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Transformational Directing:  
An Analysis on How Leadership Affects the Creative Process

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

By

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## Productions of Discussion

1. *Mother Courage and Her Children*

Winter 2013, Fichandler Theatre, Arena Stage, DC

2. *Amazing Grace The Musical*

Summer 2012, Norma Terris Theatre, Goodspeed Musicals Chester, CT

3. *Ring of Fire*

Summer 2013, Riverside Dinner Theatre , Fredericksburg , VA

## Abstract

### TRANSFORMATIONAL DIRECTING: AN ANALYSIS ON HOW LEADERSHIP AFFECTS THE CREATIVE PROCESS

By James Clayton Winters MFA

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014

Major Director: David S. Leong

Department Chair, Theatre

Leadership is often ascribed as a quality one either possess or doesn't. We often hear phrases like "She is born leader" or "All eyes are on you", these are thrown around without discretion in the classroom, conference rooms, social gatherings, and business meetings. This work contends that leadership and in particular leadership that grows and transforms its participants is less an inherent character trait, than an outlook and set of core principles that lead to transformation. Through the application of current and developing business leadership theory and its effect on creativity and a cross analysis of "Best in Class" theatre directors and choreographers that I have worked with, I intend to show that the surest way to a theatrically innovative and engaging production is through a dedication to collaboration, selflessness, and directorial clarity.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

It was the summer of 2005 and central Oklahoma was turning out spectacular sunsets night after night with the kind of beauty that could inspire awe from anyone who had a second or two to enjoy them. Unfortunately I had missed at least 40 sunsets in a row as I was busy in rehearsal working on the Summer Chautauqua Series presented by the University Theatre at the University of Oklahoma. We had just opened our first show of the season, *Androcles and the Lion* after a harried three weeks of rehearsal and were splitting our time with daytime performances and evening staging rehearsals of Mary Chase's *Harvey*. The rehearsal schedule had been an interesting one, and a terse dynamic had developed between a few members of the cast and production team. The tension caused our director to question the work we had done as an ensemble. One evening I was the last to leave the rehearsal room, and as I walked to the parking lot with our director he asked:

"So what do you think Clayton, do they all hate me?"

A little surprised by the question, I reassured the director that a few of the actors were simply new to this kind of process and in the midst of finding their feet. They had grown frustrated because they didn't yet understand how they fit into this piece's creation. I tried to encourage him that once they recognized the amount of freedom they had to contribute new ideas to the process, tensions would ease and the mood of the rehearsal hall would improve. To be fair, I wasn't sure that this would happen at all;

I only hoped that as the divergent members of the cast grew more accustomed with the work, we would eventually become an ensemble.

This moment may have been the first time in which I stopped to consider what it takes to make a production happen from a directorial standpoint—from a leadership perspective. It also highlighted to me that that process of leadership and creativity is very delicate. So many individual elements must be synthesized in order to craft a successful theatrical production. First there is the text, and in the case of new works, the playwright and his or her ego, the Director, their vision and understanding, their process, and their ego; Designers and their egos; Choreographers and Musical Directors and their egos; Producer and ego; crew members and their ego; Interns (who aren't allowed an ego) and eventually the Actors and all of their egos. All of these complexities and we still haven't taken into consideration the difficulties encountered when dealing with the application of design and the real complications involved in the process of bringing a vision to the stage. The leadership of a production, the surrounding environment, and navigation of conflict all have a mighty effect on the work and the final product.

How do Directors navigate the seemingly endless hooks and snares that plague the process of creation? How can we as Educator Artists effectively implement our vision, share our stories, and transform our space and the time at hand in order to reach our cast, crew, and audiences in an innovative and dynamic way? I believe we can have success in our process and with our product if we can create an environment

that encourages risk taking, fosters community and trust, and actively seeks to selflessly promote only the most creative and innovative ideas.

Currently, if you visit the Barnes & Noble website and do a quick search for books addressing the topic of Leadership an astonishing number of titles will populate the screen—99,223 as of April 2014. Similarly, if you query the broad topic of Theatre you will retrieve an almost as astonishing 42,340 not including theatrical titles, with some of these results splintering into theatres of war, and nursing operation. However if you specify Theatre Directing a much more manageable result of 604 titles will populate your screen. Most interesting though, is that when you combine the three terms Theatre, Directing, and Leadership the result drops to a diminutive one, and the book is surprisingly aimed at business professionals, not theatre practitioners. Clearly, there are books that address the process of direction and the role and responsibility of the director, but few articles or books actually analyze or deconstruct the processes and philosophies by which the creative process succeeds in producing an innovative and theatrically engaging performance. It is for this reason we turn to the world of business management.

In our national and global economies the advantage goes to the most dedicated and opportunistic organization. With the proliferation of the internet, cyber commerce, and the ever growing volumes of digitized resources, the landscape of “the advantaged” is so rapidly changing that only those with an unrelenting commitment to innovation can adequately capitalize on the transitory opportunities the market provides them and just as businesses are continuously seeking an advantageous position over their rivals,

so too is the theatre artist striving to produce exciting and innovative work that draws in audiences. Scholars, Theorists, and Universities are trying to pinpoint and categorize the best practices and approaches to business that yield the greatest returns in capital, efficacy, and innovation. Recently in an effort to better understand how adaptability can help business practices, Leading thinkers in the fields of Business Management and Human Resources turned to an examination of the arts to analyze the way artists deal with routine, conflict, and improvisation. The theories derived from these examinations are beginning to make their way into the business world in the areas of hiring, skills recognition, and project management. Using the strengths of the neighboring fields of Business and Management, I believe we as Directors and Storytellers can amplify the efficacy of our theatrical production process. We can also increase the levels of creativity and innovation we exercise in our production process through collaboration, leading to more engaging and dynamic storytelling, which in its execution will carry the intention and vision of our storytellers deeper into the hearts and minds of the audience.

So then we must ask how we can create an environment where creativity can thrive, and how do we recognize innovation when it is at hand? David Campbell, in his *Columns on Leadership and Creativity*, tackled the challenge of defining creativity and innovation and said: "If imagination is intelligence at play" then the application of imagination is "leadership at work" (Campbell 4). Another way to look at it is like this, creativity is the product of one's intelligence set free to be imaginative; this is what happens in the free spaces of our process, during our conversations with others, our

day dreams and our down time. Leadership is the application of our creative thoughts, and innovation the result of the application. It's taking the imaginary concept, turning it into a reality, and reliably and repeatedly executing it. So, how can we increase our creative output and our innovative applications, and what is the purpose of doing so?

The tools and avenues of storytelling are constantly evolving and the while the live theatre form is slow to adapt it is still the most potent of the storytelling mediums. Creativity and Innovation must be at the core of our production process if we hope to have successful and effective productions. Using a collaborative model of leadership known as Transformational Leadership and through the implementation of its four core concepts we will see how to best utilize our resources and foster creativity and innovation. Applying these concepts in turn will lead to more theatrically innovative storytelling.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Leadership Models**

As an Actor who has made much of my career working in smaller regional markets, I have always had to have the conversation about what I do, and how I pay the bills. I am often in rehearsals in the evenings from 6pm to 11pm and back up and at it the next morning doing data entry until I leave for lunch, then an early dinner shift at the nearest Italian place. This chaotic and packed schedule has given me the opportunity to work with some great leaders and some not so great leaders.

I spent some time shortly after getting married working for a small firm in Oklahoma City that specialized in the recycling and resale of corporate and private communication systems. The CEO and owner of the company was a remarkably charismatic man who had made and lost millions, and then made them back again. His entrepreneurial acumen was off the charts. He had started the business with the help of a few partners essentially from scratch and had grown it into a corporation that employed close to 300 full and part time employees. He would joke with you and slap you on the back, challenge you to a foot race or a push up contest, talk endlessly about his new ideas with passion, and generally win you to his cause by the sheer volume of his personality. He was our local legend, our model, and our hero. If he took a special interest in you he would invite you on his weekly 6am, 11-mile run around the nearby

lake, and using his own unique blend of encouragement and shame he would compel you to finish the distance, a feat you were sure was impossible. He read multiple books each week, on all kinds of topics. He read about leadership and business of course, but also about the unique physical attributes of that lizard that can run across the water like Jesus. He read about the life and times of popular and historical figures like Grover Cleveland and Dolly Parton, and once a month he played bingo with us instead of working. After lunch, he personally handed out \$75 to the winner of each round. He gave us hope, he gave us something to aspire to, and he was a terrible leader.

I had been hired through the reference of a good friend with the expressed intent that I would help the CEO, a burgeoning writer, promote and sell his new book. I had been unwittingly and seamlessly escorted into this company's inner circle. I was working directly with the CEO on one of his "Special Projects". For two weeks, I shadowed him as he gave speeches and attended public events where he would gladly hand all the appropriate smiling people and I would hand freshly minted copies of his book to our acquaintances as gifts. Our objective was to get a copy of the book into the hands of every high school student in the city, and finding out how to do that was my special task.

