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# **Performing Taboo:**

**The Creation of an Aesthetic through the Exploration of Censorship in Theatre and the Challenges of Directing *Killer Joe***

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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To Duncan Pflaster who gave me my first New York City stage opportunity. Heh, taint.

To my mom...

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## Abstract

PERFORMING TABOO: THE CREATION OF AN AESTHETIC THROUGH THE  
EXPLORATION OF CENSORSHIP IN THEATRE AND THE CHALLENGES OF  
DIRECTING *KILLER JOE*

By: David Todd Zimmerman, M.F.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2012

Major Director: Dr. Noreen Barnes, Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Theatre

This document explores the performance of taboo on the stage. The exploration is focused around the establishment of my personal aesthetic, which was developed through my studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. Starting with my first trip to Broadway, my journey goes through the class work that I did at VCU and the two plays that I did on the Shafer Street Alliance Laboratory Theatre stage: my performance and use of latex costumes in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, and my direction and the troubles with producing *Killer Joe*. The exploration concludes with a look at the theatre in parts of Virginia and the ability to pursue an acting career with an aesthetic that pushes boundaries.

## Introduction

The United States of America was founded on the efforts of our founding fathers to break from the oppressive governments and monarchies that ruled the countries in Europe. People fled Europe because of religious, political and economic persecution, and they aspired to elevate their current station in life. As colonists, they were unable to obtain these sought after liberties. They needed to become independent from the British rule that maintained a stronghold over their lives. A six year Revolution was fought on the soil of what was to become a new nation, the United States of America. In creating the government for this newly born country, the founding fathers wanted to ensure that the citizens had specific freedoms that they had not been granted in Europe. These include, but are not limited to, freedom from unreasonable search and seizure of property, the right to petition, freedom of due process, the right to bear arms, as well as the freedom of speech. The freedom of speech, in my opinion, was included in part due to the Licensing Act of 1737 which restricted playwrights' ability to create dramatic satires which ridiculed government officials and the legislation they passed.

This freedom of speech did not encompass all subject material. There were still a multitude of topics deemed inappropriate for public discourse or taboo. The term taboo originated from the explorations of James Cook in the South Pacific. "In a journal entry from 1777, Cook says this word *'has a very comprehensive meaning; but, in general, signifies that a thing is forbidden.... When any thing is forbidden to be eat, or made use of, they say, that it is taboo.'*" (thefreedictionary.com) When brought back to Europe, taboo gained widespread usage in the English language. The commonality of the word continued a century later and is prominently featured in Freud's work. Freud postulated that there were two universal taboos: incest and patricide. However, the types of taboo can be quite varied across various societies.

“Taboos can include dietary restrictions, restrictions on sexual activities and relationships, restrictions of bodily functions, restrictions on the state of genitalia such as circumcision, exposure of body parts, nudity, and restrictions on the use of offensive language.”

(newworldencyclopedia.com)

If art is supposed to imitate life, or vice versa, shouldn't the stage be mandated to explore societal topics that are considered taboo in order to understand why they are not part of the socially accepted aspects of life, why they reinforce the idea of taboo or how to break them? The problem is the mere discussion of a topic that is taboo is itself taboo. When these taboo elements entwine themselves around real-life drama, does the exploration of this reality become intrinsically more important than dwelling on the taboo elements within that drama? When it comes to art, who determines what taboo is and what are the ramifications of a theatre crossing the line of decency? In this paper, I will briefly discuss the history of censorship in theatre focusing on the Licensing Act of 1737 in England, the ramifications of that Act on *Mrs. Warren's Profession* in both England and the United States, and the further attempts by the United States government in the late twentieth century. I will then follow the development of my own aesthetic in theatre, the difficulties I faced with directing Tracy Letts' *Killer Joe* at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) and the regional problems and successes that some theatres and theatre practitioners have faced in the Richmond and Northern Virginia. Through this exploration, I hope to solidify the vision of my future path in theatre as well as enlighten other practitioners of the adversity they may face in a dynamic field where many voices can be heard so long as it is within the right venue.

## Chapter 1—History of Censorship

### Licensing Act of 1737

No single piece of legislation has had as long of an impact in the name of censorship than the Licensing Act of 1737 in England. Prior to the Licensing Act, censorship in English theatre fell to the responsibility of the Master of the Revels. In 1673, this title fell to one of the two patent holders who create theater in London. This self-policing worked for some time, until “the early 1680s when the Lord Chamberlain took a more proactive role” in the censoring of works. (Thomas 18) Some conflict occurred once another patent was issued since that owner did not have the same liberties for self-censorship. This license was suspended and only reinstated when he agreed to seek approval from either the Master of the Revels or Lord Chamberlain. This censorship was granted to the Lord Chamberlain by royal prerogative instead of any legal degree. In the 1720’s and 1730’s the satires of the government became more focused at specific members of the Parliament and Royal family. Sir Robert Walpole, who is sometimes referred to as the first Prime Minister, worked his way into power under King George I and retained that power with George II. Walpole was one of the common targets of this theatrical satire by such playwrights as John Gay and Henry Fielding, who were putting up their plays in some of the unlicensed theatres of London. Contention between the licensed theatres (which were following the wishes of the government censorship) and the unlicensed theatres escalated the problems as well. (Thomas 20-23)

However, since Walpole, a member of the House of Lords, could not effectively come to appeal to the House of Commons for the passing of censorship legislation that was primarily focused on the silencing of political dissonance, he framed his argument for The Licensing Act

of 1737 around “*The Golden Rump*—an offensive and obscene play which had just come into the hands of Walpole conveniently for his purpose.” (Palmer 35) With a piece of theatre that was obscene, The House of Commons could agree with Walpole’s desire for a codified and legislative course for the censorship of the stage.

The Licensing Act of 1737 led to the requirement that any plays had to be performed in licensed theaters and had to be approved by the Lord Chamberlain prior to being staged. This killed many theatres and left only two stages which had previously received licensure. This also brought the end of several playwrights’ careers—primarily that of Fielding. His sharp wit and stabbing satire had been refined during his short career, and he had received packed houses and critical acclaim for his works leading up to the passage of the Licensing Act of 1737. With no platform for his theatrical works, Fielding’s career had ended. It also ended a period of “intense creativity and experimentation with form” of the play as well as any plays of “political and social controversy from the British stage.” (Burch 86) The Licensing Act of 1737 stayed in effect for 231 years and had ramifications on both sides of the pond.

### **British Influence on the American Stage**

The stages in England had been confined in their growth and exploration. Shakespearean plays were primarily done since they were deemed to be safe. The entire populace, however, was not content with the state of the British theatre. The second major rebellion against the Lord Chamberlain occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (1832 was the first attempt to abolish the Licensing Act). Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879) and *Ghosts* (1881) had been presented in which marriage was depicted as a “commercial transaction, in which women were the victims of patriarchal attitudes and behaviour.” (Thomas 69) Producing these plays

were not permitted by Lord Chamberlain, but private showings done by independent theatre companies would get Ibsen's plays viewed by audiences. One of Ibsen's biggest supporters was George Bernard Shaw who was "inspired to write his early plays revolving around social problems and moral issues, notably *Widower's Houses* (1892) and *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893)." (70)

*Mrs. Warren's Profession* tells the story of a young lady, Vivie Warren, who "discovers that the mother who gave her such a high-toned upbringing is, in fact, the madam of a brothel. Far from ashamed of her profession, Mrs. Warren defends it as the epitome of capitalism." (playbillvault.com) This is not subject material that would be accepted in the late nineteenth century in England, Lord Chamberlain did ban this play, but would the American stage be viable ground upon which Shaw's play could take root? Mr. Arnold Daly thought it would be since he had successfully brought other Shaw plays to the United States.

