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DEN OF THIEVES: APPROPRIATING AND APPLYING THE COLLABORATIVE IDEALS OF THE LABYRINTH THEATER COMPANY

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Department of Theatre
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April 10, 2006

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DEN OF THIEVES:
APPROPRIATING AND APPLYING THE COLLABORATIVE IDEALS OF
THE LABYRINTH THEATER COMPANY

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

by

TIMOTHY MICHAEL BAMBARA
Bachelor of Arts, James Madison University, 2003

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I would like to thank certain members of the *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* cast of the Richmond, VA premiere. Thanks to director Tovah Nunez, as well as cast members Theodore Snead and Jeffery Schmidt. I would like to thank the cast members of *Den of Thieves*, along with the production team. I would also like to thank the South Eastern Theatre Conference, which gave me the opportunity to deliver a presentation on the LABYrinth Theater Company. I would like to thank my brother, Thomas Bambara, who gladly filmed the production of *Den of Thieves*. Finally, I would like to thank Stephen Adly Guirgis for his courageous words.

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Abstract

DEN OF THIEVES:
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By Timothy Michael Bambara, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2006

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

My goal was to successfully appropriate the collaborative ideals of the LAByrrinth Theater Company and incorporate them into my directorial process while working on a collegiate production. I gathered a large amount of information from my visit and contact with the LAB and through personal interviews with the Co-Artistic Director and the Developmental Director. I had seen two of their shows and I was familiar with the quality of production that I had to uphold. I played a lead role in Guirgis' *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* and I was familiar with the rhythm, the dialect and the seriocomic matters of the

plays. *Den of Thieves* is Guirgis' first published play. I chose this project for my thesis production because I wanted to work with younger actors on a play that is not produced often. Although the company was not part of the playwriting process, the actors, director, and crew would use the collaborative ideals of the LAByrinth Theater Company to form the production. I was interested in forming a group that was diverse in ethnical background and theatrical capabilities. I wanted to see if this play and the collaborative ideals would be successful with collegiate actors. I wanted to test the material on a collegiate audience. By doing this work I hoped to instill these ideals with members of the company so that they could be positive in their future theatrical communities. I also hoped to inspire interest from the audience in Guirgis' work as well as the LAByrinth Theater Company of New York.

CHAPTER 1

Enter the Labyrinth

The Mission Statement of the LAByrinth Theater Company

LAByrinth Theater Company is a multicultural collective that produces new plays reflecting the many voices in our New York City community. We are fully committed to maintaining an ensemble that combines emerging artists with seasoned professionals. It is our goal, as an ensemble, to take on all the roles involved in the collaborative process of creating new theater. Through these works, our members are given the opportunity to write, act, direct, design and produce. We support multi-disciplinary growth as well as discovery and exploration. We give artists from diverse backgrounds the opportunity to work.

The History of the LAByrinth Theater Company

LAByrinth was founded in 1992 when thirteen actors joined forces to form a place to work. The idea was to create a home where the group, for three hours each week, could engage in a variety of theatrical exercises designed to push each others' limits and bind together into a tightly knit, uninhibited and impassioned ensemble - one in which each member is given the opportunity and support not only to act, but to write, direct, produce, sweep, paint, hang lights, etcetera.

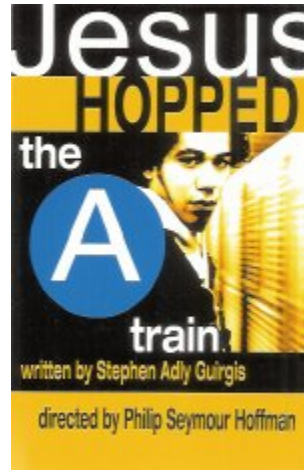
The fact that the company now consists of 96 members from a wide array of cultural perspectives (including Puerto Rican, Japanese, Israeli, Dominican, Egyptian, Jewish, Irish, Korean, Cuban, Italian, Mexican and African-American) did not occur through some political design. It grew out of a shared artistic sensibility and a desire to create personal work that reflects the community in which the company lives: New York City.

LAByrinth is dedicated to developing new plays through a unique creative process. Each play LAByrinth produces is first presented at the Company's annual Summer Intensive – a concentrated two-week retreat where Company Members and invited guest artists create brand new material and develop current works in progress. By surrounding the playwright with talented and passionate artists, this supportive environment allows freedom of expression and nurtures creativity. After the Intensive, selected works move to the next stage in the creative process and are presented in one of two public forums in New York City. These public readings give the playwright and his/her creative team further opportunity to rehearse and explore the text in front of an audience.

In the Kitchen is a semi-annual, informal reading series where plays in progress are performed in a casual setting, with minimal staging, in front of an invited audience. The Barn Series is a more formal reading series of plays in progress which are more fully staged and rehearsed. The Barn Series is open free of charge to the general public and considered part of LAByrinth's annual season. Works presented at The Barn Series and In the Kitchen are considered each year to become a part of future LAByrinth seasons as fully-staged productions.

To date, LAByrinth has produced 41 new American plays and has received 6 Drama Desk Award nominations, 5 Lucille Lortel Award nominations, 2 Drama League Award nominations, 2 AUDELCO Award nominations, 1 Olivier Award nominations, an Edinburgh Fringe First Award and the 2002 Jujamcyn Theaters Award for outstanding contribution to the development of creative talent for the theater.

Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train



In the summer of 2002 I had an opportunity to study abroad in London, England through a six-week program offered at James Madison University, where I was completing my undergraduate degree. I was planning on participating in the program since my freshman year and I worked to meet the GPA requirements and to get the recommendations. It was a trip that my parents insisted that I attend, even though at the time, they really didn't have the money to send me. Somehow my parents and I found the financial support. Before I got on the plane to London I knew that the visit was a tremendous opportunity and I needed to make the most of my experience.

As soon as I landed at Heathrow airport I picked up a copy of *Time Out* magazine (London). I flipped right to the theatre section to find out what was going on that summer. I circled everything of interest and plotted out a theatre schedule so that I would see about 5 shows a week during the 6 weeks of the trip. London theatre tickets are significantly lower priced than New York, prices averaging about a third of what one would pay in New York for the same quality shows, so it pays to take advantage of the opportunities. This

was a chance for me to experience a smorgasbord of theatre over a few weeks of the summer, between my junior and senior years of college.

I was fortunate to have two theatre companions along for the trip. One young woman was a theatre major and the other was a musical theatre major, both at James Madison University. We all shared a similar mission, to see as much theatre as possible, and Jesse, Lauren and I would gladly sacrifice a night of clubbing or drinking at a pub to check out a show on the fringe.

I arrived in the middle of June and the theatrical season had already been launched weeks before my arrival. My first attempt was to find tickets for the final performances of Kenneth Lonergan's *This is Our Youth* starring American imports, Matt Damon, Casey Affleck, and Summer Phoenix. Needless to say, this was a lost cause, and it was quite impossible to find tickets to the final performances of that play with that cast. What was interesting about the summer season of 2002 was that there were numerous "American imports" not only plays, but also casts and companies. As an alternative for that Thursday evening's event I suggested another play that was in its last runs at the ARTS Theatre of London.

I am not sure what drew me to the performance that particular night. Perhaps it was the title. *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* somehow appealed to my religious stance, "Catholic on Hiatus". I know that during my formative college years and still in the present it is a struggle to keep a faith in the teachings of the Catholic Church and I often feel abandoned. It might have been the poster and the blurb about the show I read in *Time*

Out. There was a black and gold picture of a Hispanic man waiting in front of a subway train and it was labeled as a gritty prison drama with explorations of faith.

I am fairly certain that name recognition had something to do with the choice. Actor Philip Seymour Hoffman was listed as the director of the production. I had known Hoffman's work from growing up with a number of his movies particularly David Mamet's *State and Main*, his work in the Cohen Brothers' film *The Big Lebowski*, as well as his stage work in the revival of Sam Shepard's *True West*, on Broadway in 2000. Hoffman recently won the Academy Award for Best Actor 2005 for his work in the bio-picture *Capote*. Still, three years ago, he was not a household celebrity. He worked as an independent film actor and stage actor. There was something particularly intriguing about the attachment of his name as director for the production. It did not take too much to persuade my companions to accompany me to the show that night. I boarded the tube in Tottenham and headed for Leicester Square.

I have some visceral images of entering the theatre that night. I remember that it was extremely hot (they don't really have central air in the theatres of London) and I was very anxious to kick off the summer. It was dark and muggy. I remember the theatre being full of smoke although I don't think cigarettes were allowed in the theatre. I remember there being a force of energy in the crowd, not too different from my own anxious feelings.

The lights went down and then came up on a young Puerto Rican man in a prison cell. He looked like someone was going to shoot him and his eyes were wide and full of tears. He desperately tried to pray the *Our Father* but could not remember the words. He continued to trip over the prayer, particularly the word "hallowed". As he fought his way

through the prayer other prisoners started to shout at him “Shut the Fuck Up! Shut the Fuck Up! Tell that praying nigga to shut the fuck up! We gonna’ kill you Cruz!” The young man, now breathing and crying and shouting uncontrollably, screamed “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come...” Just then a prison guard was seen in the shadows with his nightstick cocked in his hand. The guard told him to “Shut the fuck up!” and the young man replied to the guard with in the midst of his angst and confusion, “You shut the fuck up!” The lights went black and it was quite apparent that the guard was about to beat the hell out of the young man. The prisoners would then follow suit.

This was my first time hearing the words of playwright Stephen Adly Guirgis. This was my first time witnessing the powerful performance of John Ortiz as Angel Cruz. This was my first exposure to the work of the LAByrinth Theater Company. I felt like I had been shot at with a machine gun. I was completely transfixed by this work.

The play continues to follow the story of Angel Cruz, a young Puerto Rican, who is accused of murder after shooting a cult leader in the behind. The “Reverend Kim” is the victim, a fictional character based of the real leader of the Unification Church, Reverend Moon Sun-myung. It is revealed that Angel goes to shoot the Reverend Kim in order to free his child-hood friend, Joey, who had been brainwashed by the cult. At the last second, Angel couldn’t kill the man but did manage to pull the trigger, shooting the Reverend Kim in the ass. Later in the play, the Reverend Kim dies of a heart attack on the operating table, while doctors try to remove the bullet. Guirgis poses a moral dilemma where Angel must chose to claim responsibility for the life of Reverend Kim, or chose an alternative path

of playing to the sympathies of the jury. Guirgis takes the majority of the play weighing the consciences of the characters along with the consciences of the audience.

Guirgis includes four other characters. Mary Jane Hanrahan is Angel's Irish Catholic Lawyer who believes that Angel did not deliberately murder the Reverend Kim. She pursues legal and moral "loopholes" throughout the play in his defense. Two characters are prison guards, the sympathetic Charlie D'Amico, who is soon replaced by the masochistic guard Valdez (who is most likely the guard who beats up Cruz in the beginning of the play). Perhaps the most compelling character that Guirgis creates is the serial killer, born again Christian, Lucius Jenkins, Angel's cellmate in 24 hour lock down. The role was originated by *Law and Order's* Ron Cephas Jones and is a role that requires a physically and emotionally versatile performance. When I saw the performance, Ortiz, Jones, and the rest of the cast were incerdibly in tune with their bodies, the language of the play, the audience, and each other. The play is an ensemble piece, although the scenes between Cruz and Lucius Jenkins make up the heart of the play. To avoid too much more plot synopsis, I felt as though I was inside Ryker's Island prison for 2 hours, and I didn't feel like I had the ability to leave.

At the end of the night, Angel had made his decision and was convicted for first degree murder, up for parole in 2028. I felt paralyzed. I was barely able to clap when the cast came back on stage for their bows. I was in awe that a play could have this tremendous spiritual power; that actors could deliver such a highly fueled emotional performance; that a playwright could weave such a moral dilemma; while using a colorful and contemporary vernacular; and a director could effectively stage the play. I have to be

honest, I had an amazing summer, but every piece of theatre I saw after that could not compare to what I had felt after seeing *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train*. That summer I saw Kenneth Lonergan's *Lobby Hero*, Richard Greenberg's *Take Me Out* at the Donmar Warehouse, Directed by Sam Mendes, Martin McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, Tony Kushner's *Homebody-Kabul* and an all-male Elizabethan period production of *Twelfth Night* at the Globe Theatre.



