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Fail Forward

an examination of failure and the director's practice

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Fail Forward

an examination of failure and the director's practice

by

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Dedication

For all my past collaborators and all my collaborators to be.

Also for my mom. You were right.

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Abstract

Fail Forward

an examination of failure and fear in the director's practice

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This thesis is about failure and its role in the director's practice. I will define failure, its function in three of my production experiences at the University of Texas at Austin, and how this understanding of failure has become part of my artistic practice moving forward into the professional world. I seek to emphasize failure as an integral part of the director's practice.

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Introduction

Growing up I was an athlete. I played most sports as a kid and then in sixth grade transitioned into playing volleyball full-time. Over the years I was on several competitive teams, one of which went to the Junior Olympic Invitational. My entire life was volleyball. Then my junior year of high school I was cut from my school team and I thought my life was over. I was not good enough. I was a failure. I was not able to perform at a level that merited a position on the team. They did not need me and what was more distressing was I did not have an identity outside volleyball. I had constructed an identity for myself around this sport and in an instant that was gone. I continued to play volleyball outside of school in the spring that year, but when the fall season began the following year, I signed up to be a part of the run crew, the people who work backstage during theatre performances, of the musical to suppress the memory of failure.

I had never worked in theatre before, but being on a running crew for a production seemed to be a lot like volleyball here was no ball or rules about how often you could touch things, but there were people coming together to achieve a common goal with the stage manager and director playing the role of team captain and coach, respectively. I was painting scenery and handing off props as opposed to serving a ball into play and lurching to keep the ball off the ground, two things that, months before, I believed were all that could make me feel like I had purpose. As I stood backstage, listening for the millionth time to the diva leading lady sing her terrible solo, a feeling came over me; I tried to articulate it later but found myself at a loss. It was unlike anything I had ever felt. Nothing had ever made me feel like that, not time with friends, not family, not school, not

even my beloved volleyball. I did not know how to explain it. What I did know was I never wanted to stop doing this; as terrible as the musical was and as exhausted as the work made me, I felt more like myself than I ever had, for the first time I was more interested in being something as opposed to trying to fit into something. I did not want that feeling to end.

At the same time that I was on the run crew for my high school musical, I happened upon a documentary on PBS one night called *Broadway: The American Musical* hosted by the one and only Julie Andrews. I couldn't take my eyes off the screen. I had no idea the depth there was to musicals, the range of subject matter, the history, and all the different kinds of jobs involved. I continued to watch it the following two nights because as I watched, I felt that feeling again, the one I had backstage during my high school production. It was more intense this time. I learned this world was an industry; there was the possibility for a career and life here which volleyball never offered me. Outside of international and Olympic competition, volleyball careers ended after college. This world of theatre was never-ending. The feeling grew stronger and I felt my heart flutter. I went to the library to check out every musical soundtrack I could get my hands on and listened to them until I knew every word. At the time I was not able to put a name to this feeling that seemed to grow in intensity every time I even thought about musicals: the feeling that made me want to do things I did not know or understand, that made me want to take a leap. The extracurricular interest began to manifest in my schoolwork; I wrote a paper in my English class about how I wanted to make musicals.

I remember my English teacher returned my paper, the one I wrote about a dream that would probably never come to fruition, and on the back of the paper was a personal note saying I had outlined not a dream but a goal, a goal that was entirely within my reach and she believed would one day be in my grasp. No one had ever said anything like that to me before, I never felt that kind of faith in myself and to hear it from someone I venerated shifted something inside of me. I wanted to do this. I did not know how or what the first step was, but I was going to do it.

I chased this dream through college and earned an undergraduate degree in Drama with a triple emphasis in performance, management, and design. I worked in every area of theatre so I could learn as much as possible. After graduation, I took two unpaid internships at Portland Center Stage and Artists Repertory Theatre in research, which I later understood to be dramaturgy, and development respectively. Sometime over the course of that year, the fear of failure began to creep back into me. I worked hard but as I continued to look for paid positions in the field, I realized not only did I seem to be unqualified but I was also in crisis. I had played every theatrical role in college: from actor to director to designer to stage manager, and I had no idea what I wanted to do. Beyond that, I was not sure if I was even that good at any of those things. How was I supposed to measure my worth if I could not find any work? Had I done it again, was I a failure? I continued to go to my internships every day but every day there were more questions and this little doubt grew until it would not be ignored.

I was overwhelmed and discouraged when I moved back to my hometown of San Jose, California in the summer of 2010. After licking some wounds, I began my job

search and almost immediately found a position for an office manager/events assistant at a company called TheatreWorks in Palo Alto. I submitted my resume and cover letter, as I had dozens of times before, but this time I got a phone call asking me to come in for an interview. I prepared by doing research on the company to get a sense of their history and the kind of work they did, dressed the part, and got to the offices early. We had a good conversation but I left the building assuming there were many more qualified candidates and that I would be back to square one by the next week. I got a phone call a few days later and was offered the position. I was ecstatic. Though the job was not my ideal position I was working in theatre and I did not think about anything else.

After the initial delight wore off, as I continued to do the same thing day after day, I began to feel that doubt creeping back into my head. What if this was it, the same mundane tasks day after day? When I interviewed, I told the Managing Director and Director of Development that I wanted to be an Artistic Director. As I continued to work at TheatreWorks, I kept holding out hope that a position would open up in the Artistic department and I could transfer there, to really work toward that goal. After two years it was clear that would never happen. I became frustrated with my job, depressed about my future, and unmotivated to do anything. I was a failure. I would look through the website of any theatre company I could find, desperate to find something in the artistic field. I came across listings for directing internships and fellowships.

As I read over the fellowship descriptions, I realized I might be qualified for an internship or fellowship. While working for TheatreWorks, I had been directing various readings and workshops of new plays in the Bay Area community. I was also given the

opportunity to be an assistant director for two shows at TheatreWorks, something that got me away from my desk and into the world I wanted to be a part of so badly. I updated my resume and sent applications to every directing internship and fellowship I could find. I was ready to go anywhere, but my dream was Actors Theatre of Louisville.

Actors Theatre had one of the most renowned internship programs in regional theatre and offered opportunities to actually direct work, as opposed to most of the other positions which emphasized assisting and observing. The program had everything I wanted: directing opportunities, the mentorship of two incredible directors in Artistic Director Les Waters and Associate Artistic Director Meredith McDonough, and the opportunity to be a part of the company's 50th Anniversary season. I sent in my materials and though I hoped to be chosen, the voice in the back of my mind told me it was never going to happen. Lo and behold, after a phone interview and three days of waiting, I was offered one of the two coveted directing internships. I was thrilled and then immediately terrified. What if they found out I had been sitting behind a desk for two and a half years? What if the workshops and readings I had done were not enough for their standards? The "what if" questions consumed me and I entered the program at Actors Theatre elated to have been chosen but in fear of being found out for the failure I believed myself to be.

My first months in Louisville were spent playing a part; I was so terrified about being seen as a fraud that I did everything I could to seem like I deserved to be in this place. The turning point for this charade was finally having a drink with one of my most important mentors, Meredith McDonough. I asked her to explain to me exactly why I was in Louisville, and she told me about how she gave Les Waters, the Artistic Director, a

stack of resumes without any names and that my resume was at the top of his list. I had earned my position. Hearing that story settled my doubts for the rest of the evening.

