UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Ghosts, Memories & Masturbation in *Vieux Carré*

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Directing)

by

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Professor Kim Rubinstein
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The Thesis of Will Detlefsen is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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DEDICATION

To the man who taught me the specifics of directing and encouraged my worldview,
Gabor Tompa.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Ghosts, Memories & Masturbation in *Vieux Carré*

by

Will Detlefsen

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Professor Gabor Tompa, Chair

Vieux Carré is about eight tragically lonely outsiders, vagrants and artists who find solace and support in one another's company. The play follows the journey of a young, gay writer searching for love and artistic inspiration in the people and environment around him. He is an observer, a seeker, a vampire. The Writer finds himself in the Vieux Carré of New Orleans and rents a room in a dilapidated boarding house filled with beautiful dying souls. It is there that he discovers himself as an artist and the

power of empathy. At its core, *Vieux Carré* is a coming-of-age / coming-out story, which is why the research for this production truly began with my own personal coming-of-age / coming-out story.

My production mentor and directing professor, Gabor Tompa, challenges his students to articulate a clear and deeply personal concept. Concept, as I have come to understand it, is about how my personal worldview is expressed through the themes, designs and situations of a specific production. My access into *Vieux Carré* was through the Writer, but in order to find the concept and the scenic language, I needed to first discover the analogy between his experience and my own. This is how the concept for my thesis production was born: *What the Vieux Carré was for Tennessee Williams, the theatre was for me.*

There are only two times in this world when I am happy and selfless and pure. One is when I jack off on paper and the other when I empty all the fretfulness of desire on a young male body.

—Tennessee Williams, *Memoirs*

CHAPTER 1: Research

I. Research for *Vieux Carré* began the year I discovered masturbation.

When I was twelve years old, I was a shy theatre kid attending Edna Hill Middle School in a small California town called Brentwood. The high school that I would attend in two years was seeking a small group of middle school kids to be in the winter musical and I was chosen. I was cast as a pirate in the ensemble of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance.* At the time, this was a really big deal.

I created a backstory for my character and invented how I became a pirate, when I lost my left eye and what I liked to eat for breakfast. I decided my favorite color was black and my pirate secret was that I wanted bigger biceps. I was performing in my first high school play so my acting work was much deeper and more complex.

At the end of the run, the entire cast strikes the set and clears the stage entirely of every scenic element and every prop. This takes several hours. Someone's mom usually buys pizza for the cast and crew. I enjoyed having friends that were in high school. I was surrounded by people who accepted me for who I was. The Pirate King was played by a senior. He had a beard and he was tall. He had big biceps. He gave me high fives and my hand stung from his strength. He taught me how to use a drill. He took me under his big muscly wing.

When the set was completely struck and the stage cleared we would all sit in the dark auditorium and wait. At the time I didn't know what it was we were waiting for but

it would later become the most significant ritual of my high school years. All the big kids around me looked very serious. Some of them were holding hands, others were holding tissue boxes. The Pirate King sat in the row in front of me, his big arm wrapped around a girl's shoulder.

The director walked onto the stage with a ghost light. She told us that when a theatre is empty after a performance, a ghost light is always left lit onstage. It remains there until the next performance takes place. Some believe the ghost light serves a practical purpose of preventing people from falling into the orchestra pit when the stage lights are out. Others say the ghost light is left there because all theaters contain ghosts and the light allows the ghosts to perform after everyone else leaves. For us, the ghost light meant the end of something special. The end of a performance. The end of a run. The end of *Pirates of Penzance.*

The director pulled the chain of the ghost light and everyone was silent. We all simply stared into the blinding light. We could stay as long as we wanted. We could leave whenever we wanted. Most of the girls cried. Some of the boys cried too. The Pirate King even cried a little bit and he had a beard and big biceps. *I cried*. But I didn't know why I was crying. I got wrapped up in the emotional atmosphere. I was overwhelmed and exhausted and only twelve years old. I had been in my first high school musical. I had high school friends. I had recently discovered the horror and magic of an orgasm. I had peach fuzz above my upper lip. My voice was beginning to crack. My height was beginning to soar. My life was beginning to change. And in that moment I cried.

Six years later when I was a senior, I sat in the dark auditorium after the strike of *Singin' in the Rain.* This time it was my mom who brought pizza for everyone. This time I was the Pirate King of the winter musical playing the lead role of Don Lockwood, though my biceps were not much bigger than when I was twelve. Again I was surrounded by a community of theatre nerds. These nerds were my friends and allies. We were a group of outsiders, weird and creative. We accepted anyone and everyone and encouraged each other to be whoever we wanted to be. The year before my senior musical, I came out to my friends and family. I thought they would hate me. I thought I was broken. But I was wrong. While I certainly broke many girls' hearts, I never felt more supported in my entire life. When the set was completely struck and the stage cleared I sat in the dark auditorium with my friends. The ghost light was lit and *Singin' in the Rain* disappeared. *Pirates of Penzance* disappeared. Being a kid disappeared.

II. Research for *Vieux Carré* continued the year I lost my virginity.

When I was eighteen years old I moved to New York City to study acting at New York University. I was placed in a studio called Playwrights Horizons which specialized in interdisciplinary theatre training. Thus, my training included classes not only in acting and voice, but also in directing, playwriting, stage management, design, and African dance. Still, I made it very clear to my professors that I was serious about acting. I was as stubborn then as I am now.

To my dismay, I excelled in my directing class (and I wasn't half bad at African dance either), but I struggled with acting. My directing professor, Fritz Ertl, told me that I had a "director's eye." I had no idea what that meant, but decided it didn't matter because I was there to study acting. At my end-of-the-year evaluation, Fritz told me that my acting was "only okay"; he said I was meant to be a director. Still, I resisted his feedback and worked even harder in my acting classes in my second year. It wasn't until I had an amazing acting teacher that I realized I didn't want to act. I trained in Meisner technique and while tackling different roles I found myself crying and hurting and daydreaming about horrifying fictional pasts. It was painful. I learned that being a truthful actor meant feeling a version of the pain that your character feels in the play. And there was already enough pain in just living my own life. This was also the year my best friend was killed in a car accident. And after that happened, acting suddenly seemed like a lie. I hated it. I resented it. I wanted nothing to do with it.

A few weeks after Kayla passed away, I broke down in a scene in my acting class. It was the final scene of Craig Lucas's play *Reckless*. My character was seeing a therapist and he didn't realize that the therapist was actually his mother that had abandoned him many years before. I delivered the lines flatly and without emotion. My acting teacher pushed me and pushed me, trying to get a glimpse of vulnerability. It all felt terribly fake and I grew unbelievably angry. The rage transformed into tears (which my acting teacher misread as a breakthrough) and I stormed out of class. I walked a few blocks to St. Mark's Place. I stepped into the first tattoo shop I could find (it was called "Andromeda") and got my first tattoo. It was the tattoo Kayla would have gotten if she were still alive. It was an incredible pain to feel, my wrist bleeding from the needle, the permanent black ink immutable in my skin. It was real. *This* pain was real. From that moment on, I gave up acting. I lost interest in realism and so-called "truth" and instead craved the control and emotional protection of being a director.

My design professor at NYU was the first person to really crack me open. In a one-on-one conference, he asked me many influential, albeit semi-inappropriate questions like whether or not I was having sex, drinking alcohol, or doing drugs? What turned me on as an artist? What made me ache? My answers to all of these questions were clear in my innocent face. He told me that if I'm going to be a real artist then I had better know what turns me on. If I'm going to be a real artist then I need to fuck everyone, drink booze and break rules. He taught me the art of seduction. He taught me to seduce designers and actors to follow my vision and to rebel against traditional forms of storytelling. He taught me how to go after what I want and how not to settle for

mediocre work. His favorite question was and still is *Why*? Why that color? Why those shoes? Why that painting? Why that play? Why make Art?

So I had sex. For the first time. And I drank alcohol. For the first time. And I got high. For the first time. And I saw theatre that was breaking traditional forms of storytelling. I learned there was more to theatre than just Broadway. I discovered Soho Rep and Performance Space 122 and The TEAM and The Wooster Group. My taste began to transform. I was directing scenes from *Woyzeck*, *Roberto Zucco*, *4.48 Psychosis*, and *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. I learned how to be curious. I learned how to be passionate. I learned how to be an artist.

It really is the years prior to graduate school that contribute the most to my research for *Vieux Carré*. They were the formative years of my childhood and early adult life. They were the years when I first discovered lust and love and loss and passion. They were the years that shaped my worldview as an artist. They were the years that led me to being onstage for my thesis production, holding a camera and inviting myself to be vulnerable again.

III. Research for *Vieux Carré* in the year I discovered the play.

I arrived at UC San Diego when I was twenty-five years old and I immediately began reading plays in preparation for my second-year project. There were certainly plays that excited and interested me prior to arriving in San Diego: Ionesco's *Rhinoceros,* Shakespeare's *Coriolanus,* Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, to name a few. But I was also ready and open to consume so much more. I discovered *Vieux Carré* by accident at Geisel Library and took the play back to my office where Emilie and Jesca were preparing to pitch their thesis plays. I read the first three or four pages and quickly closed the book. I looked at Emilie and Jesca and said something very dramatic like, "Guys! I need to direct this play!" Emilie and Jesca both laughed and asked how I knew after only reading a few pages and I said, "I can *see* it."