After researching the original production of *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* I would go on to find that I had caught the final performances of a highly successful run with the original cast still intact, John Ortiz (Angle Cruz), Ron Cephas Jones (Lucius Jenkins), Elizabeth Canavan (Mary Jane Hanrahan), Salvatore Inzerillo (Charlie D'Amico), and David Zayas (Valdez), all members of the LAByrinth Theater Company. *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* premiered in New York during the LAByrinth Theater Company's 8th season

(1999-2000) and by the time I had seen the production in 2002, the play had already received two Drama Desk Nominations for Best Actor in a Play, John Ortiz and Best Director of a Play, Philip Seymour Hoffman (2000) and an Edinburgh Fringe Festival: FRINGE FIRST Award for innovation in theatre and outstanding new production (2001). The play was part of the “American Imports” season at the Donmar Warehouse (including the London Premiere of *Take Me Out*) and would receive an Olivier Award Nomination for Best New Play (2002). The same year the company would receive the Jujamcyn Theaters Award for its outstanding contribution to the development of creative talent for the theatre.

I didn’t know it at the time, nor did I expect that there was a journey to be taken ahead of me, but by witnessing this production I had entered the labyrinth and it would take me several years to navigate my way through the twists and turns. I would not find myself in the middle of the maze until two summers later (2004) in Richmond, Virginia.

Acting in *Jesus Hopped the ‘A’ Train*

I graduated from James Madison University of Virginia in May 2003 with a Bachelor of the Arts in Theatre. I had a fairly successful acting and directing career and I enjoyed my time, particularly in the experimental theatre. While at college I had directed three shows, acted in a dozen and I had designed and constructed several sets. The experimental theatre (Theatre II) was a place where I could learn and explore my passion for the theatre. I found out after I graduated that the professional world was not as kind to aspiring artists. I did not make a smooth transition to a “bigger pond”. I moved back home and auditioned for roles in Washington, D.C. I was called back for few things. I spent the summer of 2003 performing in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* at a

small playhouse in Harrisonburg, VA, helping my brother with a community theatre production of Steve Martin's *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*, and working in D.C. as a dinosaur at the Capital Children's Museum. I was professionally and spiritually scattered. I desperately needed focus.

I came to find that I desired to go back to college and pursue a second degree. That summer I came to find that Virginia Commonwealth University offered an MFA in Theatre Pedagogy. I found an opportunity to regroup. I moved to Richmond prematurely, before I was accepted to the graduate program. I worked a construction job refurbishing the Monumental Church on Broad St. in Richmond, VA (which I would later find out was a theatre in the 19th century) and waiting tables at a sports bar at night. Needless to say, I longed for some artistic outlet and direction in my theatrical career. When I was admitted into the graduate program at Virginia Commonwealth University I was again determined to make the most of an opportunity.

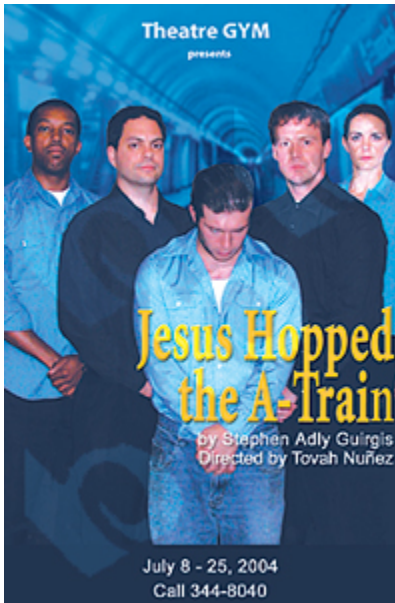
I found a temporary home in Richmond, VA and at Theatre VCU. I also found myself getting involved in the local theatre community and would often go for auditions around Richmond. I was specifically keeping my eye out for an audition of Guirgis' 2003 play *Our Lady of 121 Street*, which was slated to take place as part of the Theatre Gym Season on Broad Street in downtown Richmond. I didn't really fit the age range of any of the characters but I figured I would keep an eye on the production. I was very surprised when I received an email in early May of 2004 that the production had changed to *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train*. Again, I didn't really fit the correct character description for any of the characters (being a 22 year old Caucasian male). I figured if I had the right looks and

the director wanted to go with a younger actor, maybe I would be cast as Charlie D'Amico, the likeable prison guard.

I went and auditioned on a Saturday afternoon. I read monologues for both Valdez and D'Amico. I was reading with thirty and forty year old actors so I figured that I would give it my best, but I was not old enough to be cast. As I was walking out the door and down the street the producer who had just seen me audition called after me and asked if I would come back and read for Angel. Of course I would, but I was pondering if I had the right look for the character. I went back to read for Angel Cruz the next day and gave it my all. I remembered in the audition focusing on the words and the text and trying to get the rhythms of the fast paced, street-talk that Guirgis was able to capture and create. I played a few scenes with an actor named Theodore Snead (cast as Lucius) and I felt that I gave a solid audition, even if I was not ethnically correct for the part.

I waited a few days, didn't hear anything, and sent the producer an email. I thanked him for calling me back and let him know how much respect I had for the play and how honored I would be to work on the show that summer. I received an email in return and unfortunately, although I gave a very strong audition, they were not going to be able to use me. "Obla di obla da" and I went on with my life. The next day I got a call while I was headed to the grocery store. It was the producer of the show asking me if I was still interested. I did not hesitate to tell him, absolutely, that I would be there for the read through that night. I couldn't believe that I had been offered an opportunity to play Angel Cruz in *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train*, a role that had passionately connected to at the ARTS Theatre in London. It was a surreal moment. The experience of playing Angel helped me

to connect and communicate with John Ortiz, the original Angel Cruz, the co-artistic director, and one of the original founders of the LAB.



At the read through I was very impressed with the other actors cast in the show, particularly Theodore Snead, who would play Lucius Jenkins, and Jeffery Schmidt, who would play Valdez. I would go on to befriend both of these men and they would teach me a lot about acting in the professional community. The director also made a good impression. Her name was Tovah Nunez, and she would work with me to create an Angel Cruz for the Richmond premiere of *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train*. Working with this cast and crew taught me a lot about myself as an actor both on stage and off. I don't think I would have the ideals I have today if it wasn't for this experience.

I felt something new with this cast at the first read through. I didn't know how to articulate what I felt but I would have this same feeling during my visit to the LABYrinth and while working on *Den of Thieves*. It was an open and collaborative atmosphere. There

was a philosophical discussion about the play, where everyone shared their personalities, their upbringings, religious beliefs, political beliefs, etc. The first rehearsal was welcoming and everyone respected each other. I had never been in an environment where actors were so open with each other. Maybe they just seemed mature and it felt good to be considered an adult among them. There were no “divas”, no stars, only five actors who were to play five characters. Everyone depended on the other to make choices, learn their lines, to challenge each other, to bring good work to the stage, and to listen to each other. Theodore and I depended on each other to help with the lines and exchanges between Angel and Lucius. I would often find myself running lines with him over long lunches on Saturday afternoons. Also, in the spirit of the LAB, everyone in the company worked together to paint the set, hang the lights, and publicize the show around the community. After the production had closed, I would find that the collaborative experience I had with Tovah, Theodore, Jeff, and the rest of the cast and crew would compel me to visit the company in New York.

I spent a lot of time working on my outer appearance. I tanned every day; I grew my hair long, died it black, and grew facial hair. I soon learned that these additions were all “externals” and that these changes were not going to make the character Angel Cruz. I had to memorize the lines by rote and then work on the delivery. I needed to stop focusing on the fact that I might not fit the exact racial profile of the character, but instead find all the things I had in common with Angel, all the things that made me connect with the character when I saw the production in London.

I started to learn lines while working out everyday, running about 2 to 3 miles and reciting the monologues in my head. It would actually pay off to be in shape for this part during tech week. I would work the lines so that they were part of my muscle memory. In order to capture the rhythm of the language I reverted to a few character studies. The first was the standup comedian John Leguizamo, a contemporary Hispanic comedian who was raised in Queens. Another fantastic source for rhythm and delivery was a comedian whom I would recommend to any Guirgis fan; Danny Hoch, a contemporary performer whose album and one-man show *Jails, Hospitals, and Hip-Hop* showcases the comedian's ability to capture several different voices of characters residing in the five Boroughs. The album was actually suggested by a fellow cast mate, Jen Meharg, whose husband had performed the *Jails, Hospitals, and Hip-Hop* at the Theatre Gym. Hoch's ability to inspire character choices provided an excellent character study for actor Joe Carlson while working on *Den of Thieves* in 2005.

After the language and rhythm had been established, the blocking had been set, and everything that usually goes into a rehearsal process was well on the way, I found that I had to do some more work to get in touch with Angel, particularly on a spiritual level. Angel is a young man who is facing life imprisonment if he chooses to act on his morals and beliefs. I had to figure out what this would be like to me, if only to understand the weight of the moral dilemma. The only way to do that was to reevaluate my own morals and belief system. I found myself in Church quite often that summer. I found myself praying again and talking to God, getting some sense of spirituality. I had to remind

myself what praying was like, not just reciting words, but what having faith in a higher power does to your mind and body.

I was originally attracted to Guirgis' work on several different levels, the experimental grittiness of the pieces, the craftsmanship of the vernacular, and the use of ethnically diverse characters. But on a spiritual level I identified with many of his characters based on their struggles with faith, whether it is Catholicism or the higher power of their choice. I was making parallels to religion and the theatre the previous semester in my graduate studies. I was finding that going to church was similar to going to rehearsal. Saying a pray was very similar to performing a monologue because one has to have faith in the delivery. An actor needs to have faith in what he is saying and have faith in the play. The theatrical spirituality that I gained that summer of 2004 has also helped me to compose collaborative ideals.



The invitational dress rehearsal of the play was well attended. The show had more success the next performances as word of mouth got around. It was a show I was very proud of and perhaps one of the most challenging performances and roles I had

experienced at the time. I actually did an entire scene while jumping rope (I was glad that I had gotten in shape). All of Lucius and Angel's scenes take place in the exercise yard where they are allowed one hour of fresh air per day. They use this time to exercise, converse, smoke cigarettes, rag on each other, etc. At the end of the play Lucius is going to be extradited to Florida where he will face execution. This is revealed during a heavily emotional climatic scene. In order to get the juices flowing, Tovah had me jump rope while I was performing my monologues at the top of Act 2 Scene 4. The physical exertion helped to propel the scene and helped both Theodore and me to be emotionally available. The most important lesson I remembered during these performances was to listen. By using the words that Guirgis crafted, the direction of Tovah, and the characters that each actor had created there was more than enough to tell a compelling story. Whenever I found my concentration lacking or my focus shifting I simply listened to the play, listened to the other actors' deliveries, and listened to my surroundings. Guirgis is crafty when he chooses locations for a play. Often the characters are in confined spaces (i.e. small apartments, funeral parlors, and prisons.) Being caged, even though it's a pretend cage, definitely has a physical effect. I felt much more like a prisoner of Riker's Island as an actor in the play.

After the show closed, I refused to accept that this was the end of my work with Guirgis. I was determined to contact the LAByrinth in New York. I had to find out as much as possible about this company and what they were doing. I needed to gain insight on the collaborative ideals. I needed to understand that feeling.

CHAPTER 2

Winding through the Maze: A Journey to New York City

Meeting Developmental Director Sallie Sanders

Shortly after the Richmond production of *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* closed I contacted Sallie Sanders, the developmental director for the LAByrinth Theater Company. I caught her at a very good time because she was able to talk to me for about forty-five minutes. I was calling to set up a phone interview and by the time the conversation was finished she already had me slated to come for a visit in January. I was surprised at A) how easily I had made contact with someone from the company and B) that she was so helpful. I would find this same gracious attitude and hospitality with everyone who works with the LAByrinth.



Between the summer of 2002 when I had seen *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* in London and the summer of 2004, the LAByrinth Theater Company had made a significant impact in the theatre. The company received attention from *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* b

and gained clout from Guirgis' next play *Our Lady of 121st Street*. In 2003 the company received:

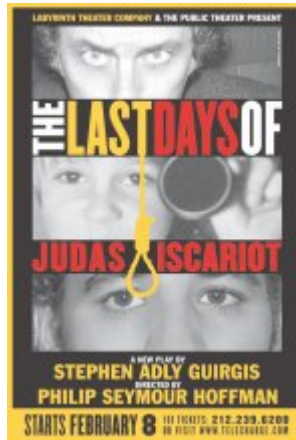
- 4 Lucille Lortel Award Nominations for *Our Lady of 121st Street*
 - Outstanding Play, Stephen Adly Guirgis
 - Outstanding Director, Philip Seymour Hoffman
 - Outstanding Featured Actor, Ron Cephas Jones
 - Outstanding Featured Actress, Portia
- Drama Desk Award Nominations for *Our Lady of 121st Street*
 - Outstanding Play, Stephen Adly Guirgis
 - Outstanding Director, Philip Seymour Hoffman
- Drama League Award Nominations for *Our Lady of 121st Street*
 - Distinguished Production of a Play, LAByrinth Theater Company
 - Distinguished Performance, Portia,
- AUDELCO Award Nominations for *Our Lady of 121st Street*
 - Best Supporting Actor, Ron Cephas Jones
 - Best Supporting Actress, Portia.

