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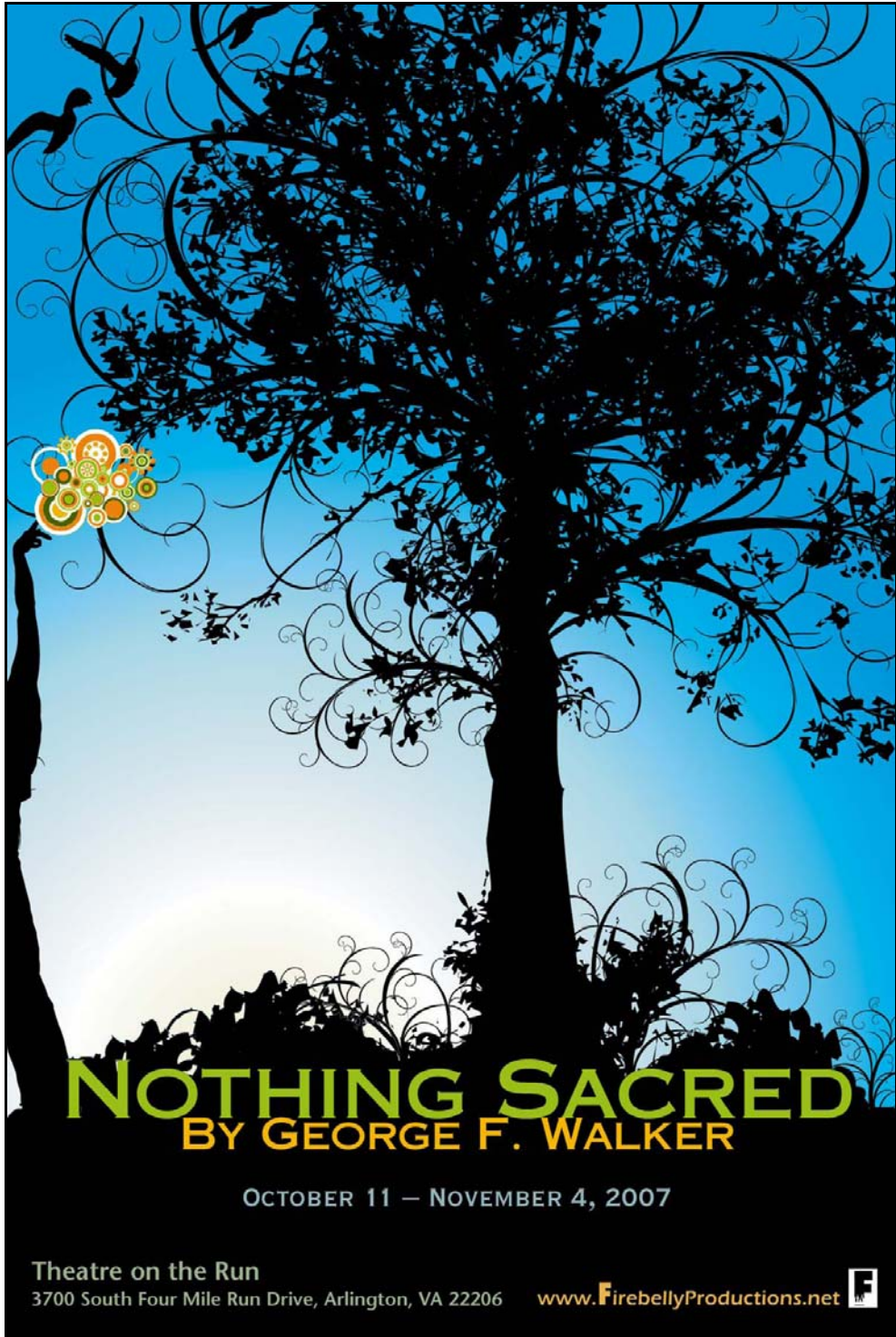
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NOTHING SACRED
BY GEORGE F. WALKER

OCTOBER 11 – NOVEMBER 4, 2007

Theatre on the Run

3700 South Four Mile Run Drive, Arlington, VA 22206

www.FirebellyProductions.net



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DIRECTING FOR THE SMALL PROFESSIONAL THEATRE:
DIRECTING *NOTHING SACRED*

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

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May, 2008

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Lastly and most importantly of all I wish to express my undying gratitude to my amazing wife, Michele. Her confidence and steadfast belief in my work has always been the driving force behind my finest efforts. Truly, I could not have done this without her.

Robb Hunter (aka: Robert H. Williams)

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Abstract

The Process of Directing in Small Professional Theatre:
Directing *Nothing Sacred*
By Robb Hunter, M.F.A.

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2008

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

The challenges of producing and directing small professional theatre in any metropolitan area are many. This thesis is concerned with the process of finding a producing theatre, casting, rehearsal and staging the play, *Nothing Sacred* by George F. Walker, in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area. Unlike many thesis projects this one was conducted completely outside of the university setting and is thus a true reflection of the small professional theatre community.

CHAPTER 1

IN THE GATE: *Getting it All Started*

Everything which I take as material for my art corresponds not to the truth of reality but to the truth of MY personal artistic whim.

Meyerhold

PART 1: *A Beginning*

There are many reasons why we each choose to do “Theatre!” Some people do so to push a particular political agenda, others do so for socially charged reasons, others turn to the stage to satisfy a need for personal expression, and still others do theatre simply for the pure joy involved in creating. The truth is that most of us pursue our artistic goals for a complex combination of reasons and I am no exception. But, for all of the subsidiary, even subconscious reasons, my primary motivation, first and foremost, is based in the love of doing the work; the jumping headlong into a project, not always sure what to expect but eager to meet the multitude of challenges that are sure to arise. It is with this attitude that I approached directing *Nothing Sacred* and I was not to be disappointed with the number of “challenges” that eventually arose.

Instead of utilizing the resources of the theatre department at VCU I chose to seek out a small professional theatre company in the Washington D.C. area to serve as a producer for the project. This choice was made for two primary reasons, the first being a purely logistical concern as I commute to Richmond from Northern Virginia in order to maintain my professional career as a Fight Director and Stage Combat Teacher

locally. The second was likewise professional in nature as I felt that this would be an excellent opportunity to expand my Fight Director reputation and résumé to encompass Director as well. As it was performed outside of the typical university setting, this alternative presented many opportunities which were both a boon and a bane to the overall process not to mention my own sanity. In addition, not only was this the first directing project connected to my graduate work at VCU, this was the first full length show I had directed in any venue so I learned many things the hard way, making numerous mistakes along the way while striving to repeat as few of them as possible. As I document and evaluate this journey I will tend to focus on these mistakes, primarily because it was through the making of them that the most valuable lessons were learned.

PART 2: *Finding a Company*

Several years ago when I relocated to The DC area from New York I was contacted by a group of theatrical combat enthusiasts to teach various courses of Stage Combat to their members. It was during a chance encounter after a class one afternoon that I met Kathi Gollwitzer, the Artistic Director of a new small theatre company called Firebelly Productions.¹ She mentioned that she was looking for a choreographer for a

¹ In an excerpt from their mission statement: *To say that the name Firebelly came from a high art concept would be a lie. Rather than inventing a clever or esoteric name, founders Kathi Gollwitzer and Barbara Walthall looked around for the tangible. Scanning their menageries, their eyes fell upon an unassuming aquarium of toads; Firebelly toads; a beautiful, voracious breed. Not unlike an actor with a passion. In a single amphibian moment, everything fell neatly into place. 'It's something I say all the time!' Kathi exclaimed. 'Acting is like a fire that burns in your belly! And actors are always hungry for work... they NEED to work!' Thus, a good name was born.* From their website: www.firebellyproductions.net

production of *Romeo and Juliet* that she was directing at a nearby Catholic High School and she inquired as to my interest. Not particularly enamored of choreographing swordfights for teenagers I was none the less new to the area and needed to be open to all “eventualities” and so we chatted for a few moments, I gave her my card and several months later she contacted me with a job offer. We hit it off quite well and after *R&J* closed I had to opportunity to come in and direct a few scenes of violence for her company.² Let’s now fast forward almost a year to my second year in the pedagogy program at VCU when I was beginning to look for a venue in which I could mount my thesis project. In a casual inquiry via an October, 2006 email I said to her:

Do you ever have a guest director work with you? The reason I ask is...I am looking for a venue in which to direct in the next year or so and I just wanted to know if that is something you did or at least I would like to ask some advice on the subject. If so maybe we could chat sometime...

Thanks,

Robb

Kathi replied:

[Various pleasantries re: family and life and etcetera]

...As for guest directors, absolutely!

I am very picky and nervous about letting others take the helm, but, you I would love to have heading up a show. So, write me up something or we can meet for coffee. Whatever is easier? I will look forward to hearing your ideas Robb!

After that we were pretty much “off to the races” and early in 2007 we had decided that I would direct. She offered me the summer or fall slot for 2007 or the first slot in the

² *To Kill a Mockingbird* (spring 2006) and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (summer 2006)

winter of 2008. One was too soon, one was too late and one was, as they say, “just right” so I went on the schedule for the fall of that year. My main thoughts once we set the preliminary schedule were “Fantastic, That was fast!” and “Oh my god! That is soon!”

PART 3: *Choosing the (Walker) Script*

Back in 2005 when I entered the [pedagogy] program my very first course was Aaron Anderson’s Modern Theatre class. Our final project was an informative presentation about a notable theatre practitioner of our choice. I decided to perform as George F. Walker in the scenario of a pre-show Q&A session during the Toronto Lab Theatre’s 30th anniversary celebration. I was somewhat intrigued by his work already and as I pursued the research my admiration of his career, style and humor only increased.

George Walker has, on many occasions, been called by critics a “playwright in progress” but he has never viewed this label as anything less than a most sincere compliment. He writes in a style all his own with no easily definable end goal, no clear destination that, once reached, proclaims out loud, “I am done, look at what I have become!” He evolves. Walker gave up his previous “career” as a taxi driver and began writing plays at a relatively early age and was at first very naïve about theatrical traditions, expectations and ART. I would imagine that if you asked him why he writes he would say something like; “Because I have to.” For Walker there is a driving *need* to write, a *need* to release all of the “wonky stuff” in his head and share it with anyone and

everyone who will listen. This *need*, and the imaginary lives it produces, is tempered...is driven by the experiences in his “other” or “real” life; every train ride taken in the dead of night, every tragic headline read in the checkout line, every moment shared with a loved one, every lousy B-movie watched half asleep at three in the morning. He writes as his characters talk, straight from the hip and heart, with little censoring and a great sense of immediacy, oftentimes surprising even themselves with what comes out. Their dialogue has the passion and conviction of a good old fashioned country western ballad and just like Walker himself, his characters are difficult to type, showing instead the personal contradictions that are so much a part of every one of us out here in the real world.

I was first introduced to Mr. Walker’s work at a Fight Directors workshop in upstate Maine. His first “commercially digestible” play, *Zastrozzi, The Master of Discipline*, contains quite a few fights and was naturally a wonderful resource from which the students might extract scenes for their work and so became required reading for us. I remember being struck at the time by the surreal quality of Walker’s writing and the unpredictable twists of the plot and decided that I should read more of this, to put it bluntly, weirdo’s work. What I found in all of his plays was a unique style that was very contemporary and relevant in its choice of subject matter, realistic and honest in its dialogue, absurdist in its presentation of the world as a chaotic irrational place often devoid of meaning, and, for lack of a better word, wonky. He has been called a subversive; his plays have won many awards; he has been ejected from the Festival Theatre at Stratford for loudly expressing his views of a performance while it was still

in progress; he has been compared to Beckett, Ionesco and Stoppard; he has been lauded and he has been panned. But one thing he has never been is predictable.

