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**2010**

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**Directing *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*:**  
**A Symbolic and Corporeal Approach**

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**Directing *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*:**

**A Symbolic and Corporeal Approach**

by

**Luke Landric Leonard, BFA**

**Thesis**

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## **DEDICATION**

For all of the sacrifices, LOVE, and support  
This thesis is dedicated to my wife, daughter, and parents.

“Poetic inspiration under the spell of violent struggle:  
such is the matter of this magic art.”

- Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique

“Everywhere and everywhen a man has to ‘*pay* with his life’; to do his work, as a soldier  
does, at the expense of life.”

- Thomas Carlyle



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**Directing *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*:**

**A Symbolic and Corporeal Approach**

by

Luke Landric Leonard, MFA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

SUPERVISOR: Lucien Douglas

This thesis examines an approach to directing Mac Wellman and David Lang's opera, *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*; in addition, the paper reflects on my artistic development as a Master of Fine Arts in Directing student in the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of Texas at Austin.

As a director I seek a balance between form and content. Similar to Installation Art, I consider the relationship between space/architecture (the stage/theatre) and sculpture, i.e., anything that can be used to create shape: performers, props, scenery, wardrobe, makeup, light, sound, music, language, etc. As a deviser, not a dictator, the success of my work depends greatly on interdisciplinary collaboration and strategies that promote understanding and appreciation among both artists and audiences.

My aim is to create structures for formal elements that when arranged uniquely and sophisticatedly have the ability to provoke emotion, thought, and memory in vivid and compelling ways. This paper explores selected stages of directing *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*, the strategies that I employed, and concludes with an artistic statement.

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## INTRODUCTION

Before beginning the Master of Fine Arts in Directing Program at the University of Texas at Austin I asked the interviewing faculty what they expected of me as an incoming candidate. Their reply was, "To hit the ground running." I took them at their word and since 2007 my time at the University of Texas at Austin has been among the most fulfilling experiences that I have ever had and beyond what I could have ever imagined. The mentorship and support has been unprecedented and the challenges that I faced helped improve me as an artist and individual. The Department of Theatre & Dance accepted my curiosities and supported my ambitions, which created the trajectory that led to discovering my thesis production, Mac Wellman and David Lang's opera, *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*, a musical-play inspired by a one-page ghost story of the same title written in 1888 by satirist, journalist, and short story writer, Ambrose Bierce.

One of my main reasons for attending graduate school was to challenge myself to do something that I had never done before, or would likely be able to do easily outside of an academic environment. I was hoping for a chance to work on a larger scale since I spent a lot of time in New York self-producing guerilla-style theatre in smaller venues. I was seeking a piece beckoning for strong design choices and asking big questions. By some happy coincidence I stumbled upon this fresh script that would provide me with all of the challenges that I was looking for and then some.

I have an interest in formal theatre, a type of theatre for which I have researched and explored in my classes at the University of Texas. I believe my first awakening toward a deeper understanding of a formal approach was in 2008 during an Advanced Performance Art class with legendary performance artist, Professor Michael Smith. The very first assignment was called "Construct Something" and that was about the extent of the guidelines (aside from not doing anything that would jeopardize Professor Smith's job). I was terribly nervous and subsequently had no clue about what to do, so I decided to simply "perform" myself, or rather, "a director cliché." When it was my turn to "construct something" I was precise with my activities. First, I carefully set up the space



by assigning a table and two chairs very specific positions. I took my time and with great care began to “construct” my scene by first rolling out a long sheet of butter paper (or canary paper, used for sketching, designing, tracing, and drafting) on a long table. I proceeded to cut the paper into three strips and on one side I wrote instructions that described an activity for another person to do and a speed at which the activity should be executed. On the other side of the page I wrote a number (1, 2, 3). I then taped one sheet to the table, one to a chair, and the other to the back wall, and asked for three volunteers. I instructed each student to assume their starting positions, read their list, and upon my command, perform the instructions at the suggested tempo. Once I said go, a silly yet compelling, alternative world emerged forcing the “actors” into relation with one another merely by being “onstage” together. The observers underscored the activities with personal narratives based on individual associations. In retrospect this exercise may have been the impetus for continuing to explore a formal aesthetic.

Prior to starting the directing program in 2007 I had a fondness for the work of internationally acclaimed, formalist theatre director and visual artist, Robert Wilson. I am inspired by the expansiveness of his oeuvre and while living in New York I was able to experience a few of his works firsthand (*POEtry*, *Monsters of Grace*). At the University of Texas at Austin, I used the libraries to study his work further and later had the great fortune of assisting one of his productions, *Sonette*, based on Shakespeare’s sonnets. The lessons that I learned from him related to formal theatre and collaboration have informed me as an artist to a great degree, lessons which were employed in my approach to directing *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*. Among these lessons were an emphasis on formal elements and the corporeal, which I find best qualified by a new/old term, “everywhen,” a word that is rarely (if ever) used and means “at all times” (Murray 1897, 345), or every instant, i.e., emphasizing the corporeal everywhen.

This paper is intended to be as much about my approach to directing *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field* as it is about a search to find my own artistic voice. Let me begin by describing the “difficulties” involved with getting a work like *Difficulty* produced.

## Chapter 1. CONVINCING OTHERS

### 2009-2010 Season Selection Committee

To be able to work on a larger scale meant that I would need a great deal of support. My only shot at funding a large-scale thesis production was to be included in the 2009-2010 Production Season at the University of Texas at Austin. Luckily, when the department requested applications from students wishing to serve on the Season Selection Committee I was elected. When I joined the committee I was still uncertain of what my thesis production would be. Of course, I was interested in pitching something for the season, but knew that my proposal might not fit the criteria that the committee was searching for. Still, I was very interested in experiencing the process of planning a theatrical season, so I welcomed the opportunity to be involved.

I learned quickly that a major priority for the selection committee was to make certain that every theatre discipline was served. From my point of view it seemed like I was a voice for the directors, with an emphasis on Marie Brown and myself, as we were graduating in 2010. I did my best to push for both of our play choices to be included in the season and we were each given an opportunity to pitch our proposals to the committee. A few committee members frequently reminded me that there were no guarantees and that I was actually elected to represent the entire graduate body, not only the directors; however, the other graduate disciplines already had strong advocates at the meetings.

### Reasons Supporting *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*

Once I discovered *The Difficulty* and got passionate about it there was no alternative. I had to learn to become a better politician, which meant laying out my argument in a straightforward, cohesive manner and telling people what they needed to hear. That did not mean lying like an elected government official who retracts on his

campaign promises. On the contrary, thinking of my proposal from a political/business-like perspective actually helped me arrange my thoughts and clarify my goals. It was a very useful exercise and learning experience. The following was the outline that I presented to the committee as my case for including *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field* in the 2009-2010 Season:

1. Scale. One of the things I was hoping to gain from graduate studies was the opportunity to work on a larger scale, and what better place than Texas for that? In New York, I often felt that I was censoring myself because my thoughts would take up a lot of space, but finding space and funding simultaneously was not possible, it was either one or the other and rarely the other (i.e., monetary support). Subsequently, my dreams required revision in order to work on a smaller scale and I did not always like feeling that I had to censor the work due to practicalities.

2. Collaboration. I am interested in an interdisciplinary pedagogy and art practice. I believe we can learn about the world and ourselves through art. Theatre, to me, brings all disciplines and people together; therefore, it is not limited to the fine and performing arts, or certain ethnicities either. To quote Mac Wellman, the arts are “truly cosmopolitan” (Garrett 1997, 94). *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field* presents a real opportunity to collaborate with other departments. Since it is music-theatre it does require talented singers, but there are two spoken roles as well, which would most likely be served better by actors from the Dept. of Theatre & Dance. I would very much like the cast to be comprised of both singers from the Butler School of Music and actor/singers from the Department of Theatre & Dance. I am also very interested in dancers being in this production too.

3. “What starts here changes the world.” I did not expect to want to direct an opera, which is exactly why I should do it. I feel there is a need to approach traditions from new perspectives. Mac Wellman and David Lang have provided the foundation for us to build an alternative production, so we can examine it for ourselves here in Texas. Along with providing opportunities for our students, I believe we should also strive to live up to our Alma Mater. For me, that means challenging the expectations of plays and music-theater and helping audiences discover an appreciation for new forms.

4. Program of Study. It is my understanding that my third year includes a focus on professional development, such as, a professional internship in Fall 2009. Over the summer, thanks to a travel grant that Professors Bob

Schmidt, Lucien Douglas and Lyn Wiltshire helped procure, I was able to visit Robert Wilson at the Watermill Center and was invited to be part of a new music-theater work, *Sonette*, at the Berliner Ensemble in 2009. Directing *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field* would be a perfect marriage with this internship. Also, in regards to professional development, as a director it is hard to convince a producer to hire you if you do not have experience handling a large production with a budget. The opportunity to direct this opera at the University of Texas will provide me with the required experience needed in order to gain future employment.

5. Event. Lastly, this can be an event, which is what I think theatre should strive to be. An event is the best kind of theatre. On top of that, David Lang is a Pulitzer prizewinning composer and willing to come work with our students. Mac Wellman is an Obie Award-winning playwright and major figure in the New York “downtown” theatre scene. I feel certain we could convince him to visit the University of Texas as well.

In addition to the above stated personal reasons for wanting to direct *Difficulty*, I had to propose solutions that would ease the committee members’ major concerns, which were: 1) Lack of talent, 2) Director doesn’t read music, and 3) Racial diversity.

