

THE MIRRORED WALLS OF REALITY:
A JOURNAL OF SHATTERED REFLECTION

by

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I find joy in life in its violent and cruel struggles, and my pleasure lies in knowing something and learning something.

-August Strindberg, October 1888

ABSTRACT

Theatre in its most crude, poignant, and honest form exists as the unapologetic mirror of our world. It houses the piercing reflections of mankind's hope, fear, self-doubt, passion, joy, despair, brilliance, destitution, and desire. It becomes the image of all that man hopes to be, yearns to achieve, and knows he has destroyed. Theatrical performance is without equal in its ability to conjure visible truth from the reflection man sees everyday and hopelessly fails to recognize. Ultimately, theatre demands that man see himself without the masks of excuse, ignorance, or makeup.

It is the vision of this journey to honor theatre's mask-less demand. Through the development of a multi-scene theatrical performance; the collection and analysis of relevant research material; and the cultivation of a comprehensive journal outlining the processes, the challenges, and the revelations that will travel the same road—from the cluttered moments of conception to the still air of an empty room after an exhausting final bow—only a mirror will remain. Each component—production, research, and journal—will function as equally essential elements. They will illuminate the evolution of fully realized theatre and detail the composition of a common theatrical message: Truth is both the seed of desperation and discovery.

For John.

Thank you.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Just nine years before his death, Oscar Wilde wrote, “I love acting. It is so much more real than life.” With these words from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde expressed not only that which is at the core of theatre’s impact, but the complexity of its simplest truth. Theatre presents us with a reality more vivid than the one that touches our eyes each day. The struggle begins when we each realize that our gaze has been cast upon the truest form of our own reflection. Yet, the intrinsic forces of human nature demand a search for the elusive demon of truth. We are, inexplicably, both attracted and repulsed by the distorted visions of our greatest desires and most intense self-loathing, bathed by the piercing tears of our own solitude, despair, and helplessness.

Throughout his analysis of Jean Genet’s life and writings in chapter four of *The Theatre of the Absurd* “Jean Genet: A Hall of Mirrors,” Martin Esslin sums up the essence of Genet’s theatre as man “inexorably trapped by an endless progression of images...lies covering lies, fantasies battering upon fantasies, nightmares nourished by nightmares within nightmares” (141). It is this very tragic human condition which links the dramatic works of Jean Genet, August Strindberg, and Martin McDonagh. *The Maids* by Genet, *Miss Julie* by Strindberg, and *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* by McDonagh each depict characters who are crippled by their personal reflections of truth, which pool in the unsympathetic eyes of those who share their stage—sister/sister, master/servant, mother/daughter. For just when man is lost and resigned to the fantastic, illusionary world of what could be, reflections of his self-truth arrive to distort and shatter the vision, leaving a stark, harsh reality, too unbearable to let be. Each playwright’s psycho dramatic construction illuminates the “dream world of the outcast of society, explores the

human condition, the alienation of man, his solitude, [and] his futile search for meaning and reality” (Esslin 167). Ultimately, the tragic thread which links the works of Strindberg, McDonagh, and Genet fosters the image of man’s trapped life, thus forcing more than the superficial realizations of a mere witness. The performance of these works generates and constructs an intensely violent reflection of truth, on the stage and off of it. The premise for these ideas will be further explored and exemplified in the scenes chosen for the performance itself.

Martin Esslin writes that it is “through being aware of himself that [man] is caught, as the man in the hall of mirrors is lost among the reflections of his own image” (146). These words are the hallmark of Genet’s writings and his commentaries on the human experience. Esslin opens “A Hall of Mirrors” with an illuminating excerpt from Genet’s *Journal du Voleur* that attempts to identify the primary source of Genet’s distorted view of reality:

Stilitano was alone. Everyone had found the way out except he. Strangely the universe veiled itself for me. The shadow that suddenly fell over things and people was the shadow of my solitude confronted with this despair, for, no longer able to shout, to butt himself against the walls of glass, resigned at being a mockery for the gaping crowd, Stilitano had crouched down on the floor, refusing to go on....(140)

This hall of mirrors serves as both the actual and metaphorical trapping of man’s existence. Stilitano had been a hero of Genet’s youth (140). His collapse represents all that Genet wished to express through his writing. “It is the expression of a withdrawal from life” (149). Esslin recognizes that Genet creates a world of helplessness, a world of solitude, and eventually, a world of nothingness. Jean Genet, like Strindberg before and McDonagh after, shaped theatre to reflect the absurd emptiness of a trapped life. The literal and figurative mirrors of man’s life merely cast back this emptiness to the point of self-devastation.

Genet's game of mirrors—in which each apparent reality is revealed as an appearance, an illusion, which in turn is revealed as again part of a dream or an illusion, and so on, ad infinitum—is a device to uncover the fundamental absurdity of being, its nothingness. (150)

Martin Esslin furthers his analysis of Genet's writings with thorough breakdowns of his dramatic works as continuous repudiations of societal standards and codes. Vindictive and often possessed with subconscious rage, Genet "projected the feeling of impotence of the individual caught up in the meshes of society." (157) An individual seeking to find meaning in a world on the brink of social annihilation for reasons, and by means, he/she is unable to grasp, and ultimately, appears to have no control.

As Martin Esslin states in his summative analysis of Genet in his "A Hall of Mirrors," and as I have applied to Strindberg and McDonagh, the works of Jean Genet, August Strindberg, and Martin McDonagh represent "a cathartic crisis of possession, a psychodrama" (144). Their characters struggle to play the part of the person they wish to be, only to choke on the stranglehold of longing to be someone else. Regularly progressing from adoration and servility to abuse and violence, each character's distorted reality births the discharge of all the hatred and envy conjured by an outcast who sees himself as the rejected fool. Collapse, bordered by the sharp fangs of helplessness and solitude, becomes the inevitable result of man's reflected truth. Man's greatest wish transforms his heart into the noose he will use to hang himself. He becomes possessed of the brilliant knowledge of all that he truly is, the mirrored walls of reality hide nothing.

CHAPTER TWO: EXPLORATION OF THE TEXT

The carefully filed words of a master playwright become the sharpest edge of the theatrical knife. They sever reality from generated fantasy and hope from helpless futility. Each word reflects not the world we hope to see, but the world as it exists in its most unadorned form. Select scenes from *The Maids*, *Miss Julie*, and *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* represent how dark the well can be with only a waning candle.

Jean Genet's 1947 play *The Maids* encapsulates the malignant helplessness that is generated when man becomes lost in his own image, one that he equally adores, imitates, and loathes. Martin Esslin most effectively outlines the opening of Genet's play in the following excerpt:

The Maids...opens in a Louis XV bedroom in which an elegant lady is being dressed by her maid, whom she calls Claire. The lady is haughty, the maid servile. But the two visibly taunt each other. In the end the maid slaps the lady. Suddenly an alarm clock rings; in a flash the whole scene collapses. The lady is seen to be no lady at all, but one of two maids who have been playing at lady and maid in the absence of the real lady. And in fact the maid who has been called Claire is not Claire at all but Solange, and it was Claire who acted the part of the part of the lady, and treated her sister as the lady treats Claire. (146)

The Maids is filled with illusions created by these servant girls as a means to combat their oppressive circumstances. They feel ashamed and dirty because of their poverty and act out elaborate role-play. Claire fulfills her dreams of wealth and prestige by playing the haughty Madame, and Solange satisfies her desire to prove herself worthy as a maid by physically and verbally abusing Madame. The illusions they craft are so powerful that both sisters distort their notions of reality. Claire several times refers to Solange as "Claire," and in Solange's final monologue, she plays and addresses a dizzying array of characters. By playing out these illusory

roles, the maids achieve a sense of power as each sadistically reduces her sister before her eyes, thereby reducing herself. Claire, as Madame, feels elevated above her real position as a maid, and Solange can cut the imitation Madame down to size. This is clearly exemplified in early dialogue between Claire and Solange in Act I (43-44):

Claire:

What language, my dear. Claire, do you mean that I've already crossed the seas? Are you offering me the dreary exile of your imagination? You're taking revenge, aren't you? You feel the time coming when, no longer a maid—

Solange:

You see straight through me. You divine my thoughts.

Claire [*increasingly carried away*]:

--the time coming when no longer a maid, you become vengeance itself, but Claire, don't forget—Claire, are you listening? —don't forget, it was the maid who hatched schemes of vengeance, and I—Claire, you're not listening.

Solange [*absent—mindedly*]:

I'm listening.

Claire:

And I contain within me both vengeance and the maid and give them a chance for life, a chance for salvation. Claire, it's a burden, it's terribly painful to be a mistress, to contain all the springs of hatred, to be the dunghill on which you grow. You want to see me naked every day. I *am* beautiful, am I not? And the desperation of my love makes me even more so, but you have no idea what strength I need!

Solange [*contemptuously*]:

Your lover!

Claire:

My unhappy lover heightens my nobility. Yes. Yes, my child. All that you'll ever know is our own baseness.

Solange:

That'll do! Now hurry! Are you ready?

Claire:

Are you?

Solange:

I'm ready. —I'm tired of being an object of your disgust. I hate you, too. I despise you. I hate your scented bosom. Your...*ivory* bosom! Your...*golden* thighs! Your...*amber* feet! I hate you! [*She spits on the red dress.*]

Claire [*aghast*]:

Oh!...Oh!...But...

Solange [walking up to her]:

Yes, my proud beauty. You think you can always do just as you like. You think you can deprive me forever of the beauty of the sky, that you can choose your perfumes and powders, your nail polish and silk and velvet and lace, and deprive *me* of them? That you can steal the milkman from me? Admit it! Admit about the milkman. His youth and vigor excite you, don't they? Admit about the milkman. For Solange says: to hell with you!

Claire [*panic—stricken*]:

Claire! Claire!

Claire and Solange's sadistic impulses and their role-play are often offset by another characteristic—masochism. Throughout the play, the sisters repeatedly humiliate one another with both physical and emotional abuse. Solange gets physically aroused at one point and nears a virtual orgasm. Both sisters repeatedly denounce themselves as much as they deplore Madame. Both the submission to authority and the assimilation of it create the escapist world the two maids need. They are outcasts, and they have a reminder of that alienation every time they see each other. Claire declares to Solange, "I'm sick of seeing my image thrown back at me by a mirror, like a bad smell. You're my bad smell" (61). Solange heeds, "There's no need to overdo it. Your eyes are ablaze.... Limits, boundaries, Madame" (42). For my own production, I have chosen this first scene from *The Maids*, not only for all of the reasons discussed here as they pertain to the sisters themselves, but also to set the tone for what is to make up the rest of the show. Themes that include: Oppression, shame, role-play, illusion, masochism, sex, submission,

alienation, wish-fulfillment, love, hate, entrapment, and escape. Each of these themes is clearly exemplified in the opening scene from *The Maids*.

By play's end, the boundaries between people Claire mentioned at the beginning of the play are destroyed. After a failed attempt to murder the Madame, the maids become awash in their own fantasy. On pain of self-realization, they resume their game of lady and maid. The two maids are forever linked, and worse, trapped by the love-hatred of being each other's mirrors. In response, Claire assumes the role of lady and asks to be served the poisoned tea intended for Madame. Solange at first refuses, but, ultimately, fulfills her role. "We are beautiful, joyous, drunk, and free!" (Genet 100) Esslin accurately notes that "the ritual of wish-fulfillment is an act that is wholly absurd—it is futility mirroring itself; the wish to accomplish something which can never bridge the gulf that separates the dream from reality" (148). Thus, by committing suicide, Claire becomes Madame, satisfying her wish to be the destroyed authority figure and fulfilling Solange's wish to destroy the reflection she both adores and despises, the reflection of herself.

In 1888, sixty years before *The Maids* was first produced, August Strindberg premiered what would become his most often performed play to date, *Miss Julie*. In the history of drama, Strindberg's work is primarily recognized for its stylistic innovations. Its preface serves as a classic manifesto of late-nineteenth century naturalism.

In the following drama I have not tried to do anything new—for that cannot be done—but I have tried to modernize the form in accordance with the demands which I thought the new men of a new time might be likely to make on this art. And with such a purpose in view, I have chosen, or surrendered myself to, a theme that might well be said to lie outside the partisan strife of the day: for the problem of social ascendancy or decline, of higher or lower, of better or worse, of men or women, is, has been and will be of lasting interest. (Strindberg 104)

In defining the new naturalistic theatre, Strindberg makes two major demands of contemporary playwrights. First, he demands that they adhere to an unflinching realism, whether in content: the explicit references to menstruation, blasphemy, lust, and bodily functions in *Miss Julie*; staging: the elimination of footlights and makeup; or time: *Miss Julie* takes place over a single, compressed, and unbroken ninety-minute time frame. Strindberg also demands that the naturalist playwright strive toward a new conception of character. Eschewing the one-dimensional stock figure of the melodrama, the playwright must people his stage with full, lively beings. Characters must not be a collection of idiosyncrasies and catch phrases coupled with simple motivations. Instead, the playwright must craft a psychology, a “soul” (Strindberg 107).

Strindberg is also respected as a predecessor of expressionistic theatre. Expressionistic devices are found throughout *Miss Julie*—continual allusions to mystical forces, the use of symbology and ritualized dance, the backdrop of the pagan festival, and the construction of an absent, shadowy, and yet precipitating center of authority in the figure of the Count. With his expressionistic plays, Strindberg penetrated into the very recesses of the unconscious, or the dream, so readily explored in twentieth-century psychopathology. He not only introduced a new subject matter in giving primacy to psychological conflicts, but he created a new dramatic form. He fathered not only modern psychological drama, but modern expressionistic style, which has had a constant direct and indirect effect on the theatre since the end of the nineteenth century, second only to that of dramatic realism (Klaf 11). Strindberg also went beyond individual psychology in his work and adopted the still wider perspectives of social drama. He related domestic conflicts to the social factors reflected and represented by the turn-of-the-century feminism and the rise of the so-called New Woman (Abrams 1831). It is with these

considerations in mind that one may discover, insert, and apply the thematic reflections of *The Hall of Mirrors* to August Strindberg's play *Miss Julie*.

Miss Julie, Strindberg's title character, is fresh from a broken engagement—an engagement ruined because of her attempt to literally train her fiancé like a dog. Miss Julie has become “wild,” making shameless advances to her valet, Jean, on Midsummer Eve. In his preface to the play, Strindberg discusses what motivates Miss Julie: “her mother's fundamental instincts, her father's mistaken upbringing of a girl, her own nature, and the suggestive influence of her fiancé on a weak and degenerate brain” (105). He also cites as influences the absence of her father, the festive mood of Midsummer Eve, her physical condition/period, the dusk of the night, the strongly aphrodisiacal influence of the flowers, excitation of the dance, and lastly, the excited man.

The laundry list of Miss Julie's motivations is a clear reflection of Strindberg's interest in psychology. This list is his diagnosis of what he considers Miss Julie's sickness and symptoms of hysteria. Traditionally considered a female disease, hysteria in Strindberg's day was increasingly used to refer to a disturbance in female sexuality—namely, a woman's failure or refusal to accept her sexual desires (Klaf 84). Julie's “hysteria” is her trapping, her helpless solitude, and her distorted reflection of self.

Raised by a shockingly empowered mother who abhorred men, Julie is alternately disgusted by and drawn to men, horrified by sex and yet, ready to play the coquette. Ultimately, however, the play is more invested in her masochism above all else. Julie desires her own fall.

I have climbed to the top of a column and sit there without being able to tell how to get down again. I get dizzy when I look down, and I must get down, but I haven't the courage to jump off. I cannot hold on, and I am longing to fall, and yet I don't fall. But there will be no rest for me until I get down, down on the ground. And if I did reach the ground, I should want to get still farther down, into the ground itself.... (Strindberg 126)

Julie is asking for her own ruin, a withdrawal from life. Like Stilitano, lost in Genet's childhood hall of mirrors, Julie has no means by which to rescue herself. The overwhelming sense of empty helplessness conjures an inevitable collapse.

Jean is the manor's valet, chosen as Miss Julie's lover on Midsummer's Eve. He grew up working in the district, and although Miss Julie does not know this, he has known Miss Julie since she was a child. Initially, Jean talks coarsely about Miss Julie with his fiancée, Christine. Later, he plays the gallant while seducing Miss Julie, honorably hesitating before her advances, telling her a heart-rending tale of his childhood love for his mistress, recounting his longtime ambitions, and generally making her believe his gentleness. Julie is delighted by Jean's performance and tells him that he should have been an actor. Jean and Julie begin donning personas, playing at being master and servant, reflecting only what they choose to see at this moment. Jean dreams of grandeur, vaguely imagining someday opening a hotel in northern Italy and becoming a count like Miss Julie's father. Again, the act of wish fulfillment is futility mirroring itself, never bridging the gap between dreams and reality.