Daly slated late October, 1905 for an opening of *Mrs. Warren's Profession* in New York City, but as early as April of that year the New York Times received letters of protest about the upcoming production. On April 19, 1905 E.D.F. Marshall wondered if "there is something rotten with the artists" since he had "pondered this nauseating play, trying to find a 'reason' for it and possible public benefit from its representation." In response, L.S. Bensonhurst's letter dated April 20 is printed on April 23 claiming the reason for the play is "self-evident, and it strikes home." Daly's production already has unadvertised publicity for his upcoming production of Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* even if not all positive. The debate about this production would heat up in the newspapers in the week leading up to the opening.

Anthony Comstock was a civil war veteran who in the 1870's began an epic crusade against erotic books sold in the New York City bookstores. His early success in court cases led to the Young Men's Christian Association to appoint Comstock as secretary of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. This organization was chartered by the New York State legislature and granted the organization "a monopoly of vice, and its agents the rights of search, seizure and arrest." (Green 522) Comstock's attention was drawn to the pending production of *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. On October 25, 1905 the New York Times published a letter that Comstock wrote to Daly warning him about putting on "Shaw's filthy products" and that he was aware that *Mrs. Warren's Profession* has been "suppressed in London." The article included Daly's response which invited Comstock to a rehearsal since he apparently had missed the message of the work if he had read it at all. (nytimes.com) This contentious debate on the appropriateness of the play continued in the newspapers until *Mrs. Warren's Profession* opened on October 30. The public was made aware of this potentially scandalous situation. Comstock refused to come see the play and left it up to the police to make any arrests as necessary. A preview of *Mrs. Warren's Profession* in New Haven on the Friday before the New York opening created some protests and was shut down after one performance. Daly decided to take a pencil to his script and eliminated any of the lines that could have a double meaning. However, after a single New York performance on October 30, 1905, *Mrs. Warren's Profession* was shuttered. Police Commissioner William McAdoo attended the performance but refused to comment on the evening's performance or on what would transpire going forward. The critics however were unanimous in deeming *Mrs. Warren's Profession* unfit for the stage. While commercially successful for a singular performance, the play was stopped, making opening night and closing night the same performance. Comstock issued warrants for many of the players, the stage

manager and Daly. While the court deemed “the play 'not pleasant,' and declare(d) it fraught with 'shock producers' and 'repellent things,' but...not indecent in the eyes of the law” in July, 1906, Comstock was successful in shutting down Shaw’s play. (nytimes.com) Comstock had become a US Lord Chamberlain leading his crusade for 40 years. The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice continued to wield the saber of censorship after Comstock’s death in 1915 for another 35 years until the society’s dissolution in 1950.

### **The NEA and On-going Government Control**

Governmental pressure and control continued throughout the twentieth century. After the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965, there was controversy over how the money was used and what programs and art were being funded. The initial appropriation in 1965 was \$2.5M. After the Carter Administration, funding for the NEA had increased to \$154.6M in 1980 (nea.gov). When Ronald Reagan won the Presidential election in 1980, his administration “planned to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts when it came into office” but determined the NEA’s benefits outweighed its costs. (Honan) Throughout the 1980’s, the conservative media acted as a watchdog for the programs and installations that received funding from the NEA. Congress in 1990 passed the “‘decency clause’ which says the NEA must consider not just artistic merit but 'general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs of the American public.’” (Carr) This legislative change occurred during a contentious time. Four of eighteen grants that were approved by a peer evaluation board of the NEA had been vetoed for funding. The “NEA 4” was comprised of performance artists Karen Finley, Tim Miller, John Fleck, and Holly Hughes. While they were accused of being “obscene”, what they did was use strong sexual images to convey a wide spread of emotions and themes including “incest, rape, violence, alcoholism, suicide, poverty, homelessness and discrimination.”

(Clements) In Finley's case, she still performed at the Lincoln Center's Serious Fun festival, but it took a three year court battle all the way to the Supreme Court in order to receive an award equal to the amount of the earlier vetoed grant.

I recall hearing about the funding issues for the National Endowment for the Arts as well as the NEA 4 when I was in high school, but at the time it was not a story that concerned me due to a limited knowledge of, and involvement in, theatre at the time. A decade and a half later, I had nearly forgotten about this controversy. Just like so many other things, this had faded into the history of my mind only to be brought back to the forefront when it found a relevancy in my life. I felt there had to be a balance between material which was offensive and that which was not. During my time at VCU, I started to develop my aesthetic which incorporated many of these taboo areas. I wanted to find works that contained taboo material, that piqued my interest, and that could be done on the stage here at VCU or in the Richmond area.

## Chapter 2—Creation of an Aesthetic

### First Broadway Experience

My interest in this topic started forming when I began my time at Virginia Commonwealth University. I started becoming involved in the theatre in high school after an extended illness prevented me from doing a play in middle school. My involvement to this point had been shows done in high school, such as *The King and I*, *Up the Down Staircase* and *Oliver!*, one production in college, *The Gifts of the Magi*, and several wholesome productions at the Racine Theatre Guild including *Oliver!* (again), *Scrooge*, *Annie*, *Packer Fans from Outer Space* and *It's a Wonderful Life*. Even the theatre that I had attended continued to fall within these wholesome parameters, with a few exceptions. On my honeymoon, my wife and I saw six Broadway shows. These shows were *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change*; *Tarzan*; *The Lion King*; *Forbidden Broadway:SVU*; *Sweeney Todd*; and *Avenue Q*. It is these last two that was the start of seeing things that were outside the previous parameters.

The musical of *Sweeney Todd* by Steven Sondheim follows the events of an innocent barber who was wrongly sentenced by a corrupt judge who longed for the barber's wife. When the barber returns to London, he seeks to exact revenge for his imprisonment, changes his name to Sweeney Todd and begins killing the people of London. This was the first play that I saw in which a great deal of killing was done. This is a very dark play, and it was the first of its type that I saw—and I loved it.

*Avenue Q* has been described as “Sesame Street meets South Park.” (playbill.com) It is a traditionally themed play in which a character, Princeton, faces and attempts to overcome

obstacles in an effort to find his purpose in life. He meets someone that he falls in love with, Kate, gets seduced by another, Lucy, and struggles with depression when things go wrong. However, Princeton is a puppet, as are several other characters in this musical. During the show, after being out for a night, Princeton and Kate get drunk and have sex on stage during a musical number entitled “You Can Be as Loud As the Hell You Want (When You’re Makin’ Love)”. In spite of the characters being puppets and that nothing was actually shown, this was the first show that I had seen in which two characters had sex on stage. But this isn’t the only irreverent song in the show. Other titles include, “The Internet Is For Porn”, “I’m Not Wearing Underwear Today”, and “Schadenfreude”. All of these songs deal with topics that are not usually addressed within mainstream plays: pornography, nudity, and making fun of others. Because these issues are talked about through the use of puppets and comedy, they were not offensive to most people.

### **Intro to Drama**

While enrolled in my first year of the BFA Theatre Performance track, I was registered in Intro to Drama, a class in which students read twelve to fourteen plays a semester and discuss their quality as both literature and theatre. The plays that are selected for this class are typically contemporary plays (within the last ten years) that have won or were nominated for major theatrical awards. Also in this list are any plays that are being produced on the TheatreVCU mainstage that semester. In Fall 2007, when I took the course, these plays included *Doubt*, *Before it Hits Home*, *Bug*, *Fat Pig*, *Red Light Winter* and *Dracula*. These plays continued to broaden my theatrical experiences as most of my prior experiences, both as an actor and patron, had involved musicals. None of these plays do anything quite as extreme as either *Sweeney Todd* or *Avenue Q*, but the themes that are entwined within these stories are all potentially off-putting.

