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The Director's Presence

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

By

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Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy, 2008

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Madolyn Rose Smeltzer: The only reason I wake up is because you are the first thought that runs through my head. And somehow, because of that, I am able to live. You are my inspiration. The shows I write about in this thesis would not have happened if I hadn't met you... my choice.

Theatre, my mistress: You are my experience. You are the all knowing and pervading thoughts in the back of my head that let me live without a care in the world. You pass no judgment and accept people for who they are. You are my release. You are my muse. You are my passion.

ABSTRACT

The Director's Presence

By Paul S. Wurth, MFA

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy

Major Director: Dr. Tawnya Pettiford-Wates

Department of Theatre

This text is partial record and narrative of the process and productions of *Orphans* by Lyle Kessler that opened on March 29th 2007 for a four day run ending on April 1st, *The Pillowman* by Martin McDonagh that opened October 28th 2007 for a three day run ending on October 30th, and *Terra Nova* by Ted Tally that opened on February 21st 2008 for a four day run ending on February 24th. The majority of the text follows the three shows from Spring 2007, Fall 2007, to Spring 2008, focusing on the process of direction of each production. Incorporated in the writing are the experiences, lessons, and complications that arose while directing the three shows. The text contains several notes on directing, acting, collaboration, choreography, casting, rehearsal and different perspectives on the creative process of the productions: all combined create an aesthetic inherent in the author's three years of study at the Virginia Commonwealth University Theatre Pedagogy Program with an emphasis in Acting and Directing.

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INTRODUCTION

I began Virginia Commonwealth University's graduate program in Theatre Pedagogy in the Fall semester of 2005. My expectations were large and I was excited to begin my journey. I entered the program with an intent of an emphasis in Acting and Directing but soon after my arrival I was asked to switch to the Movement track by the chair of the department, David S. Leong.

In the spring of 2007, Dr. Tawnya Pettiford-Wates, my advisor, professor, and mentor sat me down and questioned my happiness with the program, specifically the movement track. I wasn't happy. My education was more of a lesson in tough love than anything else. I didn't feel wanted and at times was told I was not needed. Pessimism and negativity took over my whole way of being. Somewhere in between being accepted to a great graduate program and beginning my work towards my MFA, I had lost my passion for theatre. Where was it? Why did it leave? When did something go wrong? Dr. Pettiford-Wates suggested for me to follow an African ritual she prescribes in her classrooms: Sankofa, which is a concept of realizing your past and its connection with the present as a guide to your future. The next day I went to the head of graduate studies, Dr. Noreen Barnes, and asked if a switch back to the Acting and Directing track would be too much of a problem. She had also been witness to my unhappiness and encouraged the transition. Already, I had noticed a change in my character. After an e-mail sent to Mr. Leong explaining

my switch back I felt a sea of liberation wash over me. It was as if I had taken my first breath from a coma.

This text takes you on an unpredictable journey of the last year and a half of my graduate career and the three shows that I directed. Reflections contain poems, narratives, short stories, contradictions, exceptions to rule, and also the actor's thoughts surrounding three productions I have directed. The title itself, "The Director's Presence," depicts the feelings and work the director puts forth to create an overall mood and style for a production. So many times we go to the theatre wanting to be moved but end up feeling lost, as if the director is purposely leading us into the dark. This thesis outlines my attempt to regain the initial feelings I had as a young actor stepping on stage for the very first time and give that same feeling to the heart of theatre: the audience. My job as a director became less about my claim to achieve professional recognition, my undeniable need for change, and artistic integrity and more about creating an environment in which the audience is given the opportunity to loosen their grip on reality, let go, stop watching themselves, and feel.

Some directors spend countless hours trying to reveal society's problems by staging them. They search for invisible change amongst their community and see no results. If the director's main goal is to change society, he is nothing but a common politician with self-righteous motives. He robs the audience of the mere reason they come to see theatre: to be entertained, not to start a revolution. Of course, some people come to see theatre looking for answers, but not all. I believe the root

of theatre is the idea of being entertained. Today, with all of the world's problems, I can see there being a need for theatre to provoke social change. I do not wish to create a dichotomous debate or a discussion of right or wrong as far as theatre is concerned. I do theatre because I want to break people free from their everyday strife, providing an opportunity for laughter or tears that are unrelated to their problems. One day I may see the need for change in a different perspective but for now I am focused on theatre that feels, that asks questions within the individual, something that makes him or her a better person. Artaud says theatre should attack the senses. If the director approaches his piece with the idea of attacking in the individual sense rather than the societal sense, it is my belief that society can still be affected because I touched on an individual level. Therefore, the individuals who "pay it forward" cause a ripple effect after they experience the piece of theatre.

The challenges I have faced and the battles I have won during the shows I directed at Virginia Commonwealth University might provide a sort of palette for future directors who are trying to find their "art" and ways to communicate their organic thoughts to even one audience member in a theatrical setting.

SPRING 2007:

Choosing the script

Orphans is a full-length play that runs around 2 hours. Although having assisted on several full-lengths, I had, up to this point, only directed one-act plays, around fifty minutes in length. It has heavy dramatic elements and serves as a great challenge for young actors. The scenes are long, and packed with speedy dialogue, long monologues, and heavy physical movement. Each role serves as a great test of highly skilled acting. The circumstance of the characters' poverty drives certain aspects of the play, but I think it is the strength of the characters that moves the play. It seems there is no set protagonist and antagonist. Lyle Kessler provides a script with three characters, all of who have endearing qualities as well as undeniable faults.

Set in the late 1980s, the play depicts the life of two orphans living in a town house in Philadelphia. Exposition begins with the display of the brothers' lives and the hierarchy that follows. Treat, the older brother, feels the need to take care of his younger sibling Phillip. This seems like a noble cause but Treat's care has become twisted into neglect, lies, and deceit. This is shown during the first scene of the play where Treat obviously tricks Phillip into believing an outrageous story of how much he does to scrape money together for their living. Phillip has become trapped in a lie his brother has been telling him for years about an allergy he has to the air outside the walls of the town house. Phillip is led to believe that if he goes outside he will die. Treat is a common thug who robs people for money or other personal

possessions he can sell. This is the only way he knows to make money because of his violent temper and tenuous grip on reality. The inciting incident in the play occurs one night when Treat brings home a man named Harold, whom he plans on robbing. After some convincing Treat and Phillip end up working for Harold who obviously has money to spare. Complications and crises begin to multiply with Treat's jealousy of Phillip's increasing curiosity with people, places, and things. A moment of truth in the play occurs during a fight between the two brothers about their miscommunication of love. The climax interrupts the moment of truth. Harold dies and the two brothers are left alone. The denouement is a twist in the hierarchy and the play ends with Phillip holding Treat who is devastated by Harold's death.

The majority of the one-act plays I had directed prior to *Orphans* had been comic pieces. When I first began directing I enjoyed light and fluffy pieces of theatre that catered to all levels of audiences. Choosing *Orphans* was a turn in a different direction. This play resonates in regards to my personal familial relationships, and I felt the need to explore it further. The language of the play is vulgar and caters to a higher level of audience maturity. Controversial aspects of moral behavior and attitudes toward family are at surface the message of the play. I feel the subject matter of this play will be entertaining and engaging for young adults over the age of eighteen with a history of family dispute.

Theatres in a college setting are typically full of young adults who are trying to make it on their own. It takes years to learn what one experiences while in adolescence. The play is perfect for a University's demographic. During my

undergraduate work at Columbia College Chicago, I saw a production of *Orphans* and was very intrigued with the script. As an audience member I had never felt so invited into a production. There was a connection that was visceral and real. To this point in my career I had never felt this way. The tragedy of two orphans living in a city and fighting their way through trials and tribulations to show their love for one another struck a chord. The city the two brothers lived in is otherwise known as the City of Brotherly Love: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. After the curtain closed a transformation within me occurred. The experience questioned the misguided relationship with my brother and created a dialogue that eventually worked out problems between us.

I knew going into the production that the set would be large, consisting of three walls (around six flats), each wall equipped with an entrance/exit, one of which a window. The costumes are extensive for a three-man show but highly obtainable because of the time of the play's setting. The size of the production was going to be costly. I asked the treasurer of the Guild of Graduate Students, an organization created by graduate students who were funded by the university, if there was any money left for the season. Luckily there was a budget of three hundred dollars given to me. This budget included any expenses for set, construction, costumes, and advertisement.

Orphans met the most important goal at the time for me. I was doing what I wanted to do. I was fighting my way back to what makes me happy: directing. I had no concept or main idea beginning the process. Some directors look down upon this

but it did nothing but commit me to the moments in the play. I didn't want to see what artists call "the whole picture." If I were to begin with a concept or main idea I would be focusing on the frame of the picture. With all my focus on the frame I would not be able to see the picture itself. Start with what you have when you begin the production: a script consisting of dialogue and actors to make the dialogue come alive. If things go according to plan your concept will be revealed to you and only then can you manipulate it. This became a rule I would follow for the rest of my time at VCU.