The teaming of Guirgis and Hoffman had proved to be an artistic force in the New York theatre community that would allow the company to expand to The Public Theater. Other artists started to work more at the LAByrinth and actors that had been with the company in the early years were returning. Two playwrights, in particular, started to work at the LAB. John Patrick Shanley was becoming a regular in the season, originating works

such as *Where's My Money?*, *Dirty Story*, *A Winter Party*, and *Sailor's Song*. José Rivera has recently been writing for the company and has two shows in the 14th Season (2005-2006) *Massacre (Sing to Your Children)* and *School of the Americas*. The LABYrinth was also starting to receive more financial support from corporations such as Dramatist Play Service, Newman's Own, Red Bull, and HBO Films; art foundations such as the Lucille Lortel Foundation; and government support from The New York State Council on the Arts and National Endowment for the Arts.

I went to visit the LABYrinth under the guise of a graduate student doing thesis research who was also planning to do a presentation on the LABYrinth Theatre Company at the Southeastern Theatre Conference. Deep down I really just wanted an excuse to go and meet Sallie and the company members. I did gather an abundance of research from the visit that helped me form a presentation at SETC, which has all been incorporated into my thesis work.

I had a wonderful phone conversation with Sallie; she seemed enthusiastic about my interest. Sallie offered to let me interview her in person at the LABYrinth headquarters in Manhattan with the possibility of arranging some other interviews. There was a possibility that I might be able to meet with Stephen Adly Guirgis.



In August 2004 there were a few things going on with the LAByrinth. They were finishing up the summer intensive program and still making a move to their new home at The Public Theater. Sallie advised me to keep email contact with her and that she would arrange the visit, it just would not be until late January. January of 2005 was a perfect time to visit because Guirgis was writing a new piece called *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* that would be in rehearsal. Actor Sam Rockwell (who had been in early productions of the LAB, originating the character Flaco in Guirgis' *Den of Thieves* and going on to pursue a film career, seen in features such as *The Green Mile* and *Matchstick Men*) was coming back to the LAB. He was headlining the production as the title character, Judas Iscariot. Other actors slated to be in the production were Eric Bogosian as Satan, Kohl Sudduth from *Take Me Out* and John Ortiz (the original Angel Cruz) was slated to play a mystery part. The production was scheduled to preview at The Public Theater in mid February. This would be a very exciting time to be visiting the LAByrinth Theater Company while they were in the rehearsal process of a new work.

The New Year finally arrived and by the end of January I was scheduled to meet with Sallie on Friday January 28th, 2005. I had to be very flexible in my own work because the spring semester had just started and I didn't receive a confirmation date till mid January. I had to be ready to pick up and leave. I booked a flight within a day, made arrangements with work and school and I was off to New York. One of the incredible surprises about the trip (I had only known a day prior to leaving) was that John Ortiz had agreed to meet me! I just wasn't sure when and where it would be.

January 28th, 2005

The LAByrinth Theater Company main offices had moved to New York's financial district. I found myself walking down Wall Street to meet Sallie Sanders. I went through security checks and went up to meet her. At the time the LAB was in the midst of moving and looking to settle. Headquarters consisted of three work places, a few computers, and a fax and copy machine on a floor of a high rise shared with another corporation. Sallie Sanders introduced herself, she cleared away a spot to sit down, and Sallie and I started to discuss the LAB.

Sallie came to work with the LAByrinth when she was in Graduate School completing her MFA at Yale. In 2000, she was interning in New York when she first saw the Off-Broadway production of *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train*. When she finished her graduate degree in 2002 she started freelance grant writing and started working for the LAByrinth Theater Company two times a week. It turned into a full fundraising position and Sallie decided that she wanted to devote her time and energy to the company.

Her experience with the LAB had also been invaluable. She explained to me that the company did not follow the traditional model. There are 2 co-artistic directors. Artistic concerns always preceded issues of budgeting and commerce. The artists managed the company up until 2001. They are continually trying to find the balance between the artistic ideals and the managing staff. Since the success of *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* and *Our Lady of 121st Street* the LAB's production capabilities had significantly grown. Sallie talked about how it was a challenge to manage the growing theatre and all of the new doors that had been opened by the success. LAByrinth hadn't had a developmental director before Sallie. Once she realized what made LAByrinth so special, the things that were done in the company that wouldn't make sense to any other model, she realized that was what made working there so exciting. The LAByrinth had previously been on a showcase contract, and as usual, with non-profit theatre, Sallie felt that they were understaffed. When they moved to The Public Theatre the LAB also received a legitimate Equity contract as their production budget was increasing. When I talked to Sallie in January of 2005, the LAByrinth was in a state of "catching up" with the success.

Sallie illuminated more of the company's history. John Ortiz, David Deblinger, and Gary Perez were all professional actors who met around 1991. They met at the Playwrights Theatre of New Jersey where they worked with a program for incarcerated youth. They met and had something in common aesthetically, as well as their cultural backgrounds. Both Perez and Ortiz have Puerto Rican roots, Perez growing up in Harlem and John in Brooklyn, while Deblinger grew up with a Jewish family in Queens. Deblinger was fluent in Spanish. They decided they wanted to form a company. The

company came about as a response to a Broadway production of *Death and the Maiden*, where all of the Hispanic characters were cast with Caucasian actors.

The company was founded as the Latino Actors' Base (LAB) in 1992.

They would meet once a week for three hours, partaking in a "theatre gym". They did acting exercises and would have auditions. At first the company was exclusively for Latinos. Occasionally, someone would bring in a friend (i.e. Sam Rockwell) to do scene work. If an actor had the right vibe and the right energy (most company members were in their early 20s) they were welcome. While the company stayed primarily Latino, Ortiz realized early on that the company should recognize certain demographics that were reflective of the entire city, especially if they were from a similar socio-economic background. They changed the name of the company to LABYrinth, keeping the LAB in capital letters for the origins and also because the work was experimental. The company had been a place where artists could test out new works. Another important quality of the LAB was that as the company grew, the members formed a tight knit community. Sallie could not stress enough that The LABYrinth Theater Company is a family.

The following is excerpted from a letter that Sallie showed me during the visit:



11/19/04

*What is my message to you, good LABPASS holding people? My message, I guess, is the challengingly comforting one that Artistic Director John Ortiz has been preaching to us since the formation of the company in 1992: The LAB is our safe place to fail. All I can say about *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* is that, despite all my nonsense, I am willing to fail writing it, and that maybe-- I hope-- but still only maybe-- it can be a piece worth failing over. I know that Phil and Sam and the cast will be willing to fail regardless. And so, beginning February 8th at The Public Theater, please do come and be a part of it, and once again, be a part of us.*

Respect and Thanks,

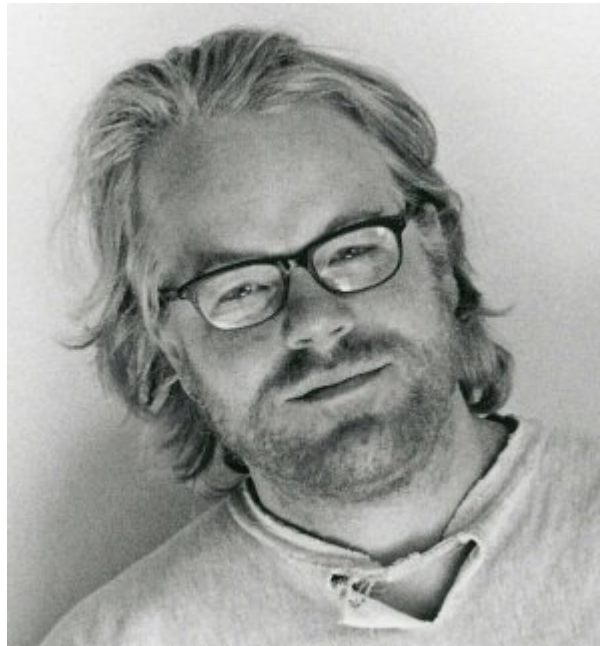
Stephen Adly Guirgis

Sallie explained that it is easy for a theatre company to say that they are a family in a trite or cliché way but this is not the case with the LABYrinth. It truly is like an extended family. Guirgis and Ortiz met during college at SUNY Albany. Guirgis had been in school for a while and discovered theatre late in his college career. Ortiz arrived at SUNY, a very raw and gifted freshman actor. Sallie told me about a story published in *American Theatre Magazine* during an interview with Guirgis. He claimed that Ortiz would often try

to get Guirgis to write papers for him in exchange for sneakers. This is where Ortiz found out Guirgis had an incredible skill for writing.

The original company had 13 members (Guirgis was an actor as well) and they started to produce one-acts. Guirgis was never trained in any way, shape or form as a writer. Ortiz encouraged self-generated work and pushed Guirgis to write his one acts. A particular piece, *Den of Thieves*, blew everyone in the company away. At the time, Sallie was helping to write a proposal to the National Endowment of the Arts through the Theatre Communication Group for Stephen Adly Guirgis and the LAByrinth Theater Company to be participants in The Theatre Residency Program for Playwrights in 2004/2005. This is how the company works; everyone pushes each other in the right direction.

Phillip Seymour Hoffman and John Ortiz met as actors in 1994 during Peter Sellars' production of *The Merchant of Venice* that premiered at the Goodman Theater in Chicago, IL. Hoffman was living in L.A. at the time and wanted to get back to the theatre in New York. Ortiz told him about the LAB and Hoffman started coming to meetings on Monday nights. He performed in some of the early works and co-produced plays that were never published. In 1998 the LAB found a performance venue at Center Stage. Guirgis' work inspired Phillip Seymour Hoffman to start directing for the LAB. One of the core values of the LAByrinth is the promotion of cross-disciplinary skills among the company members. An actor would take on roles of director or writer and also be required to hang lights or build sets. Phil took on the role of director for Guirgis.



In 1999 Philip Seymour Hoffman directed *In Arabia We'd All Be Kings*, Guirgis' second published play. They started to click as writer and director. It was the first LAByrinth Theatre Company production to receive critical acclaim. By then, Phillip Seymour Hoffman's name was known in film and that started to draw attention. Since 1999 Hoffman has directed the original productions of all of Guirgis' published plays.

One of the most important components to the process of the LAByrinth Theater Company's work is the summer intensive, which inspires the *Barn Series*. The intensive takes place at a farm in upstate New York. It was started in the summer of 1996. The company members decided that they needed a retreat in order to get everyone together and focus on producing new works. They found a barn in upstate New York and started an assembly of workshops. The summer intensive went on to grow and became an annual two-week meeting. They would bring the *Barn Series* festival back to Center Stage to

perform staged readings. The first *Barn Series* festival was produced in 1999. They would perform in the winter and generally would read four to eight plays. When the LAB moved to The Public Theater in 2003 the *Barn Series* grew to ten plays. Writers that participated in the *Barn Series* included Shanley, Rivera and Nilo Cruz. That year the festival had subscribers on waiting lists and had to turn people away. In 2004 the festival was expanded to 20 play readings including playwrights such as Charles Mee.

The artistic directors work to hear the voice of the company members. There were eighty-two members of the company in 2005. Logistically, it's hard to get that many people together. Sallie said a good turn out for a meeting was usually fifty members. Everyone talks about business and artistic goals with open minds. I asked Sallie if she thought the LAB was headed in a good direction and she told me that the LAByrinth was continuing to preserve their core values while successfully expanding the company's realm. Programs like *In the Kitchen*, an informal play reading series, continue to promote new works. Another program is *Write Night* where guest artists like Neil LaBute will attend workshops. Although the company has some heavy hitting men, women in the company contribute significantly to the development of the LAB. Some of the major female players in the company are actors Liza Colon-Zayas, Portia, Elizabeth Canavan, and Elizabeth Rodriquez.

Sallie was able to share some specifics on the LAB's fundraising tactics. Board members play poker games where the antes raise money for the company. The big fundraising event is called Celebrity Charades. Madonna came to the first Celebrity

Charades and donated fifty thousand dollars. A few other celebrities that have come by to play Charades in the past are Ed Norton, Robin Williams, and Elijah Wood.



Before I left the office that day, Sallie took me into the archives. She gave me a copy of every important article that had been written about Stephen Adly Guirgis, Phillip Seymour Hoffman, John Ortiz and everything concerning the LAByriNth Theater Company from the last ten years. Along with a public relations packet (which would have been more than enough) I walked out with countless magazine and newspaper articles, show programs, and poster artwork. Sallie Sanders was my guide in the labyrinth that was the LAByriNth.