*Doubt* is a Tony award winning play by John Patrick Shanley. It delves into the world of the priesthood and looks into the accusations of one nun, Sister Aloysius, against the priest of a Catholic School, Father Flynn, for molesting a student. While the setting is in 1963 in the Bronx, the play originated in 2004. During this time, the Catholic Church was under a litany of fire with a multitude of allegations against priests for sexually molesting altar boys. These allegations were beginning to be confirmed by court case after court case either convicting the priest or the church settling out of court. This “ripped from the headlines” feeling of a play was a new excitement that I had never experienced. All the other plays were simply stories that were told either to entertain or to convey a message, sometimes both. But *Doubt* has a sense of immediacy and realism that was prevalent regardless of its fictional setting and characters. This is a play that deals with a prominent, current issue that was affecting people. But the play also warns us that in spite of her convictions and getting her way, Sister Aloysius has doubt in what she has done in the lack of evidence that was present. This parable reminds us that words can be more damaging than the sharpest of weapons.

*Before It Hits Home* and *Fat Pig* are similar to *Doubt* in that each deals with an issue, AIDS and obesity, that while not in the limelight, still affect millions of people. *Before It Hits Home* is the first AIDS play that I read. It deals with avoidance of taking care of oneself in a world of bisexual promiscuity, which is one of the root causes of the disease spreading unabated. The play examines the impact of such an individual life choice on the friends and family that are sought to help with the after care of a devastating diagnosis such as AIDS. *Fat Pig* deals with self image and the pressures that society, especially friends, places on the importance of personal appearance and the appearance of the people with whom you associate. Obesity has been an issue in the public view for decades, including a push with the current First Lady, Michelle

Obama. By making it the central issue of a play, it brings light to the bullying done by people in the name of making themselves feel better about who they are.

*Red Light Winter*, by Adam Rapp, follows two friends as they adventure to Amsterdam. Matt and Davis are in Amsterdam to rekindle their friendship and to experience new things. Davis goes to the red light district of Amsterdam and pays for a prostitute to come and have sex with Matt, but not until after he has already taken her himself. Within this love triangle, Christina falls in love with Davis and Matt falls in love with Christina. Each love is unrequited. In the second act, Christina has returned to the United States and searches for Davis but instead finds Matt because Davis gave her Matt's address. Christina barely recalls Matt even though Matt has kept the dress that she was wearing in Amsterdam. While Matt steps out for a moment, Davis arrives. Christina has a similar situation with Davis in that he doesn't remember her until she describes their meeting. Davis takes Christina for what she was in Amsterdam, a prostitute, and takes the opportunity to sexually assault her in Matt's apartment while his wife waits in the car downstairs. Rapp stated in a 2012 New York Times article, "Shock Me If You Can" that "I love putting dangerous moments onstage. It raises the stakes and brings out the nervous system in an actor. The audience's nervous system will change too." This was the first play that explicitly shows sex on stage between people that I have read or seen. This was a shock to me, but in my budding fetish life, the idea of (simulated) sex being shown on stage was intriguing.

*Bug* and *Dracula* are both psychological thrillers that walk a line of sanity and reality. While *Dracula* is a classic piece of literature and drama, it reminds us of the fragility of the mind and the influences that people can have over others. *Bug*, by Tracy Letts, does the same thing while placing the context within both the medical and military worlds—a more realistic setting.

*Bug* explores the mental stability of Peter, an AWOL soldier, who has locked himself into a hotel room with a woman. The play allows the reader/viewer to determine whether Peter's story of medical experimentation is true or if the Army doctor is telling the truth of Peter's mental instability and breakdown. This play addressed and examined more real life issues in the context of a theatrical piece of literature.

Now, my interest had been piqued. There seemed to be no limit on the topic that a play could explore and still be a considered quality piece of theatre. While these plays focus around topics that could be considered taboo to some people (religious criticism, child molestation, prostitution, homosexuality, the occult/supernatural, mental health), there is nothing specifically graphic displayed in the plays. *Bug* might contain some nudity, but there is nothing specific to the play that would require the actors to be naked. *Dracula* would contain some (a lot) blood and killing but since the story is fantasy, the audience understands that this is not a realistic situation, at best a metaphor for killing or suppressing evil. *Before It Hits Home*, *Doubt*, and *Fat Pig* all are more traditionally set plays, so they do not have any setting issues that would be taboo. My interest in this class and its format led to my desire to be an instructor in it a year later when I transitioned to the MFA track. While some of the plays were repeated from year to year, I was exposed to dozens of more plays that had a variety of topics, both intriguing and mundane.

### **Latex Hits the Stage**

In Spring 2009, a fellow graduate student, Adanma Onyedike was working on her thesis project. She was exploring the surrealist piece of theatre, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. This play by Adrienne Kennedy "chronicles the last hours in the life of Sarah, a young black woman troubled

by race and identity.” (enotes.com) It explores this through a dream-like series of hallucinations that are brought to life through the images created on the stage. The exploration of different manifestations of the same self was manipulated through imagery and language throughout the work. Onyedike wanted to create a nightmare in her manipulation of the staging and the provided text.

Sarah explores herself through different manifestations including Jesus, the Duchess of Hapsburg, Mother, and Queen Victoria. Each of these manifestations at different times seem to be talking to themselves, as if an echo within Sarah’s mind, or with other manifestations, symbolizing an internal struggle as to which voice truly belonged. As props are needed on stage, two Shadows bring the items out that are requested. The tempo of the actors’ movements, as well as the specific lines of text, helped to dictate the surreal feel that this play needs to be the most effective.

I was intrigued by the title, as well as a brief conversation with Onyedike about the play. This was another new threshold I was about to be crossing—Surrealism. Not knowing exactly what to expect, I went to the auditions. I was cast as one of the Shadows. Not a very large role, in fact the role has no lines, but I appreciated the opportunity. What it meant at the time was that I was in a show, but not bogged down by a lot of rehearsals since my movements would be blocked later in the process. What it meant during rehearsals was that I could appreciate the play as a spectator, watching the play come to life, as the actors bonded and explored the text as well as the research of the play. After I was cast, I asked what Onyedike intended to use for costumes for the Shadows. She alluded to the fact that we would be in all black, just as shadows would be, and that theatre blacks might be the base of the costume. At this point in my life, I had been wearing black latex clothing for about six years. While primarily fetish wear, I was always

looking for opportunities to wear it in a more mainstream way. There had not been too many opportunities for this in the Richmond area. However, this was an opportunity to take a chance. I knew there were obstacles to overcome, including having to get both the director and the other actor playing a Shadow to agree, but I had to take the chance.

In Modern Drama class, I approached Onyedike with the wardrobe question “what about full coverage in black latex?” Onyedike, according to her thesis, “approached the concept with trepidation. I didn’t want the latex to take away from the production.”(57-8) She had similar concerns with the other actor playing a Shadow regarding his comfort level in wearing the latex as a costume choice. She also wanted to see what it looked like. I showed her a picture of a person wearing black latex. Granted, this was not necessarily my best decision since the person in the picture was in a stockade at the time, but I told her to just ignore the stockades. She was intrigued, and I was given the task to approach the other actor on the topic. I approached Bryan about the idea. He was open to the idea, but his face showed clear signs of nervousness. I showed him my suit and allowed him to touch the suit. His anxiousness eased somewhat. He was still willing to try a suit.

I took Bryan to meet my friend who was going to lend us a suit that would fit Bryan well. Bryan took the suit home with some baby powder after being given instructions on how to put the suit on. A personal lesson was learned at the next rehearsal—when giving someone a latex suit to put on for the first time, actually help them put it on for the first time. Bryan had inadvertently destroyed the latex suit when trying to put it on due to not having all three of the zippers in the down position. I was able to obtain another rubber suit from a different friend, this time being careful to help Bryan put it on for the first time. His suit was not as form fitting as mine due to this accident, but the effect was still achieved.