My dream is that I am lying under a tall tree in a dark wood. I want to get up, up to the top, so that I can look out over the smiling landscape, where the sun is shining, and so that I can rob the nest in which lie the golden eggs. And I climb and climb, but the trunk is so thick and smooth, and it is so far to the first branch. But I know that if I could only reach that first branch, then I should go right on to the top as on a ladder. I have not reached it yet, but I am going to, if it only be in my dreams. (Strindberg 126)

However, Jean remains subjected to authority throughout the play. The reminders of the Count—his boots, the speaking tube, Jean's livery, and most importantly, the ringing bell—automatically reduce Jean to a lackey. Shattered images penetrate his daily fantasies.

There will be barrier's between us as long as we stay in this house—there is a past, and there is the Count—and I have never met another person for whom I felt such respect. If I only catch sight of his gloves on a chair I feel small. If I only hear that bell up there, I

jump like a shy horse. And even now, when I see his boots standing there so stiff and perky, it is as if something made my back bend. (134-135)

Jean's relationship with Miss Julie is complicated by his class envy and misogyny. "What I wanted, that's more than I can tell. Of course, there was not the least hope of winning you—but you symbolized the hopelessness of trying to get out of the class into which I was born" (130). Resembling the sisters in *The Maids*, Jean at once elevates and scorns the object of his desire. Upon the consummation of their romance, when Jean finds that Miss Julie is penniless, he rejects her and confesses that he has deceived her, cruelly leaving her to her disgrace. He sees himself a man of worth, a future count, climbing the tree limb by limb, only to have his skewed concept of reality shattered by Miss Julie's monetary impotence. She reflects all that he will never have and all he that he has ever wanted—status, a passport to the upper class. Jean is trapped in a world of neurosis and compulsive obsessions, locked by the manacles of daydreams and fantasy. He is the outcast forever making futile efforts to reach the world of acceptance and belonging. Picking up after the 'sex-act' Jean utters:

It hurts me to have discovered that what I was striving to reach is neither better nor more genuine. It hurts me to see you sinking so low that you are far beneath your own cook—it hurts me as it hurts to see the fall flowers beaten by the rain and turned into mud. (139)

It is after the sex-act that I have chosen to illustrate in performance the relationship between Miss Julie and Jean as it is discussed and explored in this context.

In order to escape their botched 'love affair,' Julie wants to flee, marry, and divorce. Jean advises her to stay, refusing her hand. He tells her she is sick. Julie submits completely, begging him to help her, to tell her what to do. She succumbs fully to her self-induced role of servant. She is fighting to scramble down the tree of self-realization before her actual reflection holds her accountable for her actions. Finally, she concludes that there is only one way to

effectually attain her goal. Like Claire in *The Maids*, Miss Julie deems suicide the only answer. “No—in order to enjoy ourselves: a couple of days, a week, as long as enjoyment is possible. And then—die!” (143) Now, completely immersed in her fallen state, she embraces the role of the servant to the end, begging for orders from Jean to kill herself.

I can't leave! I can't stay! Help me! I am so tired, so fearfully tired. Give me orders! Set me going, for I can no longer think, no longer act—...Command me, and I'll obey like a dog! You know what my will ought to do, and what it cannot do—now give me your will, and make me do it! (145,156)

Julie is helpless, alone, and begging to be relieved of her nothingness. By asking Jean to play the Count and to order her about, she illustrates not only her own desire to hurt herself, but also the degree of manipulation Jean has achieved throughout the evening. She wants to play the servant to his master. Projecting herself across class lines, Julie identifies with the figure of the servant bowed before his master. Her suicide is her victory. It is the destruction of her trappings and her ultimate revolt against the deprivation of her personal reality.

Jean asserts numerous times throughout the play that he sees himself as a count someday. His performance as the Count falters however, when he cannot grant Julie's request. While Julie successfully imagines herself as the servant, Jean's authority over her is incomplete. He is paralyzed by seeing the Count's boots and hearing his voice. He collapses in the mirrored halls of his actual reality. For all of his noble rhetoric and the vain proclamations asserting that he is over and above Julie in every way but by birth, Jean is, in the end, trapped and lost, forever married with his own true reflection. He is a servant.

Sixty years on the other side of Genet's *The Maids*, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* was performed at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway, Ireland, on February 1, 1996. The play rocketed playwright Martin McDonagh to fame at age 25. By 1998, he became the first playwright since

William Shakespeare to have four of his plays produced professionally in London in a single season (Burns). A high school dropout at the age of 16, McDonagh wrote *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* in just eight days. Set in the mountains of Connemara, County Galway, *Beauty Queen* is a domestic brew spiked with Irish humor and seat-gripping suspense in which mother and daughter engage in a bitter but hilarious battle of wills. *Beauty Queen* tells the darkly comic tale of Maureen Folan, a plain and lonely woman in her early forties, and Mag, her mountainous, monstrous, and manipulative aging mother. Mag's interference in her daughter's first, and possibly final, chance of a loving relationship sets in motion a series of events that lead inexorably towards the play's inevitable denouement (McDonagh, ix).

McDonagh's *Beauty Queen* does not propose or introduce any new forms of theatre like Strindberg. He does, however, offer an enduring, old-fashioned melodrama replete with a clearly defined plot, tumultuous mother/daughter relationship, and last chance romance. These elements coupled with his ability to capture the true grit of a dismal village offering none of life's social and emotional amenities transform the *Leenanners* of his play into extraordinarily interesting personalities. He also peppers the story with enough black humor to make even the gross behaviors of Mag's "infected urine" disposal and other nasty habits, if not amusing, at least, integral to the characters of the story. In short, his brutal picture of a village where decency and familial affection are homeless is disturbingly moving, entertaining, and funny.

The distressing dysfunction of mother and daughter is set up for us clearly within the first pages of dialogue (McDonagh 6-7).

Maureen:

I can't see how a urine infection prevents you pouring a mug of Complan or tidying up the house a bit when I'm away. It wouldn't kill you.

Mag: *(Pause)*
Me bad back.

Maureen:
Your bad back.

Mag:
And me bad hand. *(Mag holds up her shriveled hand for a second.)*

Maureen: *(Quietly.)*
Feck... *(Irritated.)* I'll get your Complian so if it's such a big job! From now and 'til doomsday! The one thing I ask you to do. Do you see Annette or Margo coming pouring your Complian or buying your oul cod in butter sauce for the week?

Mag:
No.

Maureen:
No is right, you don't. And carrying it up that hill. And still I'm not appreciated.

Mag:
I'll give me Complian another go or so, and give it a good stir for meself.

Maureen:
Ah, forget your Complian. I'm expected to do everything else; I suppose that one on top of it won't hurt. Just a blessed fecking skivvy is all I'm thought of!

Mag:
You're not, Maureen. *(Maureen slams a couple of cupboard doors after finishing with the shopping and sits at the table, after dragging the chair back loudly. Pause.)* Me porridge, Maureen, I haven't had, will you be getting?...Will we have the radio on for ourselves?...The dedication Annette and Margo sent we still haven't heard. I wonder what's keeping it?

From the onset, Maureen's 'station' is clear. Like the maids and Jean, Maureen is a servant. Unhappily, her forty years of service to her mother have, to this point, led to no indication of change for the next forty. Maureen is trapped, unable to escape the solitude of her existence while she 'cares' for her brutish, contemptible mother. But then one day the heavens part and in walks a man.

And that night we shared...it makes me happy just to think about it, being close to you, and even if I never hear from you again I'll always have a happy memory of that night, and that's all I wanted to say to you. Do think about it. Yours Sincerely, Pato Dooley.
(34)

The gravity of this gift, the unfathomable realization that it is all happening to her, stirs Maureen's soul and renders her weightless and floating. She will be free—a thing she has never known a day in her life. And what about the night that they shared? Her dreams have come true. Her reality has finally caught up with her fantasy. Now, all she sees is her imagined self, validated in the reflection of her new love's eyes. And with equal joy, she sees the envy reflected in her own mother's face, relinquishing her absolutely from her former station.

Kissed the face off me, he did, when he saw me there. Them blue eyes of his. Them muscles. Them arms wrapping me... 'You will come to Boston with me so, me love, when you get up the money.' 'I will, Pato. Be it married or be it living in sin, what do I care?...so long as I'm with you, Pato, what do I care...?' (45)

But it's all an illusion, a fun house of lies, each a distortion of truth. Mag intercepts a letter intended for Maureen, her invitation to freedom. She has once again won out over her daughter, shattering Maureen's first and certainly last prospect—her final hope of escape. It is this very moment, found in scene seven, that will be showcased in the final performance. Upon this discovery, Maureen recognizes, once and for all, the impending, trapped nature of her life. She will never escape her mother, this town, this country, or this life. Reflected in her mother's deplorable behavior she sees the ugliness of her own reality. In order to destroy what she sees herself becoming, she has only one recourse. She murders her mother.

(The rocking chair has stopped its motions. Mag starts to slowly lean forward at the waist until she finally topples over and falls heavily to the floor, dead. A red chunk of skull hangs from a string of skin at eh side of her head. Maureen looks down at her, somewhat bored, taps her on the side with the toe of her shoe, then steps onto her back and stands there in thoughtful contemplation.) 'Twas over the stile she did trip. Aye. And down the hill she did fall. Aye. (Pause.) Aye. (Pause. Blackout.) (46)

By play's end, the destruction is complete. With the introduction of new information, supplied by the lover's nephew, Maureen sees herself for what she truly and irrevocably is, and now, forever will be.

And then you go wondering who's a fecking loon? Who's a fecking loon, she says. I'll tell you who's a fecking loon, lady. You're a fecking loon! (*Maureen lets the poker fall to the floor with a clatter and sits in the rocking chair, dazed.*) (52)

In taking over her mother's chair, Maureen literally accepts her defeat. She physically, mentally, and emotionally has become what she hates. She has murdered only to become all that from which she desired escape. She sits, "refusing to go on...." (Esslin 140) She has murdered hope. And without hope, the hall of mirrors is endless.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

A play's power is in its performance, for theatre's essence is harvested on stage. The driving force of this journey is no different. Each and every research and process element serves to foster self-discovery, new textual understanding, creative interpretation, critical reflection, and professional production. One carefully placed brick at a time, a performance will be built. The performance will be the blossomed realization of a once seeded idea and the culmination of the passionately pitched bread crumbs that marked the advance of every step.

The method of this madness will function in three parts:

1. The seed, the through line, the idea. "For man never reasons so much and becomes so introspective as when he suffers, since he is anxious to get at the cause of his sufferings, to learn what has produced them, and whether it is just or unjust that he should have to bear them" (Pirandello). The works of Genet, Strindberg, and McDonagh are rooted deeply in this beautifully crafted thought by Luigi Pirandello. Man rarely, if ever, questions his joy, his happiness, or his success. Yet, he cries out to his mirrored reflection if he suffers, demanding a truth his ailing soul can digest. He seeks a justice that only exists in his mind. He experiences an anxiety that can only be quelled by the deliverance of an invisible tonic. The seed has been planted.

2. The journal. The journal recounts the attentive cultivation of the now planted seed. Each thought, a bread crumb—a marker that details the travels of a long, and sometimes dark, road followed. The entries of the journal reflect a process and a person that is sometimes abrasive, sometimes lost, sometimes overwhelmed, but always passionate, and most of all,

always honest. It is the extensive account of all that a journey should be—challenging, relevant, and rewarding.

3. The performance. The performance is the sculpted bouquet, rich in the blooms of perseverance, discovery, and shared wisdom, all chosen carefully from the graduate garden. It is the fully realized vision of three scenes which, when fused together, form the mirrored walls of all that we know, all that we hide, and all that we seek to destroy. The performance, entitled *Shattered*, will run one night without intermission or introduction. It will be the mirror, both for the audience and the actor.

CHAPTER FOUR: JOURNAL

December 2005

This makes 17. Seventeen times now I have started writing, and all 17 times I have struck the delete key upon completion of each sentence; sometimes even after the first word. In fact, at this moment, my fingers are imploring me to quench their insatiable appetite for achieving some kind of a delete-key-hitting-utopia. Tourette's of the keyboard. Absurd. Seriously, who is running this operation? It's a conspiracy. My brain and fingers have teamed up to sabotage this entire experience. I'm not sure what it is they have to gain. Clearly they cannot, ideally anyway, live separate from me, nor I them. And yet my lackey fingers have cowed to the neurotic, compulsive, slightly dingy editor that lives in the comprehensive matter of my mind. For the minute an impulse, a thought (brilliant by nature, of course) springs from the well of my creative, soulful being, the crotchety old editor living in my mind raises his furry, white eyebrow, cocks his pointed, little head, and diddles my brilliance to some sterile, unoriginal germ of an idea that, in reality, truly, probably, most-likely, really wasn't very good anyway. Either way, I have now been 'writing' for over an hour, have only one completed paragraph to show for it, and haven't even addressed the purpose of this document.

Herein lies the truth: I want to do well. I want this experience to be successful, rewarding. I want people talking about it for days, weeks. I want it to be the most fantastical graduate production in the annals of UCF's theatrical history for tomorrows to come. And yet, when faced with the reality of what that means—the enormous amount of work that looms ahead of me—I want to run and hide and let someone wake me when it's over. I want protection from

that loathsome of all words—*failure*. If I can just write with some kind of literary authenticity, I might be able to avoid actually having to expose my own thoughts on anything. Then, I can't be judged. And maybe no one will notice. After all, I've nearly completed an entire second paragraph and still haven't addressed that this document is a personal journal intended strictly for recording the trials, tribulations, pitfalls, and successes of putting together a graduate thesis show in order that I might obtain completion of my UCF MFA Performance pursuit. This is a story about process, my own. (And the first lesson I have learned already on this journey, is that I do an awful lot of bullshitting and procrastinating instead of just jumping in. HmMMMM.) OK, no more bullshit. Time for work. Write!

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Note: Bullshitting. To bullshit. v. A defensive maneuver performed by a person(s) who is thoroughly petrified of being 'found out.' I.e. What if it turns out that after all this time and energy, I just plain old cannot act? What if I come to the end of this journey and realize I have absolutely no business taking money from hard working, unsuspecting, enthusiastic theatre lovers who have unwittingly trotted into a theatre in which I am performing, where I piss away their entire evening with one bad line delivery after another? What if all the people on my dream team list say yes to helping me and then find out I have no idea what I'm even talking about? Man, that would really, really not make me happy. But hells-bells folks, that's why we're here, huh? Let's test the ole girl and see what she's learned. Does the fantasy in her mind match the reality of her performance? Or will the magic of theatre trick us all into seeing only the illusion of accomplishment? And how will the truth be reflected? Through the audience? From the directors? A through line in this journal realized only upon completion? It's a mystery. And though I am making light of it, I, more accurately, am acutely aware that it matters

deeply to me that I accomplish something very real, and not at all fantastical. Although, *fantastic* would suit me just fine.

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Met today with Julia (Dr. Listengarten) and Kate (Ingram) over at Starbucks coffee shop. Great little place. Wish I drank coffee. Nevertheless, the aromatic ambience had me fully stimulated and excited to talk. The agenda: to solidify what the heck this thesis is going to be. Last spring I had the amazingly good fortune to play Scapin in Moliere's *The Trickeries of Scapin*. It is traditionally a male role. Moliere wrote the part for himself when it was suggested that at 49 he was aging and couldn't handle the big, physical stuff like he used to. Further,

under vicious attacks from the clergy for impiety, certain segments of society for immorality, with his private life in disarray and his health failing, Moliere evidently felt the need to write a comedy which would appear to be mere froth, the lightest of entertainments, totally devoid of any social criticism, but which, nevertheless, would give him the opportunity to get even with his opponents, whose stupidity, narrow-mindedness and bigotry he would personify....Also, he obviously intended the play to be a celebration of the art of theatre itself and must have created Scapin for himself in order to show his prowess as a performer before saying farewell to what he valued most: his art and life itself (Yalman 4-5).

To be sure, it was a tremendous experience, for I have never worked so hard in one show as I did with this role. Factoring in nothing of my own input on the character, the rudimentary requirements for the part, as dictated by the script itself, were endless and indeed ruthless in their demand on the voice, body, imagination, and overall physical endurance and mental toughness. My focus was challenged wholly throughout rehearsals and with each performance. In the end, I was tremendously grateful for the chance to play this incredibly challenging role. Sadly, I question if I'll ever again be awarded the opportunity to take on a role of such humor, ferocity, physicality, and genius, to create a character politically motivated and, therefore, dangerous in his unassuming, low-status, clown disguise. A personage capable of making absolute fools of

the unsuspecting leaders of the day, much to the sheer delight of the leaders' constituents. I question it because women's roles are not written like this. (I challenge anyone to come up with a woman's role existing already in theatre that embodies all of these very intense, luxurious, and powerful characteristics.)