AUDITION AND CASTING

I recruited actors to work with me on the project. Frank Alfano and I had been cast together the semester before *Orphans* in Theatre VCU's main stage production of *The Nerd* by Larry Shue, and we spent much of our time discussing our favorite plays. Lyle Kessler's script was in our top five most loved plays. In *The Nerd* he was cast as Rick Steadman, the actor who plays the nerd, but offstage he is nothing of the kind. Frank lives life for himself and is always pushing himself to the limits of his ability in anything he does. First, I know he is a hard worker. Secondly, he has a tendency in his life to behave as Treat behaves in *Orphans*. He is always trying to be the know-it-all. His physicality was also what I envisioned for Treat: small but very stout. I saw Treat as someone who had been picked on as a boy, who later decided to make a change and start working out to bulk up, becoming physically intimidating. Frank's love for the script and his Treat-like tendencies pushed me to ask if he would be interested in being in my production. Frank leapt at the chance. This excited me to no end. I knew I would be working with a great friend who has an amazing work ethic.

I had one brother down and one more to go. Phillip was going to be the most challenging role so I needed an actor I knew had the potential to do the role justice. A year prior to *Orphans* I had worked with a very talented junior named Rob Fenton. We had acted together on another graduate student's thesis project. I knew he was talented. I decided to take a chance. I chose Rob, not because of his talent, but mostly because he reminded me of myself. Rob is tall, quirky, and sometimes

misunderstood as far as humor and overall disposition. Phillip has qualities that are similar to my own. It took some convincing but after reading the script, Rob saw what Frank and I were harping about. He was very intrigued with the character of Phillip and accepted the challenge, knowing it would be a difficult one.

The only missing member of the cast was the father figure. I didn't cast who I initially wanted to play the part, Peter Schmidt, a fellow graduate student. Although he didn't accept the part, he would later be added to the cast of *Terra Nova*, my final directing piece at VCU. After Peter turned down the role I began searching. Frank mentioned another junior who was interested: Kevin Duvall. I had seen Kevin's work and wasn't impressed. I thought that he lacked focus and maturity for the part. I was glad to hear of Kevin's interest and decided it would be good to have an assistant to be at rehearsals I couldn't attend. (See Appendix A)

I still needed a Harold. One evening, while sitting at home trying to figure out whom I could find, I received a phone call. It was another Junior Acting student by the name of Jaike Foley-Shultz. He was interested in the part but had not yet read the script. I gave him a script to read and a day later he was on board. I was glad to hear from him because I thought there was animosity between us due to casting of *The Nerd*. Jaike possesses a good deal of wisdom. He carries himself with confidence and integrity. Harold displays those characteristics in *Orphans*. Jaike was also taller and bigger in the waist, which helped me to envision him in an older role. He is bigger in build than both Frank and Rob. His physicality would create the respect that Treat and Phillip give to Harold by the end of the first act.

REHEARSAL PROCESS

The first rehearsal was an experiment for all. I had not yet decided on a stage manager, stage designer, or lighting design staff. The rehearsal took place in my home with Treat (Frank), Phillip (Rob), and myself. The actor playing Harold was not able to attend. I had set the room up as if it were Treat and Phillip's living room, already trying to capture what I envisioned the set to look like. Things were strewn about and I had dimmed the lighting in the room. I wanted to jump in headfirst. I told the boys they wouldn't need their script. Their instructions were simple: to live as Treat and Phillip for the next three hours and not break what you think your character is at this point. I wanted them to keep finding ways to make the atmosphere interesting. I sat down with popcorn, a beverage, and my notebook, watching their every move. I saw Rob and Frank scratch the surface of their physical and vocal worlds. The notes I took during the exercise gave them a starting point for the character work in the weeks that would follow.

William Ball, in *A Sense of Direction*, says: "For between three to five days after the first reading, it is useful to keep the actors seated. In the *sitting rehearsal*, the most important thing is contact between the actors. Before getting on their feet, the actors need an opportunity to explore their scripts." Through my exploration in the rehearsals for *Orphans*, I found that I do not necessarily agree with this statement.

The second rehearsal was a typical read through that seemed boring in comparison to our experiment the night before. This would be the only seated

rehearsal. I like for the actors to explore while on their feet. Table work gives the actors an opportunity to think about objectives with their mind. Placing the actors in the character's world from the start is a way for the mind and body to explore together.

I think it is important to establish certain questions about the characters: How old are they? Where are they from? What is their relationship, not only with each other, but also with the rest of the world (society)? Where do they live? What are their beliefs/morals/religion? These questions can also be answered while the actor is up and moving around. I am not going to say that this method would only work with actors who have experience. Although it was helpful, I believe it would work with non-actors as well. Non-actors would not have previous training or notions of how to approach the script or process; therefore, they are free to be molded by the director. I teach an introduction to performance class for VCU and some of the students that come into the classroom have no previous experience in acting. By throwing them right into acting they are immediately calling on their impulse and not using their powers of reasoning, which allows for a more organic and real response to the text. For actors, it would have the same affect: not allowing them to use their bag of tricks in approaching the script.

Outside of the acting rehearsals, all of the technical elements were in line. I had found set and lighting designers and had meetings with them to finalize the technical aspects. The meetings were during rehearsal time for all to hear, actors included. They are the workers who will bring the designers' constructs to life, so I

feel their presence is highly appropriate. Caylyn Temple was a volunteer stage manager that assisted me throughout the process. Although she wasn't a stage manager at heart she was very helpful in many aspects of the production process. Rehearsal report forms were always a priority. Scheduling conflicts were discussed with her. She occasionally made very good suggestions that took a part in the direction.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES FOR *ORPHANS*

A boy growing up in a Kentucky Lake home sits on a dock contemplating what truly makes him happy. He squints his eyes to the rising sun shining over the horizon of trees from across the white-capped water warming the cool morning air. A moment passes as his attention is averted to his reflection. He stares at the water while listening to ambient music, trying to see what his reflection sees in himself. He looks up to see a flock of birds twisting and turning in the air. As he looks towards the mouth of the cove he sees a blue heron gliding inches above the water. The tall, long legged, awkward bird lands and rights himself on the very same dock. There seems to be a similarity between the two. After staring at the bird for a moment the fuzzy picture behind him focuses. An old man who loves only one thing stands with his fishing pole and casts his line into the water. The old man looks up and takes a breath as if it were his last. It is his father. His father doesn't see his son staring at him. The boy takes another look at the beautiful painting in front of him and realizes how his father has the ability to love. The boy looks back at his father, takes a deep breath and realizes what makes him happy.

My main idea for *Orphans* was conceptualized the very last week of the rehearsal process. The above short story and excerpt from the program epitomizes what I feel the piece was about. I decided to write a short story because intellectually writing on the subject would become stale and unoriginal.

Every play has a specific mood, feel, and theme. The theme of this drama, as I discovered from my personal reaction to it, is change. The audience experiences a

change in each character as well as a change in themselves. With my direction of the play, I hoped to force the audience to take a look at relationships with their family and make a change whether it is good or bad, as I had done in my own life after reading the play.

I believe that my personal connection with the script and the parallels between my life and the story was shown within the staging of *Orphans*. With my family history, I was able to relate to the characters in the story, which made for a cathartic experience for me. I gave myself to the show, and told the story of *Orphans* through my life. Treat and Philip's exchanges, though not necessarily exactly like my life, were very similar to my relationship with my brother. In a lot of ways, I felt like an orphan when I was young because my father was never home. I tapped into these memories to help the actors tackle these feelings of their characters. I also tried to relate the actors' lives to *Orphans*. Frank Alfano Jr. writes: "Often Paul would speak about the power of brotherhood...I started drawing my inspiration from my older brother" (Appendix D). For example, some of the exchanges that my brother and I had growing up manifested themselves into physical arguments. I would stand up for myself and immediately be scared of what I had said or did and would then proceed to assume a stance of defense, often balling up on the floor, legs in the air, ready to defend myself, as he came at me. There was a scene where I incorporated that exact childhood movement into my choreography for an altercation between the brothers.