Onyedike loved the look of the suits. The rest of the cast was interested in the look and could visualize the possible appearance this would have on stage. The effect was tremendous. “The reaction to the latex suits was universal for each audience. In each night of production there was a deafening silence as the Shadows first appeared. However, once the audience realized that the stage was being set, some felt free to continue conversation. There were definitely gasps and laughs from each audience in reaction to the latex suits.” (60) After the show, I received a lot of congratulations for a show that was done well. As to the reactions to me wearing a latex suit...they were much more varied. Most students had no issues giving hugs with the congratulations of the show. There were some though that were both wanting more and wanting less. During the show, other than my feet, I was completely encased in latex. While greeting the attendees, I had the hood off. Some wanted to touch the suit and see what it felt like. One student even hugged me several times to feel the latex again and again. But, one did not want to even give me a hand shake. It wasn't due to not knowing who I was since the hood was off, but he did not want to even touch the suit.

This experience was very invigorating to me. The line between acceptable and taboo was momentarily blurred. While they were not 100% accepted (nothing that is out of the ordinary can ever expect full assimilation), the latex suits on stage were accepted and not shunned. They enhanced the overall theatrical experience and left an effect on all the patrons, even those that didn't want to touch me after the show. Nothing other than performance was done while I was wearing the latex suit other than the meet and greet and driving to and from the venue. The latex suit was framed strictly as a costume for a shadow; none of the fetish uses were discussed. Since a shadow is mysterious, it was not out of place for the show.

I was asked by the friend who lent the suit that was used in the show by Bryan to write a brief article about the experience for a newsletter he published on fetish wear and its use in unique ways. It was an honor to be asked to write about the situation for his newsletter sharing the story of latex on the stage. I began to think that there were other lines that could be crossed and ventured through upon the stage. What other plays existed that could allow for creative uses of taboo things without being the main focus or what other taboos could be done on the stage and still be accepted?

### **Gender and Performance**

Due to some personal problems, my academic studies were put on hold for a semester. During that time I began to question whether acting was for me in terms of a career, or if it should just go back to being an occasionally paid hobby. Obviously, since you are reading this, my passion for the stage was rekindled and continues to burn strong. When I returned, in Spring 2011, I returned as a part-time student. I took two classes. A seminar class entitled Gender and Performance was one of them. As the title clearly states, the class looked at how gender, as well as sexuality, were portrayed in theatre and other performances over time. Incorporated into these topics were the views of homosexuality (both perceived and blatant), cross dressing (both as a normal convention due to women not allowed to perform on stage and as a specific choice) and cross casting (both males in typically female roles and females in typically male roles) and how all of these characteristics can be portrayed on the stage.

This specific class was of interest to me in terms of my continued exploration of both my individual sexuality (I am bisexual) and of my desire to perform things that are typically considered taboo as well as finding how people in the past were able to cultivate these ideas onto

the stage. The culmination of the class was a research paper of a performer, playwright or other theatrical practitioner that pushed boundaries of gender in some manner. I was still rather green as to who would be a good artist on which to do research to fit my particular developing aesthetic—bi-sexual and fetish orientated. The instructor of the class, Dr. Noreen Barnes, suggested that I do my research project on Robert Chesley. I had never heard of this individual, but I figured that Dr. Barnes knew what she was suggesting. I fell in love with Robert Chesley. He was a perfect choice.

Robert Chesley was a gay playwright whose plays primarily dealt with AIDS. Now you might be attempting to figure out what that has to do with me. Chesley's early life has a lot of similarities with mine: parents divorced at an early age, often picked on at school, few if any friends. The similarities continued in that Chesley got married and had affairs with men while married. My wife and I have an open relationship, and we have played with others together and individually. This is where the differences start to form. Chesley was a musician and a teacher. He composed music to the poetry of Emily Dickenson, Walt Whitman and Gertrude Stein. In his personal life, Chesley frequently brought men home, to his wife's dismay. It took graffiti at the school where he worked to give him the courage to come out to his wife and school. After this, Chesley divorced, moved to New York City and became a writer and reviewer of plays. It was watching these plays that motivated Chesley to become a playwright since he felt that he could do better.

Chesley's first major work, *Night Sweat*, explored the idea that people diagnosed HIV+ or with AIDS should be able to choose how they will die instead of having the illness destroy their body. For \$10,000, a person may join an underground club, Coup de Grace, where that person may choose the "experience" they wish to have to end their lives, "he's calling it 'The

Dance of Death’—but that’s behind Jason’s back. Dirty word, you know.” (Chesley 24) These experiences are personal, can be anything the person wants, and are witnessed by other club members both to help other members decide what their own experience will be as well as to allow the other members to celebrate the person whose experience is being viewed. Many types of experiences are enacted throughout the play—this is what intrigued me and hooked me into Chesley’s works. The play opens with a person being escorted to the gallows by two hangmen. When everything is ready, “the board upon which the prisoner stands is released, and he is hanged. His body shivers in wonderful spasms, a wet spot spreads at his crotch, and then he is still.”(Chesley 15) The man has just had his experience; a climax to a life that is celebrated instead of being destroyed and ignored, since that was often the fate of people with full blown AIDS. Slowly, acquaintances, friends and even family tended to leave a person suffering through the symptom of AIDS as the illness consumed their body, leaving purple Kaposi Sarcoma lesions marking the sinner as clear as a scarlet A, as was the case with Chesley. Chesley’s play examines the possibility of avoiding this lonely fate by choosing the method of death instead of having it chosen for them.

The experiences that Chesley portrays in *Night Sweat* are quite varied in the level of fetish play demonstrated. Gamblers meet for a hand of cards in which they allow fate to decide one more time on who wins and who loses. However in this game of cards, the winner of the game loses their life by being shot in the head—a Win-Lose-Win situation. The loser of the game has the honor of killing the winner—a Lose-Win situation. Everyone but the winner must wait until the next game to see if they are fortunate enough to win.

Role playing is demonstrated in two of the experiences: Cowboys (good/bad) and Superhero and Villain. Chesley’s personal life comes through in the latter of these two. He

often would wear spandex suits as one of his many fetish interests. This can be seen in a series of photographs that he had done near the end of his life showing his KS lesions while donning a Superman outfit...apparently Kryptonite comes in many forms. In these two scenes, the bad cowboy or villain is killed as an experience of a lifetime.

The other experiences either enacted or described are making a political statement about gay bashing, a reenactment of a scene from *Lucia di Lammermoor*, a Dance of Death, a beheading at the moment of climax, a tortured confession, and a dead body being saved for someone else's experience. All of these are graphic, horrifying ways to die and many of them are depicted on stage for the audience to witness.

As graphic as those scenes might seem, the play has a wonderful story of hope to be told. Chesley's play implores the audience to celebrate life and choose to live over dying. Just before the main character, Robert, is beheaded, a friend, Tom, who was suppose to experience the gay bashing but fled instead, has returned to the club to stop the experience from happening. Grateful, Robert earnestly tells Tom, "but I'm going to die!" (66) Tom understands Robert's fate "but in the meanwhile you're going to live! Live until the very moment you die! And make love...in every possible, safe and sensible way! Enjoy it all, from the most delicate cruising to the heaviest S and M trips" (66). This message, "choose to live", gives those battling the disease a sense of positive empowerment instead of the negative one of death.

