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by

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2016

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I used to be an asshole. I got better.

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I used to be an asshole. I got better.

by

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Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2016

Dedication

To A Very Young Natalie. You done good, kid.

Acknowledgements

Jared, Teena, Andie, Po-Yang, Andrew, Matt, and Michael—Thank you for giving me a family here in Texas, for teaching me about the type of artist and human I want to be, and for always being there with a kind word, a cocktail or crowbar (depending on the needs of the situation). You are the best friends and collaborators a girl could hope for.

Joanna—Thank you for being the first friend I made at UT. Thank you for being a friend I will keep forever.

Brian—Thank you for taking a chance on me. And thanks for keeping me.

Richard—Thank you for giving this loud mouth, opinionated director a home with the designers. Thank you for always letting me be myself. Thank you for giving me the confidence to try, fail, and amend.

Kirk—Thank you for making me feel safe as a vulnerable, messy wreck of a human. Thank you for giving me the confidence to show that mess to others. If my gratitude were a clock, you'd have 12 hours.

Abstract

I used to be an asshole. I got better.

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

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Before UT, I didn't feel like a story-maker. I was a director. Or maybe a story-interpreter. I had a desire to have authorship that extended beyond the production or the process, but I had no idea how to make that happen. Through my work on new plays with generous playwrights and close collaborations with designers, I began to see my ideas take solid form on the pages of the script and on the stage. That level of physical input and meaningful change felt both rewarding and important. It is now something I strive for in all my projects and something I value in artists with whom I choose to work. In this thesis, I will reflect on my directorial history, how that history led me to a place of authorship, and where my work stands today in my evolution from story-interpreter to story-maker.

Table of Contents

I USED TO BE AN ASSHOLE. I GOT BETTER.....	1
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The role of the director is shrouded in mystery. Even for those of us who have made being a director a core part of our identity. If you were to ask me what my responsibilities are I could confidently rattle off a list of job duties, things you would expect to see in a corporate job posting. Directors analyze plays, develop point of view, cast the show, work with the design team to execute the vision, work with actors to shape the characters and the narrative arc, etc. But for me, the WHAT has never been the question. The HOW is the question. If you were to ask me how I analyze a text or work with other artists or develop a point of view, that's where it gets murky. The short answer is that there are longer answers. Mostly because it depends on the specifics: what play are we working on, what does it need, what is the specific chemical make-up of the design team or cast, have any of us worked together before? It's alchemy. Because the WHAT is fairly straightforward but the HOW is in perpetual amendment, I learn something from each show I work on and I continue to refine my process based on experience and practice flexibility in the moment. This continual reevaluation of what it means to be a director has made pinning down my voice a challenge.

During my entire undergraduate career I only saw the role of director modeled by older, mid- or late-career, male director-professors. The lack of representation by young professionals and women was quite detrimental to my formative directing years. I had no idea how to function in the world as an emerging, female director. I learned to copy directors whose modalities were not only outdated, but were creating fundamental tensions with the type of collaborator I would become. And the kind of plays I was assigned to work on were by dead white males: Ibsen, Williams, Miller, Shaw, etc. I hated every moment of it. I had only ever seen these privileged men exude confidence, walk into any room and own it without doubts or apologies or questions. Those who didn't come along for the ride were bullied, talked down to, or left in the cold. The

troops got in line pretty quickly once they realized the alternatives. The directing styles modeled for me felt uncomfortable and forced when I tried them. Nothing made me feel more like a little girl playing dress up in her dad's clothes and telling her grandpa's stories. I didn't know any other way to be a director in the room. I spent so much time acting like I thought a director would behave. In truth, I was posturing, trying too hard, and generally being an asshole. And so a Very Young Natalie ruled her rehearsal room with an iron fist. I demanded and bullied and yelled. I was directing SO HARD.

As my final project to complete my undergraduate directing emphasis, I directed *Never Swim Alone* by Daniel MacIvor. In addition to the production, we were required to write a reflection of our process and its influence on the outcome of the production. In my reflection I wrote about how the early days of the process of making the show had been especially challenging. Beginning a rehearsal process as a director is hard; it is the first moment we get to share our vision for the show with the whole team and outline the roadmap for our journey together. It's where we garner excitement and buy-in. It's like a first date, except that there's no backing out if you're not interested in a second date. You can't give a fake number or pretend to have a headache-- you've already got 4 weeks of dates on the books. It's up to the director to make sure everyone is excited to come back for all those subsequent dates.

In *Never Swim Alone*, I squandered my opportunity to create goodwill with my team and achieve the buy-in I needed because I walked into that room with the swagger of an older, mid- or late-career, male director and not with the humility or curiosity of a still-learning, early-career, female director. Those early days of rehearsal set the wrong tone for the process. I wrote about the actors (my peers) who had been unwilling to give me the respect I "demanded and deserved." Yes, I actually wrote that. And it only sticks

out in my mind 11 years later because my directing advisor circled that portion of the reflection and wrote “REALLY?!?” next to it.

While that behavior wasn’t questioned during my undergraduate career (probably because that’s how all the actors were trained to be treated), working in the professional world was another story. In my first storefront show, not only did I ignore concerns raised by the cast and design team, I tried to dictate and control every aspect of production. I even went so far as to repaint the whole set without consulting with the scenic designer. Here’s a direct quote from an artist involved in the project: “I no longer feel safe artistically with you in the room in any capacity. I feel belittled, condescended to, and humiliated.” Yep. I was that asshole. Understandably, after that experience I gained a reputation of being someone with whom you didn’t want to work. Several of the cast members from that show had been slated to act in my next project, *4:48 Psychosis* by Sarah Kane. And they all quit as soon as they could.