Something happens when I connect with a play and it's difficult to put into words. My heart races, I have ten ideas per page (most of which don't end up in the show), and I begin to *see* the play happening in my mind. The spark of inspiration is impossible to ignore. At a certain point, maybe about halfway through the play, I no longer cared about how it might end. I made up my mind: I needed to direct *Vieux Carré*. I pitched the play as a third option for my second-year project because at that time the scenic design in my mind was only possible with a thesis budget and I felt a stronger desire to direct *Rhinoceros.*

Looking back on my experience pitching my thesis, it's surprising that it took so long for me to arrive at *Vieux Carré*. For some reason I thought that in graduate school I

was *supposed* to do Shakespeare, so I pitched *Coriolanus*. I was also eager to be rebellious and break rules, so I pitched an adaptation of Lars von Trier's gorgeous film, *Melancholia*. But eventually it was Kim Rubinstein that suggested I pitch something I was truly passionate about. I could hear my design professor's voice in my head asking *Why? Why this play? Why make Art?* And almost immediately *Vieux Carré* became the only choice.

It wasn't until after *Vieux Carré* was approved that I began to research the world of Tennessee Williams and the production history of the play. For me, research and concept are connected, one constantly influencing the other. My initial concept stemmed from a deep connection with the protagonist, a young Tennessee Williams referred to in the script as simply, "the Writer". As I read the play closely it became clear that the character of the Writer is writing the play as the audience is experiencing it, his memory alive and active in the space. Immediately the Brechtian trope of audience direct-address inspired me to include the opening stage direction. As an homage to Thornton Wilder's *Our Town,* I imagined the Writer as the stage manager / narrator of the play. This was the central jumping-off point in my concept and was an idea that remained present through the end of the process.

Vieux Carré is about eight tragically lonely outsiders, vagrants and artists who find solace and support in one another's company. The play follows the journey of a young, gay writer searching for love and artistic inspiration in the people and environment around him. He is an observer, a seeker, a vampire. The Writer finds himself in the Vieux Carré of New Orleans and rents a room in a dilapidated boarding house

filled with beautiful dying souls. It is there that he discovers himself as an artist and the power of empathy. At its core, *Vieux Carré* is a coming-of-age / coming-out story, which is why the research for this production truly began with my own personal coming-of-age / coming-out story.

My production mentor and directing professor, Gabor Tompa, challenges his students to articulate a clear and deeply personal concept. Concept, as I have come to understand it, is about how my personal worldview is expressed through the themes, designs and situations of a specific production. My access into *Vieux Carré* was through the Writer, but in order to find the concept and the scenic language, I needed to first discover the analogy between his experience and my own. This is how the concept for my thesis production was born: *What the Vieux Carré was for Tennessee Williams, the theatre was for me.*

It was very early in my pre-production process that I decided to strip the play of its setting, time period and dialect. Though the play is originally set in "the period between winter 1938 and spring 1939… in the French Quarter of New Orleans", I wanted to represent a contemporary world of artists who could be from anywhere and exist in anyplace. This idea was influenced by two powerful artistic forces in my life at the time: Ivo van Hove and Peter Brook. I had just seen, for the second time, Ivo van Hove's stripped-down and celebrated production of Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* and just read, for the second time, Peter Brook's *The Empty Space.* In the book, Brook famously declares, "I can take an empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this space, whilst someone else is watching him, and that is all that is needed for

an act of theatre to be engaged" (Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*). This is how my production of *Vieux Carré* began: the Writer walked across an empty stage, and I, one of many spectators, watched.

In the summer leading up to the rehearsal process a horrifying event took place in Orlando, Florida. On June 12th, 2016, a twenty-nine year old man killed 49 people and wounded 53 others in a hate crime inside a gay nightclub called Pulse. It is simultaneously the deadliest incident of violence against LGBT people and the deadliest mass shooting of any kind in United States history. My costume designer, Junior Bergman, is from Orlando and lost a friend in the attack. In response, she wrote: "Orlando was and is, in a lot of ways, my Vieux Carré. Orlando taught me about the kind of work that I found value in, and the kind of person I wanted to be to best do that work. Orlando was where I learned to be my most authentic self amongst people who did nothing but support and encourage that authenticity."

I believe that universality in art is made possible through specificity. Junior's Vieux Carré was Orlando. For many of the men and women who were killed in the Orlando attack, Pulse was their Vieux Carré. My Vieux Carré was that dark auditorium when I was twelve where I stared at an empty stage and a brightly glowing ghost light. My Vieux Carré was filled with passionate artists and mentors who encouraged risk-taking and rule-breaking. My Vieux Carré had to take place in a theatre. The theatre is where I discovered I was gay, where I found the people that most inspired me and where I became a real artist. The theatre is also a transformable space. It was my hope that an

empty theatre would invite an audience to find their own connection to a place of personal growth.

Because of the personal nature of the piece—and because I saw a lot of myself in the Writer, I played the role of the Photographer in the production. In the script, the Photographer plays a small part in the boiling water scene after which we never see him again. In our production, the Photographer instead acts as a double of the Writer. Perhaps a more fitting character name would be the Director or the Cameraman. The character became a meta-theatrical presence literally representing myself as the director, but also embodying a real-life mirror to the Writer's journey—my own. As the Photographer, I captured and framed moments of intimacy through a tiny rectangular screen that was then projected on the back wall of our space, seventy-feet wide, making the most intimate moments visible by an audience in a large theatre. It was an IMAX-theatre experience of cinematic vulnerability. Conceptually, my presence in the production complicated the already autobiographical nature of the play. The play became autobiography within autobiography within autobiography.

In summer before rehearsals began my pre-production research was deepened by reading and watching films. I read the incredible Tennessee Williams biography by John Lahr, *The Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh.* I read Tennessee Williams's deeply personal and sexually promiscuous memoir, aptly titled *Memoirs.* I read as many Tennessee Williams plays as I possibly could such as *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, A Streetcar Named Desire, Sweet Bird of Youth, The Rose Tattoo, The Night of the Iguana, Camino Real,* and many of his more obscure one-acts. I read essays and articles and production reviews about *Vieux*

Carré. I watched The Wooster Group's version of *Vieux Carré* and the famous Williams / Kazan films starring Marlon Brando, Katherine Hepburn and Vivien Leigh. I completely immersed myself in the world of Williams and American realism because I wanted to be an expert. I wanted to know all the historical facts and quotes and production stories in order to deepen my relationship with Tennessee. In a sense, that summer Tennessee and I were boyfriends.

I read rapaciously about Tennessee Williams's sexual escapades. I read about the first time he slept with a man: "Soon as we entered his bedroom, I puked on the floor. He swabbed up the vomit brew with a towel and then he removed my clothes and put me to bed. When he got in bed with me he caught me in a tight grip with his arms and legs and I shook so violently that the bed rattled. He held me all night and I shook all night" (Tennessee Williams, *Memoirs*). I observed the direct reference to this moment spoken by the Writer in scene two of *Vieux Carré*: "He took me into the bedroom… I was shaking violently like I was a victim of—St. Vitus's Dance, you know, when he said 'Undress'!" (Tennessee Williams, *Vieux Carré*). I greatly admired Tennessee's bravery for unabashedly writing about gay sex and intimacy at a time when such language was considered blasphemous. I read about his insatiable sex drive as a young man in New Orleans: "There were memorable ones, particularly a gay marine. I wouldn't believe it if it were not recorded in my journal of that summer, but I screwed him seven times that night" (Tennessee Williams, *Memoirs*). My design professor at NYU would have been proud.

Memoirs is filled with detailed accounts of homophile erotica. Tennessee offers his readers advice about how to avoid the clap from topless and bottomless go-go boys in the French Quarter and discourages sex on the beach for he has "never regarded sand as an ideal or even desirable surface on which to worship the little god" (Tennessee Williams, *Memoirs*). Reading *Memoirs* inspired me to look at the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe. I was introduced to Mapplethorpe in Patti Smith's incredible memoir *Just Kids* and have continued to be shocked, aroused and profoundly moved by his photographs ever since. It was Mapplethorpe's use of black-and-white portraits that influenced the black-and-white live-feed projection on the back wall. Mapplethorpe's "Two Men Dancing" influenced a staging idea in the final scene between Jane and the Writer when he asks her "Want to play chess?". Instead of playing chess, they dance together, close and intimate. Ultimately, it was Mapplethorpe's unapologetic capturing of the sexualized male nude that influenced the intimate close-ups of the male form through the camera lens.

CHAPTER 2: Process

I. The Dramaturgical Process

In the spring quarter of my second year I met first year PhD student, Will Jones. We met in Jim Carmody's Dramaturgy class and quickly became friends. In the class we discussed the winter productions and the different plays we were reading each week. I realized Jones and I had a lot in common. We both studied at NYU, we both loved the same theatre companies and we were both obnoxiously opinionated. Jones is as contrary and snarky about theatre as I am and we share a similar taste in theatrical style; The Wooster Group and The TEAM are two of our favorite companies. In our first meeting about *Vieux Carré* Jones asked me why I was doing the play. He asked me what I cared about as an artist and what I cared about in the world. He asked me how I envisioned his role as a dramaturg throughout the process. He asked challenging questions that forced me to articulate the seeds of a concept. He wrote down everything in his notebook and told me he was going to hold me to what I said and act as a production dramaturg in support of my vision and concept. He cared very little about research packets and glossaries and historical facts. I needed a dramaturg who would push back on my initial ideas, who would question my design impulses, and who would provide criticism in rehearsal from the audience's point of view. I also needed someone who could help me cut the text. Will Jones was that person.