I spent some time putting together a proposal that would make the book available to the schools through grant funds allocated for mentorship programs and suggested an accompanying workbook so that the teachers guiding the students through the material could have a reference point for completion and comprehension. The plan was solid, and with a little long-term vision, the material would and could sell

tens of thousands of copies annually. Without any direction or parameters, I had come up with a simple and effective proposition that would gross the author 20,000 dollars annually per city in which the initiative was employed. After sharing my plan with the CEO and his personal assistant, I was told it wouldn't work. It just wasn't the kind of direction "we" needed to go. Shortly after this interview, I was demoted from my position without any additional feedback on my presentation. I spent the next two years in a 3x4 box with my head tethered to a computer by a telephone cable. That I allowed myself to stay an additional 24 months with the organization is now a wonder to me, but the lessons I learned about leadership through this experience will serve me for the rest of my life.

### **The Heroic Leader**

The model of leadership I experienced from the CEO is what HR theorists are now referring to as The "Heroic" Leader (Andrews 2). The Heroic Leader is a person who "cares about protecting the long-term care of their people" and possesses the "power and charisma required to turn vision into reality" (Andrews 2), also required is a position of latitudinal authority. Matt Andrews in his deconstruction of the Heroic Leader, "Going Beyond Heroic-Leaders in Development" which he published through Harvard's Center for International Development, Working Papers series (2013) suggests that what also must be present is an environment and practices that allow the work of others to be ascribed to one upwardly mobile and visible character, our movement's leader, our Hero.

Andrews rightly points out that our leaders are not always heroic. (Andrews 8)

The CEO of the tech firm had power, had charisma, and was uniquely credited for doing amazing things. He made a million dollars (something I'm sure he had help with) and then lost it (something I know he had help with) and then made it all over again reinventing himself as a leader in a new market (something we are led to believe he did on his own). This framework Andrews suggest is a cultural narrative that is reinforced through our history and literature courses (Andrews, 3). For instance, George Washington single handedly willed our colonial forces to victory over the British. Abraham Lincoln alone ended slavery. Rosa Parks inspired the man who brought an end to segregation in the United States. Historically individuals are lifted up as the focus of the narrative and are credited with bringing progress because of their unique and special abilities. All the while the millions of helpers or incidental characters are never mentioned and never credited.

The Heroic Leadership narrative ascribes greater personal value to those who have ascended into higher levels of management and posits the idea that only a person of great worth and skill would have the attributes to attain such a level of importance. In fact this narrative, according to Henry Mintzberg, fosters "faith in important people [who are] quite apart from the others who develop product and deliver services" (Mintzberg 10). Perhaps this is a cultural layover from the divine monarchies of Europe or the manifested destinies of the Middle Eastern nations, or perhaps a Darwinian application of social evolution, but the understanding of value and worth implicit in the

Hero Leader model gives advantage and makes room for the best of us to become the worst of us.

This is why my CEO was allowed to openly mock the employees who could not finish the 11-mile lap around the lake with him. Admittedly, his vision, drive, charisma, and skills had allowed him to ascend into rarefied air in the business world, and in many respects these qualities allowed his venture to flourish and grow, but what I learned in hindsight is that his greatest skill was duplication. He excelled tremendously in leading those who saw him as a prototype for success. If you wanted to be like him he could make that happen, but if you came to the table with an alternative view, you would not long hold his interest. The reality is that sometimes your employment is just a job; it's the thing you do to pay the bills and put food on the table. In the meantime, you daydream about the kind of work that would excite you.

While I have not yet personally discovered that vocation, I have come remarkably close. In an apparently providential turn, I found employment shortly after my wife and I moved to Richmond for graduate school. To cover the increase in the cost of living and to offset the increased fees for out of state students, I was going to have to work as much as my scholastic and production schedule would allow. I had at various times worked as a musician and content developer for a couple of churches in Oklahoma City and hoped that a position like that would be available in Richmond. Not only was that the case but it also happened to be with a congregation two miles from the house we were renting. I could have endured almost any level of corporate dysfunction for the simple cost saving advantage of the commute alone.

To my great joy, my new boss and Executive Pastor was not only congenial, but was eager to see me advance in areas that were not explicitly linked to the ministry. In fact, multiple times throughout my tenure on his staff he encouraged me into avenues that could possibly lead me away from my service to his congregation, and genuinely championed my success to his own loss. This endeared him to me in such a strong and lasting manner that I believe his display of compassion and character will be a positive and lasting model of leadership for me, this is of course in stark contrast to the model of leadership displayed by the CEO.

What is at work in these two scenarios that makes them so divergent? We existed in the same culture, the same century, the same decade. We even shared regional heritage and tradition. Even though I was employed in Oklahoma and I'm currently employed in Virginia, my current Employer is from northern Texas, a geographic region that is almost indistinguishable from its two hour, northern neighbor Oklahoma City. All parties involved purport the same worldview and have similar levels of education. Yet the latter experience is so fundamentally antithetical to the first that the difference is perplexing. Why is one environment life giving while the other was so demoralizing?

As a direct result of the cultural dynamics at play in my current position, I have been allowed to advance programs and initiatives that are far outside of the purview of my job description, and I have been both grateful and willing to tackle the opportunities, in some instances committing mental and physical capital that far exceeds my contracted salary. The support from my current employer and his

expressed personal interest in my well being, encourages me to continually address issues within the work environment and to find where improvements might be and innovations employed. Even though these efforts don't impact my salary I want to do them because I care for the health of the organization as I believe it also cares for me. This is expressed to me in a very concrete way through my interactions with the Senior Pastor, and this is what makes him a very different type of leader.

### **The Transformative Leader**

In an article for the *Journal of Business Research*, Professors Lale Gumusloughlu and Arzu Ilsev hypothesized that there is a direct causative relationship between the creative output of employees and the leadership and management style of their superiors. Picking up where Human Resource theorists have left off, Gumusloughlu and Ilsev begin their study moving beyond the current scholarship dealing with leadership models of the: "Charismatic Leader, Visionary Leader, and Heroic Leader" (Gumusloughlu & Ilsev 462) and pressed on into the testing of the application of what they call Transformational Leadership. "Transformational leadership has four components; charismatic role modeling, individualized consideration, inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation" (Gumusloughlu & Ilsev 462.) These four leadership characteristics serve as the pillars that support a culture of creativity and innovation. We will examine them individually.

**Charismatic Role Modeling** is possibly the only component that Transformational Leadership shares explicitly with the Hero Leader model. There is an indication of positional power, and perhaps inescapable do to our cultural narrative is the accompanying ascription of heightened value and personal worth. However with the right intentionality, these incumbent outlooks can be very useful. The charismatic role model through their personality, charm, and social vitality inspire the admiration and respect of their team members. With the collective focus on them, and through integrity-based interactions and consistency of character they will also encourage the growth of trust from each individual with whom he or she works. This helps to unify the workforce leading to an oft unspoken understanding of collective mission.

**Individualized Consideration** is when the leader “builds a one-to-one relationship with his or her followers, and understands and considers their differing needs, skills, and aspirations” (Gumusloughlu & Ilsev 462). As an actor you understand that every character in the story must be a unique individual, particularly if you have the opportunity to play multiple characters in the course of one performance. They must stand, move, sit, sing, think, and breathe differently than the last. An organization is even more diversified as it is populated with actual unique beings. When individualized consideration is extended from the leader it makes each employee feel special, and increases the worth that the team member projects onto themselves, this alone can have a positive effect on creativity and innovation as members are more inclined to focus on problem solving tasks when in a positive mood.

**Inspirational Motivation** is the third of four legs on the stool of Transformational Leadership and may be the most important of the four elements of this management style. Having a clear and inspiring vision or direction is paramount to a successful rehearsal process. In part Inspirational Motivation is a combination of the first two elements, and it is also a unique element unto itself. The term Leadership implies directionality. Charismatic Role Modeling gives a directional focus to the members of an organization, while Individual Consideration allows for a group of individuals to be unified in an emotional directionality towards a leader. However without a stated vision or objective, the group members have no other reason to organize. In many cases I believe this is the fault line that sinks the Heroic Leader Orthodoxy. There is a verse in the book of Proverbs that speaks to the importance of this concept it says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish..." (ESV, Proverbs 21:18). Hauser and Reich echo this in their book *Notes on Directing* when they remind us that "Actors and others will follow you even if they disagree with your direction. But they will not follow if you are afraid to lead. A clear, confident presence and strong direction are highly reassuring to everyone" (Hauser & Reich, 14).