I could have written a thesis on this particular subject. I think it is a wildly fascinating topic of discussion, offering a penetrating look into the kinds of roles that exist for women. Perhaps it is something I will delve more into later in my life. But at this time in my journey, it is a role I reflect on and relish. Though, for the record, I'd say I did a pretty damn good job...even for a girl! But I digress. So why exactly am I meeting Kate and Julia today? Why are we not discussing my process with Moliere? Simple. I didn't enjoy the research part of Commedia. While I loved the role and the opportunities it afforded and the challenges it presented, I wasn't terribly interested in the history of Commedia Dell' Arte as an art form. I had no interest in spending countless hours on a topic that less than thrilled me in order to fulfill my thesis task. Thus, Plan B.

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I wrote a paper in the spring of 2005 for Julia's class titled "The Absurd Mirror of Reality." After reading and critically analyzing Martin Esslin's essay "The Hall of Mirrors" in which he examines the quintessence of the theatre of Jean Genet, I explored his findings, made sense of them for myself, and reapplied them to Genet's *The Maids*, August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, and Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. Esslin sums up the essence of Genet's theatre as "a series of plays concerned with expressing his own feeling of helplessness and solitude confronted with the despair and loneliness of man caught in the hall of mirrors of the human condition, inexorably trapped by an endless progression of images that are merely his

own distorted reflection—lies covering lies, fantasies battenning upon fantasies, nightmares nourished by nightmares within nightmares” (Esslin 140-141). As I wrote in the introductory paragraph of “The Absurd Mirror of Reality”: “*Miss Julie, The Beauty Queen of Leenane, and The Maids,*” each depict characters who are crippled by their personal reflections of truth, illuminating the ‘dream world of the outcast of society, [exploring] the human condition, the alienation of man, his solitude, [and] his futile search for meaning and reality’ (167). Esslin’s “A Hall of Mirrors” identifies and constructs the image of man’s trapped life, which serves as the link among the works of Strindberg, McDonagh, and Genet” (Bryant). I don’t suppose I am to quote and cite myself, am I? I guess not until I’m published. I’ll leave it for now. This *is* a thesis about reality vs. fantasy. I’ll fantasize that I’m published.

Anyway, the ideas and the themes raised by Esslin were compelling, indeed intoxicating to me. Commedia, in my mind, resonated as something archaic, almost irrelevant to the theatre today. Though brilliant in its form and indelible in its importance to theatre history, the acuity that once made Commedia an acidic, sharp, and sensory-stimulating tongue lashing to Moliere’s theatre audience, has transformed itself into something else for today’s couch-potato patrons of the ‘modern world.’ Modern audiences turn to the likes of *Letterman, The Daily Show,* and various sketch comedy productions to satiate their proclivity for fast-paced, satirical, politically charged pleasures. And in that way, Commedia lives. But it is a form, now, for the sound-byte era, not the stage. (I suppose Commedia experts would jeer at me for such a statement. But, it’s my thesis. I can say whatever the hell I want.)

What I do like is people. Actually, that isn’t all together true either. Rather, I am fascinated by people. What makes a person tick has always been an endless source of acute interest, awareness, and observation for me. How and why a person is who s/he is and how that

affects every aspect of her/his life, for all of her/his life, brings hours of meditative enjoyment to my voyeuristic behavior. Further, it is the ‘bad’ stuff that resides in all of us I find most exciting. But, I suppose that is of little surprise, as it is the ‘bad’ stuff that usually creates the conflict. And conflict, my dear, is drama. Trust me when I say that there is LOTS-O’-DRAMA in the three plays I chose to take on. So, let’s get to work. Tomorrow. So tired.

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What began as a study of the Avant-garde in Julia’s class has now become an enormous challenge—my thesis. *Miss Julie* and *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, in particular, made notable impressions on me. I was most struck by the humanity of the characters. Though the playwrights tend to explore the ‘dark’ side of human behavior in both plays, they do so with particular attention to the character’s reality, juxtaposing the fantasy in the character’s mind with the reality of their particular lot. The characters are all multi-dimensional people, reacting to real life situations like real life souls, right and wrong. There is nothing idealized or romanticized in these plots, unless, like in Genet’s *The Maids*, the exaggeration is written in for effect, for point-making. The playwrights themselves do not make excuses for the characters in their exploration of the ‘darker’ side. But rather, and that which attracts me most, the playwrights are unafraid to explore the parts of humanity that no one wants to see: fear, fantasy, self-loathing, jealousy, hate, abuse, loneliness, madness, obsession, neurosis, want, need, desire, despair. All are themes found within each play. All are themes found in real life.

In myself, I find the ability to relate to some part of all the characters, perhaps more than I would care to publicly admit. And perhaps that is the reason I am drawn to the electricity of these plays. Perhaps it is the identification within me that I wish to explore. Perhaps it is an awareness of the fantasy within my own mind in conflict with my actual reality that drags me

toward these characters. Perchance all of this thesis-ing is a ruse in order that I might discover something of myself through these plays within the guise and, essentially, safety net of academia. Perhaps it is only natural that we should all want to see what life is like on the ‘other side of the tracks’ to explore the fallen without falling ourselves. Perhaps. Only the process will tell.

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So, how did Genet get involved in this project? Again, this whole project stemmed from a class with Dr. Julia Listengarten, a formidable force within the UCF theatre faculty, from whom I have learned more about theatre and its impact on society and vice-versa than I had ever imagined even existing. Her teachings made theatre so much more than simply, “What part did I get cast as?” Though I have loved theatre and acting for essentially my entire life, it wasn’t until Dr. Listengarten that I thought of theatre as having any weight or any real meaning within the greater scope of society. Besides the fact that she is wicked smart, she brings with her a European appreciation of theatre as an art form that, arguably, does not exist in America outside of the theatre culture itself. (She’s Russian.) She has taught me to think about theatre beyond performance. I am grateful to her, for I know that this awareness will in turn foster a greater, more informed performance as an actor. And as a future teacher of the arts (and impending teacher...as I will be teaching Dramatic Literature to BFA theatre sophomores next semester), my future students will receive a greater education about what it means to be an artist who is actually involved in and articulate about the arts, rather than just an ego masturbating empty lines on a black stage. “Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it, as many of our players do, I had as lief the town crier spoke my lines” (*Hamlet* III.ii). The reference is current. I am, in addition to working on this thesis and

teaching Dramatic Literature, also playing Gertrude in UCF's production of *Hamlet* this spring. Digressing! Anyway, because of Julia, I understand that I am, and moreover know how to be, a contributing member of an important group of peoples, despite the capitalistic rape of what it means to be an artist in American culture today. For in the capitalistic society, it is not about art, but rather about the almighty dollar.

OK, back to Genet. "The Hall of Mirrors." It was Julia who saw the connective tissues, in terms of themes, from *Miss Julie* to *Beauty Queen*. She suggested Martin Esslin's book, *The Theatre of the Absurd* as a place to consider the writings of Genet, the themes Genet explores, and how those themes match up with *MJ* and *BQ*. As I wrote in my thesis abstract,

Theatre in its most crude, poignant, and honest form exists as the mirror of our world. This piercing mirror reflects mankind's hope, fear, self-doubt, passion, joy, despair, brilliance, destitution, and desire. It becomes the image of all that he hopes to be, yearns to achieve, and knows he has destroyed. Theatrical performances are without equal in their ability to conjure visible truth from the reflection man sees everyday and fails to recognize. Ultimately, theatre demands that man see himself without the masks of excuse, ignorance, or makeup.

I concluded that *The Maids*, *Miss Julie*, and *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* each demonstrate these ideas. Now, we get to the meat of this thesis and the greater question looming on the horizon: HOW DO I BRING THIS CONCEPT TO LIFE? I have written extensively, at this point, on my original paper, and the ideas covered in its pages. (Not to mention, I wrote the paper!) The text and the source material are established. Now it is time to put a show together. A 'theatrical performance' wherein my UCF audience might see something of themselves reflected in the three plays I have selected. Where do I begin? Well, it seems only right that since *The Absurd Mirror of Reality* began with Jean Genet, so too should the show. Enter Chris Niess. God, I hope he says yes! He's the only one who can do what I think I want. Truth is though, as I write, I realize that everyone I want for this show is not only my first choice, but my

only choice. I say *only* because they are the best. And frankly, I want the best. Why aim low? As the inscription from the painting on my office wall reads, “The greater the challenge, the more glory in surmounting it. Skilled captains gain their reputations from storms and tempests.” I’m not sure what size squall this thesis will produce, but my compass rose has been retooled and made shiny over the last three years of MFA training. Time to take her out and see what she’s made of. Let’s get dirty! All for now. Christmas cookies are fresh out of the oven. Ciao.

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In the transfer of notes from chicken scrawl on scrap sheets of paper to nicely typed verbiage on a brand new laptop, some of the frustration gets lost. The process looks far rosier in type and less, well, processed. For example, the following is what I actually wrote:

December 28

- J.J. Casting, casting in general. (Ed, Donte, Keston...all black men...Is that a problem? Just worked out that way.)
- Through line of the piece. Begin with Chris Niess. (?)
- Not wanting to step out to narrate.
- Moving from Chris with a voice over narrating from Genet’s...*Thief’s Journal*? Into... rehearsal of Gertrude/Hamlet scene with him having her look in the mirror @ herself—Roberta, (chair of the theatre department at UCF,) hopefully. Stop us—establish for the audience that this is a rehearsal...or can *The Maids* do that?
- Write dialogue between R-me-Eddie about...essentially Esslin’s idea of Genet’s theatre and “The Hall of Mirrors.” This will explain what it is the project is about w/out stepping out to describe it to the audience.

(Arrow drawn to bottom of page. Then...)

- —what I like about the concept—what I find interesting about it. That the whole thesis stems from a paper I wrote for Julia in spring ’05.
- Biggest hurdle...

The biggest hurdle is what? Transferring all of my notes from messy thoughts to well ordered, formal writing? Even what I wrote above is way too neat to be an accurate replica of my first round of recording. But, I have to hand write everything first. With that comes chicken

scrawl, incomplete sentences, lots of scribbling, and endless arrows connecting thoughts from one page to another. For the most part, I loathe writing journals. It comes down to patience. My brain works so much faster than my hand, obviously, that I wind up frustrated. I've worked out twenty-eight different scenarios in my mind before I've finished my first sentence. Patience. It would serve me well to have some. Left to my own devices, I would just keep everything in my head. However, I have been in graduate school long enough to know that such ideology isn't in the least bit ideal. It gets crowded in the ole craw. Putting thought down on paper gives us the opportunity to process it. Mull it over. Examine, explore, reflect, and respond. I have seen the merits of journaling over the last three years. They have done me well from class to class, fashioning clear opinions and molding visceral experiences into tools that can be used to hone and craft more visceral experiences. Experiences that I can write about and mold into more tools for crafting new visceral experiences. You get the idea. However, let me be super clear. I do work out many things in my mind before I even get to the pen and paper. Writing helps me to clarify and that clarification is important. But as this is about my process, I have come to learn in graduate school that rightly or wrongly, I *think* about my projects and assignments and rehearsals. Everything! I think and think and think and think and think and think and eat junk food and think some more. I consider things like: Will this Thesis be interesting to anyone besides me? Will I be able to juggle everything efficiently? Are my classes going to be good this semester? Will I be an effective instructor in Dramatic Literature II? Will I be successful in *Hamlet*? Do I want to cut my hair? What do I want for dinner? And so on.... This isn't to say that writing is less important, but rather only to acknowledge to myself that I am often consumed in thoughts about school, acting, my future in acting, and particularly these days, my thesis.

We'll see later if this awareness amounts to anything later on in the process. Ok, back to my notes and putting this show together. Fortunately, I know how to translate chicken scratch.

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January 2006

The Dream Team:

Beauty Queen - Has to be Kate Ingram. That's it. If she says no, I'm screwed. There is not only no one else in all of Orlando who can do the part as I want it done, but of all the people I've personally known in my whole life that I could ask, it would still be Kate. And fortunately for me, she said yes before I left for Christmas break. Kate. My voice professor for the last two years—acting voice, not singing voice. She's ridiculously talented. I've not met, to this point in my life, an actor who lives as completely in 'the moment' as she. Good Lord, I've learned so much from this woman. But probably the greatest lesson I have gained from her, both by her own example as well as her classroom pedagogy, is what it means to be involved on the line...in the line...not ahead of the line or behind the line. IN THE MOMENT. (Reading Cicely Berry's *The Actor and the Text* for Kate was intensely beneficial for me.) I wrote in my journal for Kate in the fall of 2005:

Cicely Berry is an endless fountain of good, the way that she phrases thoughts and ideas are at once revelatory and obvious. She manages to put into words what I sometimes experience, but didn't know how to articulate. I.e.: 'One of the important things we learn from them, [sonnets], is how to place the main thrust of the thought and hold it in the mind of the listener, while digressing and going up side-alleys of imagery.' (Berry) Having studied Shakespeare all semester, we know that the argument of the sonnet is most often straight away at the start of it. I've understood that our obstacle is to maintain that first thought till its conclusion at the end. But Ms. Berry's validating phrasing empowers me to say, "This is a difficult thing to do, but it *is* the structure of the sonnet—so let's get to work!"

With Ms. Berry's text as referential source material, Kate taught us how each word has meaning, has resonance, emotional value, integral thought, and serves to push-pull-repel-attract. Kate is emotionally available as an actress, fusing every thought with sustenance, with air, with quite literally, a life force. She is the model of her own pedagogy. You have only two choices when opposite Kate:

1. You hurdle yourself headfirst onto the zooming Kate Express and zip-zap-zop your way from acting class 101 to 6340 in 0 to 60 seconds.

or

2. You stand frozen for fear of failure and wince as a missed opportunity whizzes past. Dumb.

Fortunately, I'm on a mission to destination excellence and I'm gonna need a heavy duty diesel engine to help me get there. (I hope she doesn't mind me referring to her as a choo-choo train. But I trust the analogy is clear. I need power in this program, and she's among the best of the best.) Her only fault lies in being way too attractive for the part (Mag). But I don't know any actress who would take offense to that kind of criticism. She's on board.

I will ask Dr. Seay (Doc) to direct the piece. He is the former chair of the UCF Theatre Department and my acting teacher for the final semester. I feel that with Kate on board to play Mag (me owl pea-hen of a mother), he will be more inclined to say yes. I appreciate his knowledge and experience as a director and actor. Moreover, I've heard wonderful things about him as an acting teacher, so I'm hoping to double up on him as much as possible this last semester of my MFA career. One scene down. Two more to go.

Miss Julie - Whelp, the 'perfect' actor for this part doesn't exist, currently, at school. Ok. So, immediately, plan B rears its ugly head again. Almost perfect. Where Kate is too pretty,

Donte Bonner is too young. But with guidance from JJ Ruscella, dream director for the scene, I think that the three of us can turn in a quality performance. The fact, too, that Donte is black could add a whole other layer to the relationship, contextually speaking, that could raise the stakes even further than I'd previously imagined. Most importantly, I trust my friend, Donte. I appreciate his talent, his focus, and his diligence as an actor. I know that if he says yes, he will be as committed to the project as if it were his own. I'll need that. And I would rather not have to ask for it. With Donte, I won't. It's part of his package. Oh please, Donte, say yes! The perfect director for this scene is JJ Ruscella. JJ scares the hell out of me and I love him for that. His expectations are intensely high, his personage is super intimidating, and his concentrated commitment to the *craft* of acting is nothing like what I have experienced in my training to this point. He presents a reservoir of endless tools that I know will bring me to the level and quality of work I wish to achieve. Moreover, he seems to believe in me...sees something in me that might resemble possibilities...maybe even talent. I cannot think of too many more people beyond JJ that I would want that vote of confidence from. As JJ, Donte, and I have worked together a few times now already, I am hopeful that they will each agree to this tri-union and bring my vision of a professional quality performance even closer to reality. Aim big. I'm picking the superstars for this project. I've always said I want to work with the best of the best. Why work with anything or anyone less than that on my own thesis?