Over the years I learned from my mentor, Gabor Tompa, that young directors are too obedient to the text and not obedient enough to the dramaturgy. It is impossible to be obedient to the text because the text can have many meanings. But in a production, a strong concept and specific choices allows for the text to have *one* meaning. So we met for two hours every three weeks to make cuts to the text and be obedient to the dramaturgy of the production concept. Most of the time we agreed on where to cut and found ourselves eliminating a lot of the specific references to New Orleans and time period. When we disagreed, we were ruthless with one another about why the cut should or should not be made. We cut entire characters such as Nursie, a black maid, the two tourists who call Jane a whore, the interns who cart off Nightingale when he dies, the naked models in the orgy scene, and the ghost of the Writer's grandmother. We found alternative ways to represent the characters of the pickup, the judge and police officers onstage that included the use of undergraduate stagehands and strategic doubling of the cast in the night court scene. We essentialized the cast to a lonely troupe of seven players to perform the roles of the Writer, Jane, Mrs. Wire, Nightingale, Tye (who would double as Sky), and Mary Maude and Miss Carrie.

Loneliness is the central recurring theme throughout every scene of *Vieux Carré* and it manifests itself in each of the characters in different ways. As a result of cutting Nursie, Mrs. Wire's loneliness was deepened, and her need for the Writer to embody the role of a surrogate son became more palpable. Jane's loneliness was represented in her sickness; Tye's loneliness in his solitary drug addiction. Nightingale's loneliness stemmed from a hunger for intimacy and artistic inspiration; Mary Maude and Miss Carrie's

loneliness was kept at bay through clinging to a glorious past fading away. We identified every aspect of the text that pertained to this theme and constructed the situations of each scene to capture, in some way, the colors of loneliness in these seven characters. This made the cutting process quite freeing and simple as we honed in on the specifics of this particular production concept.

Early in the process, the theme of loneliness was tied to rain. At the end of scene two, Nightingale seduces the Writer and says "You are alone in the world, and I am, too. Listen. Rain!" This is followed by the delicious stage direction, "They are silent. The sound of rain is heard on the roof. He draws back the bed sheet. The light dims." In scene six, the Writer enters Jane's room with rain-soaked envelopes and says "The mail gets wet when it rains since the lid's come off the mailbox." Again the mention of rain is followed by a sensual stage direction: "His look irresistibly takes in the figure of Tye. Jane tears the letter open and softly gasps. She looks slowly up, with a stunned expression, at the young writer." One of the initial impulses I had from the first read of the script, was that it would rain onstage and every character would be soaked. This was inspired by the abundance of text about the dampness of New Orleans, about the characters listening to the rain and the stage directions in nearly every scene that read "The sound of rain."

I knew that rain had an emotional weight. In my own life, rain presented itself as a paradox. It was simultaneously deeply melancholy and spiritually cleansing. When I was dealing with the loss of my best friend, I would sometimes go out in the rain along the Hudson River in New York and let myself get completely soaked. When I found out my

boyfriend of a few years ago was cheating on me, I ran six miles in the rain. Both times were simultaneously emotional and cathartic. Vladimir himself queries about this very same paradox in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* when he says to Estragon, "I missed you and at the same time I was happy. Isn't that a queer thing?" I wanted to re-create this feeling onstage. Little did I know this would become the single most difficult moment in the play in collaborations with both designers and actors alike.

I retyped the *Vieux Carré* script eliminating the cut lines and written dialect as much as possible. I also added text in scene two and scene nine. Because of the autobiographical nature of scene two, and because it is the Writer's coming-out scene, I included text from Tennessee Williams's *Memoirs* that elaborated on his first time sleeping with a man. I made the most significant conceptual alterations to scene nine. More than half of the scene's dialogue was cut and replaced with a song that would be sung by the full company. Following the song, there was a three-minute rain sequence and a post-rain monologue taken from Tennessee Williams's reflection about what it feels like to be a writer: "What is it like being a writer? I would say it's like being free. To be free is to have achieved your life. It means any number of freedoms. It means the freedom to stop when you please, to go where and when you please, it means to be a voyager here and there, one who flees many places, sad or happy, without obstruction and without much regret. It means the freedom of being. And someone has wisely observed: if you can't be yourself, what's the point of being anything at all?" (Tennessee Williams, *Memoirs*). It was exactly the feeling of hopefulness I wanted the rain to give to all of the

characters as a contrast to the tragic loneliness for those who remained in the boarding house.

The final aspect of the dramaturgy process was inspired by a UC San Diego production directed by Robert Woodruff and written by Naomi Iizuka. In 2003 D.J. Hopkins wrote an article called "Research, Counter-text, Performance: Reconsidering the (Textual) Authority of the Dramaturg" about his process as a dramaturg working with Quinn-Martin Guest Artist Robert Woodruff. Upon meeting Hopkins, Woodruff instructed him to "Go to the library and get everything [he could] on Wilhelm Reich. The texts of Reich seemingly had nothing to do with the play Woodruff was directing, but this idea of counter-text was such that it need not be obviously related to the production text. "The counter-text presents an alternative site of authority in performance, an alternative center of gravity that exerts influence over the trajectory of a production process." After writing to Woodruff for more clarity around this, he told me, "Jean-Luc Godard has the expression 'DISTANT AND RIGHT' when he speaks to what elements go into making a work. They must be distant enough to create resonance and yet not too far where no poetry will ensue." This notion of counter-text inspired our dramaturgical research to include inspiration from the dance form of Tango, postmodern theories in film and theatre and the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe.

II. The Design Process

I was lucky to have a dream team of designers. It was my first experience working with scenic designer Anna Robinson, lighting designers Joel Britt and Brandon Rosen, and costume designer Junior Bergman, but I knew from the work they did in their first year that they were all incredibly talented artists. It was, however, my fifth time working with sound designer and composer Steven Leffue, which made for a very deep and rewarding process on this production. In our first few meetings I asked everyone to refrain from talking specifically about design. We discussed the play, what it was about, how it made us feel, and each of our individual associative responses. We made visual boards of our impulses and ideas and brought in five photographs that told the story of the play from beginning to end. We were fortunate to begin this process many months before design prelims were due and we were able to take the time to get to know one another as artists and collaborators.

Early scenic and lighting ideas were eventually deemed too illustrative. Wallpapered platforms, lightbulb installations and mounds of unused furniture were eventually cut from the design. I encouraged the creation of an evocative space that changes over the course of the play, rather than an illustrative space that looks beautiful but says only one thing. As the concept of the production became clearer and clearer, the concept of the overall design fell into place.

It was important in the production design that our Vieux Carré was not tied specifically to New Orleans, but was represented instead as a universal space to which an

audience can attach their own personal place of growth. Because of this, we stripped away period, stripped away New Orleans and set the play in a contemporary world—in a mostly empty theatre space; vast and black. The space was divided into three main playing areas: the upstage subconscious space, the mid-stage rain space, and the downstage memory space. Light played a central role in defining these spaces: an icy, cool subconscious upstage space and a warm, inviting downstage memory space. Inspired by Tennessee Williams, white light became central to the lighting design: "The narrator stands in a spotlight, bathed in white light—the light of the imagination" (Tennessee Williams, *Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh*).

The scenic design had a raw, minimalist aesthetic, which strived for authentic theatricality rather than artifice or realistic approximation. I repeated over and over again that I wanted an "honest" design; no fake walls, no masking, no illusion. Striving for honesty likely stemmed from my retaliation against what I deemed "the lie of acting" while studying at NYU, many years before. The Forum Theater, stripped of its masking could exist as it really was—a theatre space, black and dilapidated in its own right. The audience viewed the performance from the four center sections of blue seats, thus creating a proscenium space. The furthest seating banks were filled with lighting instruments and tech tables. The stage manager and board ops ran the show from there as opposed to running the show from the booth in order to keep visible the theatrical elements of putting on a play.

The upstage playing space included seven "character stations" elevated atop a black platform. These so-called stations were personalized in collaboration with the

designers and actors. They were as minimal as possible while still feeling unique to each individual character. They represented memory pockets, little homes for these characters to live when they weren't playing a central role in a scene.

The mid-stage space was left mostly empty except for a horizontal four-foot grating built into the stage floor. Throughout the show, when lit, this area represented the staircase in the rooming house as well as a few other abstract theatrical spaces deep in mind of the Writer. Primarily this space was used in the rain scene when the actors were soaked in a shower of rain.

Most of the scenes in the play existed between two or three characters, so we needed to solve the problem of intimacy in a space as vast and open as the Forum. In the thrust section of the Forum stage, we built a black square platform, untreated and raw. This platform represented the title's English translation, "old square", and served as a stage for the Writer's intimate memories to take place in a more confined space. The platform was devoid of all other scenic elements such as furniture and props. Lighting helped divide the platform into multiple sections for simultaneous action to occur, allowing for scenes to co-exist in two different spaces at once rather than creating an architectural barrier. Most of the duet-scenes in the play took place on this downstage platform, the memory space.