The choice of playwright was a fairly simple one but choosing *which* play of Walker's to explore was perhaps a bit more problematic as I liked several but had to find a script that satisfied several criteria:

1. It must be one that means something to me.
2. It must be commercially viable for our target audience.
3. It must be possible to produce in our rather limited time frame.
4. It must be feasible to produce in our very limited budget.

Nothing Sacred certainly fit the first criterion. I truly appreciated and found myself in sync with Walker's dry wit and fast pace and found myself laughing out loud every time I read the script. While the setting for this piece is Russia just prior to the Emancipation Reform of 1861, the dialogue is quite modern. It is also important to remember that *Nothing Sacred* is not a Russian tragedy but a *Canadian comedy about a Russian tragedy* which makes it something altogether unique. As for the characters, there is at least one aspect of each of these characters that I personally identified with and I felt that the audience would also feel this connection, even if they were unaware of it at the time. Herein lies a valuable lesson; just because I "get it" does not mean that everyone will. I mention this, not because the audiences didn't appreciate it but because there were times that the actors just didn't get the timing or the sarcasm inherent in

much of Walker's dialogue.³ I could have been more objective in my assessment of the script and should not have assumed that the humor would be so obvious. What's that old joke? "Ask me what the most important thing about comedy is..." There were times in rehearsals that I was truly dumfounded and frustrated that certain beats were missed when it was so incredibly clear (to me!) what the playwright intended.

That being said, in the early stages I was also considering *Theatre of the Film Noir*, a much darker "black comedy," set in Paris during the allied liberation of WWII. Ultimately I decided against it, despite my attraction to its dark side, its intriguing exploration of sexuality and the more manageable cast of five, because the subject matter (overt sexuality; hetero- and homo-) would not be a good fit for the theatre's typical audience. In other words our audience was generally more "sub-urban" than "urban" and so...*Theatre of the Film Noir* went into the "maybe next time" files.

Beyond Mozambique was equally alluring for me with its incredibly dark humor, high levels of gore and mayhem but again, the subject matter (drugs, porn queens, and mutilations) didn't quite fit in with either the producing company's profile or the audience it typically attracted. In choosing the producing theatre I had unconsciously chosen, or at least considerably narrowed my choices of, a script. A last "honorable mention" goes to Walker's two *East End* trilogies but I had just recently worked on *Criminals in Love* and wanted to investigate something fresh and, in the end, I felt that

³ One of my favorite television shows of all time is a BBC show from the 1980s, starring Rowan Atkinson, called *The Black Adder*. It had a similar rhythm and also made liberal use of sarcasm. The most effective moments were generally the beats between dialogue and the perfect timing of the star in delivering scathing retorts or fixing simple looks that spoke volumes.

Nothing Sacred worked much better as a stand alone play.⁴ And so I was off to Russia, or at least a Canadian Russia.

Concerning time frame and budget there was honestly little that I felt we needed to concern ourselves with...at first. I was confident that we would have the time we needed and, as I was planning a more minimalist approach to the sets and costumes, we should be able to effectively manage cost. As casting was completed and conflicts began popping up unexpectedly, however, time became an increasingly valuable and elusive commodity. Surprisingly, minimalism turned out to be less cost effective than realism and so was re-evaluated as well but these issues will be addressed more fully in later chapters. The main financial concern was that the actors and other staff members⁵ were paid exclusively from ticket sales in the way of a percentage. They were guaranteed a minimum of \$200 (the designers were \$300) and profit sharing only managed to raise the final figure to about \$260. This is one of the difficulties in staging plays with a cast in excess of 5 or 6 actors. Obviously costuming and paying more actors will generally increase expenditures but I had been unaware of how dependent the actors' salaries, small in any case, were on ticket sales. Having experience primarily in Equity affiliated productions over the last ten years or so, and certainly not involved in the financial business of the theatres beyond my own paychecks, I had been mostly unaware of this "tradition" that seems to be fairly common in the area.

⁴ *The East End Plays, part 1* (I directed the violence for this in 2006)

⁵ I donated my salary back to the theatre.

PART 4: Pre-Production – the Staff

Our first pre-production meeting was held in June and it was here that I met my staff consisting of:

Mike Fernandez – Assistant Director

Andrew Griffin – Production Manager

Connor M. Dale – Lighting Designer

Lynly Saunders – Costume Designer

Andrew Berry – Set Design

Sandra Gayle Wade – Graphic Designer

This entire group was selected mainly by word of mouth and a few résumé submissions but I personally had little real input. This was not a problem for me as the people that were recommended knew the space and had worked with the company before in addition to the fact that I knew few people that would be willing to do design work for such a small fee. As Firebelly Productions was established in part to give young artists a place to grow and hone their craft, I neither desired nor expected to have high profile designers in any case. That being said our Lighting Designer turned out to be very dedicated and did a fine job with very limited resources. Our Graphic Designer likewise gave us a wonderful design that handily survived my best efforts to “improve” it. Our Costume Designer would have done a fantastic job, I’m sure, and she brought a good deal of research to the first meeting. Unfortunately she had to leave the project due to another job conflict. Kathi, the Artistic Director, and I took on the position in her stead. The Production Manager started off exceptionally organized and looked to be quite capable but he was only able to work on a very part-time basis as we approached the beginning of auditions which is to say...he did dreadfully little when it really mattered. The set designer came to the first meeting with sketches and ideas that, while

interesting, did not fit with the image I had in my mind of how the show should look. I didn't see at the time that he apparently was only interested in doing things the way he wanted to do and this would come back to, as they say, bite me in the ass. Kathi (the Artistic Director) would take on the role of Stage Manager as well as handle props with my assistance and she did the work of many people. Her energy and patience were astounding. Lastly, there was the Assistant Director, Michael Fernandez. I did have a person in mind to assist me but had been unable to reach her for several weeks. Michael was a recent graduate from George Mason University who wanted to direct and was very enthusiastic so I decided to go with him, also on the recommendation of Kathi. We had a few rocky moments early on but he really proved his worth once we got closer to tech week. His assistance through the final two weeks and the run of the show was invaluable.

At this juncture all was well. I had what seemed to be a competent staff that was young, energetic, imaginative, willing to work for peanuts and familiar with the space. We were ready to move ahead and begin casting the show!

PART 5: *Concept*

One thing that struck me about *Nothing Sacred* was that the setting was nothing unusual, the characters were pretty normal (at least the main ones), and the manner in which they interacted was, given their personalities, completely rational. But, the straightforward interaction between them brought out the absurd, the ridiculous...the wonky, as Walker likes to say. I guess you could say I felt attracted to the juxtaposition

of normalcy with absurdity and it seems to me that each of our lives has the potential for this same dichotomy. I wanted to emphasize this by setting these relatively normal characters in a world that was abnormal. I planned to do this primarily with sets, costumes and other technical aspects but, as I mention later in Chapter 3, some of these ideas were forced to undergo major alteration although I still maintained the basic concept through the use of other devices, such as sound, transitions and a key set piece or two. Costumes, which initially were going to be single character-specific pieces over a unified basic costume, changed and became more realistic but this didn't finally happen until near the end of our rehearsal process. Another goal I had from the beginning was to make this production a theatrical event, with a [very loose] nod to Brecht. As some of our major technical elements begrudgingly became more realistic I accomplished this by employing a contrivance or two that made the audience aware that they had come to see a piece of pure theatre. I will discuss this more in later chapters.

CHAPTER 2

AND THEY'RE OFF! *Casting*

PART 1: Casting; Round One

This was initially the most exciting part of the process as well as, for lack of a better word, the most “director-like” and I was both looking forward to it and intimidated by it. The artistic director of Firebelly offered her assistance in this matter and invited me to the League auditions with her but I was unable to attend due to a previous commitment in another show. Kathi therefore took the character breakdown with her and brought back a pile of headshots for me to look over.⁶ We talked about holding an open call but eventually decided to hold an “invitation only” audition. This decision was made because, to be blunt, the “quality” of persons attending them can vary quite widely. Small local theatres, in particular those who cannot afford to offer anything resembling a true salary, tend to draw an “interesting” array of amateurs as well as professionals many of whom tend to be...well...not generally talented. Between the small pool of people I had worked with in the past, a few recommendations from the production staff, actors from Firebelly’s previous productions and the handful of relative “unknowns” from the League auditions we had a fair number of actors to see, perhaps 40 in all. Additionally, several actors whom I felt that I knew fairly well were requested to only come to the callbacks.

⁶ See appendix C for breakdown.

The first night of auditions, held on July 9th consisted of the actors performing prepared contemporary monologues of two to three minutes in length after which I gave a few notes and had them perform again.⁷ I coached them through portions of their monologues to see if they could think on their feet and take direction and I must say that this was an utterly energizing experience for me! I saw several rather flat monologues take shape with just a few simple adjustments and clarification of beats and several people left that night with much more polished audition pieces than the ones they brought in. By and large I simply urged the actors towards expanding the choices they had already made, trying to get them to more fully explore their impulses. For some actors I asked simply that they become more physically connected to their pieces and let what they were feeling manifest itself physically. A few actors in particular were too much in their heads and this simple suggestion allowed me to see their choices more clearly.

There were several clear choices for some roles: Fenichka, the young housekeeper; Kirsanov, her older lover; Anna, the vibrant and mysterious femme fatale; and Sergei, her huge bodyguard. These were actors with a relatively high level of experience and who obviously worked well with my style, which tends to be straightforward and high energy. Kelley Slagle and Cliff Williams were essentially pre-cast as Anna and Sergei as I had worked with them previously and they were both perfect for their respective roles. There were, of course, those who brought in lengthy classical monologues or who had very little prepared and “needed a moment” to search

⁷ See appendix D for initial audition posting that was sent out.

their memories for something appropriate. I will never cease to be amazed at the lack of preparedness in some performers. Clearly this is one reason why some make it professionally and others do not. Besides un-preparedness, another pet peeve of mine is résumé layout and there were some that were very poorly arranged, so there was a little frustration on my part. Overall, though, I found several people worth calling back the following week.

PART 2: *Callbacks*

Callbacks were scheduled for July 13th, however there were several conflicts with people we were really interested in seeing so we rescheduled them for the following Monday, July 23rd. Before we even announced callbacks I had decided on one actor, John Collins, to play the role of Kirsanov. He was exactly the right age, had a fairly impressive résumé, was highly recommended by Kathi and had a wonderful first audition. Combine these four selling points with the fact that finding a non-Equity actor in his late 40s/early 50s is almost impossible and you have a “must cast him now” situation. (If we had needed only women and men in their early 20s we would have been all set.) I called him almost immediately with the offer. Unfortunately, John was also auditioning for another company for which he had not previously worked, and made us wait as a back-up. I was not thrilled to be a potential second choice but at least he was honest. On the upside I didn’t have to feel like I cast someone who viewed my show as a back-up choice; on the downside we lost a perfect Kirsanov, an event which was to become a theme.