Concern number one and two were relatively easy to answer. I addressed a shortage of good singers by simply quoting the University of Texas department websites for theater & dance and music. The Theatre & Dance site said:

...the UT Department of Theatre and Dance is the *largest theatre and dance department in the United States*...Our Department's M.F.A. programs rank 8th in the nation...*Approximately 350 undergraduate theatre majors and 90 graduate students.*

The Butler School of Music’s site advertised:

Serves slightly more than *700 music students*...Housed in one of the country’s largest and most outstanding universities...Students have opportunities that are not available to students in many other institutions. These enrichment opportunities include the Performing Arts Center, the Blanton Museum, the Harry Ransom Center, the LBJ Library, etc.

Our production of *Difficulty* would require a cast size of twenty and eighteen would need to be singers. Between both departments there were approximately eleven hundred students. I proposed that it seemed highly unlikely that we wouldn’t be able to find eighteen good singers.

I did not read music, nor had I directed an opera, so I wrote to Mac Wellman to ask his opinion. He replied:

Luke: No, you don't have to be able to read music—you might take a look at the DVD of the Montclair State production directed by Bob McGrath of the Ridge Theatre (he doesn't read music). I hope this works out!<sup>1</sup>

A message from the playwright was a huge benefit to my case. Luckily, I was also blessed that a generous Department of Theatre and Dance faculty member, Lyn Koenning, agreed to serve as Music Director. Solutions for the first two concerns had been met.

Number three on the list of concerns was a bit trickier to figure out. I knew that there was a shortage of African-American singers in our department, but I still had hopes that between the two departments (and the university) we would be able to find our talent. Yet, I also questioned myself whether casting an all black chorus, or all white principals would even be necessary? The chorus is actually the principal character. At this stage in the process it was too soon to reach a clear conclusion regarding the depiction of race in the production, though, I knew it would be a major concern of mine and others should the play be picked for the season. For the purpose of easing the committee members' minds (as well as my own), I suggested that we approach the chorus of slaves allegorically, to allow the character names (Round, Square, Juniper, Crabgrass, Candlestick, etc.) to be expressed symbolically through a design convention. One idea I proposed was the use of camouflage to indicate the slaves' connection to the land, which meant scenery and costumes working in tandem.

I began to wrap up my pitch by referring to more of the Theatre & Dance website, which read, "We train students to work in professional arts environments. We empower students by challenging assumptions," and then I concluded by quoting my undergraduate alma mater: "Nil sine magno labore/Nothing without great effort!"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mac Wellman, email message to author, October 6, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Alma Mater of Brooklyn College, City University of New York.

## Conclusion

*Difficulty* was in no way an easy sale. First, how do you describe its genre? It isn't a traditional opera, or a conventional musical. The piece mixes arias with spoken text and post-minimal musical composition. How do you describe the libretto? On the page it appears to be written in verse, which is appropriate since Mac Wellman is also a poet, though, from my initial observations *Difficulty* (unsurprisingly) does not adhere to traditional rules of verse like that found in Shakespeare. The text does not follow conventional scansion that deciphers recurring rhythmic patterns, yet the text is whimsical, musical, and rhetorical, so there are rhythms at play. The music is a separate challenge, appearing simple, but containing built-in intricacies, such as, precisely placed changes in rhythmic patterns that subtly enrich things. Given that I do not read music and for those readers who do, an example referred to by the music director as being rhythmically demanding is in the Fifth Telling, the section where the chorus sings "Slaves you slave, slaves you slave, slaves you slave."

Despite the challenges my tenacity paid off, the selection committee heard my cry and answered my call by choosing *Difficulty* as *the* musical for the 2009-2010 season! The real work was now ahead, which began with comprehending what the hell I had just gotten myself into.

## Chapter 2. APPROACH

### The “Difficulty” of the Dramaturgy

As Helen Shaw so accurately points out in her foreword to *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field: Nine New Plays*, Mac Wellman “delights in nothing so much as causing other people trouble” (xi). For example, he deliberately leaves pieces of the play-puzzle missing. It is safe to assert that he has mastered the art of ambiguity. One subject in *Difficulty* is Haitian Vodou (Voodoo), however, it is never named directly. The only way to uncover the link is through the dramaturgy, beginning with a study of the history of slavery in America.

The slave trade began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when “Spain’s Ferdinand II ordered the transport of two-hundred and fifty slaves to Hispaniola to work the gold mines” (Hornsby 1997, 3). Slaves sent to Hispaniola were purchased in West Africa where many practiced the polytheistic religion, Vodun. In Haiti, Africans were exposed to Christianity and formed a monotheistic religion, Haitian Vodou, which mixed West African and Christian beliefs. In *The Difficulty*, Virginia Creeper announces “Prince Zandor” during the First Telling, a one-legged, cannibal spirit found in Vodou tradition that “protects and assists black magic sorcerers” (Webster University). The Zandor reference is the first indication that Vodou is part of this play-world.

In the Third Telling, the Williamson Girl warns her father; “You have not talked to the horses about the history of horses and the mysteries of Selma, Alabama.” The word “horse” is used in Vodou to represent a person that is taken possession of by a spirit (Loa), as if they are being ridden like a horse. Loa are also referred to as Mysteries, and the reason they are called mysteries is because no one can ever fully understand the truth about them (Gade Nou Leve Society). Such is the case with the dramaturgy for *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*! The more you try to put the pieces together the more you come to realize that a logical explanation would contradict the playwright’s intention, which is to create “the unfolding of dreamlike scenarios that bubble with meaning but

never announce it” (Shaw 1997, viii). In fact, the only thing true in this play is magic! I even wrote to the authors to ask if they found anything “missing” from previous productions. Wellman’s response, “Hmm. The feeling of ‘something missing’ should animate the entire venture. Looking forward to it!”<sup>3</sup>

“Vodou” and “horses” are not the only items deliberately left vague or used symbolically. “Bug or beetle. Or a weevil,” is another example. The play never says “cotton” field, never says where they are exactly, only “six miles” from Selma, but through my research I discovered that the boll weevil kills cotton crops and there is an actual location approximately thirteen miles from Selma called Old Cahawba<sup>4</sup> (“Alabama’s most famous Ghost Town”), which was a fertile place for cotton farming in the mid-1800s (Cahawba Advisory Committee). Since Wellman’s play was based on the Ambrose Bierce story by the same title, a ghost story published in 1888, is Cahawba merely a coincidence? I’m not suggesting that the play is set in Cahawba, although, I suppose it could be, but this information does help add some context and allowed me to justify a choice for Mr. Williamson being a cotton planter. It also helps serve as a reminder that this is a ghost story and not to forget its macabre appeal.

The quest for comprehension was plentiful, but (similar to playwright Samuel Beckett) Wellman skillfully provides just enough to force the question: What keeps theatre compelling? In the case of *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*, a sense of wonder created by the combining of words, music, and symbolism will hopefully produce a dramatic effect that resonates with charm and generates meaningful questions for the audience.

The significance of symbols in this play influenced my interpretation, primarily the symbols of candle and light. The interpretation of these symbols affected my approach to storytelling, race, and a visual expression of the phenomenon (the disappearance). A large part of my interpretation of the story was inspired by the Williamson Girl’s poem, which she recites in the Third Telling:

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<sup>3</sup> Mac Wellman, email message to author, March 21, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Google Maps says Old Cahawba Archaeological Park is 13.6 miles from Selma.



Someone or something  
carries a candle  
in the night, or in  
the open and visible,  
in broad daylight.

Someone or something:  
candle blows out  
in the night, or in  
the open and visible,  
in broad daylight.

Someone or something goes.  
Someone or something stays  
in the night, or in  
the open and visible,  
in broad daylight.

Multiple readings might be derived from this, e.g., the candle could refer to Mr. Williamson's cigar or walking stick, but I was inspired by an old phrase, "hold a candle to." Typically, this phrase is used to suggest that a person is inferior to another ("cannot hold a candle to"); however, according to *The Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms* the origin is more optimistic. "In the 16th century, an assistant would literally *hold a candle to* his superior by standing beside him with a candle to provide enough light for him to work by" (Ayto et al. 2009, at "oxfordreference.com"). The openness of *Difficulty* affords an opportunity to think broadly, so I based my interpretation of the slaves' situation in accordance with the original use of the phrase.

Pro-slavery advocates justified slavery on the basis of its economic profitability, though, obviously immoral, slavery helped build America. Progress and growth are embedded in American culture. *The Difficulty* prompts the question, could the slaves have known anything other than slavery? The play also asks if slavery (regardless of race) still exists today and in what forms, and what allowed slavery to succeed for four centuries? My conclusion is that fear enabled people to control others and continues to be a tactic in modern politics and consumer culture (I mean, how did we ever survive before hand sanitizers?). The slaves in the play claim that they are "building a nation,"

but from whom are they learning? “Someone or something goes. Someone or something stays.” It is possible that the slaves held a candle to the Williamsons.

With this in mind I explored the theme of duality, not only the celestial versus the physical in terms of voodoo and the mundane, but also the free versus the oppressed. I wanted to express the transformation from one class to another in the final “tellings” and to suggest the possible consequences inherited by the switch; in this case, the continued presence of fear (the Giant Weevil appears), illogic takes precedent (the slaves unintelligibly and mockingly appropriate gestures from Armour Wren and the Williamson’s while Virginia Creeper stands by numbly, Sam holds his hand to his head almost indefinitely, Mrs. Williamson waits on the roof), and madness in all roles (the smiling Chorus, the blank stares of Sam, the Williamson Girl, and Virginia Creeper as they repeat, “Wonder who I am boy,” and the Old Woman seated with a book and a horse skull resting on her lap). To strengthen this work throughout the course of the play I explored the specificity of gestures and physicality to create contrasts between the two groups.