When I woke up the next morning, I appreciated everything Meredith told me but felt like I needed to continue to prove myself at Actors Theatre. I did a lot of great work during my internship. I worked to build relationships with my fellow interns and staff, knowing they would be key to my future in this industry. I took on one of the most difficult ten-minute plays because I loved the language but, while it was well received, I did not do the work to fully explore the message of the playwright. I wanted to be great, I wanted to be the best intern Actors Theatre had ever seen, but my fear of failure inhibited that trajectory. I was well liked but not artistically fulfilled, though at the time I was not able to make a distinction between those two feelings. It took a move to Austin, TX and three years in a Master of Fine Arts program to recognize the difference.

I was not supposed to get into graduate school when I did. I knew when I finished my undergraduate work that I would want to go back to school but my plan was to move to Chicago after my internship at Actors Theatre to be a freelance director before beginning the application process. During a car ride into the office one day, the other directing intern and I were talking about graduate school. As we got off the freeway, we decided to take a risk and apply. My goal was to get an interview. Instead, I got an offer of admission, which I enthusiastically accepted and found myself in graduate school, and would be spending three years immersed in the craft of directing among people who clearly knew more than I did. Oh dear, how could I possibly hide from this?

At the beginning of his book on directing, William Ball states, “We learn in threes. The first step of learning is discovering; the second step of learning is testing; and the third step of learning is pattern-setting” (15). Over the course of my time at the University of Texas at Austin, I discovered a pattern of doubt, both in myself as an artist and in the work I made. This doubt created habits, ones I leaned on in my work and my practice that, combined with my resistance, prohibited me from taking the second step of learning. The lack of testing had to do, in part, with a misinterpretation of failure.

This thesis is an exploration of the paradox of failure. After presenting the paradox, I will use four of my production experiences to illustrate how I have come to understand failure as an essential component of a director’s practice. The dissection of the paradoxes, using scholarship from leaders in the field as well as my own patterns during my experiences in school will culminate in the claim that failure is an invitation as opposed to a limitation; something to be embraced instead of shunned.

A Tired Definition

In the world at large, failure is viewed through a negative lens; something to be avoided at all costs. The first citation for “failure” in the Merriam-Webster dictionary is “omission of occurrence or performance, *specifically*: a failing to perform a duty or expected action.” Subsequent definitions include “a fracturing or giving way under stress” and “a falling short.” The culmination of these definitions identifies a failure as something or someone who lacks, is not enough. It is about an absence; there is an expectation and that absence is especially notable because an anticipated service or function was missing.

Failure has always been one of my greatest fears. The idea of not being enough or falling short drove many of the decisions I made throughout the course of my life. Failure meant inability: not being smart enough or good enough and falling short of expectation. Failure was something to be avoided at all costs, something to run from as quickly as possible. I would rather do anything than fail so I built my life and myself accordingly to ensure that would never happen. As I stated, I believe my fear of failure was one of the things that initially drew me to directing in the theatre.

Being a director meant the opposite of failure. A director was strength, certainty, a force that commanded a rehearsal room to steer the play toward a production that would eventually be embraced by a theater full of people. Before my time at the University of Texas, as I mentioned previously, I was an assistant and had the opportunity to work with several incredible directors at Actors Theatre of Louisville including Les Waters,

Meredith McDonough, Ken Rus Schmoll, and Giovanna Sardelli. They never seemed to fail and I so desperately wanted that. What I overlooked was the incredible amount of work that went into what they were doing and how the definition of failure under which they were operating was so different from my own. I constructed an identity of director based on what I observed from their work in the rehearsal room, neglecting the homework that came before that moment. In my graduate school experience, I would come to understand there was so much a director did before walking into the rehearsal room. There was time with the script and the vision, which came from the director's imagination, that served the work in rehearsals. Without this foundation, there could be no production.

Based on my understanding from observation at Actors Theatre and my own work, I built a façade of a director. I knew what qualities built allegiance in the rehearsal room and knew the right things to say to actors and collaborators, but I did not understand the work that came before that. The identity I created got me to graduate school, and for that I try to be grateful because this is the experience that broke me. Until graduate school, failure had to do with forces outside myself; it did not come from within. My experience at UT taught me I was in stasis driven by that fear of failure. I spent a lot, some might say too much, of my graduate school career fighting not to break down. I coasted, doing just enough to get by because I was unwilling or afraid to do anything else. In the final year and a half of school, the walls I spent most of my career and life building shattered. I finally broke down. I never imagined how the breakdown of

that identity, embracing a new definition of failure, would shape me into a stronger artist and person.

William Ball states “Failure is the threshold of knowledge” (45). It is through failure we learn the most, taking a step back to observe what went wrong and how it could be improved the next time. In this sense, failure is an opportunity, an invitation to learn when seen through the correct lens. When fully embraced, failure is a tool for growth. That is the opposite of the Merriam-Webster definition and something it took the entirety of my graduate school career to understand.

Repetition, Eroticism, and “Maybe”

Two weeks into my first year of graduate school, I sat down in Sarah Rasmussen’s, the Head of Directing at the time, office and she said, “So what do you want to direct in your second year?” which left me speechless. As I mentioned before, I did not expect to get into graduate school and was still trying to wrap my head around being there. I was also struggling with imposter syndrome; feeling like I was fooling people into believing I was actually cut out for this kind of work. I was overwhelmed and scared and failure was at the forefront of my mind. I answered Sarah with the first thing that entered my mind, “I was actually hoping to get through the first month if that’s okay with you.” That made her laugh and then tell me I did not need to have an answer right then but I should devote some time in the coming weeks to a proposal for the season.

I left that meeting and my mind started to race. I wanted to choose a piece that was of interest to me but I also wanted the experience of directing in the “main-stage” season. I did not think I could have both. One thing I knew I wanted from my graduate school experience was to direct a variety of projects. Coming into school, my background was exclusively new play development. The last published play I directed was my undergraduate capstone project, *Stop Kiss*, so I was eager to work on something I could claim as my own. As I began to consider the pool of published work it dawned on me, musical theatre was my introduction into the world of the theatre, graduate school was the perfect forum to direct my first musical.

After going through dozens of titles alone in my apartment and with my peers I finally settled on Michael John LaChiusa and George C. Wolfe's *The Wild Party* for my pitch to the selection committee. *The Wild Party* is an ensemble musical, based on a long-form poem by Joseph Moncure March, which demands a racially and gender-diverse cast. Each character is named, has an individual identity as opposed to Chorus Member #4, and has a song or duet. The content is dark, asking questions about race, gender roles, sexuality, and what it means to reveal your most intimate parts to others and yourself. I was interested in the question: "What does it look like when your façade comes down?" I believed it was important to do this piece at UT because it gave the students an opportunity to work on a non-traditional musical that dealt with subject matter some people believe can only be addressed in straight plays. I also wanted to challenge myself; the cast was large and the musical is almost entirely sung-through, meaning there are very few scenes where characters are talking instead of singing. I felt it would offer a great learning experience on several different levels.

I started preparing for the pitch with Sarah and the other MFA directors. We did practice pitches in class, addressing the "why here, why now" of each selection along with why we felt passionate about the project. I was incredibly nervous, never having done a pitch with these kinds of stakes. I got into the room the day of the pitch and found it incredibly easy to speak about this project. I felt I had a strong argument for "why here why now" and had done the proper preparation work. I was ready for anything that could happen in the room, which allowed me to push past my fear. I also had no concept of failure for the pitch. Being selected would be the ideal outcome but I had zero

expectation. I left the room feeling great; it was a good exercise and I was proud of myself for the work I had done. I debriefed with Sarah and continued along with my work. In November I received the final confirmation email along with the date and time for the official season announcement. *The Wild Party* was going to happen and I was going to direct.