Meeting Artistic Director John Ortiz

January 29, 2005

Sallie Sanders set up an appointment for me to interview the Co-Artistic director of the LAByriNth Theater Company, and founding member of the company, John Ortiz. I

was to meet John in the lobby of The Public Theater at 425 Lafayette. He was on call for rehearsals of *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* but I would be able to catch him on a lunch break at 1:30 p.m. I walked in the lobby and looked around. A man about my height, with a thick beard, in an orange fleece, who I didn't even recognize when I walked in the building, came up to me and introduced himself.

The first thing John Ortiz did after shaking my hand was to ask me if I wanted any coffee. He took me into the rehearsal space. There was Philip Seymour Hoffman blocking a scene. During our conversation the environment was very lively, as people would be coming in and out of the theatre and communicating with Ortiz. He took me back to the lobby and we commenced to talk about the LAB and its origins.

I first asked Ortiz about his experience with the Playwright's Theatre of New Jersey and the program with juvenile delinquents. They were hired as actors to come in after the inmates had written the first drafts of the scripts. There, Ortiz met Deblinger and Perez, while they were young and wide-eyed. Ortiz was twenty-two. They had a lot in common and a passion for wanting to do anything and everything. Perez and Ortiz became close friends. They had access to the administrative offices of INTAR (an off-Broadway Hispanic theatre company) and they would go hang out after hours, talk and go through head shots. This was their initiation to the administrative side of the theatre. They started talking about the protests that were happening over the play *Death and the Maiden*, a story based in South America. In the play written by Ariel Dorfman, directed by Mike Nichols, starring Glenn Close, Gene Hackman, and Richard Dreyfuss there were no Latino actors in the cast. They read in the paper a quote to the affect that the producers of the show

couldn't find any Latino actors in New York. They didn't know where to find them. So Ortiz decided to create a place where casting directors could find Latino actors.



Ortiz and Perez found out that INTAR had an abandoned theatre for which they also had the keys, and they came up with the idea of starting a lab, with a handful of actors. In exchange for using the space, INTAR could have access to all of these actors. They started readings and workshops. They dug into their pockets and put out an ad in *Backstage Magazine* and (without asking for permission from INTAR) held auditions. At least a hundred people showed up. They started with David Deblinger (who wasn't Hispanic but was an honorary Latino, being fluent in Spanish) as well as a few more actors. They also asked a veteran actor, Paul Calderon, to become part of the team that proposed the idea of the Latino Actor's Base to INTAR. Member Yul Vasquez (one of the original 13) brought in Sam Rockwell as a scene partner. Rockwell would come to parties and meetings with Vasquez and the company. About three to six months after the

exclusively Latino group began they came to realize that race was not important. What was important was that the members had an intangible thing which was the willingness to take risks and check the egos at the door and not expect anything other than being, living, and learning. All of the values they were learning about were feeding the ensemble for a greater thing. Ortiz told me that even now that “thing” is still hard to explain.

They would meet every week, once a week on Wednesdays from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. and would go out and eat and drink and come back around midnight and be there sometimes until 3 in the morning. There was a different plan of attack every week regarding what type of theatre style or game they were going to approach. They would dedicate time to who needed focus and to work on each other’s weaknesses. They would encourage people to fail. It was all actor-centric at first. Money wasn’t a factor, and they had the space, so if actors were willing, it was there.

Whenever they wanted to put on a show they would invite friends. They would promote shows by word of mouth, and whoever got wind of something being presented were the only audiences. If they needed a budget they would throw a keg party. Ortiz told me while the group’s theatre work was raw; they did have the party aspect very polished. They would make around a thousand dollars every party to fund their weekend shows. Each presentation ran on a shoestring budget of around two hundred dollars. In the third and fourth years members started becoming very proud of the work they were doing and started to put more effort into producing the plays. This was around the time when Phillip Seymour Hoffman came into the mix.

Ortiz met Hoffman during Peter Sellars' production of *The Merchant of Venice* in Chicago. Ortiz played Bassanio and Hoffman played Launcelot Gobbo. They had a workshop in New York, premiered at the Goodman in Chicago, toured London, Germany, and Paris. Hoffman was visiting New York; he had attended NYU, and was living in L.A. at the time. When he came to do *Merchant* Ortiz claimed that it re-ignited a spark in Hoffman, an interest in the theatre. Ortiz and Hoffman instantly bonded. Ortiz let Hoffman know that if he made the move back to the city and he was contemplating a home with a "little rascals" theatre company he was welcome. Sure enough, a month after the show closed, he moved back to New York and it was right around the time the company was feeling the need to expand to audiences. The weekly meetings are the most important part of the company. They are chances to regroup, make announcements and voice opinions and it keeps everyone in check. It still remains the most important part, but they have scaled back on the meetings and have been putting an emphasis on producing.

At that time the company also received their first grant from a friend who went to college with Ortiz and saw one of their shows. The company was composed of inner-city cultures and they decided to establish a mission. There was a multicultural ideal that was already in place. No matter who a person was or where they came from, as long as they were there to do the work, they were invited. They would encourage actors to write. They would encourage cops to act. Guirgis had actually worked as a prison guard.

The LABYrinth became an interdisciplinary group. Anyone that was cast in a show also had light calls and paint calls and did whatever it took to get the show up. John liked to call it a factory where everything was in house. Money wasn't part of the equation.

They started to structure the work. They put an emphasis on playwriting. This is where the summer intensives and the *Barn Series* were born. They had writing workshops in the day and readings at night. The intensives were demanding, having Yoga workshops, then combat, to readings and then to partying at night. The first intensive conceived fifteen new plays that were originated by company members. Four of the plays were producible. That's when the LAB started to get an identity and the mission started to activate. Since then, they have done all original works, every play being introduced at the summer intensive. Company members have written about seventy-five percent of the plays done by the LAB thus far.

Ortiz had known Guirgis from college. He claimed he was an actor not a writer, but Ortiz knew he had it in him. He had a natural ability to write. It was at the first intensive that they took one of Guirgis' plays (one of the four) and decided to produce the show. It just took a little bit of a push, not just from Ortiz, but also from other company members. Everyone was pushing him to be better. Again, the purpose of the LAB was to push actors and playwrights to the point where they were not afraid to fail. Even if Guirgis didn't want to write, he really didn't have a choice. Ortiz told me that selfishly, as an actor, he loved Guirgis' characters, especially the ones that were written for him, because he was able to become totally free as an actor and play with the words.

I didn't want to ask Ortiz too many more questions because I knew he was on break but he did have the time so I stayed to ask him some "selfish actor" questions, particularly about Angel. Ortiz looked at me and laughed, asking me what I wanted to know about that guy. I asked Ortiz if he was Catholic or religious. He responded that while both he and

Guirgis were raised Catholic, Guirgis had more of a structure. They met up in school and beyond that they clicked on other levels. Ortiz began to tell me that Guirgis has a great sense of people. He has a great knack of picking up peoples' idiosyncratic natures, not that he writes a translation of an actor on paper but that he takes an essence of a person that he knows, and with his brilliance, creates art. He lifts them from life because he has a certain respect and gathers an inspiration. The characters hone in on what's going on and he goes inside them in a beautiful way. Guirgis draws from his own personality to create characters. He gets down and dirty. He sheds light on some of the darkest secrets that they have. He draws the personal into these bigger pictures, but doesn't avoid the personal. With Angel, it's him needing to become a man and become responsible. There's no looking pretty.

I asked Ortiz how he prepared to play Angel. He told me it was a lot of personal drawing on growing up, on putting stuff off, on putting things off on other people. Almost every ugly thing he could imagine doing he had to go back and face by acknowledging the responsibility and asking for forgiveness. A lot of that related to drawing on being a kid when he was thirty years old. The idea of Angel's friend, Joey, was a projection. Joey was fine. Just because Angel thinks that the religious cult was a screwed up thing, Joey might not, and everyone has his or her own path. Angel wanted to live like he was still in high school. Ortiz told me that was a heartbreaking aspect of the character, that Angel's memories are delusional. One of the Achilles heels of the character is his pride and his ego. Angel thinks he is better than the other prisoners are, from the first scene with the lawyer.

I asked Ortiz about *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* and how he felt after having excellent success within ten years of the company's beginning. John told me success and awards are secondary. What will make it all special are the values that were there in the beginning. Sometimes not everyone is going to like the work, but if the company stays on the path of being genuine and honest, that's the main thing. The minute it becomes about getting the good review, or the awards, or the nomination, what is the company doing? But with that said, he told me the recognition is nice to have and it put the LAB in a position to reach out and share to a bigger audience.

Ortiz told me about his experience taking *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* to performances for prisoners at Ryker's Island. He said that it was bizarre doing that play for the prisoners. What was fascinating was that the prisoners were all on Valdez's side, which was wild. They knew what they were feeling bad about and they were projecting their guilt onto the character, their own ill feelings of the actions they took, that kind of self-hatred thing. Overall it was great, a very powerful day, and a good discussion afterwards.

Ortiz went to take a break for a few minutes. To my surprise, he came back with Phillip Seymour Hoffman. I didn't get to talk to him for too long but it was thrilling to shake his hand and be introduced. I was able to get a few more acting stories out of Ortiz. He told me about the first time he worked with Ron Cephas Jones, on an Anna Deavere Smith play called *House Arrest* at the Arena Theatre in Washington, D.C. Guirgis thought of Jones to play Lucius. In the early stages of the play Angel was in jail and the story was told in flashback mode. Then Guirgis got the idea that Angel shares a cell with a mass

murderer up for the death penalty and thought of Jones for the part. Ortiz told Jones about the play and introduced him to Guirgis. Once he started talking to Jones and getting stories out of him, Guirgis started writing the character Lucius.

Ortiz claimed to have a 'brother bond' with Ron Cephas Jones. They knew how ugly they had to be towards each other, and Phil directed them to have the utmost love for each other, i.e. the craziest fights a person will get into are with loved ones. Guirgis was writing the play during rehearsals. The last half of the second act and the last scene were written during tech week and the last scene was written for Ortiz on opening night.

The Last Days of Judas Iscariot

The process for *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* was similar at the time I spoke to Ortiz. The play was bigger in scope and was much more ambitious for Guirgis. The play worked on a lot of different levels figuratively and literally, and at the time (January) he was a lot further along in the process. He was writing as they all went along. Ortiz actually showed me the new draft of the second act that day. Ortiz talked about how Hoffman and Guirgis would put a scene in the second act back into the first act because it fit better. They were constantly restructuring the play. There is also constant collaboration, which takes a lot of patience and a lot of trust. Guirgis and Hoffman look for that in their actors. It's not about self-interest but about being part of something great and it takes some letting go.

Ortiz told me about the secret role he was playing in *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, which was the role of Jesus. Ortiz didn't even know too much about the role because it hadn't really been finished yet (about ten days before the show went into

previews). There would be more moral questions posed in the new work. If God is all about forgiveness why shouldn't he forgive Judas? Ortiz argued that Guirgis was not necessarily trying to answer that question. He was asking the question why Judas couldn't forgive himself.

Finally, I asked Ortiz about the LAB family. This is not the ideal family that everyone dreams of having but there is no escaping the intimacy and the challenge of each other. It's the thing that Ortiz and Jones had on stage; they can call each other out. There is that love and they can push each other to the limit. They know when someone is coasting and shouldn't be. It's what's great about the LAByrinth but also what's challenging. They wouldn't have it any other way. Ortiz told me that if an actor needs money, go do television. Television is where people accept seeing mediocre. An artist can't be mediocre and survive in the LAByrinth.

Before Ortiz walked me out he waved to one more surprise in the lobby of The Public Theater. Stephen Adly Guirgis came by the table and shook my hand. Ortiz told him that I was doing a thesis project on the LAB. I will never forget the smile Stephen Adly Guirgis gave me. He simply told me that it was very cool.

Ortiz walked me out to Lafayette and pointed me in the direction of the subway. It was like coming out of a Church service. After meeting with Ortiz, my faith in the theatre had been renewed. I felt spiritually fulfilled. When he walked out with me that day it was as if he was sending me away to spread the work, to teach others about what the LAB does and why the work and ideals are so vital to the theatre. I took this experience and incorporated everything I had learned into my own directing style and approach to a play.

Collaborative Ideals

Studies in human development show that when people are placed in a model based on compromising they tend to gravitate in four different directions. They can choose 1) to care about themselves, 2) care about others, 3) to not care about themselves, and 4) to not care about others. Those who choose not to care about themselves or others avoid compromise. Those who care about themselves but not others are competitive.

These first two types are not the ideal actors and theatre practitioners for the collaborative process. I find that these two types can be toxic in the theatre. Those that gravitate towards the competitive quadrant lose sight of the overall objective. It's just as Ortiz and I were discussing: the moment that the work becomes about winning an award or getting a good review or making money then what does the art become?