In her essay, “*Gestures in African Art*,” for the L. Kahan Gallery’s 1982 exhibition of African sculpture, Suzanne Preston Blier states that:

Gesture—the motion, stance, gaze, and dynamic of body presentation—is central to the form and meaning of African sculpture...gesture includes any distinctive form of body movement, conscious as well as unconscious, meaningful as well as mundane. Hands are particularly important in this regard...Gesture conveys an essential part of the sculptor’s unique way of handling a given subject. (7)

I encouraged the chorus to find weight in their stance, to lower their center of energy to represent that they are more connected to the earth, i.e., more down to earth, grounded, honest and spiritual. This was not a passive stance, but a readiness, like a deer, very present and listening with the entire body. It was important to remind the chorus that their terseness was a result of their confidence, that they have agency; therefore, urgency, and that with Vodou they are warriors (Pierre 1995). We referred to several images of African sculptures from the L. Kahan Gallery’s collection: “Chokwe/Lunda, Zaire Figure” (page 12), “Namji, Nigeria, Standing Figure” (page 17), “Bamun, Cameroon,

Cylindrical Stool” (page 28), and “Eastern Ibo, Nigeria, Standing Figure” (page 42) to name only a few.



Figure 2.1. *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field: First Telling*. Morgan Beckford (center) as Virginia Creeper.

Other sculptures from the collection inspired the character of Virginia Creeper (played by Morgan Beckford). For example, the symbolism associated with the arm positions of “Ibibio, Nigeria, Allegorical Figure” (page 18) and “Urhobo, Nigeria, Statue for Spirits” (page 30) justify the reasons for Virginia Creeper’s hand gestures during her entrance in the First Telling. I asked Morgan to cross downstage with her left arm raised making a soft sculpted hand and her right hand making a fist (Fig. 2.1). The meaning of gestures varies in African communities, but typically the right hand and the left hand stay the same, the right hand represents masculinity/power whereas the left hand expresses femininity/spirituality (Blier 1982). Morgan wondered why I wanted her to then switch her hands (right hand soft/left and fist) while she moved to downstage right, so I

explained that her character is strong and progressive, she is switching the strength from the traditionally masculine hand and empowering the traditionally feminine.

On the other hand (pun intended), my approach to the principle characters was even more formalized and upright, very conscious of their movement, including specificity of their arms and hand gestures, which illustrated bodies aware of control. I encouraged the production choreographer, first year Master of Fine Arts in Dance candidate, Alvin Rangel, to focus more on the chorus, while I provided movement for the principals. My goal was to emphasize contrasts in the characters' physicality by mixing the fluid, lyrical style of Alvin's with my formal/corporeal approach. Again, defining the distinction between the free versus the oppressed was intended to aid in the storytelling by emphasizing the duality of slaves versus slave-owners.

The tactic I used to build a gestural/physical language required that the cast develop a deep sense of listening to and with their entire body (if they did not already comprehend this skill). As Robert Wilson explained it when describing his own methods of directing actors, it is a formal expression that is more inwardly felt not outwardly acted.<sup>5</sup> Emotion, thus, stems not from psychology, nor even relies heavily on the connection to another performer, but from a complete awareness of breath and body at all time. Through this awareness lies an emotional realm that is felt by allowing oneself permission to respond to formal stimuli. In my approach to *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*, the heightened emphasis of the corporeality sets forth a particular performance style. This style is not a representation of natural behavior as we experience it in the everyday, but must seem natural in the context of the play-world and the established theatrical conventions.

Perhaps the best example is my work with the actress Jennifer Adams (Mrs. Williamson) on her aria at the beginning of the Seventh Telling (Fig. 2.2 – Fig. 2.7). In situations like these I would typically work alone first to create a movement pattern, or physical score, which I would then demonstrate for the performer, not unlike the way

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Wilson, "Sonette" (note from rehearsal at the Berliner Ensemble), Berlin, Germany, March 11, 2009).

Robert Wilson provides movement for the actors that he works with. However, in this particular situation I began with an image in mind, that of her on top of the house reaching out over the edge of the roof, and I described it in terms of the degree of a dramatic angle. Jennifer is a highly skilled performer, able to pick up movement quickly and knows how to fill it with substance. She assumed the description of the angle quite naturally and began to sing the song while I directed her movement. This way of working does not only place demands on the actor, but on the director as well. Whether I propose the movement myself, or discover it in the moment as in the situation that is being described, it is absolutely necessary that I be just as focused and intuitive, if not more so, than the performer.

Together, Jennifer and I engaged in a sort of slow dance, and as the male, I lead. I spoke in a soft voice and advised her when to open her fingers, when to drop her elbow, when she should extend her arm again, when to stand straight, and then we explored how to do a weeping gesture. We made the steps together and it did not take very long. Afterward, I asked her how it felt and she said that it gave her a thought process. I sense that the challenges present in the movement also informed her “emotional baseline.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Professor Franchelle Dorn, TD 353T “Acting in Style” (note from class at the University of Texas), Austin, TX, February 18, 2010).



Figure 2.2-2.7. *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field: Seventh Telling*. Jennifer Adams as Mrs. Williamson.



Figure 2.3



Figure 2.4



Figure 2.5



Figure 2.6



Figure 2.7



An actor possessing a great deal of physical training will, of course, have an advantage when presenting this style of theatre (a corporeal theatre), but surrendering to the form can be just as advantageous if the actor does not have a strong physical background. After all, you don't have to have talent to be an actor; you just have to have the will (Bruder et al. 1986).

We began the rehearsal process with a couple of four-hour movement workshops designed primarily to help train the chorus (and company) physically and kinesthetically, though, it was apparent from the exercises that the time allotted for these workshops would barely scratch the surface based on the overall skill level of the young performers. The rest would have to be learned by doing, i.e., in rehearsals, so my approach with Alvin was to keep things fairly simple in order to best serve the group.

I explained in clear terms to everyone that my goal for the first two weeks of staging (before departing for Spring Break) was to put a shape on the play, to learn it technically first, and then figure out how to fill/act it. This, of course, meant that things would change, but was intended to provide a starting point for the cast, so that they would be on their feet after the break. A collaborator criticized my work during these initial rehearsals, claiming that I was working like a painter or a sculptor and not serving the story. Ironically, painting and sculpture were as important to Haitian Vodou as music and literature because they provided a way to make the invisible visible and connect to the spiritual world (Alexis 2010).

In further support of my methods I'd like to refer to a passage from Hans-Thies Lehmann's book *Postdramatic Theatre*:

Theatre is catching up on an aesthetic development that other art forms went through earlier. It is no coincidence that concepts which originated in visual arts, music or literature can be used to characterize postdramatic theatre. It was only under the influence of reproductive media like photography and film that theatre became conscious of its specificity. (94)

And according to Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique's chapter in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*:

The art of Vodoun magic rests upon aesthetics of sign and symbol, distillations of meaning that appeal to the inner being; its activation

depends upon effective interchanges at the level of the collective unconsciousness...In the magico-religious domain, this terrain of symbolism becomes increasingly formalized. (171)

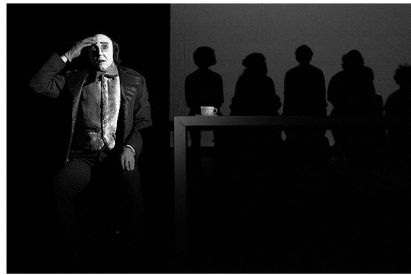
Once the precision of gesture was in place, it could then be used to create pattern. An example of my use of pattern was in Armour Wren's gestures for the Second Telling (Fig. 2.9). I wanted to create a "hand dance" for the actor that could be viewed as an attempt at helping him illustrate his testimony while alternatively expressing the gaps in his memory and trance-like condition at the end of the scene.



Figure 2.8. Rehearsal for *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*. Luke Leonard directs actor Joey LePage.

However, the direction for the scene changed slightly the more we worked on it. One night I decided to ask the actor playing Armour Wren (Joey LePage) to make an adjustment. I proposed that Armour Wren knows what happened to Mr. Williamson, causing him to be implicated in Mr. Williamson's disappearance. This helped Joey by providing a deeper sense of the circumstances and the stakes; therefore, placing him further on the hot seat. One of my mentors, Dr. Lucien Douglas, offered additional support through an exercise designed to aid the actor with freeing his voice, which helped him emphasize the operative words and vary his pitch. I believe the combination of the

adjustment and the method enabled the scene to finally take off. Armour Wren's gestures (steps for the hand dance) became more clear for Joey, and then they were taught to some of the chorus and incorporated in the Seventh Telling as a way to suggest the slaves' appropriation of the Williamson's world, subsequently forming new meaning.



1



4



2



5



3



6

Figure 2.9. Joey LePage as Armour Wren in *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*: Second Telling.

This is also one example of what might be best described as a “visual dramaturgy,”<sup>7</sup> i.e., information embedded in a visual language. University of Texas alumnus, Kurt Mueller, created the actual gestures used to make the hand dance.

In 2009, I visited The Glassell School of Art at The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston where Mueller was giving a guided tour of works on display by artists participating in The Core Artist-in-Residence Program. I was so intrigued by the movement of his hands that I approached him afterward to ask if it would be okay to videotape him the next time he talked about art in a public forum. Luckily, he did not think I was too strange and agreed, thus, I spent several hours and days reviewing a 40 minute tape of him talking at the Contemporary Arts Museum in 2010 in order to create the “dance.” As Texas-born artist Robert Rauschenberg said, “I think a painting is more like the real world if it’s made out of the real world” (Kotz 2004, 16).