While I understood after the fact that I had fucked up, I didn’t know how to make amends for what I had done or know how to do it better in the future. I lost my shit, had a nervous breakdown, threatened to become an accountant, and prayed to the theatre gods to have one more shot at directing and I promised I wouldn’t fuck it up. *4:48 Psychosis* was going to be my second chance and it was going to come right on the coattails of my epic fuck-up whether I was ready or not. While I made doubly sure to treat my creative team with respect and be a responsive shepherd for my cast, I was finding new and interesting ways to just do whatever I wanted. Very Young Natalie, in a fit of being too clever for her own good and wanting very much to perform the role of director, use her psychology degree, and feel pleased with herself—she re-authored *4:48 Psychosis* and shoehorned the uncharacterized voices into Freud’s Id, Ego, and Superego. For those unfamiliar with the play, Sarah wrote it with no characters or distinguished dialogue. It

reads more like a poem on the page. In order to figure out who should be talking when and highlight the playwright's battle with mental illness, I not only made up characters, but I forced those characters to be something very far outside the text. On opening night, Very Young Natalie was really excited about how cool her play looked and how good it sounded. She was also very excited that a local, big-wig, fancypants director for whom she had spent the last 6 months working for was in attendance. After the show, she caught aforementioned director outside having a cigarette. He took one look at Natalie and said, "Natalie, this play. It has no characters. It only has text. Why has the playwright not given specific characters' dialogue?" Natalie, without batting an eye and being very well connected to her instincts blurts out, "Because all the voices belong to Sarah Kane." And it was in that moment, the opening night of my VERY COOL PLAY, that I realized I failed to interpret the story and the playwright's intentions in any sort of meaningful way. I'll give this to myself-- rarely do I repeat the same mistakes. I always find new and innovative ways to explore my own failure.

I sought out the opportunity to observe and assist directors who were kinder and more collaborative than I had previously known to be. They shared with me new ways of approaching work and collaborators. They expanded my notion of HOW. I learned to listen and be supportive. I learned to place the story in the center of the room and work to make space for everything else to work in tandem with story. In experimenting with these new methods of HOW and trying to avoid repeating my past mistakes, I overcompensated by letting actors, designers, and artistic leaders walk all over me. I made everyone else's ideas more important than my own regardless of how well they served the story. Sometimes I stopped having ideas at all because then I couldn't be wrong. I avoided any kind of conflict (considering I grew up in the passive aggressive Midwest, that meant I avoided anything that looked like a discussion where I might have

a slightly different opinion than someone else). I let an Artistic Director completely railroad one of my rehearsals and re-stage a scene. I let an actor berate me in front of the full cast until I changed the location of our performances. In all honesty, I just wanted to be liked. And as much as my dictatorial work was devoid of the passion of my collaborators, my submissive work completely lacked my own passion and point of view. Again, I found myself in a place of wearing someone else's clothes and telling someone else's story. I still was unclear how to bring myself to the work in a way that wasn't unhealthy for myself or my collaborators. I was a little like the Goldilocks of directing; the first approach was too much, the second approach wasn't enough, but I had no clue what was going to be just right.

Around this time of hitting another kind of rock bottom, I had found two exceptional collaborators-- Christopher Kehoe and Christian Carter, who were both Minneapolis-based theatre-makers and arts administrators. They were dedicated and fierce and refused to let me give up. They began to show me there were ways I was capable of working that lived in the middle of my previous, failed attempts. They picked me up by my bootstraps and motivated me to try some more, knowing even if I messed it up again, they weren't going to take it personally. They showed me it was possible to find the courage to trust myself and the room I was leading. They believed in my vision and my ability to achieve that vision. They believed in my ability to create a space where artists could feel vulnerable, invested, and integral. We laughed and we fought and we drank. We made new plays based on ideas we had at the bar. We made plays by Will Eno and Rajiv Joseph. We had open dialogue with artists where everyone was vulnerable and supported. We made compromises that allowed everyone to feel good about the work rather than letting one person "win." We were open and honest and committed. It was so scary, but so good. I felt more invested in the work than I ever had before and I

was flanked by these two men who challenged me to clarify, get specific, or amend. They made my work better and taught me more than any professor or mentor ever had up till that point. With their help, my HOW was adaptable, strong, and effective. I was making work that felt true to the intentions of the playwright, but fueled by the passions and inspirations of my collaborators. Finally, my HOW and my WHAT felt “just right.”

During this time, I was working solely (and very happily) in the traditional role of director as story-interpreter. I pick a play. I visualize it. I communicate that vision. I get the buy-in from the rest of the team. We move forward as a unit. We may stick with the point of view as I originally communicated it or we may as a group amend that original vision. Whether the process or the product is successful, we will have accomplished the not-so-simple task of taking words on a flat piece of paper and interpreting them for a three dimensional performance event.

