep in character or keep to what had been rehearsed, he fixed the prop before going on with the scene. In actuality, he did stay in character. He reacted to the truth of the moment. He did what he felt. He did not apologize for what he did. He made this action a viable part of the character. For me, courage is important.

With these ideas securely in mind, I go forward into the professional world of theatre. As an actor, I understand that I must acknowledge myself as well as the character. I must accept my impulses as worthy of exploration and continually seek out ways to expand my behavior patterns. This focus will allow my talent, which is composed of differing traits, experiences and ideas, to flourish.

As a teacher, the Stanislavski method will give my lesson a foundation. That is to me, I will encourage each student to give an honest reply of themselves and an honest reaction to the material. I will encourage them to expand their perception of their world. Moreover, I will recognize that all students are different, that every person has a different way of moving through the world and that every individual has a different way of thinking. Therefore, I will continually draw upon a variety of exercises and techniques in order to help actors share themselves with others. Above all, I will enjoy myself.

## LIST OF REFERENCES

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints .1 Sept.2005

<<http://www.mormon.org/learn/0,8672,1092-1,00.html>>.

Insomnia. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Per. Al Pacino, Robin Williams.

Warner Brothers, 2002.

Kaufman, Moisés, and Members of Tectonic Theater Project. The Laramie Project .

New York: Dramatists Play Service Inc, 2001.

The Laramie Project . Dir. Moisés Kaufman.

Per. Peter Fonda, Steve Buscemi. HBO Films, 2002.

Larson, T. A. Wyoming: A Bicentennial History .

New York: Norton, 1977.

"Latter-day Saints, Church of Jesus Christ of: History." The Columbia Electronic

Encyclopedia. Pearson Education, publishing as InfoPlease .

11 Jul. 2005 <<http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/society/A0859200.html>>.

Loffreda, Beth. Losing Matt Shepard: Life and Politics in the Aftermath of Anti-Gay

Murder. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

Moore, Andrew. "Studying Bertolt Brecht." Universal Teacher .1 Sept 2003

<<http://www.universalteacher.org.uk/drama/brecht.htm#6>>.

<<http://www.universalteacher.org.uk/drama/brecht.htm#7>>.

---. "Studying Bertolt Brecht." Universal Teacher .1 Sept 2003

<<http://www.universalteacher.org.uk/drama/brecht.htm#13>>.

<<http://www.universalteacher.org.uk/drama/brecht.htm#14>>.

NationalGovernorsAssociation .12Sept2003

<<http://www.nga.org>>.

Phelps,Mark.Letter.TheTopekaCapital-JournalOnline .1Oct2003

<[http://cjonline.com/webindepth/phelps/stories/080394\\_phelps03.shtml](http://cjonline.com/webindepth/phelps/stories/080394_phelps03.shtml)>.

Rapp,Linda.“MoisésKaufman.”GLBTQ:AnEncyclopedia ofGay,Lesbian ,  
Bisexual,Transgender,andQueerCulture .Ed.ClaudeJ.Summers.1July2005

<[www.glbtc.com/arts/kaufman\\_m.html](http://www.glbtc.com/arts/kaufman_m.html)>.

Schoeps,KarlH.WorldDramatists:BertoltBrecht .

FrederickUngar,1977.

Stanislavski,Constantin.AnActorPrepares .Trans.ElizabethReynoldsHapgood.

NewYork:Routledge/TheatreArtsBooks,1964.

---.AnActor'sHandbook:AnAlphabeticalArrangement ofConciseStatementson  
AspectsofActing .Ed.andTrans.ElizabethReynoldsHapgood.

NewYork:TheatreArtsBooks,1963.

---.BuildingaCharacter .Trans.ElizabethReynoldsHapgood.

NewYork:Routledge/TheatreArtsBooks,1977.

---.CreatingaRole .Trans.ElizabethReynoldsHapgood.Ed.Herminel.Popper.

NewYork:TheatreArtsBooks,1961.

TheTectonicTheaterProject .Ed.ChrisCaramanica.

CareBeProductions.20Sept2003

<<http://www.tectonictheaterproject.org>>.

"Wyoming, State, United States: History." The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia.  
Pearson Education, publishing as Infoplease. 11 Jul. 2005  
<<http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/us/A0862023.html>>.