While it is not one of the four pillars of Transformational Leadership, Intrinsic Motivation is one of the measurable elements of the Gumuslouglu & Ilsev study and I argue, an outcome of Inspirational Motivation. "Intrinsic motivation refers to the motivational state in which employees are interested in a task for its own sake" (463). Simply doing a thing because you are good at it and enjoy doing it. This has a

significant effect on the quality with which a task is done and the degree in which it is improved in the processes (468).

**Intellectual Stimulation** is the last pillar in the construction of our Transformational Leader and works in conjunction with Individualized Consideration to display the characteristic of selflessness that I argue must be present in any leader who is aiming for results that extend beyond numbers, percentages and your return on investment. Intellectual stimulation is an intentional effort on the part of the leader to improve and strengthen his or her team members on a collective and individual level. When paired with the Individual Consideration component, you have a leader who is thinking about the unique situations of their team members and in response is offering solutions and aids that promote growth for the sake of the individual. While the organization does reap benefits from the growth of its individuals, in order for this component to be truly effective it cannot be self-serving, otherwise employees will develop a mistrust for the leader and organization.

Now that we have a better understanding of Gumusluoglu and Ilsev's vision of the Transformational Leader and its application in the business and nonprofit world, we will apply these theories to the production process of multiple shows. We will take special time to see how these practices affect each individual stage of production and how they can increase the creativity and theatrical innovations used in the storytelling and story making process.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Transforming Creativity**

I have been playing music and writing my own lyrics since I was a junior in High School and I've always thought that I was a decent songwriter. I often received compliments on my lyrical imagery, melodic ideas, or inventive song structure when I would share my work, but no one was begging me to record an album or write the soundtrack for their life. They weren't asking me to do these things because my songs were just good, not great. I realized that if I was going to be honest with myself the reason they were just good and not great was because I was afraid to share them while I was creating them. They were still clumsy and mismatched. The edges were rough and jagged and the joints didn't line up the way I knew I wanted them to. I lacked the courage to engage in one of the most effective creativity boosting disciplines: collaboration!

Before my time at VCU I don't think I even had a context for what healthy creative collaboration looked like. Sure I was comfortable giving ideas to others but to receive critique on one of my own "ugly babies" as Ed Catmull of Disney's Pixar likes to call them, was too harrowing an endeavor to undertake. In an Op Ed for Fast Company Magazine, Catmull starts by stating with comfort and authority that "A hallmark of a healthy creative culture is that its people feel free to share ideas, opinions, and

criticisms.” I can tell you that after my first (and only) pitch to the CEO, I was a little more reticent to share my ideas. Not only was I unsure of the protocol for such things, but I also could no longer trust that I would be free from punishment if I had an idea that wasn’t headed in the right direction. After all my first presentation had led to a quick demotion. Unlike the environment that Catmull describes, I did not feel free to share ideas, or opinions, or criticisms. I especially didn't feel free to share criticisms. The CEO had communicated to me with his response to my pitch and subsequent actions that only the right ideas are rewarded all others with be punished. Even though he did it with a smile and a handshake, it didn't really soften the blow.

Catmull talks about his work with the Pixar cofounders in a way that might seem shocking to some creative types, and it has a uniquely unsettling tone for business administrators and some theatrical directors. At Pixar they have this remarkable feedback mechanism they call “The Braintrust”. As a group, the employees of Pixar meet every other month or so. The production units working on each story bring to the table what they have—it’s something like a show-and-tell. It may be a trailer cut, a reading of a script outline, some new animation that they bring, and then they lay their creative baby on the table to be observed and analyzed. As an artist all I really ever want is for someone to see my work and say, Wow! That’s amazing, it’s perfect just the way it is, in fact it has changed my life, I’m now a better person just having witnessed your incredible genius. Pair this with the fact that artists often are blind to the flaws of their work, having spent so much time with it. To address these issues The Pixar Braintrust has one simple goal which is to put “smart, passionate people in a room

together” and “charge them with identifying and solving problems” (Catmull). How terrifying and wonderful to bring your precious babies that you have slaved over, set them out in an open forum with the express intent that they be scrutinized for failures. No one is looking to praise your ideas. They only want to find the flaws in your work. They do this in order to improve the product, strengthen the story, and grow the storyteller technically and aesthetically.

In spite of the cold sweat-inducing scenario described above, there must be something good in the water over at Pixar because in the last two decades, going back to the 1995 release of *Toy Story*, the company has produced 14 consecutive number one box office hits. While Catmull suggests the development of the Braintrust was an organic one, the size and scope of the organization now requires specific and intentional guidance be leveraged to maintain the fruit of those early successes. “At Pixar we try to create an environment where people want to hear each other's notes (even when those notes are challenging) and where everyone has a vested interest in one another’s success. We give our filmmakers both freedom and responsibility” (Catmull).

So how can we experience the same kind of creative and innovative success in our theatrical environment? How do we replicate the highly effective artistic environment that permeates the offices of Pixar in our own process? I believe the first step comes in building your team. A few things Catmull benefited from were, a group of highly skilled, highly passionate people who selflessly came together to serve the project, and an understanding by everyone on the team that they must be committed

to speaking earnestly and honestly. Doing this has not only improved their creative outcomes, but has also grown their creative community.

At Pixar each production team has a Director. This person acts a lead storyteller, a vision maker, and team builder. Our theatrical process is very similar as a show's Director may have a trusted team they like to design and create with, or a Choreographer may have a skeleton crew they uses as stand-ins for large scale production numbers. The selection of team members is arguably the most important step in any creative process. Laura Dunham puts it this way: "Directors will attest that casting is the most crucial step they take to assuring the success of a production. Hauser and Russell say that without the "right people" in the "right roles", the most brilliant of directorial conceptions will fail to make the transition from vision to realized production" (Hauser & Russell 15). How can we best cast our creative team, what are the traits that we should look for, what are the skills and characteristics that will lead us to success? Campbell presents an interesting character analysis that will serve us in recognizing who we should work with and who we might want to avoid, and for added insight I'll use one of my own experiences as an illustration.

### **Problem-Makers, Solvers, and Finders**

It seems like in every situation you have got at least two camps of personalities. There are the glass half empty folks and the glass half full crowd. Whatever it is that leads people into a constant state of doom and gloom is outside the purview of this text, but there is possibly no greater tragedy than walking into a group project only to

find out that your team is dominated with half empty glasses. Imagine being in a meeting trying to problem solve some issue from act one and as you look around the table at the blank and lifeless faces you stop at the one body that is showing signs of life, unfortunately the crossed arms and pursed lips are only a precursor for this person's favorite phrase "I just don't think we can do it, because...". It's at this point that the heat from your chest rises through your neck and by the time it hits your eyes you're gone. Next thing you know you come to, on your couch, weeping and still you have no solution. Campbell calls these delightful people "Problem-Makers" (157). A "Problem-Maker" is a person who not only comes to the conversation with a pessimistic tone, but also with the uncanny ability to discover in any and every situation a reason why it just won't work. These folks are all problems and no solutions, their de facto position is that we should just stand pat, consolidate our losses by refusing to venture deeper into the process and accept that the current product will meet only some of the requirements of mission.

A year ago, I directed a production at a small regional theater where for the first time in a couple of years the producers had agreed to use a live band on stage to support the performers. They had avoided the use of a live band in part because of operating expenses and the increasing availability and quality of backing tracks provided by organizations like MTI and Samuel French. I'm glad they decided to use the band as it greatly helped the energy and feel of the show. Understandably, this created a few problems as the space was not designed for amplified musical instruments and the technological infrastructure lacked the capability to mix and balance the sound of a

whole band. After a very difficult rehearsal with the band and a few unbearable stumble through rehearsals, I brought up the issue during one of our post rehearsal production meetings.

Many members of the team nodded their heads in recognition of the problem but offered no solutions or support for my campaign to see the sound issue fixed.

Eventually a line was drawn and on one side I stood asking the Sound Designer, Stage Manager, Music Director, and anyone else who would listen what could be done, because what we had at the moment just wasn't good. Then from the other side of the line came a reply that simply sunk my heart. "I just don't think we can do it, because...the audiences around here don't expect it to be any better than it already is." The resignation to the "Problem-Making" nature of the organization was truly heartbreaking, but this was not an outcome that I would ever be comfortable accepting.

Ultimately the problem was fixed! After a clandestine meeting with the Sound designer and the purchase of a few beers, audio cables, and repurposed sound gear we produced the absolute best live sound product that the theatre was capable of. Which was still just alright, but it was such a profound step forward for my production team. In my situation as an itinerant director I walked into an environment where the creative team was already established and I was the outsider. I had not picked them; they had picked me and suddenly their culture was my culture not the other way around.