At its most essential and crass definition: I think long and hard about a story, I make a bunch of decisions about how that story looks and moves based on what I think the writer might have intended, or I make a bunch of decisions that have nothing to do with the story, but they are more in line with my vision or perspective, or I have a lot of conversations with trusted collaborators and we make decisions and then we call it a play. We ask questions and guess and intuit and look at the research and hope that some combination of those things will lead us to something adjacent to what the playwright imagined. For a director working with published texts still under copyright, all we can do is read the text, do some research, formulate a vision and point of view, and execute that vision. There’s absolutely nothing we can do about words. Those words belong to someone else and unless that someone left a note about how we can muck about with their words, those are considered sacred. Stage directions can be a point of flexibility-- maybe I as a director need to incorporate every stage direction because they are the words

of the playwright. Maybe those stage directions are actually notes from the first production and are more a reflection of the work of that initial director than the writer. The spaces between the language of the story provide some wiggle room. This is where directors (and designers) can begin to shape the visual and physical world of the play in a way that aligns more deeply with their point of view.

This past winter I was directing *The Best Brothers* by Daniel MacIvor. This is the fifth show of his I've worked on and I felt confident that I had a handle on his voice and intentions. The play revolves around two brothers dealing with the death of their mother. While both brothers probably should have a strong character arc, only one is written in the text overtly. One night in rehearsal, I was talking to the actor playing the unspecifically transformed brother. The actor told me how he was struggling. Without knowing how the character changed, the actor couldn't wrap his head around the character's stasis or conflict. I sympathized. I told the actor that we would work together to find where and how his character grows.

I'd worked with this actor before and I knew that if he could make a silk purse out of a sow's ear-- he would. He brought this issue to my attention because he had been struggling to solve the problem on his own for two weeks and had reached the place where he needed reinforcements. We talked step-by-step and scene-by-scene through the character arc to pinpoint the moments where the arc became unclear or where the leaps were too great. Through those discussions we found the leap from the penultimate scene to the final scene to be the murkiest.

While I don't have the power to change any text, I can use my scene transitions to help tell this character's story. This brother has a fear of stability; he's always moving; he hates the permanence of their family home that's been willed to him. In the final scene in his late mother's (now his) home, I chose to use the transition into the last scene

to allow this brother to embrace the permanence and “move in” to his new home. In the 30 second transition, the audience watched as the actor removed boxes of the mother’s possessions out of the space and added his own throw pillows and décor. It was a simple idea, but it allowed the actor the space and time to create a journey and share it with the audience.

The Older, More Experienced, Slightly More Learned Natalie listened and worked with the actor, scenic designer, and sound designer to craft a moment that was deeply rooted in story. While it is still a moment of interpreting a script, it is also an example of the type of authorship a director (or designer or actor) can have over the visual storytelling. Through those conversations, my team and I created a meaningful difference between our production and any others that previously existed or would exist in the future. In the spaces between the playwright’s language I was able to make a mark that was uniquely mine. But after 10 years of relegating my authorship to the small spaces allowed by existing texts, I desired a bigger stake and a bigger voice in the work that I was making.

Something I find deeply frustrating about the craft of directing is that I don’t actually make anything. I don’t present a character; I don’t design and build a set; I don’t create the aural world; I don’t hang or focus lights; I don’t put any words on paper. I’ve often felt like my job isn’t important. Designers, actors, and playwrights could still do their jobs if I wasn’t there. I’m mostly like a weird oracle or a glorified traffic cop, or (my personal favorite) a theatrical Sherpa. At the end of the day, if I do my job, no one will notice, but everyone will have a good time. That’s frankly pretty crappy.

In my non-theatrical life I’ve always considered myself a doer or a maker. I’m constantly knitting or baking or crafting or building. I like making things with my hands. And my job as director is one of the few aspects of my life where nothing I do is actually

made by me. I reached a place where trying to decide what another person intended can no longer be more important than my own intentions. I want to make decisions that don't need to be checked for accuracy against someone else's script. I want to get my hands dirty.

Julie Taymor has always been one of my directorial heroes; mostly because of her incredibly visual aesthetic, but also because she so often has a deep and personal stake in the story being told. As much as I admired Julie, I didn't know how to translate my personal skill set and theatrical passions for directing into being a storyteller or story-maker. I worked on a devised piece once and while I loved watching the work being made, I also hated it because so much of the process was dependent on my participation as an actor or writer. I had been an actor during my time as an undergraduate and frankly I wasn't any good; I was selfish and safe and guarded. I didn't have what it took to tap into my primal and emotional core and let people stare at it for money. Being selfish and guarded kept me out of writing as well; I could barely express my essential self in the real world let alone craft language and emotions for random made-up people. I was scared to risk in the way that devised work demanded and I honestly felt my participation would be detrimental to the process. I didn't know how to be inspired. I didn't have any stories to tell and even if I did, I wouldn't know how to write them. I didn't know how to be a director in a devised process. I was stuck between my desire for something more, my lack of knowledge and experience, and my fear.

I know there are many directors and theatre artists who don't see the traditional director's role as limiting as I do. We're in charge! We have final say! We control the vision, the process, and the outcome! I look at that traditional role of a director more like middle management. The story and the words belong to the playwright and the production belongs to the actors and the designers; the ones whose work you can actually

see and hear on stage. As a story-interpreter, I feel my job is to be the conduit of transferring the play from the author of the script to the authors of the production. I can't make anything. I can't alter anything. I'm the middle-woman. It wasn't until I recognized how to generate my own work that I felt like a creative artist. It was the most liberating, terrifying, and exciting revelation of my career.