The lighting design enhanced the true architecture of the space while also providing isolated moments of intimacy in the downstage memory spaces. During the pre-show the space was lit solely by a ghost light on a rolling stand atop the downstage platform. The ghost light represented an empty theatre, the very same empty theatre

from my childhood. Each character station had its own lightbulb practical dimly lighting the character's space. There were enormous architectural light booms onstage in the stage right and left wings as well as house left and right seating sections to create sculpted side light. These architectural lighting booms were just as much a part of the scenic design as a practical tool for optimal lighting. There were also strip lights beneath the upstage platform which created a ghostly glow underneath the character stations.

The characters wore contemporary clothing in which each of the character's essential qualities were represented in a minimalist aesthetic. Despite the contemporary style, each character was clothed based on their economic status and individual characteristics. In an attempt to represent the Vieux Carré as a symbol for each of our audience members' own Vieux Carré, we sought out the modern-day analogy for each of these characters. Who is the Writer *today?* What does a heroin-addicted nightclub bouncer look like *today?* The clothing was largely dictated by the bodies cast in the roles as character and costume were intrinsically tied. Together, Junior and I created a world of bohemian artists. We were greatly inspired by the musical *Rent*, my favorite musical when I was a teenager, and Tennessee Williams's own belief that his "place in society then and possibly always since then, has been in Bohemia. On my passport, Bohemia is indelibly stamped, without regret on my part" (Tennessee Williams, *Memoirs*).

The Writer wore black jeans and a paint-splattered white shirt. He is immensely shy, introverted and closeted at the beginning of the play. His clothes allow him to remain a blank slate, an everyman of sorts. The splattered paint was meant to foreshadow and express his inner longing and desire to create. In our production, Jane was a modern

ingenue, whip-smart and strong-willed. Her clothes represented a higher class and sophistication while still revealing her sex appeal and fiery spirit. We discovered early on that Tye felt most comfortable naked, but when he did wear clothes, it was only the necessities. He was our Marlon Brando / Dean Moriarty / James Dean character clad in fitted white t-shirts and tight dark blue jeans. In every way, he had to ooze sex appeal. Mrs. Wire, often referred to as a witch by the other characters, was our most eccentric character. She wore bright colors with bold patterns. As the oldest character in the play, we wanted her to be the most covered while still feeling contemporary and fresh in her sense of style. Nightingale was, surprisingly, the most difficult to get right. There are many different types of modern gay men, but we were careful to avoid stereotype. In the end we were too careful and were left with a vague representation of Nightingale. He wore a basic blue robe and pajama pants. We lost the pizazz and flair that Nightingale immediately brings into a room. Mary Maude and Miss Carrie involved the biggest leap for an audience. Instead of painting young faces in old age makeup to represent old crones, we re-imagined these ladies as New Orleans train-hoppers or homeless bohemians that you might find in Tompkins Square Park. While this was successful in the costume design, the actors in the clothes struggled with making this leap throughout the rehearsal and performance process.

The sound design consisted almost entirely of Gustav Mahler's "Adagietto from Symphony No. 5". This luscious, melancholic music brought an operatic grandness to the space and behaved like a cinematic score. This music choice came from sound designer, Steven Leffue. He played it for me in my office and showed me the hair standing straight

up on his arms as Leonard Bernstein conducted the opening swells of this gorgeous composition. The music is sensual, melancholy, and above all else, beautiful. “Beautiful” was uncharted territory for both myself and Steven. After collaborating closely on a hard-hitting noise composition for *Rhinoceros*, making a beautiful show was a thrilling new challenge. The Mahler was utilized three times in the production: as an overture accompanied by cinematic credits, during the intermission and when the rain came down at the climax of the second act.

The second sound component was dealing with the ever-present stage direction, “The sound of rain.” We investigated many different possibilities for these moments. We tried actually playing the sound of rain. We tried avoiding sound altogether and letting the moments remain silent. Finally, we decided that it would be a different sound altogether. Steven created a static-sounding white-noise effect that grew and changed throughout each of the scene transitions. We wanted to avoid the moment of hearing the sound of rain in hopes that an audience would feel a sense of relief and catharsis when actual rain came down in the second act.

The final sound component was the use of body microphones. Each of the actors wore visible body microphones, their voices amplified for nearly the entire show. Inspired by the Wooster Group and Robert Woodruff, I was interested in the amplified voice as a tool for allowing actors the full range of acting possibilities. At times effects were added to voices to make characters sound ghostly and far away, but most of the time the microphones offered a

cinematic boost to the more intimate scenes between two characters. With the microphones and the live-feed close-ups, the actors were free to perform a more honest cinematic style of acting. Steven and I feared the actors would resist the use of microphones and knew it would take some time for them to adjust to the sound of their own voice amplified in the space, but surprisingly the actors bought into the idea immediately and enjoyed the freedom the microphones allowed in tech and performances.

The final design element was the trickiest: the live-feed projection. The projection design consisted of two elements: live-feed and projected text. The projection surfaces included the untreated natural architecture of the back wall and the downstage square platform. In early conversations about the live-feed my second production mentor, Robert Castro, asked what would happen if the live-feed stayed on for the entire show? This question led to exciting discoveries about the final scene of the play. We decided the live-feed and camera would exist in every scene until the rain. By necessity, the microphones could not be anywhere near water and had to be removed prior to the rain moment. Thus, after the rain there would no longer be amplified voice and in tandem there would no longer be live-feed. Lighting played a role in this temperature shift by bringing in a fresh white open light, illuminating the entire space. We wanted the space to feel clean—cleansed. We wanted the space to feel radically changed. We believed the rain was a catalyst for change.

At the start of each new scene, there were Brechtian title cards summarizing the scene the audience was about to see. I used the same technique in *Rhinoceros*, which I

have humbly stolen from Bertolt Brecht himself and the films of Lars von Trier. At specific moments, some of the dialogue in the play was projected as floating text to signify that the memory we were witnessing was also being written by the Writer. In scene eight, in which Tye rapes Jane, projected text was the driving force of action. I knew the rape scene would be difficult no matter how it was staged. I imagined a world in which the Writer tried to stop the rape from happening, desperately trying to protect Jane. But the reality, and the *truth*, was that the rape did happen, and this idea always felt false when tried in rehearsal. We tried a version where Jane and Tye spoke the stage directions, a version where the Writer spoke the stage directions and even a version where the Photographer, myself, spoke the stage directions. In the end, I felt it was more powerful if the stage directions were projected on the wall in silence. The actors carried out a simplified staging of the brutality; there was the feeling of roughness without real violence, the feeling of lust without real sexual contact. In the end, it was possibly even more brutal for the actors to perform than a choreographed rape scene would have been, because it asked them to go through the emotional journey without the mechanics of staged choreography.

The motif of projected text built up to the final moment of the play when the Writer leaves the Vieux Carré behind. Gabor Tompa suggested an idea for this moment. When the Writer closed his laptop and exited the theatre, the wall was filled with projected text from the script of *Vieux Carré*. He finished his journey and it was time for him to leave. The final image of the play was an empty stage, a brightly lit ghost light, and the gorgeous words of Tennessee Williams completely covering the back wall. As

though transported back to my high school years, I remained in the theatre with the audience, staring into the ghost light. I crossed to the downstage platform, pulled the chain on the ghost light and *Vieux Carré* disappeared.

III. The Rehearsal Process

My process with the actors was not quite as smooth as my process with my dramaturg and design team. As a consequence to opening the same quarter as the Quinn-Martin production of *Native Son,* and its hyper-specific racial casting requirements, I was required to cast the three actors of color who were neither white nor black. In addition, none of the black actors would be eligible for *Vieux Carré* as they were all needed in *Native Son*. Thus, the casting pool was small and compromises had to be made. In the end, I felt confident in the abilities of the seven actors cast in the show and knew them all to be extremely gifted in very different ways. Still, it would take a lot of specificity to lead this company towards a cohesive and singular performance style and there were many challenges along the way.

On the first day of table work one actor voiced his distaste for the play and didn't understand why I chose it as my thesis. Another actor was offended by the outdated racial language in the play found in Jane's opening monologue when she tells Mrs. Wire, "I do not have an Oriental, a Buddhistic tolerance for certain insects, least of all a cockroach and even less a flying one" and wanted to know how I would handle race in the play. At multiple points in table work the actors expressed distaste for the actions of some of the characters: Nightingale molesting Tye in his sleep, Tye raping Jane coupled with the fact that she stays with him after such a horrifying act. I encouraged the conversations and debates. In fact, I was invigorated by the complexities of everyone's emotional response. Isn't that exactly what great art is meant to do? For me, art is not about comfort. Art is

about disruption and taboos and the embodiment of the deepest complexities of the human condition. But my investment in arguing both sides of these characters' actions and my attraction to the play's dark themes were not shared by a all of the actors and I knew this would make our process together more challenging.

