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This is to certify that the thesis prepared by Sarah Mansell Yount entitled WHAT'S A FEMALE DIRECTOR TO DO? THE WOMEN OF *MEDEA REDUX* AND THE MEN OF *SOMEONE WHO'LL WATCH OVER ME*: A STUDY OF THE SEXES has been approved by her committee as satisfactory completion of the thesis requirement for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

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April 30, 2009

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WHAT'S A FEMALE DIRECTOR TO DO? THE WOMEN OF *MEDEA REDUX* AND  
THE MEN OF *SOMEONE WHO'LL WATCH OVER ME*:

A STUDY OF THE SEXES

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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Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia  
May 2009

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## Abstract

WHAT'S A FEMALE DIRECTOR TO DO? THE WOMEN OF *MEDEA REDUX* AND  
THE MEN OF *SOMEONE WHO'LL WATCH OVER ME*: A STUDY OF THE SEXES

By Sarah Mansell Yount, 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, 2009

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

My thesis will explore the role of the female director. The two plays on which I will focus, Neil LaBute's *medea redux* and Frank McGuinness's *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*, call for quite different casts. The former involves a woman in a police interrogation room; the latter involves three men in a Lebanese prison. Despite the overt masculinity of these plays, traces of femininity permeate.

Indeed, my status as a female director provided one of the clearest paths into these plays when I directed them last year at Virginia Commonwealth University. My gender also greatly influenced my direction of the actors. My experiences working on these shows

provided a backdrop from which to reflect on my role as a female director in a male-dominated field.

In my thesis I will reference notes I took during the rehearsal process. I will also include much of my dramaturgical research. Finally, throughout my writing process, I will attempt to define “masculine” and “feminine” both with regard to theatre and to theatre direction.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

During my second year in the graduate Theatre Pedagogy program at Virginia Commonwealth University, I took the opportunity to direct two plays. First, I directed *medea redux*, one of Neil LaBute's *bash* plays. A fellow graduate student, Danny Devlin, had approached me that fall and asked if I was interested in collaborating with him on *bash: three plays*. He was going to serve as producer for the three-play project as well as direct one of the plays, *iphigenia in orem*. He told me that one of our classmates, Paul Wurth, had already signed on to direct *a gaggle of saints*. Danny wanted me to direct *medea redux*. I had read *medea redux* in a class the year before and had found it hip and edgy. I could not wait to dig my teeth into the eighteen-page monologue of a modern-day Medea, and so I told Danny yes.

The other play I directed was *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* by Frank McGuinness. I had assistant directed the show six years before, and in light of current world events—wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, protests over America's prison at Guantanamo Bay, kidnappings of civilians in war zones—I thought it was time again to stage the play. I asked my classmate Lisa Kelly to serve as stage manager, assembled a team of dramaturges to help me increase the play's accessibility, and began the directing process.

Then, last year, when I began thinking about possible thesis topics, several of my friends suggested writing about my work as a director. While it seemed a simple enough

idea, I was not sure how I could turn my experiences into a thesis. Then, this past summer, a friend of mine who was taking the History of Directing class at VCU mentioned that my name had come up in a class discussion. Some students had voiced their surprise at my ability—as a woman—to direct what they considered to be “masculine” plays. They wondered what drew me to plays such as *medea redux* and *Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me*. They marveled at the way I skillfully directed both women and men.

Their questions got me thinking. What had drawn me to these plays? In what ways were the plays masculine? How had my sex influenced my interpretations of the plays? How did the sex of my actors affect my directorial style? Did I treat the women in *medea redux* differently from the men in *Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me*? As the questions started flooding my brain, I knew I had the topic for my thesis.

I am grateful for the experiences I have had in the theatre. I thank the directors with whom I have worked, and I thank the actors who have worked with me on my own projects. The women of *medea redux* and the men of *Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me* will always have a place in my heart. They gave me everything they had, and they did not disappoint. I have learned much from them as well as from my other collaborators. The best theatre is produced by a team, and in these two instances, I was fortunate enough to be surrounded by true professionals. I look forward to directing more theatre and to learning even more about the art and about myself.

## CHAPTER 2 THOUGHTS ON DIRECTING

### INFLUENCES

So, how did I get here? How did I come to be contemplating my place in the world of theatre direction? It all started in early 2006 when I made the decision to pursue a graduate degree in theatre. I had been working odd jobs since my graduation from Franklin and Marshall College in 2003, and the time seemed ripe for change. I applied to the Theatre Pedagogy program at Virginia Commonwealth University and was accepted. I knew I had to seize the opportunity and enroll, and I knew I had to study directing. I had never been surer of anything in my life.

Indeed, I had entered the world of theatre as an actor, but eventually discovered that my true talent lay in directing. It was Dr. Donald C. McManus, then a professor at Franklin and Marshall College, who first recognized my potential. I had taken his directing class and two of his acting classes, and when, on occasion, I would solicit career advice, he would calmly tell me to go to graduate school and learn to direct.