THE AFTERMATH

I remember the week after the closing of *Orphans* more vividly than any other time in the process. I was called into David Leong's office for a meeting about the show. A shockwave of fear penetrated my body. Closing night of *Orphans*, the actors, the crew, and I broke down the large set we had constructed, consisting of 6 large flats, a window, and a door we were never going to use again. We tossed the wood next to the dumpster outside Theatre VCU. I thought this was the reason I was being summoned. As I walked through the door to Mr. Leong's office I could feel my heart racing. There sat Mr. Leong, Patti D' Beck, and Dr. Aaron Anderson. For the next half hour I was stripped of all dignity, not as a director or student, but as a person. "The reason you're here is because you are a co-dependant person." "You lack responsibility." "You know Paul, after you leave VCU, none of us are going to remember you." The comment that stood out the most was: "No sets are allowed on Shafer Street's stage." As the hits kept coming I wondered to myself: how are you supposed to learn the art of blocking with no set? How are the student actors benefited? Why can't I provide an opportunity for technical students to learn? Is this not a learning environment?

They showed me something that will forever haunt my memories at VCU. It was an e-mail two fellow students had sent to Dr. Anderson. It contained lies and accusations that weren't true. The Shafer Alliance Laboratory Theatre is an alliance started in the Fall of 2007 at VCU to create an understood camaraderie among the directors, actors, and technicians working in Shafer Street Playhouse. The e-mail,

containing a list of my “violations” of the guidelines set forth by S.A.L.T. was sent by two members of the S.A.L.T board – and, as it turned out, by two people that I cared for and trusted. They never once came to me during the month of rehearsals and communicated their problems. Maybe it could have turned out differently if there was some communication. The letter that I read seemed like two people placing all the blame on someone else to save their own skin.

I was taught two very important lessons from the aftermath of *Orphans*. First, know the rules and regulations inside and out. A production begins with an understanding of what can and cannot take place in any given theatre. Two, create a dialogue with those surrounding your workspace. One of the reasons I got in trouble is because one of the technical students had taken tools out of the Theatre VCU shop when they weren’t supposed to. Problems like this can be solved if communication lines are kept open. Had I known this was going on, I would have questioned the student about the use of tools outside of the shop, and whether this was permitted or not. Have production meetings weekly about what is happening and developing in the process. With everyone on the same page there will be smaller risk of miscommunication.

On many levels I am glad to have taken risks with *Orphans*. I gave opportunities to people. I provided people with a way to express their art that professors sometimes discourage. By no means am I trying to justify my actions. If I had the choices to make again I would. True lessons come from breaking the rules

as much as following them. The only regret I have is making the decision to not have everything out of the theatre and ready for the next show.

FALL 2007

Choosing a script

Orphans was a hit. Teachers and students were saying it was the best work they had seen in Newdick Theatre. Theatre, my mistress, was trying to tell me something. The feeling I got when I directed was like nothing else. It was as if I was alive during rehearsals. The actors and I were a unified rhythm. I wanted more. I had to direct again. After *Orphans* I was asked by my friend Danny Devilin to direct a one act by Neil Labute. I proudly accepted his offer. The Labute show was to go up late in the Fall 07 semester and I had decided to take the beginning of the semester to focus on classes.

Around the beginning of September I was approached by Kevin, Rob, Frank, and Jaike with a script by an Irish playwright named Martin McDonagh. They all raved about how good the script was and asked me to direct them again. Thus began my amazing journey with... *The Pillowman*. I had heard of Martin McDonagh but never read any of his scripts. I told Kevin, Rob, Frank, and Jaike that I would read it that afternoon and let them know. On the walk home I remember feeling very flattered that they wanted to work with me again. We had some great times during *Orphans* and worked very well together. I sat on my couch and began reading. *The Pillowman* was dark, humorous, dramatic, witty, and filled with energy. I was sold. My imagination was running wild. *The Pillowman* reminded me of scripts that my favorite film directors have worked on. I am a huge fan of Tim

Burton's use of shadow in lighting and his communication of horror, The Coen Brothers minimal acting style, Wes Anderson's wit and humor, and David Cronenberg's realistic approach to violence. Martin McDonagh provided me with a script where I would be able to take a piece from each director I love and make it my own. I like to think that I didn't find *The Pillowman*, *The Pillowman* found me.

The effect *The Pillowman* had on me was much different from Kessler's *Orphans*. *Orphans* raised issues of personal and familial conflicts in more of a real context while *The Pillowman* took my imagination to a completely different, but very tangible world. Before I had even finished the script I knew what I was going to do and how I was going to do it: characters, set, lights, sound, i.e. mood. Most importantly, I knew how the audience had to feel. I called the boys and told them to meet me at a local restaurant, the same night I received the script, and I would give them their roles.

The Pillowman is a dramatic/thriller play with a cast of five males and two females. For some reason, I don't know why, I wanted to stick with the actors I worked with the semester before. This meant that I would have to find a way to cut two female roles and one male role. There are two parts during the play depicting stories in which a mother, father and two children figures are on stage. Katurian tells his stories while the actors act it out. But I needed to get rid of those parts. My idea was to make Katurian young and have him do a voiceover of all the parts. When I told the cast about this, they thought I had gone insane, but I knew it was a strong idea and stuck with it. By doing so I kept the four main roles and added a

role. Even with this change the script read/ran about two hours and forty-five minutes. The play had to be cut. I am not a big fan of sitting uncomfortably for that long as an audience member and I don't want to put that burden on anyone. I wanted to make the audience uncomfortable with unrelenting realness, and not because their seats made them so. There are many comedic aspects to the play, some necessary and some unnecessary. Since I initially saw the script as intensely dark, I wanted to keep it that way. The comedic aspects were cut and so were some of the long-winded dialogue exchanges that seemed to be very repetitive.

Playwrights often go on too long with certain beats in their writing. The writing grows stale, loses the focus of the actors, as well as the audience. I enjoy plays in which the writing is fast paced and full of emotion. It was necessary for me to remove some of McDonagh's writing to accomplish what I feel is good for the audience. Although it was to be performed in an educational setting with no income, after messing with the script that much, I knew I needed the rights.

Since my budget was shot from the expense of the rights I knew that the set would be as minimal as possible. But, the set didn't require much and I knew I could find most in Theatre VCU's props and storage unit. There are two set changes and one was during intermission. Also, this time around I decided to do a couple of things differently. I wanted to experiment with the staging a bit. The acting was to be very minimal so the audience needed to be closer to the actors. I had toyed with the idea of taking the show to one of the smaller rooms in Shafer Street Playhouse but this would mean the lighting I wanted, i.e. fading, dim, blackouts, would be unattainable. I sat in Newdick Theatre by myself one night and sketched designs on

how the audience could be seated. That same night I noticed the brick wall stage right and realized that is where it needed to be staged. The dark brick would provide the shadows that I spoke of in Tim Burton's work. I went through the right people and okayed the audience being raised on platforms, sitting on stage. This meant that there would only be about fifty seats available every performance. The thought of having fewer audience members somehow appealed to me even more. I wanted the night to be as intimate for the audience as it should be for the actors. The play is very violent and heavy in adult language therefore the audience age group is that of an older disposition. The placement of intimacy requires the audience to stay focused and in the moment on stage.

The acting: vocal requirements, movement, fight choreography, was very demanding of each actor on stage. The play runs about two hours and each actor is onstage for at least fifty minutes each, besides the main protagonist, Katurian, and the main antagonist, Tupolski, who are on stage for a larger sum of the play. I wanted four completely different characters. I worked with each actor on vocal and physical mannerisms. If someone was in a higher pitch someone else needed to be lower in pitch. If someone crossed their arms I would have the other with his hands in his pockets. The dynamics of character is very important but by doing this the director changes the dynamics of the entire stage.

The Pillowman is in present time and is set in a totalitarian state. A writer, Katurian, is brought in to a police station and is interrogated about several child homicides that parallel his writings. The exposition reveals itself through Tupolski

and Ariel's questioning of Katurian's stories. The point of attack occurs when the detectives reveal to Katurian that they have brought his handicapped brother, Michal, in for interrogation too. The inciting incident is made evident to the audience when Katurian, the protagonist, shares happenings from his childhood through his short stories. The incident reveals to us his love for his brother and reason for writing his demented, but somehow beautiful stories. After Detective Ariel tortures Katurian he is thrown into a holding cell with his brother where we learn that Michal did kill two of the children. Through this complication, Katurian decides to kill Michal and confess to the child murders and the murder of his parents. The moment of truth occurs in the realization of the detectives that Katurian is innocent because of Michal's lie about murdering the third child. Instead, Michal reenacted his favorite story that Katurian wrote. The moment of truth is put to a halt by the climax of the play, with Tupolski shooting Katurian in the head, execution style. The denouement tells us how Detective Ariel kept Katurian's stories safe and did not burn them.

AUDITION AND CASTING

I began the casting process by thinking of what roles the boys had previously portrayed in *Orphans*. I did not want them to be playing the same kind of roles in this production. Rob Fenton writes, “The casting of the show surprised us all.” (See Appendix E.)