I made every attempt to inspire my cast by telling them the story of how I found the play and why it felt personal. I shared my philosophy about theatre, a philosophy I inherited from mentors and teachers and directors before me. The philosophy that horrifying atrocities happen onstage so that they won't happen in life. I shared my passion for Antonin Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty*, which is not to be mistaken for actual cruelty, but rather a brutal kind of honesty. I shared my love for postmodern theories and characteristics in films by Lars von Trier, Jean-Luc Godard, John Cassavetes and Charlie Kauffman. I shared my belief that painful events onstage can sometimes be a catalyst for catharsis, empathy and a greater spread of compassion in the world. I tried to seduce the actors into the world of Tennessee Williams that I have come to love.

The actors seemed thrilled by the overall design, the costumes, the music and the microphones. Some actors seemed confused, however, by my desire to strip away New Orleans and period and dialects. It was clear that some of them were expecting this process to be similar to the *Golden Boy* process or the American realism acting process class led by Kyle Donnelly, two years prior. But I was seeking a very different acting style. I didn't want them to play stereotypes of Tennessee Williams characters. I didn't want them to hide behind a southern dialect. I wanted honest human beings alive onstage. I wanted people. *Real* people. *Honest* people. I wanted these actors to bring themselves to

the roles they were playing. I can't help but think back to the moment I switched from being an actor to a director. I thought that being a director meant more control and in a lot of ways that's true, but I was wrong about it offering more emotional protection. A director has to be naked in the process. I had to sacrifice my own emotional barriers and let myself be vulnerable in every moment, because if I wasn't willing to do that then how could I expect it of my actors?

In our first weekend of rehearsals I invited the cast into my research process and my initial inspirations for the production. We watched Jean-Luc Godard's *My Life to Live*, a 1962 black-and-white French New Wave film about a woman in her early twenties who leaves her husband to pursue a career as an actress. Without money or fame, she succumbs to a life as a prostitute and is ultimately killed at the end of the film. We talked about Godard's innovative use of jump cuts, long shots of the backs of actors' heads, and his use of chapter titles. We discussed the acting style the film is most known for: "cinéma vérité". It is a style akin to documentary-style acting—so real and honest an audience might think the film is a documentary. Again, the room was divided. Some of the actors seemed enthralled by the film, others slept.

I tried another. I hoped, because it was in English, it would be more accessible to those who could not sustain interest in a black-and-white French film. We watched John Cassavetes's masterpiece, *A Woman Under the Influence*. Again, I wanted the actors to study the performance style, specifically in the two leading actors. In the film, Mabel, played by the unbelievably gifted Gena Rowlands, is the devoted wife of a construction worker, Nick, played by the brilliant Peter Falk. Over the course of the film Mabel's

strange mannerisms and odd behavior becomes a threat to the safety of her children and Nick reluctantly commits her to a mental institution. Their performances were messy and raw and mesmerizing. This was the kind of honesty I wanted to bring to Williams. I later learned from my stage manager that the film greatly disturbed one of the actors and they were disappointed that I didn't properly warn them of the intense themes presented in the film. All of this only increased my sense of isolation at this school. I have struggled throughout these past three years to connect with the actors on an artistic level and my taste and love for these films were no different.

If I couldn't convince the actors to love the same films I loved and I couldn't convince the actors to love the play, I knew I needed to at least convince them *why* what we were doing mattered in the world. Again my design professor was in my head: *Why make Art?*

In Robert Castro's "Power of Myth" seminar he introduced me to something he calls "The Dr. Dorn Effect." He sites the moment in the final act of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* when Dr. Dorn is struck with the memory of Constantine's strange play: "I have great faith in Constantine. I know there is something in him. He thinks in images; his stories are vivid and full of color, and always affect me deeply." Even if in the moment of witnessing Constantine's play, Dr. Dorn thought it strange, something about it stayed with him over time. I strived for this very same effect in *Vieux Carré*. I wanted the audience to witness the play and experience it without necessarily leaving with a linear-driven narrative that is easily digested or spoon-fed. Instead, I hoped to affect the audience on a more subliminal and emotional level. I wanted the audience to stay awake and I wanted

the audience to be nudged toward living a more empathetic life; to be more open-minded, to lead with kindness and generosity, and to choose love over hate.

Loneliness is a universal ache and despite a huge amount of interconnectivity through social media and technology, our culture is lonelier than ever before. This loneliness is the current state of the American people, and we need to connect to make the world a healthier more humane place. A place of embracing and loving each other, not hating or fighting each other. At a time when hate and violence is in the news every week, we can use a little more love and empathy in the theatre.

I presented this idea of the Dr. Dorn Effect to the actors in conjunction with an incredible article from the New York Times called "Taking 'Fun Home' to Orlando, for a Catharsis Onstage and Off." The article, written by celebrated actor Michael Ceveris, is about the cast of the Tony Award winning musical *Fun Home* traveling to Orlando to put on a special benefit performance for the relatives and friends of the people who died in the Pulse nightclub attack. In the article, Ceveris states, "An audience member in New York once described our play as providing 'a place where you can bring your grief.' Certainly, that was what we hoped to offer the people of Orlando. In murky, frightening times like these, that is the most essential thing theater offers an audience: a brief community, connecting us to one another in larger, lasting ways." This article seemed to have a real effect in the rehearsal room. I could sense that, if nothing else, the actors understood the *why* of what we were setting out to do.

Clinging to this moment of unity in the room I asked the company to free-write for five minutes on loneliness. They could write anything they wanted, but it should be

about their personal relationship to loneliness and they weren't allowed to lift the pen until the five minutes were up. With this we concluded our three-day workshop rehearsal process on a positive note. We were beginning to feel like an ensemble.

Rehearsals continued in a typical fashion. We spent a few days at the table discussing the situations of each scene and character intentions. Gradually we worked up to staging the play on its feet and discovered the rules of the space. In an empty space like this one, stylized staging and elimination of props almost always strengthened the scenes. I was trying a new process influenced by Robert Castro's assignment to create an action breakdown. He advised that I write down every single sentence spoken in the play into a separate notebook followed by the action of that line. It was a grueling process and it took countless hours over the course of many weeks, but it led to a deeper understanding of the text. I knew the play better than I had ever known a play prior to starting rehearsals. While I don't think I was fully successful in encouraging actors to play consistent actions, I don't think I fully understood how to put the action breakdown to proper use in the rehearsal room. It wasn't until I assisted Gabor Tompa on Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* that this idea of action fully resonated.

Along the way, I experienced countless difficulties with a few of the actors. I struggled to articulate the situations in the scenes with Mary Maude and Miss Carrie and could feel the resentment from these actors throughout the process. I struggled to keep the strength of Jane in the final scene of the play because the event of the rape and the character's sickness deeply affected the actor's ability to fight against it and play the opposite. In the end, I struggled the most with the rain scene.

Prior to the rain scene, Nightingale is on the floor choking and dying. In the scene before that, Tye rapes Jane. And in the scene before that, Mrs. Wire is shut out by the Writer. Mary Maude and Miss Carrie don't even return in the second act. And here I was asking the actors to sing a song together, get soaked in a cold shower for five minutes, and think of it as a positive moment for their characters. Their resistance to the whole idea was completely understandable. I worked tirelessly to articulate why I wanted rain in that moment and why I thought it was important the rain changed something in each of the characters. But the actors pushed back, finding no reason in the text for this sudden shift. Some of the actors went so far as to say the tone of positivity in the song was offensive. I went back to my original impulse for the song. It was inspired by the bizarre but incredibly moving sequence in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* in which every cast member stops what they're doing in the film to sing Aimee Mann's "Wise Up." It's a strange moment outside the realm of realism. It's both funny and sad. And the song in the film had a way of making me feel like things were going to be okay for everyone. I wanted to create that feeling at the end of *Vieux Carré*. I also wanted it to act like a song in Brecht play, breaking the fourth wall, and allowing the actors to step out of the characters for a moment. And in that there was a beautiful contradiction. The actors asked if they were the characters or themselves, to which I answered, "Yes."

We changed the song four or five times and ultimately landed on Aretha Franklin's "Say a Little Prayer." We tried duets, full company unison and harmonies, but in the end it all sounded awful because the characters were all so depressed by the time the song came in the play. They refused to let themselves out of that emotional state.

They could not free themselves of the restraints of realism. I empathized with the actors playing Mary Maude and Miss Carrie. I couldn't answer why they were singing either except to say that this moment is outside the play and their presence added to the feeling of togetherness and union. After all, I wanted this moment to be about a shared experience of loneliness. Together in everyone's solitude.

Eventually the rain scene became a compromise. The actor who played the Writer was the only person who sang and he sang it exactly how I imagined it: at the top of his lungs, with fervor and pain and joy all mixed together. The Mahler drowned him out as the rain poured down, soaking the seven actors for several minutes while the beautiful music swelled. It was a beautiful moment, but it was never quite right. The question remains: What went wrong? How could I have better articulated what I wanted? Did the actors resist because they disagreed with the idea? Or were they right? Did the rain and the song simply not work?