The Maids - Arlen Bensen, dream director. I was cast in Neil Simon's *Proposals* at UCF Fall of 2004. Arlen was a guest director that they brought in last minute. I could not have been more fortunate than to have landed in this particular play. Arlen encapsulated what it means to direct at the collegiate level: treat us, the students, like professionals, exhibit high regard for our contributions and willingness to perform, and also provide us with the means to work as

professionals. He validated that though we were students, we were, more accurately, young actors who wanted to act. His dialogue was always on a professional level, nothing ever ‘dumbed down’ for the sake of the academic environment. He established a code by which we would work and we did. But it was the respect he gave to the cast that was his greatest gift and ultimately, got him what he wanted—a high quality performance. I have often found that professors expect/demand respect from their casts for the knowledge they are about to ‘bestow.’ Yet, the professor shows very little of the same respect for the students, forgetting that though the students are young, in most cases, they still have a voice. Arlen engaged us in dialogue, in intensive amounts of table work, imploring us to take responsibility for the entire production and story, and not simply limit our focus to our own lines. He allowed us to be a part of the discoveries within the story. It wasn’t something spoon fed or force fed to the cast as being only his way or the highway. Further, he took his time to work with us as an ensemble and individually. His expectations were high, but he provided a means by which to achieve them. When I went to rehearsals for *Proposals*, I felt like I was going to a professional rehearsal. And perhaps that was what I liked best about him, not that he found a way to direct us on an academic level, but rather, that he directed. And we acted. And together we found a good show.

Further, Arlen tapped into regular habits of mine that contributed to a sameness I brought from character to character. I have often received the note over the years that my characters are too “sophisticated.” I didn’t always know what that meant. I would think, ‘I’m playing the character too smart? Too refined? I’m playing the end of the play in Act I, scene I?’ I would try to make adjustments, but didn’t always feel successful. Finally, Arlen said to me, “You know how the ballerinas walk in NYC? You know, when they’re in street shoes, on their way into Lincoln Center, just off the subway? Feet turned out, flopping heel-toe, heel-toe? Beautiful,

elegant, otherwise poised young ladies in their pink tights and satin slippers, but on the streets they walk like clods?” And I thought to myself, ‘Yes, I know exactly what you are talking about. They *do* walk like flat-footed heathens!’ Still, I questioned, “What’s your point, Arlen?” “That’s how your character needs to walk, Lisa.” He went on to explain that I was walking with way too much ‘sophistication’ for my character. But this time I understood the meaning.

From my own dance training I have taken pride in my ability to move well on stage, to carry myself gracefully from one side of the room to another. But guess what? Not all characters move with grace. In fact, a whole bunch of them don’t. I know. Quite a revelation isn’t it. I was taking so much ‘pride’ in my ability to move well that I was missing out on character choices that went beyond something surface or articulated, demonstrative in some way. Suddenly, I was aware that even if I were playing a character who didn’t move well, I probably ‘didn’t-move-well’ with great ease and agility. Duh! How could I have missed something so basic for so long? And yet, it wasn’t until Arlen was able to put it in to language I understood that I recognized what it was that was sabotaging my otherwise strong choices, that I was able to finally take some major steps forward. In that moment, all of the notes I’d received in my movement classes about being overtly demonstrative, or too dance-y, truly hit home. People move like people, not like dancers. 30 years-old, folks, and I just got that one. Whatever. Point is, I got it. And I want more. I want to work with Arlen 1000 more times and be 1000 times stronger as an actress for it. And furthermore, I like him. Like Kate and JJ, Arlen is in love with his craft. Again and again, these are the people I want to work with.

But who will play my sister? Hmm, tough one. Once again, I think there is only one gal who can add to the level of achievement I am looking for. Jenny Ashman. Prior to asking Jenny, I actually scoped out another actress for the part, based on a kind of loyalty I felt toward

her from early conversations. I knew in my gut she wasn't the best choice, but I was willing to make it work. Fortunately, however, she was unable to follow through with the necessary time commitments for the show and I was free to ask Jenny. Big lesson there. When it comes to big things like this, screw niceties and go for what you really want. Had the other young lady followed through with it, I would have been intensely distracted by her not being exactly what I was hoping for and would have experienced a kind of stress that would have been unproductive for me, and unfair to her. I got lucky that she backed out. I won't count on luck in the future.

The Maids is a bitch of a play. Jean Genet didn't exactly write in straightforward prose. Further, he actually intended men to play all of the roles in his original inception. I felt apologetic that I wasn't a man and was afraid that as such, we would miss something innate in the final performance. But, I trust Jenny. She's a strong, young actress, and like Donte, she will take on the challenges as if they are her own. With Jenny and Arlen, this scene could be really fantastic.

Chris Niess - This one is a really big deal. I spoke with Chris prior to leaving for Christmas break about whether or not he would be interested in being a part of the show and he said yes. But, as of right now, I have no idea how in the hell I am going bring it to life. We'll see if he still says yes after I explain better what I am looking for. (When I figure it out.) But this is what I am looking at:

Stilitano was alone. Everyone had found the way out except he. Strangely the universe veiled itself for me. The shadow that suddenly fell over things and people was the shadow of my solitude confronted with this despair, for, no longer able to shout, to butt himself against the walls of glass, resigned at being a mockery for the gaping crowd, Stilitano had crouched down on the floor, refusing to go on... (Esslin 140).

I want Chris to represent the Stilitano figure. The paper opened with Genet, so, too, should the show. It is important to establish the visceral tone for what the rest of the production is going to be. His 'breakdown' will foreshadow each of the character's breakdowns. If we

boiled all of the scenes and scenarios down to one emotional reaction, it would be like that of Stilitano's. His breakdown represents human futility, that we are all lost in a hall of mirrors. My first and greatest concern, however, is how in the heck am I going to produce a hall of mirrors? The fact is I'm not. I'm not interested in doing so, for then the show becomes something else and far too massive for its vulnerable, opening moments. I don't want the opening to dominate or even dictate the rest of the show. I want merely to establish a voice, set up a through line, and introduce a mood. "For man never reasons so much and becomes so introspective as when he suffers, since he is anxious to get at the cause of his sufferings, to learn who has produced them, and whether it is just or unjust that he should have to bear them" (Pirandello). It is this kind of irritation that I am looking to instill in the audience, even if it be only slight. It is key for Chris to take on this role. First of all, he's perfect for it. He is a man. He is adept at movement. He embodies a strong presence and is self-assured. He rarely ever exhibits vulnerability, and seldom speaks with ambiguity or doubt. He is well-liked throughout the department and is a highly recognizable faculty member. To take such a poised, self-reliant man, a presence in the classroom and behind the audition table, and have him crumble in front of an unsuspecting audience of mostly his students will make a statement. Even if they don't know what the statement is, they'll know something is definitely going on. Again, I am so happy that Chris has said yes to this. And it so important to me that I find a labyrinth in which he can reach a point of breakdown. Otherwise, the set-up will be wholly contrived, completely confusing, and provide a limp wristed opening to what is supposed to be a very intensive evening of theatre.

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Back in school and holy crap!!!! EVERYONE on my dream team has said yes!!!!!! I can't believe it. I'm thrilled. Who knew? No one even batted an eye. They said sure, when is

the show? March 20. Ok. That's soon, but we'll get it done. I picked March 20 because I would like to have the show over before *Hamlet* opens. I would hate to have to push it to the end of the year. Furthermore, Donte, Jenny, Doc, and Kate are all in shows outside of school, but none of them start rehearsal till after the 20th. It's great timing.

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Arlen will not be directing *The Maids*. He has personal needs to take care of and doesn't feel like he could provide the kind of focus he would want, and knows I want, for such an important project. I am disappointed, but I respect his decision. I have only one person in mind to replace him, Mark Brotherton. He was my acting professor last semester, but beyond that, we have never worked together. What I know best about him, however, is that he loves working with the students. He loves theatre. He has great ideas. He is passionate. And he will want us to look good. I want to look good. I will ask him tomorrow.

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Mark said yes! He wasn't thrilled that it was *The Maids*. It's not exactly the easiest piece of theatre. But he was also, I think, excited for the challenge. One thing, though. We won't be able to start until after ACTF, The College Theatre Festival. And that isn't until the first week of February. Kate said the same thing. Okay, okay. Deep breathe. No worries. We'll still have about eight weeks to get the show on the road. We'll wait until February to get to work. I have plenty to think about until then. WEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!! Everyone said yes!!! This show is gonna rock and roll, babies!

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In order to help with the concept of the "Hall of Mirrors," I am placing the performance in Dance Room 1. It's the larger of the two. I intend to use the corner of the room where the

mirrors come together as the backdrop for the stage. The audience will then sit actually facing the mirrors. I want to create an opportunity for them to catch their own reflections within the scenes, to grasp a glimpse of themselves responding to something they are watching on the stage, and maybe to be surprised by what they do or do not see within that response. The entire argument of the piece is centered on the reflection of self. I believe it would be a missed opportunity to not use the mirrors. Furthermore, I want to shake the audience up a little. Take them out of their comfort zones. There is a kind of contentedness that happens in doing something that is familiar. We go to the theatre. We sit in the chairs. We wait for the lights to go out. We wait for the lights to come up. We look at the show. We clap when it's over. We go home and forget everything we've just done. I'd like for this show to be considered beyond that bland recipe. These characters, these playwrights, and my work should resonate with the audience even after they've left. Otherwise, I have done a disservice to the text and to my own vision. By disrupting their 'normal' patterns of show-watching, I hope to encourage all of the aforementioned possibilities. In addition, I intend to fully transform the space so that it resembles nothing of a dance studio. I will be hanging, I hope, materials from the ceiling that will block out three quarters of the walls, framing the stage even further. I want to create a sort of Bohemian, circus-tent kind of feel. That we, as the actors, have shown up that day, set up our magic tent, and invited the audience to join us on a journey they were never expecting. It is important to sell the environment from the moment they step into the space. Initially, there will be so many questions about "How is Lisa going to perform in the dance studio?" and I want those questions squelched immediately. The audience needs to know that before the show even begins, a great deal of thought has already gone into the making of it. If I am willing to find and

hang material that will fill a room of that size simply to establish an environmental experience for the audience, then what will I not be willing to do for the actual performance?

I am a big believer, though, in hooking the audience immediately. It's a business move. You've got to 'sell' the idea, 'sell' the show. So much of the success of that sale comes in the form of packaging. We see it everyday on television. Verizon asks, "Can you hear me now?" While Sprint replies, "Call me!" They are working to 'hook' their audiences. "I'll see your Razz phone," says Verizon, "and raise you an itunes PDA." Sales, people! Just look at the invasion of untalented movie actors currently starring on Broadway. Producers are selling the name, not the talent. My hope is to get the audience hooked by the packaging and keep them there with the talent! So, in order to get them excited about sitting on the floor, I intend to throw a huge, oriental rug in the middle of the room. I also hope to find bean bag chairs, throw pillows, and some other cushion-like apparatus that will make them want to join the party on the floor. For the adult types, I will pull the big blue chairs in from the hall, as well as arrange a few other normal chairs. I want them to be comfortable. The rest of throng will sit on the floor and they'll like it! I want the show to have a cinematic feel—uninterrupted, intimate, and naturalistic. I want music to work with setting the tone and to highlight the overall experience of the piece, as well. I will use music in the transitions, in the pre-show, and as underscoring for one or two of the scenes, particularly *Beauty Queen*. The script calls for Irish tunes in the background anyway, so it all plays directly into my scheming little hands. Best of all, Kate already said she has Irish music she can supply. I am most interested in using music for the opening sequence with Chris. But until I figure out what that sequence will be, exactly, I can't pick that piece of music.

All right. The big things to figure out between now and rehearsals actually getting started are: Chris's labyrinth, the through line/connective tissue from scene to scene, and the actual

scenes. Has anyone seen the sun? What about my son, Roofus? He probably thinks his mother has abandoned him. I wish I could smell May.

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It's a good thing that we don't start rehearsals for another week. Between teaching Dramatic Literature and rehearsals for *Hamlet*, not to mention my own course load, I am incredibly busy. Starting to get nervous about juggling everything effectively. Have I bitten off more than I can chew? I'm feeling heavy under the weight of it all right now. Everything sounded so good in theory. Now faced with the actuality of bringing it all together is slightly daunting. Keep aiming high. It's all gonna work out. It has to! Right?

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February 2006

I asked Roberta about setting the date for my thesis on March 20. I had hoped that she would consider giving everyone the night off from rehearsal to come and see the show. (Or at least give me the night off.) Answer was a resounding NOPE! I can understand. It will be the week we are opening *Hamlet*, and we'll just have had the week of Spring Break off prior to. What was I thinking? I knew it seemed too good to be true. Set new date. I must find a time that will not conflict with Kate, Mark, Doc, Jenny, or Donte's rehearsal schedules at Orlando Rep. or OSF, respectively. The only dates I see as plausible are April 17 and 18. Both theatres will be dark those nights. But will my actors still want to sandwich in my show between their other commitments? It could all blow up right about now. Have you ever seen a stack of carefully placed cards collapse into a pile of nothingness? Yeah, that's the image I have. Shake the image. Here we go. Still thinking about through lines, labyrinths, and scenes. Still trying to not sink in Dramatic Literature II. I feel like a plane in a holding pattern in the Bermuda

Triangle. And yet, only in the externals. My mind is ceaseless in its ponderings and pontifications. Let's get the date changed and work on picking out scenes.

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April 18th set. April 17 will be a tech, I hope. April 16 will be the final day to rehearse the hell out of each scene. I've reserved the space for all three days. I've reserved my directors and actors; I have now only to start the rehearsal process. The only sad news, Mark will not be able to attend the show. But, I don't have any other time to do it. For the record, it was/is important for me to do the show while we are still in school. I want as many people as possible to be able to come to see it. I don't want to do a shit-ton of work, only for no one to witness the event! So I have fought to make it happen before the school year is out. On the other hand, as it is now mid-February, I'm really glad for the extra time! Now, seriously, what am I going to do about this opening sequence? I cannot move to the through line, I don't think, until I know how I am going to establish my visceral impact on the audience. I know what I don't want. I don't want to step out and break the fourth wall with a little song and dance about "Last year I wrote a paper about...and then Genet watched...and now Chris is going to....", or "What Chris just did was...." Bleck! I want the show to stand on its own. I don't want any explanation about what is going on. I want only experience. As long as I know what is going on, we can achieve it through performance. On the other hand, I don't want the audience to be so alienated in their own confusion that I completely zap their attention to the rest of the show. Simple is better. Simple is better. Everything is too big in my head right now. Boil it down...what is the labyrinth, Lisa?

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Meanwhile, ACTF is over. The cast and crew are ready to get to work. I need to put together a presentation of my vision so that we are all on the same page regarding the story I wish to tell. Perhaps through the sharing of ideas, a solution will be found pertaining to the through line and Chris's maze. But first, scene choice and show order:

The Maids. Sets the tone for fantasy vs. reality. I've chosen the opening sequence from the play to be the opening sequence of my performance. The play opens with the sisters already engaged in a role play 'game.' The audience (most of them) won't know that the sisters are not who they are playing until the interruption of an alarm tells them so. This is the first shattering of glass, the first experience, post-Chris, in which the audience will experience a kind of, "What's going on here? What is and what isn't real?" As Jean-Paul Sartre, one of Genet's mentors wrote of Genet's work, "Appearance, which is constantly on the point of passing itself off as reality, must constantly reveal its profound unreality." (Sartre 16) I think this scene, with the built in interruption of fantasy broken by reality, is a strong opening statement for the rest of the pastiche. And what is more, by beginning with *The Maids*, I am able to continue the 'tribute' to Genet as he was the starting point for the rest of this journey. Between Chris/Stilitano and *The Maids*, Genet's voice ought to be clearly established.

Miss Julie. Should represent the results of the mirror shattering. We will pick it up after the sex act (18-25). The role playing and the seduction dance are over. They've had sex, and now they must deal with the reality of their shattered illusions. (That and the fact that Miss Julie is a nutcase!)

The Beauty Queen of Leenane. A fusion of the first two scenes. A fusion (in terms of dysfunction) played out all the way to the absolute destruction of self. The suicide/murder that is alluded to, and enacted in *Beauty* scenes seven and eight, represent all three plays, (as all three

plays, ultimately, end in suicide or murder). Although, I am not convinced that we will need scene eight: Maureen's big monologue. By that point, the audience will have been hit with the spectrum of emotions. And I rather like ending on the intensity that scene seven brings us to. Without doing the whole play, I'm not convinced scene eight, and the discovery that Maureen has murdered Mag, will be as jarring. It may be more interesting to the audience to let their imaginations speculate as to how the play actually ends. Maybe they'll be interested enough to actually pick up the script and read it. What a concept. (Have I mentioned that I'm thrilled with the opportunity to do an Irish dialect in performance? On top of everything else...I really am.) I'm not being sarcastic. I am, however, tired. Meeting tomorrow. Nervous. Hope they don't think I'm an idiot. Put together a packet. Can't write in complete sentences at all. Must learn my *Hamlet* lines. Nighty-night, world.