For the callback audition I grouped actors together and had them perform scenes from the script, which was pretty standard protocol. Each person attending knew beforehand the role or roles for which they were being considered and had been sent appropriate sides. I had everyone arrive at once and, while I saw several new people for the first time one on one, the groups had time to run through their scenes. It was interesting to note that there were very few surprises after the first audition. So much is determined from the first moment that an actor opens his or her mouth—well, actually from the moment they walk through the door. I almost felt that I could have saved several hours if I had just asked them to walk into the room, say hello and then walk out again. I would most likely have made the same casting decisions. Of course this would have been neither fair nor wise (nor a great deal of fun for anyone concerned) and, as it turned out, there was to be a surprise or two awaiting me.

Andrew Pecoraro, with whom I had some familiarity and was looking forward to directing, did not quite turn out to be “Bazarov material,” the role for which I had thought to audition him. As a student of mine he had been confident, energetic and took every note with great relish and aplomb. In the audition, however, his youthful demeanor, particularly in comparison with some of the more mature actors, became apparent and he seemed to disappear into the background...a definite problem for the charismatic lead character. That being the case I still felt his energy and talents could be put to good use and so I chose to cast him in a different, smaller role. Another young woman, Clarissa, received a callback (for the role of Fenichka) almost exclusively as a courtesy to my assistant director with whom she was friends. At the initial audition I

had seen Tori, a more competent and experienced actor, for the role and had mentally already cast her but Clarissa so clearly embodied Fenichka during the callback that I ignored her relative lack of experience and chose her instead. Unfortunately I learned that, in general, there is no substitute for experience and underlying ability and that I should have trusted my first impression. Clarissa was “fine” in the role but it was often a struggle, especially in the more emotionally intimate scenes with Kirsanov where Tori would have excelled. As fate would have it, Tori would get her chance...at least once.

PART 3: More Callbacks; the Search Continues

With callbacks over I had still not found my male lead (Bazarov), the older servant (Piotr) nor had I found an older actor for Kirsanov. I had one person left to see for Bazarov named Jon Towson, another acquaintance from my classroom, and he came in separately one night to read with a young high school graduate I was considering for Bazarov’s best friend, Arkady. The young man in question, Patrick Flannery, was a quiet, serious person who looked every bit the slightly awkward young college student that he would eventually be playing. The two of them had wonderful chemistry together; the tall, dark, handsome Bazarov and his faithful, but not slavish, friend. I offered them parts on the spot, although I refused to let them answer immediately, and they both accepted the following day. Now if only we could find a middle aged actor worth a damn and a “spry 80 year old” to play the servant, Piotr.

The search for a Kirsanov led me to a former student of mine from Catholic University, Lee Ordeman. He was in his early 40s and was a good actor with excellent

instincts, having received several favorable reviews for his recent local work. I managed to catch him just before he was leaving on a three week trip to Italy. As there was no time to see him before his departure I asked him to read the script, which I sent right over, and let me know if he was interested. The next day he said that he loved the role and so, time being of the essence, I proposed he join the cast. He accepted and I breathed a sigh of relief...until two weeks later when he phoned me and said that he would have to miss several weekends in September (our rehearsal period) as well as the first part of October (our tech week). I refrained from putting out a hit on him right away and informed him that, since we are slated to begin rehearsals in about three weeks, I was less than happy with his last minute choice to “help his parents move into a new house.” We parted [NOT] the best of friends and the search resumed. In the meantime I had found an actor to play the “spry 80 year old.” He was only about 35 but had a nice reading and came well recommended by Kathi, the Artistic Director so I decided that the servant, Piotr, in no way needed to be ancient. Call it “practicalities beyond my control.”

With barely three weeks to go I found myself scouring stacks of headshots and wracking my brain for anyone that I might possible call in for Kirsanov. The résumés that I had were a mixture of people that were far too young, had far too little experience or were cast long ago in another show. So another valuable lesson learned was to hold auditions much earlier next time and plan on losing at least one or two actors along the way. I always thought that Olney Theatre and Baltimore Shakespeare Festival cast way too early (9 months or so) but I think I might reassess that opinion. I made several

phone calls and eventually found an actor to come in and read and, at this point, I was just hoping for a heartbeat and several functioning brain cells. Charles St. Charles walked into the rehearsal room and immediately struck me as a very open and enthusiastic person...so far so good. He looked several years older than his headshot, and said that a full beard aged him a few more years, so he looked the part...also good. We chatted a moment and I found out that he was a rather high powered lawyer in DC who was frequently invited to the larger theatrical fund raising galas in the area. His monologue was adequate in that he was able to communicate at least some level of emotional connection to his words and he spoke clearly. I do not recall what it was from. He was physically a bit stiff which, I later found out, was due to several fused vertebrae in his upper spine. After two more attempts with the monologue, in which I simply asked Charles to expand or suppress his emotional reactions "here and there" I was satisfied that we would be able to work well together and I offered him the role on the spot. He accepted with a great deal of excitement and I breathed easier that night for the first time in a while. Charles was one of the nicest people I had met throughout this process thus far and he would prove to be the most professional member of the company. Although Charles never got quite as far as I wanted with a few moments in the play I could have done far worse than casting Mr. St. Charles.

CHAPTER 3

INTO THE FIRST TURN: *Technically Speaking***PART 1: *Space; the Final Frontier...Almost***

Casting had pretty much consumed most of those fleeting weeks of summer but we found a modicum of time to discuss and plan the play with my technical director. The space we were going to use, a small black box theatre space possessed of a few rather unforgiving physical qualities, was Theatre on the Run, or TotR as it is generally referred to in written missives. TotR shares a building with the Arlington County Cultural Affairs Division in Arlington, Virginia and is just on the edge of the newly revitalized area known as Shirlington. The building that houses the theatre is literally on the wrong side of the tracks and remains in an industrial area with no real access to public transportation and a decidedly “shady” feel. Hopefully the urban creep of hip restaurants, clubs and theatres just across the tracks will spread to encompass this area as well since its current location does not aid in enticing audience members to attend performances held there.

The theatre’s seating capacity can vary widely depending on the specific layout of the playing area and the audience area which is comprised of four levels of risers that can span the width of the theatre. Our set-up eventually allowed for about 60 or so with potential additions on the floor if needed. In the most common arrangement, there are exits on either side of the “box” with the audience on one side and the playing space on the other with two subsidiary exits, one of which led to 2 “cozy” dressing rooms. This

common arrangement was one area I had initially hoped to alter or at least expand. I had planned to split the essentially square space diagonally leaving two main playing areas in two opposing corners and utilizing the long connecting “path” between them as transition areas and for playing the several outdoor/road scenes. I felt that having an audience on both sides would allow for more exciting staging alternatives. I saw the possibility for movement swirling into and out of each scene that would really help push the story forward. The typical productions in this space use a proscenium arrangement, which I feel is such a waste of interesting possibilities especially since the space itself is a *black box*. The point of a black box theatre, in my training and experience, is to have an area with few constraints and that you use to “experiment” with alternative staging. You are not limited by a proscenium arch and a permanent house. However, I was warned that this might be difficult due to a lack of a true lighting grid on one half of the space but I did see several ways to get light where we needed it. At this point I was talking primarily with my set designer/technical director, Andrew Barry and he “politely” agreed that it could be possible but that I should get our lighting designer’s opinion. Our lighting designer, Conner Dale, was currently engaged with two other productions and was hard to meet face to face. In hindsight this was the first instance that I began to meet with resistance from Andrew, even though at the time he was technically agreeing with me. I didn’t know him well enough to see that he would “play along” but with no real desire to try something he had not planned himself. In any case it became a moot point as I eventually consulted with Conner and we had a lengthy discussion about the number of instruments the theatre owned and that it was often

barely enough to light single scene productions. We might be able to get the instruments hung without a true grid but he felt that there just were not enough for what I wanted. That being said, he informed me that he would look into making it work none-the-less so I was still prepared to use the space the way I had envisioned.

After these initial conversations I spent a good deal of time in the theatre marking out performance areas and exploring the possibilities. To my surprise and disappointment, what looked like a black box (primarily because it is black and square!) is really a proscenium theatre in disguise. The lighting/sound booth is at the back; the risers are set up under the booth in the widest part of the “box” with exits to left and right. There is a six foot wide corridor between these two exits that separates the audience from the “stage” which is a point where the space narrows to about 23 feet across, creating a sort of proscenium arch. It goes back another 15 feet or so and ends in a wall. This is essentially the stage. There is a little wing space stage right with an exit to a crossover/hallway and a larger space stage left with two dressing rooms and a fourth exit. Above this stage area is a lighting grid. I began to see the difficulties of traffic patterns and getting the light where we needed it and, after another meeting with the technical staff, we decided to use the space in its usual configuration. With a different play we might have been able to do pull it off but discretion won over valor. Now I think it was the right decision for several reasons and once I saw how truly difficult it would be to light that space I stopped doubting it. But, it still bothers me that we used that space in the same old damn way. I told Kathi that if I were to direct there again I would not stage a proscenium show.

I then began to think how we could split this area into the various settings we would need. The main playing areas were the house interior and the outdoor garden which I decided to connect, with entrances and exits possible through these rooms and into the next. As this would leave us with very small areas, one ten by ten and the other only slightly larger, I planned to have light spill into the adjacent sets so that we could make use of at least portions of the secondary areas while concentrating the action in the primary one. Suffice to say that we staged it and rehearsed it this way and then during tech week we found that, once again, our lighting resources were not sufficient to provide a decent amount of spill outside of each primary playing area. I then had to re-block and compact several scenes, primarily those in the garden, the smallest space. This occasionally found the actors in an area simply too small to contain them all, particularly when there were four or five people sharing the space with two stone benches in an area barely ten by ten feet in size. The drawing room set suffered slightly as well but only during those few moments when nine members of the cast were present all at once. So we had a little congestion but did the best we could.

The third main playing space was the friendliest to us and was the long connecting section of floor between the two exits located in between the “stage” and the audience. Once again lighting was our main hurdle but was, by comparison, easy to work around. This space was used for the four outdoor locales and for the one scene in a hotel suite. The outdoor spaces were a field, two roadways and a wood and they each worked quite well where they were staged. For these scenes I primarily utilized placards to announce the locales. This was one of the techniques that I continued to use for every

scene and placement and manipulation of the placards was the major device used to remind the audience of the theatricality of what they were watching. To give an idea of how the process worked I will describe the opening of the play as it eventually was performed.

As the audience enters the theatre they see the set in dim light and on either side of the proscenium arch is a brass music stand with a large white sign that said;

Russia
Late Spring
1859

After the house lights and pre-show music faded, the audience heard the twanging of a mouth harp, which dove-tailed with fading pre-show music. A sharp spotlight suddenly came up on the stage left stand and we see a large poorly dressed peasant (Sergei) playing the harp. He looks in surprised discovery at the stand and removes the placard to read it more closely. Revealed beneath is another which had on it;

A Roadside

As this sign is revealed we see the character of Arkady step into the light and place a battered, twisted road-sign down in the scene. On it are the names of Russian cities and with arrows pointing off at various angles, signifying that we are on a lonely country road. The peasant, surprised at Arkady's appearance out of thin air, and believing that these placards have some sort of power, eagerly reveals the next which read simply:

Darkness

The stage is suddenly plunged into darkness during which two other characters (the Bailiff and Gregor) move into place on the opposite side of the stage. After a beat we hear whimpers of a superstitious fear of the dark coming from Sergei. The spotlight slowly creeps back up on Sergei and Arkady. Sergei reveals a final sign which read:

**The Sounds of
Someone Being
Beaten**

As this is revealed we hear the sounds of a whipping (the Bailiff) and a scream of anguish (Gregor) from the other characters who entered unobserved on stage right. Sergei approaches and stares in fascinated horror, bringing us into the scene, and then runs offstage before he becomes the Bailiff's next target. Then the true text of the play begins.