If you had your choice (and hopefully you do) you would avoid the "Problem-Makers" all together. They would come with an alarm or a foul stench that would alert you as soon as you began to share an idea with them, a sign would drop from the

ceiling alerting you that this is not the kind of person you want to invest time in. Then you could cordially shake their hand and keep your ideas for a set of ears that are more willing to listen. In better circumstances you would be surrounded with the kind of people that Campbell calls the "Problem-Solvers" he describes them as: "Bright, motivated people whose attitude is oriented toward accepting increasingly complex challenges and then solving the inevitable attendant problems" (Campbell 157). Going back to our imaginary meeting, consider how simple it could be if someone would have said "I'll fix it."

Who said that? Does it even matter? As long as it gets taken care of. Also, remind me of your name because I want to hire you again! Obviously if you could surround yourself with a team of "Problem-Solvers" over "Problem-Makers" you would be very fortunate indeed, but what if you don't have that opportunity, or like I was, you have been invited into an environment dominated by pessimists. Is it possible to transition a "Problem-Maker" to a "Problem-Solver"? The Gumusluoglu and Ilsev study indicates that such a transition is possible if you employ the four key elements of Transformational Leadership.

I suppose I am a little like Harry S. Truman in the fact that I grew up in Kansas City, and I am a firm believer that the buck stops somewhere, and while the theory of Transformational Leadership has an emphasis on communal involvement it is not entirely decentralized. You must first be the team member you want everyone around you to be, this is Charismatic Role Modeling at its core. As stated earlier, charisma is not an individual discipline but rather an aggregate term given to leaders who "inspire

admiration, respect, loyalty” and who can communicate a “collective mission” (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev 462). Perhaps the first step in the transformation of Campbell’s “Problem-Maker” would be to communicate a clear vision that requires the person’s involvement, but don’t stop there. It must also be clear that the individual is important to the process, they have something valuable to contribute and have an opportunity to shape the creative work in a positive way, and along with their input the creation of a unique and wonderful moment will occur. In this way you have also touched on the component of Individual Consideration, making the team member feel valued and unique. These are the seeds for the transformation of our problem-maker into a problem-solver, you have included them and empowered them to participate in the process. At this point your team member has the option to choose to be inspired by the vision or the artistic challenges at hand, and if they do decide to play then you know you will have the opportunity to challenge them further and see how they will respond. Possibly you will get the opportunity to watch them grow as a team member and artist into what Campbell calls a Problem-Finder. A Problem-Finder is someone who has forward thinking vision and discovers and solves problems the team has not even encountered yet (37).

Transformational Leadership can affect the way you cast your team, allowing you to identify team members who will be at the very least problem solvers and at the very best problem finders. Perhaps during your process you need to recast a team member and transform them into a problem solver showing a little individual consideration can

set you on a productive path. To further examine these theories lets discuss the pre-production process of *Mother Courage and Her Children* at Arena Stage.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Transforming Pre-Production**

Legend has it that Michael Bennett called a hand full of his close friends and fellow Broadway dancers together and over a large jug of cheap red wine and a microphone to share their personal stories. The group began a conversation that would lead to his seminal work *A Chorus Line*. Bennett wanted to tell a story, to be more specific he wanted to tell stories, the stories of the living, breathing, working, hustling ensemble performers of Broadway's Musical Theatre. He didn't know quite how to do it, but he knew he wanted it done, and he knew who he trusted to help him see that it was accomplished. Bennett and his team engaged in a process that would change the way stories are shaped and created for musical theatre. Michael Bennett and his team are credited with creating the workshop musical, a method of establishing context, themes, choreography, and staging before you ever officially go into production. A pre-production process that has the potential to be some of the most fruitful and excitingly creative times an artist will ever experience.

Bennett had won the hearts and minds of his team to his unique and adventurous endeavor. He gave every member of the team an opportunity to tell their story, to share what makes them special, unique and interesting. The team understood that the process, the subject, and the context for the production was entirely new and they also understood its importance to Bennett and wanted to see it succeed. Lastly every member of the team was being challenged intellectually, artistically, physically,

and emotionally. Bennett so concretely modeled the core concepts of Transformational Leadership through this process that you only need look at the longevity of the work and the effect that it had on its team members and the performers who have continued to bring the story to life.

I have also had the opportunity to be a part of pre-production processes that have employed the core components of Charismatic Role Modeling, Individual Consideration, Inspirational Motivation and Intellectual Stimulation, and have found these unique and exhilarating experiences to be foundational in the change of how I see and understand the creation of ideas all creative and group endeavors. One example that I would like to share with you is the environment created for the Arena Stage production of *Mother Courage and Her Children* that was presented in their 2013/2014 season.

### **Pre-Production as a Community, Mother Courage at Arena Stage**

The second week of December was a cold one in Northern Virginia. There were still piles of snow lining 95 highway between Richmond and Washington DC. I rode in the back seat while David Leong and his assistant made conference calls to James Suggs the music composer of Arena's production of *Mother Courage*. I mostly tried to stay quiet and listen for clues as to what might take place in DC as I was aware that a lot of work had already gone into this production from a movement and choreography standpoint before I had been invited to the process.

A four day workshop in July of 2013 had culled together 14 professionals and professors all who at one point have studied under or assisted David Leong, the production's Choreographer. Each team member brought with them a set of skills that could uniquely assist the process and were hand-picked by David. The mindful casting of the collaborative team set the stage for success as the sense of community and shared vision was established the moment the team members started to arrive.

Some members were skilled in areas of mask and mime, while others were certified in multiple disciplines of stage combat and theatrical movement. This was a necessity as the context of the piece and director's vision called for multiple seamless and varied transitions, and as this production was being scored and orchestrated similar to a musical, dance choreographers and musicians rounded out the troupe. The collection of artists was so diverse that you might expect it would be difficult to get any creative momentum moving, especially when the players involved were all leaders and scholars in their field, but this is where the leadership of David Leong the production's Choreographer ensured a highly productive and transformative pre-production process.

My personal involvement with the creative process of *Mother Courage* began halfway through the pre-production work. The July workshop had come and gone and the primary result of the work from that team was idea generation. Armed with some historical context, information on the design of the set, and little else the team of collaborators along with the shows director Molly Smith and the actress playing the role of Mother Courage Kathleen Turner, set out to create as many possibilities for transitions, musical staging, and scenes of violence. These initial concepts had come

back with David to Richmond where I was invited with a few other graduates and students to begin clarifying the ideas and doing some count by count choreography as much of the show's music was being finalized. This count by count work although very concrete in some respects was always subject to the rule of the process which was: "The best idea in the room always wins". There was always a very clear understanding that everything could change, not only with the next workshop but also with the addition of the actors in the production as well.

Now that we were in DC, in an environment that had the potential to be divisive and slow moving you might expect a leader to come in with an iron fist and install a command and control culture of leadership. By doing so they would establish themselves as the singular source of idea generation and approval. This would have been your typical "Heroic Orthodoxy" in practice. (Andrews 3) In opposition to that model David came in and took the lower position of encourager and collaborator all the while juggling what Laura Dunham calls the principles of "Unity and Multiplicity: the pulling together a cohesive whole whereas encouraging an explosion of individual and idiosyncratic activity." (1) The first problem Dunham illustrates is that of finding a collaborative vision, you must achieve "organizational unity and cohesiveness" and you must have clear objectives and "set goals" (1). This was done masterfully by David Leong and his assistant Brad Willcuts.

Once the whole group was assembled and introduced, an itinerary was set for our workshop. To accompany the written itinerary, along the walls of the rehearsal space had been placed four foot by four foot pieces of paper representing every

transition and musical number in the show. They served not only as a place to record notes, changes, blocking and questions but also as a token of the work that was going to be done and a way of identifying what had been accomplished. As was the case with the first workshop the team was divided into groups that best suited their particular skill sets, with one group working on musical numbers and choreography while the other worked on transitions and battle scenarios. Throughout the day each team would be given a specific task, addressing one of the transitions, scenes, or musical numbers. A set amount of time was determined and a single idea or hook from the earlier workshop was given to the group with which to play. At the end of the allotted time each team would reconvene in the main rehearsal hall to perform their progress and then receive critique in the Pixar Braintrust fashion. In this way David gathered many disparate contributors under a single vision and brought unity and clarity to the process of pre-production.

This brings us to the second problem Dunham indicates, the difficulty of orchestrating this kind of environment. The team leader, in our case the choreographer must also “give free rein to the multiple, individual and unique talents of the people within their organization” (Dunham, 1). I feel like this has the potential to be the death knell for a process like this. The collaboration of highly skilled and opinionated people sounds like every project managers nightmare. Giving free rein to “multiple individual and unique talents”? No thank you, but there was an ingredient in this environment that I believe made it all possible - trust.