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Presentation went well. I think they liked what I had to say and seemed to be really on board. I have asked quite a lot out of many people for this production. I have three faculty directors, and two faculty actors helping with just the performance end of it alone. Furthermore, I will be approaching the tech/design faculty for help in that particular arena as well. I am intensely grateful to them all for their agreeing to assist me in this massive project. How or why it is they said yes, I am unsure. I fully recognize that they would not necessarily do so for everyone. And yet, on the one hand, I believe they would. Each of the professors I have solicited help from is intensely committed to his/her roles as an educator. All of them go above and beyond the minimum in their day to day existence. I would like to think, though, that over the last three years, between class work, twelve UCF productions, and various other interactions, I have proven myself to be worth the investment. Worth the time. It was important for them to

know that this thesis is important to me and that is why my proposal today was extra thoughtful and passionate.

I was very clear in my proposal, today, that I was to function in two parts. The first is as a kind of Artistic Director. Such was the role I played today. I asked these folks if they would be willing to be a part of my vision. In my presentation I discussed what that vision is, as I have written about it in this journal, and how I hoped they would consider working within that scope. In order that the show have order, it is important that as an ensemble we are all working with the same, big picture/goal in mind. By having so many creative, accomplished folks involved, it would be easy to have a wildly diverse showing of several different versions of the same idea. That would certainly be an interesting choice, but not one I wanted to make. I like the idea of having four different directors. Naturally, the approach to each piece will be different because the artists are different. But, hopefully, the integrity of the through line and continuity of the performance will be preserved and articulated by a global understanding of what it is we are striving to achieve in the final performance. We will take four different scenes, seven different characters, three different playwrights, and an ensemble of varying, but accomplished talents and produce a cohesive showcase of common themes expressed through different voices—all of our voices! It's going to be glorious! I hope.

My *other* role is to function strictly as an actor. It is incredibly important to me that if I am going to ask these professors to help me with *my* project in *their* own free time, that I also take the opportunity to learn from them, and that I treat myself to an acting intensive 'seminar' for my final M.F.A semester. Further, I am earning a degree in acting, not directing or producing. Though this is a thesis, the connotation denoting something of an intellectual process, it is also an acting showcase of sorts. I want to act. I want to exhibit acting—what I

have learned, what I am capable of, and where I could go. And within this process, I want to luxuriate in the opportunity to act out remarkably difficult, beautiful scenes, as well as relish in the abilities of the directors and actors who have committed to helping me achieve my goal. Here is the situation. It's Feb. 23. The show is April 18, but we must have most of our rehearsals locked in by March 20 before everyone embarks on their other productions. Fine, it's good to have deadlines and parameters. It keeps us structured, focused and on task. Now that the scenes are picked, we can all start memorizing and doing our own, preliminary, behind the scenes work. Good ideas were brought up in the meeting as well. Regarding the transitions and through line, Mark suggested making them a part of the show. Rather than try to hide what was happening, allow it to be part of the convention. He pointed out that the theatre itself is an example of fantasy vs. reality, and that by making that apparent, we were supporting the point of the production and also finding a solution to our problem. I liked it! Kate suggested creating a sort of roadmap with the program, potentially putting any necessary explanations down on paper for people to read and apply for themselves, rather than taking the time to step out of the world of the play to explain. Thought that idea had possibilities, too. I was grateful for their willingness to jump in with ideas, particularly with so many other things on their plates. They were wonderfully supportive.

Quality meetings with Vandy Wood and Martin Wooten about set, lights, and sound. Vandy, set and lighting designer and professor at UCF, also on my thesis committee, seemed confident that my desire to hang materials from the ceiling of the dance studio would be fine and that the ceilings would support the weight. I just have to find something light enough, and a way to secure it. The tricky part is going to be in finding the time to get into the space and hang everything. But one thing at a time. I won't be hanging anything in there for over a month from

now. She also said that she would mention my thesis to students in her lighting class who might be interested in taking on the project for their own experience. That would be freaking fantastic. I know, without a doubt, I will need something besides the ultraviolet lights we have in there right now. Without lighting, I may as well scrap the nuances of the whole project. Traditional classroom lighting won't work with the package I am trying to 'sell.' I spoke with Martin about either he or a sound student building a soundtrack for me. He said to see him when *Hamlet* was over. No problem. I'll find him right away! So, all the balls appear to be in the air. Now it's time to juggle, I mean, rehearse.

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March 2006

Chris...labyrinth. I'm still thinking. We spoke about his vision of ugly flesh. Good, strong image. Does the labyrinth have something to do with the audience? Something he has to get through, to work past, literally? He is aspiring to be something that he is not. He is spiraling, but what is the spiral? To illuminate the hopelessness vs. the aspiration? But how do we show that? I have given him a copy of the excerpt from Genet's *The Thief's Journal* in order that he read the full story of Stilitano's breakdown, as well as copies of all of the scripts, per his request, in order that he can be familiar with, not only the character of Stilitano, but also of the disparity involved in each of the scenes. (Now that's some kind of sentence. My husband will either be impressed or very troubled.) I'm happy to find that Chris is thinking about it as much as I am.

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Rehearsals are underway. We all meet when we can, considering how rarely the free time, and I use that term loosely, in our schedules overlaps. First and foremost, I should note that I have lost Doc. He is the lead in Orlando Rep's production of *You Can't Take It With You*,

and feels he has too much on his plate. Frankly, it's fine with me. Though his input would be invaluable without a doubt, his particular process requires more time than I currently have at my disposal right now. I need people who can blend both quality and speed at this stage of the game. Again, I have been fortunate that the people that I am working with have been very receptive to my vision. As the "artistic director" of this show I recognize that this is not always the case from production to production. People can be stubborn, difficult, unwilling to work with a vision, unwilling to show up to rehearsals, learn lines, take direction, etc. While I continue to be grateful for the time that everyone is VOLUNTEERING, I/we also must then adopt the mindset that once the commitments have been made, they are in. Else, like in Doc's case, alternate decisions must be made. By saying yes to a project, you enter into a contract to work and commit time and energy. It's a matter of respect. Doc had a lot on his plate. As the artistic director, I made the choice to 'let him go.' I knew it would make him happier and feel less stressed, and it has also done the same for me. I couldn't look at it as, "Oh, I'm a graduate student. I can't 'fire' Doc." I see it only as, "Hey, this is my project, and I want it to be great. Let's alleviate the potential stresses ahead of time so that we can continue forward in a healthy, productive fashion." It's about expectations. As the artistic director/leader, it is my job to present myself in a way that defines how I want to approach the work and at what level of professionalism I expect everyone else to adhere. Fortunately, I asked people to help me who would automatically work at a higher level than just minimal requirements, and who, as the professionals that they are, would extend the same kind of respect and professional courtesy to me as I have to them. Consequently, I haven't run into this particular issue much at all. I am fortunate enough to have had enough professional experience to recognize that when a director, producer, or artistic director fails to regularly monitor each link in the chain, then the strength of

the overall production can be undermined. I wanted to ensure that this did not happen with my show. Regroup. Find a new director and move on! So, to whom have I turned for help in this semi-crisis? Mark Brotherton. He is amazing. Mark is the embodiment of an accomplished, skilled, and wholly committed professor of the arts. He has not only said yes to directing *The Maids* and now to directing *Beauty Queen*, but he has also been an advocate for my vision, working quickly and efficiently to fit the scenes into the structure I have established.

Furthermore, he himself is the director of Doc's production of *You Can't Take It With You*, not to mention taking on his own course load and whatever the heck else he does in his spare time. I am humbled and grateful and tired just thinking about all he does for his students.

In the meantime, Kate and I have met about six times on our own to read lines, talk about dialect, and to gain an overall familiarity with the text. It has been nearly impossible to meet for any intensive sessions with anyone due to everyone's very busy schedules. But I am willing to work whenever I can: coming in early, staying through lunch, finding time on the weekends, staying late in the day, working till rehearsal for *Hamlet*. It's all been fine. I cannot ask folks to help me and then make them fit to my schedule. If I have a break when they have a break, I will meet. It looks like we won't get to *The Maids* until Spring Break. Jenny has to work during the day, then I have rehearsal at night, and now she is in California for the week. It's fine. I trust her. I trust Mark. We have lots of rehearsals planned for Spring Break, and then three weeks after that to hone and craft. (Of course, she'll start rehearsals for *You Can't Take It With You*, and I'll be opening *Hamlet*, but I'm still not worried. I trust it will all work out! I do believe in fairies!) This is when years of summer-stock become handy-dandy little experiences to draw upon. My only concern lies in not wanting to just throw something together, by reason of having no other option. And yet, I don't believe that will happen. I think about this project, these plays,

and these characters way too much to suddenly toss a performance together and hope that it will be a success.

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I felt like Alice in Wonderland. I was awakened to a new reality, a new approach. Suddenly, I had unlocked the doors to another world of possibility and wonder, and potential achievement. I thought to myself, ‘My God, I don’t know anything about acting!’ I was mad. I was happy. I was scared. I was hungry, immediately hungry, for more work. But I was also completely wrecked, spent, and exhausted by my experience. I had to come home and eat a cupcake. But I couldn’t. I had to go to rehearsal for *Hamlet*!

What had happened? I’d just had my first rehearsal with JJ and Donte for *Miss Julie*. I was specifically instructed not to plan the pieces ahead, not to pre-read or discuss them with Donte prior to our meeting time. Fine. No problem. No, I didn’t know why, but it didn’t matter. I knew there was method to JJ’s madness, and I couldn’t wait to figure out what it was. So, we all showed up. JJ was silent, mostly. “Put your chairs together, knees together.” “Look each other in the eye.” “Get your line/thought.” “Now say your line/thought to each other.” “Where did you get that wine?” I said. “Say it again,” JJ responded. “*Where* did you get that wine?” “Again.” “Where *did* you get *that* wine?” “Again.” “Where did *you* get that *wine*?!” “Ok, we have a problem,” JJ whispered. “We do?” I thought. We have a problem with me? It’s only the first line of the scene and he’s figured out, finally, after two years of knowing me that I can’t act. And it only took him one line. I’ve been found out. I am a fake, a fraud. I am in the wrong business! I’m humiliated. I’ve made a fool of myself in front of someone whose opinion matters to me. Fuck! But, I can’t back out of it now. I’ve come too far. I have to keep going. Whatever is about to happen has to happen. All right. Breathe. I must learn from this. I must

grow. I cannot be afraid. It's time to get tough. It's time to be strong. Note to self: "You have never wanted JJ to call you out, and yet secretly, you have because you know you need work, that you aren't perfect, and that he has tools that can make you better. Breathe, let it go. Be tough. This is what you've asked for. Now here is your opportunity to excel."

"Stay on the line, Lisa. Get out of the intellect. Let the line lead you. Don't force the impulse, let it hit you," JJ said. Slowly and methodically, we went through the entire scene, line by line, and learned to ride the impulse. I was laughing. I was crying. I was angry. I was hurt. And I was all of these things as Julie. JJ cautioned me about the amount of academic thought I had been putting into this project and reminded me that it also needs to be about my artistic challenges and achievements as well. That I need to play in my rehearsals. That I need to revel in the acting and in the discoveries that come with those kind of processes. That I can't possibly find something real and layered and textured by making it all up in my head first and never listening to what my partner has to offer. I can't act the scene alone. It can't be one-sided or all predetermined. To craft a character means to find the balance between the intellectual experience and the visceral exchange between partners. Ask the intellectual questions like, "What do I want?" Do the intellectually driven homework like flushing out the character—'particularizing' Miss Julie with specifics that my partner and I can react to. Find and create memories. Detail the history. That kind of head work is appropriate and needed. But I was painting Miss Julie with large, generalized brush strokes. For believability, for the greatest success, I needed to develop more complex thoughts. And to develop into the actor that I wish to be is to commit to this kind of detailing with every beat of the scene. Then, I have something to bring to the table. I have something my fellow actor can respond to and react to. At that point, the visceral impacts can have greater velocity because there is a history in place to respond to.

In a addition to the introduction of all of these new awarenesses and of ones that I have heard in my lifetime but somehow resonated differently this time, I was brought to a new level of ‘intimacy’ with a fellow actor. In order to establish the familiarity with one another that people gain from having just had sex, JJ had Donte and I do an exercise where we were very close physically. We sought out known (only to ourselves) spots with our noses on the other’s face—smelling, feeling, touching, experiencing one another’s breath on sensitive places like the ears, neck, mouth, etc. In order to find a germ of truth for a scene that was so dependent on the intimacy between the characters, we had to explore that intimacy. If we didn’t go there, we would never achieve believability. JJ provided a means by which to explore the intimate level that was safe and risky. Furthermore, I trust Donte implicitly. This is the very reason I had asked him to be a part of the scene. I needed someone who would be willing to explore the intimate, the dark, the ugly, the want, the desire, the urges, and the destitution of these incredibly lost individuals. I needed to know that I could work to find these repulsive attributes in Julie. That I could explore horrible, obnoxious behavior, and that we could challenge one another to be nasty and threatening, while also fighting, struggling to feel love and acceptance for the other and ourselves. I needed to be able to degrade Jean, without worrying that Donte’s feelings would be hurt and vice-versa. I found all of those things with Donte. He proved to be everything I had hoped he would be. With JJ’s guidance, we were intellectually crafting the characters while preserving the heart’s visceral awareness and life. I was finding that it isn’t enough to think about the obvious issues with a character, or to not go beyond the surface givens of the character. I truly found that telling the truth, looking a character in the eye and telling them what you (as your character) need, is simple only when you have clearly established those

needs. I am tired and losing focus. Exhaustion comes in waves. Moments ago I was swimming. I'm at the bottom of the ocean now.

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Only by immersing myself in the homework of layering/daydreaming this character, uncovering her secrets, creating her lies, establishing vivid memories from which to draw on throughout the scene, can I be successful in telling the truth. Until then, I cannot possibly hope to affect my scene partner with anything real, because I myself am just a shell of a human. I could feel the difference between when I was playing at the reality and when I was playing in the reality. This first step of awareness, of something I can hold, touch, see and smell, is the first step toward something greater in my work. That I am not at the mercy of 'winging' it and accidentally getting something right because good instincts got me close. I can be better than what I do naturally. I just haven't worked as hard as I've needed to until now. I am beginning, just beginning, to understand this new verbiage of JJ's and how to apply it to myself for greater growth, and ultimately, greater truth. Lesson for the day: Good acting is hard. It's time consuming. It requires enormous amounts of focus, tenacity, character development, imagination, risk, and abandon. I have, until this whole experience, been a relatively lazy actor. I've been resting on my laurels. But between this last year of the MFA track, and the work I am putting into this production, I am seeing the metaphors for what my future endeavors are going to require. **WORK!** The work is play, but first and foremost, it is work!!!!!!!!!!

One final layer of distinction on this note. No one who has paid any attention to me over the last three years would ever accuse me of laziness, from the outside. And I don't believe that I have tackled the last three years of classes and rehearsals and thought of myself as lazy or not working. But beginning with Scapin last spring through my classes this past year into teaching

Dramatic Literature and now to this project, I understand that I have learned and am continuing to learn how to work. And this particular project is driving that home for me. I know now, in my core, that to go through the motions of a busy schedule doesn't automatically mean I will learn something. It's just going through the motions. I don't believe it has been until most recently that I have truly begun to exercise the actual acting muscles. I have tools. I have ability. But the muscles that will get me to those intensive, vulnerable, open places for performance after performance are slightly atrophied from inconsistent usage. In the same way that students must learn how to learn, I am learning how to work, not just what the work is. A significant lesson!

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Talked to JJ about my discoveries. I liked his response to me. "You're on the playing field now." I'm not in the game, but I'm a hell of a lot closer than 90% of the rest of the jokers out there who call themselves actors. I can smell the park. I can see the guys on the field close up. I'm starting to understand the skill, the smarts, and the ability behind the game. My hands are itching to catch, or throw, whatever they'll let me do. I've made it to the field. Now it's time to work my way to the batting box. I'm gonna hang on to the analogy. I like it!

Got myself two stage managers. Zac Alfson and Nicki Priest. Met with them about the show, my needs, the dates, concerns, etc. They are going to be fantastic; already taking the ball and figuring out how they can help me roll it. The reality is that beyond asking for permission to use items, and then checking to see if we have said items, there isn't much they can do right now until we get closer to the show date. But somehow, I just feel better knowing that I can get some of the technical things out of my mind and make them someone else's problem for a while! I'm freed up to make more acting strides. And frankly, I am enjoying the intensive, acting work I've

created for myself this final semester. It's feeling good to have so many light bulbs going off at the end of this MFA run.