This story, however, is all but lost to most people since they will not want to go see this play or will not stay to the end to receive the message. The graphic display of homosexuality is not acceptable by the vast majority of the heterosexual population. Even though the night Robert and Tom spent together occurs off stage, the actors in various fetish clothing—leather, spandex,

cowboy, cross dressing—and the orgasmic actions of hanging, torture and finally double penetration of Robert are too much for the straight audience to accept in a theatrical piece. A simple male-male kiss is often too much for the homophobic, “people in general find gay love—kisses of parting at the train station and the like—sicker even than gay sex.” (Clum 13) This was reinforced by a conversation that I had with my friend Edward Hibbert. He was cast in a revival of *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*. Just before he leaves the stage, he would engage another male actor in a kiss. During one matinee, Hibbert stated that he nearly lost it on stage when an older, Jewish woman said, “Oy-vey” in a very loud voice as he kissed the other male actor. This homosexual act did not sit well with this particular patron.

Chesley has clearly written *Night Sweat* as a piece of gay theatre for the gay audience. Chesley has created a beautiful script for gay men to realize that they can still celebrate their life and enjoy sex so long as they are safe in doing it. Chesley does all but admit this himself in the notes preceding the play asking the reader if it says “anything to you about our community” (11).

I wanted to bring this play to the VCU student stage, the Shafer Street Alliance Laboratory Theatre (SALT). Its message is one of hope, and being a Laboratory stage, I hoped that it was a play that the board and students would appreciate for the material that it was exploring. Dr. Barnes, however, and I eventually agreed that the material, for the reasons listed above, would be too much for a college student audience. A former graduate student, Jason V. Campbell, also did part of his thesis project on Robert Chesley. He did a staged reading of Chesley's tamer work, *Jerker*, which portrays a phone sex relationship, the evolution of safe gay sex, as Dr. Barnes felt that any of Chesley's works would be inappropriate for full staging on a student stage. I was a bit disheartened, but I fully understood that decision. Now, I had to come

up with a play that would explore taboo topics without completely offending everyone. I reached out to a playwright with whom I was already familiar from my first year in college...Tracy Letts.

## Chapter 3—Directing *Killer Joe*...eventually...almost.

### Introduction to *Killer Joe*

In Fall 2008, I taught Intro to Drama for the first time. In that semester, one of the plays that the students read was *August: Osage County* by Tracy Letts—the second of his plays to which I was exposed. This play is “traditional” family drama in which the entire family has come together to search for the patriarch of the family, who has gone missing. Through the play we see the severe dysfunction among the thirteen family members through type A personalities, a separated couple who pretend to still be together, drug usage, sibling rivalries, and cousins who fall in love. This three and a half hour play won several Tony awards and was well received by most of the students. I, as well, was absorbed into another one of Letts’ plays in spite of it being completely different type of play from *Bug*. It appeared to me that Letts can aptly write plays in a variety of genres.

I talked about *August: Osage County* with Ron Keller, the professor in charge of the Intro to Drama class. He picked up on my interest in Tracy Letts’ plays and provided me a copy of *Killer Joe*, Tracy Letts’ first full length play. *Killer Joe* has some obvious parallels to *Bug* and *August: Osage County*, in that it revolves around a dysfunctional family who make brash choices based on incomplete or incorrect information, but this was yet a third genre of play written by Letts with an overall tone more in line with pulp fiction. Letts describes the impressions of his work during an interview when the film adaption of the play was released in 2012, “One of the principal aspects of that kind of *noir* is people who want things really badly—who want and need and feel things really strongly, and yet who make some terrible decisions in their

attempts to get them. I think something about that is very human, something we can all identify with.” (Peterseim) I found this play to be very interesting and disturbing.

*Killer Joe* opens with a half naked woman, Sharla, answering the door of the trailer. Immediately, the reader or viewer knows that this play is potentially offensive in that the lower half of a woman’s body is on display. Her step-son, Chris, is the one who answers the door to Sharla’s exposed vagina as clear as the morning sun. The play’s premise is revealed in the opening scene. Chris, who has been kicked out his mother’s house, tries to borrow money from his father, Ansel, in order to hire a hit man to kill his mother for stealing Chris’s coke and to inherit money to pay off a loan shark to which Chris owes \$6,000. In the first fifteen minutes of the play, the audience is challenged with female nudity, drug dealing and usage (Chris rolls a joint and smokes it with his father during the opening scene), murder for hire, and language that is offensive to many (swearing as well as three different slang terms for a vagina). Letts immediately bombards the audience with a realistic scene in which we see a lower-class, redneck family being themselves, making knee-jerk decisions over a situation which only compounds the problems being faced. Many potentially off-putting situations are revealed throughout the entire play. Chris’s sister, Dottie, is offered as collateral for the money needed to pay the hit man. Killer Joe Cooper falls for Dottie, has her undress for him on stage and seduces Dottie as he reaches under her skirt. Sharla is beaten by Joe on stage and is forced to simulate giving Joe a blow job while Joe holds a chicken leg at his crotch. Finally, the play ends with a frantic scene of violence in which multiple characters are shot and tensions are high as Dottie reveals that she is pregnant. In this brief synopsis of the play, many of the “terrible decisions” that Letts referred to are revealed. I wanted to see a production of this play.

## The First Proposal

At the end of each semester, the SALT board accepts play proposals for the upcoming semester. These directing opportunities are given first to graduate students and then to undergraduate students who have taken the directing class. I decided to make a proposal for the Spring 2009 season. What better decision than *Killer Joe*? Why not direct this play that I found so intriguing so that others can see this wonderful work? I submitted my proposal to the SALT board which included a copy of the script for the board to read. I was contacted by Barry Bell, the faculty advisor to the SALT board. In this role, Mr. Bell does not make any selections of which plays are chosen for the season but advises the board in terms of the appropriateness of the plays they have selected. During this semester, I was Mr. Bell's teaching assistant in the Acting for the Camera class. He approached me before class regarding my proposal. Mr. Bell was concerned about the amount of foul language and some of the nudity that is in *Killer Joe*. He wanted to know what my intentions were regarding some of these elements of the script. I advised him that I was hoping to do the script as close to verbatim as possible, but I was flexible to any suggestions that he would have in terms of edits and staging. It was at this time, I was told that *Killer Joe* had been previously proposed as a mainstage play at VCU but was not produced due to the language and the nudity. Mr. Bell's concern about the female nudity on the SALT stage is that the stage is elevated above the audience. If a female was nude from the waist down, the audience would be looking directly up at her uncovered vagina. I reiterated that I was open to any recommendations he would have on the staging of this play in order to make it acceptable for the SALT stage. My proposal was not accepted. While I was upset about the decision, I was still a novice at directing and knew that more opportunities would present themselves.

## The thesis proposal

When Dr. Barnes felt that Robert Chesley's *Night Sweat* was inappropriate for a thesis project on the SALT stage, I immediately suggested *Killer Joe* as an alternate. Dr. Barnes thought that it was a good choice since the play involves several taboo areas in language, visuals and topics. She was aware of the failed mainstage proposal previously made by Gary Hopper, but I assured Dr. Barnes, as I did with Barry Bell years earlier, that I would take great care in how much was shown to the audience and playing with the idea of suggestion in terms of the nudity in order to make it acceptable on the SALT stage. Also, the SALT stage has done shows that have been laden with taboo topics and themes previously, such as *Red Light Winter* and *Beirut*. I didn't think *Killer Joe* goes any further than either of these two shows. By having both Dr. Barnes and Mr. Bell on my thesis committee, as well as making myself open to both of them in terms of staging, I thought that my recommendation for a show would be accepted by the SALT board for a fully staged production of the show in Spring, 2012.