In an issue of the *Human Resource Development Review*, Professors Suzanne Gagnon and Heather Vouch along with the help of Robert Nickerson an improv artist from Ontario authored an article titled *Learning to lead, Unscripted*. In their work they posit that the disciplines of Improvisational Theatre “can be used to build a distinctive kind of leadership skills” that can serve to address the “high levels of complexity” and “rapid rate of change in the ever evolving world of business” (Gagnon et al. 299). One of the skills attributed to their leader is trust generation. The leader goes about this by presenting an environment of openness, engaging in exercises that create trust in others, as well as trusting others in the process. I believe that this element of trust is what contributes most to the success of any communal and creative endeavor. I have heard people say that trust must be earned, and while I agree that once trust is lost it takes time and consistency to reestablish, but in the crucible of the preproduction process trust must be extended from the beginning. This must be done so that all parties involved can feel safe enough to imagine and play. In saying this I would amend the leadership skill of “trust generation” given by Gagnon and her associates, and instead highlight an elevated skill of trust giving.

Once the environment of trust was established at Arena Stage, the stage was set for a truly beautiful thing, something Gagnon refers to as the “virtuous cycle of collaboration” (Gagnon et. al, 302). If you have ever been fortunate enough to have worked in an environment where a “virtuous cycle” exists it’s truly intoxicating and creates the most exciting collaborative buzz. The cycle is simple to understand but difficult to execute. I experienced one of these rare moments while working on *Mother*

*Courage.* I will highlight it in order more accurately illustrate my point about what is possible through leadership in a creative environment.

One of the musical numbers in the show that had given the creative team particular trouble was called Solomon Song. It had been described as a meta-theatrical campfire tune with a possible dumb show illustrating the narrative of the lyrics, but without being too literal. So the obvious questions arose. Questions like: what, how, and why? I was a part of a team that had played with a few concepts for this piece while we were work shopping in Richmond. Once our concepts were set on the new participants we went to work. In order to spark creativity we gave ourselves an obstacle to work with, this became our visual "hook" for the number and ultimately the through line for all the choreographic work we did during our session on this number.

We introduced in the first few lyrics of the number a large piece of fabric approximately 15 feet long. This contribution came from our Choreographer David Leong and was our first opportunity to initiate the "virtuous cycle" discussed above. The team said yes to this idea with no discussion over the merit of the idea and instead adopted it immediately as a given for the scene. This got us all moving in the same direction. The first verse of our song referred to the life of King Solomon. We first dressed our "Solomon" in robes by draping the fabric over his shoulders and back, but this was too similar to an idea we hoped to use later for a verse regarding Julius Caesar. Next, we turned the fabric into a baby and pantomimed dividing it in two illustrating the tale of Solomon's great wisdom, but we quickly canceled this idea as it consisted of a narrative that ran in opposition to the lyric being sung.

I have to take a moment to say that each of these ideas, although not the final product were immediately taken up by the team without judgment. Each new creative contribution was met with affirmation and we continued to build momentum as a creative team. Finally, we discovered that with some careful draping the fabric it could become a turban, that when tugged would quick unravel allowing for a seamless and quick segue into our next lyrical theme. Deconstructing the process you can see that the first creative idea was met with trust and acceptance. This energized the participants and sparked more imaginative responses to the problems at hand. Each successive idea was met with the same positivity, creating in the team an atmosphere of acceptance. We all understood that at any given moment we were serving the musical number, not our own egos or our quest for fame and recognition. This meant that it was safe to bring any idea to the community and that the following critique would be seen in light of the service that the team was engaged. Everyone was made to feel valued, every idea validated, and because of this the best ideas came from the group and belonged to the group, for the sake of the song and the betterment of the production. We followed the same process for the remaining four verses of the song with each roadblock to creativity being overcome by a new and innovative use of the fabric and an unwavering dedication to the idea that the best idea always wins.

After working with David on this production I had an opportunity through correspondence to ask him a few questions about his views and approaches to leadership and the creative process, and as always, his responses were insightful and often remarkably transparent. This only further illustrated to me one of the strengths he

possesses that make him a transformational leader, availability. As can be expected by the description of the remarkable process above when I inquired as to David's favorite part of the creative process he told me "The time immediately after I get the offer up until the first day of rehearsal." In other conversations and through lecture he has repeated this idea to his students, myself included. It is because anything is possible! If you can conceive it and find a clear and effective way of communicating, any idea can live in the theatrical space, as long as it serves the story. There is no limit to inventiveness, no constraints on time, and as long as you have willing collaborators the possibilities are endless. David also indicated that a lack of these three things "freedom to invent, time, and creative collaboration" contributed to some of his most difficult working environments.

Repeatedly in my time assisting and learning from David he has reiterated that whatever we do as Directors and Choreographers must serve and support the story being told and when I asked him to define the role of a Director he delivered once again by saying that the role of a Director is to "conceive the world of the show" and once having done so "bring the story to life, that is true to the playwright's words" He also suggested that in its administrative duties and entrepreneurial nature being a director is most like being the CEO of a new corporation. This is a remarkable analogy as the CEO and Theatrical Director have many of the same responsibilities including being a visible leader, a high level decision maker, a personnel manager, and an executor of action items. This is often done under high stress, limited budgets, and short timeframes.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Transforming Rehearsal**

For the longest time my favorite part of the production process was rehearsals, because this is when you finally got to play with more than ideas, you got to play with people. Similar to the pre-production process as a Director/Choreographer, the rehearsal process for me as a performer is when the excitement of collaboration begins. Bringing your fresh ideas into a moment with another actor who has ideas of their own and then simply letting them loose in the space to either align with or mangle one another is simply a joy. Once you have done your preparation and have made yourself available to the moment at hand, you simply never know what you will get when you stand opposite your partner and that is the moment I wait for all day.

As a Director/Choreographer, however, I don't yet have the same enthusiasm and excitement about rehearsal. I feel like those few short weeks, and what seems like remarkably elusive hours are more like running a medieval gauntlet comprised of time, money, and creative constraints. It is a given that there will not be enough hours, space, or coffee to bring your imaginations to full realities, so it is often better to take the position of Broadway Director Joe Layton and realize, "We are all human and nothing comes out perfect from the start"(Barre). And yet there they sit, your ideas fresh from the pre-production process still warm, and you simply want them to live to the fullest.

This is the time in a production's life when the influence of a transformational leader can really elevate a production to a higher level of creativity and innovation. Regarding the production mentioned above David accredits Arena Stage Artistic Director Molly Smith with teaching him "the importance of human connection on and off stage...she promotes collaboration, empowers her team, encourages risk and yet guides with a firm hand when necessary." This description of Smith is almost an exact iteration of Gumusluoglu and Ilsev four traits: Charismatic Role Modeling, Individualized Consideration, Inspirational Motivation, and Intellectual Stimulations. It as well illustrates the point made by Gagnon et. al. regarding the importance of generating trust which encourages risk taking and greater innovative rewards. Gumusluoglu and Ilsev discovered this as they were doing their study on the effectiveness of the transformational leadership model when it was implemented in small to medium sized research and development firms in Turkey, they stated the "leaders effect through enabling [the workers] to make their own decisions and take initiatives might be a more powerful creativity-enhancing force...than influencing their intrinsic motivation" or doing the work for the sake of the work(Gumusluoglu and Ilsev 470).

When a Director is able to encourage their performers to make decisions on their own, enabling them take initiative, and allowing them to risk without the fear of punishing them for their creativity, they are creating an opportunity for the positive feedback loop of the "virtuous cycle" to build momentum and transform the entire process. The Director, however, does not only work with actors they also are simultaneously being pulled in multiple directions by designers for each discipline and

their crew, as well as Producers, Artistic Directors, and in some instances Playwrights and Composers as well. This is truly an environment where a “transformational leader” can shine.

In the summer of 2012 I was fortunate enough to accompany David to Connecticut where I got my first opportunity to work on a brand new musical titled *Amazing Grace* which was being work shopped and produced by Goodspeed Musicals. I was also introduced to the show’s Director Gabriel Barre with whom I have since worked, in workshop and production. Watching Gabe’s remarkable calm and collaborative nature was a delight, and his consistent character easily offset the high stress involved with the crafting and redrafting of a new musical with Broadway aspirations. We will now take a look at a few key moments from that process and examine how “transformational leadership” played a part in the rehearsal process.

### **Assistant Direction of Movement and Military Violence for Amazing Grace**

The theatre is unlike any other form of storytelling. It is captivating, cathartic, comedic, and clairvoyant. Hamlet tells us that plays have the ability to strike us to our very soul and bring about a change in us so deep that we would never again be the same person. We are drawn to environments that offer the opportunity for such change, and we are drawn to stories that illustrate this kind of change as well. As a piece of music, “Amazing Grace” is something of a cultural institution as it is sung at memorials, births, deaths, and celebrations. It has been recorded by symphonies, pop

artists and bluegrass bands but in spite of its cultural saturation, not many know about the life of the man who penned the memorable tune and lyrics.