It was because of my close relationships to playwrights in my program at UT that I gained insight into how and where they found inspiration. I read and saw new plays that were generated from news stories, visual art, dance, sports, music, personal experience, other plays or literature or conversations with collaborators. I learned that story generating wasn't about plucking ideas out of thin air, it was about opening yourself up to the world and responding to what you saw and how it made you feel.

I began to see story ideas and inspiration everywhere. I began to hook into the questions I was asking of myself and my work and tie them to story in a way that allowed a deeper and more thoughtful exploration of both. Those questions gave me purpose. They gave me a point of view. They allowed me to make something, start to finish, with my own two hands. I found more and more that my excitement for creation, openness for collaborators, and need for co-authors inspired others to get excited about my ideas in ways that united us in the act of story-making. Before I can tell you about those projects, I need to tell you about the springboard that got me from trying to be a new play director to being a generative director/story-maker.

Story-making comes in two forms in my world. The first is when I am brought on as a collaborator to another person's project and that person makes space for my ideas to inspire them and create meaningful change in the script. This type of authorship very rarely ends in any kind of credit or shared legal ownership of the writing, but I think the generous act of making space for another artist should be met with the generous act

placing the collaborative relationship before ego and individual recognition. The first time I truly felt like an essential partner in the act of making a story was on Brian Kettler's *Poor Boys' Chorus*. Brian was a graduate playwright one year ahead of me in the program. His story of Steeds, a young, lower class boy, who falls in love with Annabel, a rich girl, in the midst of a carnival one magical summer felt very familiar. It played with the doomed love stories we know so well; a boy from the wrong side of the tracks, an obviously rich and beautiful girl, and so many obstacles standing in their path to love. Brian was using the story to play with form and audience expectation. In the story, Steeds is shepherded by a chorus of boys who are also from the wrong side of town; they are his fierce friends as well as a theatrical mechanism that propels the story toward its tragic end. What was most interesting to me in reading the play for the first time was Brian's voice. It was straightforward in its honesty and drive, but Brian's ability to capture the terror and joy of being alive and his incredible vulnerability took my breath away.

Brian had been developing the script on his own for roughly a year before he asked me to join the process as a collaborator. He already written a couple of drafts and had received notes on the script in classes from both professors and peers, but I was the first director he asked to investigate the text more deeply. Brian is an incredibly self-aware playwright; he understands the limits of the work he is able to do alone and is able to instinctively know when it is time to open his process up to others. He told me in an early meeting that he knew the focus of his development workshop needed to be working with actors to physicalize the text and activate the rhythm of the script because he had gone as far as he could alone in a room with his computer. Brian was able to set very concrete goals for our work together, but was also secure enough in his own work to make a great deal of space for my ideas and input.

In the first draft, the Chorus of *Poor Boys' Chorus* consisted of three members who shared the choral sections in exactly the same way each time they spoke; first Poor Boy #1 would speak, then Poor Boy #2, followed by Poor Boy #3, and then it would start all over again. The characters of the Chorus lacked individuality and the repetitive nature of the lines lulled the audience in a sense of security by knowing exactly who was going to speak when. It became very clear after hearing it out loud for the first time that in order to enliven the text for both the audience and the actors, we would need to add some variety. Brian and I worked diligently with the actors to score the Chorus text and to find personality arcs in the individual lines that could open the door for distinct characters and dissent within the choral unit. We found that we needed a leader of the chorus, someone who always knew where the action was moving and would be a grounding point for the audience. The leader also served as a voice of reason or tie-breaker between the other two Chorus members, the eternal pessimist who always saw or expected the worst and the eternal optimist who was able to see the joy or hope in every moment. Once characters were conceived it was much easier to assign lines because we could do it based on personality rather than the original 1, 2, 3 model of line assignment. We placed an emphasis on aural interest and worked hard to incorporate different and exciting rhythms, to play with volume and tempo, as well as add moments of unison and moments of silence. So much of the work of scoring the Chorus was similar to the work necessary to directing *4:48 Psychosis*, but this time instead of forcing my own concept on a play that didn't need it, I let the text guide me toward who the characters were and how they could best function to drive the narrative forward. I used the incredible resource of the playwright in the room and the instincts of the actors to generate the best ideas not just for our production, but for the script itself.

In this way, I was able to make a substantial and meaningful impact on the text of *Poor Boys' Chorus* that will be felt in any future productions because the playwright and I shared a vision for the play and a mutual trust that opened the door for my authorship of the text. Brian and I did not have much of a relationship before beginning this process and we never had a conversation about our collaborative expectations, workload, or input. We were very fortunate that our creative process was as productive and positive as it was because without discussing the terms of our new collaborative relationship there was a potential for frustration or mistrust. I've had development processes go south because we didn't think to have those conversations before the relationship or the process became difficult. It was only after the failures that I truly saw the need for those conversations to happen early and often. I now feel comfortable starting those conversations with playwrights, actors, and designers. Brian and I had an incredible amount of trust in each other and our process. He trusted my vision and I trusted him as a collaborator and friend. He and I both saw the play in similar terms, we had mutual respect for the other as an expert, were very open to the idea of amendment, and refused to pull punches or bullshit each other. All these things contributed to an incredibly symbiotic creative relationship. Our development workshop as well as the rehearsal process that moved into production were very open to shared authorship and collaboration from any member of the team. New ideas were always met with open ears and a spirit of curiosity. I never felt as though my ideas were shut down or my input stifled and I did my best to meet the ideas of others in the same way. Brian was invested in my vision for the play and I was invested in helping him physicalize the text. We achieved a level of honesty, respect, trust, and no bullshit that solidified us as strong collaborators and good friends. Brian gave me the confidence to believe that I had value

as an artistic collaborator; that my ideas and my voice are smart enough and strong enough to effect change in the play, not just in my production of an existing work.