The selection of *The Wild Party* for the “main-stage” seasons is an instance of repetition for me, as outlined by William Ball. I was again selected for something I wanted so badly yet felt I needed to disconnect from because of the impossibility of it actually happening. There is some merit to this attitude. As I would later experience, no director should assume they are going to get a job. There is always someone in the field who is better, so it is of the utmost importance for directors not only to pitch their vision and skills for a production but also to pitch themselves. Having humility is a desirable quality when preparing for a pitch, but the disconnect is something to be avoided. Any pitch a director gives should have the time, preparation, and confidence built into it not only to instill their passion for the project but also to make it clear why they are the only one who can make the vision come to life. When I pitched *The Wild Party*, I did not leave everything in the room. I left a lot of things, as it was chosen for the season, but I could have done a better job being more specific as to why I needed to be directing the show. Robert Ramirez, the Head of Acting, reminded me as I wrote this thesis of an observation on specificity he had during my first rehearsal speech for *The Wild Party*. He told me there was no doubt I was passionate about the musical, but there was a lack of clarity as

to what I wanted to say with this particular production. If I had taken this information to heart, I might have avoided the downfalls in my process during *The Wild Party*.

Eroticism, used colloquially, is most often associated with romantic relationships; it is a force desired to forge a passionate connection between two people. It relates directly to passion, which between two people is often about sex. For artists, eroticism is about the connection between the artist and their work. Anne Bogart uses “the archetypical pattern of a passionate relationship” to outline the pattern of eroticism in art which is: “1 Something or someone that stops you in your tracks. 2 You feel ‘drawn’ to it. 3 You sense its energy and power. 4 It disorients you. 5 You make first contact; it responds. 6 You experience extended intercourse. 7 You are changed irrevocably” (61-62). In her essay on Eroticism, she lays out the principle that “The primary tool in a creative process is interest” and that is something with which I wholeheartedly agree (76). There must be a connection between directors and their work. For some projects, the interest is immediate and strong. For others, it is necessary to find a “way in,” meaning a search for the seed from which eroticism can grow. My Eroticism with *The Wild Party* was immediate and strong, yet I relied too much on that to propel me through the process.

I thought my intense passion for *The Wild Party* was all I needed to get me through to production. As Bogart says, interest is a key tool for the process but it should not be the only one and that is where I fell short. Interest needs to be broken down and examined, much like a script, so the specificity of that interest can rise to the surface. That specificity is what guides the vision and provides a foundation for choices

throughout the process. Because my general passion for the project served me well enough, I did not dig deeper into the root of what I wanted to say with this particular production which resulted in a lot of “maybe” throughout the process.

From the first design meeting to the final dress rehearsal, there was a lot of “maybe” in my approach to *The Wild Party*. At first, “maybe” is an ally. It can serve to open up the environment so more specific choices can be made. At the time, I felt “maybe” was an invitation to my collaborators, a chance to continue the conversations and allow ownership over the piece. For a while that approach was successful. We made some big decisions; one specific example was the scenic design. We chose to do the musical in the round, with audience seating all the way around the stage. Overhead there was a giant curtain we would use for several moments in the production. We went into rehearsals with this, and many other bold decisions and that is when the “maybes” began to set in everywhere.

During the rehearsal process for *The Wild Party*, I came into the room each day, excited about the work and about being in a room with the cast and creative team. As stated earlier, interest in the material is a key tool in the director’s bag, but it should not be the only one. I was passionate, yes, but I rested on a lot of my old practices from my experiences before graduate school. I did not do a thorough breakdown of the text and songs. I relied on the actors doing their assigned homework, reading through the book and listening to the soundtrack, and my instincts in the rehearsal room to guide me as I worked.

At the beginning of the process I had individual meetings with each actor and with the production dramaturg, Gabby Randle. Gabby and I talked to each actor about their initial ideas for their character as well as any questions or concerns they had. I asked them to do some homework with their role, to make three lists that said: what they knew about their character based on the book and songs, what they inferred about their character based on their perspective as actors, and what questions they had about their character. While that is good homework that all actors should do, I relied on the actors to do that work for me instead of doing a thorough job of that myself. I felt that was their job and we would use that as needed while we worked in rehearsal. That attitude brought out another shortcoming of mine, which was the desire to find everything, from intention of action to blocking, in the rehearsal room alone, without much preparation before rehearsals began.

My approach to rehearsal time with *The Wild Party* was to maintain a strict schedule, compiled by Lyn, our choreographer, Natasha Davison and myself. I would come in each day ready to work on the assigned pages. I thought that to be excited about the project and enjoy the people around me was enough, that the rest would come into rehearsals, but in doing so I relied on the work the actors had done to build moments instead of coming into rehearsals with ideas. The part I left out of that process was the foundation I needed to build before starting rehearsals, something that I saw as limiting because it felt prescriptive. I did not see the value of going through the minutia of each moment. Rehearsal was the place to find those moments organically as a group. What I overlooked was even directors with the most honed instincts do their necessary

homework before walking into a room. That is what allows for discovery. You build a map but are willing to make detours. I was fortunate to have a strong acting company, along with the support of fantastic collaborators like Gabby, Lyn, and Natasha, to be able to build what became a well-received production.

While *The Wild Party* was the opposite of failure in terms of my definition coming into graduate school, I see now it did not give me the artistic fulfillment I now crave in my work. The production was well received by audiences, the reviews were good to great, and the company was happy. I had not fallen short; I was good enough and therein was my failure with that production. I stopped at good enough. I lived in a world of “maybe” when I could have been saying “yes.” Bruno-Pierre Houle, the scenic designer, created this incredible curtain for the center of the stage that revealed a piano at the top of the opening number. Our intention was to use this curtain throughout the production; there were large pieces of fabric that were supposed to fall during “After Midnight Dies,” a song where the characters were revealed after a giant orgy. The intention was for the pieces of falling fabric to be a metaphor for the fall of the characters’ façades. As we worked in rehearsal, I kept saying “maybe” to the fabric pieces. I was having trouble choreographing them into the musical number and, rather than reaching out to my collaborators for ideas, I kept saying “maybe” until it got to be too late so I cut them. I gave up instead of taking a risk because the risk might not pay off and would set me up for failure. If I had been able to embrace failure for the ally it can be, there was a version of the production where the moment of the curtain falling apart

could lift the dramatic action of the scene playing below, adding dimension to the action onstage and the thematic message of the piece.

As directors, we must circumvent generality, which reads as static and vague when applied to the various components of production. William Ball says, “I have learned from my own experience and from my observation of the work of other directors that the more clear and striking the metaphor, the more unified and powerful the production. The converse is also true. The more vague the metaphor, the more commonplace the production” and I agree with him (36). *The Wild Party* began with a series of strong metaphors that as I continued to work, as I allowed my fear of failure to infiltrate my process, fell into the “safety” of vagueness. Understanding that failure can be a valuable tool, the boldness to try something and use a production as a means to test it rather than avoid falling short might have given me the vibrant force of a production I wanted. The content of the musical provides all the materials for a daring piece of theatre, but the willingness to fail freely would make this piece soar.

Leaning into failure, treating it as a friend as opposed to a foe may have pushed me to examine my process more thoroughly. In order to do that, I would have needed to reach out to my collaborators and mentors, seek their counsel and give over the control I held in the process, which was something I was unwilling to do. The seeming success of *The Wild Party* also fueled my poor preparation habits; I felt like I could continue to work as I did on any production I encountered. This way of working got me this far and would surely continue to do so, which was true until it was not.