Unfortunately, there are many people that work in the theatre that gravitate towards the competitive and one can choose to work with them or not. A good identifier of a competitive person is when that person will start using language such as, “*my theatre, my role, my play, my thesis, etc.*” These are signifiers that the person one is working with might not be willing to compromise. I was always careful to avoid claiming “ownership” to the *Den of Thieves* process. It was just as much my thesis as it was the actors' experience. This is especially important to remember when actors are not being paid and they are volunteering their services. On the other hand, one doesn't want to work with a nihilist, a practitioner who claims to care about nothing and doesn't want to have an opinion. They will never bring forth decisions or make choices about characters. A collaborative director does not want marionettes.

The other two types are both desirable, and an artist in a collaborative environment will work in both of these realms. People who don't necessarily care about themselves but care about others and the whole of the project are adaptive. Their decisions are always based on what's best for the company and what they can do to contribute. Finally, the artists who thrive in this type of process are those who care about themselves and care about the whole. These artists are collaborative and I find they often produce the best work in rehearsals.

From experience with *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* and from the discussions with Sallie Sanders and John Ortiz, as well as all of the research combined with my graduate studies I started to define my ideals. I would take this aesthetic approach to the practical part of this thesis, directing *Den of Thieves*. They are as follows:

- To create a safe experimental place for actors, directors, and playwrights to fail
- To promote all cultures, ethnicities and socio-economic groups, every group needs a voice and every human has the right to work in the theatre
- To take on the collaborative process of creating new works in the theatre that speak to contemporary audiences
- To apply a collaborative and empathetic perspective
- To experience a multi-disciplinary process where everyone shares the roles
- To treat every member of the company, from actor to technician to intern with respect; to create a family in the theatre
- To be a leader for emerging artists, to help others just as I have been helped
- To treat the theatre with spirituality, where humanity can be revitalized
- To take pride in the work, the company, the play, and to protect the process

CHAPTER 3

Choosing the Right Path: Finding the Project and Casting

Finding *Den of Thieves*

After I gathered all of the information and documents from the LAByrinth and after productive discussions with Sallie Sanders and John Ortiz I was able to put together a presentation for the Southeastern Theatre Conference in Greensboro, NC in March of 2005. The presentation included all of my research with the LAB as well as clips from the Richmond production of *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train*. The presentation was called *Contemporary Religious Works of the LAByrinth Theater Company*.

Shortly after the conference was over I traveled to New York one more time to attend *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*. The production was unlike anything I had ever seen the LAByrinth do and the piece was unlike anything Guirgis had ever written. The play literally and figuratively took place on several different levels, the symbolic location being Purgatory. It was a courtroom drama that concerned an appeal of a previous decision of Judas Iscariot's fate. Actors sat among the audience as they watched the trial. Saints descended from heaven. Apostles spoke freely to the crowd. Satan (Eric Bogosian) made a special trip to the courtroom. The two attorneys battled Judas' case, bringing in several surprise witnesses, such as Pontius Pilot (who was dressed up to play a round of golf), and Judas' mother, Henrietta Iscariot. There were flashback scenes of Judas Iscariot's life as a child and his meetings with Jesus. One particularly seductive scene had Satan approaching Judas in a cantina and persuading him to sell out his friend.

It was ambitious of Guirgis to write this surreal serio-comedy about the lost sinner. To me the most powerful moment of the play was when Ortiz, as Jesus, visited a catatonic Judas in hell and began to wash his feet, begging Judas to forgive himself.

I was ambitious about *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* and I was hoping it would be a show I could translate to a space in Richmond. After consideration of the spaces available, the actors available, the money involved, the time limitations, and weighing every decision involved when picking out a project, I wisely chose against trying to direct the show. I was thinking I might even be able to stage a reading of the show, even though I really wanted to direct a full production. One major concern was that I would not be able to obtain the rights in time.

When I returned to Richmond I went back to the drawing board. I was thinking I might take another look at *Our Lady of 121st Street*. This was a show I really enjoyed, as much as *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train*. The problem was I didn't think I would be able to do this show successfully with college actors. Twenty-year-olds are not the right age to play the characters. I also didn't know if I would be able to find enough actors of diversity that were not already going to be tied up in main stage rehearsals and I could see casting presenting a huge problem.

Spring of 2005 came and I needed to propose something in order to receive any money to produce a play. The funding for most graduate projects comes from the Student Council Government Association at Virginia Commonwealth University and that organization needs to know who needs funding a semester in advance. I went with *Our Lady of 121st Street* with the idea that I might find a space in the Richmond community (possibly the Theatre Gym). I hoped that I would have better luck casting the show from

actors in the community. I tacked this idea onto the proposal and proceeded to try and find a venue. This turned out to be an issue as well. I tried a few places but did not find any home or producer who was willing to put up the money. I even considered producing the production myself and raising the money to put on the show in a professional venue.

Then I stopped. I was pushing this too hard. This was not what I set out to do. I was heading down the wrong path of the maze and I could see the dead end in front of me. I regrouped and got my bearings. I wanted to do a Guirgis/LAByrinth show at VCU. I wanted to produce and direct the show and I wanted to cast VCU actors. My thesis was about taking what I had learned and applying the ideals to an *academic* environment, not a *professional* venue. I couldn't afford to pay actors out of my own pocket. I also thought it was important that the actors were volunteering and dedicating their time to the project. More importantly, I wanted to introduce students to Guirgis' work. I wanted to share my experiences with the student body. I wanted faculty members to come and hear his words, see the end results of this process, so that a Guirgis play might be considered for a main stage slot or more productions of his work would appear in the Shafer Street Playhouse. I wanted to spread this work to more people, audiences, and I specifically wanted to share my ideals of collaboration with a company of actors. I was not going to have a playwright available but I was confident I could create a company based off of the ideals that propelled John Ortiz to create the LAB. The main problem still persisted: no play, no project.

As I was deliberating on the project over the summer I remembered a play mentioned during my conversation with Sallie Sanders, a work that had originated at one

of the first summer intensives that I hadn't really heard of before. The play was called "Den of...something". I found *Den of Thieves* through Dramatist Play Service. This was Guirgis' first published play, not his first written or produced play, but the first full-length play with acting editions available.

The synopsis of the play is that the main characters, Maggie and Paul are in an anonymous program for recovering kleptomaniacs. The play opens after Maggie has ripped off a local convenience store of some products. Paul, a fellow recovering thief, is there to comfort her. At the end of the first act, Maggie's ex-boyfriend, Flaco, comes to her with an opportunity to rob a safe of \$750,000 dollars. Flaco's new fling, an exotic dancer named Boochie, is also going to come along on the heist. At the end of the act Flaco convinces Maggie and Paul to go along on the robbery. The second act opens with Maggie, Paul, Flaco and Boochie all tied to chairs in an undisclosed area. The safe that was the object of the heist contained Mafia money. The four become captives of Louie "The Little Tuna" Pescatore and his partner, Sal. Louie shows mercy on the four thieves and tells them that three of them can live but one of them must die and they have till the morning to decide who goes.



After looking for information on the play, I found that it was originally produced in the 5th season of the LAByrinth Theatre Company (1996-1997), right around the time that the company was receiving attention. *Den of Thieves* is Guirgis' preceding work to his later success. There are actually many themes and even lines from *Den of Thieves* that are revisited in Guirgis' later work. The original production was directed by Max Daniels (who Guirgis dedicates the play to) and featured LAByrinth Theater Company members Liza Colón (Maggie), Chris McGarry (Paul), Sam Rockwell (Flaco), Lidia Ramirez (Boochie), Lou Moreno (Sal), David Zayas (Little Tuna), and Ernest Mingione (Big Tuna). There had also been a revival of the show in Los Angeles at the Black Dahlia Theatre in 2002 featuring current LAByrinth Theater Company members Russell G. Jones, Ana Ortiz, Trevor Long, Elizabeth Rodriguez, and Marco Greco. There had been another production at the Boston Center of the Arts in the spring of 2005. I didn't find any evidence concerning a collegiate production. I believe it is fair to claim that December 1st, 2005 was the first time Guirgis' *Den of Thieves* was performed at the collegiate level.



I ordered *Den of Thieves* from Dramatists Play Service out of curiosity to see if this was what I was looking to direct. The plot sounded interesting and the character descriptions were hilarious so I decided to give it a shot. I read the play in late June. I immediately read it again, then I read it a third time and I still laughed my ass off. It was absolutely the perfect project to undertake. My first impression was that the script was very funny and that it was character driven. The characters were fresh and well crafted. I could see myself directing actors in these roles.

Several “Guirgis Themes” grabbed my attention. The first was the idea of self-improvement through 12-step programs. The second was the idea of cultural identity. He had created a character (Paul Abraham Handleman) whose ethnicity was black, but was adopted by a Jewish family, and whose grandfather was the leader of a Jewish crime organization in the 1930’s called the “Den of Thieves”. There was a street-wise Caucasian “wannabe” gangster named Flaco who claimed to be a Puerto Rican street thug. Guirgis created another outrageous character to add to the mix, a Latino stripper named Boochie. Finally, what really intrigued me was the way Guirgis captures the Italian characters, Little Tuna, Big Tuna, and Sal. Guirgis’ character descriptions in the beginning of his plays are ethnically specific. The age, sex, and ethnicity of each

character are specific and Guirgis uses such terms as “Italian-American” rather than using “Caucasian” or “White”. This is an aspect of Guirgis’ work that I have always appreciated and admired. I do not believe that this aspect stems from political correctness, rather out of the need for the actors and audiences to identify with the characters’ cultural heritages and continuing presence in a diverse America. This is especially important in a city like New York. Italian Americans have always been associated with New York and there is a fine line between creating a three dimensional character and a stereotype. These characters that Guirgis created would allow me to work with the actors in finding the truth of the stereotypes, and project honest characters, not just with Italian American culture, but within a multicultural New York.

I was sold on this project. It provided a vehicle of Guirgis’ writing that was accessible to a collegiate audience. It was very cast-able with college-aged actors. It was going to provide fantastic character work. I also think the piece has an important social message: claim responsibility for your life.

Casting *Den of Thieves*

Last October (2005) a colleague and fellow playwright, Dennis Schebetta, and I escorted a Theatre VCU guest artist, English playwright Kwame Kwei-Armah (*Elmina’s Kitchen*) to his first dinner during his week in Richmond. The dinner was filled with wonderful discussions and I particularly remember talking about casting. Dennis and I were both working on the production aspects of our theses at the time. Kwame, Dennis and I agreed that about 80% of directing a show is casting. Once the show is cast the hard part is over.

Casting is tough. A director working on an academic project (especially if one is an undergraduate or graduate student) will find that they have to take on many responsibilities, arguable more than a director in a professional arena. A collegiate director doesn't have the benefit of a casting director. At this level the director, not only serves as a leader, but as an organizer of a company, a production manager, a publicist and a protector of the play.

If one is to be a successful casting director the "eye" is definitely necessary. Actors have their types but the "eye" goes beyond type casting. Does the actor have the correct physicality? This is not only a question of do they look the part but also is he moving like the part or does he have the ability? Is the actor cognitive? Is she able to understand what is going on and make choices based on the given circumstances? Is the actor emotional available? Is she willing to venture into unknown emotions? And how does the actor act in a social group? How is he going to fit into the whole? A director needs to figure out who is going to work well together, who is going to look good next to each other, how each part fits into the ensemble. My thesis concerns the collaborative process with seven actors so I had to pay attention to the actors who were really paying attention. During casting I chose the actors who took the most risks, who showed me something I hadn't thought of before, who listened to each other, who worked well with each other, and who were polite and humble during the audition process.

Pre-casting is unavoidable. I am a teacher at VCU and I have taught several sections of Introduction to Drama and Introduction to Stage Performance. I've worked a lot as an actor and director at VCU. To supplement my income I work in the main office at the theatre department so my eyes are everywhere. There were several students that I

had my eye on for the project. There were also several surprises at auditions. I will say that I had an idea of the group of actors I wanted to gather for the project. At VCU students have obligations to audition and perform in the main stage productions so I had to wait until those shows had been cast.

Although the performances were not scheduled until the first week of December, I held auditions for *Den of Thieves* the second week of the semester. I wanted to get the company cast before actors became tied up in other obligations. I also did this so that the actors would have plenty of time to be familiar with the script. I had a fairly good turnout at the auditions, which were held on Thursday and Friday evenings the first week of September 2005.