CHAPTER 3: Thesis Committee Questions

QUESTION #1

Where do you feel you have grown the most as an artist, a professional director and theatre maker in these three years of the MFA Directing Program at UC San Diego? What contributed the most to the better understanding of the specifics of the directing work (which courses and experiences) and what major influences did you consider as view-changing in these years? What is the importance of concept and form in your directorial work and how did you try to articulate it in productions as Lear*,* Rhinoceros*,* Vieux Carré *or* Machinal*?*

I. Concept and Form

Before training with Gabor Tompa, I thought concept meant something akin to setting a Shakespeare play on the moon. I had a vague sense that it was more complicated than that, but I never truly learned about the meaning of concept until I studied at UC San Diego with Gabor Tompa. In my first quarter, I reached out to directing alum Tom Dugdale and asked him to help me understand concept. Tom offered, "One of the ways I have had success defining concept for myself is: how a production works. Don't be afraid to let concept be a little like carpentry or masonry." *How a production works*. This became my jumping off point for finding a concept for my second year production of Eugéne Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*.

Few may remember that my first concept for *Rhinoceros* was terrible. I knew that I had to solve the metaphor of the rhinoceros transformation, and I knew that whatever I decided the transformation meant had to be tied to the overall concept. In my first written proposal I wrote, "For me, rhinocerization, rather than sprouting Nazis, is actually a

symbol of people dying." I continued to articulate an elaborate justification of that choice through a close study of the character of Bérenger. Not only was I completely wrong, I was also basing my analysis on an understanding of the text from a realistic point of view. This was my first time directing Ionesco and my first time dealing with the dramaturgy of the Absurd. Before I could arrive at a concept, I needed a better understanding of the play's form.

I met with Hungarian dramaturg and playwright, András Visky, and he set me on the right path. He informed me about the horror of what the play was actually about—the horror of seeing people you knew and trusted transform into animals before your eyes. He must have known my idea about the play was completely wrong because he suggested that I read as much as I could about Ionesco's life and about the political climate at the time the play was written. To understand the form, and subsequently the concept, I had to first understand everything about the play and the social and political context of the time. Gabor was right: *never trust your first, second or third ideas!*

I read about World War II and the rise of the Nazi party and I sought out a modern-day analogy. I must note that this production process began two years before Donald Trump was elected president. Had I directed this play as my thesis, while Donald Trump was running for president, I imagine the rhinoceroses would have looked quite different. My idea about the rhinoceros symbolizing death quickly seemed too sentimental, and ultimately a misreading of the play. I thought deeply about the original political context of fascism and began to see the horror of the transformation. These were *human beings* transforming into mindless killing machines. I became obsessed with this

idea that the transformation came from within. Human beings transforming into monsters. Hate and violence and terrorism are results of the human transformation Ionesco was alluding to in this play. My answer to Tom Dugdale's question about how the production works was that the transformation would be entirely human—an ideological transformation—a change of belief, of personality, of ideals; a change that is entirely human.

It is painful to re-read some of my early writing on *Rhinoceros*, but it also opens my eyes to how much I have grown over the past three years. Very simply, I have become a stronger reader. The reading lists throughout the past eight quarters of seminars and the plays I have read for process classes have strengthened my ability to read a text. It sounds so obvious, but one of the greatest lessons I learned in my time at UC San Diego is how to read a text closely and how to fully understand its content and form.

When it comes to concept, the growth is quite visible. I began with a horribly misguided concept for *Rhinoceros* which became something simple, clear and true to that present moment in my life. I had no concept for Young Jean Lee's *Lear*, because at the time I didn't think concepts were necessary for new plays. Still, I had a strong sense of the performance style to fit the production even if concept never crossed my mind. With *Vieux Carré*, concept dictated every choice. It was the first production I directed where I saw cohesion in all the elements of the production process, which is entirely due to stating a clear concept that worked for the play. And most recently with an adaptation of Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*, concept preceded even the creation of the text. With an

actor and a team of designers, we decided how the production works and then we found playwright Stephanie Del Rosso to write the words to fit the concept.

I can't begin a process now without understanding how the production works. It is the most important lesson for a director and it is something that will surely deepen over time. Concept is no longer about setting Shakespeare plays on the moon. Instead, concept stems from a much deeper and more personal understanding of a text and its form.

II. The Specifics of Directing

There is always a context for why we speak—this is the situation. My understanding of situation is an ongoing process. There is no simple way to define the situation of a scene, yet no scene can exist without a situation. Situation is not something that can always be found in the text. In Gabor Tompa's "Basics of Directing" class, he defined a dramatic situation with an example: "If two characters are having coffee, the matter becomes dramatic according to whether the audience knows that one of the cups of coffee is poisoned, or even both, and either one or both characters do not know it; the words spoken by these two characters in such a situation may be of the utmost triviality. It is the *situation* that charges them with a maximum of meaning." Drama is thus seen as a continuum of situations.

Situation, along with Robert Castro's action breakdown exercise, was always something that I understood intellectually, but wasn't entirely sure how best to implement the ideas in rehearsal. It wasn't until I assisted Gabor Tompa for seven weeks on Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* that the embodiment of situation, action and intention became clear. In table work, Gabor set up the situation of every single moment in the play for the actors. The situations in this play were always tied to actions and intentions of the characters. Some of the situations lasted for multiple pages, other situations only lasted for a couple lines of dialogue. But in every instance that there is text, a situation must be created. I wish I had started my three years of training with this experience because it illuminated where I went wrong in my own rehearsal processes. In Beckett (and in

Ionesco) there is no character development; that is a dead end. Characters don't follow a realistic trajectory from beginning to end; they don't change over time. In fact, they change in nearly every moment. Performing the Absurd requires an extreme playfulness. Characters constantly contradict themselves and huge emotional shifts occur moment to moment.

The first time we ran the second act, I sat beside Gabor to take notes. It was clear something about the rehearsal was off, but I didn't understand exactly what it was. The actors were saying the correct lines and following the correct staging, but they were not truly playing the situations. It finally clicked. I can talk about actions and intentions and situations ad nauseam but the performers must *play* the situations, *embody* the actions and *experience* the intentions before speaking the lines. For the first time I understood what Gabor had been teaching me for three years. Without the experience of assisting him on *Waiting for Godot*, I may never have come to this discovery.

QUESTION #2

The production of Vieux Carré *included the element of video and a camera. Discuss the impulse for the use of the video and the camera. How did the use of video and the camera support the storytelling and the dramatic action of the production? Describe the development and creation of the acting aesthetic with respect to the camera. How did that acting aesthetic compare/contrast/support/counter the acting that was experienced "directly", not via the camera. What determined the use of video and the camera during specific scenes/moments? In the spirit of Williams' world and artistic project, was the video and camera imbued with any cultural, social, political, economic, moral or spiritual POV? What were the challenges of the video and camera overall? How did the video and camera element develop throughout the performances? Finally, what was the relationship of the the video and camera with respect to the audience in the production?*

I. The Happy Journey

In my second year at New York University, I directed Thornton Wilder's *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*. It is a gorgeous one-act play that takes place almost entirely inside a car going from Trenton to Camden with the Kirby family. Ma and Pa Kirby, along with their young son and daughter journey to visit their eldest daughter who recently lost a baby in childbirth. In the play the character of the stage manager leads the audience through the journey about the joys and sorrows of life. The scenic design was an empty space with four chairs on wheels to create the suggestion of a car. The play took place in house lights in the first and final scenes of the show. When the family stepped into the car, theatrical lighting and cinematic sound filled the space, along with the use of live-feed projection. The theatricality of sound, light and video was used to heighten the emotional journey that took place in the car along the way. The character of

the stage manager operated the video camera, capturing small hand gestures and close-ups as the audience witnessed the endurance a family tortured by loss and grief.

I mention this production that I directed seven years ago because the question of the relationship between live-feed projection, a camera operator and an audience has been a question I have wrestled with for many years. I'm not entirely certain where the impulse to incorporate video into my work originated. After *Happy Journey* I experimented with live-feed over and over again in productions of Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party,* an adaptation of Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* and countless other classroom projects. For *Vieux Carré,* I was inspired by the live-feed camera work in Ivo van Hove's production of *The Damned,* Robert Woodruff's production of *In the Year of 13 Moons* and virtually every production by The Wooster Group.

I am attracted to video and live-feed as a technique of Brecht's Epic theatre. Brecht popularized the idea of the "alienation effect", which is one of the most significant characteristics of the Epic theatre. Also known as Verfremdungseffekt, the alienation effect makes the audience feel detached from the action of the play so they do not become immersed in the illusion of the stage and sympathize with the characters. Instead, the Epic theatre revealed the mechanics of the theatre in order to encourage an audience to think about the situations represented onstage and subsequently act on those ideas in the world. Seeing the camera and cables and projection has always been akin to seeing the stage lights and mechanics of the theatre. A camera and video projection onstage is immediately anachronistic in a period play. It is inherently self-aware because live-feed

projection requires a live camera operator. The mechanics of the production are visible, thus keeping an audience from escaping into the illusion of a theatrical world.

II. The Camera In Performance

It began with a simple test. As the camera operator, I walked down the center aisle of the Forum Theater, placed the video camera on a tripod, opened the rectangular screen and panned across the faces in the audience. Then—a selection was made; I zoomed in on one or two specific audience members. The audience members laughed nervously as they saw themselves projected across a seventy-foot wall in front of them. Immediately the audience associated seeing me as the camera person and vulnerability in the projected image; capturing vulnerability remained a constant throughout the performance. When the Writer entered the space, I spun around and zoomed in closely on his face which was far upstage. This created a double of the writer. There he stood, a live actor in the theatre, but he was also represented in a projected close-up. As he approached the downstage area of the stage, in close proximity to the audience, I swerved to his side and a blinding light washed him out until he was as pale white as the shirt he wore. This heightened his projected double by framing him as a ghostly figure, simultaneously live and caught in a projected silhouette.