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Spring Break. I'm meeting with everyone all week. Mark has been awesome. He took *The Maids* script, cut it up one side and hacked it down the other, but all in the name of gearing the scene toward my needs of my show. He's incredibly smart with the material, and I appreciate his attention to the details and parameters I've set up. Jenny has been great. I'm so glad she said yes. She's playing my younger sister, but through much of the scene, her character dominates. Her voice is strong; her presence is wholly invested and her carriage supports the illusion that she is the one in control. This sets up the transition for my takeover in the scene so nicely. Contrast! Mark's blocking is tremendous. He has, essentially, created the whole set. But he has done so with consideration to each of the scenes and my concerns about transitions and through lines. The weight of having a director come in and naturally take care of those things is a huge lift off of my shoulders. And yet, I can't express how much gratitude I feel that he has made decisions based on my needs and not, necessarily, his own.

The blocking for *The Maids* has already helped so much to clarify what the hell is going on when we are role playing vs. when we are ourselves. I am starting to get excited about this piece. It's the last one to have really been tackled, and in its way, perhaps the most difficult. Genet's writing isn't exactly straightforward, and an element of confusion will and should exist for the audience. Yet, I don't want to completely alienate them within the first scene. We must continue to work with absolute clarity on our end in order to ensure involvement on the audience's part. Meanwhile, the piece is really quite fun. The overt role playing is a nice way to get into the show. It establishes, on purpose, that we are 'acting.' But then the fun begins when

the bizarre game turns into something very threatening and dark indeed. The sooner Jenny and I can get off book for this piece, the better off we will be. It is prop heavy, blocking heavy, costume heavy, and twist and turns heavy. I think it will be tons of fun when we can really let go and play. But that won't come until the scripts are out of the way. This piece is going to be awesome. I'm encouraged by Mark's commitment and great ideas. The show "is taking shape...the mold is setting."

The Maids will transition directly from Chris's breakdown. We have decided that I will watch the end of Chris's piece so as to represent Genet watching his mentor's collapse. I like this element. It brings me directly into the picture from the opening piece, where I will remain until the show's end. I will be the through line, the connective tissue from one scene to another. The show will be preset for *The Maids*. Chris's still-to-be-determined labyrinth will fit into it all somehow. (Staying positive.) I don't just want to force something out. Time, and time alone, will reveal the appropriate task. Mark's blocking then begins with me escorting Chris off the stage (per Chris's request), and then me going straight into my fascination with the gloves and Jenny's first line! It's great. It's the seamlessness I've been talking about and looking for. I just have to figure out a way to apply it to the other two scenes as well.

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Kate and I had a wicked rehearsal today. We have actually met the most because we can do so much by going over and over the lines for memory, as well as for dialect. In addition, there is very little blocking in the scene. There is almost none for Kate, except her collapse at the end, and mine is minimal, functional at the most. (Mark blocked this one for us, too!) Needless to say, rehearsals for us can be done with ease in places like Kate's office because of the lack of need for space. We use the time, as I stated, to learn the lines, practice the dialect,

and establish our intentions, subtext, wants, secrets, manipulations, etc. In some ways, *Beauty Queen*'s writing has built into it the kind of work JJ has me doing for *Miss Julie*. The secrets, the lies, the tortures, the needs in *Beauty* are spelled out throughout the play. The fun for Kate and me is realizing them in the moment, within the scene. We go at each other with our games—poking, prodding, needling, tricking. It's fun. The material just happens to be very dark.

Much of the fun comes from working with someone who is already so incredibly good. I almost only have to respond to whatever she's doing and she's back to me and we keep going from there. We have truly found enjoyment in playing with one another as actresses and letting the fabulous text do the rest of the work for us. Almost. I'm not about to give the text all of the credit for what we've brought to it! We had a hoot of a day this week in the dance studio. It really allowed us to get up out of our chairs, particularly for Kate, and truly go at each other, establishing clear beats, tactics, and the arc of the piece.

Unlike JJ, who I have had zero classroom time with while at school, I have had the honor to work with Kate a ton! Daily. For two years now. While I write sincerely of JJ and his approach to the acting craft, with great respect and constant desire for more, it has much to do with the fact that I haven't had him as a professor at all. My work with JJ has all been outside of the classroom, though I have often wished I'd had the opportunity to work with him on a regular basis. I've wanted learn from him since my first experience with him in UCF's production of *God's Country*. He says many of the same things that I have heard in other acting classes, but he approaches it all in a distinctive fashion, one, that when I've been privy to it, makes sense to me. It has created a continuous want for more. But let me not diminish the growth I have achieved from the regular, constant classes I have had with the likes of Chris and Kate. To have consummate, committed, and capable technique exhibited for you day after day is an honor and

not an opportunity to be overlooked or taken lightly. To then have the opportunity to work and play with these model archetypes of acting achievement is...completely wonderful.

Now, to be sure, behind the scenes she's truly an 'oul bitch' and I can't stand her. So when we met for one rehearsal earlier this week and threw workout balls at one another, it was sheer delight! (Just wanted to see if anyone was paying attention!) In our voice work with Kate, she is forever bringing in toys for us to play with that aid in freeing our instruments so that we might find range and color, and new and exciting choices within our text. I loved our games. I've missed the games this semester, for we have moved on to dialects and don't need them there. So, I was really excited when Kate suggested we 'play' and bring the balls out and try them with the scene. Good grief! In addition to having a hoot and screaming so loud that people at the front desk of the building could hear us, we actually accomplished some valuable tools to use in the scene. We each took turns, throwing the balls at one another, as the other stood behind a large crash mat. This way, we could literally throw the balls at one another and absorb the impact, without really being hurt. In no time, the balls took on the role of subtext. Sometimes they were hurled. Sometimes they were tossed. Sometimes rolled. Sometimes only used to threaten the other. But it went even beyond the balls. I was able to, at one point, exacerbate Kate by constantly, repeatedly knocking her script off of the mat. Later in that pass, I had her trapped under the mat while I hurled balls on top of her, and then finally threw myself on to her. In return, she threatened me with constant attacks, withholding the balls at other times, drawing out suspense, and discomfort, and challenging me by invading my space also with the crash mat. I laugh as I revisit the scene and put it into writing. The lesson this day is that really hard, focused, intensive, productive work can also be fun. And further, what a luxury to play with someone who is completely open and giving to the text, to the partner, and to whatever means is

tried in order to find success. Yes, it was fun, but let me clear: We each wanted, at one point or another, to graze the temple of the other's head. We were immersed in the needs of our characters which were to hurt, bait, frustrate, and piss off the other. But we didn't have to furrow our brows and contemplate the end of the world to do so. There are so many ways to approach working. But the constant through line, so far, has been the luxury of working with focused talent and the ability to work hard! *That* particular combination will foster the greatest opportunity for success on any stage.

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April 2006

Getting closer. Rehearsals have now moved to Tuesday and Thursday mornings for *The Maids* and *Beauty Queen*. They have all begun rehearsals now for *You Can't Take It With You* and are spread quite thin. At this point, we're chuggin' along. Mark gives feedback, helps to clarify intentions, movement, and clarity of tactic. He makes sure that the story we are telling is visible, that it doesn't peak too soon, and that it isn't feeble when it ought to be stout. Kate and I are coming along quite nicely on our lines. Jenny and I still have some work to do, though we're making progress in clarifying our intentions and role playing with every pass. *Miss Julie* continues to be about process, going ever deeper into the character and exploring the needs and wants. JJ has now introduced us to the idea of 'building the ideas': slaps, kisses, spitting, whipping, humping, demeaning, petting. Idea building is the creative part of the intellect. The intellect provides us with the facts, the cornerstones of the scene. But 'building the ideas' is what fleshes out those cornerstones. Building the ideas is like taking a snapshot, replicating the clothing, the poses, the time period, the surroundings, and then bringing them all to life with the specifics of the subjects. I.e.: What happened right before the picture was taken? Why does the

man in the picture look away from the camera? Why is the woman holding her stomach? What were they talking about as they waited for the flash? Even these questions are general, but the idea is right. It is work. Again, it is about specifying the scene, the people, and the relationship. Have a secret. A secret implies a life beyond the apparent moment, something that will significantly damage or otherwise affect the other character if they found out the secret. It raises the stakes, makes the moment life and death. Otherwise, why is it important for the audience to be there? Who cares? Donte and I have met several times for at least two hours at a time over this whole process. We have been incredibly open with one another, allowing each other infinite room to explore and discover the path and journey each of us are attempting to trek. Building and building some more. It's hard. I'm going to have to work at it for a long time, for the rest of my life, maybe. But it's worth it. I hope I will get to do it with the likes of a Kate on a regular basis sometime soon. I would like to do this kind of detailing with someone who is stronger and more experienced than I. I am so happy to be working with Donte, but I am ready to work with people that have been at it longer than me so that I might learn from their lessons, sooner. I'm not looking for shortcuts at all. But I am ready to saturate myself in talent after experienced talent and just listen, watch, do, work-hard, and ride the ride! (And work.)

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EUREKA! Labyrinth has been found! Chris and I figured it out together. I was still concerned about what it could be, but I knew we had to come up with something. I didn't want to scrap it, although it's getting close to show time. I was talking to Chris about various possibilities and then happened to move into a discussion about set changes. I knew I needed to set up some kind of set change convention that would be functional, but not pull focus. I was speculating about whether or not we should, in the aid of that convention, have my set crew

representing the Parisians that were taunting Chris while he was having his break down. In this way we establish the taunting, but we also don't pretend like the set crew isn't there. We bring them into the story. With this discussion, Chris asks me if I've ever heard of the game "How many ways can you sit in a chair?" No. I hadn't. He goes on to explain that it is exactly what it sounds like. He will literally take a chair and try to 'sit' in it in as many ways as possible. He will begin with great success, but then, slowly, he will have more and more difficulty with it, ultimately falling into despair and failure. The awareness of the audience (the Parisian crowd) will add to the humiliation of the event. Further, he will use the mirrors as reference to "The Hall of Mirrors," but also as a means by which he cannot hide. It sounds great! But best of all, it sounds simple! And simple is better. I don't want the opening to be a whole act. I want it to simply establish a tone, to tell a story—the story. I want the show to open just as my paper did. It will be the thesis statement, the introductory paragraph. I know that I want it underscored with music, and I want it to finish with the sound of shattering glass as he hits his collapse. Beyond that, I can't wait to see what it looks like. It sounds perfect.

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Chris is going to be beautiful. We don't need a ton of underscoring. I watched his scene today with only the sound of his breath supporting his work and it was gut wrenching. I even knew what the story was, what was happening, the function it served, and I was still moved. I cannot imagine that the audience will not experience some kind of reaction to watching their otherwise consummate professor enter into the breakdown that broke my heart today. I am so proud that he said yes to me and that he is willing to go so far. The story he tells is exactly what I wanted—Stilitano's story. The focus needs to be on him. No fancy music tricks or sound cues.

He will begin as the last of the pre-show music fades out, and end in haunting silence. What a beautiful piece of work he has developed for me, for this project. Thank you, Chris.

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All of my actors have stolen away to other projects. We are in good shape; we still have the weekend, tech, and hopefully, a final dress ahead of us. I am trusting in the work that has been done to this point, and I know that the professionalism that everyone embodies will foster us through those final crucial steps in the time we have remaining. So now, my focus must address the technical aspects, and man alive, have I been the luckiest girl at the school.

Lights: Vandy has GRACIOUSLY opened up my thesis as an opportunity for her lighting class to work as a part of their final exam! That is completely bad-ass. I'm thrilled beyond words. I met with Mike Wilga this week. We talked through the whole show. He and three of his other classmates are taking on the challenge. I have heard wonderful things about Mike and I am happy beyond words that they are going to add this extra layer of professional design to my project. I said to him, "Look, I was going to be happy with lights up, lights down. ANYTHING you want to do is fine with me as long as it fits the mood of the piece." I love lighting. It's probably my favorite tech thing. The depth that lighting can bring to the show is immeasurable. Setting, time, and mood can all be achieved with lights. I am happy beyond belief that I am going to have them. Done!

Costumes: Pulled everything from the UCF costume department. Bought a pair of shoes from Goodwill. Donte is supplying his pants, Jenny her panties, and Kate her slippers. Thank you, Virginia. Done!

Set: Zack, in the shop, has given Nicki Priest and me unlimited use of the props, props storage, the props van, ladders, materials for hanging, and the manpower to hang them. I CAN

NOT believe my good fortune. It's coming together so 'easily' that I am trying not to be wary. I don't think I mentioned that I lost Zac as a stage manager, so Nicki is my only one now. But she has been great. I swear she must have 100 arms, and one or two clones, to achieve all that she does in a day, and so effectively, I might add. On the day that shop Zack supplied us with all the material I could ask for (to cover the walls), he also sent over a truck, two ladders, and two guys. Nicki then got on her cell phone and within 15 minutes we had at least 10 people in the dance room measuring, cutting, and hanging material. She's been awesome. Furthermore, the room looks great and so far we haven't spent a dime. All of the shop heads have been more than agreeable in terms of my requests. It's all coming together. Nicki and I found everything I needed in props storage for what I think is going to be an amazing set. And so now, we wait until Monday to put it all up! Done!

Music: Martin Wooten, head of UCF sound in the theatre department, built my entire soundtrack, minus pre-show. I have to do that myself this weekend. I have an amazing glass shattering sound. I have an old fashioned bell ringing for *The Maids*. And I have about 50 minutes worth of crackly, Irish music that will underscore perfectly the entire scene. Seriously, could I have been any more fortunate technically speaking? I am positive that the answer is no. Done!

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April 16

The countdown has fully begun. Rested much of the day. Though I did spend 2 ½ hours putting together my pre-show music. It was important to find French pieces, in order to set our locale in lovely Paris. The audience would never know why I chose France, nor do I imagine that it would matter much to them beyond mood, but it mattered to me. As we are opening with

a sequence based on Stilitano's breakdown, which happened in a Parisian square, I thought it appropriate to pay homage to Paris, Stilitano, and Genet. It took more time than I thought it might to find music I liked, but I am very happy with the outcome! Thank you, itunes. I wonder if anyone will notice or make comments.

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Worked on my lines quite a lot with John. Particularly *The Maids*. Tonight was my one, final work through rehearsal with Kate and Jenny for each scene. Kate volunteered to look at *The Maids* for us since Mark is out of town. I'm grateful for it because, quite frankly, Jenny and I still haven't found a rhythm to the scene. I am nervous about this. But I also know that we'd never yet truly had a rehearsal where we were solid on our lines. I know, cutting it close at this stage of the game. But, it's about being flexible. She's had a whole other show to put up. And I've...had a lot of other things to keep me busy! (Ahem.) Furthermore, we do 'understand' the scene. We've done enough work with Mark to know where we need to get. We just needed the f'n scripts out of the way. That meant me, too. So I went in tonight, and I was off book!

Prior to meeting with Kate and Jenny, Nicky met me and we ran over to storage to pick up all of the props, and a few of the set pieces. I can't say enough about how instrumental Nicky has been in keeping me sane. She is seemingly unflappable. She's organized, thorough, supportive, enthusiastic, calm, and self-assured. From day one I have said, "This is my dream for the show, and we'll cut back as we get closer to whether or not reality will support that dream." By dream, I've meant, the actors I've chosen, the directors, the venue, the scenery, the lights, costumes, show-date, the programs...everything! My whole mentality has been "Might as well go for everything I want. Why settle before I try?" And Nicky helped to keep me on that track. If nothing else, she started repeating it as a kind of show mantra. "Shoot for the top; we'll

cut back later!” But thanks to her, we haven’t had to cut back. Thanks to her, I have gotten everything I’ve wanted. She has secured props, storage keys, fabrics, ladders, trucks, everything technical we could possibly need to facilitate the success of this show. Perhaps her greatest gift to me, however, was that if at any time she was stressed out about my needs or requests, or ran into any kind of debacle on her end, she never let me know it. She continually made it seem that everything would be ok, that everything would work out, and that I could have anything I wanted. The enormous relief and calm that brings me is immeasurable. I am confident that I will not be able to appropriately thank her for what that has done for my body, mind, and soul!

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Rehearsal was great! Jenny was off book, and with Kate’s encouragement, we played-played-played. The scene is about two sisters literally role playing, and so we did. We over role played, making sure to cringe when the maid, or to dominate when the Madame. With Kate’s eye we brought greater clarity to when we were role playing and when we were actually our servantile selves. Mark had already done so much in terms of blocking the piece, and distinguishing between when we were role playing and when we were not, but now that both of us were without scripts and able to go all the way with our choices, the scene truly came to life. We were high-fivin’ all over the place. Finally, I was excited about the piece. I thought, ‘You know, the audience may be confused, as is the nature of this beast, but Jenny and I won’t be. And that is most important!’ Kate was able to do what Mark wasn’t. (Because Jenny and I had not been ready, not because of Mark). She helped us with specifics, “Take more time with the gloves, relish touching one another, how do you feel about the milkman?” And so on. We had a scene now. But the part that made me happiest this evening was that Jenny seemed excited by it. It’s so important when people are volunteering so much of their own time and energy to feel

that they feel they are getting something out of it all. I think she can see the bigger picture now. I think we are both ready to show everyone what we've found. Jenny is going to kick ass Tuesday night. We are going to meet tomorrow morning to run lines. We will have tech with props and costumes tomorrow night, and hopefully a run before the show on Tuesday. We are in great shape. I'm feeling good.