I had the actors fill out contact information with specific questions such as: Why are you an actor? Do you have any special skills? Can you perform different dialects? I also had a nice range of ethnically diverse actors and actors from the sophomore to senior range. I think this is due to my advertising of the audition. I didn't put on the audition form that I wanted diverse actors. Instead, I had a list of Guirgis' character descriptions, taken from the play. Actors chose to identify with character descriptions. After the main stage auditions had taken a majority of actors in the department I was still left with an excellent group. I was able to pull fifteen actors from the first auditions and have a callback on Saturday afternoon where I was able to make my final decisions. I was also able to pick up an assistant director and stage manager along the way.

The final production consisted of:

DEN OF THIEVES**CAST****MAGGIE...*****JACQUELYN PRATER*****PAUL...*****ANTHONY SANTIAGO*****FLACO...*****JOE CARLSON*****BOOCHIE...*****ANNA SOSA*****SAL...*****KEVIN DUVALL*****LITTLE TUNA...*****RODNEY CLARK*****BIG TUNA...*****ZACH JESSE*****CREW****DIRECTOR...*****TIMOTHY BAMBARA*****ASSTANT DIRECTOR...*****JACLYN WILLIAMS*****STAGE MANAGER...*****NEIL REDA*****TECHNICAL DIRECTOR...*****ANDY WATERS***

Jacquelyn Prater as *Maggie*

Jackie originally impressed me both on and offstage her first year at VCU. She is an excellent actress with a wide range of emotions. She is also a very pleasant person and a leader within her class. Before the auditions Jackie questioned me about the play, asking why there aren't any parts for black women. For some reason (call it a hegemonic view of the world) in my mind, I had always seen Maggie as being a white Irish woman. When I put the character descriptions next to the audition notice I hadn't even thought about the fact that I had listed Maggie as "early twenties Caucasian female". Guirgis is very specific about all of the characters ethnicities (it's crucial to the comedy) except for the lead, Maggie. There's absolutely nothing in the script that says anything about Maggie's ethnicity. I quickly revised the character description so that Maggie's read "early twenties- female" with no specification of ethnicity.

Jackie made me rethink the way I was visualizing Maggie before I had held auditions. Maggie is the central character. I had to rethink the whole group and it had an effect on the casting process. I knew Jackie and I wanted to work with her so I tried her out as both Maggie and Boochie. She started to fit, especially next to Santiago as Paul. The actress who plays Maggie has a tough gig because she is the "straight" woman to Paul and Flaco's antics. Jackie brought a sweet and believable sincerity to her audition and was also willing to go to some of the darker places that Maggie had to enter. Along with her stage presence and personality, Jackie Prater is a very courageous person and I need Maggie to have that component. I knew that she would be willing to do what it took to find Maggie and I knew I could trust her to be a leader in the cast.

Anthony Santiago as Paul

Tony had been a freshman in my Introduction to Drama class, my first year of teaching. Again, he is one of those actors I had my eye on. I was relatively sure that Tony would be cast in a main stage production (Jackie Prater too, for that matter) so I always had alternatives, even though he was always my first choice. Tony was cast in the first main stage production that fall, *Wait Until Dark*. I asked Tony if he would audition for the show if he had a night off and he told me he would try to be there. I caught him in the hall of Shafer the night of auditions and I don't even think he was planning on auditioning. He had the time and he read a monologue and a scene.

As a student and actor, Tony works hard to please everyone. One of the challenges I knew I was going to face was to convince him he did not have to please me. As Ortiz kept reiterating in the discussion, I wanted to create an environment where it would be okay for Tony to try something and fail. Tony is also a leader in his class and his heart is always in the right place. I had seen Tony's work often and I knew that he had an emotional range, but I also knew he had excellent comic timing, he could move well, and I was sure that he would be able to be a leader in the company.

Tony's ethnicity is half black, half white, although his last name is Hispanic. Tony is adopted. Although I never, specifically spelled out the similarities for him, I was sure that he would connect to the character Paul Abraham Handleman, as an actor. I did pre-cast Tony in my visions of *Den of Thieves*, but I think I was right in my assumption that he would be right for Paul, with a push here and there. After he had the permission Tony ran away with the character and I think he really enjoyed the role.

Joe Carlson as Flaco

Joe is the type of actor I love to cast. This is the actor of “unforeseen potential”. I love discovering the actor, I love how hard the actor works to win the respect of the cast and the audience, and I love watching that actor succeed after taking so many risks. This is where the “eye” for casting comes in, not only from auditions, but also from having a sense of potential and for an actor’s work ethic. Flaco’s character is all about a young entrepreneur who has potential, he just needs someone to steer him in the right direction.

I didn’t have an actor in mind when I read Flaco. I thought of Kevin Duvall (who I ultimately cast as Sal) as a possibility but I didn’t know if he would fit in that role. It’s a very challenging character. The actor who plays Flaco has to take a lot of risks and make a lot of bold character choices if Flaco is going to come alive. The actor has to be rugged and “raw”. It’s a very dirty role, but also a role that has several different levels and opportunities for honesty. Flaco’s speech also has a musicality and poses a challenge.

I had known Joe his first semester and I remember that he had somewhat of a “reputation” when he first started at VCU. He has visible tattoos (which is a big “no-no” at Theatre VCU). But Joe always said hello to me, even when I didn’t know him. I heard other teachers and students talk about his work ethic and the risks he took, especially in classes like Devising Theatre. At the auditions everyone who read for Flaco did a bad Spanish accent (which wasn’t required). Joe didn’t. He approached the character with honesty and he trusted the script. He consistently had the walk, he had the talk, I knew he was willing to take risks, and I knew he was starving for a part like Flaco.

Anna Sosa as Boochie

Casting Anna Sosa as Boochie was a delightful decision. Boochie is another character that Guirgis writes with a certain musicality. Boochie's consistent use of malapropisms requires excellent comic timing. Boochie has several attitudes ranging from hostile, to seductive, to scared. She has a character quality known in the vernacular as "ghetto superstar" meaning she comes from a lower class but longs to elevate to the highest class. All of the actors that were cast had to be versatile and start from both ends of the spectrum, ranging from pride to humiliation. Anna had that ability and she was the only person at the auditions who really took a risk in exploring Boochie's sensual nature.

It was time for another lesson on racial perceptions. Anna is from the Philippines. Her ethnicity is Asian. Most of the night, while I was auditioning Boochie, I was getting a lot of bad Rosie Perez impressions and most of the actors were recreating a caricature of something they had seen in a movie or on TV. When Anna auditioned (after four or five other Boochie readings) she brought the house down. Anna had decided if everyone else was going to do a stereotypical Latino prostitute than she was going to give Boochie an Asian spin. Even though Anna was doing her own take on Boochie, she was still remaining honest to the character's intentions. I cast Anna as Boochie, regardless of casting against the type, because the character could easily be a mixture of Hispanic and Asian descent. Anna also has an inner quality as an actor that is hard to explain but is extremely commanding on stage. She doesn't have to do a whole lot to get your attention which is an awesome power. I knew that she would be able to find the truth in Boochie's character and she would find the sincerity in the stereotype.

Rodney Clark as *Little Tuna*

I had known and worked with Rodney on a production of *Corpus Christi* in 2004. He is a very funny actor. He played several parts in drag and created excellent characters. His serious work also has honesty and sincerity and I always liked what Rodney brought to rehearsals as an actor. I knew I wanted Rodney to be part of this cast. Rodney does have a certain type about him. He reminds me a lot of actor David Zayas (who originated the roles of the Little Tuna and Valdez in *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train*). He is a large actor meaning he is usually the biggest actor on stage. His choices are always big and bold. Rodney has always had success because he refines his choices. I had Rodney in mind for the Little Tuna the first time I had read the script.

I didn't immediately cast Rodney in this part. He is a very versatile actor and I read him in the roles of Flaco, Sal, and the Big Tuna. I wanted him for the Little Tuna but I wasn't sure if anyone else at the auditions could pull off the Big Tuna (who is about age 55). Finding an age appropriate actor to play the Big Tuna was the one obstacle I faced with the college audition pool. Most students were not over 25 so I would have to find a commanding actor who could pull off the character. Rodney fit so well in the role of the Little Tuna I didn't want to cast him as the Big Tuna, although I knew it might have to be an option. Rodney immediately underplayed the jokes and the Italian stereotypes at the audition. He let the words propel his body and speech. This was what I was looking for in the actors that portrayed the Mafia members. He didn't push anything. A common casting trend in this process would be to go with the actors who didn't let the stereotypes get in their way as well as the actors that were not afraid to face the stereotypes with courageous choices.

Kevin Duvall as Sal

Kevin was another student I was watching. I had Kevin in another Introduction to Drama class. Kevin was charming and he started to grow on me over the semester. He turned out to be a very sweet student although a bit of a class clown. Like Rodney, Kevin Duvall is an actor who brings a tremendous amount of choices to his work. They both have a knack for improvisation and I knew that they would be able to bounce off of each other.

As big an actor as Rodney is, Kevin is just as big, only about half the physical size. Kevin is a very limber and slim individual and he acts with his whole body. He moves incredibly well and is very free with his choices. The comic bits between the Little Tuna and Sal are reminiscent of Vaudeville exchanges. In fact, I almost wanted an Abbot and Costello type duo to play the Little Tuna and Sal. Kevin fit with Rodney and the two actors were constantly playing off of each other.

Again, like Rodney, I knew I wanted to work with Kevin but I couldn't exactly place him in a specific character. I tried him out as Flaco and the Little Tuna. He brought something to Sal that everyone else seemed to lack. Kevin was menacing and sadistic in his readings. If there is an antagonist in the play, it's Sal. He is a wild degenerate gambler and the maniacal member of the organization. Sal was the kid who liked to torture animals. Kevin kept bringing that quality to the readings and he took pleasure in acting the part. He was having fun! He was doing a very interesting thing with his teeth, bearing them on certain syllables. To meet him on the street, one wouldn't necessarily think of Kevin as a menacing character, but on stage, I was sure that his Sal would create a dangerous vibe.

Zach Jesse as *Big Tuna*

The Big Tuna was a difficult role to cast. The character is the mob boss who comes back from out of town business to find his son and the four thieves in the basement. He appears in the final scene of the third act and the character is responsible for wrapping up all of the loose ends. If I have a criticism about the script Guirgis runs out of room at the end of the play and the Big Tuna is his *deus ex machina* solution. But still, he's got some great lines and he is a very well rounded character. He also has a wonderful anecdote, describing life as an artichoke. The challenging part of casting the role was finding an actor who could pull off the age transformation with a minimal amount of make-up and costuming.

Zach was a freshman in 2005 although he was an older freshman and he probably has the deepest voice in the department. His base voice would definitely add a powerful weight to the character, which was necessary. My biggest concern about casting Zach was that he was a very 'hyper' actor and his choices were always big and bold. I already had some "big" actors in the cast, making choices that demanded a lot of attention. I gave Zach some of the Big Tuna scenes and had him read against Rodney's Little Tuna. Zach started to make smaller toned down choices, and I could see that there was a possibility of making Zach work in the role. I asked Zach to drop his voice even lower into his register and to move slower and I read him again. Zach was taking direction well at the audition. He didn't ask me why, he just did the part. That was an important factor in casting Zach. If he could take direction and still bring his bold choices, together Zach and I could create a believable Big Tuna.

CHAPTER 4

Facing the Minotaur: Rehearsing the Play

The Rehearsal Processes

I assembled a good group of actors. I didn't take anyone who was avoiding making choices and I didn't chose any actors who were all about making themselves look good at auditions. I was fairly confident that I had picked collaborative artists. If the actors were gravitating towards adaptive work I tried to push them into the collaborative by encouraging them to make their own choices.

The process was my favorite and most successful part of the thesis. At the end of rehearsals I knew that the actors and I had used the ideals of collaboration because it showed in the work. Before the cast started to rehearse I made sure everyone could gather for a read through. This ended up happening at *Piccola's Italy Restaurant* next to school, over a couple pizzas. Everyone enjoyed getting to read the lines out loud in public as voyeuristic customers looked on.

I started rehearsals in late October for a December 1st open of 2005. Everyone was present at the first rehearsal. I had to lay down the ground rules for how the process would work. I started off talking to the cast about the LAByrinth; sharing words of wisdom from Ortiz, giving them the history, and letting them know what kind of environment was necessary to produce this play. I told them that I wanted to create a collaborative process and that I wanted to start the rehearsal process by inviting everyone to *fail*. Everyone looked at me with perplexed expressions.

I wanted to establish with the cast that this was a *safe* place. Rehearsal was a safe place to try out new ideas, to mess up blocking, to give a line a fresh read. If they wanted to go to someplace they had never been with the character, I invited them to pursue those impulses. I let the cast know that I would always be there to catch them if they fell. I would be there to reel them in if they swam too far. This was the place to make mistakes in order to succeed.