As a piece of musical theatre *Amazing Grace: The Musical* is attempting to address that deficit. With a real life story that dramatically rivals that of *Le Miserables'* Val John, *Amazing Grace* introduces us to the flaws of John Newton and the events that led him on a transformative journey from slave ship captain to abolitionist and hymn writer. The concept showed such promise that composer Chris Smith was given an opportunity to workshop the piece at the historic Goodspeed Musicals in East Haddam, CT. The show was co-produced by Goodspeed Musicals and CRC Productions and staffed by a creative team of Broadway veterans including Toni-Leslie James (costumes), Ken Billington (lights), Beowulf Boritt (set), and David Leong (movement & military violence). The productions Choreographer was Benoit-Swan the Artistic Director of New York's Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet, and the Director of this new work was Gabriel Barre who has directed shows all over the world and has a history of developing new musical theatre productions.

Work shopping a new musical is a very unique process. It is not only the staging of a new production, it is also an "in the moment" creation of a new work. New songs are being added daily, revisions to the text are being made in the moment, and whole scenes are eliminated just minutes after they have been staged and rehearsed. Night after night new problems and conflicts arise as a change in one act creates unforeseen obstacles in the next and as the days of rehearsal move steadily along and the

impending opening night approaches and the level of tension in such creative environments is palpable.

My position on the production was as assistant to David Leong the Director of Movement and Military Violence. I joined the process after a series of on campus pre-production workshops were done to create a movement language and staging for a couple of large ensemble movement pieces, one of which was a riot that takes place at a slave auction consisting of fifteen people. Another was a nautical battle that concludes with two men diving overboard. I worked very closely with David to transfer the creative concepts and movement language from the workshops to the rehearsals at Goodspeed and was also called on to create movement alongside David as things were being changed day to day. While I feel I had some creative and innovative successes, the process was very challenging for me and the learning curve very steep as this was my first professional project of this caliber. My inexperience I believe hindered the process at times but the leadership and instruction I experienced has fundamentally changed the way I work and see my work. Since I have already taken a moment to talk about the experience I had working with David during my time at Arena Stage, I want to focus on the leadership style of the production's Director, Gabriel Barre.

When you meet Gabe one of the first things you notice is his calm and cool demeanor and his ability to make each person in the room feel like they have a supporter in him. One of the ways that he does this is by quickly and remarkably learning everyone's names and intentionally using it when he speaks to them. On our first day of rehearsals, we took a number of hours to go through each of the

department's pre-production work. We heard from costumes, music, light and scenic, movement, and the shows dramaturge. These presentations did much to set the tone for the work that was going to be done. Next Gabe gave every member of the cast from the production's lead down to the last ensemble member an opportunity to share with the room what the phrase or song Amazing Grace meant to them. This very intentional activity follows one of the steps Gagnon and her fellow researchers proposed when applying improvisational theatre techniques to leadership practice. It served to fundamentally shift the understandings of the power dynamics at play in the Director/Team Member relationship. (Gagnon et al. 309)The exercise required that each participant fully participate with the room by listening and sharing. It also created instant pairings with other team members who had a similar understanding or experience with the material, and lastly it was a simple and fun way to be introduced to individuals who you would be working with in close proximity.

This kind of ensemble building work is important because of the effect that it has on the process of rehearsal and ultimately the finished product of the play, this kind of exercise provides energy, allowing the participants to be more open to considering new thoughts, feelings, and activities. From the beginning and throughout the rehearsal process you must create an atmosphere that changes the framework of how the team members see the production and their role in it. At this point I think we may have been four or five hours into our rehearsal process and already Gabe had personally illustrated multiple aspects of Gumusluoglu and Ilsev's Transformational Leader. The importance of the application of this leadership method is that before we had ever gotten to the

reading of the script the director was already setting up the team members and performers for an environment that would significantly increase the creativity of each individual.

As a “Charismatic Role Model” he was working early in the process to present to each member of the team the collective nature of what was to come, as well as increasing ownership of the mission for participants on both sides of the table. When I asked Gabe about how he approaches the creative process he said that his process was “totally collaborative. I see my role as providing both the space and opportunity for everyone on the team, including the cast, to contribute their best, but also to (hopefully) inspire and encourage them to want to bring themselves, their ideas and commitment to the process. At the same time [I try to ] provide gentle and consistent guidance so that no one ever feels adrift and separated from our goals of telling a compelling and clear story.” (Barre) The concept of group progress toward an objective is so intrinsic to his leadership model that he frames the rehearsal and production process as a journey through which the participants can achieve “our goals” versus his personal goals for the piece.

Gabe also indicated in our conversation as is illustrated in the quote above, that he has a desire to see each team member “contribute their best and be encouraged and inspired.” In other words he wants to see each actor and team member perform efficiently their part. One of the ways he does this is by creating an environment where each individual feels valued and considered. This serves to increase the intrinsic motivation of the artist and as they own the process of their work and contributions,

they begin to invest more creative energy towards its success. "Transformational Leaders who develop their followers' self-efficacy can positively affect their team's creativity. Employees with enhanced self-efficacy are more likely to be motivated to generate novel ideas and solutions." (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev 462)

The outcropping of this "Individual Consideration" was very visible during the process. Many of the difficulties we encountered during the rehearsal process came from the scope of action being portrayed, as mentioned earlier during the first act in the show our protagonist John Newton is charged with the oversight of a slave auction in the cities harbor. Growing local opposition to the slave trading industry had galvanized the abolitionist movement in England and made them bold to act out. One of the first issues we encountered with this scene was how to transport our African ensemble into their "holding pen" in a safe and responsible way that also clearly illustrated the violence and danger associated with their situation.

The original concept was to have a lengthy measure of chain that the performers could bind themselves in by wrapping it around their waists, wrists, bodies etc., however this solution only referenced some of the remarkable historical images that we had observed. The ownership or intrinsic motivation for the African ensemble was very high as the solution had much to do with their personal safety, but I also noticed a number of the company's other performers coming up with creative answers as well as they saw the safety of their fellow performers as integral to the corporate goal of a successful production. In the end, after receiving feedback from the performers, David and I worked closely with the Properties department to come up with a solution of soft

leather cuffs with padding inside that had been painted to resemble iron shackles. The final solution was something entirely new to the properties department and the implementation of the innovative solution was a success in that it gave each actor a sense of confidence and safety which subsequently allowed them to more fully engage with the stakes of the scene, increasing the theatrical value of the production and the audience's enjoyment of the piece.

In a 2002 interview panel for the American Theater Wing series, *Working In the Theatre #304*, Gracielle Danielle describes the relationship between the Director and the production team and cast as follows "it is no different than a family, a family is what a director tries to create... it's a short time but a very intense time, so what I think you try to do as a director is create a sense of protection, nurturing and security at the very beginning so that everyone can expose themselves , then I believe it is really, finally up to the Director who has to take the responsibility to make the choice" (Working in Theatre #304).

Barre who has worked with Danielle, created a similar environment and also credits her with teaching him to "Have fun, laugh, think outside the box....people come to the theatre to spend time out of their box...we should make sure we take them there." (Barre) What is being pointed at here is supported by the work of Gagnon et al. in that in this "family style" atmosphere where there is laughing, fun, and safety everyone has their role and everyone contributes something to the whole, and through this sense of shared ownership and play we see a situation where the power dynamics are drastically reduced, (Gagnon et al. 309) but we also see unique kind of openness

where there is an intentional effort being made to listen and create “opening space for others ideas.” (Gagnon et al., 307) This “space” that is created is where creativity and innovation can truly be amplified in your production, because it is where you as a director can hear from the other creative minds on your team.

Creating a space for collaboration is integral to the creative process so that no time is wasted on irrelevant ventures and rabbit trails. It is as important as the director’s ability to shape that space with their creative vision and theatrical aesthetic. A Director, will and must come to the project with a clear vision for what they hope the production to be. This is what provides the “inspirational motivation” that is a core trait for the Transformational Leader, (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev 462). It also serves as a buffer for collaborative input. If everyone involved in the process understands where they are going visually, thematically, in regards to mood and movement then ideas from collaborators that exist outside of the vision will be self-edited by their contributors thus saving time and energy in the creative process.

Every Director and Choreographer has their own method for discovering or stumbling upon their vision for the production or aspect of production that they are engaged with. When I asked David Leong, whom I assisted on this project about his initial steps in the creative process this is what he said: “I have the script read to me so I can sit back and listen to it. I then read as many reviews from other productions, followed by reading critical analyses of the show.” What he does next “depends upon what my role is...Fight Director, Movement Coach and Director are all different. If I'm directing, I begin by breaking down the play/musical into scenes to make sure I can

make sense of the story and understand the characters and their relationship to one another." It's this understanding that gives him the ability to shape the rehearsal space in such a way that generates productive creative contributions from his collaborators.