Another way repetition was used was through staging patterns and the usage of props. In the First Telling, the path that Virginia Creeper makes from upstage left to up center and then through center to downstage center is the same path taken by Mr. Williamson prior to his disappearance in the Third Interlude, so the repeated blocking is intended to associate Virginia Creeper and the chorus with the “event.” The Old Woman followed this blocking as well for the entrance to her aria in the Fourth Telling.

I devoted the First Telling to a Vodou ritual where the slaves attempt to conjure a Loa to help free them from slavery (and in our version the Black Boy Sam, who we also considered as the slave character of “Nuisance,” was ‘ridden’ by a spirit, i.e., taken possession of). This is an example of the liberties that Wellman’s work provides a director and his team of collaborators. Nowhere does the script say that the fieldhands are clearing the field in order to perform a ritual, in fact the stage directions only indicate that they are in the field at night, we hear “strange night noises,” and Mrs. Williamson’s face is the moon, so action and event become the responsibility of the director, designers, dramaturgs, and actors.

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<sup>7</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann devotes a section to “visual dramaturgy” in the chapter, “Panorama of Postdramatic Theatre,” from his book *Postdramatic Theatre*.

I recalled my first role at the University of Texas as Laura Kepley's Assistant Director for *Elephant's Graveyard* written by University of Texas alumnus, George Brant. As she broke down the script she created subtitles, or headlines for each scene, so the First Telling in *Difficulty* became "The Conjure." Of course, Wellman already provides subtitles; such as, "Belladonna," "Monkshood," "Poison Hemlock," etc., which are all names of poisonous plants with differing characteristics and can be used to inform mood, design, and so forth; however, I found it helpful to also think in terms of the event for each scene, as often advised by mentor, Scott Kanoff. Since acting is essentially doing, or behaving "truthfully under the imaginary circumstances" (Bruder et al. 1986, 8), I needed to help the performers understand each situation. This can be a delicate procedure when trying to present a formal expression and avoid getting bogged down by too much literal/intellectual reasoning. As noted earlier, the way to resolve this in the early stages of rehearsals is to focus on generating a physical score with the actors in order to create a frame within which they can play freely: this approach requires little conversation. The given circumstances can be explored later once the actors begin learning how to 'fill' the 'frame.'

Dr. Douglas reminded me often of something Edward Albee would say, "I don't care what you do as long as you do my play." There are things to consider when doing (acting) a Mac Wellman play. For instance, Wellman is not interested in sentimentality because he feels it is false (Savran 1999). I noticed the Williamson Girl (played by Haley Hussey) forcing her emotions at the end of the play (Seventh Telling), so I explained to her that her emotions are not in her control; therefore, she need not ever worry about them (Bruder et al. 1986). Instead, I encouraged her to focus on playing an action and suggested that she "search for an alibi." This helped ground her and kept her focused on the scene rather than how she imagined she should be playing the scene emotionally.

As for the way in which I incorporated the repetition of props, the following is one example. Black Boy Sam begins the Third Telling holding an umbrella and Mr. Williamson reads a newspaper. The slaves in the Seventh Telling later acquire these props after Mr. Williamson has disappeared. The idea to include umbrellas came from a

Hugo Bernatzik photo taken in Portuguese Guinea circa 1930-31. The description of the print is, “With the introduction of Western civilization, the Fula people replaced their old dance rods with imported umbrellas” (Conru 2003, 284). One could assume that the slaves replaced their farm tools (used in the Opening and Fourth Telling) with the umbrellas (Fig. 2.10 and Fig. 2.11).



Figure 2.10. *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*: Opening. Slave chorus in the field at night.



Figure 2.11. *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*: Seventh Telling. Chorus with umbrellas.

The script is laden with repetition. Repetition is the way we learn and is a tactic employed quite often in postdramatic theatre to convey meaning. As playwright Jeffrey M. Jones notes in his preface to the anthology, *New Downtown Now*:

Pattern establishes an equivalence of form and content: the more the structure of a piece depends on correspondences and differences between repeating elements, the less the “meaning” of a piece itself depends on the nature of those elements—what would otherwise be “content.” This single property of pattern makes possible the idea of a tightly structured, bounded piece that, being at the same time independent of its content, resists complete definition and is therefore open. (xiv-xv)

Sticking with the openness created by Wellman, his use of symbols, and the encouragement of our dramaturg, Ph.D. candidate in Performance as Public Practice, Ninoska M'bewe Escobar, I decided to look past a literal depiction of race and focused on “bodies” instead. Referring to *Difficulty* as a ghost story, we decided to apply the same makeup treatment to all cast members, a liquid white with a little black to create a pale,

grey color, that when lit using a high-temperature HMI (Hydrargyrum medium-arc iodide) lamp would produce a ghoulish, corpse-like effect. Another reason for this choice was to assist the audience with looking past race in order to accept broader, conceptual, thematic considerations, e.g., the characters in the play as ‘dead’ citizens.

Given my desire to learn more about traditional Asian theatre aesthetics, I researched the use of Kesho (white) makeup in Japanese Kabuki theatre and discovered that pure white makeup was originally intended to depict the principle characters (aristocracy); however, in plays like *Benten Kozo*, pure white was used on the peasants since they play the primary role (Cavaye 1993). The slave chorus in *Difficulty* is the main role, appearing in every scene aside from the Third Telling and all interludes; therefore, they received a similar makeup treatment as the “principals.” There is somewhat of a connection between my interest in Asian theatre and Wellman’s inspiration for writing *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*. When working on the play, Wellman referred to another Bierce story, “The Moonlit Road,” which was the inspiration for the Japanese film *Rashomon* (Swed 2002), a crime story told from differing accounts that never reveal which version is the truth.

To write a play about slavery is to fix it on one meaning, a narrative conflict about the oppression of one race due to another. This is not Wellman’s intention. In the 1997 interview with Shawn-Marie Garrett, Wellman states, “I think the whole idea of race is racist” (93). He goes on to describe his approach to *Difficulty*:

I didn’t set out to write “about” slavery, because I wouldn’t trust myself to write anything better than the liberal plays on the topic that I don’t like. Put another way, to redescribe the black people of Bierce’s fable according to our contemporary notions would be worse than Haley’s fraudulent *Roots*. It would rob them of their cunning silence, patience, their terse and succinct truth-telling. Their irony. (90)

Wellman goes on to explain that his attraction to the Bierce story was, “Just the idea of a person disappearing off the face of the earth. That event offers a very elegant way of posing an enormous number of questions” (ibid.).

My dramaturgical cohorts researched theories of representation and suggested that ghosts could support the ‘dead’ citizens angle. Wardrobe, makeup, and movement were



other tactics employed to keep the text open and to endorse Wellman's beliefs. Casting a mixed-race chorus was justifiable based on a clear design convention supporting the playwright's intentions and production team's interpretation. The story is not about slavery but a man disappearing and "he," symbolically, introduces several topics for discourse.

Light is a major symbol in this play and used to describe Mr. Williamson's disappearance. In the Third Interlude Mr. Williamson says, "Light, Light poured level across the open field...music and shadow passed over me and I was gone." I thought long and hard about the quality of light and which type of light would best describe phenomena and came to the conclusion that fluorescent tubes would do the trick. I am a fan of the late Dan Flavin, an artist known for his groundbreaking use of fluorescent lighting as an artistic medium. It took some time to convince the design team that this light would work. Due to the inherent modernity of fluorescent tubes, when viewed from a literal perspective, a valid question was raised about what fluorescent tubes had to do with 1854, but my approach to interpreting this play was to ask what does 1854 have to do with today? The following are some of the reasons that I provided in support of fluorescent lighting:

1. In everyday life it is the light we hate, but when used in art you could say it is the light we love to hate. Mr. Williamson and slavery are the 'lights' we hate, but at the time slavery was the 'light' people loved to hate because it was so economical. People justified it based on it being economically profitable and it was helping to build the nation.
2. Using this type of lighting is taking what's considered banal and making it dazzling, and that relates to Wellman's work.
3. Fluorescents are energy saving. Slaves saved their slave owners energy and time.
4. Fluorescence was a phenomenon in nature that scientists started to comprehend during the mid-19th century (when this play takes place).

The lighting designer, third year Master of Fine Arts in Design candidate, Lih-Hwa Yu, embraced these ideas and ran. Luckily, his thesis project was on lighting, installation,

and its relationship to theatre, so he was able to derive a lot of inspiration from the art of Dan Flavin, which he incorporated into *Difficulty* as well as into his own thesis work (Fig 2.12 and Fig. 2.13).



Figure 2.12. *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*: Preshow.



Figure 2.13. *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*: Third Interlude. John Hazelwood as Mrs. Williamson.

Lastly, in further consideration of my approach being inspired by Eastern aesthetics, it is worthy to note a few similarities of Noh Theatre with *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*.

Professor Stephen Gerald suggested a wonderful book by Kunio Komparu, *The Noh Theater: Principles and Perspectives*, which states the following characteristics of Noh:

- Symbolic theater of great purity and refinement.
- Not to be comprehended by intellect. Theater of the heart.
- Fine arts, architecture, time, space are intricately woven.
- Total stage art that approaches perfection.
- Passage of time non-realistic. Transcends (perfects) time/space. (Wellman says, "phase-space.")<sup>8</sup>
- Never aim to perfect "stylization," should engage unending struggle to attain perfection.
- Clean, straight-line composition, Mondrian-like patterns of dark and light.
- Move away from melody-centered music toward rhythm-centered.
- No great sets. Subtle, portable properties.
- Event to be experienced directly and personally. Different drama created for each spectator. Encountered only once in one's lifetime.
- To experience approach naively, "never forget the beginner's mind." Spectator shares play with performer through free association.
- Dim consciousness of reality. Release self into music.
- Hana (apparent beauty). Flower or blossom.
- Yugen (invisible beauty). Profound sublimity. Concept found in poetic theory. Elegance, grace, lingering charm, or suggestiveness. Beauty that perfects. Refined elegance.

