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*1,000 Miles:
Bridging the Distance between Austin and Chicago*

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**1,000 Miles:
Bridging the Distance between Austin and Chicago**

by

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Thesis

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Abstract

1,000 Miles: Bridging the Distance between Austin and Chicago

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Abstract: *1,000* miles marks the culmination of my course of study at the University of Texas. As an MFA student in the playwriting program, I have juggled my responsibilities to the department with my role as a professional playwright, frequently splitting time between Austin and my hometown of Chicago, where I opened four world premieres from 2010-2012.

In this thesis, I discuss the ways in which my work has been influenced by the aesthetics of both artistic communities. I focus on two of my plays in particular: *Kingsville*, which premiered in Chicago during my first semester at UT, and *Colossal*, which opened in Austin just weeks before graduation.

Through the lens of these two plays, I outline my artistic evolution over the past three years, highlighting the ways in which my work has drawn from the very best of Chicago's storefront theaters and Austin's experimental scene.

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Introduction

“Where’s Andrew?”

- *Philip Kan Gotanda, Playwright*

I was rejected from the University of Texas three times before I was accepted.

My first rejection came in 2002. I had just completed a Bachelor’s and Master’s—both in creative writing—with honors, from Stanford University. I had studied theater in Oxford and London, interned for acclaimed playwright Philip Kan Gotanda, and authored plays that had been exceptionally well received on Stanford’s campus.¹ Why would anyone *not* accept me into their MFA program?

Well, maybe for the same reason that Philip had advised me not to apply in the first place.

Actually, Philip had gone one step further, encouraging me to leave theater altogether.

“If playwriting’s for you, you’ll come back to it,” he assured me. “But you need to live your life. Because right now your plays are pretty well-written and kind of funny, but I read them and keep asking myself...

“Where’s Andrew in all of this?”

It’s never a great feeling when your mentor tells you to leave the profession. But after a couple more internships that’s exactly what I did; I took a three-year hiatus from theater. In that span, I lost a friend to suicide, my wedding engagement dissolved, family

¹ This was before I understood the concept of a ‘home field advantage.’

members got sick, my heart got savagely broken, and eventually I returned to writing for no other reason than I needed to. The plays that followed were deeply personal, rooted in emotional honesty and lived experience and pain. I didn't write *Suicide, Incorporated* to get it produced; I wrote it to grieve my friend and ease the guilt I felt at failing him.

When I returned to theater after that self-imposed sabbatical, I returned full force. I burned a hole through my Chicago Public Library card, checking out the maximum allotment of thirty plays at a time. I ushered and volunteered at theaters to see their shows for free; I attended every talkback, fireside chat, and panel discussion I could find. I swallowed copious volumes of theater, but the greatest lessons I learned often came packaged in single sentences.

Like when Jeffrey Sweet told me to “create space in the writing so the audience can fill in the gaps.”

Or when John Olive remarked that “characters in a comedy don't know they're in a comedy.”

Or when Philip asked me, “Where's Andrew in all of this?”

Simple sentences like these, so easily dismissible as fortune-cookie wisdom, became something different when I took the time to grapple with them and apply them to my work. They became the foundation of a lifelong education.

In that spirit, I have framed my thesis around several of the smartest, most profound, single-sentence pieces of wisdom that I have encountered during my time at UT. I have no doubt that I will return to these quotes, just as I have returned to Philip's question, over and over, for more than a decade, as the 'true north' of my work.

‘Those Other Plays’

The bulk of this thesis will focus on two pieces—*Kingsville* and *Colossal*—but during my time at UT, I have worked on six additional full-length plays. I will address *Heart & Bone* during my exploration of *Colossal*, as the two plays are intrinsically linked (or as UT Professor Steven Dietz puts it, “*Colossal* is the play that ate *Heart and Bone*.”) I have elected not to include *Christmas/Music: Two Stories*² in this thesis, as it is the only play that I have ever abandoned after just one draft.

But I would like to take a moment to reflect on the four remaining plays: *Suicide, Incorporated, Dirty, I Am Going to Change the World*, and *The Kingdom*.

“As a dramaturg, the key to my ability to see is distance.”

- Janet Allen, Artistic Director of Indiana Rep³

In June 2010—just two months before I entered the program at UT—*Suicide, Incorporated* received its world premiere at a 36-seat storefront theater in Chicago called The Gift. It was my first professional production.

Never did I anticipate the response that the play would receive: rave reviews, a twice-extended, sold-out run, and a Jeff nomination as the Best New Work in Chicago. Within a year of the play’s auspicious debut, New York’s Roundabout Theatre offered to produce it, capping off *Suicide, Incorporated*’s remarkable journey from the smallest Equity theatre in Chicago to the largest non-profit theatre company in the country.

² *Christmas/Music: Two Stories* was written just weeks before I arrived in Austin, and appeared as a reading in the 2011 Cohen New Works Festival.

³ Janet Allen visited our department as a Guest Artist Respondent in the fall semester of 2011. This quote is taken from a Q&A at our Playwrights/Directors Colloquium.

The New York production was not without its share of pressures. The show's producer, Robyn Goodman, is among the most powerful new play champions in the industry, having moved multiple young writers to Broadway. That she believed in my work was reassuring, but I felt an overwhelming desire to prove her right. I was also keenly aware that *Suicide, Incorporated* would be reviewed by Charles Isherwood of *The New York Times*, arguably the most influential theatre critic in the United States, whose reviews had launched or halted the careers of many of my contemporaries. And of course I wanted the Roundabout to be so thrilled with the production that they would commission and produce future work.

I vowed to take every advantage of this potentially watershed moment in my career. I attended each rehearsal, every design meeting, and *all* of the more than twenty preview performances. When I wasn't in rehearsal, I was meeting with director Jonathan Berry, collecting feedback from Robyn and others, and constantly rewriting and rethinking the play.

This absolute immersion into the production came at a cost, however, as I began to lose sight of the emotional core, or 'heartbeat', of the play.

There's a moment, near the beginning of *Suicide, Incorporated*'s final scene, when the protagonist, Jason, confesses himself to his younger brother:

"I was accountable to you. I could've done more. I should've done more."

That's where the play lives. In that moment. In those lines. That's when I, the playwright, confess myself to my friend and ask his forgiveness.

It's easy for me to write that now. I have the benefit of distance—I haven't looked at the play in over a year. But back in October 2011, with opening night looming and Isherwood's arrival imminent—all I could see was a scene that wasn't working on stage. When Jason said, "I should've done more," I didn't feel the depth of his guilt and regret.