When I asked the Director of *Amazing Grace* the same question, he replied: "I create a place for it on my mental shelf....as well as a box and folder where I keep all the scraps of ideas, sketches, notes and paper on the show. I read the script numerous times. Sometimes I see one image, one lynchpin that becomes the key or code to unlocking the whole piece for me visually...until I get that key, I have to keep reading it and/or listening to it...I also have to focus in on what I want to say with the piece...what can I get behind as a person." These few concrete elements of a visual key and a discernable empathetic message must be in place for Barre before he can move into the fun and family style collaboration that he enjoys.

In this respect it is not the Director's job to tell the performers exactly what to do and how to do it so much as it is their responsibility to remove creative options from the table that do not serve the vision or aesthetic of the piece. In this way the director is a production's last line of defense from poor technique, boring storytelling, bad ideas, and poor staging. The Director or choreographer then is really operating as something of an editor for the cast members and technicians providing guidance when progress stalls and offering encouragement that helps to jumpstart a new and creative idea. It also helps if you greatly enjoy each step of the process you are in, regarding rehearsals Barre said this, "Also the tech period has always been the most rewarding to me... when you see something born in your mind come to fruition and life! And then, of

course, witnessing an audience complete the circle of communication....until then it is all theory and guess work...if they connect...if they laugh, cry, think, open up, appreciate...then you've done well."

## Chapter Six

### Transforming the Audience

Today's current trends and theories in business and entrepreneurship heavily espouse the importance of holistic intentions of service. You need to believe in your product and its efficacy, you need to desire to serve your target audience, and steward your market share like you would a valued friendship. In a 2013 interview with the *EntreLeadership Podcast* where Lisa Earle McLeod was promoting her new book *Selling with a Noble Purpose*, she shared an insight she discovered while analyzing the success of top sales performers in various industries. She says that in any given market, the success of the top performing sales staff is not dependent on the number of calls or emails produced but is directly linked to the individual's sense of purpose for engaging in the promotion of their product (McLeod). While there was corollary evidence that indicated that top sales performers also made more calls, sent more emails, and met with more contacts the numbers only became effective when paired with an ennobling sense of purpose for the labor.

I believe the same is true for the production of theatre as well. The Producer, Director, Designer, Choreographer, and Performer must have driving them, something larger than a paycheck or notoriety. Admittedly there are those who have successful careers with such base motives, but the influence of works founded on such motivations can only reach to the self, and this is not the purpose of theatrical

storytelling. *Hamlet* defines the intent of our form well when he says the “end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.” (Hamlet 3:2, 20-24), but in these lines Shakespeare is only echoing a truth told by others. Plato allegorized that the intent of art, and the duty of the artist is to bring the revealed truth of creation to the people of society, that they may know a life in the light and be freed from the bondage of shadows. You might be asking how it is of any benefit to your finished product to use such lofty and philosophical words, and I would ask you, how it could not benefit you and the finishing of your product to be motivated by such a great weight of thought. It’s for these very motivations that I engage in theatre, to not only be transformed but to be transforming, and to be transformative.

In the summer of 2013 I had an opportunity to direct my first full-length musical. I had heard that the Riverside Center Dinner Theatre had two shows scheduled for their summer season that had yet to contract Directors and Choreographers. One was the hyper pink, pop rock musical *Legally Blonde*, the other was a combo of a jukebox musical/musical revue called *Ring of Fire, The Johnny Cash Musical* featuring the music of Johnny Cash. Immediately the possibility of being a part of *Ring of Fire* struck a chord with me as Cash's music comprised a significant portion of the soundtrack of my childhood. I had grown up in the wings of the Hartland’s country music Opry House’s. My father was a headlining act as a male vocalist from the mid 70’s to the turn of the century and I was his backstage shadow. Not only did I know the music of Johnny Cash

I was born into and raised up by culture that his music helped to create. I scheduled an interview with the theater's Associate Artistic Director and after a brief discussion about my connection to the piece and my ambition for the production I was awarded the contract to direct. I am proud of the work that was done and although I did not possess the quality of skill and depth of information that I have now in multiple respects the process and product were a success. Using the theories presented thus far I will analyze the process of production to see where and how *Ring of Fire* was successful and could have been improved.

### ***Ring of Fire: Pre Production as an Individual***

Understanding the importance of collaboration from my previous work with David, Gabe and Broadway veteran Patti D'Beck, with whom I have been fortunate enough to work on five different productions, I set out to cast as many of my friends and fellow graduates as possible. The ability to work with a small team of people with whom you share community, work ethic, and theatrical aesthetic would have added truly unquantifiable worth to the production. Unfortunately due to scheduling and budget constraints I was only able to "hand pick" one out of the six performers in the show. I did however benefit from slight windfall as one performer recommended to the production had previously worked with Patti and was already familiar to the aesthetic I had been mentored to appreciate.

*Ring of Fire* held a special position amongst the shows of the Riverside season: it was a filler. It would run for only four weeks in-between *Legally Blonde* and the four

month stay of *Les Mis*. And because of the size of both the former and latter productions our little show was cut down to six performers three men, three women, and a small five piece country band. Every consolidation that could be made was. There were to be no Equity performers or musicians, all hires would be local and the undisclosed budget was only ever referred to as "Limited." There was to be very little construction and setup time allotted to the production as all other resources were being directed to the show following ours, and there was never a permanent rehearsal space for our production. All in all the cast rehearsed in five different locations one of them being the scene shop, and never with a live musician playing the score. All of this is enough to plant despair in the most stalwart of hearts and added to the mix were a number of very complicated exchanges with a few members of the production team. Nonetheless I had connected with the piece, had a vision and was driven to see it realized.

While many iconic works of choreography and direction have been envisioned by single artists, I had come to greatly value working collaboratively during the initial stages of choreography and staging. Every ear is able to hear something unique in the music, every eye sees shapes and angles in a way that can strengthen the storytelling, and every mind when committed to the project and lead us to transformation and can and will deliver creative and innovative answers to theatrically tricky situations. However I did not reap the benefit of multiple eyes, ears and minds, I found myself very much alone in this stage of the creative process and I know ultimately this shaped the final result of the production.

In approaching the staging and choreography I tried to implement as much of what I had learned from David, Patti, and Gabe as possible. Reading and rereading the text, taking notes on both my script and score, drawing pictures, patterns, and formations for the choreography and scene transitions all the time knowing the limitations that were presented to the production from its onset. One very useful aid to me was the script itself. While the book of *Ring of Fire* in my opinion is actually very weak, the first act has some truly beautiful and inspiring moments. Act one follows a loose chronology of Cash's life and the themes provided from the music and lyrics inspired such clear imagery that I had a very solid understanding of what I needed from the play space and what practical elements must be present in order to create the flowing and evolving world of this production. While I was unable to work with some of my most favorite and imaginative artist, I was able to develop a clear and imaginative vision of the production. This came in handy when we had our first production meeting with the Light, Sound, Scenic, and Costume design team.

The designers were regular staff at Riverside and I was contracted, because of this I quickly realized that I had been imported into a unique administrative culture that I was entirely unfamiliar with and yet I was being asked to lead and manage to some extent multiple departments towards the goal of creating an excellent production. I found the staff to be very friendly and willing. However all were quite reserved as to their expectations of success do to the nature of the administrative culture at hand. Each idea I had for the show was met with equal parts of excitement and resignations and when that is the case resignation always wins.

I had been given an opportunity to cast my vision for the show to the design team. I provided slides of photographs and paintings to each of the designers and a detailed list of the indicated props to the properties department. I was able to share my experience in the Opry House culture and was glad to invite everyone on the team into the process of bringing this production to life. I had done my very best to be the charismatic role model that I myself had responded to positively in previous situations. I believe this created buy in from many of the team members; however, because there was some very visible resignation amongst a few of the designers I recognized that something else must be done to encourage these team members to exchange their passive involvement in the process for an active one.

At the time I would not have used the terminology of "Individual Consideration" but as I look back on the events that followed I see that that is exactly how I engaged with each member of the design team. I do not have the ability to miraculously remember the names of dozens of team members but I can listen, be empathetic, and encourage individuals to do their best. I found time to meet with each member of my design team in their own space, and on their own terms. Each department was able to clearly illustrate to me the constraints of their time, technology, and resources and as they knew the environment much better than I did, I tried my very best to give each designer ownership over their product offering only the slightest of critiques to their design. What I discovered in the early stages of this process is that each designer responded favorably to the room given them to create and because of it they were able to produce innovative results with the resources that were available to them.