When I think back on my new play development opportunities at UT, this is the one that really stands out as outstandingly positive. I felt as though my colleagues had numerous positive collaborative relationships with playwrights and were able to find things about every script they worked on that they could get passionate about. I was never that way. It took a special kind of script (either existing or new) to get me excited about directing. I found more often than not that my vision for the play and the playwright's vision would be very different.

The tension I felt in new play development became more frustrating for me than directing existing work because, even though I had very little freedom to deviate from the script in existing work, at least I had the last word when it came to artistic decisions. With the playwright in the rehearsal room, I needed to defer to them in all matters. If this were *The Best Brothers* and Daniel MacIvor had been in the rehearsal room with me, he might have listened to my actor's concerns and solved the issue in the script. But he just as easily could have disagreed with the actor and shot down my final transition idea. The playwright is under no obligation to take anyone's note; not mine, not an actor's, not a designer's. But everyone on the creative team understands that if the playwright wants to make a change or disagrees with a choice, we need to align our vision more closely with theirs. This model left me feeling as if I was a servant to the playwright and the text rather than a co-creator of the story.

I am not a new play director. It wasn't until the end of my second year at UT when I was able to diagnosis and name that part of my identity. Even though I am attending a new play program with one of the most preeminent writing programs in the nation, I am not interested in serving someone else's ideas or story or vision. I am

actively seeking a deeper connection to the work, an outlet for my own creative exploration and questions, and a more meaningful input to how it is both made and presented. Working with Brian Kettler challenged and inspired me to expand how I saw a director's role and gave me confidence in my own abilities as an author and story-maker. That collaboration specifically became a springboard for my directorial identity as it exists right now, in this moment.

If working with Brian was the first form of story-making, then I am actively participating in the second form of story-making in my creative life. In this type of story-making, I am generating ideas and visual or textual content with a group of collaborators who I have brought into the project as co-creators. Because directors don't actually make anything, my co-creators are essential to taking my idea and making it a play. Rather than creating a devising model that copies a traditional new play process, placing me at the center of the story and asking collaborators to serve that idea, I am interested in forming partnerships with other artists as equal stakeholders to the story. I want to make relationships where inspiration and ideas flow freely between all the members of the generative team. For me, this is a place where authorship is opened up to many others besides as the individual who generated the seed idea.

A colleague was recently telling me about the Gallup StrengthsFinder test. Where the standard personality test tells you about the way you move through the world in both positive and less productive ways, the Gallup StrengthsFinder test illuminates your greatest assets as a person and suggests that rather than trying to mitigate your weaknesses internally, you should surround yourself with individuals who are good at the things you are not good at so that as a team you can complement each other. I never realized there was a name for this kind of philosophy, but I recognized how I had unconsciously tried to implement it in much of my professional creative life. My

production teams were filled with people whose skills complemented what I had to offer and whose presence made my work stronger. Christian was so good keeping people happy and calm no matter how he personally felt and I mostly ran around like a chicken with my head cut off if I thought the house was on fire. Christopher excelled at keeping his eye on the big picture, where I was obsessed with small details. Without having the skills or excellence to achieve solo story-making, it was imperative to bring on other artists who were passionate about my ideas, who could fill in the gaps in my ability, and who would be collaborators who would challenge and engage me.

My first idea for a new play came to me when I was 21. I had to read *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver for an English class. As I was reading it, I was visualizing the action of the book in the same way I visualized plays as I was reading them. I found the imagery in the book vivid and accessible. I remember having a fleeting thought that someone should make it into a movie or maybe even a play. I was so clueless that I didn't know it was in my power to make it into a play. All I knew was that I didn't know any playwrights and I didn't know how to go about acquiring rights. I put that in the back of my mind as a good idea that someone else would need to accomplish.

Nine years later, I was preparing for my professional development workshop and was scouring my mind for a project on which to work. I had seen my the graduate director in the year before me work on a published play and felt that had not been as successful a process as it could have been with a new play. I didn't have any new plays I was working on and I didn't have any big projects on the horizon that would benefit from a semester's worth of development. I was at a loss for what to spend my semester working on. Then, from out of nowhere, my very old, very inconsequential thought about *The Poisonwood Bible* came back to me. Luckily, there was a playwright in my

program who I thought would be interested and with whom I was very excited to work. She came from Georgia, wrote primarily teenaged characters, and was raised a strict Baptist. On paper, this playwright was the perfect fit for the project; her background, her artistic voice, and her favorite writing topics were all running parallel to the story I wanted to tell. I approached her about the idea and she revealed to me that *The Poisonwood Bible* was one of her favorite books as a teenager and she would love to work with me to adapt the book.