Had I stepped away from the production and returned with fresh eyes, I might have seen that we hadn't built to that climax properly—that the real problem rested not in that moment, but in earlier scenes that were falling flat. But I did not afford myself that distance, instead opting to rewrite (and rewrite) that critical moment, each time carving away at the play's heart.

It's a simple idea—when I lose perspective, walk away—but how do I know when perspective has been lost? My experience with the New York production of *Suicide, Incorporated* would suggest that the rewrites themselves offer an excellent barometer. Are the rewrites making the play better? Are they in service of the play's emotional core? If the answer is 'no,' then it's a strong indicator that it's time to step away. But I find this incredibly difficult to do when the show's about to open, the writing's not working, and my collaborators depend on me to get it right. And it doesn't take a high-profile New York production to exert this pressure.

Less than a year after my experience at the Roundabout, I returned to the Gift for the world premiere production of *Dirty*.⁴ When I stepped into the theater for our very first rehearsal, I felt an overwhelming sense of exhaustion. I had been going non-stop for two years, maintaining full-time status as a student while opening *Suicide* in New York, world premiering two additional plays in Chicago (*Kingsville* and *I Am Going to Change the World*), and workshopping my newest play, *Colossal*, at the Kennedy Center. I had depleted my energy reserves and more than anything, needed a week off to restore myself physically, emotionally, and artistically.

⁴ *Dirty*, a satire about a young couple that forms a socially responsible porn company, was written just weeks before I started the program at UT. It was developed in Chicago (Victory Gardens, Chicago Dramatists), New York (Rattlestick) and through the Professional Development Workshop at UT. It premiered at the Gift in September 2012, as I entered my final year of the program.

But rehearsal had begun; actors were in the room—good actors, smart actors—and they were raring to go. And so I showed up, every day, and brought in new pages, every day, and rarely was I making the play better.

And herein rests the unsaid underbelly of Janet Allen’s wisdom, the hard truth that makes her single sentence so profound:

There are no gold stars for showing up, for working hard, for churning out pages.

Sure, it’s my work ethic as much as anything else that’s led to some success, but sometimes the greatest gift I can give my collaborators is to leave the room. This invariably feels like an act of laziness, but it’s ultimately an act of faith, a belief that even when the clock’s ticking, there is enough time to step away.

Fortunately for me, and for our production of *Dirty*, distance was forced upon me just two weeks before opening. With the fall semester about to commence, I had no choice but to hightail it back to Austin for classes. And something remarkable happened on that thousand-mile drive. As I gained literal distance from Chicago, I started to achieve the figurative distance I needed from the play. Suddenly it was so clear to me why all these latest rewrites, aimed at making the play make more sense, were so entirely dissatisfying: they weren’t rooted in my characters’ needs.

“The size of your characters’ needs is the size of the play; the force of your characters is the force of your play.”

- Steven Dietz, *UT Professor of Playwriting*⁵

During the first two weeks of *Dirty* rehearsals, I neglected my characters and focused instead on trivial technicalities. I devoted entire pages to the operating costs of Katie’s philanthropic institution, and to the profit margins of Matt’s growing business. I even used these figures to

⁵ Taken from my notes from Steven Dietz’s playwriting workshop, Fall 2010

justify certain key plot points: ‘well, in order for Matt to threaten his competitors, he technically needs to generate at least ten million dollars.’

The quickest way to kill one of my plays is with the word, “technically.”

Technically, the central premise of *Suicide, Incorporated*—a company that edits and rewrites suicide notes—would get sued and go out of business. But that setting, however borderline absurd, springs forth from a young man’s grief and guilt over his role in his brother’s death. His gnawing need to redeem himself by saving others, his relentless questioning of whether the right words really exist—these needs are deeply human and *real*.

When my plays get criticized for being implausible, it is not because the world of the play has strayed too far from our world. It is because I have strayed too far from my characters. What Katie needed was to build a center that helped people; what Matt needed was to provide for his unborn daughter. When I leaned into these needs—when I simply allowed my characters to *yearn*—something remarkable happened. *Dirty* shed more than half of its plot points, and yet felt ten times more dynamic. Because here’s the thing:

“Dramatic action doesn’t happen on stage; it happens in the mind of an audience.”

- Sherry Kramer, *Playwright*⁶

During the spring semester of my second year, playwright Sherry Kramer came to UT as a visiting artist of the Michener Center for Writers. I was lucky enough to take her workshop on magical objects, which revolutionized the way I think about theater.

Sherry asserts that nothing actually happens in a play unless an audience is transformed. But with all due respect to Sherry (who to me is the Yoda of playwriting) I don’t believe action happens inside the audience members’ minds, but in their hearts.

⁶ Taken from my notes from Sherry Kramer’s Magical Objects workshop, Spring 2011

The most affecting moment in *Dirty*—one of the most intimate moments I’ve ever written—occurs at the end of Act Two, when Matt and Katie play a lullaby for their unborn daughter.⁷ There’s no conflict, no discovery, no reversal, no significant shift in status—*nothing happens*. Except that it does, because something very significant happens in the audience. Our investment in Matt and Katie deepens, and we willingly join them on their journey of moral compromise, because we need what they need. We need this family to be whole.

The two most affecting scenes of my play, *I Am Going to Change the World*, which premiered at Chicago Dramatists Theatre in June 2012, are equally free of plot twists. There are no reversals or status shifts when best friend Troy tells protagonist John about the moment the two of them first met. But there is a ton of motion happening *inside the audience*. We’ve been hungry to know why Troy’s friends with John; we’re ravenous for a moment of vulnerability and compassion from our protagonist, and when it’s delivered, the audience experiences a reversal (in our perception of John); his status shifts with *us*. In a play with plenty of loud moments—where we witness a psychological breakdown in a Goldman Sachs interview—it is this moment where we witness nothing at all, where we simply hear a confession told in the dark—that the greatest event of the play occurs.

Though if I’m being honest, this isn’t my favorite scene in the play.

It’s not even my favorite moment between John and Troy.