The characteristics of Noh were intrinsic to my approach to working on this play with actors, designers, and dramaturgs. Formulating a clear interpretation of the work and justifications for my ideas helped prepare me for the most fundamental stage: Collaboration.

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<sup>8</sup> Mac Wellman, "Speculations: An Essay on Theater," in *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field: Nine New Plays* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 325.

### Chapter 3. COLLABORATION

Anne Bogart is a wonderful writer/director/scholar and perhaps the most quoted in academia. In her book, *A Director Prepares*, she writes, “If your work is too controlled, it has no life. If it is too chaotic, no one can see or hear it” (132). I have been trying to avoid the latter throughout graduate school. Control is a delicate attribute. It is what artists are after, although, many might deny it. Art is created by establishing control amidst chaos and limitations. Even Jackson Pollack's athleticism was a wrangling of paint in an attempt to tame his canvas. I am not referring to individual power, exercising control over someone else, especially in theatre since it involves collaborators. I just feel that at the end of the day all artists are trying to put a frame around what they call their work, and this comes from a process of trying to mold ideas and inspirations into a cohesive form.

My background in theatre-making in post-undergraduate studies and prior to graduate school was primarily self-producing original works, which meant that in several instances I only needed to explain things to myself. For example, when I wrote my first one-act play (*Bony and Poot*, 1999) I did not have the support of a dramaturgical or design team providing a force by which to measure my choices. In fact, to make and produce the work, I even had to rent a garage and start a theater. I was the producer, director, designer, author, marketing director, and dramaturg, so I did not have anybody to answer to other than me. Of course, this is only an example of a time when I had to do everything myself. I worked with several artists in various ways on other projects in New York City, but when it was my script and I was directing it was my vision, and I led the way. I am the type of person with a plethora of ideas and I can lead people and work well under pressure, but graduate school provided a new source of insight into how to collaborate well with others. I have learned several things at the University of Texas at Austin, but in terms of directing *The Difficulty* I had to find ways of expressing my visions while allowing others the opportunity to exhibit their own expertise.

During Fall 2009 I took a collaboration class with Professor Steven Dietz and it was one of the most informative and useful courses due to its balance between lecture and practice. One of the things that Professor Dietz shared with us was that his adversaries are often his best collaborators. I believe this after working on *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*. My design team respected my visions, but asked lots of questions, which forced me to justify in plain terms what my intentions were. Professor Dietz reiterated three points throughout his course: 1) Initiate, 2) Interrogate, 3) Illuminate. The *Difficulty* designers entrusted me as their visual leader, but generated their own work and brought it to the table along with their inquiries.

I remember fighting for a Tony Oursler-like moon (Fig. 3.1 and Fig. 3.2) to serve the stage direction, “Only, the face of the moon is Mrs. Williamson’s.” It was important for me at the time that the moon be personified in 3-dimensionality because it was the top of the play and I wanted to start strong. We did several tests projecting onto a convex surface and they were successful, but due to budgeting issues it was necessary to compromise in order to have enough available funds for the hydraulic lift (Fig. 3.3 and Fig. 3.4), which was used to raise and lower the Magistrate’s desk. The design team helped me prioritize the reveal of the Magistrate’s ghastly height at the end of the Fifth Telling in place of the face of the moon in the First Telling. It was a wise decision, and we got more bang for our buck.



Figure 3.1. Tony Oursler video/sculpture. Lester Mark’s private collection.



Figure 3.2. Third Year MFA in Design Technology candidate, David Tolin, assisting moon projection test.



Figure 3.3. *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*: Fifth Telling. Ben Schave as the Presiding Magistrate.



Figure 3.4. *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*: Fifth Telling. Ben Schave as the Presiding Magistrate.



## Visual Language

Images often speak louder than words; especially, when it comes to working with designers, so in the early stages of our process I referred to the work of other artists who I felt might aid in the aesthetic choices pertaining to this work, visual artists like, Kara Walker (for her use of silhouettes), Dan Flavin (for his use of light), Daniel Buren (for his minimalist ‘visual tool’), and Robert Wilson (for his non-hierarchical combining of formal elements).

I expressed my visions through sketches (Fig. 3.5 and Fig 3.7) and storyboards (Fig. 3.9) and prefaced my proposals by stating that the drawings were merely a starting point and ideas for the designers to make beautiful. The response was positive. Third year Master of Fine Arts in Design candidates, Alison Heryer (costume designer) and Sonja Rainey (set designer) seemed to appreciate the sketches. Sonja said she had never worked with a director who thought in images before, and Alison praised how involved I was in the design process stating that she had not worked with a director who cared so much about lighting. I said, “Light is everything and I want to know more about it,” though, Robert Wilson put it best, “Without light, there is no space” (Marx 1998, 40).

I observed Robert Wilson’s work forcing people to collaborate, thus, teaching them to work as a team. In America, my assumption is that a lot of times in professional theatre people work rather independently. In design class I was told that there are instances where designs are created without ever having a conversation with the director. For my work (and, needless to say, Wilson’s as well) that is impossible. Every element must work in tandem.

I have never observed a director working as hard as Wilson. His discipline is something that I admire and learned from. By exemplifying a model of will and perseverance he encourages others to work at their highest standard. I always strive to do the same.

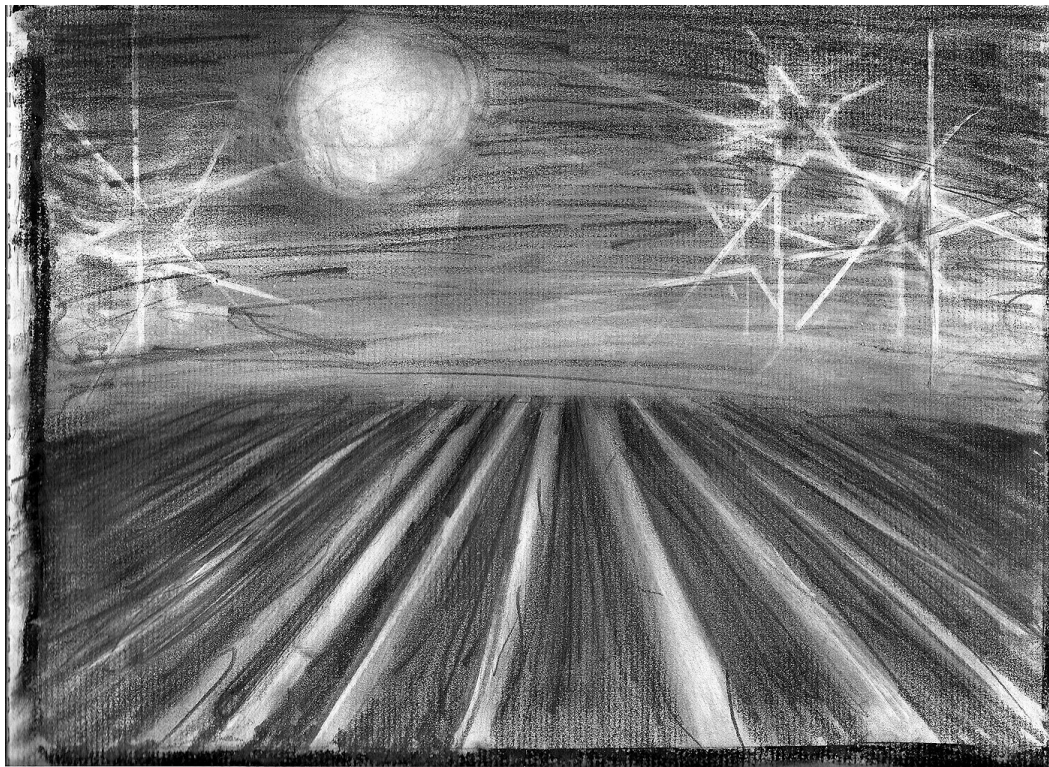


Figure 3.5. Sketch by Luke Leonard used to relate visual concept to designers for the “Opening.”



Figure 3.6. The floor and moon design for *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*. Set Design by Sonja Rainey.