I borrowed the idea to announce each scene on signs from Brecht and then made the transitions into short scenes in their own right. In addition to their use as a "wonky" element, I used the placards and their manipulation to expand some of the minor characters, having the interactions and shifts performed in character. This process developed throughout rehearsals and it will be touched on again later.

PART 2: *The Set*

Originally this was to be a variation of a unit set that would morph as we needed it for each scene. My concept was to have a single table that would lengthen and shorten, raise and lower, based upon a fairly simple device. At first I did not know how to accomplish this but I eventually sketched out a plan for the technical director that

would require a bit of work but that was simple enough. The chairs would be modified rehearsal blocks that had a hinged portion that could flip up to provide a chair back (to differentiate between dining room and hotel sitting room for example) and that would have different designs to be revealed from scene to scene. I viewed these set pieces as a touch of theatricality that would become more than simply a scene change with actors carrying furniture off and on. Not for the last time, however, my TD insisted that it was not possible and yet he made no other suggestions other than a realistic set. In the early production meetings I had voiced these ideas to a room full of nods and by the time we were in rehearsals I was getting reasons why “it just won’t work.” I could have insisted but I guess I was unclear of how hard I could push and perhaps I doubted my ability to judge what really was possible.

What we ended up with was realistic furniture for the most part. For transitions, into the hotel for example, I had Sitnikov directing the other actors in setting up the suite as it was his father’s hotel. He proceeded to clean and straighten up and then ushered in his guests, Bazarov and Arkady. In a similar manner, for the final transition into Bazarov’s deathbed scene, Anna took control and directed the setting up of the bedroom. The various actors in the scene were simply helping get the mortally wounded Bazarov into the bed and comfortable so it flowed seamlessly from field to house. I will say, not for the last time, that the transitions ended up being wonderful scenes in-and-of-themselves so I can’t complain too bitterly about the end result.

The one scenic element that I managed to keep was “the tree” and it sprang from a simple scenic description in the script;

The Garden of the Kirsanov house. A couple of benches.

A small table. Lilac tree.

I was struck by the specific mention of a lilac tree and decided that it must have some significance and, if it did not, it should have. I knew from the start that I wanted his tree to become the focal point of the garden if not the entire house. As the death of Bazarov was the main element that heralded in a new beginning for the rest of the characters, each in their own way, I felt that there was a definite aspect of rebirth and I would use the tree to symbolize this. I considered having a tree that shed its leaves throughout the play; too technical. I considered a tree that was grotesquely twisted and barely a tree at all, simply a curled trunk; this was too much in contrast to the more realistic turn we had taken with the scenery. I finally found the perfect tree; dead and with gnarled roots still attached. I decided that this would be hung in midair in the garden and at the end of the play as Bazarov died, Anna would reveal a new branch covered in fresh blooms of spring. With a bit of sleight of hand and misdirection it appeared almost by itself. The end of the play, with its flash of light silhouetting the entire cast then revealing an empty bed, from which Bazarov had mysteriously vanished, had always puzzled me and had never seemed quite right,. Perhaps it was intended to be puzzling but I perceived the end of the play to be one of hope, or at least to be filled with possibility, and so our dead tree blossomed once more as Anna’s laughter faded into the darkness.

PART 3: *Music and Sound*

Some time ago I had used a song for another show, called *Vendetta Siciliana*. This tune was played on Italian mandolins accompanied by a mouth harp and when I decided to do *Nothing Sacred* I thought, “That song IS this play.” It is a very unusual combination of instruments to begin with and its lively tempo has an air of mischief about it that could only be described as “wonky.” This would definitely be my choice to open the play and I searched for similar music to use pre-show, eventually ending up with a wide variety of music from Italian mandolins to French café music to Hungarian folk tunes. The key element I was searching for was a sense of play, of fun and I wanted music that would be just a little strange...a little wonky. I planned to utilize music for the majority of the transitions as well and was able to mine the pre-show music for sections that complemented the moods for each scene. (Several members of the cast and audience asked for the soundtrack and it gets frequent play in our home to this day.) I also used sound effects on two different occasions in place of music to help set locale; once to aid in the establishment of the dark and spooky woods at midnight and for this I blended different tracks of jungle and forest noise punctuated by an owl’s frightening hoot; the second was the “field of honor” on which the duel was to take place and for this I again blended two tracks with birds and various early morning sounds. These sounds became audible in sync with the changes in the placards mentioned before. In both cases my assistant director, Michael did the technical cutting of the tracks I provided.

CHAPTER 4

INTO THE SECOND TURN: *The Actors and the Process*PART 1: *Jumping Right In*

Our read-through was scheduled for September the 4th, the Tuesday after Labor Day, the most inconveniently placed holiday on the calendar. It was a very exciting night for me, even more so than the first auditions. That night I was taken aback when I realized fully for the first time that all of these people; the eleven actors, the Artistic Director, the assistants, interns and designers, were looking at me because I was “running things.” I had a moment of “What have I gotten into? These people all are looking at me and they want something, but what is it they want?!” The moment lasted for about three seconds and did not return...well not often. I realized that we were all in this project together and that each person will, literally, play his or her part and all I had to do was keep us headed in the right direction...that’s all! The read-through was fun and encouraging and I got a couple of clues about who I could count on to explore on their own and who might need more coaxing. Some people knew each other but most did not so there was a nice level of comfort mixed with that sense of being on your best behavior when you are around new people. If only we could have retained some of that “best behavior” throughout the entire run...but I digress. In the subsequent section I will briefly touch on our first week of rehearsals followed by initial impressions of the actors as well as how I addressed working with each of them.

After the read-through we had a brief production meeting and everyone went their separate ways until the next night. I had set up a loosely structured rehearsal plan that would attempt to make the best use of everyone's time. During the last rehearsal of each week I would give my stage manager, Kathi, a schedule for the next week and she would send it via email to the cast. As scheduling was one of the many aspects of directing that I had never really done before, I modeled this and other structural choices after those I had witnessed working for other directors. I began with week one and eventually decided to set the show down in rough shape and have it all blocked during that time. After that week, which would also be a period to evaluate the actors more fully, I would assess how to proceed with the subsequent weeks. In addition, we were fortunately, and unexpectedly, able to make use of the actual theatre for the rehearsal process. By the end of that first week we had the entire show on its feet and were ready to begin working the scenes in depth. With three weeks left before we began to tech the show I felt that we were in good shape.

During "block week" I began to find out which actors were really going to bring something to the table, so to speak. Several actors actually had ideas of their own! I had made copious notes for each scene about movement possibilities and some obvious moments where "Arkady sits" or "Anna and Bazarov embrace" but I allowed each actor to let their impulses dictate their actions. I would let a scene progress for a page or two then run a section again encouraging each actor to keep an action or movement that "felt right" or to try something new where a choice had gone nowhere. I promoted a sense of play but there were some who were very tentative so for these actors I would

make more specific suggestions. Clarissa (Fenichka) and Charles (Kirsanov), for example, needed the most help and would often just stand and talk “at” each other even in scenes that screamed for a touch or caress. Considering the fact that these two were supposed to be in love I made definite notes to set aside plenty of time for them alone.

Once we had our initial shape we progressed in much the same fashion as that first week. I would choose sections of the play, primarily based upon which conflicts I had to deal with at any given time as much as which scenes needed the most work. I did my best to get actors at least one night off during the week and avoided bringing them in for a single brief appearance. Since everyone was working at least one day job, this was greatly appreciated. At times it was like trying to solve Rubik’s cube with a couple of pieces missing. At the end of each week we attempted a stumble-through in order to keep some sense of the progress of the play in mind.

PART 2: The Actors, et al...

As far as stage experience is concerned Clarissa definitely seemed to have the least. She was a recent graduate of the theatre program at George Mason University where teaching actors to turn their back on the audience and speak to the upstage wall is apparently a prominent aspect of their training. I am now aware that the time spent with constant reiterations to “let us see your face every now and again” could have been better utilized but I just could not let this go. Call it a pet peeve of mine but she and Patrick, both with very modest experience, just did not get that I wanted them to cheat out, not always of course, but occasionally. This hurdle was finally overcome right

before opening so if I accomplished nothing else with her there was that one minute victory! As I mentioned earlier, Clarissa had a quiet, reserved quality about her that was very close to how I envisioned the character of Fenichka. One of the reasons I cast her in the role of the manically shy housekeeper was because she truly embodied her. We also worked on other basics such as filling beats and waiting until that uncomfortable silence became just long enough but not too long. Again, there were things that the older actors knew instinctively that she just needed to be taught. I made a concerted effort to avoid “showing” her how I wanted her to move or deliver a line, particularly in the intimate scenes with Kirsanov (Charles), rather asking questions that would lead her to make discoveries on her own. There were, however, a few times when the ever-tightening schedule dictated that I do so. At these times she would often visibly breathe a sigh of relief so I did not chastise myself overly for what I considered a major directing transgression.

Jon (Bazarov) and Kelley (Anna) were much more connected to their physicality and tied their actions to their words. Their characters had a lot of history, some of it sexual, and they needed to appear familiar with each other, so it was a great help that Jon and Kelley were willing to freely explore their physicality. As I mentioned previously, I had worked with both of these actors before and my expectations were high. For the most part they did not disappoint and their performances were compelling and well received.

Jon has earned a bit of a reputation in the non-union acting world as a strong leading man type and generates favorable reviews consistently. He brought a wonderful

sense of the charming rogue to the production and knew his way around a stage well enough that he did not need to be told such things as how to counter another actor or to actively listen. My principal objective with Jon was to create a Bazarov that could believably engender the complete devotion that Arkady, Sitnikov and, to some extent, Anna, felt for him. In my research into past productions of *Nothing Sacred*, one criticism that surfaced with some regularity was that Bazarov came across as an insufferable, arrogant ass. Several critics wondered how anyone could subject themselves to his cruel words and harsh personality; much less actually love the man. So we strove to emphasize his straightforward nature and have those moments of brutal honesty come from his passion for the truth, not from a desire to hurt. In many instances we tried to remove the overt emotional connection to his words, addressing his speeches in a more intellectual fashion. Since he obviously was passionate about everything he did, this served as a rather crude beginning but it did soften his biting sarcasm in many places and ultimately proved to be effective. The pitfall was that Bazarov often said rude and offensive things even though he didn't mean to be rude or offend. It was almost a certain degree of naïveté. He could sense that his words sometimes gave offense he just didn't understand why the truth should be perceived in that manner. Once we got Bazarov to be likeable (for lack of a better way to put it) he really began to settle into the role and find the more subtle nuances in his relationships with the other characters. This development was evident particularly with Sitnikov, his obsequious disciple, and Arkady, the best friend for whom he was able to voice his genuine affection only as his own death becomes certain.