It is the play’s final scene, when the two men simply stand on a bridge and negotiate a new normal to their friendship, which I find most resonant. I attended perhaps three of *Change the World*’s thirty performances, but on a dozen different occasions, I snuck into the back of the theater, hiding behind the curtain, listening to that final scene. In a play where the characters

⁷ This moment was made even more affecting in our production, because the actor playing Matt (Michael Patrick Thornton) has a disability that inhibits hand motility. So I had to rewrite the scene, such that Matt and Katie played the guitar together, her fretting chords while he strummed and sang.

experience profound discoveries, switchback reversals, and 180-degree shifts in status, it is this scene, where the characters only tiptoe in a new direction, that affects me most profoundly. And there's a great reminder here, as I continue to push through my current play-in-progress, *The Kingdom*.⁸

"Trust the quietest of turns."

- Steven Dietz⁹

There is a fantastic playwriting exercise that I first learned from Steven Dietz, then stole, modified and delivered to my Playwriting I class. I asked my students to:

"Imagine that you're walking down the street when a single moment of theater stops you in your tracks.

"Got it? Good.

"Now create that moment."

I then told my students to do it again, and this time, "without gunshots, without violence, without that kiss, without loud noises or big, physical gestures"—how do we write the whisper that rings in the audience's ears, or a touch that feels more violent or intimate than sex?

How do we write a play that lives in *pianissimo* more than any other dynamic?

⁸ *The Kingdom* was commissioned by commercial producer Marc Platt in March 2011. Platt was interested in Bradley Manning, the Army Private who had leaked the greatest cachet of military secrets in the history of the US. But what began as a commercial play about internet privacy has evolved into a hyper-intimate piece about redemption, set in the basement of a small church.

⁹ Taken from my notes from Steven Dietz's playwriting workshop, Fall 2010

This is one of the central questions of *The Kingdom*, which will receive its public debut in an enhanced reading at the 2013 University of Texas New Theatre (UTNT) Festival. As I continue to develop the play, I keep two foundational tenets in mind: first, to lean into my characters' needs. Samuel *needs* to save himself by saving this boy. That may manifest itself in the smallest, quietest of gestures—by washing Chris's feet or feeding him a single slice of apple—but that action can resound with a volume of ten, if it's driven by the most desperate need. The second tenet is to remember that there are two physical objects, right on stage, which seem to contain all of the characters' needs, hopes, and fears: a small wooden cross and a simple black dress.

“A magical object is magical because it holds our character's hopes and dreams.”

- Sherry Kramer¹⁰

Thank god Sherry Kramer came to UT when she did. Because she took one look at my promising mess of a script for *I Am Going to Change the World* and then gave me the sharpest, shrewdest, most helpful, most succinct critique I've ever received:

“Lift the dad, lift the list.”

Following Sherry's advice, I tracked back through the play, leaning into John's relationship with his father, but also raising the significance of the slip of paper he carries in his wallet—the list he wrote when he was nine years old, charting out all of the achievements he will accomplish later in life. Or, to quote Sherry:

“You know that thing in your protagonist's pocket that's a metaphor for your whole fucking play? Yeah, you may want to pay attention to that.”

To be fair, my plays aren't exactly littered with magical objects. I lack a poet's eye and when metaphors arise in my plays, they tend to live on a much larger scale. The company that Matt

¹⁰ Taken from my notes from Sherry Kramer's Magical Objects workshop, Spring 2011

and Katie form in *Dirty* is a metaphor for our country, borne out of promise but corrupted when its ideals become compromised. The journey that John takes in *Change the World* is the journey that our nation has taken this past decade, when in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and a financial collapse, we collectively woke up, wondering, “how could this happen? How the hell did we end up *here*?”

And probably there’s a larger metaphor at play in *The Kingdom*, but I’m not worried about that just yet. My job right now is to trust those quiet turns and remain focused on those two magical objects in the room. And perhaps above all, to have faith, much like the characters in this play, that there is indeed a light in the darkness, and that the darkness has not overcome it. That this play, of which I’ve written well over a hundred pages and kept fewer than twenty, will nudge its way into nascence.

“The secret to a happy life in the theater is to work on a project you’re truly passionate about, and to collaborate with artists you genuinely like and admire.”

- Sherry Kramer¹¹

The projects mentioned above have been produced in dingy storefronts, small Equity houses, and Off-Broadway by one of the largest theater companies in the world. I’ve crashed on friends’ floors and I’ve been housed in a corporate apartment complex in midtown Manhattan, with a penthouse gym overlooking Central Park. And not to belittle that experience—to quote Ferris Bueller, “it’s so choice. If you have the means I highly recommend it”¹² but the New York production of *Suicide* was no more rewarding than the Chicago premieres of *Dirty* and *Change the World*.

All three productions provided the opportunity to work with Jonathan Berry, a director I deeply admire and sincerely love, to collaborate with actors and designers that shame me with their talent and generosity, and to be produced by theater companies that have unequivocally

¹¹ Taken from a Q&A at our Playwrights/Directors Colloquium, Spring 2011.

¹² *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*. Dir. John Hughes. Paramount, 1986. Film.

told me, “this is your home.” And if former MFA director Halena Kays’s great contribution to the realm of UT theses is to “be the collaborator you want to work with,” then perhaps this is mine:

Write the plays you want to live with; find the people you love to work with.

Kingsville

“Are your characters making choices, or are they making mistakes?”

- Kirk Lynn, *UT Professor of Playwriting*¹³

When *Kingsville* premiered at Chicago’s Stage Left Theatre in October 2010, the production was electric and wholly absorbing.... right up until the final moments of the first act.

For nearly an hour, audiences and critics alike bought into this hypothetical America, where children legally carry guns to class. They emotionally invested in the central relationship between James, a pacifist teacher, and his 13 year-old son, Justin, who defends his father’s stance and endures horrific bullying because of it.

But in the moments before intermission, I felt the audience begin to detach, as Justin staged his own murder, in order to show his father that guns are necessary to protect the people we love. The eyebrows only raised higher in the second act when James, now believing his son dead, engaged in a series of extreme, irrational and violent behaviors.

The play was ultimately decried by critics as overly complicated and preposterous. But a more accurate analysis would have been this:

Kingsville fell apart once my characters stopped making decisions and started getting tricked.

But while the play positioned itself inside my characters’ needs—and particularly Justin’s conflicting desires to defend his dad and assert his own presence in the world—the piece was devastating.

¹³ Asked during my End-of-Semester Meeting, Fall 2010

Nowhere was this more apparent than in Act Two, Scene Two, when Justin takes target practice at a range, and answers a simple question—“How did you feel when you fired that gun?”—with just one word:

“Big.”

This is the heartbeat of the play.

“What would the play look like if you cut every scene you didn’t love?”

- Kirk Lynn¹⁴

I think I just stared blankly at Kirk when he asked me this question, at my very first End-of-Semester Chat.