Since I felt that Kevin wanted to be more than just an assistant director in *Orphans*, I wanted to give him the biggest opportunity. I cast him in the lead role of Katurian. Kevin was right for the part of Katurian. Both men are intellectuals. I imagined the physicality of Katurian being similar to that of Kevin’s: tall, lanky, and clumsy. Kevin is also a very hard worker, and I knew he would bring a lot to the table, having seen his work as my assistant in *Orphans*.

Rob Fenton previously played a somewhat mentally handicapped character in *Orphans*, so I knew I wanted to steer clear of casting him as Michal in *The Pillowman*. Rob has very sharp features, and I imagine Tupolski to be the most handsome of all the characters. At times Rob can be very laid back and easy going, as if he doesn’t have a care in the world. This is exactly how I pictured Tupolski: someone who is very confident in his looks, his intelligence, which dictates a higher status. Rob is also a smoker, and I saw Tupolski going through packs of cigarettes during his interrogation process. The smoking masks Tupolski’s unhappiness with his self-image and self worth.

Tupolski's partner, Ariel, needed to be something of the opposite nature: loud, angry, yet generally a better person. Ariel's tough exterior masks his personal unhappiness with himself. Frank Alfano, Jr., definitely portrays this disposition, sometimes in his real life. Physically, Frank had worked out over the summer to a point of gaining lots of muscle mass, and was a much larger presence than he had been before. Ariel needed to be a large presence in a room, needed to look physically stronger than anyone else on stage. Frank, during *Orphans*, toyed around with a voice for Treat that I wanted him to use for Ariel.

In my opinion, the most difficult role to cast out of the chosen actors was the role of Michal. This was a man who, in his childhood, was tortured physically and mentally by his parents. The only thing that I really wanted was Michal to be physically present. Jaike Foley-Schultz was the largest of the Dead End Kids in stature. I knew that his size would lend itself to my vision of Michal. Jaike is also a very intelligent actor and logical thinker. Michal's thinking is very logical, but is disconnected from reality. I thought that would be an easy transition for Jaike; twist his logic in a childlike direction and he would understand where Michal's logic exists.

For the role of Young Katurian, which I incorporated in voiceovers, I had to find an older child with a younger-sounding voice whose parents would be open to the dark subject matter. I called the artistic director of SPARC, a performing arts program for children in Richmond, to inquire about an actor. She gave me the name and number of a 13 year-old boy, Eric Evans. I called his mother and asked her to

come to a rehearsal so she could hear the material he would be working with.

Afterwards, she agreed to let Eric be involved with the production.

REHEARSAL PROCESS

For the first rehearsal we had a read through. The only thing I wanted to accomplish was making a decision to use (or not to use) the Irish accent in the performance because the play was originated by an Irish playwright. Because McDonagh set the play in a totalitarian state, we were given free reign in the decision to use the dialect or not. I must say I did enjoy the two detectives using an accent, but the use of the accent did not work so well for the two brothers. So, I decided to use Standard American dialect.

Later that night we decided to have three rehearsals a week, due to our lengthy rehearsal period: we had two months to put the production together. Of course, later on, we would be in a five rehearsals a week process.

I contacted the director of the stage management program and asked if anyone would be interested. The next day, I received an email from Sara Drake saying that she would love to be a part of the production. This excited me most about the production, not to speak poorly of Caylyn Temple's work as the SM in *Orphans*. Sara was studying to be a stage manager, and therefore had more experience and knowledge to bring to her job. Sara took care of every aspect of the show but the directing, which made my job much easier. Anytime there were scheduling issues, they were taken care of. Any production meetings I could not attend, she was there. Because of her field of study at VCU, she was friends with lighting designers and costume designers, which took care of finding the crew for the show.

I wanted costumes to be very realistic. Detectives in dark suits with bold colored ties, with guns in shoulder holsters that were built by the costumers. Katurian needed worn out, beat up, dirty clothing that was reminiscent of the Seattle grunge rock and roll scene. The script said Michal was taken out of school for his interrogation, so I imagined him in more formal clothing, with a hint of hand-me-down, slightly tattered appearance. The only costume change consisted of Michal wearing a white suit, depicting him as if in heaven, delivering his last monologue at the end of the show, walking around the frozen tableau of the other actors. Costumers Amber Thibodeau and Ashley Eheart frequently brought in pieces for the actors to try on, and I never doubted that the costumes wouldn't be ready by opening night.

During rehearsals I love to focus on character and the actors' intentions. This makes for an easier blocking process and more organic production. The acting space was very small, which called for organic blocking. I would give the actors a place to stand or sit or lie at a certain time. They had to be in a certain position at a specific time, and I would give them an even smaller area to conduct in before and after that moment. Of course there were times that needed to be very inorganic and staged. The fights were very choreographed for safety purposes, and had to in a specific space due to the proximity of the audience. For example, after the first act, a young Katurian gives a voice over while Katurian is living through the thoughts being spoken. Katurian, played by Kevin, had two blocking notes: begin stage left, sitting down in the position Tupolski left him, and end down stage right standing so that Ariel could steal focus in his entrance. The fight that took place after this

moment was staged down right, but had to end center stage with the threat of Ariel pulling Katurian's fingernails out with pliers before the lights went down. What happened in between those moments was the actors truly living in their characters.

The week before the show opened, we got to work in the space, adding all the technical aspects. This brought even more of the initial mood and feelings I wanted into reality.

The Pillowman is one of my proudest achievements as a director. We sold out every night, and even had people sit in the house of Newdick, which was removed from the house I created onstage. Even though these audience members did not get the same feeling as those seated on stage, they were still affected by the performance. I think they benefited not only from the actors' performances, but from the onstage audience's reactions to what they were watching.

After one of the shows, while I was leaving the theatre, I stopped and spoke with Rob Fenton's father about the production. He spoke briefly on his experience with *Orphans*, and how he had enjoyed it, and then spoke about how we raised the bar with this production of *The Pillowman*. He told me he "could really feel the director's presence on stage," which may sound familiar, as it is the title of my thesis. The members of my committee had nothing but good things to say about the production. As a matter of fact, I am used to getting notes on everything that I do, and having to change things, but this time around I believe my mentors gave nothing but positive feedback and began to realize my calling in the theatre, as I had done during the process of *Orphans*.

I think my presence was most prevalent in the mood I created for the show. I composed music with the intent of creating a sound that would take them to a particular place without having to rely on the actors to paint the picture for them. I wanted the music to immediately effect their emotions, and to better reveal the story. I didn't want them to be sitting in a theatre, I wanted them right there, engaged in the action, thoughts provoked by what they saw and heard. By defining a space for the actors, I essentially restricted excessive movement, as they had very little room to move and live on stage. During *Orphans*, it was all about the relationship, the need of my story (my relationship with my father and brother) being told. For this production, not only did I include some of those parts, but I started looking at the larger picture, i.e. the audience, music, transitions, keeping the audience's minds engaged during those transitions, set placement, and staging. My presence grew as I used my own music that I created specifically for the show and I began to understand more of my own process and how to approach directing these actors.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES FOR *THE PILLOWMAN*

A boy sits on the footsteps of his back porch, overlooking the moonlit features of Kentucky Lake. He contemplates the night's events whilst tears begin to blur his vision. A shimmering glimmer of light catches his eye as he stares down the railroad tracks, formed by the moon reflecting on the water; they run side by side, only to meet at a single point in the distance. A cloud of fog whisks across the water and floats into the trees, carrying his attention to the heavens. A blanket of stars covers the world in which he lives. A star shoots across the night sky. He squeezes his eyes shut and hopes that this wish will come true. As he opens his eyes, he finds his brother has appeared beside him. "What did you wish for?" asks his brother. The boy returns his gaze to the sky and says, "If I tell you, it won't come true." The brother's irritation sends him, in retreat, back inside the house. The boy, still inspecting the night sky, whispers: "One of these days I will understand you. And then, I will forgive you."

The mood for this production of *The Pillowman* wasn't truly realized until I wrote this note. People never realize how much beauty there is in sadness, and how several mistakes and disappointments can reveal something that is honest, true, and real. Even in the midst of despair throughout the production, there lies a sense of forgiveness and acceptance. The theme or main idea of the play became forgiveness. Just as in my director's note for *Orphans*, there is a familial relationship undertone, but the piece applies to all of the characters in the production, whereas *Orphans* was about myself and my father's relationship. I feel that passing through that with

Orphans allowed me to open up to the idea of social forgiveness with *The Pillowman*, instead of fulfilling personal needs.

THOUGHTS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF SOUND

Having been a fan of music for the majority of my life, and a musician for the last ten years, and I feel that music is a universal language that everyone can relate to and understand. Therefore, the instrumentation of music determines the mood one feels. Every theatrical production needs a soundtrack. Music should be used to supplement the writing/acting/performance.