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Final rehearsal with Kate. It's great. She's great. In a way, it's the easiest scene for me. I am working with the Ingram Express and I jumped. (On board, I mean.) We have probably had more rehearsals than the other two scenes, true. But it is more than that. It's about working with someone who is an experienced, mature, consummate, professional actor. It's also about having the privilege to work with someone who is hopelessly in love with her job. Kate loves to act. She eats it, breathes it, and saturates her entire being in it. She leaves nothing to chance, but she is thoughtful, intelligent, deliberate, and fearless. She takes her work seriously, without ever forgetting to play, that we are playing, that this is all pretend. PRETEND! FANTASY, folks! But Kate embraces the fantasy with such tenacity and aplomb, that she brings characters to life with the kind of realism that an audience can lose itself in. They readily forget that she's acting because she has invited them into a world they want to experience and revel in. And all I have to do is listen and respond, and my work is done. I am working toward Kate's kind of emersion. I am so intensely happy that she is a part of this team. That I reap the rewards of sharing the stage with her, that I get her all to myself for 20 minutes, and that, proudly, I am able to keep up! It's reassuring to know that I am on a good track. Particularly, if it resembles the "oul-peahen's" path in any way!

And finally this evening, John and I went to Wal-Mart to pick up the final odds and ends that I need for the show: rubber gloves, thigh-highs, junk jewelry, etc. But while we were there, we came across an interesting chair-like device. It's essentially one huge oval, with hinges that can adjust to create a chair with a back support. It's actually called a "video-chair." It's a floor chair for all of the smelly, pre-adolescent, video game junkies that are taking over the planet, that they might 'nuke' all of the characters in their *Ghost Recon* video game in comfort. But I decided they would be perfect for my show. I know that there are going to be folks that are not happy about sitting on the floor. But again, I know if I can package the idea and 'sell' it to them in such a fashion that they find it cool to be on the floor, I will have succeeded in winning my audience over before I even enter the stage! Like the French music, they won't even know it's happening, but hopefully, they will be seduced by the *reality* that I have created for them. Yah, tax-refund money! (Maybe I can re-sell them after the show, too? HMMMMMMMMM?)

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April 17

Tech night. Wow! We actually had a tech. AND, unbelievably, we're going to be able to do an entire run before the show tomorrow night! And all but Chris were there. And it looked really cool. And everyone was in good spirits! And I never really got stressed out! And we were done by 9:00 pm! And I am waiting for the shoe to drop. And I just wanted to start one more sentence with *and*; English teachers be damned. (All but my husband.) This is all going too well. Shouldn't I be way more stressed out than this? Have I suppressed my concerns so deeply that I simply don't have access to them? Or am I actually in a good place with it all? I mean it's not like I haven't been through 1000 tech rehearsals before this. (Though none of them with quite the same meaning.) COULD I BE LUCKIER? My gosh, to have so many amazing

people helping me with this...it's insane. Kate watched the whole process. She's my chair, and I suppose was required to observe, but I valued her presence and her input just the same. But even she seemed to think it's all looking good. I don't think she'd blow wind up my skirt at this point. So I have to think, 'Ok, it must be looking good.' The lights are thrilling. I actually have two pipes, about 10 instruments, all of my props, costumes, set pieces...OH! The rug on the floor looks really good. It will be inviting. Really sells sitting on the floor like it's a fun thing, I think. My own run crew came into the room and immediately flopped themselves onto it as if they were at home with nary a complaint! Ding-ding-ding! I win the prize. My subliminal message ~ *you will sit on the floor and you will like it.* ~ worked! The acting wasn't all that it could be tonight, but tech is very rarely ever about acting. It's about tech and transitions, and how to get from point A to point B. And we did it. We figured it out.

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The transitions...I've been worried about them since day one. Transitions are so important in any production. They are too often overlooked in pieces, but I believe they have the power to really ruin a show, or to really make it fly. In the same way that I wanted to 'sell' the convention that performing in the dance studio was a great idea, I knew I was also going to have to 'sell' the transitions from one scene to another such that the mood, momentum, integrity, and overall through line of the piece were never lost or compromised. I needed to find the line between artistry and function. There had to be scene changes, no doubt about it. I was adamant from day one though that I never wanted to break the fourth wall. I never wanted anyone stepping out of a moment to comment on the show, or to explain what was happening. Nor did I want the audience to have an instant to rest or pause or to look at their programs while they

waited for the next thing to happen. I wanted one, seamless line from start to finish. The answer came in the form of selling another ‘convention.’ And it was simple.

“Imagine you’re ninjas,” I said to the run crew. “You’re in all black, you move with steady, stealth like accuracy, calling zero attention to yourself, concentrating all of your focus solely on your mission: to move furniture! Meanwhile, I’m going to be in front of you, doing my job so well (you know, acting) that the audience people won’t be able to take their eyes off of me. They’ll be riveted. (Ahem.) I will use the scene changes to my own advantage and make the appropriate shifts from character to character.” And that was that. The transitions became more a means to an end rather than some brilliant idea that I hatched from months of plotting. I needed to set props and move furniture, and I also needed to switch, mentally, from scene to scene. If my crew does its job, and I do mine, we ought to have something pretty cool. Further, it will all be underscored by lovely, unobtrusive light shifts, a bit of music, and the entrance of new scene partners that will engage the audience with thoughts of ‘Hmmmmm, wonder what this is going to be?’ Or something that sounds kind of like that. I hope. It worked well tonight. We’ll make it fly tomorrow! It’s the whole slight-of-hand idea, direction and misdirection. Point the audience in the direction you want them to go and keep them focused. Sell them the fantasy of the story. Hide the reality of the show. Funny thing. The fantasy is the reality and the reality is the fantasy. And trust me, it’s no easy task hiding anything a room full of mirrors.

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More to note. Donte and I had our final rehearsal with JJ the hour before we got started with tech. The time wasn’t ideal, but again, with so many varying schedules, this was the only time we had available. To be honest, it didn’t go very well. I think that much of that had to do with me. In the first place, Mondays and Fridays are my very long days. I have classes back to

back to back all day long. My day started at what felt much earlier than 8:00am because I needed to finalize the production of my programs at Kinko's. Further, I knew I had tech approaching and I knew that if glitches were going to turn up, it would be now. And finally, here I was with JJ for the last time. He was not going to see the final show the next night, due to personal reasons. I wanted to act the hell out of it. I wanted him to see the work Donte and I had put into the scene since last we'd met. I wanted him to shower me with praise and tell me I was wonderful! But, that didn't happen, none of it. Besides the fact that at this point we still didn't have any blocking, Donte and I were still playing with our characters. Nothing was truly set. That had much to do with the way in which we had rehearsed all along, which was mostly improv by nature, so that we could focus on the relationship instead. But suddenly I felt this enormous weight to set the blocking and yet, completely ill-prepared to do so. On the one hand, I had enjoyed not 'fixing' our bodies in one way or another. It was something different, and allowed the freedom to find new things every time we met. But at this point, we needed to set a few things concretely. I wanted the technicians to have an idea about what was going on physically for their own needs, and I didn't want us to get bogged down in any poor, repetitive, unfocused blocking patterns. But on top of all of that, a few potentially troubling things happened during this last rehearsal. Donte tried something really new with his character that went against everything we had been talking about and working on to that point. His Jean, this last rehearsal, was completely unsympathetic, crude, harsh, and overtly angry. I didn't have any qualms at all with Donte exploring some of these other qualities that do indeed exist in Jean. But I was completely taken aback by the fact that JJ was here and was seeing something wholly new and different from anything we had worked on to that point. Furthermore, here we were with only one hour to work and the direction of the scene has just shifted dramatically. And frankly,

there was no way in hell that if Julie felt even remotely unsafe with this Jean that she would even consider the whole last third of the scene where she entertains running away with him. And still there was no blocking!

Three things happened as a result:

1. Because Donte went so far in one direction, I was able to say, “I need more of this.” He understood that he’d created someone so irate that I would never leave with him. This was good. And later in the evening, during our tech run, I felt that we had found a balance between the harsh, stark realities of the characters, as well as the tender, vulnerable sides to each of them. The gamut of emotions grew infinitely, and we found even more layers of love and loathing, both mutual and self. If Donte had not made such a monstrous leap, I question if we would have found what we found so close to performance? It was a good lesson for me.

2. I continue to discover that I still have so much to learn and so much further to go in my acting journey. I wish JJ, the craft master, was going to be there. I sensed that he left our rehearsal believing that we were not at the level we are capable of achieving. And frankly, I agree. He spoke with both of us about how we were very close to reaching an entire other level of acting achievement that comes from thoroughly crafting a character, particularizing Jean and Julie, and being “idea-men.” He assured us that the audience would still be greatly impacted by what we do have to show, but I was aware that he felt we could go even farther. We were on the ball field, but we weren’t hitting the ball out of the park quite yet. In that moment, I felt like such a rookie, and a bench-warmer rookie at that. But at least I felt like the rookie of an all-time league. Yes, I was frustrated to feel like I wasn’t where JJ wanted me to be yet, or perhaps more accurately, I was frustrated that I wasn’t there yet for JJ. But rather than feeling defeated or embarrassed, or upset that somehow maybe JJ was unsatisfied, an idea that most days would eat

me up, I was excited. I am at a new, beginning level of achievement. I'm gonna get off that bench in the all-timer's game soon. And this show is going to illustrate that I have grown, and that my acting is strong. There will forever be room for improvement, but I know I have the potential and ability to play ball with the biggest of the big. But first, I'm gonna have to get my new, MFA graduate cleats soiled. So, I'll take to the field tomorrow night and make my first impressions on the floor of Dance Room 1. (The dance teachers are not going to be happy with me, or more specifically, my soiled cleats!)

3. And that lesson is the third. When JJ asked me how I felt, there was a part of me that could have cried and said, "I suck. We should have worked harder. I'll never act." That part of me exists. That incredibly fearful person, the one who is particularly star-struck around people I find talented. The girl who makes it all her fault or points the finger at her lack of ability if the going gets tough. But she was gone this day. With everything going on, with so many other things to get to, like all of tech for example, I trusted myself enough to say, "Whelp, I can't control everything. I can't lose sight of the bigger picture. There are three other scenes that also need my focus and attention. There are about 20 people coming that are all looking to me to get them where they need to be, and I have to know that I don't suck, that I am going to do well, and that Donte and I are still going to get two more whole runs at performance level before tomorrow night." I said to JJ all of these things. I said that I know I have more work to do, but that it is what it is for now, which is far from bad. And that I also have tons of other bits and pieces to tend to equally in the next 24 hours. And guess what? I didn't lose my shit or have a nervous breakdown. Though I'm 30, and one might assume I ought to have had that kind of maturity already, I confess that I haven't always. It is so important to me to do well for the people I respect and admire that I sometimes can't see the forest for the trees. Throughout this process, I

have developed a much more clear assessment of my own commitment to self success, sharing my visions with other capable hands, entrusting the people I respect to do their jobs and learning everything I can possibly learn from them. I was prepared to let go of what I couldn't control and embrace what I could. Best of all, I managed not to lose sight that this is my program, that I have solid skills under me, and that there won't ever be a time that everything will be perfect or even ideal. By remaining flexible, by showing gratitude and support to all those helping me, by being willing to work extra hours in order to facilitate the needs of my gracious cast and crew and their time and needs, I have created an opportunity for success. I head into tomorrow with great calm and preparedness, and most especially, with tremendous thanks for everyone who has done so much. That is the bigger picture. Getting bogged down in a self-serving moment of "I can't act. I'm no good. I'm a disappointment." is an insult to the loads of work everyone else has committed toward making this a truly fine program. How dare I be so selfish? But I wasn't! And that's the point. But I could have been. And that's the lesson! Tomorrow night we PLAY BALL!!!!

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April 18

Came home to rest. Can't. Going back to school to get ready. Excited for the possibilities. Nervous? Yes. Strangely calm, too? Yes. Lots to do before show time to keep me occupied? Yes. Want more than anything to turn in a solid acting performance tonight. Don't want to write. Just need to think and focus and keep it all to myself right now.

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In a word—wow. I had no idea the weight was that heavy. I am exhausted.

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April 19

I can't believe it. It's over. The work, the hours, the rehearsals, the planning, the meetings, the worrying, the hoping. It's all over! For the last 4 ½ months I have been solely focused on this one achievement and it all came together last night! And...I'm thrilled. I honestly do not think that the show could have gone any better than it did. I'm almost speechless about the outcome. I don't know exactly where to start in my response. First and foremost, and though I have said it already, I'll say it again. I am thoroughly grateful to everyone involved. The technicians, my running crew, all of the UCF shop-heads that provided everything I asked for, Nicky Priest, who truly made the show sing, and the cast. I can't think too much about how or why I was so fortunate to have so many people willing to help me put this puppy together, for it is completely overwhelming. This may indeed have been my project and the ideas my own, but I don't for one minute consider that the show would have been as successful as it was last night without the help and aid of everyone involved.

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As I was standing in the parking lot after the show talking to John, an audience member drove by and yelled, "I would have paid money to see that!" And I felt what she meant. I didn't feel for a second that the show resonated as a mere 'thesis production.' It truly felt like a professional venture from set up to strike. I was grateful for the comment, for the validation of the work. But I think what helped to foster that professional vibe was the collaboration of all of the elements. Theatre cannot be done alone. Part of the magic for me has always been the awe I feel when so many different talents come together under one vision to create something cohesive. That is the addictive part of the theatrical experience. In order to create a fantastical experience for the audience, a great deal of good old-fashioned grunt work must take place first.

The space must be cleaned and dressed, the costumes picked and readied, the props built or collected, ditto with the sets. Lights are gelled, hung, focused, and cued. The actors are rehearsed. Time is managed. Publicity attracts the crowd, and hopefully people show up to see the fruits of everyone's labor. But as actors, though it is commonly heard that we are the lowest on the proverbial totem-pole, we are also seemingly the luckiest of the bunch. For we get to experience the world that has been created by so many other talented people around us. We get to put on the costumes, we get to use the props, sit in the chairs, be made beautiful by the lights, and then applauded for the work we did that was made better by all of the elements surrounding us! The general audience would never consider such things, but as a community of artists, we ought never to forget that the show is only as strong as the least committed. And that is why I continue to write of thanks and gratitude in this journal, because whatever the individual motives were, the show came together beautifully because of *everyone* involved. I will carry this re-learned mantra with me into my career both as a professional and a professor. Nobody gets anywhere all by themselves. That you must first give trust, to gain trust. Then, you can *do*, everything, anything.

But now I must address my fellow actors. In this one evening, I truly learned the value of the term 'risk.' Every time an actor takes to the stage, it is a gamble. Though we are duly supported in a world created for us by the hidden artisans in the wings, it is still the actor's job to take the audience to that final destination. Through our own imaginations and commitment to the world we are living in, the audience either decides that we are worth their investment, or that we are not. There are no small stakes here. The situation can often feel threatening, dangerous, and incredibly uncomfortable. If something fails, it is our faces that are exposed. As the front men, we are often hallowed when things are successful, but we also shoulder the blame when

things are not. It is the actor's courage, the leap-of-faith, most often within themselves, that can bring a story to life. And my actors took leaps all night long.

Chris Niess. We were able to insert him into the final run before the show. (He was unable to attend the tech.) I wasn't remotely worried that it would present a problem to include him so late into the process. Our work session the couple of weeks prior had been resonating in my insides since then. I knew that he was going to be awesome and I was happy that he had said yes. Time for the final dress. As he began, the students were immediately sucked in. The effect that I had hoped to create, students finding themselves fidgety and uncomfortable at the sight of their professor sinking into an abyss, was working. At the start, they were so excited to see Chris, and to revel in what he was doing. They giggled at his chair acrobatics, poking at each other and smiling as he spun, twisted, and tricked his way through a series of chair antics. But then slowly, the chair began to work against him. He was getting embarrassed, upset. The student's faces turned from amusement to bemusement. They started to look around at how other people were reacting. Were they missing something? What was happening? Yes, I'm confident they were bewildered because they wanted to understand the point of what was happening, but they were also uncomfortable with watching their professor have this breakdown of sorts. The best part was that these were the kids that were helping with the show. They'd already seen everything; they had some idea of the theme of the show, and yet, they were still completely drawn into Chris's journey. I couldn't wait to see how the unsuspecting, virgin audience would react with no idea at all about what kind of an evening awaited them. After all, I didn't include Chris on the program for a reason. I didn't want them expecting to see him. In the same way that Genet was uncertain and mystified watching his mentor fall apart, while

seemingly all of Paris looked on in sheer delight of his failure, I wanted to foster a bit of confusion for my own UCF-Paris.