“I can’t just cut half the play,” I silently thought. “There would be gaping holes in the narrative.

And yet, a part of me was exhilarated by Kirk’s provocation.

“What would the play look like if you cut everything you didn’t love?”

It’s an extraordinary question, isn’t it?

Think for a second about the best scene you have ever written. Think about how it feels to be sitting in the audience, in that moment before your favorite scene’s about to begin. It’s not just the anticipation that the audience will love it; it’s the realization that you yourself are looking forward to it. You may have watched this moment five or six or fifty times, but you know there’s something real and extraordinary in this scene, that for once the writing happened not *by* you but *through* you. And now ask yourself:

¹⁴ Asked during my End-of-Semester Meeting, Fall 2010

What if every scene in the play felt like this?

What if *that* were the litmus test, and if a scene or moment didn't pass it, it was either cut or rewritten until it did? It's quite a barometer, isn't it? And if I'm being honest, I'm still apprenticing myself toward that standard. But it's not coincidental that, in the most recent draft of *Kingsville*, every single moment of trickery—all of the 'preposterous' plot points—have been cut. I never loved any of those moments and now those moments are gone.

But that moment where Justin talks about feeling big? And those boys' monologues at the top of Act Two? The claw machine reveal, the blistering debate, the final, unresolved chord between Justin and James? Those moments are most definitely still in place. And now that I've cleared away the clutter, I'm moving closer and closer to a play that looks like it might look if I cut everything I didn't love.

And yet...

Kirk issued that challenge my very first semester, and I've only made those cuts within the last year. It took time to fully embrace Kirk's advice, and in large part because I had to learn one lesson first:

"You have to be willing to get lost. Only then will you be able to go somewhere you have never been before."

- Suzan Zeder, *UT Professor of Playwriting*¹⁵

Like Sherry Kramer, Octavio Solis was brought to UT as a visiting artist of the Michener Center for Writers. When he arrived in the spring semester of 2011, he brought with him an approach to playwriting that he had learned from Maria Irene Fornés. The approach is rooted

¹⁵ Zeder, Suzan and Hancock, Jim. *Spaces of Creation*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann Drama, 2005. Print.

in visualization exercises and Octavio would often ask us to begin by closing our eyes. He would then tell us to picture an image—it might be our childhood home; it might just be the number 5... and then 4... and then 3, 2, 1, and he would ask us to step inside the number 0, to enter the endless expanse inside the number's borders.

To say I struggled with these exercises would be an understatement.

While other playwrights performed their visualization exercise and started scribbling away, I'd still be stuck on the number 5. Eyes closed, head in hands, trying to block out the sound of their pens on paper, the tap-tap-tap of keyboards clicking, just waiting for that goddamned 5 to materialize. On one occasion, this took more than an hour.

It's a bit embarrassing to admit that I'm a playwright who struggles with visual imagery, but it's the truth. I grew up in a family of musicians; if you've ever seen me walking on campus, you've seen me in headphones, and if you've ever read my plays, you know they're not written; they're *scored*. I don't see plays, I *hear* them.

But the great gift that Octavio gave me was the opportunity to lean into that weakness. And that semester, I would get up at 5 AM to work on *Kingsville*, always beginning with the simplest of visualization exercises—5... 4... 3... [Damnit]

5... 4... [damnit]

5...

....

Eventually, though, I started to see not just those numbers, but fragments of the town of Kingsville itself: dead grass, trees that hadn't sprouted leaves, a grayish hue to the sky. None of these images were perhaps that striking in and of themselves, but *Kingsville* is set toward the end of May. The grass should be green, trees should be lush, the sun should be shining.

The school year is almost over, but the entire town seems stuck in a winter that won't give way to spring.

Framed another way, the physical landscape of the world has been shaped by the emotional landscape of the people who inhabit it.

This may seem like a simple enough idea, but for me it was a realization with profound implications. It freed the world of *Kingsville* from the laws that govern our own world. All of these scenes I had written, all of this research I had conducted to understand the policies that would permit armed schoolchildren—all of this *information* lived in a part of the play where the heartbeat was faint. *Kingsville* was never about gun legislation; it was my reaction *against* the way we reduce school shootings to a question of gun legislation. It stemmed from my profound confusion and frustration that whenever these horrible events happen, they're always done by a boy on the brink of manhood, and rather than discussing our toxic paradigms of masculinity, we center our debate on the number of bullets that should be allowed in a magazine. We circumvent the complex core, in lieu of more manageable minutiae, and here I was, making the very same mistake in my own play.

All of those pages I had devoted to laws and policies—I could redirect them to my characters, to their fears, to their own questioning of what it means to be a man. And if the people who inhabited *Kingsville* felt fully human, then the world would feel undeniably familiar, even as children pulled guns out of claw machines and brought firearms to class.

So I embarked on rewrites, focusing less on circumstance and more on character, and remarkably enough, I began writing scenes that existed completely outside the action and time frame of the play. *Kingsville* lasts just one night, but I was writing scenes that took place *years* earlier and that had nothing to do with armed schoolchildren. I was writing about the road trip that James had taken with his family, how it felt to drive through Georgia while his wife and son slept in the car (“Justin has been to Atlanta and he has never *seen* Atlanta.”) I wrote a scene that took place the morning after Justin's first school dance, the family's breakfast ritual that had forever been interrupted. And I wrote about the school shooting that had transformed

Kingsville almost two years earlier, how Audrey's son had hidden in a bathroom stall, quietly dialing his mother's number, over and over, and how Audrey had decided to leave her phone at home that morning.

Even as I wrote these scenes, there was that voice in the back of my head, reminding me that these moments lived outside the frame of the play: "So either the frame is wrong, or these scenes don't belong." But if I were truly willing to do what Suzan so encouraged, if I actually dared to get lost, then I had to silence that voice. I had to trust where the play was taking me. I had to have faith that if I am indeed the first audience of my play—and I believe this with all my heart—then all of these discoveries were absolutely events of the play. They captivated my attention. They moved me closer to an understanding of who these people were and how this all-too familiar world came to be.

"And that's the thing; it is always in your power to work on your play in a way that enables you to keep loving it... always."

- Kirsten Greenidge ¹⁶

I wrote the first draft of *Kingsville* in the spring of 2008. It was the first play I worked on when I arrived in Austin; it is the only play I've worked on every semester I've been here, and it will be the first play I return to when my studies are complete. As of this morning, there are 91 versions of the script on my computer.