Throughout the performance the camera supported the storytelling by always trying to offer the audience a perspective they wouldn't be able to see without the projected image. This ranged from intimate close-ups on actors' faces to capturing entire scenes that took place far upstage or in the wings, obstructed from the audience's line of sight. In every moment the camera represented an eye—*my eye*—the director's eye. The

camera was an entry for the audience to see what I wanted them to see. It was another form of directing the eye of the spectator.

The acting aesthetic was discussed early in our process. With the aid of body microphones and camera close-ups, the actors were freed from the usual acting requirements of performing in the Forum Theater. Rather than projecting their voices to the back walls of the space, they could whisper or speak as softly as they would in the real-life situation of the scene. Rather than cheating out so the audience could always see their faces, they could turn their backs and the camera could capture the hidden emotions in their face. I introduced my cast to the acting style of French and American New Wave films, "cinéma vérité", which translates to "truthful cinema." In direct cinema, filmmakers create shots in which the spectator might become unaware of the camera's presence. In cinéma vérité, the camera work is visible; the filmmaker participates in making artistic choices to create an artifice within the film. There can be stylized set-ups which incite an interaction or altercation between filmmaker and performer. It is argued that the obvious presence of the filmmaker and movements of the camera is the best way to reveal truth in cinema. In this style, the filmmaker is the catalyst for every situation.

The actors were thrilled by what the camera and body microphones allowed them the freedom to do. In scene two, between the Writer and Nightingale, this style of performance was the most successful. The actors spoke softly, intimately, as if other tenants down the hall might be able to hear their private conversation. They moved independently, at times with their backs to the audience, as the camera wheeled about to capture the ways in which their eyes were seeing one another. In the final unit of the

scene the Writer comes out to Nightingale. They sit on the edge of the downstage platform. They are very close to the audience, but they are not performing for the audience. Instead, they are making a genuine connection with one another, as if they are the only two people in the room. They offer company to one another and slowly create a real bond. The camera, as voyeur, in a close-up of each of their faces, gave the audience a window into these characters' intimate relationship.

In Tara Knight's media design course, we developed the tenants of "good media design." Good media design should "have a presence on stage onstage which behaves with intent—*action*. It should add something not otherwise there. It should be seamlessly integrated with the actors on stage in a symbiotic relationship. It should not detract from the narrative. It should have a visual presence that is stylized, abstract, graphic; not a literal representation. It should be treated as an actor in every scene." I created the language of the video in collaboration with projection and scenic designer, Anna Robinson, and my production mentor, Gabor Tompa. In every moment, we wanted the camera work to be specific and active. In every moment, the camera heightened the experience for an audience in a close-up or a new angle. Anna and I created multiple storyboards throughout the rehearsal process, revising our ideas in tech and each subsequent performance.

The video and camera related to Tennessee Williams' world and artistic project as a portrait of loneliness and the human condition. At times the camera captured a writer at work, diligently typing in a passionate fury. At times the camera captured Jane's emotional instability, alone in her relationship with a man who doesn't truly see her. In

other moments the video and camera was the embodiment of the gay male gaze. In scene three, the Writer meets Jane for the first time in the room of Jane and Tye. Tye sleeps, half-exposed, under a white sheet. The camera panned across Tye's sleeping body. Like a Mapplethorpe photograph in motion, the camera zooms in on his muscle tendons, the curvature of his torso and the muscularity in his legs. Inspired by the eroticism of Williams' writing in his plays and *Memoirs*, the camera unabashedly represented the Writer's sexual arousal in the scene and heightened the scenic situation.

III. The Challenges of the Camera

There were countless challenges throughout the process. The first challenge was self-inflicted. I was the director and the camera operator but I could not be in both places at once. Luckily, I had first year director Dylan Key as my assistant who was able to stand in for me throughout the rehearsal process. Gabor Tompa advised me to plan every shot before tech, but because it was impossible to know how the video would look until tech, I had to be more flexible. In the rehearsal room the camera was handheld. Because the video screen in the room was small, we didn't know that the shakiness of a handheld camera across a seventy-foot wall would make an audience feel nauseous. We tried multiple tripods and other handheld contraptions before landing on a wheeled tripod. This allowed for the camera to remain as steady as possible and offered a freedom for me as the operator to rest and observe the scene.

Because I was in the show and focusing on my own track with the camera, I relied on my design team and mentors for feedback. I received notes from Anna, Dylan, Steven and Gabor throughout tech and previews and trusted their eye as I adjusted my camera work. I came into the space an hour before every performance to review my staging and framing just as an actor might review their lines and warm up before a show. In the first few performances it was almost impossible for me to know how the performance was received. I regretted my decision of being the person to operate the camera and I was exhausted by the meticulousness of the tiny rectangular frame in each moment. I had to

trust the actors and designers could deepen their work autonomously. I trusted my assistant to give acting and design notes throughout previews.

By the time we reached the second weekend of performance, I felt more relaxed. I was able to enjoy the work the actors were doing. I was able to trust myself as the camera operator and slightly adjust what I decided to capture. Without veering too far from the original selection of shots, I played with framing, lighting and zoom. I found myself splitting my attention between the live performance and the video frame. Eventually it was a pleasure to live in the world of *Vieux Carré* with my company. To this day I feel that I had the best seat in the theatre.

QUESTION #3

Consider the roles that sound and music play in your pieces. Describe the influence of these elements during your creative process acting as the solitary researcher/thinker, as well as the collaborative artist working with others. How do you negotiate the tension between musical and narrative connotations of your formal approaches in construction of your pieces? Address these issues specifically in the creative and realization process of your two pieces Rhinoceros *and* Vieux Carré.

The idea for the sound used in *Rhinoceros* came to me before the concept. Composer, musician and sound designer Steven Leffue and I bonded at the beach over beers and our mutual distaste for boring regional theatre. We both despised the idea of making plays that relied on doorbell sound effects and musical transitions. We shared the belief that making theatre is about creating an emotional experience for an audience, not just telling a clear story. Before I met Steven, I met his music in his debut album titled *Tandava*. The album is described as an "improvisation avant-garde noise collide in a frenetic bid to destroy the monophonic limitations of the solo saxophone in a meditative debut." I was instantly intrigued.

In an undergrad course at New York University, I took a class called "Experimental Music and the Avant-Garde." I was introduced to compositions by John Cage, John Zorn, Phillip Glass and Iannis Xenakis. Listenting to *Tandava*, I was struck by Steven's incredible musicianship and unique talent. I was also struck by how much he reminded me of the incredible experimental composers and musicians I encountered in that undergraduate class. I wanted the rhinoceros transformation to sound exactly like his album, so I came to Steven with the idea and asked him to perform live with his saxophone in the production. Not only did Steven perform in the show, he took it one step

further by co-creating a collaborative machine with fellow sound design student, Grady Kestler.

The machine we used in our production of *Rhinoceros* is called AIIS (An Intelligent Improvisational System). AIIS allowed for the modern use of electronic sound in live performance (whether by instrument or composed processing). In a paper published by the International Computer Music Conference, Steven and Grady describe how they created AIIS: "With the construction of AIIS, we sought to build an interactive performance system which allows for musical improvisation between a live performer and a computer generated sound world based on feedback between these components. The system's micro and macro decisions generate a programmable musical 'personality' derived from probabilistic measures in reaction to audio input. The system's flexibility allows factors to be modified in order to make wholly new and original musical personalities." AIIS became our rhinoceros and was used to create the electronic sounds of the rhinoceros stampedes in the first act, the explosions in the second act and the manipulation of Jean's voice as he underwent rhinocerization in the third act.

I found my artistic soulmate in Steven. We have spent countless hours discussing art, sex and politics and it would be impossible to answer this question without discussing our collaborative process. Over the past three years we have collaborated on Will Snider's *Death of a Driver*, *Rhinoceros*, Emily Feldman's *Go Please Go*, *Vieux Carré*, and most recently Stephanie Del Rosso's adaptation of *Machinal*. We share similar taste in theatre, film and music. Sound and music have always been a central component in my directing work. Before I met Steven I would often design the sound of a production

myself. In every process together Steven gives me directing notes and questions everything he sees; he is my true dramaturg in every production; he keeps me honest and he cares deeply and personally about the quality of the work.

Sometimes, however, there is tension between the composition and the narrative. I follow the narrative of any given work more closely than Steven and frequently ask for his sound to support the narrative by creating a specific feeling. With *Rhinoceros*, the sound was integrated into the production concept. The sound was, in fact, the only physical representation of the rhinoceros in the production. There were no masks or costumes or projections that signaled to an audience that a transformation was taking place; it was all in the sound. For *Vieux Carré*, however, sound and music was much more difficult to crack.

I came to Steven with big questions early in our process: What does the audience hear when the stage directions say, "The sound of rain"? How do we stage the bizarre night court scene without casting undergrads to play the added characters? Is there music during the rain scene, or is it simply the sound of rain hitting the stage? What do you think about the entire company singing a group song in unison? Steven resisted these questions at first. He asked if I was asking for rain sound effects. He asked if I wanted recordings of "offstage" character voices coming through a door. He asked why I wanted the company to sing in the first place? He hesitated to offer any answers because we didn't yet have a concept for the sound.