In anticipation of doing *Killer Joe* as a full production, I took the opportunity to workshop Act 1, Scene 1 in the directing class that I was taking with Josh Chenard. As the final project in the directing class, I needed to direct a fifteen minute play or part of a play. After doing selections from *Dead Man's Cell Phone* (a mostly seated, text driven scene) and *Death Knocks* (a Woody Allen comedy blending text and some situational humor), I thought a more dramatic selection would provide a well rounded learning experience as well as fleshing out my ideas for the SALT production. The exploration this class provided allowed me to realize that the set layout I had in mind would work, the ideas of vocal and physical pacing would need to be explored with the actors cast, and my initial vision of body types for certain roles would work with the text of the play. This experimentation of the scene went well, and I received solid

feedback as well as recommendations about the scene if the full play was to be performed. I knew the full staging would be great if given the opportunity.

The SALT board meets individually with each of the students who are proposing a play for the upcoming season. The board wants to make certain that the director has a sound plan for doing the show, the director is aware of the SALT rules and guidelines for using the space, and any questions that the director might have can be answered prior to committing to do the show. I met with Sarah Worden and John Kernisky regarding my thesis proposal of *Killer Joe*. Their concerns were in line with those that I had already discussed with Dr. Barnes and Mr. Bell. They wanted to make certain that the students who were playing the roles in which nudity was involved were clearly aware of the expectations at the time of auditioning and that they would sign a waiver after being cast in the show clearly stating that they were agreeing to appear nude or partially nude on stage during the production. I assured them that I was on board with that requirement as well as making any warnings that they felt were necessary on publicity for the show. They also questioned me about my thesis topic. Previous graduate students used the claim of “thesis project” in order to be guaranteed a space directing on the SALT stage without actually using the play in the thesis paper. I assured them that *Killer Joe* would be part of my thesis project and went into a brief discussion of my thesis with them. After about thirty minutes, all questions were asked and answered by everyone involved. About a week and a half later, I received confirmation that *Killer Joe* would be part of the Spring 2012 SALT season. I was excited to move forward with this project. I would spend that Christmas season not only in a production of *White Christmas* and in rehearsals for *Fiddler on the Roof*, but also pulling together the concepts for a full production of *Killer Joe*.

## **Casting the Show and Fight Choreography**

I knew there would be some possible problems with casting the show due to the number of taboo themes that this show presented. While language, weapon usage and fight choreography would be elements to overcome, the largest problem, in my opinion, was going to be finding three actors (2 female and 1 male) who would be willing to be naked or partially naked on stage. Madeline Lovegrove played the role of Dottie for my scene in directing class and was willing to do the full play in the same role. Dottie must get naked on stage at the direction of Joe just before the end of Act 1. They are on a first date as Dottie is received by Joe as collateral. She has shown Joe the dress that she was going to wear, and Joe has asked her to put it on. Instead of letting Dottie go to her room to change, Joe orders Dottie to do it there in the same room as Joe. The other two roles that are naked or partially naked are Sharla and Joe. Sharla is naked from the waist down at the top of the show. She enters the living area, she answers the door, and instead of returning to bed, she stays in the living area and has a beer. Joe is completely naked at the top of Act 2. As Chris breaks into the trailer, Joe is startled awake and sneaks up on the “intruder”. He has come from Dottie’s bedroom where he and Dottie were sleeping together. Sharla’s scene has to have her naked as several lines of dialogue refer to her being naked and her “beaver hanging out.” (Letts 9) Joe’s scene, while showing the intimacy he is having with Dottie, is not required in order to have the scene and the rest of the play be fully understood.

I had the auditions on February 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>, with callbacks as needed on February 28<sup>th</sup>. On the notification that I posted, I listed that both females and one male cast in the show would require nudity. I created a sign-in sheet which included the standard experience requests, but also had sections asking “Are you willing to be naked (partially or fully) on stage,” “Have you

ever fired a gun,” and “Been around gun fire?” These were all issues that I needed to make clear to the actors prior to being cast if they were going to be in the show. There would be a gun fired in the show. There was going to be nudity required. If I was unable to find actors willing to do these elements of the show, I would have to redesign the show to adapt or not direct this particular show. On the first day of the auditions, only one male actor showed up. This could be a problem. I was hoping more would show up the second day. They did not. To further complicate the situation, the actor who showed up, Chase Little, listed that he wanted to play the role of Chris but his physical appearance was that of Joe, the cop and hired killer. At his audition, I asked him if he would consider playing the role of Joe. He was a little hesitant due to this role requiring the nudity. I told him that the nudity was something that could be discussed and was not a necessity for the role, but to keep it as a consideration. He said that he would, but I could clearly see he was uncertain about playing the role.

I invited everyone who auditioned on Monday to return to callbacks on Tuesday in the hopes that if anyone else showed up, I could have different pairs read for scenes that I had selected. With no new actors showing up on the second day of auditions, my preliminary casting decisions based on day one were becoming more solidified. Nothing significantly new was shown by the five actresses to sway my casting decisions. The challenge that remained was finding two more male actors who would be interested in doing this play and convincing Chase that Joe was the best role for him.

The actresses that I cast were Madeline Lovegrove as Dottie (I was glad she auditioned), and Grace Earley as Sharla. Grace stated that she was fine with the nudity, but she did ask some questions about how long she would be nude and the context of the nudity since she had not yet read the play. I addressed her concerns letting Grace know that if she was uncomfortable about

the decision to be nude from the waist down that I was more than willing to discuss with her options to the situation. I had already made a backup plan, an extra long T-shirt, in case she was unwilling to be naked. With the actresses cast, I offered the role of Joe to Chase. I was hoping that since Madeline, Grace and Chase were all first year acting students that they would want to work together on this project, and that in spite of not getting the role he wanted, Chase would still want to work with two of his friends. I did not immediately hear back from Chase. I was a little bit worried that he would not accept the role. My concerns were eased on March 4<sup>th</sup> when Chase finally accepted the role. I had not confirmed both other male actors at this point, but I was getting closer to filling my cast.

Connor Scully did a role for me in one of my other scenes for directing class. He did not show up for the auditions for *Killer Joe*, but he did mention that he wanted to work with me again. I saw him on February 29<sup>th</sup> between classes and asked him if he would be interested in the role of Ansel. He reiterated his interest in working with me again, and we scheduled an audition for the next day. As far as I was concerned, this was merely a formality, but I wanted to see what he had to offer in terms of a prepared monologue. Connor did well for what I needed from him for the role of Ansel. Connor accepted the role after the audition and confirmed his role acceptance by e-mail on March 4 when the cast was posted.

I would have liked to have the actor that did the role of Chris in my directing class, but he was academically ineligible. I approached Patrick Long about playing the role of Chris on March 2<sup>nd</sup> in Acting II class. I was the teaching assistant in his Acting II class, so I knew the quality of Patrick's work. Patrick told me that he wanted to come to the auditions, but he was unable to make it due to his schedule. I offered Patrick the role, gave him a copy of the script,

and told him to let me know as soon as he could. On March 4, Patrick accepted the role. I had my Chris...I had my cast. The show was a go.

Back in December, 2011, I had talked with Dan Granke, a fellow graduate student, if he would be able to help me with the fight choreography for *Killer Joe*. He was excited to work on this show. Dan had told me that he had met Chuck Coyl, the original fight choreographer for *Killer Joe* when it premiered in Evanston, IL. Chuck had shared with Dan a story about the origination of the “chicken leg” scene. Chuck told Dan that Tracy Letts wanted something to be done to Sharla so that she would be degraded when Joe revealed that the entire plan had fallen through. The bucket of chicken had already been part of the scene for the post funeral dinner. A simple comment about having the chicken already in the scene was made and an infamous scene of forced fellatio on a chicken leg was created. I had asked Dan to see if Chuck would be available for me to contact, but he never received a reply about it. Dan had several ideas about a breakaway knife and collapsible potato peeler similar to those used in the original production. We walked the stage in Newdick Theatre talking about set layout and how the fight choreography would work in the space. His addition to the creative team of this show was extremely fortunate, and his excitement for this project was infectious.