And the hard truth is that the play still isn't right.

One of the plot points remains a bit preposterous, I'm still figuring out who James is, and the play's time frame may indeed be flawed.

¹⁶ Greenidge, Kirsten. "When There's a Reason to Rewrite." *Howlround* 10 June, 2012.
<http://www.howlround.com/when-theres-a-reason-to-rewrite>.

Moreover, *Kingsville* carries the weight of a play that's been panned. Of all of my plays, it is the least likely to receive a second production. While I tend to its revision, I fall behind on two different commissions—projects that actually pay, with producers already in place. And perhaps most to the point, I don't actually *enjoy* working on *Kingsville*; it's exhausting and difficult and sad to live in a world where there's only a pinprick of light in all the darkness. I don't sleep well when I write this play; I don't feel good; the play itself tests my faith in the goodness of people. There is every single reason in the world to abandon *Kingsville*, except for one:

I still believe in it.

I still believe in these characters, whose pain and love are *deep*. And I believe that the play has something important to say, that *Kingsville* has and will continue to catalyze a conversation that must take place. Perhaps it's a bit telling that this play that was so poorly critically received, is nonetheless the piece of mine that people still talk about the most.

So while there's a part of me that hopes there aren't another 91 drafts in store, there's a much larger part of me that's excited about writing the next draft.

This is what I mean when I encourage others to “write the play you want to live with.” It's not always the play that's the most enjoyable to write; it's the one you still want to grapple with after five years of trying. It's the piece that, through 91 difficult drafts, truly teaches you what it means to be your own harshest critic, and your most ferocious champion.

Colossal

“From the Latin, ‘dis,’ for ‘through.’ Disabled doesn’t mean unable; it means able through another way.”

- Kevin Kling¹⁷

Shortly before I arrived at UT, two events happened which forever altered the way I view moving bodies on stage.

First, I began working with Chicago-based actor, director and improv artist Michael Patrick Thornton. As the Artistic Director of the Gift Theatre, Mike offered me my first professional production, and his stunning performance in *Suicide, Incorporated* was a major factor in the show’s overwhelming success.

Mike gets around mostly in a wheelchair, having experienced a spinal stroke on St. Patrick’s Day, 2003. Mike jokes that ‘spinal stroke’ is medical jargon for “we have no idea what really happened, so we’re going to call it this.” Essentially, Mike was in the backseat of a friend’s car, returning home from a night of drinking, when he began to feel a tingling in his toes. The tingling quickly became a shooting pain that spread through his feet and up his ankles. By the time it reached his knees, he told his friends to drive him to the hospital. By the time they reached the emergency room, Mike couldn’t move.

Over the next several weeks, Mike would fight for his life (enduring another spinal stroke along the way) and over the next several years, he would undergo massive amounts of physical, psychological and occupational therapy. Though doctors prepared him for the possibility that he would never perform again, Mike returned to the stage four years after his stroke and earned his reputation as one of Chicago’s most celebrated actors.

¹⁷ Master storyteller Kevin Kling visited our department in the spring semesters of both 2011 and 2013. This quote is taken from a performance he delivered on March 2, 2013.

Mike's scene partners in *Suicide, Incorporated* often said that working with him was like a master class in stillness. They dissected and analyzed the way he could hold an audience captive with silence. I, meanwhile, watched the way Mike *moved*. The Gift is a postage stamp of a theater space; it measures 10 feet deep by 22 feet wide, and when the set is made wheelchair accessible, it measures a lot smaller than that. Yet Mike could maneuver hairpin turns and stop on a dime. But when his path was obstructed, whenever someone carelessly dropped a bag or prop in the middle of Mike's route, I watched his jaw set, as frustration settled in and he realized that he was stuck.

Shortly after I began working with Mike, my mother started experiencing a spinal condition of her own, a disability known as stenosis. Essentially, the vertebrae in her spine were collapsing on top of each other, causing her extraordinary discomfort, limiting her movement, and making it all but impossible for her to get more than a couple of hours of sleep at a time. In her youth, my mother had been a dancer and a nationally ranked tennis player. Her body once worked in a way most of us can only imagine, and now it was failing her.

As these two events became more and more prominent in my life—as my relationship and friendship with Mike deepened and my mother's spinal condition worsened—I began to lose all interest in seeing 'flawless' physical bodies on stage. I also became increasingly skeptical of these plays I was writing, which seemed to engage the body in minimal ways, which usually featured a couple guys, seated around a table, remaining static for twenty or thirty minutes at a time. And though there was certainly movement in the spoken dialogue, percussive and musical, I began to appreciate that many characters don't speak through words. Their body is their vehicle for language, and I was hungry to hear what they wanted to say.

There's an irony, I suppose, in that I only explored physical movement after intersecting with individuals with disability. But perhaps this is part of what Kevin Kling means with the phrase, "able through another way." Both my mother and Michael move with greater precision and greater *inventiveness* than almost anyone I have ever met. I still remember when, during a rehearsal of *Dirty*, Mike's baseball cap fell onto the floor and without missing a beat, he pulled the arm off his wheelchair, scooped the cap off the ground and flipped it onto

his head. The moment was more arresting than any scene I had written in the rehearsal room. In just this single gesture, Mike had challenged my assumption that he needed my help; he had taught me to see in another way.

“You will know Will’s work by the way it moves.”

- William Davis¹⁸

Like myself, director William Davis had come to UT in the fall of 2010 by way of Chicago. Though we’d never worked together prior to Austin, we recognized in each other certain qualities that perhaps aren’t unique to Chicago, but deeply imbedded within that community. For starters, we both worked our asses off. For another, we looked to emotional truth as the underpinnings of theater. We both had a profound respect for structure, the frame of a play, but whereas my work was mostly *sonic*, his was *kinetic*. William had spent years as a dancer and choreographer, and his brother, Sebastian Grubb, is a company member of Axis, the nation’s leading dance company featuring movers of mixed ability.

During my first semester, William and I began to work together on *Heart & Bone*. I had written the one-act in Dietz’s workshop, and specifically in response to his challenge to lean into my weaknesses. So I created a piece with a female protagonist (since my work often explores masculinity)—a former dancer, struggling with the onset of stenosis. Much of the spoken dialogue was replaced with physical dialogue, and to develop the play, we substituted a more traditional reading with a movement workshop, facilitated by William and Sebastian. That workshop was full of stunning moments, including a beautiful presentation on the physiological function of the spinal cord, and the way in which it’s protected by the spine. The most resonant moment, however, was when everyone in the room selected a single line of text, and then expressed that text through movement. Whereas my own physical interpretations presented the verbal equivalent of a few muttered, inarticulate sounds, the movement of the dancers packed paragraphs.