I truly enjoyed working with Jon and would jump at the chance to do so again. He was always on time (meaning early); he always stayed late to help; he was the consummate professional. However, by his own admission, he had taken too much on his plate that fall and was not off book until tech week and by “off book” I mean he didn’t carry a copy of the play...lines were still an issue. I knew after the first week that Jon would need the least work and for that I was infinitely grateful. Unfortunately I felt we never got to work as freely as we needed to because of the damn script anchoring him down or having “line” being called right when he was really digging deeply into one of his many monologues. That being said, I accept the responsibility for this as I am certain that there were ways to get the work done without worrying about Jon being free of the script. I cannot cast the “inexperience” stone without realizing that I am also likely to be hit by it, especially when it comes to directing. Rehearsing the dialogues was not an issue as with his multitudinous monologues so I can’t say it was a pervasive problem. Although I would liked to have had more time to work solely with Jon, I did recognize that others in the cast needed much more assistance so, in the end, I didn’t bemoan his struggle with the lines excessively.

Kelley Slagle, who portrayed the mysterious Anna, was an obvious choice for the role. She was tall and pale with red hair and could shift between beautiful and frightening or a combination of the two in an instant. I must say that casting her was a “no-brainer” and she made my job easy. When she was on the stage she naturally and audaciously commanded attention. It was in her intimate scene with Pavel that we spent a great deal of time finding the softer side of Anna that could be touched by this

haunted man who had been vainly pursuing her. In writing about each of the actors, I realize that the one thing I spent the most time on was finding subtleties; testing the extremes of emotion for these characters, and then focusing on exploring the many places in between. For Anna this was no different. She was a strong charismatic character, and Kelley was an expert at being strong and charismatic, so we used this as a baseline and then found the moments when her guard was dropped and she showed more vulnerability. Her performance was ultimately rock solid and I was very pleased with the final product. Technically speaking Kelley's only difficulty was in speaking slowly enough to keep her words clear. I only mention this because it was a surprise to me and it persisted even into the final previews, if not into some performances. I attributed this to the relatively large amount of independent film work that she does although it is necessary to be understood in film as well as live theatre and this should be no excuse. It mainly became an issue when Anna's emotional commitment increased so I simply reminded her that her primary goal in speaking was to communicate something to another person, no matter how excited she became. In any case, she was aware of her "speeding problem" and strove to control it and, as I said, I was eventually well satisfied that she would be understood.

Cliff, who played Sergei, had the smallest role and yet did the most with it. Perhaps it was a matter of the actor simply looking for ways to amuse himself but the end result was that in every scene he made strong choices and committed to them completely. He was the only actor who [consistently] gave almost too much and I think we all know what a gift these performers can be. I had decided early on to use him for

several of the transitions and after watching him for a few days I began to expand some of my ideas about how to better use his energy and talent. Sergei opened the show and established both his character and the placard device that would be used throughout the play; he announced intermission by changing the final Act I signs to “Intermission” and then to a menu of the concessions available in the lobby complete with belly-rubbing-lip-licking pantomime that kept the audience laughing out into the hall and reminded them that “it’s all part of the show;” he led the curtain call with more signs that were essentially cast credits and he remained the last person on the stage with a big “The End.” Cliff embodied the sense of fun and quirkiness that I felt was vital to *Nothing Sacred* and his performance was infectious...in a good way.

Patrick, the recent high school graduate who played the “co-starring” role of Arkady was the most unusual member of the cast (and he had some pretty stiff competition). He was very bright and knew exactly what he was saying about 99% of the time and we quickly got him to 100% with little effort. However, he had not quite grown out of the gawky-ness associated with teen boys and had a hard time with his physicality. On the one hand he was the perfect companion to Bazarov and his stooped-shoulder posture and hang-dog expressions were “wonderfully Arkady.” On the other hand there were times when Arkady needed to become energized or when we needed to see him verging on violent anger and his body would simply not rise to the occasion. He took notes well, however, and he eventually got to a level of physical connection to his work with which I was content. Patrick also came to the first rehearsal off-book; completely off-book. I am uncertain how I feel about this still, in-so-far as how it can

potentially get the actor set in his ways before having the chance to explore the script with the cast and director. I will say that in this instance, it was a blessing, and Patrick was, at least early on, an example for them all. What he needed most was what I termed, a cheerleader. He had superb instincts but was hesitant about making bold choices so in his monologues I would encourage him with “yes, yes, more!” It was [acting] coaching and yet it was more than that. At times I felt like I needed pom-poms but it was worth it and once he got out of his head, so to speak, he began to make more courageous choices all on his own.

As a side note that is honestly not worth detailing but that negatively affected many of the cast and crew, Patrick became remarkably obnoxious. He was incredibly bright and quite reserved so most of us forgot that he was a recent high school graduate. His ego was boosted considerably when he came in off-book and was the only one that had done so not to mention the fact that he also knew most everyone else’s lines as well. He also developed an infatuation with an older member of the cast and the attention he received from her further boosted his sense of self importance. For whatever other reasons he started to treat several of the people in the production with less respect than was warranted. He never let me see this for some reason, perhaps it was the “alpha male” status that I had (I say this in jest but there was some truth to it). In any event once I heard of it I had to find a way to approach him without causing further damage especially since this occurred right at the beginning of the run. A casual conversation in which I mentioned that some people in the cast might not be offended by his “harmless sarcasm” seemed to do the trick. I didn’t come right out and say “you are being an ass”

so he got to save face with me and yet the message was clear. It was reported back to me that his behavior improved greatly and all went relatively smoothly afterwards. Honestly, I sometimes felt that I was in grade school again; all part of the process.

Craig (Gregor) started off quietly but apparently took Cliff as an example and began to “play” with his character, in such a way that made his brief time on stage a joy to watch. I had to periodically remind him and Cliff not to upstage the other actors with their “work” but they were always genuinely respectful of their fellow performers and of the production. Craig had the difficult task of being on stage several times for long periods with nothing to say and very little to do. Whereas I did want Gregor to disappear to some extent, as all good peasants should, I didn’t want him to become invisible. Craig stayed completely in character and would stay active in the scene but it was a simple addition that really did the trick; props...many an actor’s favorite thing. A simple letter rolled into a cylinder gave him a thousand things to do in one instance, which we trimmed down to three. In another it was food. Craig had said he was disappointed in having a smaller role at first but after we worked on Gregor he found how much he had to contribute.

In my experience one of the more difficult things for an actor to pull off believably is interrupting himself, as thoughts shift and his mouth gets ahead of him or he is working against some other obstacle to saying what he means. For instance; “What I meant is that I like...no I mean I really care...I...errr...I guess what I want to say is...” This is something that we have all done before and that we easily recognize but it can be difficult for actors to do on purpose. Craig was very adept and this and in the scene

where he becomes a masked bandit attempting to rob Bazarov and Arkady he stammered brilliantly. He was a good example of Kirsanov who spoke this way through much of the play. Like Cliff, Craig was willing to make choices, sometimes not great but he made them and he took notes and suggestions well. Craig was and is a skilled physical actor and in the prologue he and Andrew (as the Bailiff) performed a brilliantly executed whipping.

With Dave Bobb, who played the blustery Pavel, we had to work on the subtleties in his character and with creating contrast and depth in his performance. He was able to play the elitist aristocrat with a good deal of surface conviction but tended to prefer working on a single level...over the top and loud. As Dave was good at being loud and at finding the bombastic nature of Pavel we spent most of our time on his more human side, in relating to others on a more natural level. He had one scene towards the end of the play with Kirsanov (Charles) that was a reflection on their lives and what they had done to bring themselves to their apparent sorry state. For Pavel, this scene was one in which he foreshadows his own death and, during which, he decides to end his own life, at the hands of Bazarov. His hope in doing this is to finally give meaning to his life by dying honorably and honor is one thing that he values very highly. For Dave this scene leaned towards either excessive melancholy, which was difficult to watch as the energy sank lower and lower, or acute hysteria which was just confusing. This potentially moving scene was one moment where the brothers truly connected for a brief time, when Pavel dropped all pretenses and was just a sad, aging man who felt his life had been wasted. Kirsanov too was feeling a mid-life crisis in which he watched

helplessly as his last chance at love and happiness slipped through his grasp. We made the most progress with this section of the play, and by extension with other scenes, by having Dave and Charles simply read their lines and *listen* to each other. It allowed them to worry less about what they said and more about what was being communicated *to* them. Of course this made them find nuances and uncover new meanings in their own words as the focus was shifted to the other for a while and it helped greatly. It was interesting to watch them think about what they were hearing and then go back to see what their previous response had been and how it could have been interpreted. I also asked Kathi to work with them when we had additional rehearsal rooms and she had them doing similar exercises in which they just listened and talked about what they were feeling.

My biggest complaint about Dave was the copious amount of “really important” conflicts that came up well into the rehearsal period. Remembering that all of the actors were essentially performing pro bono I made every attempt to be accommodating. However, when I was informed with a week’s notice about “the most important holiday of the year” that would effectively make him unavailable for the entire weekend, I almost lost it. The holiday was so important that it had slipped his mind every time we asked for a list of final conflicts. All I can say is that I made due and we struggled on. In the future I will be less forgiving.

Charles, as mentioned in chapter two, was a delightful man. He had performed quite regularly in local community theatres but clearly had little training. From the outset, he informed me that he was “slow” and would eventually “get it,” a statement

that offered both small comfort and a sense of dread. Charles worked harder than any other actor in the cast and, although his final performance was not likely to get a Helen Hayes nomination, his performance progressed light years over the course of the month long rehearsal period.

Kirsanov was in a constant state of conflict, torn between his love for Fenichka and the social taboo of being involved with a person of a lower class. He also was trying to become more progressive in his operation of his farm and treatment of the “peasants” which was in direct opposition to his brother Pavel’s views. Never knowing what to say and correcting himself at every turn Kirsanov stammered through the majority of his speeches. Charles himself embodied this sense of confusion at many times when working through his scenes so we attempted to keep what was occurring naturally and apply it elsewhere. This worked well in numerous instances but never quite took in the intimate quasi-romantic scenes with Fenichka. They never truly got over being uncomfortable with each other as actors, in my estimation. With Charles I used a lot of “as if” exercises shift the focus from what he was *actually* feeling about his scene partner to simply finding a truthful way to experience what he *should* be feeling. He and Clarissa responded well to the “in scene” coaching that I did with Patrick. I also had them work through their scenes without the use of text to get to the physical impulses they needed make me believe these people actually had made love to each other. Repetition was particularly effective with Charles so I made sure that we spent time going over and over each moment and, as I perceived that he felt slightly self-conscious around the other actors that he believed to be “professional,” we sometimes worked in

seclusion. The end result was that Charles' performance was fairly solid. Some people who saw the show felt he was a perfect Kirsanov and really nailed the conflicted, kind father of Arkady. Some thought he was not the strongest actor. For me, as I said, we progressed light years and I would like to work with him again.

Scott Ziegler was young, quirky, and bald with arms down to his knees. After the first audition I asked him to come to the callbacks with a laugh for Sitnikov and he returned with an infectious wheezing sound that was "lovingly irritating." Scott was a fairly recent college graduate but had just spent a year working at the Barter Theatre so he had had some real professional experience. Scott gave the strongest performance right from the beginning and again, casting was important as he was physically and vocally exactly what I wanted. We worked primarily on his [comic] timing and on the rare instances where Sitnikov was being truthful as opposed to "putting on a show." Contrast was one of the key elements in his character. He had to be able to travel between joyous exuberance, when he felt that Bazarov had complemented him, to nearly tragic disappointment in those moments when he was spurned by him. The image I asked him to keep in mind was that of a faithful setter wanting nothing more than to please his master.