A Note on Cycles

My mother often tells me the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results. I know this is not an expression she originated but during the numerous pep talks I have needed over the years, especially during my time in graduate school, it is a phrase that comes up often. I understand and agree with the phrase, but after feeling energized and ready to take on the world post-pep talk I would go back into my world and continue to repeat the same patterns. I was stuck in a cycle.

In the Buddhism there is a term called “samsara” which relates to the cycle of life and repetition. There is no satisfaction to being in samsara, it is a mundane existence driven by desire and ignorance. The only way out of samsara is to accumulate enough “karma,” garnered through action, to move forward in the next cycle of life to work toward “nirvana,” or enlightenment. When it came to my work on the “mainstage” at UT, I was stuck in samsara. I was going through motions and repeating practices that did not serve me, unwilling to take action to change my trajectory. There was a weight to the mainstage work. The stakes felt so high and I became paralyzed by my fear of failure. I decided the best action was no action and I became my own barrier. I continued to live in my samsara not fully realizing there was active karma in my creative life.

I was not aware of the karma that existed in my directing class work. I saw the work in class merely as exercises. There were no stakes. I could do whatever I wanted because there was no real consequence, not like the consequence that existed with a failed mainstage production. That freedom allowed me to develop a practice in class that

was free of intimidation. I created work that was entirely my own. I felt free and fulfilled, though I was not able to transfer the practices of my class work into my mainstage directing work. In my mind those were two different worlds that I kept in separate boxes. It would not be until my final production at the University of Texas that I would be able to move forward, shifting into the next cycle of my creative life.

Hubris, Resistance, and “No”

In the fall of my third year, I directed *Lost Girl*, a new play by Kimberly Belflower for the “main-stage” season. The play centers on the story of Wendy Darling after she returns from her adventures in Neverland. There are familiar characters from the Peter Pan story along with a chorus of women and outsiders who comment on Wendy’s journey as she seeks the kiss Peter took from her so many years ago. The play was my third “main-stage” production and the first production of a new play on the “main-stage” in years.

My work on *Lost Girl* began in my first year. Kimberly emailed me in the first weeks of school with some samples of her work. I immediately connected with the character of Wendy and the play spoke to my interest in retelling known stories through different perspectives. We met about the play and I gave Kimberly all my thoughts about the story, questions I had about the structure and characters, and we began to plan for a workshop at the end of the spring. For a week in the final month of our first year we rehearsed with an incredibly talented group of undergraduate actors and held an invited reading of the play so our peers and faculty could hear the work. We proceeded to hold two more workshops between the spring of my first year and the fall of my second year. Each workshop had a different cast so none of the actors would get attached to any of the roles as our intention was to pitch the play for production in our third year. Overall, the developmental process went well. We learned so much from each one and the script grew tremendously during that time. My approach to each workshop was similar; we would read the play with each new cast and then focus on areas Kimberly and I identified as

troublesome. We tried new things, Kimberly did copious rewrites, and the play grew exponentially.

By the fall of 2016 we had a script we felt was ready for production, and Kimberly took the lead on the “pitch” to the season selection committee as I was pitching a project of my own for consideration. This was where my process began to show signs of weakness. Ultimately I think the pitch is where I began to detach from the play. It did not feel like mine in the way that *The Wild Party* did so I felt more comfortable letting other people do the work. I was present for the pitch but was the only person in the room who did not speak. I felt that my presence was enough to show my support and also felt comfortable that my involvement in the development process secured my role as director.

My instincts were correct and the play was chosen for the “main-stage” season. What I did not see coming was my faculty asking me to make the case as to why I should direct this play. At first I was upset and offended; I had been working on this show almost as long as I had been in school. It was mine. Over the break as I thought more about it, I came to see the lesson in the exercise. No matter how long you work on a project, you can always be passed over or replaced and “why me” for the show is as important as the “why here, why now” of the play. I came back from the break with that understanding but when it got closer to the pitch I shut down. I was so afraid to fail I was at a loss as to what to do. I felt paralyzed. Fortunately for me, I had the full support and faith of Kimberly and she worked extensively with me before the pitch to prepare my thoughts. The thoughts were mine but I relied too heavily on her and let her do a lot of

the work putting my ideas together. As a result of that work, I went into the pitch feeling confident and found out later that day I had been selected to direct the play.

My history with the play contributed largely to the hubris that was one of the sources of my failure during *Lost Girl*. I felt that because I knew the play so well I could do what I had always done and rely on my instincts. I did not put in the necessary work, like going through the script to imagine entrances and exits or connecting the intention of the words with the intention of the movement, because I felt I did not need to do it; I knew my practice and would be fine. My lack of preparation was especially apparent when it came to the production design. We met as a group on a regular basis and the meetings quickly became about the scenic design. The designer, Camryn deWet, was having difficulty connecting with the play, no matter how many times we went back to the play or how many approaches we took to brainstorm ideas.

Eventually, we arrived at a design which – at least at the time – I felt served the physical and thematic needs of the play. The set was a raised oval platform that sat in the middle of a thrust stage, essentially an oval within a square. There was an oversized window upstage, an image essential to the story, and room between the platform and the audience to put actors. We presented this design and Steven Dietz, one of my core faculty members, who encouraged me to examine the design, to go through the play and look at the blocking as he saw challenges with what we were presenting. In the next few weeks during a meeting with my directing mentor, KJ Sanchez, she gave me the same notes as Steven and, just as I listened to him, I heard her notes but did not do anything with them. It had taken this long to get what I believed to be a usable design and I was not willing to

put in the work to test something that was already overdue rather than take responsibility for a lack in my process with my designer, that was the story I told myself. I did not take the responsibility for my role in Camryn's struggle to connect to the play. I needed to make the time during meetings with the design team and, when that was not garnering the results I desired, set up one-on-ones with her to arrive at an understanding of the environment of the play. I needed to adjust the language I was using with her. I kept talking about "the magic of the play" and she did not understand me. William Bloodgood, Camryn's faculty advisor, approached me and suggested "magic" was too broad, the idea needed to be more specific. I needed to find a tangible term Camryn could use as a springboard for her design instead of this nebulous one that meant one thing to me and something else to her. If I had done my pre-production homework I would have been able to give Camryn the tools she needed to engage with the work. Instead, I took the easy way out, doing just enough when I needed to do more.

My hubris was also apparent in my approach to the script work. I do not have a lot of formal training in script analysis. I took one directing class as an undergraduate, which focused more on staging than an examination of the script. While at Actors Theatre of Louisville, I worked with Meredith McDonough using her techniques with text from *The Three Sisters*. This technique was the list exercise I used during my process for *The Wild Party*, homework I gave to the actors but did not do myself and did not apply to my work on *Lost Girl*. I felt the work I did in development was enough to get me through the rehearsal process, as it had always been. Toward the end of the spring semester, KJ Sanchez, the visiting directing professor who would later become the Head of Directing,

advised me to go through the script using Transactional Analysis and we set a time to meet about my work in the first weeks of the summer. I had never done transactional analysis; in fact, I did not know what it was. Rather than ask for help or talk to KJ, I decided not to do it. Again, I had gotten by without it so far, why should I change things now? When we met on our assigned date, KJ asked me to share my work and I said I had not had a chance to go through the script yet. I could see that she was surprised but we moved on and talked about her notes on the design. She assumed I would do the work over the summer and I did not because I did not think it was work I needed to do. I was unwilling to ask for help, which laid an unstable foundation for my practice with the script. I allowed my hubris and laziness to get in the way of the work.