Due to external conditions the cast was only able to meet about twenty times before the open. I gave them a time frame, let them know that I expected them to be on time, but I would also let them out of rehearsal exactly on time. As an actor I value my time and as a director I always do my best to respect actors' time. No one is at rehearsal unless they absolutely have to be there. I let them know that they were responsible for learning their lines, I would help them, but they were responsible. Surprisingly most of the actors, especially Joe Carlson, were already close to being off book at the first rehearsal. Apparently Joe had been performing his Flaco monologues in character for people at parties, promoting the show. By casting the show a month in advance, the actors had a lot of time to get familiar with the script and they were very anxious to start rehearsals. There was an excellent spirit the first night of rehearsal.

Preliminary Rehearsals

The first few rehearsals were more about blocking and getting everyone on their feet. I thought *Den of Thieves* would be a relatively simple show to block. The only set pieces in the first act are a sofa and a table. During the second act most of the actors are tied up in chairs and the other actors revolve around them. However, the actors were bringing a lot of their own movement into the process and I decided to mark out essential

blocking, giving them places they *had* to get to in order to pursue an action, or things they *had* to accomplish in order for a gag to work. I concentrated on sight lines and making sure that the actors knew exactly where the other actors were at all times, to avoid upstaging.

I am not the type of director who sits at home with action figures and dolls and plots actors' paths as they move through the set. I like to give the essential blocking and let the actors work within the frame that I have set. This is not organic blocking, I hear directors throw that word around a lot. There is definitely a game plan. But it's not set in stone, and the blocking is always subject to compromise. For instance, the comedy of the show really starts to take off about eight pages into the script when Paul and Maggie have a fight over Yodels (a Yodel is a chocolate cream filled snack that is local to Northeastern America). Paul is trying to explain to Maggie that she is an obsessive thief, but also an obsessive overeater, and she eats junk food whenever she feels bad about herself. She doesn't care and wants to eat Yodels and a Heath Bar. Paul swipes the Heath Bar from her and she attacks him. I had blocked a picture that looked like a showdown, Paul with the Heath Bar and Maggie with the Yodels. One night Jackie started to take off after Tony and they continued the scene with Maggie chasing Paul around the sofa, waving Yodels in her hand. This blocking was ten times funnier than what I had originally thought would work and so I told the actors to revisit that idea, thinking of each other as wild animals with rabies or vicious criminals with loaded weapons, and the blocking was modified.

As a director I let the actors play but when it comes to notes I am extremely specific. I have found, often as an actor that most directors never say exactly what's on

their mind. It's much better to be honest, direct and specific. As a director it's imperative that there is an open communication and dialogue with the actors. A director needs to know how to talk to actors. The more specific one is the better chance they have of communicating a concept. I found myself having to be very specific with Tony Santiago; this is a good thing. I knew that Tony could hit certain aspects about Paul, but in order to do that he needed permission. When Tony started the rehearsal process he had an adaptive personality. He was waiting for me to tell him what to do. So, in order to be efficient with rehearsal time, I would give Tony very specific notes. For instance, in one scene where Paul is trying to get Maggie to confess her theft, I told Tony to grab her hands and to think of the scene as performing an exorcism. After he knew exactly where I was coming from and what I wanted to see out of the character, he was able to take off with his own choices and have fun.

I have often told friends that a director (and teacher) has to be very fluent in current pop culture. A lot of my notes come from examples, i.e. through movies, television, music, or whatever imagery I can gather that I might be able to use to communicate with the actor. The common vernacular is also important; a director needs to know the new terms in language (theses are also gathered from pop culture). I feel it's essential for communication and it can be extremely effective when I use a common imagery or bit of language, regardless if the media generates the term. This helped me to translate specific notes to Tony. I wanted Tony's character to have a "likable falseness". This was important to establish in the first act for all the characters to have these false exterior shells that they are not able to shed until the second act, tied up in chairs, facing death. In order to get that quality from Tony, I asked him if he knew the character, Stuart

Smalley, from *Saturday Night Live*. Al Franken used to play Stuart Smalley in a skit called *Daily Affirmations*. Stuart would look at himself in a mirror and say that he was “Good enough, he was smart enough, and dog gonnit, people liked him.” As soon as I gave Tony this image his character completely changed. He started to develop Paul into a genuinely nice guy with false motives. Paul’s character started to evolve into this character that was full of affirmation for Maggie, only because he wanted to sleep with her, a likable creep. Another example of this was when I asked Tony if he knew what a “sketchy hug” was like. Basically, this is when a man gives a woman a hug of affirmation, only to cop a feel. He was able to work it in.

The cast and I often had discussions about certain aspects of the characters. At one rehearsal in late November I led a discussion on the following topic: why would I hold the door open for someone? It was very interesting to hear the reactions of the cast. Am I doing it to be nice and helpful? Am I doing it to feel like I am a nice and helpful person? Am I doing it because society says that’s the way to be polite? Am I a good person if I am polite? What is a good person anyway? Is my character a good person? What am I getting out of holding the door for you? These discussions (“As if...” discussions) were very helpful throughout the process and allowed the actors to find relatable humanistic qualities to their characters. I always expressed the idea that an actor is always a human being on stage and off. When lines, blocking, choices, and exteriors are added, a character in a play is created.

Joe Carlson and Anna Sosa were both actors who were always throwing themselves into scenes. Every night they brought a new take to a line, or did something just a little differently, and I would always let them know I enjoyed their choices. I

looked forward to working with Joe Carlson and the character Flaco, and Anna Sosa and the character Boochie, specifically with the dialect and movement of the characters. My experience in *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* helped me to translate some ideas on the characters that Joe and Anna were already starting to understand. I had ordered a copy of *Jails, Hospitals, and Hip-Hop* for everyone in the cast, but I specifically wanted Joe and Anna to listen to Danny Hoch's characters. Joe was able to come up with many different levels for Flaco's character and made him into a very likable thug. Together, Anna and I found a mix of spices for Boochie. She was able to take what she had done at auditions and build an honest character out of stereotypical behaviors. Anna achieved one of the most empathetic moments in the play during her monologue in the second act.

One of the darker places that I had to go as a director and Jackie Prater had to go to as an actor was dealing with Maggie's suicidal tendencies and self-hatred. This was an aspect of Maggie that had to be explored and needed rehearsal time. I find that a director needs to make time for actors, and issues in rehearsal, regardless of the schedule. For a few weeks, Jackie was timid about going to the dark place that Maggie needed to find. One night the entire cast talked about this idea and experiences of self-hatred, things they had experienced and people they had known. I think that this helped Jackie to find Maggie's soul and gave her courage to take Maggie to darker places.

Throughout the process the actors were starting to take more risks. I encouraged this every night before and after a run. If something didn't work I let them know that they could try it again, and if that didn't work it would probably be cut. If something really worked I would keep it in the play and let them subtly know that it worked, so that they didn't over-pursue or try to recreate their success. Rodney Clark and Kevin

Duvall are comedians. They were always making the most odd and entertaining choices with their characters, things I never would have thought to add. A lot of bits and ideas got cut, but I tried to keep in as much as possible, especially if the choice could appear to be spontaneous and subtle. One particular thing Rodney added was at the end of the play where he decided the Little Tuna would give the Big Tuna a kiss on the cheek, like a little boy would give a kiss to his father. It was a brilliant humanistic touch that Rodney brought to the character with a simple action.

Kevin as Sal was very frightening! I had to work with Kevin in order for him to find small and devious ways to torture his victims (i.e. a flick in the ear, or lurking up behind someone). Zach Jesse, the Big Tuna, always came to rehearsal with a lot of energy and I had to work to get him to harness his choices and settle into the character. I would specifically do this by giving him imagery, expressions like “playing it cool” or “this guy is suave, he’s relaxed, he’s in charge, he runs the show”. When I was as specific as possible in the direction, I would receive wonderful choices from the actors. By working together we were able to build characters, and in essence, the play.

The Crew

There were four other collaborative spirits that offered their assistance in the process of *Den of Thieves*. I was very fortunate to have these people on board during the process and they helped to keep me in check as a director. They came to me volunteering their services and I was glad to accept them into the process. The first was the assistant director Jaclyn Williams. Neil Reda, the stage manager, also served as a right-hand man during the rehearsal process and during the run of the show. The technical director of the Shafer Street playhouse, Andy Waters, helped with design choices and served as a

technical “eye” for the aspects I wasn’t able to see. Finally, I also wanted to acknowledge Glynn Brannan, the creative director for the theatre department at VCU. Glynn gladly donated her time to designing a practical and effective poster and program for the show. All of these elements and positions are always present in the collaborative process. Their voices must be considered and their time must be thanked.

Assistant Director Jaclyn Williams

Jaclyn originally auditioned for *Den of Thieves* as an actor. I was considering her for the role of Maggie but for a variety of reasons I did not cast her. I was thrilled when Jaclyn caught me after the auditions and asked if I would consider her to be an assistant director to the show.

I had worked with Jaclyn as an actor, working on two original plays in 2004 and 2005. I knew she was a hard working actor and I was excited that she was taking an interest in directing. I saw this as an opportunity to expose Jaclyn to the rehearsal process and to help her develop her “eye”. An important ideal to always uphold in the theatre, which I derived from the LAB and from personal experience, is to try and expose and teach the next artist to come after you.

Jaclyn was an immense help throughout the process. I had to give her the permission to do so. I let her know that it was okay to disagree with me. She started taking detailed notes. Jaclyn (and Neil for that matter) became part of the rehearsal process, warming up with the actors; being present at all rehearsals and helping me organize everything. Jaclyn would alert me to moments that I was missing. I would always be able to check in with Jaclyn after rehearsals and compare notes with her on the runs. I made sure that she was always part of the process and I let her give notes after my

own. I am aware that this can be dangerous; too many voices in the room can become confusing to actors. Jaclyn and I were almost always on the same page. If anything contradicted my notes we would discuss the matter together, not in front of the actors. I also made sure that the actors understood Jaclyn's notes and they respected her as a part of the process. I felt that by letting her give notes she was becoming a positive force at rehearsal. She added to the experience and the final product. She was an invaluable asset and I think that a director should always try and have an assistant director or a dramaturge at their side present during the process. I was able to teach her a few things, and vice-versa. But the main reason for the addition of the assistant director was to give Jaclyn, a new director exposure, to a process.

Stage Manager Neil Reda

Neil approached me after a Graduate Student meeting and asked me if I needed a stage manager. I absolutely did and I couldn't have asked for anyone better. Neil had experience, organizational skills, and knew how to talk to actors efficiently without demeaning them. I found myself relying on Neil, not only to run the show, but also to be a right hand man. He would run warm ups, check all the props, and he also took on the responsibility of picking up fresh donuts everyday (essential props for the production).

Den of Thieves is a minimal play, but a "prop heavy" show. The characters go through a lot of food items, specifically a tray of donuts used in the final scene, as well as several different items that Maggie steals from the convenience store in the first act. On top of the food props there are also firearms and a chainsaw. I avoided using a real working chainsaw (the gasoline used to run the saw would have created a fire hazard even with a chain-less saw). There are also two guns that are necessary props. I went

with the simplistic choice of using replica prop firearms with no capability of being loaded or fired. By using gun shot sound effects, as well as chainsaw effects, the theatrical illusion was created. Still, the responsibility of being caretaker for the weapons lied with Neil and I applaud him for his maturity and safety.

Technical Director Andy Waters

Andy Waters, the unsung hero of the Shafer Street Playhouse at Theatre VCU, also became part of the collaborative process during the technical runs. Andy is responsible for the technical duties of the playhouse. After working with Andy on several other projects I knew he would serve as a great asset to this production, not only for his technical expertise, but also for his artistic integrity. In a short amount of time Andy, helped me to do some minimal light and sound adjustments that aided to artistic aspects of *Den of Thieves*.

Reactions November 21st, 2005

The show was slated to open on Thursday, December 1st 2005. The rehearsal process was interrupted by Thanksgiving and the cast took a five-day break between the final rehearsals and tech week when *Den of Thieves* was to move into the performance space. I found it necessary that the cast had to leave for the break in good spirits in order to keep the successful momentum when everyone reconvened. The last rehearsal before the break I did not have them run the show. Instead, I asked them to talk about the process.

At first I asked about everyone's first impressions of *Den of Thieves*. I asked what he or she initially thought about the rehearsal process. Joe Carlson said that he loved it. He wondered how anyone was not going to like the show and that Guirgis had a mastery

of the common tongue. Anna had loved *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* and she wanted to audition for the show. She talked about how it was funny that she was cast because she didn't see herself in the play but she really enjoyed the character of Boochie. Kevin talked about how he felt unnaturally comfortable in most of the male roles. Tony had found a lot of heart in all the monologues in the second act, not just Paul's.