Scott's arc as an actor peaked about halfway through the rehearsal process, however. He came in at about 80% where I needed him and we got another 15% or so early on but he seemed to lose interest, is the best way I can describe it. If I had to elaborate I would say that he felt the work had all been done with two weeks until opening and then he got bored. This seems a harsh statement but it is made chiefly

because he started out so far along and my expectations were high. There were just a couple of moments that were great early on that we never recreated fully. I am fully aware that this was as much my responsibility as his and I will admit that the final product of his performance was well received and only I really knew there could have been “more.” Scott’s portrayal was generally a favorite and I will say that he pulled off a couple of fairly eccentric costuming choices with aplomb. In closing if I could get every actor to 95% every time it would not be the end of the world. I would gladly cast Scott again.

Based on the scene work that I had witnessed Andrew Pecoraro perform the previous year I was considering him for the role of Bazarov. Nevertheless when auditions came I felt that he didn’t have the power and self assurance that the role needed. Additionally, although he was technically the correct age he appeared far too young especially when reading opposite Anna. So, I found myself in a quandary since I knew how dedicated he was and I wanted to work with him but I couldn’t decide where to place him. He had a great deal of stage combat experience and was decidedly more imposing than Craig, whom I had cast as Gregor, so I decided that he would become my Bailiff. Our biggest challenge was getting around his very boyish appearance to create a character that could intimidate both Gregor and Kirsanov and who seemed to be the kind of person who enjoyed beating random peasants for recreation. Fortunately the prologue did most of our work for us as he towered over Gregor and abused him with great pleasure and zeal. I essentially “front-loaded” the work by making him seem as savage as possible the first time he is viewed by the audience so that when we see

Kirsanov hounded by him in the next scene the image of him gleefully beating a man almost to death is still in our minds. (Of course, Walker's text might have had something to do with this as well.) The other thing that needed to change was Andrew's appearance so we greased his youthful hair into a lank mess that hid the contours of his face.

As is generally the case, a character's most interesting moment is when you see the façade drop, in this instance when the bully is frightened. We had already seen this once when Bazarov handled him easily, which actually spoke more to Bazarov's power than the Bailiff's weakness. A second occurrence would be in Act II, during what I referred to as "The Rustics Scene." I utilized the Bailiff to facilitate the scene shift and commensurate placard changes in much the same fashion as Sergei had opened the show. A series of placards revealed under a stark spot read: Midnight, The Woods, and The Light of a Full Moon in succession. With light and sound cues during these moments the scene took on a spookiness that ended with an owl's hoot, sending the bailiff running off only to be herded back on by Piotr. We took the notion that the "bully" is usually the most afraid and ran with it which allowed Andrew several fun moments during what was essentially a clown scene. I would have liked to have delved more deeply into the menacing quality of his character, particularly with Kirsanov, but I was very pleased with how we developed his comic side.

Lastly I come to my "spry 80 year old," Piotr played by Mitch. Mitch was cast completely on the recommendation of the artistic director, Kathi. Mitch was the webmaster for the Firebelly Productions website and had performed small roles in a few

of their shows. Considering we were only two weeks or so away from the first rehearsal and still had no Piotr he seemed ideal! Even though he could not make the first week of rehearsals I decided to cast him and I must say that I was very pleasantly surprised.

Mitch didn't have much theatre training, if any, but he was very dedicated and open to taking direction. Piotr was the servant who was wiser than his master and who was the "real brains of the operation." I have found that focusing on the external first can often

be very effective to give an actor a direction for developing his character so I worked with Mitch on a few formal postures and gestures which helped form Piotr's

physicality. We also decided on a single costume element that he would have from the beginning; a pair of immaculate white gloves which he was to keep clean at all times.

This simple choice seemed to provide a strong basis upon which to develop Piotr's physicality which in turn informed his total performance, primarily through the sense of propriety and decorum inspired by these gloves. Although Mitch came into the process late he was a team player from the start and a pleasant surprise at virtually every turn.

CHAPTER 5

THE FINAL STRETCH: *Tech-time and Opening*PART 1: *It Ain't Called Hell Week for Nothin'*

Tech week is many things for a director. From my past observations fun is not often one of those things yet I admit that for me it was one of the most satisfying times of the entire production. Watching many of the actors begin to develop and really listen to each other balanced my anxiety that some performances would never quite reach my expectations. It seemed that we might possibly have a set, costumes and lights for the actors. Most aspects of the play were beginning to come together and countless notes that I thought I would be giving until my last breath began to “take.” I was eagerly anticipating layering in the technicalities!

Now that I have prefaced this section with those statements I will look at a few final moments of frustration, most of which involve the aforementioned “technicalities” or technical characteristics of the play. The first was, not surprisingly, with my TD. For the first time in two decades I was very close to physically harming another human being. Never in all of my years of doing theatre had I heard the words “I can't” repeated more often. I made adjustments with the set and with my original concept without too much suffering, assuming that these changes were necessary due to my lack of experience. Not until this final week did I understand that the man was just unimaginative, lazy and egocentric. We had decided upon using a platform to help differentiate between the garden and the dining room. This also allowed for better sight

lines for the first rows and, as we were going to rake the stage, it would provide the shorter actors a chance to be seen more easily when seated at the table. In addition, the rake was going to be mirrored on the opposite side of the stage with a smaller, similarly angled piece and we would tilt the frame of the house to further add to the slightly wonky feel I have frequently mentioned. I discussed the rake and its height the weekend before the load-in began on Monday. There were witnesses and written documentation to this effect. When I came into the theatre on Monday to see how things were going I found a platform that was larger than I asked for and that was raked half as much as was discussed. The tilted house was only tilted at a slight angle so that it looked like a mistake instead of a place that was somehow “out of kilter.” The TD and his crew were nowhere to be seen and when I called him he insisted that he did it the way we talked about. Every time I mentioned that it was NOT what we had discussed he merely said that it was and that it would be fine, ignoring the fact that it was not what I wanted. When I said that it needed to be raised he said it wasn’t possible. At every stage in the production, I now fully realized, his answer was always a negative. He was the worst team player in history and will not work at that theatre again, nor anywhere else where I have any input. The producer wanted to fire him on the spot but we could find no one else to finish the job so...sigh...I dealt with it. The tilted house frame was set completely straight since it would now be the only out of kilter piece and we descended further into realism.

The TD continued to under-perform and do less than promised but by this stage I had assumed that would be the case so the rest of the staff took up the slack. I cannot

emphasize enough how much Kathi did to get us off the ground. I get the feeling that she always works this way but, in my opinion, she went “above and beyond” many times over. She was a fantastic stage manager who instructed my assistant, Michael, on running the sound and lighting boards. She served as the costume master and made sure everything ran smoothly backstage. She was nursemaid to bruised egos and often babysat those who needed it. Looking back I am sure that I don’t even know half of the work she did. The other backstage “crew” consisted of Anna who helped out wherever needed and was also of inestimable value.

The lighting designer, Conner, worked wonders with what he had. We still ended up with dark spots on our six-foot-four lead actor when he crossed too far upstage and actors had to “find their light” every now and then but everyone was visible. Conner was able to give me tight spotlights in several places, night when I needed it and he lit our thirty-foot wide “outdoor” space completely. He managed all of this with 24 dimmers and a handful of lights. We all helped hang and focus but he took notes each night right up until opening and then came back the next morning to make adjustments. Many thanks to him!

Costumes came together fairly late, at least in their final versions. Part of the concept was to have a unified under-layer of light linen in a neutral tan color. Over this was a single piece that best represented the character. For example, Pavel would have a fancy waistcoat, Sitnikov a short sleeved “revolutionary’s” jacket, and Fenichka a shawl. In contrast, Bazarov was to remain essentially in black the entire time. I had hoped that in addition to being striking in its simplicity we would save on the budget.

Of course, I was wrong as the most difficult thing to find was a unified under-layer. Linen was right out of the budget and even in a less costly fabric we would have had to build almost every costume from scratch, something that our budget could not handle. We gathered enough for a similar layer but it didn't look unified or on purpose. It looked "accidentally monochrome." We raided the costume departments at VCU, George Mason and other shops and schools in the area. We assembled a mass of costumes with some really nice pieces and we gradually ended up with a fairly realistic look that was not exactly what I had envisioned but it worked. What is the saying? The best laid plans of battle never survive first contact with the enemy.

PART 2: The Elements Converge on Opening Night

A brief comparison between my initial ideas and what I ended up putting together showed some major differences but, I hope, the underlying concept remained intact. I had planned to place the characters in a world that was slightly skewed, that was not realistic and that was striking in its simplicity. For diverse reasons mentioned in previous chapters, on opening night we had costumes and a set based in realism. What we retained, however, was something less than realism and that, for me, made it something more. Although not precisely what I had envisioned I believe that the elements converged in a way that was most likely better than my original intention.

When all was said and done and opening night arrived I must admit to being relaxed and eager to get live feedback from an audience. The only sources of nervousness for me were the technical aspects of the show and hoping that they would

work correctly. For instance we had previously experienced several sound cue mishaps as we worked on the fairly antiquated equipment and had only really gotten every cue to function correctly on one occasion. The placards (or cue cards as some called them) were many and had to be revealed in a very particular order. One out of order could throw the entire sequence off and this had occurred several times before. The light cues were also surprisingly numerous and were vital to the revelation of the placard convention and in easing the segue-ways between scenes. The actors, aside from various personal dramas, were as ready as they were ever going to be and for some, they needed the audience to go the final distance.

As is customary, there was a brief reception before the show in which the thirty-odd patrons milled about listening to French and Italian tunes and drinking Chablis. Finally the curtain went up, or in this case, the sound cue happened and the wait was over. In this space an audience of 30 or more seemed to fill the house, even though twice that number could have been seated comfortably, so the audience's presence was noticeable. The first technical cues went off with "some degree of accuracy" and the prologue drew laughter when I expected laughter and the sharp intake of breath at the onstage whipping. After that it was somewhat of a blur.

The actors were more stiff than usual and their pace was uneven at times. There was hesitancy amongst the cast as audience reactions appeared where none had been before coupled with moments of unexpected silence that had previously brought a chorus of giggles from the crew. All this was to be anticipated and after the third scene the performers seemed to relax, perhaps because scene three was one of the strongest of

the ten and it seemed to really captivate the audience, winning them to our side, if you will. Act I finished in just over an hour (several minutes longer than normal) to an enthusiastic round of applause and more laughter as Sergei enticed them to enjoy the selection of concessions advertised on his placard.

Act II started after a brief intermission and finished in fifty minutes, which was fairly standard and a bit surprising as the pace seemed “stately” at times. I recalled very little of this act as I was furiously writing notes, mostly the same ones I had been giving for the last two weeks, which was frustrating. I wrote as clearly as possible and caught up with each actor after the show to share them. I tried to keep them simple and few and offered praise even when it might not have been warranted. At this stage I knew very well when the recipe called for honey and when it called for vinegar. By and large I was pleased with the first show but not ready to quit working on it just yet.

PART 3: Letting go; conclusions, Reflections, and Other Tales

I attended every show for the first week, four in all, five counting the preview. After and before each performance I would meet with individual actors to give notes or to run a short sequence. After the first week was over I came every other night and somewhere in the third week of the run I stopped giving notes unless someone asked and only if I felt it would do any good to give them. I still took them, of course, and would maybe mention to Kathi a thing or two to pass along. I just couldn't completely give up when I felt that more work could be done.