¹⁸ Davis, Will. “About.” *Will Davis: New Plays, New Work*. <http://wmjdavis.com/about/>

And as we progressed through that workshop, as I watched dancers like Sebastian, Chell Parkins, and Tom Truss unpack the play with their bodies, as I continued to explore physical movement through a series of contact improv workshops with Chell, I began to realize what should have been so obvious so long ago:

My characters will speak to me in their own language. It's my job to be fluent in as many languages as possible (or to work with those artists who are), so that I can hear what my characters are trying to say.

In the spring of 2011, William and I presented a reading of *Heart & Bone*, enhanced with movement. We allowed the actors to remain on book for all of their spoken lines, while William choreographed and staged the lines that were spoken through the characters' bodies. Ultimately I wasn't thrilled with the script itself; perhaps it was too autobiographical, too close to the act of writing my own story, rather than drawing from deeply personal experience to create something larger than myself. But the play's *final moment*—when the protagonist, Elizabeth and her husband, Daniel, stand outside their son's school dance and learn to lean on each other in a new way, to adjust their bodies so that slow dancing doesn't hurt... that moment was just right.

And underneath that moment was a question, and a story, that I was hungry to put on stage.

"Write the unproduceable play."

- Kirk Lynn¹⁹

During my three years at UT, Steven Dietz has been my mentor, Suzan Zeder has been my role model, and Kirk Lynn has been my *provocateur*.

¹⁹ From a conversation that took place in the Spring semester of 2011

It was Kirk who first acknowledged that most of my plays are best served by institutions outside of UT, and then challenged me to write the one that worked best *here*. Or, as Kirk actually put it:

“Write a play with 8 tubas. I bet you the Roundabout can’t do *that*.”

Setting aside my strong instinct that Kirk just wanted to see a play with 8 tubas, he’d barely uttered the words when I knew the play I wanted to tackle. I’d already discussed it in my first End-of-Semester Report:

“I want to learn how to write an epic play. I know I can write a piece for an audience of 50; can I write one for 300? I have some thoughts for a play about football that has the potential to live on a grand scale.”

At the time, I had no idea that ‘grand scale’ would translate to a twenty-person, fully-padded ensemble, to a drumline, to full contact choreography, and to a lead actor in a wheelchair. I did, however, suspect that I was about to embark on a project at which most producers would balk.

“Good,” Kirk replied. “Write the unproduceable play.”

“You spend more time tearing down other artists than building them up.”²⁰

- Kirk Lynn

Of course, not all of Kirk’s provacateuring would be delivered in such a positive tone.

In August 2011, Kirk and I engaged in a heated debate on Howlround, after I criticized a work of theater I’d seen just weeks earlier at Rubber Rep. Kirk had interpreted my post as a

²⁰ Mahoney, Jeni. “The Horton Lens.” *Howlround* 28 August 2011

<http://www.howlround.com/the-horton-lens>. [taken from ‘Comments’ section]

condemnation of the whole genre of experimental theater and the artistic community of Austin. Our ensuing argument, which for Kirk may have been a bit of forgettable banter, was for me a formative experience, the flashpoint of my time in Texas. Because if I'm being honest, I *was* frustrated by much of the work I had first seen in Austin, and by many of the attitudes I had encountered when I arrived. There seemed to be an open disdain for anything that smacked of naturalism; to many of my classmates this was the realm of television, not a gateway to an authentic human connection between artist and audience. Character depth seemed to be less important than stage image, and the very notion of a playwright, sitting alone in his room, scribbling away in the dark, was to some of my colleagues an archaic approach. Plays were now written, if written at all, by collaborative, devised means. There seemed to be little place for the work I so loved back in Chicago, the kind of intimate, emotionally honest, character driven theater that thrived in a 22 by 10 foot storefront.

If I felt a certain disdain toward the work I loved and loved to make, I responded in kind, rejecting much of what I first saw in Austin. Throughout my first year at UT, I would attend theater and note the ways it failed Chicago's standards, rather than appreciating the ways it redefined standards of its own. I saw subpar acting and clunky dialogue, choosing not to see the stunning design, the inventive approaches to structure, to story-making, to audience configuration, to a broadening of what theater is and can be. My Howlround debate with Kirk was in many ways a culmination of my failure to embrace this artistic community, but it was also an opportunity to redirect my attitude and energy.

I didn't have to choose between Chicago and Austin. I could keep the storefront at the core of my writing, and allow Austin's influence to broaden the boundaries of my work.

Because deep down, I didn't just want to write an epic play. I wanted to write an epic play that was more intimate than anything I had ever written or seen. I didn't just want to explore physical dialogue; I wanted to score it alongside the spoken word, to create theater that was both kinetic and sonic. When I think about what is deeply theatrical, I think of those moments that house the intimate right alongside the epic, that juxtapose breathtaking movement with gorgeous language. I think about Lear's *fortissimo* cries in the storm, followed by his quiet

recognition of Cordelia. I think about Stanley's scream of 'Stella!' that contains both heaven-splitting violence and naked vulnerability. I think about *Blasted*, when a room blows apart and a blinded man is fed. And I think about the opening moment of *September Play*, when we're invited into the very human experience of assembling an intricate mural, and then witness its epic destruction.

Is it ambitious and a bit naïve to aspire to such lofty company? Perhaps.

But what the hell are we training toward, if not to reach these heights?

"The play is that of contradictory energies working to arrive at a new equilibrium, if it kills everybody."

- William Gibson²¹

If *Colossal* is my attempt to incorporate so much of what I've discussed in this thesis—to bring together physical and spoken dialogue, to draw from the Chicago storefront and Austin's experimental community, to write a play driven by deep character need and not by coincidence, to strip the piece down to only moments I loved, if I wanted to do *all this*, then I needed to house these goals in one singular aim.

I needed to create a *visceral* piece of theater.

Merriam-Webster defines the word, 'visceral,' as:

1. Felt in or as if in the internal organs: deep
2. Not intellectual
3. Dealing with crude or elemental emotion²²

²¹ Gibson, William. *Shakespeare's Game*. New York: Atheneum Books, 1978. Print.