Due to my lack of preparation, the first days of rehearsal were a mess. I did not set expectations in the room because I felt like I was in over my head and spent most of the time trying to hide that from everyone. The rehearsals felt unfocused and inefficient. We blocked the show in a week, which felt like a win at first, especially because I felt so adrift in the process, but after we did our first “run thru” I saw how disconnected the cast was from what was happening onstage. The central feedback I received from my mentor, KJ Sanchez, was the lack of connection between the action onstage and the intention of the dramatic action. I needed to put intention behind the movement, but the lack of preparation and feeling like we were running out of time led me to a state of paralysis. Instead of asking for help, I hid from my collaborators, further isolating myself and creating more distance between the work and me. My resistance to collaboration would be my ultimate failure during *Lost Girl*.

As directors, “[Our] attitude[s] toward resistance determine[s] the success of [our] work and [our] future. Resistance should be cultivated. How [we] meet these obstacles that present themselves in the light of any endeavour determine[s] the direction of [our] life and career” (Bogart 155). In this sense, resistance is an ally to creativity. It pushes creative thinking, to go beyond the first idea into the fifth. The things we resist are often the things that will bring the most integral components to the work. My resistance, however, was counter-productive as it was colored by the hubris I developed throughout my career, especially after my success with *The Wild Party*. If I had engaged more with my resistance, leaned into the unknown and things that did not make sense, I would have found the tools I needed to work to strengthen the production. I would have been a stronger collaborator and been able to be more present in the room. Instead, my resistance alienated me from my collaborators, especially Kimberly, and the work. I resisted the guidance from my mentors. I resisted the ideas from the design team. I continued to say, “no.”

My resistance and lack of work in the rehearsal room became abundantly clear as we entered the tech process and “no” became my response to anything. The action of the play was either static or unclear because I had not done sufficient work in rehearsal. This created a need to spend more time on acting moments during tech, which was when the designers needed to be my priority. Because I was so concerned with clarifying the scene work and rehearsing moments we had only gone over once or twice in rehearsal, I said “no,” both in my decisions and in my attitude in tech. I tried to hide my shortcomings. I said “no” because I was not willing to take the time to fix things, to talk with designers

about what was going wrong or to utilize Kimberly and Kevin Poole, the assistant director, to take care of the actors while I worked on the design. I wanted the designers to solve things for me instead of working with them to find solutions. I continued to say “no” because I felt we did not have any space to make errors. In my mind, I was avoiding failure when, in fact, I was shutting people out and creating an unhealthy working environment. By the time we got through our big tech weekend, I just wanted to do the bare minimum to get the production open. I had failed and I wanted to be able to run away from it. Little did I know the audience for *Lost Girl* would be a turning point in my attitude toward failure.

As *Lost Girl* opened, I was charged by my faculty to attend multiple performances and observe the audience. When I received this assignment, I immediately resented it. I knew the work was not up to par and I did not want to continue to engage with it. I pushed past that, trying to see the exercise for the learning experience it was intended to be, and found it incredibly informative. I began to see the notes I got from run-thrus about rhythm and intention present in the audience’s response to the action onstage. The pacing of so many of the scenes was the same and caused restlessness in the audience. Moments of surprise and genuine intention from the actors had the audience literally leaning in and then I would watch them relax as we went back into something they identified as familiar. I also saw the effect of technical notes, especially pertaining to lighting. The show itself was beautiful but we lit for mood instead of inviting contrast. I saw how that contributed to the monotony of the scenes and thought about how variety could have served us in those moments, both in the color and the angle of the lighting. KJ

Sanchez recently pointed out, and I agree, the lighting utilized a lot of down light and would have benefitted from more face light, giving the audience a chance to connect with the characters. Overall, much of the design did work the script was already doing instead of complimenting it or highlighting it.

Instead of utilizing the resources present in my faculty and collaborators, I allowed my hubris, resistance, and going to “no” to put me in a position to truly fail. The responsibility was mine alone, and yet in many ways, my failing in *Lost Girl* opened my eyes to what a new approach to failure could mean for me as an artist. The exercise of observing the audience allowed me to make specific notes about moments that needed to be improved. I saw the notes from my faculty put into practice through audience response, it was tangible, something I could see. Though it would take time to fully comprehend how *Lost Girl* could serve me, this was the beginning of my shift in attitude toward failure. Instead of living in my shortcomings I could take the notes from faculty along with my own observations and make the next process better. I did not have to continue to live in the hubris, resistance, and “no” of *Lost Girl*. I could take the leap and begin to fail forward, something I was unwittingly already doing in my course work.

Working in Parallel

Each fall, the MFA directing students take a practical skills course with undergraduate actors in the department. The focus of Advanced Directing in the fall of 2016, during my work on *Lost Girl*, was spectacle, exploring the magnitude of theatricality. I was unaware of it at the time, but this class became my laboratory. It was an outlet for me to express myself in ways I did not feel was possible with my main-stage work. There were new assignments each week that centered on different elements of spectacle. These weekly assignments were small-scale productions, an arena for experimentation and boldness that I embraced. Part of that embrace came from a lack of pressure for results. In my main-stage work, I felt there were a million people to listen to and answer to; there was little to no room for my voice because there was so much to lose. With class, the only person I had to answer to was myself and if things went awry there was always next week. There was nothing to lose so I did not see any opportunity for failure with my work in class. The freedom in that was extraordinary and allowed me to produce some of the best work I did while at the University of Texas.

The first assignment on spectacle asked us to work with scale; that was the only prompt. I immediately knew two things: I did not want to work with height and I wanted to dump large quantities of paint on actors. Height was the first place my brain went after seeing scale, which was exactly why I wanted to avoid it. I wanted to challenge myself to go beyond expected and first instincts. I started to think about what else scale could mean and centered my vision on image. Scale became a unifying factor in how we

perceive ourselves, the range of extremes between presenting perfectly and overindulging. I set up different areas where actors repeated tasks that had to do with scale, from binge-eating ice cream in the bathroom to weighing individual grains of rice. Each area had its own soundtrack and, after the audience had ample time to view each area's activity, all the soundtracks converged, drawing the actors from their individual areas to a center space that contained four large buckets. The action of the piece culminated with the actors discovering paint on them, finding the bucket that matched their color, and having a giant paint fight, throwing it at each other and laughing. The action brought these individuals out of isolation to form a community but, once the music stopped, they brought their buckets up in unison and dumped all of the paint on their heads before returning to their individual stations.

In this piece, I embraced this new understanding of failure whole-heartedly. The circumstance of class allowed me to throw away my tired definition and take big, bold risks. I did exactly what I wanted to do and the results were just what I wanted, moreover, the class was thrilled by the results due to the commitment to the vision of the piece. Because my vision was so strong, the actors leapt into the piece, they were fearless because I was fearless. The strength of my leadership in that moment was fueled by the risk I took. Unlike my mainstage work, I was not concerned with reception; I only cared about saying the thing I wanted. In exploring this new idea of failure, I see th boldness is a huge component in collaboration. The strength of the director's vision gives collaborators a strong beacon to lead them in their own work. Having a strong directorial

voice is an essential tool of the director, as long as there is room to welcome other voices in order to sing as the project demands.