The music I chose for *Orphans* were instrumental pieces from The Appleseed Cast and Explosions in the Sky. For the next two shows, I decided to score my own music, knowing exactly how I wanted the audience to feel, and the kind of mood I wanted to set. I have noticed that playing music behind voiceovers, such as in *The Pillowman* behind Young Katurian and *Terra Nova* behind Amundsen's character, automatically provided the audience with a feeling. The sour atonal notes struck in *The Pillowman* provided the horror element that went along with what was being said and actually let the audience focus more on what was being said because their minds weren't paying attention to how they were feeling. The desolate Western United States sound that I gave *Terra Nova* actually gave the audience a backdrop of the landscape of Antarctica, letting them know that there was no one else around.

Music and sound also provides for transitions, keeping the audience focused, and also pre-show, intermission, and after the show.

THOUGHTS ON APPROACHING A SCRIPT

My process is as follows: Begin by running each act individually. Two days focused on the first act, the next two days focus on the second, next few days focus on the third act. After focusing on the larger acts, you can begin to distill the moments within the acts. This makes the process from the actor's standpoint more tangible and expedient.

Focus on all characters/actors equally. All characters should be given equal importance, which will make for a more comprehensible production. Specific parts of the play are to be given time to work. I began with the director's beats, which can be changes in conversation, topics of dialogue, changes in mood and/or scene changes. The moments in between the director's beats should give the audience the opportunity to feel something before the actors have moved on to another subject or scene. This also provides a point of transition for the actors to experience a new emotion. I like to compartmentalize with my beats. Within the beats are moments, smaller beats that must be addressed. Within those beats, there are even smaller moments, breaths, that must be worked on. The play becomes a metaphor for an ice sculpture. You begin with a large block of ice and then you carve bits and pieces off until you have a formation. Within the formation, you must detail. Underneath the detail lies a story, maybe subtext that must be revealed to the audience. The block of ice must tell a story.

THOUGHTS ON DIRECTORS

As an actor who has worked with many different directors, I have learned how *not* to direct based on experiencing and viewing some of their techniques and approaches. For a lack of better terms, I will be giving these directors dubbed names to maintain anonymity.

- Anyone who has been in theatre for a number of years has worked with the “actor/director.” This is a person who wants to play all the parts, who doesn’t let the actors discover anything on their own, and who is basically playing puppet master. I like to let the actors make choices for themselves, and then guide them to illuminate what they are trying to communicate to the audience.
- In complete opposition to this kind of director is the “pay roll” director. This is a person who is there for purposes of pay. It is my feeling that the director is the mediator of all the rules given a stage production. There has to be something done. They sit back and act like they’re doing something, but they are not. I have come into contact with a lot of these directors, and believe me: we know you are not doing anything.
- Then you have “the cool guy” director, putting himself on everyone else’s level as far as fraternizing is concerned. This breaks a lot of trust that could be otherwise developed through a higherarchy system. As an actor, my respect for the director comes from the system of respect because it keeps me from truly getting to know the person, and keeps everything on a

- professional level. The director is the leader, the guide. I distance myself outside of the rehearsal period; not making myself available for situations that would allow distrust to seep into our relationship.
- The “tunnel vision” director is the director who ignores the multitude of responsibilities he has as a director and spends the whole rehearsal process on one aspect of the show. I like to make equal time for every thing: costumers, actors, set designers, stage managers, and music. As I’ve seen before, if one spends too much time on one thing, the show becomes unbalanced, and the audience is aware of the lack of preparedness or even the over prepared.
 - There is also the “beat the dead horse” director who tries to tackle one issue in the script and literally hit the audience in the face with it instead of letting the audience experience it. Don’t let your concept infiltrate your work. If you have a concept, it will reveal itself organically.
 - The “artistic” director. One of the main components of theatre is collaboration. Once in a while, you have a director that says that it’s his way or the high way. I feel it is my job to accept and be open to people’s ideas. This keeps me humble and also keeps respect between members of the production. It also makes people feel that they have a say in their art, which is important in keeping their interest and their focus. Being a director does not mean it is your vision and your vision only. As I said before, it is the director’s position to make everyone else’s vision come alive.

- The “psychological” director is one that is difficult to understand, as they give notes to actors that are cerebral and try to motivate and help their actors by giving them one note that is a dissertation of the actor’s character. Most actors just want the director to tell them how to be in the moment, i.e. notes that are basic and primal. I like to give primal notes and not mix the actors up with complicated jargon and complex terms. The more simple the instruction, the better the product.
- There is also the “I don’t know” director. This is the director that says “no” to the person (actor/technician) and does not offer a solution to that which he does not approve of or like. To me, this is someone who lets everyone else do the work while he maintains his throne. If someone brings something to the table, it is good to tell them your opinion. If you do not like it, tell them why so that they are not left in the dark.
- The “resume” directors. Those who are only looking for professional recognition. They spend more of their time documenting, i.e. photographing, videotaping, journaling, than working on the actual show itself. I think this documentation does matter, but it should not overtake your personal investment in the show. I’m usually too worried about everyone else’s process to pay attention to my own.

THOUGHTS ON DIRECTING/COACHING

- The rules always change.
- There is no use in finding a concept for the piece before you begin. This will only hinder the process and creative impulses.
- Rely on the moment and pure impulse.
- Put yourself in the mind of a child.
- Don't give up on the understanding of a moment.
- Simply make the actors appear invested/in the moment/impulsive/real/living/breathing.
- Begin character work while blocking. The quicker the actor taps into the character's mind, the more organic blocking will be.
- The director is the outside eye. The actor cannot see everything.
- The director is the camera.
- The story should reveal itself.
- The director is the channel through which the understanding of the play is provided.
- Try to be in sync with the actor's choices. By doing this you can bring to light what choices they have made.
- Actors love encouragement.
- Actors hate discouragement.
- Saying "no" to the ideas brought in by anyone working on the show only hinders the process. Instead of saying "no," say "yes, and what else can

we do to make the audience understand what you're talking about?" Try and try again. This way, the actors'/technicians' thoughts will be revealed to the audience.

- Detailing is a process. Begin with a wide focus for director's beats and transitions. Then sharpen your focus, detailing small moments.
- The more detail = the more moments = more for the audience to feel.
- Take risks. Logical thinkers only get so much out of all aspects. Learn through the risks.
- Rely on your actors. Trust those you work with.
- Stillness and soft speak from actors is much more effective than yelling.
- Levels of dialogue in scenes create realness: To god/higher power/heavens, to public/environment, to personal/someone else, to yourself/intimate.

QUESTIONS ABOUT BLOCKING:

- What looks good? Why does it look good?
- Would the audience understand this picture? Is it relatable?
- Why did the character (not actor, always make it about the character) stand, sit, or move at all? It must be justified.
- What character is in charge of the conversation? When does the status in the conversation change and where are the actors in accordance to their status?
- Is this starting to look stale?
- If the characters stand in a straight line is it interesting? If it is...why?
- Must I follow the stage directions? Would something else look better?
- Should I micromanage?
- Does this picture create levels not only in low to high but in depth too?

What is blocking? Blocking is constantly referred to as patterns moved by the actors on stage. Blocking really has nothing to do with movement at all.

Blocking is a never-ending silent dialogue happening between the actor and director to create what I call "a pretty picture." Blocking is a shared impulse between the actor and director to justify their motives and objectives. What follows is the patterns created? Yes, but blocking is derived from the impulse to move. Most actors don't follow their impulse. The director sees that and makes actors trust in what they feel.

THOUGHTS ON GRADUATE SCHOOL

Graduate school is a very interesting setting. Graduate students find themselves in limbo between a student, friend, and colleague to their professors. The first year I thought I was something I am not: smart. The second year I found my calling in Theatre: Directing. The third year I found myself maturing and self-actualizing: becoming an adult. I am not receiving my MFA because I am an amazing student. I have never been an amazing student. I spent more time on projects outside of my classrooms than actual class work. A setting I create and trust is where learning, knowledge, and wisdom exist for me.

There is a certain feel, a mistrust I experience when I am sitting in a classroom full of graduate students pontificating and searching for a moment to hog the intellectual spotlight. It seems like for the most part, graduate classes consist of people talking about theatre rather than doing theatre. I find this to be the most theatrical setting in a program whose initial goal is to teach all aspects of theatre. As I sit and listen to everyone speak, I myself not saying anything, I realize how logical some people are and how linear minds think. I sometimes wish I could make the choice to think either linearly or non-linearly. It would be quite a gift. But, I have never been accused of being logical. My ability to focus in a non-linear fashion forms the foundation that actualizes the style in which I direct.