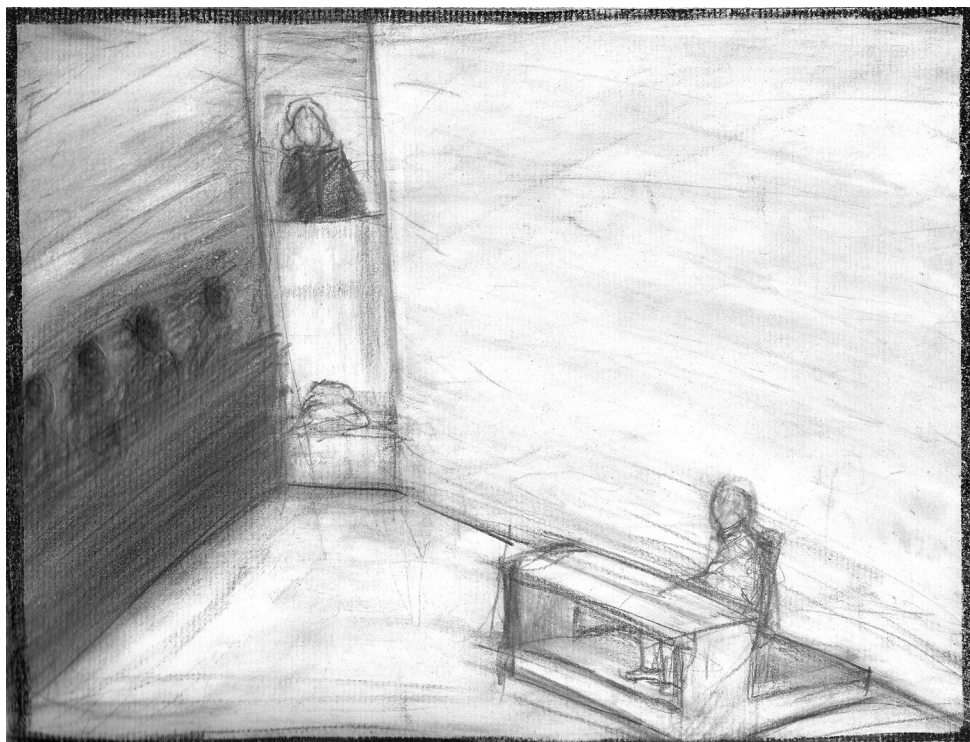


Figure 3.7. Sketch by Luke Leonard used to relate visual concept to designers for the “Second Telling.”

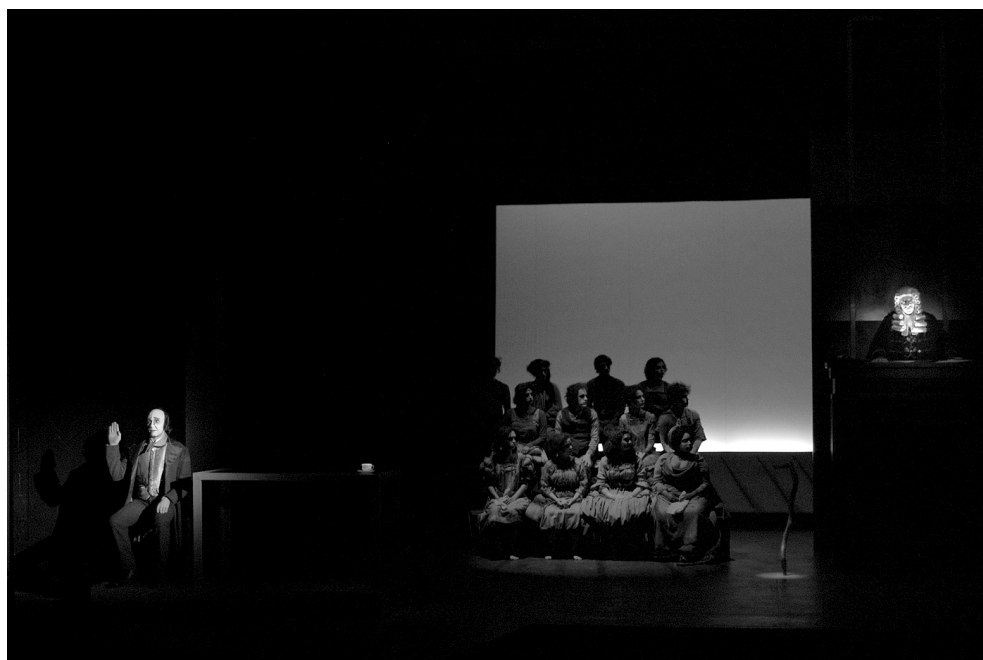


Figure 3.8. *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*: Second Telling. Set Design by Sonja Rainey.

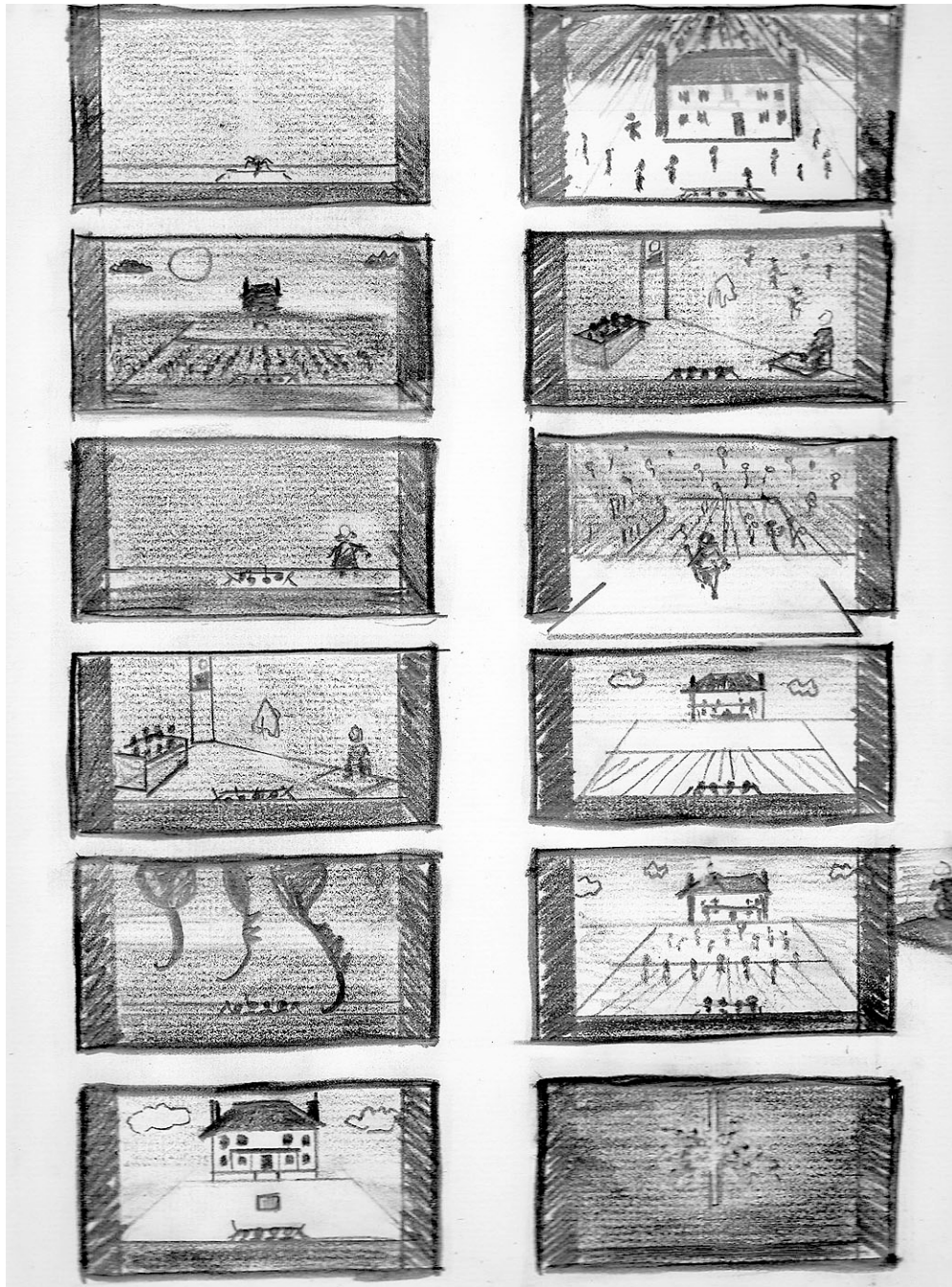


Figure 3.9. Early sketch by Luke Leonard of master storyboard for *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*.

Assisting Robert Wilson in Berlin influenced my work and was apparent when I directed Israel Horovitz's play in Italy, *L'indiano vuole il Bronx*. I did not have a lighting designer, so I designed the lights. Wilson's use of lighting and storyboarding techniques was inspirational. I tried my hand at storyboarding the lighting concept (Fig. 3.10), which helped a great deal during the rehearsal process. The pictures sped up my process because I knew what I wanted to see and how/when they related to each moment in the play. In addition, this served as a useful method for storytelling since I did not speak Italian. I focused on expressing the narrative through movement, actions, sound, and lighting.

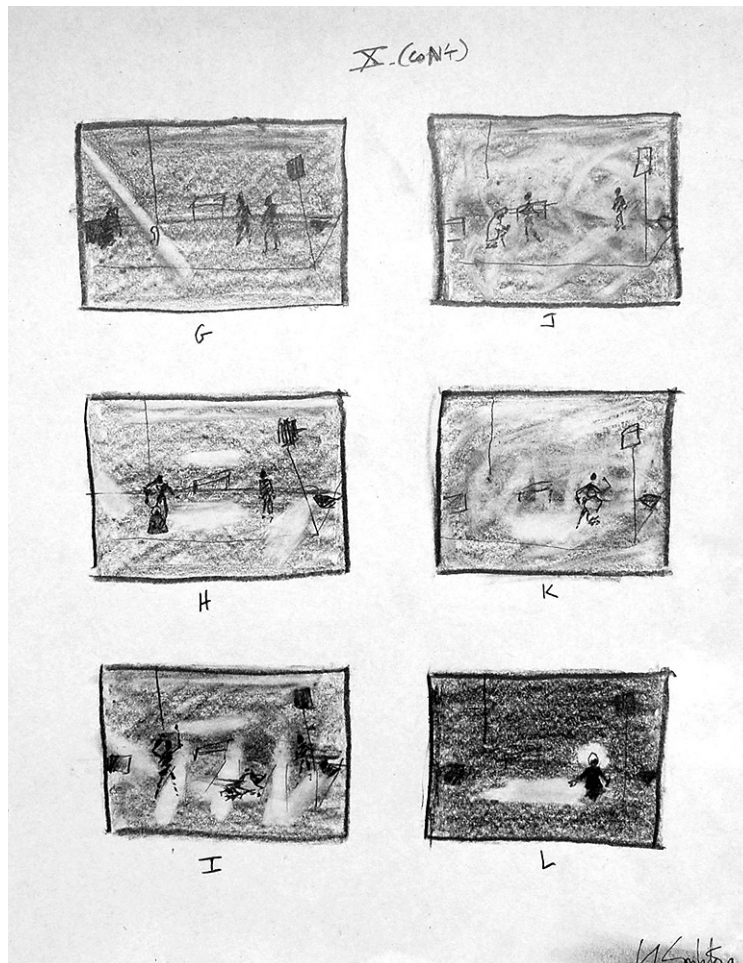


Figure 3.10. Storyboard by Luke Leonard for *L'indiano vuole il Bronx* by Israel Horovitz (Spoleto 2009).