My development workshop for *The Poisonwood Bible* was a crash course in adaptation and story editing. While we were not able to acquire theatrical rights to the book, the preparation, research, and discussion ended up being some of the most critical learning I accomplished at UT in my journey to becoming a story-maker. Lue Douthit, Director of Literary Development and Dramaturgy at Oregon Shakespeare Festival, came to UT as a guest artist for my workshop and spent a day working with the playwright and I as a dramaturg and adaptation guide. Lue had never worked as a collaborator on a play before it existed, but enthusiastically jumped in the deep end with two students who also had never done this type of work before. The first thing Lue asked us to do was to read the first and last chapters out loud to see if there was any information to be gleaned. Before hearing those chapters, the playwright and I hadn't really nailed down our point of view beyond liking the book and finding the characters compelling. After hearing those chapters, the room was electric. What we had completely missed and what was very clear in those two chapters was that this book was a conversation between the mother and her dead child. While the book spans many locations, a large time frame, and multiple perspectives, at its core it is the story of the mother's journey to forgiving herself for the death of her youngest daughter. That piece of information was a revelation. We didn't

want to manipulate the story to highlight that journey, but we could thoughtfully consider how the structure of the play could do that work for us.

Lue's guidance through that workshop taught me so many things that I continue to carry with me as a generative director/story-maker; the importance of finding my own point of view or question for a story; how to interrogate the function of characters and events in order to make decisions about what source material should be strictly followed, what might be manipulated, and what could be discarded; when to stop talking and just trust your instincts; the importance of open communication with your co-creator and how and when to fight for the things that are narratively important to you.

While working on *Poor Boys' Chorus*, Brian and I had taken a field trip to the Harry Ransom Center to research the circus and magician collections. During our visit I was excited to find out that the Ransom Center was also home to a collection of Harry Houdini's papers, correspondence, and press materials. On the surface, Houdini's job was that of an illusionist and performer, but when I dug deeper I saw that his job was actually to face death every night. Who was the person brave enough to purposefully confront death while respecting it enough to survive night after night? What did he have that others did not? What did it mean to make himself an equal to death? And who was this audience that went to the theater secretly hoping just as much to see a miracle as to watch someone die? I wondered if there was a way to capitalize on Houdini's inherent theatricality and ask these bigger questions about death, fear, and voyeurism. I have always been a fan of solo performance and the relationship between the audience and a lone actor. It seemed to me that a one-man show based around the life and work of Harry Houdini might make an exciting next project. I then began the slow process of auditioning the idea to playwrights I admire and whose voice felt simpatico with the tone and content I was imagining. After a couple of meetings with different playwrights, but

not finding “the one,” I was sharing my enthusiasm for the idea and frustration over not finding a collaborator Joanna Garner, a playwright in my cohort. After listening to my vision and questions for the work, Joanna said, “that sounds like a Katie Bender play.” Katie was a 3rd year playwright when I entered into the program. I wasn’t very familiar with her work, but I knew her to be a lovely human and a versatile and curious collaborator. I emailed her right away to set up a meeting to talk to her about the idea. We ended up having a great meeting; Katie was excited about the idea of working in the solo performance medium as well as having the opportunity to dig into a real, historical figure and interrogate how to theatricalize both the man and the myth. We began our work together back at the Ransom Center pouring over Houdini’s old posters and correspondence with his wife. We were both struck by the kind of loyal and loving husband he was, what a strong sense of humor he had, and how sharp his business sense was. Houdini the man continually surprised and delighted us when set against what we understood about Houdini the myth.

Katie took her research notes along with the thoughts we shared in conversations and began writing to the story that seems apparent to her and followed the themes and information that had heat for her as a storyteller. I have read drafts and tried to help communicate and clarify the ideas as I see her presenting them in the text. In that sense, this process has been more akin to a traditional new play development process than something that would radicalize the way directorial authorship works. We worked on one staged reading. We have discussed my role as director as the play continues to grow and have a life in the world of theatre. As we moved further into the development of the project, I saw Katie’s interest in and vision of the story moving further and further from what I originally intended.

When I read the first draft, I was taken aback. I may not have known what exactly I wanted the show to be, but I knew that what I ended up with was not quite it. I couldn't understand where Katie was coming from and what inspirations lead her to the story she ended up making. We met shortly after I read the first draft to talk about what was on the page and what direction we wanted to move. During that conversation, I learned that where I had an interest in interrogating death and its relationship to the performer and the audience, Katie had been drawn to the idea of escapism and the many ways performers and humans seek escape and the price we pay to achieve it. She told me she had struggled with finding her way into an idea that was not her own. As she was thinking about the ways she could find herself and her voice in the character of Houdini, it wasn't the potential dangerous outcome of his illusions that was drawing her in, it was the end result. She equated escape with living, with the opposite of being trapped in any one of the many ways human beings find themselves feeling trapped. She had always been a person on the go; always moving forward, always on to the next place or idea. In the moment of writing this play she found herself at a specific time in her life where the constant movement wasn't possible. She thought about the voyeurism component that was so important to me and recognized in human being a discontentment that she wanted to explore and exploit; the grass is always greener. For Katie's money, worse and more terrifying than death was the feeling of being trapped with no escape.

As I started to understand how she used my idea as inspiration and how it was intersecting for her personally, I became really excited for the changes she was making and where her inspiration was taking her. It was a delightful game of telephone; my original idea was filtered through her and came out on the other side as a play inspired by both of our shared and individual experiences. I don't know if this is always the way I

will want to work as a story-maker, but in these early experiences in generating work with co-creators, I am thrilled to try out as many HOWs as I can.