SPRING 08

The Dead End Kids

I went into the production of *Orphans* thinking it would be like any other production. I would develop relationships with the actors, and vice versa, and after the show was over, our friendship would fade away. But little did I know, *Orphans* sparked something that would consume the rest of my graduate career. The tasks that I have undertaken and the trials and tribulations within those tasks have created not only a small theatre troupe/company but also friendships and relationships that will last the rest of my life. This experience has become the epitome of what a company is and should be. Actors and artistic director and technicians coming together in an encouraging, honest, and truthful setting and creating something. Even though I am not going as in depth with the third show I directed, I would still like to point out a couple of things that made me realize that the Dead End Kids was not just a name were giving ourselves, but an ensemble.

Terra Nova by Ted Tally was by far the most difficult show to put together. Not only because of the three weeks we had to put it up, but because of the challenges of the way it was written and the roles we began to play as a company. The space and my budget did not allow me to do everything I wanted, i.e. set, lighting, and costumes. I really had to buckle down and focus on how I would portray the characters' lives without giving them the proper utilities that Tally does in the script. This meant I would have to focus more on the script and the technical aspects than the actors. This meant that I did not provide them the baby steps we

had taken during the first two shows. I trusted in them and their work and what they had learned from me to encompass their process. It was strange at times. I know the actors were frustrated with me not giving them the notes that they desired, as I was so focused on creating the mood for the piece. Although their performances were already good, the strange thing was, they didn't trust in themselves. All I had to say was, "you know this. We've been together. You know exactly what notes I'm going to give you." Then they realized what they needed to do to improve because they had already been through this process before. After I told them that, their performances continued to get better. *Terra Nova* was also a bit strange for The Dead End Kids because this was the first time we had allowed anyone else to be on stage with us. It didn't take long for the actors who came in to understand our process, trust, and faith within each other. Even the other actors mentioned to me how comfortable they felt with the group and the process in such a short amount of time.

I was frustrated because I was not doing what I excel at the most: working as an acting coach. But, this is the boys' senior year of college, and they're not always going to have me around to help them and guide them through. There are directors, and I have worked with them as an actor, that don't do anything to assist the actor's process, and I would like to say, as a director, that when I see a production that is not showcasing the actors, I blame the director. When I see a production that has no mood, only intention that is when I say it is the director's fault. When I see an actor outshining all the other actors on stage, and intimidating them, and actors who are intimidated, I say to myself, "it is the director's fault." Not that the director is a

puppet master, because he's not, he is merely a guide, a facilitator of the audience. His job is not only to direct, it is to coach and teach anyone involved in the production.

Through the direction of these three shows, I have learned that whatever job you have you must be committed 100% and work just as hard or harder than anyone else. If that means picking up other people's jobs, then so be it, because it's not about you, it is about the people that provide you with the opportunity to do what you do. The reason I consider the Dead End Kids to be an ensemble is because of the experiences and lessons I have learned with them and because of them. I now know what it takes to be a part of a theatre company, and I am eternally grateful for those having been a part of The Dead End Kids.

Throughout the three shows I developed my own style, which has become my "director's presence". Music that takes you to not only the mood but the environment in which the play is set; technical aspects that never let the audience wonder where they are or who they are supposed to be looking at or seeing on stage at that time; beautiful pictures that gives a scene heightened reality, i.e. visual aesthetic; helping the actors discover intentions/objectives in the moment as a side coach: "Paul helped me to discover these motivations by talking to me about exactly what was happening in the scene and he would talk to me while I was acting and I would change my approach because of his direction while staying in the scene" (Jaike Foley Shultz, Appendix B.) These are some of the components I have learned to focus on to create my presence as a director on the stage. I will never stop

learning as a director and as far as I am concerned my journey as a director has just begun.

APPENDIX

The following accounts are from the actors in the company (The Dead End Kids). The most important aspect of this process has been collaboration, and I think it is very necessary to include the thoughts of the students in order to supplement my journey as a director.

A: Thoughts on *Orphans* by Kevin Duvall

As those of us who were involved know, the birth of the Dead End Kids began with *Orphans* by Lyle Kessler in my junior year 2007. When I was originally asked to be a part of *Orphans*, I was under the impression that I was going to be playing the part of Phillip. Much to my dismay, I later found out that Rob Fenton was cast as the role, which lead me to think that the invitation to be involved was cut. That wasn't the case of course. Instead I was invited to be the assistant director, a position I was a little less thrilled about initially since in my experience the assistant director was that guy who always sat next to the director and served as no more than an errand boy and a yes man. I said yes though because I had read the play and I thought it was very good, and being involved in theater in any way possible was a learning experience. Since I wasn't cast in any plays for the upcoming 2007 season, I decided to also put a proposal to direct a show of my own, saying to myself that if the proposal was accepted I would have a semester chock full of theater, but from a perspective I had only experienced once before, being not onstage, but behind the table. The proposal went through and I was stuck (fortunately) with the task of assistant directing *Orphans* and directing the *Blue Room*. Needless to say, I had a full

plate. Rehearsals at least six nights a week for about two months, and plenty of creative conceptualizing to be doing in my off time.

Because of my double commitment, I only got to spend about three days a week in the *Orphans* rehearsal, so I never really felt like I was a solid part of the production. I felt more like a floater. I felt like my real job on the show was to come in periodically and act as a semi-outside eye, letting Paul know of choices he would make that wouldn't be clear to someone not involved in the entirety of the process. That only happened a couple of times, as the choices were usually very supportive of the chosen themes of the play.

The rehearsals for *Orphans* were a landmark for me because it was the first time I had ever seen the cast members take the roles so seriously, which I had been looking for since I started acting. When I watched the work Frank, Jaikie, and Rob were doing progress so much each night with the help of Paul, I was filled with a comfort that no matter what happened this show was going to land because they would not allow it not to. Everyone had something to prove with this show. Paul making his directing debut at Virginia Commonwealth University, and Jaikie, Frank, and Rob being juniors who wanted to make their mark on the rest of the department. Each of them had had numerous roles before, on the main stage and off, but nothing that they had impressed themselves with, or felt truly showed what they were capable of. This was that chance, and none of them were going to let that go to waste. Meanwhile here I am bouncing between assisting and directing with at full class schedule and being overwhelmed with the amount of work I would not

have done when I went to sleep every night. I felt there was a great camaraderie amongst the cast and crew, which I never really felt to be a part of. It turns out though, that nobody else involved shared the feeling that I didn't belong, and that is what kept all of us together for the future shows we would do in the department, and then (hopefully) professionally.

In rehearsals I mainly would observe the process of the actors and especially of Paul because I would observe that he did and take things that I liked, and worked well and try and apply them to my directing process of the Blue Room. I unfortunately don't have the same ability that Paul has to instill a relaxed faith in his actors, and give simple notes, which are understood, on a very primal level for anyone who happens to hear. Jumping ahead for a second real quick to the Pillowman process, just for an example of the type of note I am talking about, there was one rehearsal where I was trying to react to the prospect of getting tortured for the second time by being hooked up to a car battery. I wasn't really getting it right, so Paul told me, "You know how when you were young and you got in trouble, your dad was about to use the belt on you, and you know the beating is coming? So you are mentally readying yourself, but then you see the belt, and it all goes out the window and you can't look at it..." I stopped him before he finished and knew exactly what he wanted, and I never got another note about that. Paul would give notes just as easily relatable and efficient all the time.

When I think of my role as assistant director one day of rehearsal in particular comes to mind. That was one day, which Paul couldn't be there so he let

me direct Act 2 scene 2, the bus scene. I still at this point had that feeling that was only semi involved with the show, so the fact that Paul had enough faith in me to give me this control of what I considered his show, was incredibly assuring and empowering. I still felt that the work that I did that night directing that one scene was better than almost all of the directing work I did on my show in it's entirety. Maybe it was the commitment of the actors, or the attitude of a working friendship that had been developed among everyone, I don't know, but directing that scene was not hard. In fact it was one of the best single experiences I have had at VCU, or in my theatrical career. Everything just fell into place. When Paul came back and saw what we had done with the scene he was very happy and many of the things I did with the scene ended up being in the final production. That wasn't the only scene I helped with though, my input was always welcome, accepted, and considered. I truly felt like the title assistant director was fitting, unlike all those coffee getting yes men I mentioned before.

When the show went up, I was neck deep in the Blue Room, and I had to miss most of the tech runs as well as tech week, so I felt like I had to take almost a sabbatical from the show. I could watch the finished product I had helped put up with almost an outside eye. As I said I felt I was the guy who could provide semi-outside input. I saw the show as an audience member more than an assistant director, and I can easily say that is one of the best productions I have seen at VCU, if not the best. It felt like a professional production. Everything from the set to the acting made it feel for the first and only time since I have been at VCU, like I wasn't

watching student theater. I had seen dozens of shows in Shafer and in Hodges but when I watched *Orphans*, I felt like I was in a small theater in Chicago.