Later, I utilized this tactic in my approach to staging *The Difficulty*. The storyboards that I created provided a visual starting point for applying a shape to the scenes and were used to help express the stage pictures for the actors. We hung these in the rehearsal room and referred to them when necessary (Fig. 3.11).

I do wish that the designers could have been more present during rehearsals. It is one thing to converse theoretically and apply concepts to paper, but the real work happens in the rehearsal room where ideas are put to the test and, frequently, must adjust and/or change. This is why I requested a long table, so that the team could sit together, but for the most part it was not possible to work the way that I had envisioned due to my collaborators' other commitments.



Figure 3.11. Luke Leonard sitting in the rehearsal room of *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*.

## Conclusion

The goal of observing Wilson in Berlin was to help with my thesis, which it did. I was involved in the direction of the design for *Difficulty* from the get-go and used my own sketches as a way to articulate my vision. I also got the designers having conversations that they had never had by mixing scenery with light, costumes with props, video with light and scenery. The technical director, Master of Fine Arts in Design Technology candidate, Tramaine Berryhill, had his hands full with this show. Apparently it is unusual in academia, but the interdisciplinary nature was a goal for the department and incited a positive spirit amongst everyone involved.



## Chapter 4. “WONDER WHO I AM”

The reason I chose to go to graduate school was, of course, to better myself. During my time at the University of Texas at Austin I noticed that I have tended to cater toward a certain style. Style is a conundrum. On one hand it can define a signature and establish boundaries for an artist to push. On the other, style can become trendy; in which case one's style can lose popularity and go out of fashion. The famous graphic artist Milton Glaser said, "It's absurd to be loyal to a style. It does not deserve your loyalty" (Glaser 2001, in "Ten Things I Have Learned"), but as an aspiring director I continue wrestling with the notion. After all, style is merely the manner in which something is done, so everyone has his or her own style; it's inevitable. The question is, is it wise to apply a personal style to every play, or better to serve the style of the chosen work? If Milton Glaser is right, then we would be wrong either way.

Dr. Rebecca Brooks, a wonderfully insightful and inspirational, retired University of Texas professor of interdisciplinary art education, asked her class to create five personal criteria for what makes something a work of art. The operative word in her lesson was "personal." Art is personal, so it must have style. Style contains beliefs, so it must have meaning, and meaning is about communication. Based on this logic, my list now reads that art must; 1) Be personal, 2) Have style, 3) Contain beliefs, 4) Have purpose, and 5) Attempt to communicate. Some artists, like avant-garde/Dada maestro Marcel Duchamp, are not concerned with aesthetics (Kuspit 2004), and others, like director Robert Wilson are not concerned with interpreting their own work (Wilson 2007), but in essence, all artists share one thing in common, which is to communicate his/her personal beliefs through his/her style.

I asked SITI Company member, Tom Nelis, if SITI would ever perform on a concrete floor and he said no because their work requires a sprung wood floor to protect their bodies and knees. I realized in that moment that the floor helps determine your style.



At the University of Texas this thought was carried further during a site-specific workshop led by director Katie Pearl. We were asked by Katie to enter a space and record our first impressions. She encouraged us to note sounds, textures, temperatures, and to try to allow the space to speak to us. My partner and I chose the B. Iden Payne Theatre, a traditional, proscenium stage with approximately 500 seats, and the following is what I wrote: cold and old, superior, cinematic, rigid, cell-like, congressional, church-like, overwhelming, and formal. My partner wrote: dreams, being six, and part of a huge circle. Is it obvious who was the pessimist on that day! I decided to take my partner's lead and translate my pessimism into optimism. I learned not only can the floor inform a style, but the entire space can as well. At the time the Payne told me it was formal, yet rebelliously I presented an informal exercise in the space and it failed. Now the Payne tells me it is formal and I listen.

It wasn't until March 2009 that I considered "formal theatre" as a potential rubric. I was at the Berliner Ensemble in Germany assisting a new music-theatre work based on Shakespeare's sonnets, designed and directed by internationally acclaimed Robert Wilson, an internship sponsored by the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of Texas at Austin. The first day Mr. Wilson entered rehearsals he spoke to everyone about his methods and described his theater as formal. For him it means emphasizing all formal elements at the same time, i.e., creating a structure for light, sound, scenery, text, movement, etc., by using time and space. His work can be easily misunderstood because it is so unlike the norm. Wilson's art relies on ambiguity and beauty to create a space for the audience to think and feel. His long-time associate director, Ann-Christin Rommen, explains, "Bob's 'language'...is a gestural language, and also one that sometimes is abstract – and western actors are not trained to think abstractly" (Shevtsova 2007, 59). His style is very modern and Modernism is still very much a part of design and continues to affect people's lives (Ilyin 48). As described by Dr. Brooks:

Modernism places emphasis on design elements, which is believed to create harmonious surroundings that will lead to a more aesthetically aware public. This type of expression was also believed to create more

whole individuals who would be intelligent, socially and spiritually adjusted and aesthetically fulfilled.<sup>9</sup>

Sounds pretty good, right, but there is a counter argument. In her book, *Chasing the Perfect*, designer Natalia Ilyin criticizes Modernism (“pre, post, or neo”) as being “mythically male” and neglecting the “mythically female,” i.e., “individualistic, intellectual, achieving, as opposed to...mystical, chthonic, intuitive, tied to the body” (115-117). Ilyin reminds us “that the early modernists were so very interested in the outer form expressing the inner essence,” but goes on to say that this “training” has caused us to treat ourselves and other people like “designed objects” (Ilyin 2006, 86). At one point she rips into modernism stating, “The modern urge is the urge to get away from organic existence in general. It’s a negation of life. It’s a fear of life” (Ilyin 2006, 67). She concludes her thoughts by encouraging a search for a balance between the outer and the inner, the perfect and the imperfect, the masculine and the feminine, but fails to offer any practical solutions. In fact, she confesses that what is real comes from deep inside and for which there is no formula (Ilyin 2006, 19). In theatre, the inner life is always the responsibility of the actor.

There is a link between formal theatre and modernist principles, though I agree with Ilyin that a work should contain life. It is important to remember this when approaching theatre formally. Like the B. Iden Payne Theatre, Wilson’s work can appear cold to some, or like a Serra sculpture, “omnipresent,”<sup>10</sup> but, in an age where the arts are the first thing to be cut in our society and performance appears prioritized over reflection, Wilson, et al., might be deliberately presenting harsh realities in order to challenge the public to think about their own existence.

Wilson asked me what it was like to watch him direct. One thing is for sure...there are no distractions. Everything is contained and nothing is on stage that is not essential. I was impressed by his dedication to his craft and his convictions, and surprised by the emotional responses that I had to the formal scenes that he created.

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<sup>9</sup> Note from lecture at The University of Texas at Austin, Department of Art and Art History, “Elements of Art Presentation,” Dr. Rebecca Brooks, Spring 2008.

<sup>10</sup> PBS Video, Art: 21, Episode One (2001): “Place.”

Observing him direct encouraged me to continue emphasizing form in my own work, yet “formal” does not always seem to be a sufficient way of describing what I attempt to do, nor perhaps what he does, as well. In a Modernist fashion, Wilson avoids discussing interpretation during the rehearsal process, but, like a Postmodernist, he is interested in meaning as multilogical<sup>11</sup> [*sic*] and encourages interpretation by the public. Dr. Brooks defines Postmodernism as being:

Less interested in formal elements and more concerned with content. It requires a critical language that involves attention to personal, social, historical and political events, i.e., interdisciplinary.<sup>12</sup>

Wilson and I share a similar method of deriving inspiration from various sources, which reflects an interdisciplinary approach. Perhaps it is best described as a bricoleur-dramaturgical technique (postmodern), i.e., constructed from a variety of sources, combined with a (modern) reductive process that emphasizes the arrangement of formal elements.

Mac Wellman also concentrates on form in ways that break conventional models or standards. I had the pleasure of directing his play, *Bad Penny*, my first year at the University of Texas. I like Wellman because he is unlike anyone else. The worlds he creates and the words he chooses are very unusual, musical, and specific, and always “leave ample room for a director to maneuver” (Shaw 2006, xi). In an interview with Shawn-Marie Garrett, Wellman mentioned that he likes directors attracted to strangeness (Garrett 1997), and those who know me well can attest that I fit that description. Coincidentally, Wellman is also fond of Wilson.