Vieux Carré had the potential to be just like the plays Steven and I both tried very hard to avoid. The plays with sound cues of doorbells and transitional musical transitions.

Vieux Carré was more challenging for both of us because our theatrical taste differed from the play's realistic style. There is a version of this play where the sound of rain is embodied by the sound effect of rain. There is a version of this play where music plays in blackouts during the scenic transitions between scenes. There is a version of this play where the characters change their clothes according to a realistic logic of the linear narrative. But we didn't want to make that kind of theatre because we would fall asleep in our own show. In order to find a sound concept, we first had to understand the emotional journey of the play and the goal of the production. We had to tie the sound and music to the concept and get on the same page about what we wanted our audience to feel in any given moment. Because the concept was tied to the theme of loneliness, we had to find the *sound of loneliness*.

If *Rhinoceros* was our noise band rock concert, *Vieux Carré* was our beautiful love poem. The design was quiet and subtle. It supported the relationships in the play and the poetry of the language. Gustav Mahler's composition "Adagietto from Symphony No. 5" became the centerpiece of the sound design for the production. The piece is scored for a large orchestra made up of woodwinds, brass horns, percussion and strings. It is the fourth movement of a longer piece is considered one of Mahler's most famous compositions. It is said to represent a love song to his wife, Alma, so it is fitting that we utilized the music as a love song for lonely souls. The piece lasts for approximately ten minutes and Mahler instructs that it should be conducted "sehr langsam", or "very slowly." For me, the Mahler embodied a multiplicity of emotional responses. At times, the music sounded melancholy and sorrowful, at times triumphant and glorious. By

playing the Mahler in full as our overture, then again during the intermission, we set the tone for the play and created an emotional atmosphere in the theatre. Mahler became our cinematic score. The music had no narrative. Instead, it was evocative of a specific kind of experience. It was our sound of loneliness.

QUESTION #4

Describe your vision of the acting style you set out to achieve in your production of Vieux Carré *and the relationship between this vision of human behavior and Tennessee Williams'. Describe your process with the actors to achieve this vision. What moments in your production were most and least successful in extroverting this vision?*

Note: My response to Question #4 regarding my vision of the acting style in *Vieux Carré* is embedded in part three of the "Process" chapter, entitled "The Rehearsal Process." See page twenty-nine for the full response.

CHAPTER 4: Reflection

I. Reflecting on 3 Years

I entered UC San Diego at the start of a tumultuous period. I was welcomed into the directing program because of a single conversation with the head of the directing area about my concept for Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. I sat across from a bearded Eastern European man in a small room at New York University. I had already received a rejection letter from Yale, which somehow liberated me from feeling nervous in my interview that day. The man across the table offered a friendly smile and inquired about my last name, noticing its odd spelling. I told him it's a Danish name and he said, "Ah… then you must love Lars von Trier."

He spoke eloquently about my directing work. It was clear that he studied my website. But more than that, it was clear that he cared about what interested me as an artist. We began to discuss *Endgame*. Without fully knowing it, I had a pretty clear concept. I shared photographs of abandoned cathedrals with broken stained glass windows and debris-covered floors. I shared photographs of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton and spoke about the Beckettian clown. I told him that my *Endgame* took place in a bombed-out church, that these characters were the last people on Earth still alive in a godless world. I spoke about *Endgame* as the first atheist play, but was quickly corrected. *Endgame* was not an atheist play, he told me. Beckett was not an atheist. He also told me that I wasn't an atheist either because I was an artist and it's impossible to be an artist and

an atheist at the same time. I left the interview stunned. Stunned because I felt a deep connection to this man. And stunned because a stranger told me that I must believe in God.

When I arrived at UC San Diego he taught me about Meyerhold's Biomechanics and the theories of Bertolt Brecht. In my first directing process class he guided me through scenes from Brecht's *The Exception and the Rule* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. After only a few weeks of knowing each other, he invited me to join him and the third year directors to the Interferences Festival in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. At the festival, I saw twenty-four shows in ten days. I was constantly pinching myself. I always wanted to see theatre in Europe and after only four months in graduate school, I was invited to attend.

In Romania I witnessed theatre directed by master directors. How was I so lucky? I discovered the art of Pansori, I met the brilliant directors Robert Woodruff and Declan Donnellan, and I saw my first live performance by Silviu Purcarete, a renowned director that had greatly inspired me in seminar. On the opening night of the festival, I watched as my mentor's joyful spirit faded away when he found out he would no longer be the Head of Directing.

This took a huge toll on me. It led to confrontations with the actors in my class when I came to his defense, it led to a confusion of leadership and curriculum, and it led to a crumbling reputation in the directing area. In the following two years I had five different heads of directing, but always remained close to the man who first invited me to attend the school I would come to love: Gabor Tompa.

Through the years, Gabor taught me the specifics of directing. I learned how to develop a concept, how to set up a theatrical situation and the importance of following through on every idea. He taught me that the essential of theatre is the notion of convention. In a film, a chair can only be a chair. In the theatre, a chair can be a throne, a chair can be a weapon, a chair can be grave. All art is based on these conventions which must be shared between the artist and his audience. I learned not to trust the text. He taught me to doubt everything and reject my first, second, even third understanding of the text. The wrong way to make theatre is to believe the text. Intention always comes before the text. There is always a context for why we speak the words we speak—this is the situation. If there is a contradiction between words and action, *action* prevails.

I learned that the message of a performance cannot be separated from the form. Form rules the entire performance. There is no theatre without form. Music is all form. There is nothing explanatory about music. It refers to the senses and not to logic. Good theatre is also music because it eliminates the need to explain. Form is the physicalization of the text—words on the page moving in time and space through corporeal beings.
I learned a lot about the Gospels and the sacred layer. I learned about how poets and artists are blasphemous; we create scandal in order to get closer to God. I learned that I am not an atheist, as I thought I was. But rather, I am proudly and firmly agnostic. I am an artist, therefore I ask questions. And sometimes I don't have all the answers.

I asked Declan Donnellan about God and belief and he advised, "Just measure the distance between surrender and submission. Too many can never surrender because they think it means submission. Skepticism is only wise if it is specific, but in general it makes

us dumb." I arrived at UC San Diego an obnoxious skeptic, but I leave having surrendered to my training, to my weaknesses, to the differences in others and to the possibility of the divine.

II. Reflecting on *Vieux Carré*

Vieux Carré was the most vulnerable I have been in my work since my best friend passed away. *Vieux Carré* was the closest I have felt to making the kind of theatre I want to make in the world. *Vieux Carré* will always be a reflection of who I was when I was younger.

There is a lot about the production of which I am extremely proud. I led a rewarding and fruitful process with a team of talented designers. I co-created a text for the production that felt deeply personal and focused. I tore out the horrible masking in the Forum Theatre and opened up that incredible enormous space.

Still, if I could direct the play again, there are things that I would do differently. I would lead the actors through a deeper embodiment of the interior lives of these complex characters. I am interested in a more rigorous performance—a crueler performance. Loneliness, as a theme, may have been there, but I wanted to create the feeling of loneliness in the atmosphere in every moment.

There are a few key moments that we seemed to come close to achieving this ideal. The first moment was at the end of the first act when Mrs. Wire was left alone onstage. She laughed for almost three full minutes. Her laugh transformed into a cry for a brief moment and then back into a laugh again. By the end, it was impossible to discern whether she was laughing or crying. And then, suddenly, she screamed. It was long and painful and completely silent. There was projected text on the back wall that read like a stage direction: “Mrs. Wire screams.” That was a moment I actually *felt* her loneliness. If

I could direct the play again, I wouldn't wait until the end of the first act for a moment like that to occur.

The other moment that felt successful was when the Writer cradled Nightingale in his arms at the end of scene nine. The scene was staged as far away from the audience as possible. It was the first scene I filmed without the use of a tripod, which added a natural shakiness to the camera and subsequently, the projected live-feed. Nightingale fell to the floor, gruesomely coughing; he was dying. The Writer removed his body microphone and got down on the floor with him, cradling Nightingale in his arms. The Writer comforted Nightingale with a song—the same song Nightingale sang to the Writer when he was alone, crying in his room. The live-feed was the lens through which the audience was invited into this private moment. For the first time, the camera captured something that felt truly private. Subsequently, the live-feed deepened the emotional effect of the moment.

It may seem too simple to say that I wish I could have cast the play with different actors, but it's the truth. I worked as hard as I could to inspire the few actors who resisted the process, but ultimately I could never change their taste or their personal opinions of me. Some of the actors were simply miscast and some of the actors simply didn't like me. If I could do the play again, I would take great care to find the artists who were interested in this kind of performance. I would find the artists who were willing to risk vulnerability.

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I have never been one to believe in ghosts. Yet it was the beauty I saw in a bright ghost light when I was twelve years old that led me to direct Tennessee Williams' *Vieux Carré* as my thesis at UC San Diego. Memories are like ghosts. The present moment disappears and then exists only as a ghost. Tennessee Williams said, "Life is all memory except for the one present moment that goes by you so quickly you hardly catch it going." My memories are what made me the artist I am today. My ghosts keep me company in my loneliness. Thank God for ghosts.