B: Thoughts on *The Dead End Kids* by Jaike Foley Shultz

When I was first asked to come onto the show *Orphans* I was flattered but concerned. I had never worked with Paul before and the part I was going to be playing was twenty years older than myself. I am glad that I did accept the role, however, because I forged the strongest relationship with the cast and director than I ever had in my acting career. The result was a company that went on to do two more productions, with great success.

During *Orphans* my biggest challenge was discovering the fatherly love Harold had for Treat and Phillip. My first choices were generic and unimaginative. I was having trouble trying to find the truth in my objectives. Paul was there to guide me, thankfully. He reminded me of many factors about my relationship with Treat. Because of the love I had for Treat, seeing myself in him, I needed him to succeed in my goals for him and when he let me down, I had to feel more than just disappointment. There was fear and anger that came with it as well, forcing my character to push Treat to the breaking point. Paul helped me to discover these motivations by talking to me about what exactly was happening in the scene. He would talk to me while I was acting and I would change my approach because of his direction while staying in the scene.

This kind of focused direction helped to shape every character I created with Paul. It wasn't always welcomed, however. During my most recent and trying show,

Terra Nova, this kind of direction occurred mostly in the last week of rehearsal. We were in tech and opening night loomed only a few days away. I was focusing on setting my actions and Paul began this direction changing my entire approach to my character. In hindsight, it gave me more depth and allowed me to explore the character in the nights to come. Yet, at the time, I was very frustrated with the process. I felt like he was telling me how to do the part instead of letting me create it myself.

Paul would tell me to be quieter at certain parts or look off into the distance at other points. This specificity made me feel like he was micromanaging my role, that I was a puppet and he, the puppet master. Now that time has passed, I see that these choices were more interesting and allowed me to go further with my role. In addition, we had the least time to put this show up out of all our productions and so I am sure he was just speeding the process up so that it could be ready opening night. This method of direction shows Paul at his best.

In the beginning of rehearsals he allows his actors to do their own thing, guiding us with explorative questions and suggestions. When he does get into a scene, he connects to the vibe of the actors and into the energy of the room. He steers us in a direction that usually inspires our characters to go further. However, if an actor resists this guidance it can feel like he is the puppet master, forcing his choices on our work, as was the case in my experience with *Terra Nova*. Although my last show was frustrating, my best experience with a director was with Paul in the *Pillowman*.

My character in the *Pillowman* was extremely complex and it was difficult to discover all of his levels, but without Paul's encouragement it would have never developed as fully. My choices were very surface level with Michal. I originally just played him as a child and not a man with a child's mind. Instead of telling me how to play the role Paul simply told me that something wasn't right and to keep coming in with new physical, vocal, and emotional choices. When I started heading in the right direction, Paul gave me some more intimate guidance but for the most part, he allowed me to develop my own performance at my own speed. Of course, with this show, we had much more time and I was able to play with all of my choices until I found the character.

C: Thoughts on *The Pillowman* by Kevin Duvall

Before I share my thoughts on the process of *The Pillowman* I need to preface it, for my own sake, by saying that *The Pillowman* is in my opinion the greatest contemporary play I have read. The first time I read it I was blown away and horrified by the prospect of ever being Katurian in it. Like any actor, whenever I read a script I try and find the role I would play. When I read *The Pillowman* there was no doubt in my mind that Katurian was a role I could NOT do. The role I would have taken had I had a choice would have been Michal, no doubt about it... maybe Ariel, but never Katurian. I remember waling to the Village, the restaurant Paul was meeting us to tell us who got what part, and feeling overwhelmed at the prospect of being any character in the show. I was almost positive Rob would get the part of Katurian, Jaiké-Topolski, Frank – Michal, and myself Ariel. I was one hundred

percent wrong. Paul nonchalantly listed off the cast list and unknowingly heaved a giant weight onto my shoulders. "Kevin... you will be playing Katurian." That is all it took to overwhelm me with fear and excitement, mostly fear. Here I am with the role that every guy in the department would kill for, and it is the only role I have ever read which I responded to by saying, "I could not do that." It was kind of like a nightmare come true. I was stoked.

This was the first time I had been on stage in almost a year, seeing as I spent the last two semester directing. I was more than a little anxious. At this point in my life I was incredibly interested in the foreign films of Akira Kurosawa and Werner Herzog, and the acting work of their two "stars" Toshiro Mifune and Klaus Kinski. I was very ready to apply some things I had learned from them into my role as Katurian. I have always been a big fan of big choices and big risks. So I walked into the first rehearsal with all these ideas to turn Katurian into this big character not rooted in who I was, but some supernatural character rooted in reality... or so I thought. Turns out what I had were pretty much the idealistic caricature of what I wanted Katurian to be. Paul saw this, and after talking with me understood where I was coming from, but told me I was getting ahead of myself. So I took a couple steps back and simplified my choices.

Since the role of Katurian scared the piss out of me, I tried to come to the first rehearsal ready to go. I had almost all of my lines memorized from the first rehearsal, except for act two, and that helped greatly because I hate working with a book in my hand. I have this way of learning where I can hear a thousand things and

forget them all, but one thing said just the right way will make absolute sense to me, and make all the other mysteries in my head make sense. When I think of the notes I received during rehearsals only a small handful really come to mind, but those few made my performance what it is. The first one involved the layout of the set. The stage was set up so the audience was very close, Paul gave me the note, act as if you were acting for the camera...Bam! Just like that, a hundred questions were answered. Scene two in the show was always my favorite because I really enjoyed working with Jaikie, and I thought it was incredibly written. Establishing the relationship as brothers was tough for me until Paul said to me this, "Everyone is going to know he is your brother, everyone is going to know you love him, everyone is going to know what sacrifices you have made for him in the past, so don't worry about showing us that you love him." It was a brilliant note because it transcends *The Pillowman* and can be applied to any scene. Scene three was a very difficult situation to grasp. Katurian knows he is going to die the whole scene. It's very emotional for him, and I was getting stuck in the mindset of, "I am going to die, so fuck everything, I can do anything." That wasn't the case though; I still had the stories to protect. Paul said one word to me, and I'm sure he remembers this, and it clarified everything... everything for me. The note was, "Apathy with a brooding overtone." After he said that, the next time we ran the scene my eyes were flooded with tears in many different kinds, and I found... everything I needed. In fact I am pretty positive that was the last acting note I got about scene three. It just clicked.

Once those notes were given and the foundation was good and strong, I was able to add in some of the thoughts I wanted from the beginning. Paul helped me

push myself to a physical body which wasn't my own but wasn't ludicrous and unbelievable. Instead of coming in with a body, I let the body and way Katurian moved slowly evolve into it's own thing through the process, and by the time the show was going up, the body would come so naturally that I wouldn't even notice it. Another thing that was important to me going into the process was that I wanted Katurian to physically be changed by the end of the show. I wanted his physical form to go through a journey of its own to match the emotional one. I really felt I accomplished that, but what helped was Paul's willingness to find what I could bring to the table.

The process involving *The Pillowman* was the best acting learning experience I have had at VCU. Everyone who saw it loved it. And it made both my parents and my friends cry. Now that is what I call theatre!

D: Thoughts on The Dead End Kids by Frank Alfano Jr.

Last spring I searched around for a director to direct one of my favorite plays, *Orphans*. It was a powerful script I was very passionate about. After asking around I had heard that Paul Wurth, a grad student whom I play opposite of in *The Nerd*, was looking to direct *Orphans* himself. It took no time to see that our passions for the script paralleled each others. The story was of two brothers that were *Orphans* dependent on each other to survive. Since Paul and I both had strong older brother figures in our life the play spoke very strong for both of us.

It was interesting to me how different the two of us saw what character I would be good at. I thought I was built for the role of Phillip, a younger brother who

was slightly handicapped mentally. He was an innocent boy with the mind of a child, who was not allowed to leave the house or learn. Paul saw me completely playing the opposite. He had no doubt in his mind that I was Treat. Treat was older by a few years. He was a tough kid, a peaty thief who was fight and kill to protect what's his. I couldn't of disagreed with Paul more, and I couldn't of been more wrong.

It turns out that the character Treat was a complete reflection of how I respond to situations in my own life. I started drawling my visual inspiration from my older brother Nick Alfano. I have always described him as a Rottweiler that only I could pet. Paul gave me my space allowing me to develop Treat as I went, from the outside in. Every once in a while he was see my character flat lining and step in to help me with images that would just launch me to the next level. One of the most vivid to me still is the idea of a male gorilla protecting his home from another gorilla. I would actually roll my shoulders forward, flexing my chest and keeping my knuckles tight facing the ground.