Everyone talked about how they were curious to see how they would make it more than just funny. Also, everyone was wondering how he or she was going to perform the second act immobilized! It was a huge challenge and it could have turned out really good or really bad. Tony talked about how he liked that the show appealed to a general audience. He thought people would come see it and it would be refreshing to hear.

Next, everyone talked about the brand of humor of the script and how it requires honesty and truth. Every punch line is based off of personal character choices. It was a good piece for actors. The challenge of being immobilized makes the actor focus. By sitting down, much of the actor's physical power is lost. Tony talked about how an actor couldn't zone out or they would screw up. The actors expressed to me that they were disappointed that I didn't have them completely tied up in the chairs (I'll address how I staged the second act in the design section).

I asked the actors what they had thought of the rehearsal process. Most talked about how this style of rehearsal allowed the artist to do their own thing which made their choices better. Some of them commented on the seeds that I had planted as a director. They told me that it was great for them to find things, and that I didn't tell them that I needed the actors to do something for me. They also enjoyed that there were several

discussions, specifically about the script. There was also “lightness” to the rehearsals that some had not experienced in previous productions. Sometimes, rehearsals got silly and were not focused enough, but overall, everyone looked forward to going to rehearsal. I will have to say the same for myself. I always looked forward to going to rehearsals with this group and with this play. A director should always create that environment, where it is a pleasure to rehearse a play, not a task.

The discussion turned to the heart of the play. Overall, the group did enjoy that I let them take the time to get comfortable with the text, which allowed them to get to the heart of the play and past the generalities. Everyone talked about how they found heart behind everything, even the stupid moments. They appreciated the work and time spent on these moments and they also told me that they were glad I was there.

Finally everyone talked about their fears. This was an excellent place for the discussion to go because this is where everyone started to open up. After they had gotten cast they talked about being scared of the comic timing. One person even said they were terrified. Also, everyone was worried about portraying stereotypes and how they would approach the characters. The actors talked about how they didn't want to portray something that they didn't want to be. Tony talked about walking into the audition and having a script shoved at him and all he could gather from the character was that Paul was from a Jewish home. After working in the process and working on the character, Tony realized that the character was coming from him, that all of the characters were coming from the work that they were accomplishing. Joe thanked me for not having the actors do prepared monologues at the auditions. Everyone claimed at how bad they were at monologues. Joe started to talk about his audition and how he relied on the text. He

saw that Flaco wasn't just some stupid kid, but that Joe had known this guy, had been this guy, and could make this character human. Jackie talked about how she found humor in everyone's character, especially Maggie. Anna talked about how there was no clear protagonist or antagonist in the play and that all that really mattered was that these people are human. The challenge for the actors was to find the humanity in the characters and the more they could show that on stage, the more the audience could relate. I ended the discussion shortly after these last comments. I left feeling satisfied that these actors were starting to recognize the ideals of the LAB I was trying to share.

Design Choices

As a director, I find that music is very helpful in making aesthetic choices. Music and underscoring occur in my mind's eye as I read a script. I start to see the scenes in a hybrid vision of theatre and cinema that only exists in imagination. When I first read *Den of Thieves* I had this vision of a 1930s speakeasy. I heard soft and spooky jazz music in the background, a lot of horns and clarinets. I am not sure if this stemmed from the bit in Act I where Paul talks about his grandfather, Maury Handleman, who started the "Den of Thieves" in the 20s and 30s.

Of course, this was completely out of whack with the intentions of the playwright and I am glad I did not pursue this concept. I decided to find the Billboard top songs of 1995 and 1996. By incorporating pop music from mid 1990s I was able to give the play a set era. I used a lot of rap, Notorious B.I.G., Coolio, Blackstreet, and Wu-Tang. I used pop singers such as Jewel, songs like *Who Will Save Your Soul*. I even talked with my cast about the most annoying songs of that era. *Tubthumping* by Chubawumba came to mind and Tony worked it into a bit. I wanted to research what music had sounded like

ten years removed. Even though I grew up with all these songs I had forgotten what the pop culture was like in the mid-nineteen nineties. It was a *pre-internet* culture.

For the set dressing I went with bold red and black. The show poster was inspired by the HBO television series *The Sopranos* (which has become part of pop culture over the past 10 years). I used bold red sheets to cover the table and the chairs (forming the sofa in the first act). To make the transition into the second act, the sheet came off of the chairs and became a carpet. When Sal is shot at the end of the play he dies on top of the sheet and an actor was able to drag him off of the stage to the side. It was a simple and practical design that did the job.

For the costumes I suggested the actors pick specific and few externals. I let them develop their own look with some guidance. Maggie was very simple, T-shirt and jeans. I wanted Paul to look like he had fallen out of the GAP, so he was dressed in khakis and a blue sweater vest. Joe did his own thing with Flaco and went so far as to braid his hair in cornrows, which turned out to be an effective choice. Anna had a lot of red and black, a zebra print coat and big black boots. The Italians all had suits with different colored shirts, Little Tuna in blue, Sal in green. Zach added some gray to his hair and wore bulkier clothing in order to project an old man.

Staging ACT II

I didn't want to literally tie up the four actors because I felt it was unsafe. Instead, I found black rubber shackles that they could slip in and out of with ease. They could also put a lot of strain on the shackles. The actors sat in a row from stage left to right (Jackie, Joe, Anna, Tony) and they were all linked together with these shackles. This expanded their range of movement but also kept them in their seats. It also kept the

actors safe in case of an emergency. During the rehearsal process I used several different techniques to keep the actors connected. One rehearsal I had them all sit back to back and perform the scene. Another rehearsal they did the scene in the dark. I wanted them to stay connected even if they couldn't physically see each other or physically move.

This approach to the second scene of ACT II turned out excellent results. It was my favorite scene to watch every night. The four actors were connecting physically, mentally and spiritually while being confined to the chairs. I think that this is due to some of the exercises that happened at rehearsals. This scene is really where the heart of the play lies and Guirgis shows his ability as a playwright with the four characters Maggie, Paul, Flaco, and Boochie. In this scene the characters are completely exposed and must confess their sins, but they also must rely on each other to get through the night. I felt it was completely necessary to have the actors go through these exercises so that they could trust each other to get to the heart of the play.

CHAPTER 5

Exiting the Labyrinth: Final Productions and the Future

Three Show Run of *Den of Thieves*

I believe the show was at the point where it needed to be on opening night, December 1st, 2005. On the morning of opening night I wasn't exactly sure what I wanted to do with the display in the theatre lobby. I was considering getting some actor head shots. Then I remembered I had all of the articles and artwork about the LABYrinth that Sallie Sanders had given to me on my visit. I went home and gathered all the materials and pasted them up to black foam. The inner lobby became a shrine to the LABYrinth and visitors were able to read all about what the company had been doing in New York.

My actors were in good spirits, they had rehearsed just enough and they were ready for an audience. The show ran about as long as I expected, the first act lasting about thirty five minutes and the second act running about fifty five minutes. There were never any major issues or malfunctions and the actors were well prepared. In the theatre one can always formulate a plan and be as prepared as possible but what happens on opening night and thereafter is always unexpected. Theatre practitioners are drawn to the theatre for just that rush.

At first I wasn't sure if the audience was going to laugh, the first scene opened and there were chuckles here and there. However, as soon as Maggie and Paul started to chase each other around the couch, screaming about Yodels and Heath bars, the actors started to take the show to a new level. Hilarity ensued beat after beat, as Paul performed his sexual exorcism on Maggie and then her ex-boyfriend, Flaco, busted into her

apartment, guns ablaze. An image I will always carry with me from this production was Joe Carlson's first entrance as Flaco. He had kept his cornrows a secret all week and when he entered onto the stage he received a round of applause before his first line. I was proud that so many of his colleagues were there to support and respect his transformation into Flaco.

I was very surprised and pleased with the reactions I heard after the play. I am one who likes to avoid commentary after the show but many audience members sought me out to congratulate the work of the ensemble. It seems that a lot of the audience connected with Guirgis' work and many people asked me what else he had written. I was also pleased to see many faculty members at the show and I think that it opened some eyes to the possibilities of working in the experimental space. I was very pleased with the whole process of *Den of Thieves* and the final outcome of the three shows.

The first act ran just long enough and after an intermission the audience was coming back for more. I thought that the second scene in the second act worked very well. It was a challenging scene for the four actors and there was a lot of rehearsal time dedicated to working on those particular moments when the characters spilled their guts onto the stage. The show seemed to be received well by the audience members and I think that it was a great success for the Theatre VCU Shafer Street season.

Knowledge Gained

Whether I knew or not before, I am certain now that this is the environment that I am meant to work in and this is where I will always thrive as an artist. I have been working in academic and professional theatre for the past five years. Although it's a relatively short period, I have done a breadth of work and encountered all types of

different practitioners. I always cherish the experiences where I have had the opportunity to collaborate with other artists for the purpose of forming something greater.

I have directed before, but this was the first project where I consciously attempted to create a model based off of the LABYrinth Theater Company. The one ingredient missing was the playwright. I would like to work in playwright/director collaboration as a play is rehearsed and created. I gained a lot of admiration for Ortiz, Hoffman, and Guirgis as Ortiz was telling me about the creation of the last scene of *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* the day of the opening performance. Although I didn't have a playwright present in this process, I think that Guirgis was always present in spirit at the rehearsals for *Den of Thieves*. The cast and I spent a lot of time during rehearsal exploring the possibilities of the text and revisiting the play Guirgis created ten years before the VCU production.

Serving as a director in this production has also taught me a lot about how I work and how I fit into the process. I feel I am a good leader and I have an excellent style of communicating with actors. Sometimes I do let the actors get carried away with choices and my rehearsals can appear (on the outside of the process) to be light and unstructured. I'll gravitate towards the adaptive personality, thinking of others without thinking of myself. As I continue to gain experience as a director I realize that actors are pushing me to have a collaborative personality. I have always found that the best results come from this type of experimental environment.

Theatrical work is not something that one can force. A director can only guide. As a director, one can push and pull at actors but one cannot force anything. In the end the actors are going to do what they are going to do. Time management is a key

component to directing. Everything needs to stay on track and certain goals need to be accomplished. Although there are deadlines in the theatre and shows must open, good work must happen at rehearsal. A good director understands the importance of creating an environment where actors can thrive, where they can explore their characters, where someone gives them permission to take time and to take risks, where someone invites them to fail. Actors also need to look forward to going to rehearsals.

I felt that I was able to accomplish all of these goals within the company that was assembled for the Theatre VCU *Den of Thieves* production. There always seemed to be exterior circumstances outside of the company that made it difficult to rehearse and to do the work. I am not sure that those exterior forces will ever go away. I do know that if the group has a strong leader that creates a unified goal, a concentrated effort, where the actors feel welcome and safe, where they do not have to worry about anything outside of rehearsal, good work gets done. A good director will teach actors to wipe their feet at the door of rehearsal and not to worry about anything except the process.

This thesis project and process has taught me to have confidence and believe that I can thrive in the collaborative process. I am a good actor when I am involved with collaborative people. I am a better director when I am working in this environment.

A New Maze

I am never going to pretend like I “get it” any more than anyone else does. In conversations with Ortiz, he couldn’t really put a finger on why some of us gravitate towards the theatre, especially the experimental genres. All I know is that I am drawn to the theatre and I will constantly make the sacrifices required so that the art may continue.

My ideals keep me in check. This is how I navigate my way through the maze and how I show others the path.

The LAByrinth Theatre Company is now in their 14th Season and John Ortiz will be playing Che Guevara in José Rivera's new play *School of the Americas* in the summer of 2006. I have watched all of the actors who recently worked with me on *Den of Thieves*. They don't pretend to get it either, they just keep working. They continue to practice the art on all levels. Joe Carlson has taken off in the department as an experimental actor. Jackie and Tony (and now Kevin) continue their work in main stage productions. Tony and Joe have formed the Shafer Street Alliance, a group dedicated to revitalizing the space. Zach Jesse recently organized the first annual Shafer Street student play festival. Rodney and Kevin are still funny and participate in Improv troupes. Anna, after a successful performance in the *Vagina Monologues*, is graduating with a BFA in theatre.

The theatre is all about making interpersonal connections with other artists and audiences. It's about forming a family of artists. It's about living with each other, loving each other, working and collaborating with each other. I look forward to spreading these ideals and upholding the standards set forth by John Ortiz and the members of the LAByrinth Theatre Company.

VITA

Timothy Michael Bambara was born in Philadelphia, PA July 19th, 1981. He currently holds a B.A. in Theatre from James Madison University and an M.F.A. in Theatre Pedagogy with a concentration in Acting and Directing from Virginia Commonwealth University. Timothy has served as an adjunct theatre professor, actor, director, and dramaturge for the past three years in Richmond, Virginia and continues his work with experimental and collaborative theatre ventures.