Another project that pushed me to embrace failure asked the directors to utilize the elements and abundance. This project had two essential takeaways, one success and one failure. The failure was consideration of the audiencey piece travelled through the dressing rooms behind the B. Iden Payne theater, something that would have been wonderful with a small group of people and we prepared the piece with that in mind. When it came to the final presentation day, I saw the class size was considerably larger and at least a third of the audience did not see the various components of the presentation. I was upset because of the hard work we put into the piece but walked away knowing I would not make that mistake again. One of the first things I considered in my class p moving forward was the experience of the audience, something director be conscious of when making work. The piece could be the most brilliant work of art anyone has ever seen, but if no one can see it then it does not matter. he success of the piece the audacity and playfulness of the work. Once we settled on the items that would represent the various elements water, air, fire, and earth, we used puppets to track a man's journey through love. There were shadow puppets that lured him into a world populated by vivacious sock puppets, who were in the middle of a balloon dance party, that led him to his final encounter with a brown paper puppet. Two actors operated the paper puppet, and their intense focus on the puppet brought it to life in a way I never expected. It was as if the only two people in the room were the man and the puppet. The piece ended with the two operators hanging the puppet, letting the man replace it, then lighting a match and

slamming a door. It was fierce, violent, and twisted, in direct contrast with the levity of the balloons and sock puppets. Though at times the material was disturbing, the joy of the work came through.

Joy is an essential component to making theatre, to making art in general. Even the toughest subject matter has to embrace joy somehow. It is joy that allows for fun and playfulness, both of which fuel the pre-production work and the choices made in the rehearsal room. If there is no joy, there is not heart and all theatre needs to have an active, beating heart. Something I discovered making work in class was how much joy I found in . I was getting to speak in my own way without having to worry about what other people would think, without the little voice in my head cautioning me not to fail. Embracing the joy of the work quiets that little voice, a voice when allowed to take over tells you the best action is to take no action and that is the source of true failure.

Another success from class came from the week of *King Lear*. The prompt was to engage with transformation, using the Shakespearean tragedy and specific spaces in Winship, the theatre building. I was assigned to the lobby of one of the theater spaces, a giant room containing several strange couch-like chairs and a whole wall of windows. At first glance, I had no idea what to do. My focus for the project was Cordelia, the youngest daughter of Lear whose journey transcends that of the other characters in the play. I was interested in revelation, the relationship between father and daughter, and saying something without speaking any words. After some time in the space, I found we could create a tunnel with the chairs and, if positioned correctly, people could crawl through them. We ended up making a long tunnel that Cordelia entered when banished by her

father, then magically emerged from as he entered to chase after her. She walked on top as he “crawled” along underneath. When she reached the end, she was placed on a chair as a new Lear emerged; there was a new actor dressed entirely in white to match Cordelia as opposed to the one who entered, dressed in a dark formal suit. It seemed as if father and daughter would be reunited until Lear walked into the world, letting the door close and lock behind him. He struggled to reenter and Cordelia simply placed her hand on the glass, dropping a handful of red rose petals.

Through bold design and configuration choices, I was able to transform the lobby into an ethereal place for father and daughter to struggle together. One of the major successes was finding a large piece of white satin fabric to cover the chairs, allowing for the illusion of a continuous tunnel. Because the initial of the space was so challenging, I was willing to try anything to make it something other than it was. The constraint of the space opened up my creativity and I was so proud of the beauty . It truly could not have been done anywhere else.

The vision I lacked in *Lost Girl* was in my class work. Upon further reflection, there are several takeaways that I would later apply to my work on my final mainstage production at UT. I gave myself permission in class to take big risks and make bold choices, something I did not do in *Lost Girl* because I did not feel prepared enough and therefore did not trust my voice. Looking back, so many of these lessons about audience consideration, transformation, and adding my voice to the story would have transferred beautifully to my work with *Lost Girl*. The reason it did not was because I saw my class work as living parallel to my mainstage work instead of being perpendicular to it. The

necessity of the crossover is now apparent to me and I would apply it, through guidance from faculty and learning from my co-director, in my final production, *Slumber Party*.

Limitations, Terror, and saying “Yes”

Slumber Party by Elizabeth Doss (referred to from here on out as “Liz”) was presented as part of the tenth annual UTNT showcase in the “main-stage” season. UTNT stands for University of Texas New Theatre and was created by Steven Dietz to present plays from each of the four third-year MFA playwrights. *Slumber Party* is a dark comedy that follows a teenage girl through her struggle with the decision to end her life. This production forced me to reconsider the definition of failure I carried with me throughout my graduate school experience. Through limitations, engagement with terror, and saying “yes,” I would come to see the constructive side of failure.

Limitations at first glance appear to be one of the biggest enemies of creativity. How are artists expected to work within parameters? In the spring semester, the directing MFA students take a course called Directing Methods and Practice. This spring, the focus of the class is leadership, exploring different styles and how we apply the tools of leadership in the rehearsal room. In addition to our conversations on leadership, we discuss two plays a week. These plays are intentionally unruly, challenging the students to consider how one might offer them for consideration for a regional theatre season. The discussion begins with a focus on the play itself and eventually leads to a discussion of how issues or challenges of the play would be solved in production. Often students present ideas with the caveat of a “limitless budget.” Without the constraints of a budget, a director can think as big as they can. There are no limitations and while that can open many doors for creative thinking, putting limitations on work or the approach to the work can also be freeing. This tool is constructive in theory as well as practice.

In many ways, my production experiences in school seemed to have no limitations. I was largely left to my own devices even though I continued to repeat unconstructive patterns in my work, the way I kept my limitless status was acknowledging my mistakes and how I would do things differently the next time. When my words became recognized as “lip-service,” I encountered what felt like a series of limitations.

The first “limitation” was a fully annotated script due to the faculty of the Playwriting/Directing area to be delivered before the first week of school for consideration of my continued involvement in the production. Due to my performance directing the past two productions, *Lost Girl* in particular, they wanted to see the work I was, or rather was not doing. This task felt like a burden, a limitation that would restrict my freedom in the rehearsal room. How was I expected to make choices if I had already made all the decisions? I resisted initially; I let my hubris stand in my way. I had gotten by so far without doing something like this but I wanted to direct the production so I begrudgingly began. I quickly began to see how this “limitation” was the foundation of any directing process.

Once I received a new draft from Liz, my approach to breaking down the script happened in three steps, the first was to read the entire script all the way through without stopping or making any notes. I read to get a feel for the play, to experience it for the first time. I went through it again and again and made notes to myself, things that caught my eye, questions I had about the script, and thoughts about character. As I continued to read, I broke the play down into “beats,” moments of action for the characters in the

scenes. Some beats would last for multiple pages and other pages had more than one beat contained in them. The breakdown of a script in this manner allows for specificity, one of the core tenants of the practice of directing: the more specific the moment, the more specific the action.

This sequence of readings is something I taught but had not put into an active practice for myself. I would always read the play, but I would make notes as I went and then only go back to sections that were confusing to me, if that. Through multiple readings, as Ball says, “the director discovers that a certain pattern of movement and a certain sound of voices will ride forward in [his] imagination” (93). In the past, I thought reading the play once through was enough to allow for the discovery to happen in the work. Doing multiple readings allowed me to see the play, a single reading would give me a basic understanding of the play whereas multiple readings provided more tactile images, which was helpful when it came to the next “limitation” that was imposed on me.

After reading and making notes, it was time to dive into the next “limitation” which was to do “transactional analysis” for the entire play. “Transactional analysis” is a method adapted from a psychological approach to discover the inner workings of characters. For each character, I identified their “super-objective,” or their overall pursuit of the play; what is the one thing they are after that creates an arc for them from beginning to end. Once I had that for each one, I went through each of the “beats” I marked during my readings and looked at the wants, or “objectives,” of each character, otherwise known as “the Golden Key.”