There were certain scenes I felt impotent was an actor, not being able to reach the emotional levels that the script demanded. The most promising in the show was a scene in which my character was suppose to become so emotional that it overwhelms him and he blacks out. My cast members learned quickly that when I can't reach a goal that I am working for onstage I explode with angry. I cuss, yell, scream, swing my fists, and even hit things sometimes. Everyone tried to calm me down, reassuring me that it was ok to fail and that I would get it, but Paul. Paul allowed me to process my anger and help guide it into the scene, allowing my actor

of impotents drive the overwhelming emotion that causes me to pass out. All we needed know were to add the play writes words.

Often Paul would speak about the power of brotherhood, relating to the show of course, but maybe not realizing that we was also speaking to the relationships that we were building offstage. Each one of us became drawn to the story of these men and there bond that brought when together. This bonded us together as well, turning a story about two brother into a story about five brother that needed to tell this story. And it became the best work I had ever done.

When we came back from summer break, we had a 'dead end kids' reunion. 'Dead End Kids' was what the orphans call themselves, and quickly became a nickname for us. We jokingly mentioned in passing how we should do another play. After all, we loved working with each other so much we created a brotherhood. Well the more we joked about it, the less we were joking. We started throwing around names of plays that we all loved. Some had mentioned (not to boost, but I think it was me) a play my Martin McConagh called *Pillowman*. The whole group roared with excitement about this script. All but Paul, ironically he was the only one in the group that hadn't read it. As we all performed our senior cattle call, Paul stayed at home and read through the script. We meant at a café afterward to receive the cast list. Once again the whole group was driven by the passion of a beautiful script. But this time it took a backseat to the passion we had to just work together again.

I had my hopes high for a few different roles, not wanting to play another tough guy. I felt that that just wasn't the type of character I was right for. And once

again Paul proved me wrong. I played Ariel, a badass cop that tortures criminals and has no has no pity in his heart for pedophiles. Ariel had so many levels in the show though, which was the brilliant writing of McDonagh. Ariel became my favorite character I have yet played, and after the success of the show, I would never doubt Paul's judgment again.

The process for this show went so smooth now that we knew each others process. Rob would hold script until the last possible moment, Kevin would play with new ideas with each rehearsal, Jaike was off book before he read the play, and I went on yelling and swinging when I failed. Paul's directing was slightly different though. He did, what I like to call, ninja directing. We would run a scene, over and over again playing with new ideas. Then Paul would float on stage, while we continued, whisper a note to someone, and disappear. It was amazing. We would adjust and just keep going, and the notes would perfectly drive us in the right direction, or a new direction, or just forward with more steam. And it was because he would wait patiently for the moment to come up that he knew specifically what he wanted. I can't tell you how many times I would break character laughing at Paul high five-ing himself like he just made the winning basket in a game.

As before Paul allowed me to play with choices until they worked, or I decided to scrap them. He never made me get ride of something I wasn't done playing with. The best example was the voice of Ariel himself. Ariel was a character that was raped by his father at a young age and over compensated his manhood because of it. He would have to be the meanest, toughest, scariest guy to survive. I wanted his voice to be deep and rugged, almost pairing a trailer voice artist. Something that

would be forced deep consciously to hide a past. Rugged enough to hear the years of damaged on the vocal cords cause by screaming for help, or to stop. At first it didn't work at all. I hated it; I loved the concept, but hated the result. I wanted to give it up more than once, but Paul agreed with the direction it was headed and kept me on course. It turned out to work perfectly, defining the character as much as his lines did.

Pillowman was unique in the challenges given us that we had to overcome. Most of which I need not mention, others I shouldn't. But with each challenge came a moment where we as an ensemble overcame them, bringing us closer together and the show to a higher level. And it was the director who kept us in line and reminded us why we were doing what we were doing. We all had a need to tell a story, and as *Dead End Kids*, all we had was each other.

E: Thoughts on The Dead End Kids by Robert Fenton

Paul Wurth and his direction of the productions that I have been involved with shaped my career at VCU. His attention towards honesty, relationships, and telling a story were always completely fulfilling to everyone that were involved with the shows. His style is, and hopefully will always be, one that will continually leave the audience with a desire to see more of the heart and soul that is the theatre.

Paul asked me to be a part of Lyle Kessler's *Orphans* cast. When I first signed on for the project I had no idea of what expected of me in the role or what the show was about but Paul assured me that I was right for the role. The role I was cast in was Phillip, a twenty-year old man who had never known the world outside of his

own apartment, which he shared with his brother Treat. Phillip, by age a man, behaved like a child because he knew nothing of the outside world. Before our rehearsal process started I studied with some autistic children at their school. Paul said to come in with what I learned and we would make sure that their story was truthfully told. He was extremely helpful with my movement in the role, making sure that I was being organic, with a childlike innocence at all times. When I asked whether I could “live” in the character of Phillip so that I would discover new ideas and various other things in rehearsals, he worked with me in facilitating everything that I would need, even addressing and treating me as Phillip. We made sure to run through each individual scene one by one, hitting all points and beats that existed.

It was my job to bring story of brotherly love and the strength of family that was present in the script and tell it to the audience. I am a strong believer that if a director casts a show correctly than work can be done quickly and cohesively, and a level foundation has already been laid. Our camaraderie was so strong from the beginning to the end, that the brotherly love and family essence we were shooting for wasn't hard to achieve. The show still is probably my proudest achievement as an actor at VCU and it wouldn't have been possible without everyone involved. The cast of this show would later call themselves “the Dead End Kids” theatre troupe.

The next production for “the Dead End Kids” was Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman*. The actors brought Paul the script in hopes that he would agree to direct it. We wanted to pick a show that would raise the bar from our previous production and to keep challenging ourselves. The play contains interesting relationships

between men. After reading the script, Paul agreed. This was a risky show for us to put on because we knew that it was very well known and liked by the VCU theatre community and therefore a lot would be expected.

The casting of the show surprised us all. Paul went against type casting, and took the actors in a different direction, not giving them roles similar to what they played in *Orphans*. I think the first role of the director is to believe in the actors he has cast. The trust that exists within the Dead End Kids allowed us to accept the challenges posed by the atypical casting, and move forward. I was cast as the main antagonist of the show, Detective Tupolski. This was a role that I grew to love because I had never before had the opportunity to be the heartless villain in a show.

I believe that Paul's main focus for us in this show was to make sure that we understood where our characters were coming from and that we understood the stakes at hand. *The Pillowman* is quite literally a perfect play that reveals itself through stories and monologues. Paul helped me realize the significance of status in a powerful role and how to use it in the show. I remember him saying to me, "Remember Rob, you're just too cool...but you're a jerk too. It's like an amalgamation of Lucifer and The Fonz from *Happy Days*." Once we worked on each individual character's intentions the work simply blossomed at full speed.

Another element that was extremely present in this show was staged violence. There was a little staged violence in *Orphans* however this show had a much higher demand for it. Again, because of the casting of the show and the trust and willingness of all the actors involved we not only came up with extremely

interesting and compelling ways of violent action onstage but we were very expedient with it as well. It was one of the highly acknowledged elements of the show.

The last production Paul Wurth production was the most ambitious of all. Ted Tally's *Terra Nova* was a daunting task. There was a story that was compelling and rich with brotherhood and heroism. A downside of the script was its extraneous dialogue. The first thing that Paul decided to do was to cut the show so that it would move quickly and that the audience would stay engaged. This is why he decided to place the second act first and the first act second. I remember Paul saying, "I want this play to start off by punching the audience in the face." I believe that it did just that, and in doing so left them with wanting to see more.

Paul planned a camping trip for the cast so that the collective whole would have a better understanding of what it was like to be camping and trekking in cold weather. Granted, the Blue Ridge Mountains in February are nothing to the cold of even Antarctica's summer months, but it was the best we could do. A large point of focus for Paul was the atmospheric element of the cold. With his coaching in remembering how we felt atop Spy Rock, we were able to experience a breakthrough in our rehearsals.

When we were in rehearsal process Paul was very hands off with the actors in character development and had to focus his time on the technical aspects of the show. He said that he had enough confidence with us that we would deliver what he wanted and if he needed to clean up a couple of things here and there he would do

so later in the rehearsal process. This took some getting used to, and at first we felt a little lost but with time, each character found his or her path. This was important in the end because it taught all of us to take charge our own role and of our craft and apply to the show, which is what would be expected of us in the real world.

This show also had the best compilation of makeup/costume designers, lighting designers, and a stage manager who was the jack-of-all-trades that we have ever experienced. Again, that is attributed to the company we have created. Put the right people in order and good things will happen. And although this show was by far more ambitious than our previous productions it was a huge success. We had people with different tastes attend all of our shows but all appreciated the work and cause that the Dead End Kids strived for.

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VITA

Paul Wurth was born May 24th, 1981 in Paducah, KY. He received his Bachelor of Science in Theatre and Dance at Murray State University in 2004. He is an acting coach, movement coach, teacher, actor, director, singer, and musician.