Somewhere in that first week the actors settled into the give and take relationship with the audience and they performed with a greater sense of ownership and of relaxation. Lines were finally said correctly, technical cues came off perfectly (mostly) and I began to see characters really listen to each other onstage. The final and some would say most important, ingredient in putting together a show is the audience and this cast needed it to really bring it to life. Every time I came to see the show I truly enjoyed it. Sure I still inwardly took notes and found things that could have been better but I was able ultimately to sit back, watch the work that we had all done and, best of all, to be proud of it.

What I embarked upon did end up being less of a creative journey and more of a technical exercise than I had anticipated. I think this occurred, in part, because of my assumption that I would have more input from a creative team. I envisioned sharing initial concepts and ideas with my designers and then collaborating with them to mutually reach our goal, a preconception based on observations of previous design teams of which I had been a part. I assumed that it would be the same in this case and when I lost my Costume Designer and finally figured out that my Set Designer was, well...just awful...it was late in the game. I say this not to lay blame on any individuals, as the final responsibility was my own, but to acknowledge my shortcoming in the early planning stages. I should have been more proactive in choosing and, later, in talking with my Set Designer. I should have come in with more concrete ideas in some instances and not made assumptions in many cases.

I found that the role of director has a lot of similarity to that of politician and a babysitter, at least more than I imagined. There were so many compromises made that I lost track after a while but still we progressed forward. As for personal dramas, there were many, some of which bordered on the ridiculous, but I suppose it is the same in any company. It is just another challenge to face.

I would like to say that I grew a great deal as an artist and, to an extent there is some truth to that statement for everything that we do informs our art, but I don't feel that I truly challenged myself artistically. I was challenged strategically and organizationally. I learned a great deal about generalship and keeping a relatively large cast together. I learned to balance what I really wanted with what was feasible and, in many cases, how to turn lemons into the proverbial lemonade. I felt that I could have actually staged the play more imaginatively and better explored scenic composition in many instances. I would have liked to have spent more time working on impulses and less on shopping for props and spray painting podiums (although truthfully I do like to shop). The big question that remains is; was I satisfied with the final product? Yes. As a commercial exploration this project worked well. The bottom line is that the audience liked what they saw and, based on the strength of this show, will return to see another one that this small theatre company produces.

Aside from moving to New York City with no job and a rent that was the size of a small South American country's GNP, this was one of the scariest things I have ever done. I had directed violence in many, many shows and performed in yet more but there had always been someone who was in a position of greater responsibility than I. Not

this time, however. To be honest I had no clue what to do other than what I had watched other directors do. I often felt unprepared and overwhelmed but I also left rehearsals many nights and thought, “I just did a good night’s work!” Did I make mistakes? I certainly made plenty of them but fortunately no fatal ones. In hindsight I could have chosen an easier play, by which I mean one with a smaller cast or perhaps a one act, upon which to cut my directorial teeth. But, all things being equal, I am glad I chose as I did and I don’t know that I would have felt as satisfied with less than a full production of a full length play. The most important thing I will take from this experience is the fact that I got through it and that I will never have to “do it for the first time” again. I know that it can be done.

Appendix A: Character Breakdown

Nothing Sacred By George F. Walker

Bazarov: 25

Tall and angular; Unshaven and wearing loose, slightly disheveled clothing. A bit of the beat generation. Charismatic, pragmatic, energetic, bright, intellectual revolutionary. A nihilist university (doctoral) student with grand plans who scorns tradition and holds nothing sacred. Always says what is on his mind no matter who it offends. Think the Brad Pitt character (Ed Norton's alter ego) in *Fight Club* without the washboard abs and the penchant for violence.

Arkady: 23

Son of Kirsanov and nephew to Pavel. Pleasant looking young university chum of Bazarov; kind and idealistic but no fool. Arkady is influenced heavily by Bazarov and virtually idolizes him but he has a compassion for his fellow man that the latter seems to lack. Wears his heart on his sleeve. He often seems torn between his Father's generation and his own.

Kirsanov: 47

Father of Arkady (and Fenichka's baby) and younger brother of Pavel. A rumpled pleasant looking man who is always trying to do the right thing by his servants, his family, Fenichka and their child but is hampered by a serious case of self doubt.

Pavel: 48

Brother of Kirsanov and Uncle to Arkady. A healthy looking man with close cropped hair who is always clean shaven, dresses very fashionably and considers himself a well polished gentleman. An ex-army man who values tradition and the status quo highly. Fancies himself a part of the aristocracy. Bazarov considers him affected and superfluous.

Fenichka: 19

Housekeeper in the Kirsanov house and un-wed mother of Kirsanov's child. A lovely, shy, young girl who can be sometimes be found talking to herself and who is prone to darting away like a frightened deer when in uncomfortable situations.

Anna: early 30s

Friend and sometimes lover of Bazarov. Tall and wealthy with a sparkling ironic expression and immense charisma. A powerful woman who's influence comes from her dazzling intellect as well as her great beauty. She knows the "stunning" effect she has on men but seems to be above such concerns.

Sitnikov: 25

Devotee of Bazarov. A "hanger-on" friend of Bazarov who is not the sharpest tool in the shed and who has a strange laugh that he accomplishes by expelling air and somehow producing an extended "ee" sound. He often finds himself the butt of other's jokes but doesn't seem to mind as long as he is included.

Piotr: 80

Energetic servant whose obvious wit and wisdom are rarely appreciated.

Bailiff: 30s-50s

"Old School" bailiff who loves to beat peasants.

Gregor: early 20s

A young peasant who is down on his luck. Must enjoy receiving beatings.

Sergei: 20s-40

A large peasant and bodyguard to Anna (10 feet tall and weighs as much as a horse)

Appendix B: Casting Call Notice

Dear Actors,

We would like to invite you to audition for our fall production, **Nothing Sacred**, by Canadian playwright George F. Walker, **directed by Robb Hunter**. Rehearsals will begin in **late August** and the production weeks are October 8 **through November 4th**.

On **July 9th** we would like to begin the audition process, if you are interested and available, please reply to this e-mail.

We will schedule people in 10 minute slots from 7 pm till 10 pm. This will be held at Theater on the Run.

If you request a time slot and absolutely can not make it at a certain time that evening, please indicate that in the e-mail.

If you are interested but can't make it that evening, please let me know, and we'll try to schedule you for another evening.

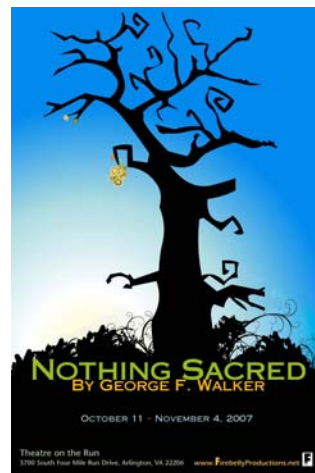
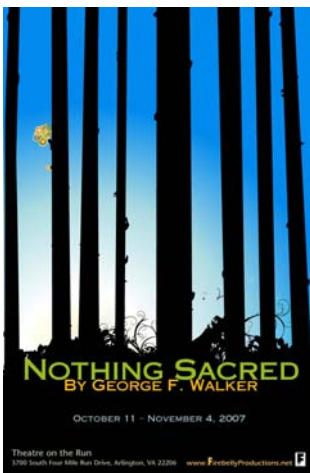
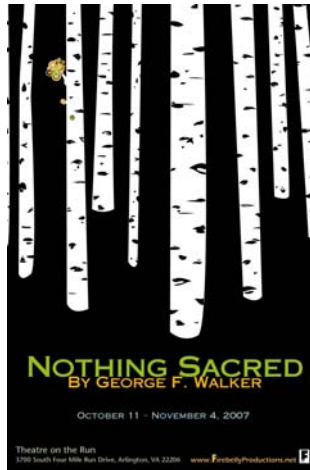
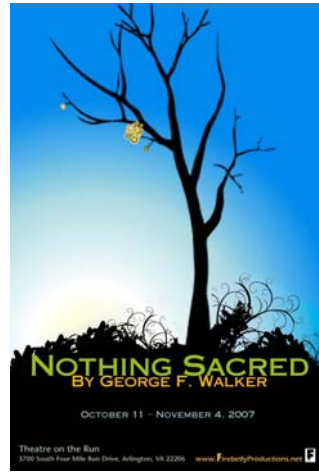
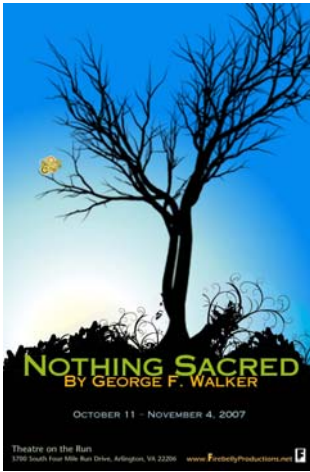
Please respond to: nothingsacredcasting@gmail.com

Below you will find the character breakdowns, and a PDF of the script can be sent to you after you set an audition time.

THANK YOU,

Kathi Gollwitzer, Artistic Director
Barbara Walthall, Producer
Robb Hunter, Director
Firebelly Productions

Appendix C: Other Postcard/Advertising Mock-Ups



Appendix D: Local Reviews

Latest from Firebelly Effectively Melds Comedy, Drama

by MATT REVILLE

Staff Writer Sun Gazette Newspapers

www.sungazette.net

(Created: Monday, October 15, 2007 11:06 AM EDT)



Firebelly's production of "Nothing Sacred" is a comedy-drama based on Ivan Turgenev's novel, "Fathers and Sons." (Photo by Raymond Gniewek)

When I'm toodling down the highway and see someone do something incredibly, moronically stupid in traffic, I always take a breath before going ballistic, and look at the license plate of the offender.

"Ah, it's OK," I'll say softly.
 "They're from Maryland - that explains it. They're all nuts over there."

When it comes to theater reviewing, there's a corollary. When a playwright pens a work that is essentially indescribable - at various times charming, caustic, witty and

maddening - I look down at the bio. "Ah, he's Canadian - that explains it!"

Such is the case with George F. Walker, whose "Nothing Sacred" is being performed by Firebelly Productions, which describes the show as "a Canadian comedy about a Russian tragedy" (the latter being Ivan Turgenev's 1862 "Fathers and Sons") and notes, probably correctly, it is, as such, unique in the annals of theater.

Set in the 1850s on a farm in rural Russia, the production looks at the relationship between a father from the old school and his son who has been away at college and has picked up modern-day ideas, such as nihilism/anarchism, but retains a love of family and the homestead.

Throw in plenty of offbeat characters, and you have more than two hours of sometimes frustrating but ultimately quite satisfying work.

Patrick Flannery, who I thought did quite well in Firebelly's recent work-in-progress called "Shelter," is Arkady, the son caught between two worlds at a crossroads in

Russian history. Arkady is accompanied back to the farm by Bazarov (Jon Townson), one of those know-it-all, just-out-of-school firebrands who challenges everyone and everything and does it in as obnoxious manner as possible.

There, they meet up with Arkady's salt-of-the-earth father (Charles St. Charles) and his more flamboyantly eccentric uncle (Dave Bobb), along with a servant (Clarissa Zies) who recently gave birth to the father's illegitimate child.

After a while, we meet Bazarov's love interest, Anna (Kelley Slagle), who may be the most sinister of the group. Slagle did so well as nasty Nurse Ratched in 2006's "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," and here she gets another chance to show a sadistic streak, with a side of charm thrown in.

The show cuts back on some of the novel's back stories - we don't see Bazarov's parents, and the relationship between Anna and the boys is less fleshed out - and the demise of one of the main characters near the end occurs quite differently in the book.