William Ball, who coined the term “Golden Key,” says, “There is one and only one way to enter and know and experience and express the inner life of a character in a play. And that technique is the systematic and thorough pursuit of the *wants* of the character” meaning we come to conclusions about characters in plays by understanding what they are after beat-to-beat (76). A successful objective has three parts: a verb, a receiver, and a desired response. For each beat, I would take each character’s super-objective and find how they were in pursuit of it in that particular beat. That would manifest in a verb, something playable for the actor, and be in relation to one of the other characters, or receiver, to elicit a desired response. This gives the actor not only something to do but something to pursue. Once the objective is established, the tactics can be put in place. The tactic is how the actor uses their lines to pursue an objective. The key to a successful tactic is something specific and playable, meaning it needs to be a precise verb. The action in the beat is stronger the more specific the choices. This work is exhausting but informs not only the path for the actors but also the path for the blocking.

Another part of my pre-rehearsal work was blocking the entire play. Blocking is a term used for putting actors into the environment of the play, mapping their entrances, exits, and physical movements in scenes. In my practice I did my blocking in the rehearsal room with the actors; pre-blocking, or writing down all the blocking before the first rehearsal, was something I had never done with anything I had ever directed. When I was working for TheatreWorks, a close friend of mine, who at the time was assisting the Artistic Director, Robert Kelley, on a production where an actor asked him to explain the intention of a blocking direction he had just received. The way Kelley, as I understood it,

would block his productions was to take the scenic model and do the entire play from start to finish with plastic figurines. I asked my friend for Kelley's response and he said Kelley did not have one, he just told him to move over there because that is what he had done with his model and figurines. I was horrified and vowed I would never do that. I came to graduate school absolutely resistant to doing any kind of pre-blocking. I felt to do so was tyrannical and prescriptive, a hindrance to actors, and being asked to block an entire play before the first rehearsal made my skin crawl. I wanted to direct the play, however, so I went to work.

After going through the script as I described above, I could see a picture of this play in my mind. Though it went against everything I believed, I put that picture on paper, coming up with various configurations and tracking how the play moved. I found this process not only to be liberating but it also was incredibly insightful in sections where I was struggling with intentions for the characters. I would take a break from the transactional analysis and go back to see the bodies in space, taking the work I had done and making it three-dimensional. I began to see how certain configurations could lift moments and inform the moments to come. There were several times where my questions in the transactional analysis were illuminated based on what I was doing with the bodies in space in the moment prior or after. This act I so abhorred in my practice before *Slumber Party* served to be incredibly enlightening and engaging. I had an understanding for the play unlike any I had experienced before and felt connected to the structure of what was on the page.

Within the limitations set by my faculty, I found the incredible artistic freedom that exists in creating a foundation within the text going into rehearsals. What I saw as exercises set up to show me that I was not good enough, a failure, instead showed me I was, in fact, good enough, moreover, I gained valuable tools to incorporate into my pre-rehearsal process. The work is not about being right or wrong, it is about setting up a foundation from which to work. The volume of work a director puts into the weeks leading up to the first rehearsal is incredibly important. It is in doing this work that allows the director to “abandon[s] all [his] homework in order to allow the give-and-take of the rehearsal process to have its creative effect” (Ball 96). Without this work, it is impossible to be fully present in the room. This was something I experienced as I encountered the terror involved in the rehearsal process.

Terror is another term that has duality when it comes to the colloquial and artistic interpretations. My friend Merriam-Webster says terror is “a state of intense fear.” While that is not wrong, the way in which artists engage with terror is different than what we experience in the world. In general, things that terrify us are things to avoid. In doing so we care for our psyche, performing a radical act of self-care. When it comes to artistry, “In the face of terror, beauty is created and hence, grace” (Bogart 83). Artists are encouraged to embrace their terror, to let it fuel them and inject it into the work.

Up until *Slumber Party*, I avoided terror in my work. I stayed away from the things that scared me or tried to create a container in which the fear could live. Unique to the process of *Slumber Party*, making me confront my terror, was my co-director, Liz. The boldness of her instincts, the way she jumped into the work made me embrace the

things that scared me about the play. I had my pre-production work as a road map, but I was still living in an antiquated definition of failure. In Liz's world of direction, you leapt into the fear. The moments that were uncertain or unclear were moments to hold close. I walked into the first rehearsal ready to direct a play that exactly reflected the work I had done over the winter break. What I found was that work served to help me be present. I could fully engage with my terror because I knew where we needed to go. I was more able to receive feedback from my co-director and actors because there was a foundation.

The rehearsal process was by no means easy. Working on a new play, there is much to be discovered in the rehearsal room. Because of the new pre-production practice I had, I found it easier to be available for the questions that arose as we rehearsed. We established a practice of repetition, going over beats, again and again. The shifts would be slight, to the outside eye they might seem like nothing. What we found was that the rigorous specificity we demanded enabled the actors, much like myself with my pre-rehearsal homework, to fully embrace these moments when we ran sections in their entirety. They made discoveries and could truly be present in the moment because the work of the repeated transactional analysis was present in their bodies. I found I was able to leap into my terror because it was not about being right; it was about finding the moment that led to the next one. In order to do that, I had to be open and continue saying "yes."

Saying "yes" had never been an issue for me in my practice when I agreed with a collaborator. When we were on the same wavelength "yes" came easily. It was the moment of uncertainty where "maybe" and "no" came out and moments I disagreed with

entirely got a stern “no” without any second thought. I thought that was the sign of strength in direction, knowing what you wanted and giving in to nothing less. Through the process of *Slumber Party*, due to my co-directing relationship and the preparation I had done, I found myself inclined to follow Anne Bogart’s philosophy behind “yes” and “no.” She writes of a German word, *Auseinandersetzung*, which means, “literally ‘to set oneself apart from another’” which is “usually translated into English as ‘argument’” and incurs negative associations. Bogart uses this word to explore the interaction between “yes” and “no” saying, “This does not mean ‘No, I don’t like your approach, or your ideas.’ It does not mean ‘No I won’t do what you are asking me to do.’ It means ‘Yes, I will include your suggestion, but I will come at it from another angle and add these new notions’” (88-89).

The process of *Slumber Party* opened my eyes to the world beyond the binary of “yes” and “no.” To say “yes” does not mean to completely acquiesce to what a collaborator is saying, it is not about turning over power but rather opening the door. I often allowed my hubris to take over when it came to making decisions on past productions. As director I felt I had to be the singular voice in the room; that was my job. What that was, in fact, was the selfish understanding of failure I cultivated for myself at work. I wanted to avoid being a failure and saying “yes” was opening the door for potential problems. It meant giving over control.

Part of the “yes” of *Slumber Party* came from having a co-director. The decisions about the production were not mine alone to make. Liz and I had hours of conversations, about the script as it was being developed, decisions made with regard to design, and

acting moments in the room. I could say “no” when these conversations arose, but my answer was never the final answer and, more often than not, I unwittingly leaned into *Auseinandersetzung*, I began to set myself apart. That is not to say I disengaged with the conversation or work at hand, rather I took myself out of it. I became an observer and examined the choices at hand.

There was a specific instance where our media designer, Alex Gendal, presented a look for the death moment in the play, where the three girls, who are in fact one girl, jump off a cliff together. At first glance, I did not understand what I was seeing. My instinct was to say “no” because it was not what was in my head. I listened to that first response and instead asked Alex to talk more about what the moment was to him and how this image captured that. He talked about the movement of the river Styx, how the lines he created were meant to represent waves drawing us into a world of death. I looked at the image with this new understanding and was excited by the potential of this first draft. I said “yes” and we ended up using a version of that image in the final production. Alex made some great adjustments to the video so the animation was closer to the flow of a river. It was a steady rhythm that worked wonderfully with the sound design. Looking back, it would have been interesting to see how different tempos of the animation could have served the death moment.