²² <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/visceral>

In other words, the moment that *Colossal* drifted outside of the heart and crept into the head was the moment that the play would die. And die it did, many times over, early draft after early draft, as I pursued subplots that weren't visceral, but topical or intellectual. When entire pages were devoted to whether or not Mike would attend a press conference, honoring his coach's commitment to player safety, I was perhaps raising the oft-undiscussed issue of chronic football injury, but I wasn't forcing Mike into an action that would rip him open raw. If Mike skips the conference, he's less friendly with Coach; if he attends it, he's a bit of a hypocrite. So what?

Fortunately—for me and the script—I was invited to develop *Colossal* at the Kennedy Center's MFA Workshop, where dramaturg Mark Bly reminded me that this isn't a play about hypocrisy. "By god," he whispered, in his Mark Bly whispery-way, "it's about that time in your life when you felt *most alive*." For the protagonist of *Colossal*, those moments were crystal clear and viscerally felt. Mike had played a game he loved with breathtaking grace and reckless violence; he had proudly defied his father's wishes and he had fearlessly fallen in love. For the briefest period of time, he had felt more alive than most of us can even imagine, and now he was supposed to accept that all of that was just gone? How could he? The notion that he could just let it go is laughable, because it negates what Mark Bly had so brilliantly pointed out: Mike's past is *alive*. And like most living things, it's not okay with being let go. Mike's past is going to fight back.

In order for Mike to move forward, he would have to first *kill* the ghost of his past. The play would have to get violent—as violent as football—and to my great surprise, everyone at the Kennedy Center embraced violence as a foundational principle of the play. Gregg Henry acquired helmets and pads, choreographer Kelly Maxner demonstrated proper hitting technique, then told our actors to, "get ready to do this *for real*." Mark Bly took us to the National Gallery, where we studied George Bellows' animalistic depictions of 1920s boxers, and actor Michael Patrick Thornton risked the greatest violence of all, fearlessly performing a sit-to-stand without a gait belt—an act roughly equivalent to walking the tightrope without a net. Because of my collaborators' willingness to embrace violence, I was able to perform an act of violence myself, tearing away at the script, cutting every moment I didn't love, moving

closer to something that was raw and elemental, that juxtaposed the intimate and epic, and that would be experienced inside the audience's heart and gut.

But of course violence without compassion isn't theater, it's thuggery, and as the rehearsal room presented greater and greater elements of danger, it also became a safer and safer space to work. We were just as concerned with taking care of each other as we were with tending to the script—a pattern that continued as William, Michael and I moved the play out of DC and back to Austin, for the 2013 Cohen New Works Festival. As we entered rehearsal, I kept waiting for someone from our department—or at least from the university—to pull the plug on our project. I had heard the stories surrounding Kimber Lee's *Fight*, and felt certain that once administrators discovered that our play required *helmets*, questions would be asked. Choreography would need to be altered, and a play that needed to be visceral to thrive, would at the very least be tamed. But that never happened. Instead, the football program gave us helmets and pads without raising an eyebrow. Playwriting faculty read the script and supported the work. Dance faculty—particularly the brilliant, gracious Andrea Beckham—made sure the movement was as safe as possible, knowing of course that the movement could never be *perfectly* safe.

More and more—and in large part because of my experiences at UT—I am convinced that every worthwhile artistic endeavor is borne out of the willingness to say *yes* in the face of an impossible task. The New Works Festival itself—the notion that 40 plays could be produced simultaneously, in large part by students, that all performances would be free of charge and all classes canceled—this is an *impossible* idea. The concept that *Colossal*—a play with a nearly 30-person ensemble, a football team, a dance company, a drumline, and a lead actor in a wheelchair—could be produced on a \$900 budget—is a laughable proposal. But when I set out to write *Colossal*, and when Will Davis set out to stage it, we moved forward with the conviction that theater is exactly the place where the impossible is made manifest before our eyes.

This is a new true north for me. If I'm writing a play that doesn't seek in some fundamental way to make the impossible possible on stage... then it might be time for a new project.

“As you get better, it gets harder.”

- Steven Dietz²³

In November 2012, Jack Reuler, the Artistic Director of Mixed Blood Theatre in Minneapolis, offered to produce *Colossal* as the flagship play of his 2013/2014 season. Prior to Jack’s offer, I’d never been produced in a theater with more than 76 seats; Mixed Blood seats nearly 300. He offered me more money than I’d ever received for a production, promised to house me in Minneapolis throughout the run, and graciously waived any rights to the world premiere. More to the point, Mixed Blood Theatre had a longstanding commitment to plays that intersected with disability and that intersected with sports, and Jack believed wholeheartedly that *Colossal* embodied his core values as an artist. In one of the kindest emails I’ve ever received, he wrote that:

“You and me are of like minds - wanting to use theatre to express our integrated passions regarding stigmas of race, disability, sexuality, and more within a framework of theatre, dance, sports, and rehabilitation, all atop a foundation of the many guises of love and conflicting emotions. Your one play encompasses my aspirations for this theatre and its purpose (and my career) in ways I have never encountered. I don't know your body of work. I know I love this play.”²⁴

I was floored by Jack’s generosity and admired him as an artist and man. I believed deeply in the values that his theater company not only aspired toward, but honored and practiced in every way—from their radical hospitality program (free admission to all productions and open access to all rehearsals) to their longstanding commitment to new work, and particularly those plays that intersected with questions of race, gender, sexuality, and ability.

²³ Taken from my notes from Steven Dietz’s playwriting workshop, Fall 2010

²⁴ Jack Reuler (personal communication, February 26, 2013)

But I also knew that *Colossal* wasn't quite ready for production (I hadn't actually sent Jack the play; he'd received it from colleagues at NNPN) and I questioned whether the theater could execute the precision that the play demanded. After four months of wrestling with this decision, I called Jack and told him that I couldn't do the one thing I have so praised in this thesis: I couldn't say yes.

With that decision behind me, the challenge I now face is how to transform this 'no' into a 'yes.' How can I look toward the future of *Colossal*—and the future of my artistic career—with a spirit of creating opportunities, rather than turning them down?

I can say yes to carrying *Colossal's* artistic team forward in some capacity; I can advocate fiercely for the continued involvement of key collaborators—most notably Michael Patrick Thornton and William Davis.

I can say yes to insisting that *Colossal* be executed with the precision that it demands, the resources it needs, and in the physical space that best serves the piece.

I can say yes to *Colossal* as a visceral theatrical event, ensuring that when the audience enters the performance space, they're arrested by the smell of sweat, the sound of deafening drums, the sight of bodies violently colliding in space.