I won't spoil said ending (although the accompanying photo may succeed in doing that), but suffice it to say I'd deduced what was going to happen early in the show - the fun, like an old "Columbo" episode, is trying to determine exactly how it would unfold.

The very end of the production contains a quite clever moment that leaves the characters, and the audience, guessing.

I have no complaints with the lead actors, and, in fact, all the cast was quite good. In the supporting ranks, Mitch Irzinski, Craig Lawrence and Scott Zeigler stood out, but there wasn't a poor performance in the show, although there were a few flubbed lines and some cross-talk during an opening weekend matinee.

Director Robb Hunter keeps the pacing moving in his professional debut. As with any production at Theatre-on-the-Run that features a cast of more than a half-dozen, the cramped stage confines provide challenges. Hunter and his creative team did a good job in surmounting them.

The dialogue is surprisingly modern, done without fake accents (thank you!) and without the characters calling each other by all their long Russian names every time (double thank you!). And - just an inside joke for the Firebelly crowd - there is not a single reference to "fraulein" to be heard.



Potomac Stages Review, October 18, 2007

www.PotomacStages.com

Reviewed by Brad Hathaway

This is not your typical stage adaptation of a novel. Highly successful, often produced Canadian playwright George F. Walker took the characters from what is often cited as the first modern Russian novel, Ivan Turgenev's 1862 *Fathers and Sons*, and built his own play. He starts just where Turgenev began, but he ends miles away with the lives of the characters having taken different paths. The result is a play quite appropriate for Firebelly as they pursue their mission of giving younger, less experienced cast members a chance to sink their teeth into challenging roles in a supportive environment. It features Jon Townson strutting to good effect as the charismatic young nihilist and Patrick Flannery finding a nice balance between hero worship and spunk as a follower who follows his lead only so far. The production under Robb Hunter making his Potomac Region directorial debut is a diverting and entertaining evening of substantial theater blending a light comic touch with undercurrents of tragedy which, after all, is the hallmark of Russian literature.

Storyline: The son of a land owner in rural Russia in 1859 returns home from school with his older best friend to find his widowed father has a child by a servant with whom he is in love, his uncle has complications in his own love life and the overseer has difficulty with the newly freed serfs.

Those who know Turgenev's novel will find familiar ground at the start of this play but things begin to become a bit destabilizing as the plot veers from the source material. Walker constructs his plot from the motivations of the characters and lets it play out in a different way than the original. Those who aren't familiar with the Russian classic needn't fear, however. No knowledge of the source is needed to quickly comprehend events and recognize sharply defined characters. The language that Walker uses is free of any pretension of being "historical" or "classic". Instead, while he avoids any contemporary jargon, there is a lightness in the dialogue that feels distinctly modern even as the characters retain their Russian names.

Townson looks a bit like a young John Lennon, which seems right for a young nihilist. Russian nihilism of the mid-nineteenth century rejected the social mores of society, but Townson gives it a touch of flippantry that feels sort of Lennon-like. Flannery has a bit more reserve, as befits the scion of an estate. Together, they establish a rapport as friends. Charles St. Charles and Dave Bobb find a sharper, slightly more competitive relationship as the young student's father and uncle. Clarissa Zies is effective as well as the servant the father loves.

Following the action of the nine-scene (plus prologue) play is easier because of the use of signs at the side of the stage reminiscent of vaudeville posters that give the location for each scene ("A Country Road," "The Kirsanov Garden," "The Kirsanov Drawing Room"). Andrew J. Berry's set splits the playing space in the Theatre on the Run into thirds with one segment the garden, one the dining room and the third, the front lip of the playing space, serving as a road or the woods or even an extra room. Highlighting the fact that this is not your stuffy classic, Hunter adds music ranging from a mandolin solo on the old Italian tune *Funiculí, Funiculá* to one with a hint of a Parisian cabaret.

Written by George F. Walker. Directed by Robb Hunter. Design: Andrew J. Berry (set) Connor M. Dale (lights) Ray Gniewek (photography) Kathi Gollwitzer (stage manager). Cast: Dave Bobb, Patrick Flannery, Mitch Irzinski, Craig Lawrence, Andrew Pecoraro, Kelley Slagle, Charles St. Charles, Jon Townson, Cliff Williams III, Scott Zeigler, Clarissa Zies.

Russia via Canada Makes Easy Watching

Firebelly's "Nothing Sacred" Is Turgenev-Lite

www.connectionnewspapers.com

By Brad Hathaway

October 17, 2007

Canadian playwright George F. Walker did more than just translate Ivan Turgenev's "Fathers and Sons" when he created his stage play drawing from that famous 1862 novel. Using modern stage techniques and distinctly modern language to make the characters as accessible as possible for modern audiences, he created something very different than the original 250-page tome.

Perhaps that is why he didn't title his creation "Fathers and Sons." Instead, his stage version is "Nothing Sacred," and its tone is distinctly present-day, even if it is set in — as the vaudevillish poster at the sides of the stage informs the audience — "Russia in the Spring, 1859."

What is more, the plot has changed considerably. Walker says this is not an adaptation — it is a play inspired by the novel. He stays fairly close to the original characters, which explains why they are given the same names as in the novel: Bazarov, Arkady, Kirsanov, Fenichka, etc. The set up to the events is also quite Turgenev-ish. But it leads to a very different conclusion.

FIREBELLY PRODUCTIONS, a company specializing in giving younger talent a chance at professional experience in roles they can sink their teeth into, picks up this 1988 play by one of Canada's most prolific and often produced playwrights (over two dozen full length plays in the last thirty years).

Robb Hunter is making his local debut as a director, but it is certainly not the first time

his name has shown up in the programs of local theatergoers. It's just that, until now, the credit has been "Fight Direction" or "Fight Choreography" rather than "Director." As you might expect from someone who has been on the choreographic side of productions before, Hunter brings an eye for use of the stage space to this mounting, even if it is on the fairly small space available in Arlington County's black box called Theatre on the Run. He creates very different locales in the garden stage left and the dining room stage right, and the path through the woods downstage.

Firebelly veterans Jon Townson and Patrick Flannery are the young "nihilists," the 1860s Russian equivalent of the hippies of America's 1960s.

Townson uses his light way with a flippant line to good effect, and he strides across the small stage with a certain flair, but when he stands still he often holds one hand in the small of his back as if striking a pose. Flannery has the more demanding role as his character is less sure of himself, torn between admiration for his colleague's ideas and his affection for his father who still holds on to more traditional values.

The father is played with an appropriate sense of confusion by Charles St. Charles, a newcomer to Firebelly but certainly not to local theater. That confusion is prompted by his character's dilemma posed by his love for a woman not of his class. Clarissa Zies is attractive as the woman he loves and she shows the spunk it would take for her, a servant, to stand up for herself.

Dave Bobb handles the role of the aristocratic dandy with a sense of humor that keeps him from seeming too much a fop. This sets up the final confrontation well.

This excursion on the characters and situations in Turgenev's classic is something less than classic itself, but it is an entertaining evening of theater in the hands of these performers.

Brad Hathaway reviews theater in Virginia, Washington and Maryland as well as Broadway, and edits Potomac Stages, a Web site covering theater in the region (www.PotomacStages.com). He can be reached at Brad@PotomacStages.com.

DC Theatre Scene Review

www.dctheatrescene.com

Nothing Sacred by George F. Walker

Based on the novel *Fathers and Sons*, by Ivan Turgenev

Produced by Firebelly Productions

Directed by Robb Hunter

Reviewed by Tim Treanor

Once in a great while, a production can be of such high quality that it redeems a mediocre script. Firebelly's production of *Nothing Sacred* is not one of those

instances. However, it presents a few terrific performances which ought to provide us with good cheer.

Like many mid-19th century Russian novels *Fathers and Sons* is as lengthy and complicated as the U.S. Tax Code. George Walker's retelling of it slanders it down, but does not make it appreciably clearer, and moreover adds the faint whiff of the potboiler to it. It is 1859, and under the leadership of progressive Czar Alexander II, Russia is rushing pell-mell from the 11th century to the 19th. Serfdom has been abolished, and something approaching parliamentary democracy has been installed. Arkady (Patrick Flannery), a fresh college graduate, proceeds with his friend Bazarov (Jon Townson), a charismatic nihilist, to the estate of his father (Charles St. Charles), a down-at-the-heels gentleman farmer. It appears as though dad and the housekeeper (Clarissa Zies) have just had a child, and dad is deeply in love - although their difference in class makes marriage impossible to contemplate. Arkady, enraptured with the new thought he learned at college, is eager to impact the New Russia, though he has no idea how. Bazarov, who has burnished his fashionable cynicism to a near-blinding sheen, has resolved to say or think nothing which is not "useful." It is surprising, still, how talkative he is. As we learn only at the end of the first Act, Arkady's uncle Pavel (Dave Bobb), a Europeanized dandy, has begun to stalk Bazarov's mistress, Anna (Kelley Slagle) - because he was in love with Anna's late mother.

None of this exactly resonates, shall we say, with the contemporary Western mind. Russia has entered the modern world in a series of lurches, and these lurches have inspired much great literature. Turgenev's novel is a dark meditation on the human spirit, and on the vitality of love and compassion in a society obsessed over ideas of class. It is unclear why Walker would take this novel, full of interior dialogue, and try to make it a comedy. In any event, the result is a lengthy and windy play, full of 19th-century political theory.

Firebelly does its best to turn all this stuff into something vital and engaging. It uses cute little placards to establish time and place. It cushions the scenes with cool music. But the best thing it does is engage Flannery and Townson in the two principal roles, and Kelley Slagle as an important supporting player.

Townson is rapidly establishing domain rights over charismatic, arrogant, bullheaded characters. His Henry VIII in *A Man for All Seasons* was the very model of regal hearing loss: a man deaf to all voices but his own. Here, given a much larger, rounder role Townson creates a charming boor, a man of towering physical and intellectual strength who lacks a sense of compassion but not a sense of humor. Flannery, a relative newcomer, gives Arkady a sort of stubborn hangdog sweetness which makes him an endearing protagonist. And Slagle's Anna, wise, warm and capable of tremendous mischief, is a subtle and witty creation.

When these three are on the stage, with each other or in combination with the comic characters - the naïve Gregor (Craig Lawrence), Piotr (Mitch Irzinski), Pavel's

pretentious butler, the vicious bailiff (Andrew Pecoraro), the superstitious moron Sergei (Cliff Williams III), or, most spectacularly, Arkady's Cretanous friend Viktor Sitnikov (Scott Zeigler) - the production sparkles. When they are offstage, things go downhill. St. Charles captures his character's sweetness, but is otherwise so abstracted that it is hard to be engaged by him. Bobb and Zies were both, in my view, a little over the top. An extended scene between Bobb and St. Charles, intended to set up the climactic confrontation, seemed to go on forever. Bobb, having already set his character on fire several scenes previous, simply could not ramp him up sufficiently further to give the scene any volatility.

Firebelly is an ambitious company and has already taken on some difficult shows and done them well. This one, however, is neither within its grasp nor worth its efforts.

(Running time: 2:20). Nothing Sacred continues Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m. until November 4, at Theatre on the Run, 3700 South Four Mile Run Drive in Arlington. Tickets are \$15; \$12 for students and seniors; and \$5 for seniors on Sundays. For tickets, call 703.409.2372 or go to <http://www.firebellyproductions.net/>.

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