While learning that I could generate new ideas and find materials I was enthusiastic about adapting, I still hadn't disrupted the process of making work in a way that felt fulfilling to my authorship as a director/story-maker or for any other non-writer/actor theatre makers who also desired a stronger, deeper stake in the work they chose to make. I came back to all my good conversations in Studio I with my fellow designers and how we all bemoaned the state of the American theatre placing primacy on the voice of the playwright and everyone following suit. These folks were some of the smartest visual storytellers and visual dramaturgs I had ever met and still their work was coming at the end of the process. I began to think about how much of the information an audience takes in during a piece of theatre and how much of that break down over the five senses.

We very rarely taste anything at the theatre during the performance (which really is a shame) and if we do it's from concessions or we're at a dinner theatre. The food or drink isn't necessarily available to enhance your experience of the work except maybe to lubricate you into a place of enjoyment. We also don't really touch anything in the course of a performance that is meant to deepen our understanding of the story we are experiencing. Designing the smell of a play is just beginning to gain popularity and is done so rarely that I also think we can't consider it a factor that enhances the theatrical experience. That leaves us with sight and sound.

If sight and sound is nearly 100% of the material from which we create theatrical meaning, why are we leaving those who craft the visual and (non-textual) aural world of the play to the last minute? Why are we okay hoping that the things we plan in the rehearsal room will magically work out in tech? I know much of it has to do with the

financial climate of the theatre and issues of deadlines and workloads, but I find it irresponsible to place so much of the theatrical meaning making on the shoulders of designers while we refuse to adapt our production timelines or rehearsal processes to allow them to be essential at every stage of making the play. What they do is important. They are just as much the communicators of the story as the playwright or the actors and yet we don't treat them as such. Much like The Wooster Group's belief that rehearsal is just as much for the designers as it is for the actors and director, I set out to find a way my story-making and devising work could incorporate visual narrative, design, and design collaborators sooner and more deeply in the rehearsal process.

It all began with Jared LeClaire. Jared is a student in the integrated media program. One of the big reasons I chose to come to UT was to learn how to visualize projections as that I would visualize scenery or lighting. I was interested in learning how to integrate filmic elements more deeply into my visual storytelling and utilize this new(ish) design area more effectively. Jared and I immediately clicked; we were interested in the same kinds of stories and modes of working. He was already an experienced IM designer before coming to UT and was more than happy to take me under his wing and teach me how to work with projections and in what ways projections could enhance my storytelling. I've learned a lot from many of my classmates, but hands down the most important and influential learning I've done on a peer level has happened because of Jared.

Jared and I decided very early on that we wanted to make our thesis production together. We knew we wanted it to be big and groundbreaking and fun. Our original source of inspiration was the movie *Singin' in the Rain*. We were interested in creating a stage version of the musical that was more closely linked to the movie version by using integrated media and innovative staging techniques. Jared and I were excited by the way

technology was opening up our work and asking us to be even more imaginative because of the limitless applications. We felt this time of great technological change in the theatre was akin to what the characters in *Singin' in the Rain* were experiencing. What better way to talk about an industry on the cusp of a scary and exciting technological revolution than to link it to the technological revolution the performing arts is currently experiencing? While projections and integrated media are still new to many, I believe it's the future of our industry and will only continue to grow in popularity and pervasiveness. Unfortunately, this idea was not picked up by the season selection committee, but we were committed to working together with this medium and started the process of looking for another story that needed media and two years of our lives to create it, but would not require the dense production coordination that a musical would.

Similar to *Singin' in the Rain*, we started looking for other stories that had a connection in both theatre and film to necessitate the use of integrated media. We watched a lot of Alfred Hitchcock movies. We talked about the silent era and Charlie Chaplin. We contemplated *The Red Shoes*. We flirted briefly with the idea of *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou*. At the end of the day, none of these ideas inspired us to the level that *Singin' in the Rain* did. Sticking to adaptation across mediums, we moved into literature. After *The Poisonwood Bible*, I was hesitant about getting attached to a title that we ultimately couldn't get access to, so we narrowed the field to books in the public domain. *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Frankenstein*, *The Call of the Wild*, *The Time Machine*- all of these titles posed problems of one kind or another and none of them got our creative juices flowing. After roughly a month of digging through stories and coming up short, we landed on an epic story that would require strong visual storytelling, compelling design, and would need two years of our lives to adapt properly- *Moby Dick*.

In order to turn our process of creation entirely on its head, we began our work without a playwright and enlisted our close collaborator, classmate, and scenic designer, Teena Sauvola, into the fold of co-creators. While we weren't breaking any new ground in the world of theatre, we were breaking new ground in our personal artistic journeys. We had to remain flexible and keep an open dialogue in order to make this new process work for us.

The questions I had for *Moby Dick* were selfishly directorial in their nature and linked very deeply to this new way we were exploring. What happens if we disregard the notion of fate that is so pervasive in the text and think about the journey of the Pequod in a more modern sense? What does it mean for Ahab to every day make an active choice to chase an obsession that is just as likely to end in death as success? How does he motivate his whole crew to make an active choice to join him on his selfish journey rather than to mutiny? How does one lead people on an adventure that has nothing to do with them? How do we as humans get up every morning and face being one day closer to death?