I can say yes to striving toward even greater levels of intimacy, while making the play even more epic.

Perhaps above all, I can say yes to ensuring that *Colossal* continues to honestly honor the experience of football players, dancers, and individuals with disability.

More and more I am coming to believe—and perhaps this is my own single-sentence quote—that every play should have an audience that terrifies the playwright.

Colossal has three.

Conclusion

“Find your people.”

- Steven Dietz²⁵

A decade into my playwriting career, I’ve been extremely fortunate to collaborate with some of the most talented and generous artists working in theater today. I’ve mentioned some of those artists by name—Michael Patrick Thornton, William Davis, and Jonathan Berry—the latter of whom truly deserves more page space than I’ve afforded him in this thesis. It was Jonathan who, despite being one of the most sought-after directors in Chicago, took a pay cut to work on *Suicide, Incorporated* because he believed in the script, and because he believed in me. It’s Jonathan who has directed all but one of my world premieres, whose support has never wavered, even when the rewrites are lacking and reviews aren’t glowing.

“That’s the secret,” Steven Dietz once told me. “Find the people who will support you when the career’s *not* going well.”

Of course, Steven’s sage advice applies to more than just the collaborators I choose. It applies to my friends, my family and even to the characters I write, as I came to discover during my very first semester at UT.

When I first arrived in Austin, I did so with a swagger that bordered on cockiness. *Suicide, Incorporated* had just opened to rave reviews, I’d been signed by one of the biggest agencies in the world, and my upcoming production of *Kingsville* was garnering interest from theaters around the country. Again and again, I was asked, “Why are you going to grad school?” and even began to wonder myself. During my very first class, when Dietz charged us to “play above your level,” I looked around the room and questioned whether I had come to the right place.

²⁵ Taken from a private conversation with Steven Dietz, Spring 2013

And so, even though I enjoyed my first few weeks in Austin, I began to feel like my ‘real work’ was happening outside of UT. Between Monday and Thursday I was a student, but come Thursday night, when I hopped on a plane and flew to Chicago for *Kingsville* rehearsals—*that’s* when I got to be a playwright. Forget the fact that most of my flights were paid for through Suzan Zeder’s generosity. Or that I had taken pages and pages of notes in Dietz’s workshop, that I was profoundly affected by Julie Marie Myatt’s three-week residency, her charge to live one’s values as an artist. I somehow ignored all that and pretended that my artistic life existed exclusively in Chicago. It was in Chicago that *Suicide* was still playing to sold-out houses, and that I was sleeping on floors and completing rewrites deep into the night. It was in Chicago that *Kingsville* was generating press and anticipation, and it was there that I’d have my next big hit, the one that would truly launch my playwriting career.

And as I’ve mentioned, that didn’t happen; a play with promised had failed to reach its potential. There were no sold-out houses this time around, and all that interest from outside producers almost instantly evaporated. After attending an opening party that felt more like a wake, I boarded a plane for Austin, not knowing that *Kingsville*’s dismal opening was just the first in a series of unfortunate events.

When I landed in Texas, I learned that an aunt whom I loved dearly had died after a short battle with cancer. Just a week earlier, I had visited her in the hospital and she had convinced both of us that it was not her time to go. When I turned to my girlfriend for a bit of consolation, she instead informed me that she no longer wanted our relationship to continue. And because there’s a difference between an ultra-personal thesis and a diary entry, I’ll stop right there, underscoring only one critical point:

Up until September 2010, I never truly believed, in my heart of hearts, that I would achieve the life I so desperately wanted. This notion that I could be a successful, working playwright (i.e. that theater could pay my bills) and that I would find and marry the woman I loved—deep down, I knew it was a pipe dream.

But for a few short weeks in the fall of 2010, that dream became not only possible; it was *imminent*. I was about to be launched onto the national theater landscape; I had fallen for a woman who could see herself growing old with me. I listened to Dietz read poetry that asked, “What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life”²⁶ and heard my heart screaming, “*this* is what I plan to do, and I’m *doing* it.” And then, in the span of twenty-four hours, all of it became a pipe dream once again.

For about three weeks thereafter, I didn’t really do much of anything. I’m pretty sure I attended most of my classes, but other than that, I withdrew into my room and into myself. I didn’t respond to invitations from my colleagues to socialize; I didn’t return calls from family, and I certainly didn’t do any writing. I just felt deeply unhappy, and no doubt a little sorry for myself, and all of this threatened to consume my first semester and beyond.

And then a funny thing happened.

A play I’d written a year and a half earlier—a piece about a young man, struggling to cope with a life that hasn’t turned out the way he’d planned... it started telling me that it wanted to be rewritten. It was a play I’d dreamt up at a time when my most profound doubts (that I have no place in this profession, that I’ll end up alone, that I’ll disappoint my loved ones) were alive and deeply felt. But soon after writing the first few drafts, my life started to go *well*, and every attempt at additional rewrites felt like a false move. I simply couldn’t force myself back to a place of profound disappointment and doubt, until November 2010, when that place was forced back upon me.

²⁶ Oliver, Mary. “The Summer Day.” *New and Selected Poems, Vol. 1*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2005. Print.

So I stopped feeling sorry for myself, opened my moleskine, scribbled “I Am Going to Change the World” on top of a blank page, and rewrote the play from scratch. And let this be a reminder that I carry in my heart long after I leave Texas:

The work will always be there for me.

My characters don’t give a shit how my ‘playwriting career’ is going. They just want my time and absolute focus, and an open emotional pathway so I can really hear what they’re saying.

The same, of course, is true for my friends, my family, and so many of my colleagues and mentors here in Austin. Over the past three years, as I have pursued a most unconventional course of study, Professors Zeder, Dietz and Lynn have supported me throughout—whether the reviews have been raves or pans, whether I resisted Austin’s aesthetic or embraced it, whether I was even on campus or opening a show in another city.

I take some delight in suspecting that my path through the UT MFA program was unlike that of any playwright before me. I take pride in being the first UT student to balance a rigorous curriculum and teaching load with the world premieres of three different plays and the Off-Broadway premiere of another. Over the past three years, I have taken work-related trips to New York, Chicago, DC, Minneapolis, Denver, and Pittsburgh, logging more than 30 flights while remaining fully committed to my classes, my colleagues, and to my responsibilities as a member of this artistic community.

As my playwriting career has continued to grow, my devotion to this department has only deepened. I am profoundly proud to submit my application for graduation from the University of Texas at Austin’s MFA Program in Playwriting.