8:30 p.m. Chris begins. The show has opened. I hear people still talking. I hear others shushing them thinking that the show has begun. This went on for a few seconds. Great! I liked the puzzlement. I wanted them to participate in the show on my terms. We were dictating when they would pay attention; they were on our ride. We had already removed every other UCF program convention. We weren't performing in a previously accepted performance space. We took their chairs away from them. We put mirrors in front of them, and now we had Chris Niess playing himself (as far as they were concerned) having a nervous breakdown. And that was all before the 'show' started! We forced them, from the start, to view things through a different sort of lens than from what they were all used to. And then, the same kinds of things that happened in his first run began to repeat themselves. People were giggling at first, excited and ready to see a show. Like well-behaved theatre goers, as it was a theatre crowd, they were free and easy with their laughs, benevolent with their supportive vibes. Suddenly, I had two reactions:

1. As the show's creator, I, like Genet, the playwright, couldn't wait to zap them out of their happy little "Oh, we're here to support Lisa's thesis skit!" attitude. "Aren't we good people?" I was ready to get down to business and hold that reflective glass up to their own base humanity and get over these silly little niceties.
2. As Lisa the observer, I noticed that some of them were starting to get uncomfortable with Chris's actions. Again, I think some were frustrated that they didn't understand what was going on. Good. I was looking for agitation, not complacency. And I believe others were uncomfortable watching Chris being uncomfortable.

Normal theatre goers go to watch a show with a certain amount of safety. There is distance between an audience and the stage. Not tonight. Traditionally, there is anonymity from audience to performer. Not tonight. The show usually works its way into something dramatic so that the audience is better prepared for it. But not tonight. Nope. Tonight, Chris told the whole story within the story within the first five minutes of the show. They just didn't know that was what was happening.

And Chris told the story beautifully. In our movement classes with Chris, we talk about taking risks from day one. That without risk, there can be no progression. There can be no growth. There can be nothing interesting for the audience to watch. It is not enough to memorize lines and blocking, and then to do them. There must be investment. There must be danger. There must be life and death stakes; else no one will care what happens to the characters in front of them. Tonight Chris took huge risks. First of all, he said yes. He allowed himself, as a professor, to be potentially judged by his students. In that moment, had anyone deemed his performance lackluster, he could have lost the respect he has spent a year or more earning. He completely opened himself up to major criticism. Beyond that, I had asked something of him that I might have refused to do, given the same offer. "I want you to represent the failure of humanity, Chris. I want you to embody Jean Genet's mentor having a nervous breakdown in front of all of your own colleagues and students. I want you to show vulnerability, failure, embarrassment, and man's futile attempt to be anything other than what he truly is—base." Only a demonstration of sexual impotence could have made my request worse, I think. And yet, he did it! It was great. The audience was now perplexed and interested. And then...Jenny.

I will never forget what Jenny Ashman did in the name of my thesis. Where Chris got the audience engaged and knocked them off their centers a little, Jenny Ashman said, "Ok class,

tonight we're goin' all the way. No dickin' around. No soft-peddling it for you weaker stomachs out there. We mean business. So, shut up and pay attention!" The night before, during our tech/dress rehearsal, she had worn a corset, a bra, thigh-highs and boy-cut underwear under her robe for her onstage costume change. By costume change, I mean, she drops her robe and poses, arms outstretched at down-stage-center while I'm rustling around upstage, for a good three or four minutes. She looked beautiful with the corset. It was still a risky outfit, particularly considering that she was not more than twelve inches away from the first row and that most everyone in the house was of her own particular peer group. (Undergraduates.) She just recently graduated this past December. But when I walked into the bathroom on the night of the performance to get myself ready for the show, Jenny was standing there in little black panties, a black bra, thigh-highs, and a smile. She looked amazing! But that's all she was wearing. And to her extra credit, Jenny does not have a model's body. Her body is lovely, but one must appreciate that, though far from grotesque, she took this risk without the universal agreement of "Why wouldn't she stand almost naked in front of all of her peers?"

The scene started strong. Her voice was powerful, assured. Her gaze was unwavering, confident, focused. She was ready to play hardball with me, and she had made the first call. I was to meet her challenge. I loved it! But what I loved even more was what happened almost immediately next. The time came for me to dress her. I went to the up-stage chest, pulled out the appropriate costume and turned around to see Jenny in tiny black panties, black bra, black thigh-highs, and a smirk, facing dead out at the audience of roughly 60 students and professors, all squeezed into one dance studio. I was so inspired by her in that moment that I wanted to squeeze her with gratitude. The folks in the front row could have literally reached out and touched her legs she was so close to them. Yet, there was not an ounce of self-deprecation,

apology, embarrassment, or amateurishness about the risk she had just taken. And the audience was hooked. By laying bare her literal self, the audience knew that this show was not to be taken lightly. We were going to go wherever we were required to go, and they were going to go there with us. Jenny held risk by the throat, and choked it with naked courage and fearless poise. Ladies and gentlemen, that manner of backbone can not be bought, marketed, or sold. And Jenny's contribution paid off 1000 fold as the tone for the show was set fully into motion and marked for destination "kick-ass."

Miss Julie. It went great. The transition from me threatening Claire in *The Maids*, led into kissing Jean, then to slapping Jean, and then kissing Jean again and again and again—establishing the love making that has just happened prior to the scene. In a minute long transition, we established sex, violence, play, and loathing, appropriately foreshadowing the rest of the scene. In the run prior to the actual show, Donte and I established lots more clarity in blocking, intentions, and the back and forth nature of the relationship. All of our work, discussions, reflections, trials, and tribulations came together to produce something solid and stirring. But again, it was the large leap that Donte took the night before that I think really allowed us to find a path by which to navigate for the performance. In that moment, I had been almost upset with him for changing things so radically at the last minute. But, because we were able to discuss our concerns and our needs as the characters and as the actors, we were able to move forward with the discoveries that Donte's risk opened up to us. A good lesson to recall and to remember. Remember.

The greatest luxury of having had Donte for this scene was our personal relationship with one another. We had to be intimate with one another in one moment, then turn around and physically, verbally, and mentally abuse each other in the next. I slapped him, spit on him, threw

liquids on him, teased and taunted him throughout the scene. Yes, of course, it wasn't me and Donte personally, but it was still me doing it to Donte. I was grateful for his trust, and our ability to give one another permission to touch, yell, hit, and spit in the name of our art. We allowed each other to cross significant personal boundaries, all with great respect for the other's challenges, ensuring the integrity of the piece. The entire experience was professional and rewarding.

Miss Julie is a difficult piece. I want so much to have the opportunity to do the whole show sometime. I loved the fashion in which JJ worked on the piece. I loved the focus on the building of the characters, the questions about why we were doing what we were doing. JJ was adamant that I not play a crazy person who is 'just' disconnected, and therefore seemed crazy. But that the crazy moments were coming out of a need, coming from a place of wanting something that I am not getting. He encouraged working to craft intellectual choices that I could then breathe life into. Things that sound so lovely to say, but all of which are so difficult to do. I loved our discussions about craft. I loved what JJ opened me up to. I want more and more and more of it all of the time. So, do I think *Miss Julie* was successful last night? Did I feel that people were engaged and listening and responding? Did people come up to me and specifically comment on that scene, the intense brutality and vulnerability of the piece? Yes, to everything. But I have trouble commenting on it regarding myself because I feel we were still so much in process. I would be more inclined at this moment to hear feedback from others about what they saw. And here again, I wish JJ himself could have been present. I was working with a vernacular that is still so new to me that I am almost unable to articulate what happened.

The ability to compare this experience to other like experiences does not exist. I can only explain it as this: Sometimes actors say that they were so immersed in a particular scene or

moment that they don't even remember doing it. Most of the time, the previous statement is made with equally positive intention and impact. That the actor, in essence, was out of his head or out of his body and the scene just happened to him. But in this case, I am having difficulty responding to not only this scene, but to my roles in all three scenes because I was concentrating and focused, intensely aware of and invested in each moment as it presented itself to me. I was neither ahead nor behind. I was neither judging myself, nor forgetting my job. Kate would be proud. In that statement I find great reward. I was so completely immersed in each scene, that to sit back now and try to dissect one moment from another is too much. All of my work and preparation and thought and rehearsal and discussion and research led me to that performance last night. A performance where at the end of it, someone in the audience said, "That's what I want to do."

The greatest lesson I can possibly verbalize today is that I need to work that hard ALL OF THE TIME. Not just when there is a thesis involved. In order to achieve the level of accomplishment I wish to attain, I understand, with greater clarity now than I have ever possessed, that riding on good instincts or a certain amount of God-given ability isn't going to cut it. This project forced me to plunge myself into myself and use everything I had to surmount my Everest. And what's more, I liked it. I like knowing that I am capable of doing this again because I did it this time. I took everything I have ever known and learned in my MFA, and all of my training and experiences prior, to bring this show to life. But because of my MFA training, and because of this process, I know so much more about my ability to risk and achieve.

That I was able to suggest that I could hold my own with Kate Ingram in a globally recognized piece of difficult dramatic literature was a risk. But I am so happy for that moment of conceit! *Beauty Queen* was the perfect closer to the evening. We had hooked the audience in

with Chris and *The Maids*. We beat them up pretty good with *Miss Julie*. And then we provided a well-earned respite of laughs and revels to close the show. Or so they thought. Both Kate and I were taken aback by the laughs we received early on in the scene. Having never done it in front of an audience before, we had become used to the silence. And knowing so well our characters' dysfunctions, we had forgotten that to outsiders, we looked like a couple of silly old hags. Apparently, they had no idea how very not funny we actually were. But, oh, that made the scene even that much more juicy and satisfying. We took the crowd back to a place of feeling safe. They believed they could relax and laugh a little at the two 'oul coots' in front of them. So soon they would be forced to conclude that, in reality, this team of derelicts was the worst of the bunch! My husband said that people were actually turning their heads as I seared Kate's hand on the 'stove.' This is a huge accomplishment since the stove I was disfiguring her on was nothing more than a black box. If that kind of reaction doesn't dictate some amount of achievement in the world we created for this audience, then nothing does.

I found myself working with Kate and saying, "Bring it!" The more she gave me, the more I ate it up. It worked perfectly for a scene centered on the mother/daughter team thriving to one-up each other. And while the relatives were having a competition of sorts, Kate and I were reveling in the fun. That was what was most satisfying to me about the scene with her last night. She was generous in her acting. She was doing her job. She was committed to her 'point-of-view,' but she allowed herself to listen, receive, and react to whatever I gave her. When all of the homework is done, the work of acting becomes almost easy when you're complimented by that kind of ability. To write about it, to go so far as to praise it here in my journal, seems almost ridiculous. Yet, Kate's ability to do all of those things comes from experience, ability, and talent. I have found that most actors can't share the work in that way. Most actors can only

function in their one way. I am confident that I have functioned that way a lot over the years. But I also believe that I am moving ever away from that isolated tendency. And I am so relieved to know that it is something I can identify and work toward in my future work. I am thrilled to have had it exemplified so masterfully in my thesis performance last night with Kate. I hope students in the audience were able to recognize it as well.

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“Through the development of a multi-scene theatrical performance; the collection and analysis of relevant research materials; and the cultivation of a comprehensive journal outlining the process, the challenges, and the revelations that will travel the same road—from the cluttered moments of conception to the still air of an empty room after an exhausting final bow—only a mirror will remain....” These are the words of my abstract, but little did I know how it would resonate within me upon the completion of this project. For at the end of the night, the players had gone home, the audience departed, the props and costumes were back in storage, the lights were struck, and the dance room looked, once again, like a dance room. Suddenly months of constant planning and worrying and discovering and everything-ing was over. Vanished. I had lived out the fantasy of what my show could be. It had happened. The audience had been affected. The actors had taken their risks. The lessons, invaluable and pure, had been learned. The students have been given their grades. But now it is finished. This thesis is a few short key strokes from completion and all else is a memory. As Miss Julie said, “Am I drunk? Or have I been dreaming all this night?” For in the moment that the audience stood and gifted us with a standing ovation, I also heard the shattering glass of my own fantasy. The show was over. And though I have gained so much through this entire process, and though the show was, in my final estimation, a tremendous success, the only question that can be asked truly is, “Now what?” It’s

back to reality. After all this glorious work, after a wonderful three-year MFA pursuit, I am now a statistic. I am officially one of the 80% of equity actors out of work at any given moment. I look at my reflection in the mirror. I do see myself. I only wish the glass weren't shattered.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Bill Bradley offers in the opening chapter of his writing about bringing out the best in yourself and in others that, “Leadership means getting people to think, believe, see, and do what they might not have without you. It means possessing the vision to set the right goal and the decisiveness to pursue it single-mindedly. It means being aware of the fears and anxieties felt by those you lead even as you urge them to overcome those fears. It can appear in a speech before hundreds of people or in a dialogue with one other person—or simply by example.” Bradley’s words give voice to that which I have come to discover, albeit less eloquently. My thesis journey has been nearly entirely about leading. It has been about leading myself, about leading others, and, in many cases, about being led. I have been forced to acknowledge both the fears I possess and the fears held by others, all while encouraging the conquest of each. I have come to recognize and value the importance of a vision, and the single-mindedness required in order to construct that vision exactly as it exists in my mind. And I count myself more fortunate than most because I have come to *this* point on *this* page with the knowledge that throughout the days of my life, my mirror will shatter again and again and again. Yet, each moment of my quest to become a better actor equips me with the skills needed to mend my mirror and the insight desired toward becoming a better person.

Genet, Strindberg, and McDonagh are now dear friends. They are keepers of a code I am learning to unlock. They have shared with me their despair, their anger, and their finite sense of hope. For fantasy can not exist without some thread of hope. No matter how dismal or diseased, fantasy thrives on hope. Perhaps the greatest irony along this narrow road is that the concept of

human futility which gave birth to this experience has also given life to an ever-growing sense of my own self worth. My mirrored walls are no longer a prison, replete with images of my past failures, lagging self-esteem, and lost dreams. My mirrored walls are sleek corridors along the path of all that I am, all that I know, and all that I will never cease trying to achieve.

There is no doubt in my mind that the timeless success of the Charles Dickens classic *A Christmas Carol* lies in a distinct simplicity, which even Jean Genet, August Strindberg, and Martin McDonagh might admire. Show a man what he was, what he is, and what he will be, and soon you will see a changed man. While one will recognize that this theorem is far from an absolute, it will hold more water than the empty buckets on the shoulders of either you or me. Ebenezer Scrooge is forced to stare deep into a mirror that he no longer believes exists. He is forced to witness something that is more real than the coins he counts each frozen night. Ebenezer Scrooge is forced to absorb, with vivid brilliance, the theatre of his life. Drawn in by the defeating nature of his own truest form, Scrooge is “inexorably trapped by an endless progression of images...lies covering lies, fantasies battering upon fantasies, nightmares nourished by nightmares within nightmares” (Esslin 141). Each lie, fantasy, and nightmare further illustrating the condemnation of an endlessly trapped life. And yet, even after being faced with the paralyzing image of his own death, a glimmer of hope remains. A new day dawns, and Scrooge is empowered with the knowledge to break free from the manacles of this desperate hall of mirrors. For in reality, human futility is merely the sculpture of our own hands.

Sadly, Solange, Miss Julie, and Maureen are not extended the luxury of Scrooge’s ghostly mirrors. None of these women are offered hope. None of these desperate souls are shown the harmless image of a nightmare. Each is tragically resigned to live one. In the

mirrored walls of my thesis production, there is no spring of hope for the characters I create. There is merely an opportunity for me to find a fragment of my voice in each of theirs.

My thesis performance, including everyone and everything that gave it life, has fashioned the vision that I hold in my hands for the journey down a new road on a new day. My journal, shattered but resolute, has given form to thoughts often devoid of shape or aim. My research, from seed to blossomed fruit, has conceived the pollen I will use to enrich the knowledge of many tomorrows.

I will one day fully embody all that this extraordinary experience has shared with me. I will remember where hope is found and where it sometimes runs to hide. I will never forget that my mirror reflects the me that I have crafted, without consideration for fault, fragrance, or fear. I will embrace the risks I have taken, and cherish the risks that are taken on my behalf. I will not succumb to ignorance, comfort, or obstacle. I will seek despair, solitude, and helplessness, and from them, craft life—just as this journey has done for me. I will, above all else, give myself completely to the work I love with the complete and steadfast knowledge that only a better me may spring forth.

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