As for the staging and choreographing of the numbers and transitions, I spent a great amount of time alone in the space visualizing what it might look like to have the bodies there creating the imagery and shapes that I believed were possible, but once the general movements and topography of the blocking was established in my mind and notes were taken, there was little else I could do until I had bodies and other creative impulses with which to respond. Out of necessity I worked more or less alone, but this only served as a disadvantage to me as I had no one to “play” with, no other creative critique or aesthetic standard with which to struggle against. I would never advise an artist to work within these constraints. In light of all this the DC Metro Theatre Arts had this to say about the productions “The ease of *Ring of Fire* gave it an antique, down-home feel. If you are a Johnny Cash fan you’ll enjoy the songs and the fine musicians accompanying the hard-working cast” (Scott).

### ***Ring of Fire: Playing Second Fiddle in Rehearsal***

As previously mentioned there were many constraints put upon this production due to its placement in the season and ultimately the value placed upon it by the Producers who had hired me to bring this work to life. To say that we were playing second fiddle is being polite, however with every complication I can say that my six performers responded with great poise and even though this was the first professional production for a couple of my cast members they showed great maturity. The Book for *Ring of Fire* really is not very good. Act one has a few moments that are so beautiful I cried as I read them, cried as I conceived them, staged them, rehearsed them, and

watched them but act two really is abysmal. There are no tear jerking moments, there is hardly even a narrative. If it weren't for the thematic progression of Cash's writing chronology act two would be little else than a live mix tape of some of your favorite songs. In order to carry the narrative so distinctly established in act one past the intermission I contacted the show's Music Director to suggest a couple of cuts and the relocation of one musical number. Once I received the Music Director's support I moved forward with our first rehearsal.

I was very excited to begin the rehearsals as it has always been my favorite time during the production process. I would finally have bodies to see, brains to pick, and people to meet. I tried to emulate what I had experienced in my time working on *Amazing Grace*, I asked each member of the team present to share with the room what the music and story of Johnny Cash meant to them. A few had grown up with a knowledge of who Cash was, while his music was entirely new to others, and yet still two members of the cast had at different times performed the works of Johnny Cash in various settings. I was then able to share with the team my connection to the material, my experience backstage as a child in the Opry House, my deep appreciation for the music, and my growing passion for bringing this production to the. Once this was done I asked the team to grab a pencil and follow along with me as I instructed them as to the cuts that would be made to the script, and why they were being made. This process was unceremoniously interrupted by my irate Musical Director and it was at this point (on the first day of rehearsal) that I realized the previously stated complications were

miniscule in comparison to the interpersonal issues that would become a defining aspect of the production.

Personalities are possibly some of the most volatile components of any production process. The delicacy of the artist's psyche, the fragility of the writer's ego, the delusional nature of the comedic partner all threaten to bring progress to a screeching halt, and the more important the person is, the more severe the consequences of the break down. This is one area where experience pays, and because of that I was certain to ask both David and Gabe how they deal with complex situations and delicate personalities. "Patience (of course) and listening" was Gabe's reply, and also "seeing the problem from their perspective and letting them know that I do." This empathetic response strongly supports the team member's perception that they are uniquely important to the process, but because progress is integral to the success of any production Barre says: "Also, at the right time and place [I offer] directness: cutting through the mirage of what they might think is going on within them or about them." This is the kind of situation that reinforces my belief that authority structures can never be fully deconstructed, never fully communal, because at times when there is confusion a single voice of vision can right the course. David encouraged me to deal with each situation dependent upon its unique needs, further supporting the fact that Transformational Leaders are attuned to individuals involved on their team.

As my Musical Director slammed his things about on the table and threatened to leave the production out of the disrespect and lack of consideration he felt he had been shown by my unilateral decisions to make cuts to score I did my very best to keep my

calm and to assure my cast (who happened to be very difficult to assemble) that things were fine and that this misunderstanding would be swiftly addressed. After a short break and a conversation attended by the Stage Manager and the Associate Artistic Director I was able to hear out the concerns of my Musical Director and then walk all of us through the email chain that had preceded our first day of rehearsal where I had written agreement and time stamped documentation of the changes to be made. This did very little to subdue the problem and in fact this very complex relationship continued to be a component of our process until the show closed in early July.

Once I became aware of the rift of expectation and decorum my primary concern as a director became the safety and confidence of my performers because there was no way we could produce a show without them, no matter how clear and exciting the vision was. In the heat of the event I was calm enough to ask for a break and to dismiss the cast as it was unnecessary and unhelpful for them to be involved in such a conflict. When our sub meeting was adjourned and I had my full cast back together, minus the presence of my Music Director I apologized for the misunderstanding and assured them that they were my top priority as I already had the confidence of the rest of the production team. In fact as I look back it may have been this single moment that galvanized the relationship between my cast members and myself. The parameters surrounding the environment of our rehearsal had been set, but our rehearsal space became its own environment, it became a place of possibilities in opposition to the organizational dysfunction of the theatre. We were not only going to communicate this

story with great effect, we were also going to overcome an environment and culture that was not life giving, and we were going to do it as a team.

### ***Ring of Fire: Watching My Cast, Watching the Audience Watch My Cast***

The entire rehearsal process was littered with moments as colorful as the one described above, and yet the cast met the emotional challenges of the process in the same way they had approached the artistic and choreographic challenges, head on, with positivity and a little bit of edge. We had been under a time crunch from the beginning and due to delays with our Sitzprobe, Dry Tech and Wet Tech rehearsals the last few days before we opened had us working down to the wire. Once we reached opening night I had already begun to feel a sense of post mortem. I had never been so responsible for the success of a creative endeavor and in spite of the odds it seemed that the show would go on.

My wife and I came through the backdoor of the dining hall and took a seat in the second to last row of tables in a room that seats close to 450. We had an opening night house pushing 400. It was exciting and while the staff designers and their families went through, each one of them, their opening night rituals, I shook the hand of the Associate Artistic Director who had been a constant support and advocate for me throughout the process and the Sound Designer with whom I had worked to deliver live mixable sound to the control board for the first time in the theatre's history. At just the right time I excused myself from my table and traveled back stage to look my cast one more time in the face and let them know how proud I was of the work that they had

done (all the while knowing that because of the lack of experience from a couple of cast members, the entirely erratic nature of the Music Director, and the as of yet untested sound system innovations I was actually terrified of what the nights outcome might be) and assured them that they would perform well and be loved by all. They performed mostly well and in fact were loved by many. The show received multiple positive reviews that commented on the energy and focus of the cast and the obvious problems with the book. The show sold well for all four weeks of the run and it was even suggested that it could have been extended if not for the lengthy schedule of the following show. Looking back I can now see where I had opportunity to improve each phase of the process as well as recognizing more clearly what was not in my control. The Free Lance Star of Fredericksburg had this to say about our production, "The performance gave the opportunity for guests to clap along with old country classics through a welcoming cast of actors sure to continue to please ears everywhere." and that's something I can live with.

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Final Thoughts**

I have always believed that the power and purpose of art is to transform its audience but had never considered the role of the Artist Leader in the process. As theory and practice progress I am sure we will find more effective and efficient ways to lead artists and others, however I believe that the Transformational Leadership model presents a highly effective route to amplified creativity in the theatrical process and increased innovation in its performance and execution.

Through the four key components of Transformational Leadership we as Artist Leaders can help to grow our fellow artists and story tellers not only making them more valuable to our production but to future productions to come. Charismatic Role Modeling gives your team an individual focus on and place to turn with questions. Individual Consideration makes men and woman out of widgets and machine parts, and could possibly deliver the biggest return on your investment of time as each individual begins to see how important they are to the end goal.

Inspirational Motivation sets the course of the project by making clear an exciting, challenging, and attainable goal, it also saves time as it serves as the biggest directive for individual editing during the idea generation phase, and Intellectual Stimulation actually grows your team members and develops them into more valuable

creative assets. Collaboration within the context of creativity is supremely valuable. The gathering of skilled minds and bodies around an innovative objective is sure to bring some friction, but the accountability provided, if selflessly directed at excellence and in support of storytelling, will produce the most surprising and theatrically innovative ideas of our future theater. So go I charge you, create, lead, transform, and be transformative.

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## **Vita**

J. Clayton Winters was born in Kansas City, Kansas. Clayton studied at The University of Oklahoma School of the Arts and received his Bachelors of Fine Arts in Theatre Performance in 2009. After graduating Clayton lived and worked as an Actor and Instructor of Theatre, Dance, Voice, and Guitar in Oklahoma City where met his wife. In 2011 Clayton moved to Richmond, Va to advance his understanding of production and pedagogy, he studied at Virginia Commonwealth University's, School of the Arts, Department of Theatre, MFA program, completing his schooling in the summer of 2014. During his time at VCU Clayton was privileged to assist faculty on projects at The Arena Stage Washington DC, Goodspeed Musicals Chester CT, and Virginia Reparatory Theatre, Richmond VA. Clayton will be starting next fall with the new title of Assistant Professor, Director of Musical Theater at Samford University, Birmingham, AL.