When directing the first production of his play, *Terminal Hip*, Wellman followed Robert Wilson’s example of using sketches to convey the look of the production (Robinson 1992), and he has stated his opinion that “Wilson and Foreman are the only

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<sup>11</sup> “Multilogical” is a term used by Joe Kincheloe in his essay, *Beyond Reductionism: Difference, Criticality, and Multilogicality in the Bricolage and Postformalism*, to suggest that topics can be considered through multiple perspectives, which serves “cultural diversity and multicultural concerns.”

<sup>12</sup> Note from lecture at The University of Texas at Austin, Department of Art and Art History, “Elements of Art Presentation,” Dr. Rebecca Brooks, Spring 2008.

well-known American directors who are up to date on new writing” (Garrett 1997, 91). During his visit to the University of Texas for the 2009 New Works Festival we asked Wellman personally if he liked Robert Wilson. Wellman answered that Wilson’s aesthetic is great and that he is the Wagner of our time. It is clear that Wellman and I are both fans of Robert Wilson, but Wellman posited once that, “In our time only bad artists name what they cherish, because what is cherished, or revered, or loved, will immediately be used as a tool by the powers that be” (Wellman 1984, 66). Professor Dietz advises his students in collaboration class to select their vocabulary wisely. I am uncertain if “formal” will have any longevity in my repertoire, but an aim of mine is to continue practicing articulation while contemplating my work, as successful artists appear to be skilled at describing what they do.

Since my internship in Berlin, the Byrd Hoffmann Watermill Foundation applied for a grant on my behalf to prolong a mentoring relationship with Robert Wilson post-graduation. I found it difficult to explain what it is that “I do” (what makes me special, why should I receive support) when asked by a Development Associate at the Foundation. This is due in part by a fear of being pigeonholed, I believe. To get work as a director I always thought that I should be able to do anything; however, when I listen to successful artists speak they have a focus. They generally refer to their process and their interests, rarely referring to what it is about, instead relying on how they do something and sometimes why. For example, in her interview on the PBS website Art: 21, photographer Sally Mann describes herself as having a “magpie aesthetic” and collects things that are lying around.<sup>13</sup> I believe I use this strategy too. Her intention is not an “overarching reference” (ibid.), but to make a beautiful, ambiguous picture. Mann advocates, “If it doesn’t have ambiguity, don’t bother” (ibid.).

When asked about the meaning behind his photograph, “La Buena Fama Durmiendo, 1938,” Manuel Alvarez Bravo replied, “People ask me, ‘Why the bandages?

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<sup>13</sup> PBS Video. “Art 21: Place (Richard Serra, Sally Mann, Margaret Kilgallen and Barry McGee,” PBS Video, <http://video.pbs.org/video/1230660017>.

Why the ‘abrojos?’ I have also thought, ‘Why the bandages and ‘abrojos?’” (Kelly 1979, 8).

An interviewer questioned the painter Francis Bacon, “Why is chance more important than conscious intellect,” and Bacon replied, “Because I’ve made images that intellect would never make.”<sup>14</sup> I ask myself, “Could an aesthetic experience be enough when language does not suffice?”

The most successful artists do not seem invested on fixating a single meaning to their work, but prefer to leave the interpretation open, which stimulates greater interest. Plays can offer the same advantage. I often seek artists in other mediums to help me clarify my way of working, and this is the way I approach my work, through the lens of an artist and the work as art.

I think that instinct is the central requirement for an artist and interpretation central for the observer. Both require practice. The twenty-first century is still arguably a visual culture, so interpretation is a necessity. It is important for contemporary audiences to learn how to see postdramatic theatre, i.e, theatre that attempts “to reexamine what can be considered dramatic” (Jones 2006, x). An important work, for me, is one that I see differently each time I go back to it. I prefer this type of theatre.

When I took a workshop in composition with Anne Bogart she described my group’s presentation as an “event,” and said that an event is the best kind of theater. I am always interested in making an event for the audience and in search of what is dramatic, i.e., what is vivid and compelling. I recall leaving a play in New York and waiting on the subway platform for the next train. I noticed an inebriated transvestite sitting on the bench. When the train arrived I got on and, through the window, watched her vomit on the platform. I thought about how sad it was that this little moment was more fascinating to watch than the two hours that I had just spent inside of a theater. My intention is to make people stop. I do not want to move people in an easy way.

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<sup>14</sup> YouTube. “Francis Bacon – Documentary part 3/6,” YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=22jJdNORnak&NR=1>.

Visual culture expels information at exponential rates creating demands for new models of pedagogy and art making based on interdisciplinary approaches. Postdramatic breaks down the hierarchy of traditional paradigms by focusing on all elements (text, design, acting, directing, etc.) rather than emphasizing one over the other. Due to its multi-disciplinary basis, postdramatic work often does not end when the play is over, but instead finds ways to extend the content into other media (drawing, prints, photography, film/video, internet). It dispels all of the other terms that have become cliché or overused; such as, vanguard, experimental, or avant-garde, and posits more specifically a question: "What comes after drama?"

Similar to most contemporary directors I create original performances and find new approaches to existing plays. I bring a strong vision that gives collaborators a framework to react within. My work combines visual art, installation, and directing in both traditional and non-traditional ways. I have ideas, love possibilities, and finding solutions. Academic graduate school training has prepared me to teach someday and will hopefully bridge my way to the profession as I move from grad school to the real world.

I feel like the theater is one of the last places we can go to experience the human spirit. I want to reach new audiences and leave very clear images on stage. My goal is to create a space where people can experience a sense of wonder. Robert Wilson is coined a director of the "Theatre of Images." Mac Wellman once used the term "Theatre of Wonders." I'd say that I fit the latter best.



Figure 4.1. Luke Leonard and Mac Wellman after the opening night performance for the University of Texas at Austin production of *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*.

## CONCLUSION

The production of *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field* came together and was astounding. In all of my experience, I have yet to receive higher praise for a work than I have for this one. Several things supported the show's success, the words, music, and story being the major catalysts. Yet it was the spirit of everyone involved that provided the necessary fuel for collaboration, an energy that spanned production meetings, planning, designing, labor hours, rehearsals, advertising, and performance.

As with all theatre productions there are compromises and sometimes conflicts. From this experience I have learned to value what is most important to me. What matters to me is what is onstage. No matter what happens, the most important thing is what I see in front of me, so I always put the play first. Compromise is expected and valuable. Conflict is irrational and avoidable. Successful collaboration requires great care and a firm commitment.

In my soul, I am an experimenter, and, for me, a show is not over until there are no longer any performances. Now, in a professional situation I am sure that I would have departed once the show had premiered, so in the future I must attempt to make everything happen in rehearsals. However, given that this production took place in an academic environment, students have an obligation to explore their ideas to their fullest, so I felt there was room for minor adjustments if they were necessary, or if they would improve the play. For example, after the show had opened I noticed that the chorus (in the First Telling) was not acknowledging that a small light had come on inside of the miniature version of the Williamson's house (upstage), and it was this information that was supposed to justify their exiting offstage, so I gave them the note. I also noticed that Mr. Williamson's disappearance (Third Interlude) would work better if he turned, faced profile (stage right), and continued walking moments before his escape. He made the adjustment and the disappearance worked beautifully. Since I relied on the stage manager to help convey information to everyone, I cannot say that these small changes (among others) were received by all, e.g., the conductor; however, the one thing that I



learned is the importance of making sure that everybody is fully aware of modifications, even if knowing full-well that an adjustment will hold no significance over a person's role in the production, to save yourself the frustration of an individual causing a raucous about not knowing, note to self: make sure everyone is on board. Robert Wilson always had a microphone next to him in Berlin. I believe the director should.

I have no regrets about this show, or my involvement in it because I know that I always worked with all of my heart, creativity, and energy, and always with the best interests of the production in mind. With further reflection I hope to assimilate the strategies that I used to inspire others, which incited original ideas and problem solving, so that I may transfer those methods to all of my future productions.

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## VITA

Luke Leonard was born in Houston, Texas and began studying theatre in Texas before moving to New York where he received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Acting from Brooklyn College in 1998. Leonard spent twelve years in New York working in theatre and film as an actor, playwright, and director. His affinity for the fine arts led to eight years working for a successful art gallery during which time he formed a theatre company, opened a theatre venue, and produced new works. He studied with legendary, experimental director, Joseph Chaikin, trained with Anne Bogart's SITI Company, and directed plays for experimental writers Mac Wellman, Jeffrey M. Jones, et al. Directing credits include: Mac Wellman and David Lang's *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*, Israel Horovitz's *The Indian Wants the Bronx* in Spoleto, Italy, Mac Wellman's *Bad Penny* (The Blanton Museum of Art), *Beat Voices* in conjunction with the exhibition *On the Road with the Beats* (The Harry Ransom Center), and Stephen Adly Guirgis' *Our Lady of 121st Street* (The Lab Theatre). He served as an assistant for the premiere of Robert Wilson's *Sonette*, in 2009 at The Berliner Ensemble in Germany. Luke Leonard is a recipient of a Jack G. Taylor Memorial Endowed Presidential Scholarship in Fine Arts, a ZT Scott Travel Grant, a Frank C. Erwin, Jr. Centennial Professorship Travel Grant, the Morton Brown, Nellie Lea Brown, and Minelma Brown Lockwood Scholarship Fund in Drama, The University Co-Op Cohen New Works Research and Development Grant, a Francis Hodge Endowed Award, and a Georgia B. Lucas Foundation Fund Award. He is a member of Actors' Equity Association, Screen Actors Guild, and an Associate Member of the Dramatists Guild of America.

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