### **A Hiccup in the Road**

With the cast set, I planned for a first rehearsal/read-through to occur on Wednesday, March 7 at Noon. I asked the cast to meet at this time so I could give them scripts prior to Spring Break, giving the actors more than a week to work on lines and character development. All of the actors could make it to this read-through. I did not ask for any of the designers that I had on the creative team to be there as I had discussed with them individually about lights and

set. My fight choreographer, Dan, wanted to be there but could not. He did ask for a rehearsal shortly after Spring Break to work with the actors involved any of the fighting (slaps, choke holds, punches and the large fight scene at the end of the play). Morgan Barbour, who had auditioned but was not cast, agreed to be my assistant on this production helping obtain props or other activities with which I needed assistance. She also was unable to make this first read though, but she was on board with the project.

On the same day that I announced the cast, March 2, Dr. Barnes sent me an e-mail and asked to meet with me on March 5<sup>th</sup> regarding the production of *Killer Joe*. We met at 1 PM that afternoon in her office. Dr. Barnes informed me that at a faculty meeting, there were some faculty members concerned about me doing this production. I was a bit surprised that this concern was first being brought up at this time since the show was selected to be part of the SALT season nearly three months earlier. Dr. Barnes has assured me that faculty members Barry Bell, Josh Chenard and she were all supporting me and the decision to do this show as a thesis project. They had all stepped up on my behalf to make certain that any concerns that the faculty had would be addressed and the students participating in the production would be protected from doing anything with which they were not comfortable. There was no indication that any further action would be taken in the prevention of doing my production, however, Dr. Barnes felt that it was important to make me aware of the situation. While a bit stunned that this had happened, I felt assured that my best interests were being looked after and that my exploration of this piece of theater was intact.

The cast and I met at the scheduled time, and we did a read-through. For a couple of the students, this was their first read-through of the entire play. I approached this read-through as an opportunity to make some initial discoveries about the characters, to convey my vision to the

cast, and to explore the status that each character held in relation to one another. I also pointed out some subtle clues that are dropped throughout the play as to the outcome of the play. The cast responded to some of these nuances with “oohs,” as they were seeing how the picture of the play was being pieced together. The cast left this read-through with excitement to get started after Spring Break. Before leaving, I provided the cast with a rehearsal schedule for the six weeks after Break so that they were able to block off that time for our project.

I was excited. I had a cast that was excited. I had an exciting script. Everything was lined up and ready to go...or so I thought. After spending a lovely evening with my wife enjoying *The Lion King*, we went home, and I started packing for the Southeastern Theatre Conference that I was presenting at on March 10. While it was late and I was planning to be on the road early in the morning, I went on the internet to check my e-mail. Dr. Barnes e-mailed me that the chair of the department had cancelled my production of *Killer Joe*, but she did state I would still be able to do a staged reading with the same cast. I was livid.

In the morning, I contacted Barry Bell to inform him of the situation and if he was able to shed any light on the situation for me. He could not but reminded me about the inability to do it as a mainstage show. This didn't help much, but he encouraged me to go forward with the reading.

Upon my return to VCU after break, the chair stated that his concerns stemmed from my contributions to Adanma Oneydike's production. He apologized for the timing of the decision, three months after the play was selected by SALT, and explained that things sometimes get overlooked. I left this meeting unsatisfied in the outcome, but decided to move forward with the

reading that Dr. Barnes mentioned I would still be able to do. I had to inform my cast about the decision.

The first rehearsal was scheduled for Thursday, March 22<sup>nd</sup>. Instead of finding a rehearsal room, I asked the cast to meet in the student lounge. Once the entire cast, including Morgan, was together in the lounge, I informed them of the situation. Some of the cast members stated that they had heard some gossip in regards to the show being cancelled, but they had not thought it was credible. I told them that the production was not cancelled, but the production had been “downgraded” to a staged reading. I told the cast that if they were upset about the decision that they should talk to me or they should talk to Barry Bell. The cast was as a whole upset, but they saw that we were still going to be able to explore this theatrical piece and do a fully realized staged reading. I told them that what was beneficial to them was that rehearsals would not be starting for a few weeks, and they would be able to explore the character more as they did not have to be off book for any of the show. We would deal with the fight choreography as soon as I was able to talk with Dan Granke about it. After this initial meeting with the cast, I thought that I did a good job about hiding my frustrations with the situation I had been dealt. I was told later by the cast that it was quite apparent throughout the rehearsal process.

## Chapter 4—Moving Forward

### The Lessons of Performing *Killer Joe*

In the last six years, I have developed an aesthetic to create theatre that was provocative and pushed the boundaries of societal norms. However, this is an aesthetic that is not universally welcomed by theatre companies. As a theatre practitioner, until I own my own company, I will be subject to the desires and guidelines of another person or group of people. I must tread lightly with the theatre that is interesting to me. However, I am not completely defined by or limited by my aesthetic. I am flexible in my work and fortunately work well with others.

But there is more to take from this situation. By directing *Killer Joe* as a fully actualized staged reading (minimal set with full blocking while actor's carried scripts) instead of a full production, I was forced to create entirely new blocking for the end fight sequence. This is a dynamically charged scene which can be played out over several minutes in spite of it having very few spoken lines. Dan Granke and I needed to come up with a new vision for the final scene since the actors were doing this as a staged reading. Dan suggested a series of tableaux that would portray various stages of the fight, each emphasizing what character(s) had the control of the scene and what character(s) were struggling to maintain life. We created a series of ten tableaux which involved a series of choke holds, punches, stabs, and wrestling holds as well as physical reactions by characters trying to stay out of the fight. This series showed the kinetic energy of the scene within the static images. Several of the audience members commented on how these images brought the urgency of the scene to life without it being a full-fledged fight. In the face of adversity, look for the opportunity.

I learned that in spite of being proactive in addressing potentially problematic areas of the script, a production can be shut down at any time from people in charge of a theatre. I had made decisions about the three actors who were scripted to be naked, and, in two of the three situations, I had back up plans in case the actor would not be willing to do the nudity (Dottie had to strip on stage). I had taken into consideration how the actors would be blocked so that the nudity would not be as blatant to the audience (Sharla facing up stage when naked below the waist; Dottie stripping behind the kitchen table to cover most of her below the waist). I had been aware of the amount of fight choreography necessary throughout the show and had Dan Granke on board with the project before the proposal was submitted. I had been aware of the amount of language that was in the play and was willing, albeit reluctantly so, to modify the amount of language in the show if it was deemed excessive. In spite of all of these considerations and the knowledge that these subject matters would have to be addressed on the poster, *Killer Joe* was not able to be done as a full production.

I also learned that not everything an actor says is accurate. At the end of the last staged reading, I bought pizza for the cast and had a brief post mortem with the cast. I asked the cast if there was anything about the production that they were uncomfortable with that they had not previously told me. While all of the actors had indicated their acceptance of at least partial nudity on their audition sheets, several indicated that they would not have been comfortable with staging the nudity as it was indicated in the script. Two reasons for this were not truly being ready to do nudity on the stage and also not wanting to do nudity on the student stage. The people who would see the staged reading were primarily friends and fellow students of the cast. The cast expressed concern that they would have to face their friends after being in compromising situations that weren't truly themselves. I found out during the post mortem that

the actors playing Joe and Sharla were very close friends. The roles that they were playing were in opposition to their actual relationship. They were concerned that friends would laugh at the chicken leg scene. They were glad that it was only simulated in the staged reading.