Reading (or re-reading) the book was the first order of business. Then began a period of intense visual and historical research as well as an investigation of art works based on *Moby Dick*. Once we each felt we had a stronger grasp on the story and its historical and artistic influence, we compiled lists of moments in the book that were exciting to us as well as images and passages that felt central to the story that we were trying to tell. Each of our favorite moments of visual storytelling and text were color-coded and electronically highlighted in a PDF copy of the full text of the book. This became a greatest hits list of everything we all loved about the story. I wanted to create a physical artifact that could guide our story-making and also could be a roadmap for the playwright. I decided to employ a play charting technique I learned from Sarah

Rasmussen, former Head of Directing at UT, and Lue Douthit. On a very large roll of paper, I created a linear map of the book by making a mark for every page and noted chapters and chapter titles. Then, Jared, Teena, and I noted action on specific pages that we were excited about or felt integral to the story we were telling. We also printed images from our research that particularly resonated and pasted them near the story points we felt connected to. Using the paper representation of the book, we were able to gather all our story and visual ideas in one map and see where our ideas aligned. We also were able to see what actions needed to happen in order for our favorite moments to occur narratively. This chart ended up being 53 feet, 5 inches (which for those playing along at home is just as big as a sperm whale).

We then shipped the chart off to California where our newly joined playwright and my longtime collaborator, Christopher Kehoe, lives. Christopher had remained very outside of the process until that point. He had listened in on conversations the designer-director team had regarding our collective vision, how the play moves, moments of visual storytelling we were excited for, and thoughts on what the world of the play might look like, but he never inserted his own opinion. Our question for this process and ultimate goal was to try to let the text be completely influenced by the work of the designer-director team rather than led by a writer. We wanted to allow design and visual storytelling to lead the process of creating this play as much as possible. Jared, Teena, and I were also acting as dramaturgs while still continuing to shape the story to our vision rather than the vision of the writer. Christopher got asked a lot of questions regarding his intention for moments in the play as well as plenty of prescriptive notes. Being a patient and flexible collaborator, he was excited to try this new way of working and was just as interested in the efficacy of this model as we were. Where Katie was interpreting my

original idea into her own play, Christopher was continually writing and editing his text based on feedback from the designers and I.

We are now two drafts into the writing process and are beginning the more traditional pre-production process going into rehearsal. This feels a little like the calm before the storm as everyone is in more of her or his “normal” creative role and we’re not fussing with this part of the process as much as we did in its creation or as much as we will in rehearsal. In thinking about a new way of working that prioritizes design and visual storytelling at every stage, we began to imagine what a rehearsal process that places primacy on those things would look like. For our first foray into working in this way, we decided on a kind of extended technical rehearsal process that would leave lots of room for amendment from all the areas. Being inspired by The Wooster Group’s model of rehearsal, we have decided for our process we will spend four weeks together rehearsing the play in the performance venue with the full creative team present. We hope this will allow for maximum exploration of the design elements in the moment of creation with the actors. We will have the opportunity for actors to be influenced by design from day one and the designers to be influenced and amend based on the work between the director and actors in the moment. Because theatre is a collaborative medium, we are interested in a process of story-making and storytelling that keeps the whole creative team invested from the first day to the last.

We’re about to go into rehearsal for *Book of Ishmael*, our *Moby Dick* play. I’m nervous because we’ve spent so much time secluded in development and I’m unsure if all our ideas and research can be communicated effectively to the actors. I’m scared that even though the process to this point has been so fruitful we won’t be able to recreate what’s been so special about the conception of the work into the creation of the play. I’m worried that I still have no idea what I’m doing and that insecurity will show. But I know

I have a whole team of amazing co-creators and collaborators who will pick me up if I fall, who will help me to make the best work I am capable of making, and who will ensure this process continues to be exciting, productive, and fun.

What all these different story ideas, collaborators, and modes of working have taught me is that it truly takes all of us to make a play. Other voices in the room make both the process and the product richer and we are smarter and more imaginative together. I'm much more interested in the concept of collaborative partnership than I am of a theatrical figurehead who seems to be making all the decisions and pulling all the strings, whether that figurehead is a director or a playwright. I want to put more of myself than I think is possible or sane into my work. I want to be personally connected to my work. I want my work to ask questions that are important to me as an artist. But it is vitally important to me that I don't make stories or collaborate in processes that are solely about me. I don't want to just be the next runner in the theatrical relay race; I want to run the marathon alongside my collaborators. I don't want to be a dictator and I don't want to be a cog in the wheel. I want a creative generative development process that places the whole team as equals in both workload and credit. I have found a way as a director to create something from start to finish. I now have story-making skills that refuse to be ignored and I have the confidence to know that with others, what we can make is only limited by our imaginations and our patience.

When asked what work I'm passionate about or what I'm currently working on, I have 5 or 6 stories that I'm trying to co-generate that are thrilling and demanding and captivating. I used to fumble for existing titles to share and try to have a one sentence big idea for the script to share. Now, I can confidently share the questions that excite me about the story, how it's being made, and what about the process or point of view is truly unique. Opening myself up to being inspired and allowing my ideas to inspire others has

unleashed a deep creative juggernaut of potential. My artistic well has never felt so bottomless and my process has never felt this energized.