With all of this, working within “limitations,” leaning into terror, and learning to say, “yes” first, I set myself up for complete failure. There was a world in which none of this worked, that I made the wrong choices in my pre-production work and none of the actors or my co-director would trust me, that my fear would work against me and poison

the room, that I would say, “yes” to too much. Some of those choices did fail, an example being, the final scene of the play.

When we began rehearsals, *Slumber Party* ended with all three girls jumping up and down on a mattress that falls from the sky. Our intention was for the three girls to be joined together in one person in the afterlife, but throughout the rehearsal process, we received notes that the end lacked clarity. Given the changes in the script we decided to take two of the girls away leaving one, the main character, Betty, alone, and it turned out that was exactly what we needed. It heightened the moment and was unsettling in a gratifying way. When it came to production, the majority of the audience was unsettled or confused, to a degree that was satisfying for us. I could see we needed to do more work to clarify how that moment connected to the one before and really earn that ambiguity. We made a radical choice in the room. We took a risk and overall it failed, but it was satisfying. It was a failure that opened doors to make the next production of *Slumber Party* better and that is what failure is supposed to do.

Onward

In her article, Pema Chödrön references the noted Japanese Buddhist Dogen Zenji with the words, “To know yourself is to forget yourself,” which she also uses as the title for her article. At first glance, this phrase seems like a contradiction, how can one know by forgetting? She argues that forgetting is letting go of outside constraints like the opinions of others, cultural pressures, and more to allow the walls you build around your person to come down. In doing so, you are revealed to be your truest, fullest self. You forget the constraints and come to know yourself. We are revealed when we stop trying to live apart from what is around us, opening ourselves up to the world. Embracing the self, embracing the contradiction, gives us room to move forward and receive the joy that is imperative to a director’s work.

Something I have recently come to appreciate about directing is the truth in contradiction. For years I operated under the assumption that the work happened in the room. As an assistant, I watched master directors at work and saw the huge successes that came from their charisma and ownership of their rehearsal rooms. I believed if I could be present and observant, everything would reveal itself and I could do the work. What I did not see was the volume of work that came before the first rehearsal. The research, time poring over the script, and constant questioning of everything was not something I saw because the director, “abandons [his] homework in order to allow the give-and-take of the rehearsal process to have its creative effect” (Ball 96). The key word in this phrase is “abandon.” In order to have something to abandon, some kind of action needs to happen.

I was unable to abandon the homework because I had not done it in the first place. I relied on my instinct and a hubris that got me all the way to graduate school, why did I need to do anything else?

This contradiction of putting in hours of work only to let it go seems counter-intuitive, however it is key. If there is nothing to abandon, there is no room for creativity. Without having an understanding of the material, how can there be an expectation of knowing what is keeping the company on track? As directors, we are seen as having all the answers. This is due to our position as leaders of the artistic process as well as the expectation of the homework we have done. It is impossible to expect a level of engagement and understanding in your collaborators if the necessary steps have not been taken.

There is a contradiction inherent in failure. Culturally we are taught to avoid failing, though it is by failing that we come to understand how we can be better. When it comes to our work as artists, failure is critical. In an interview given to American Theatre Magazine, Toni Morrison states:

With physical failures like liver, kidneys, heart, something else has to be done, something fixable that's not in one's own hands. But if it's in your hands, then you have to pay very close attention to it, rather than get depressed or unnerved or feel ashamed. None of that is useful. It's as though you're in a laboratory and you're working on an experiment with chemicals or with rats, and it doesn't work. It doesn't mix. You don't throw up your hands and run out of the lab. What you do is you identify the procedure and what went wrong and then correct it. If you think of it simply as information, you can get closer to success.

For directors, failure in our work is an ally. When we can assess the work, we see where improvements need to be made and identify the point in the process where that

improvement is necessary. This not only strengthens the work that comes next, but gives us means to make adjustments to our practice as directors. Giving up, running away does not serve anyone. If we run from failure we run from the potential to improve. We must exercise strength and rigor to examine the process from the product, whether in the rehearsal room or in production, and see where things went awry. If the director can have an open attitude toward failure, then an environment of risk is created. There is an inherent crossover in risk and failure that, when embraced, aids the continual creative learning process.

My learning process throughout my time at UT has been colored by failure, a fear of it in my mainstage work and an unwitting embrace of it in my course work. In that sense, my trajectory of learning has been exponential. I continued to run into the same wall until the end of my experience here, where I found out not only was there a window next to the wall, but that it was open. I now see I am inclined to put my work into boxes, not letting the different aspects of the work bleed into each other. Moving forward, I can see there is strength to treating production like a class. The question I have for myself is: how can I continue to develop a practice that sets a pattern for the freedom I found in my class work? Now that I see the strength of giving myself permission to work from my voice and vision first, I apply that to how I engage with the work of others. I thrive in environments of limitations of resources and thinking beyond the first idea. I see now that bringing strengths to the table from the start does not impose a voice on another artist, rather it plants the seed for collaboration and the necessary risk-taking to make great art.

Conclusion

William Ball says “Fear is the primary enemy of creativity” and I agree with him to a degree (44). Fear that inhibits is something to fight against but the fear that drives, fear that pushes artists to risk, is a key component of our work in the theatre. To embrace the contradiction of fear is to live on the constructive side of failure. We make work that scares us that pushes us to be more than we are and, in doing so, risk failing. Failure as result of risk-taking is manageable. Bad reviews or negative numbers at the box office should not inhibit artistry. The artistry is present in the risk and the boldness of the work. True failure comes from not doing, from holding back or not taking the leap or living in the repetition of poor habits. That is the side of the contradiction I seek to push against in my work as I move forward.

I have no doubt I will continue to encounter the duality of terms like “resistance” and “limitation” as well as moments of “yes,” “maybe,” and “no.” There will be times when I do not open myself up enough before saying “no,” where I say “maybe” when I should embrace the violence of choice, but I hope more often than not I will go to “yes” first. “Yes” opens the door for risk, leaning into fear and gleaning the merits from failure. “Yes” embraces the finer side of failure. Embracing the contradiction of failure empowers and opens the door for creativity and great, impactful art.

The examination of my course work in conversation with my main-stage work has been crucial to my work moving forward. Seeing my processes in parallel, I understand the necessity of crossover between structure and creativity. As directors, we must develop

a practice of diligence, a system we create for ourselves to approach that comes from an understanding of ourselves as artists. I see that I thrive in environments where I can transform objects and places with limited resources. As I continue to hone that, strengthening my own artistic voice, I will use that voice against telling me the way to avoid failure is not to act. The reality is, to create we must act. I am no longer interested in being trapped in samsara and seek to continue creating karma through bold choices. Failure invites failure, yes, but it is an invitation worth extending to explore the artistry in oneself and the work of others. I feel grow stronger and I work to create a practice for myself that brings fearlessness to my .

In her book, *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write*, Sarah Ruhl says, "One wants to feel as though endings contain beginnings, in spite of, or perhaps because of, their finality" (210). The conclusion to this thesis is a beginning in the wake of an ending. While my time at the University of Texas at Austin is coming to an end I begin a new chapter in my journey as a director, one that recognizes the contradiction of failure and a charge to utilize it as a tool rather than a measurement. Failure is a means of examining process and making improvements for stronger future work. As my directing practice continues to grow, I embrace failure as a component of the process instead of its enemy. It is a link in the chain as opposed to a force acting to break it.

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