The cast was also quite happy with the way some things came out through the staged reading that would have been more explicit in the full production. Madeline Lovegrove stated that some of her friends commented on the scene where she was to strip on stage. They were impressed with the mime work that Madeline did during the scene making it seem like she actually got naked even though she never removed a single article of clothing. The mind can imagine much more than what is actually seen. Sometimes it is better to allow the audience to imagine what they would have been seeing had it been fully staged.

Finally, I learned that my ideas of casting were well on point. While getting some positive feedback from patrons who saw the show, a stronger vindication of my casting came when I saw the movie *Killer Joe* in August, 2012. The casting of the movie and my casting of the play were very similar in the body types and in the physicalization that I had my actors perform. Chris was the shortest of the men. While confident, bordering cocky, to his father and step-mother, Chris cowers in the face of true authority. Ansel lives his life day to day, focuses only on what makes him happy, and tries not to create conflict. He goes with the flow of the situation at hand and is the weakest character. Joe is tall, confident and carries an air of well deserved arrogance. He is a calm tempest keeping everything in control until he needs to act, then he acts decisively, after carefully calculating all options. Sharla is tall, slender and curvy southern belle with a clearly vicious streak in her when wronged. She will snake her way around situations trying not to get caught while attempting to downplay any involvement when confronted. Dottie is small and deceptively smart. She is highly aware of everything while

appearing to know nothing. I could show the ten pictures of my cast and the movie cast, and people would easily be able to pair the actors who played the same role in the two productions.

## **Beyond VCU**

As I prepare to leave the safe confines of university life and venture out into the Greater Richmond Theatre scene and throughout Virginia, what can I expect as a response to my aesthetic? In the Richmond area alone there are nearly a dozen theatres that produce shows every year. How would I be able to approach this market in order to not only work but get works out there that I would be interested in directing while not being shunned for what I do?

The Castaways Repertory Theatre in Woodbridge, Virginia recently experienced such a problem in selecting plays. Castaways' is a community theatre which started producing plays in 1981. They produce three plays every year which vary from Shakespeare to contemporary musicals. According to Julie Little, a fellow VCU graduate student, the theatre company brought in a new Artistic Director from California in 2004. While the subscription base at Castaways is relatively conservative, the new artistic director was progressive and broader minded with concern to "acceptable" theatre. The first show that the new director produced in Fall 2004 was *How I Learned to Drive* by Paula Vogel. This play explores the themes of pedophilia, incest and misogyny through an extended metaphor of learning how to drive. The play focuses the developing relationship between Lil' Bit and her Uncle Peck, both outsiders in the family. Uncle Peck gives Lil' Bit a driving lesson at the age of 11 where he molests her. The molestation continues through Lil' Bit's puberty until she leaves for college. Uncle Peck maintains contact with his niece sending her gifts. When she turns eighteen, Uncle Peck hopes to finally have sex with Lil' Bit, but instead she permanently severs their relationship. While this is a Pulitzer Prize winning play for the way it handles these sensitive issues, it was not

appreciated by the Castaways' audience. Julie told me that several patrons left during the show, and the theatre lost a significant portion of their subscription base.

Over the next seven years, Castaways produced twenty “safe” plays including *The Miracle Worker*, *Odd Couple*, *Rumors*, and *My Fair Lady*. Their production of *Twelve Angry Men* was done as the original all male cast instead of the modernized version *Twelve Angry Jurors*. The re-establishment of their subscription base was working until 2011 when they did the play *Empty Closets*, a new work about a young man coming home and telling his parents and hometown girlfriend that he is gay. This again offended some of the Castaways' membership. Letters were written and members were lost, again.

Julie was partially surprised at the patron's reactions, since edgier theatre can be done “ten miles up the road.” For a theatre like the Woolly Mammoth in Washington D.C., “artistic risk is a way of life for us.” (woollymammoth.net) Julie mentioned that there was no notification given to the patronage for either show. While the first incident was a situation of a new artistic director being true to her own aesthetic without knowing her client base, the second play should have been handled better. While *Empty Closets* lacked the graphic themes of inappropriate sex between family members, I believe that in the seven years between incidents the artistic director should have been able to obtain a better sense of the client base. Castaways needs to follow the example of other theatres like The Woolly Mammoth whose website provides a myriad of media to provide as much information for potential patrons to make informed decisions about their theatre going experience.

A similar situation of nearby theatres being able to produce vastly different productions occurs in Richmond. This was noted by Amy Berlin, a free-lance director, originally from the

Maryland-DC area. She was surprised at how conservative some of the theatres in the Richmond area can be compared to others. Amy Berlin has worked at several of the theatres on a variety of different productions. Her directing in the Richmond theatres includes *The 13<sup>th</sup> of Paris* and *Almost, Maine* at Chamberlayne Actors' Theatre (CAT), *Bus Stop* at Barksdale Theatre-Hanover Tavern (now a part of Virginia Rep), *Comfort & Joy* at Richmond Triangle Players, and *You Can't Take It With You* at Fort Lee Playhouse. Amy also serves on the play reading committee for CAT. When CAT selects their four play season, they will select one show, usually the third of the season, which pushes a few of the boundaries of their subscription base. In spite of being careful, CAT will still receive complaints for the plays that they select. Most recently, they received complaints about the farce *The Fox in the Fairway*. She finds the conservatism in many of the Richmond theatres a bit perplexing. She was more familiar to the theatre scene in DC in which a broader variety of theatre is played. While she worked at the Richmond Triangle Players, she had more freedom in the text and staging that she was able to do. Richmond Triangle Players produces diverse theatre in themes and topics. They are the local LGBT theatre who has used the phrase "if not us, then who" in terms of their theatre. Amy told me that when selecting plays for CAT, they are very careful to select plays based on their language as well as the themes. However, "Triangle patrons keep asking for more. And Triangle is quite successful, so there must be a market for it. It just doesn't work for every theatre."

So what can I take from these two colleagues? Regardless of the market, I must be aware of the theatre at which I work. If I am making a proposal for a show, I need to know what their client base is and make proposals that they will be willing to produce. Similarly, if I am asked to direct a show that is already selected by the theatre, I need to be aware of their expectations in a director. I need to be open to artistic opportunities that are interesting in spite of not being

directly in line with my aesthetic of pushing boundaries. I need to find theatres like Triangle Players in Richmond, the Woolly Mammoth in DC, or a larger market such as New York City that offers more theatres that have much broader audiences. I have experienced New York City's open mindedness by acting in a gay farce, *The Taint of Equality* in June, 2012. It is plays like this that I would like to bring to other markets. My professional work has a goal. Now is the time to venture out into the professional theatre world and attempt to do more quality, boundary pushing theatre. "To Sontag, to Sondheim, to anything taboo...La Vie Boheme."

## **Epilogue**

Riverside Dinner Theatre announces auditions for *The Full Monty*. "Monty Men and Keno: if you are auditioning for these roles you need to be very comfortable with your body: enough to perform on stage in your underwear and eventually a g-string. Trust is the key for this production and you will be taken care of respectfully and our final moment will be powerful, yet careful. You will not be asked to take your clothes off for your audition."

My audition is Monday, December 17 at 6:30pm.

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## **Vita**

David Todd Zimmerman was born on August 10, 1973, in Milwaukee County, Wisconsin, and is an American citizen. He graduated from Wauwatosa West High School, Wauwatosa, Wisconsin in 1991. He received his Bachelor of Science in Math Education from Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana in 1995. He worked as a hotel manager for two years followed by being a Deputy Sheriff in Racine County, Wisconsin for nine years. This eclectic work history has helped him keep an open mind to the vast possibilities of what can be.