It took me a few years to follow his advice, but I did it. Now, looking back, I can see how I got here, and I can cite those individuals whose own directing techniques were to ultimately influence my own directorial style.

I believe it is only fair to begin with director Camilla Schade. She directed me in the role of Prudence in Christopher Durang's play *Beyond Therapy* in February 2001 and then in various roles in the compilation piece *Tragedy Works/Comedy Plays* in February of 2003. (Both productions took place at the Green Room Theatre of Franklin and Marshall College.)

Ms. Schade taught me my first lesson in directing: have fun but know when to get down to business.

Ms. Schade led by example. She viewed us as collaborators instead of subordinates. As such, she expected us to rise to the occasion and always put forth our best efforts. We often arrived at blocking organically. We were encouraged to try new things. She challenged us to delve deep within our characters, to keep journals, and to write imaginary character biographies.

All the while, her sense of humor kept us laughing. When appropriate, she would crack jokes during awkward moments in rehearsal. She encouraged us not only to laugh at each other, but also to laugh at ourselves. When you did good work, she praised you.

On the other end of the spectrum, she would not tolerate mediocrity or laziness. If you showed up to a rehearsal unprepared, she would scold you, and then she would move on. If she decided that you were wasting her time or that of your fellow cast members, she would simply ask you to leave. The embarrassment of being sent home was generally enough to keep you from slacking off again, and the truth is, such moments were few and far between. Ms. Schade's welcoming and uplifting personality made you want to please her, and you strived to do your best work every day. For me, working with Ms. Camilla Schade was a delight, and I imagine most of my fellow actors would agree.

In my next foray into acting, I worked with the then chair of the Theatre Department, Dr. Dorothy Louise. She had been on sabbatical the year before, and I had heard horror stories about her from the upperclassmen. They said she was overly demanding and mean to her actors. Intimidated as I was, I auditioned for her production of *The Winter's Tale* by

William Shakespeare at the end of my sophomore year. She cast me in the role of the queen, Hermione.

I learned quickly that she was not mean, but she was demanding. Rather, she had high expectations. The lesson I learned from her was that if you set the bar high and treat your actors with respect, you will see results. When she asked us to learn our lines over the summer before the start of rehearsals, she meant it. As with Camilla, she expected her actors to be prepared. Nothing was more frightening than a scolding from Dr. Louise. Conversely, there was no higher honor than her telling you “good work.” I remember a night when a scene I was in moved her to tears. As I was leaving the theatre, she gave me a hug and paid me a compliment. It meant the world to me. Like small children eagerly wanting to please a parent, we worked hard to gain the respect of Dr. Louise. Not everyone may have liked her, but everyone respected her.

The last individual who shaped my undergraduate theatre career was Dr. Donald C. McManus. As I mentioned earlier, he was the first to recommend graduate school to me. I had worked with him in several classes, and he had seen me direct. Apparently he liked my work, because in the spring of 2003, he asked me to assistant direct his production of *King Lear*. *King Lear* was to be the inaugural performance at the newly constructed Roschel Performing Arts Center at Franklin and Marshall College. The facility was beautiful, and its theatre featured a massive proscenium stage. Roschel was certainly a step up from the old main stage, the Green Room Theatre, and it seated about four times the people. Donald was slated to play *King Lear*, and he knew he needed a second pair of eyes. I gladly accepted his offer to assistant direct.



From him I learned that casting can easily make or break a show. Dr. McManus had decided to set the play in India, and he wanted to work with American as well as international students. Dr. McManus had it in his mind that the Duke of Gloucester would be played by an Indian student. The particular Indian student he wanted to cast, however, had an extremely thick accent and little to no acting experience. After callbacks, I voiced my concern. I had been in an acting class with this particular student. In my opinion, while he possessed a great deal of enthusiasm, he lacked the talent necessary for such an important role. He also was far from the most reliable student, as he would sometimes show up late to class or not at all. Dr. McManus took a few days to think it over, but ultimately cast this young man.

As the assistant director, I wound up working extensively with the actor playing Gloucester. I spent much of my time going line-by-line to make sure he understood what he was saying. Sadly, his Shakespearean language instincts were poor. Worse still, his lines came out almost unintelligible at times. His accent was getting in the way of our understanding him.

After weeks of rehearsals, he had made little progress. Dr. McManus and I were in a quandary: what could we do to remedy this unfortunate situation? We knew we could not replace him; we had been the ones to cast him in the first place. We decided to keep him in the play, and I worked with him one-on-one as much as I could. When we opened the show, his performances were far from spectacular. Astute audience members could sense that he was trying, but the effort wasn't enough. He was hard to understand, and the overall quality of the play suffered.

Would I ever cast him again? I doubt it. Sometimes, unfortunately, an actor's best effort is not enough. There must be some innate talent. We cast our actor primarily based on looks, and that, I learned, is the surest way to spell disaster.

These early experiences working with directors taught me a great deal. I incorporated all of these lessons, and many more, into my work on *medea redux* and *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*.

## **BELIEFS**

My idea of what makes a good director is changing all the time. I do, however, believe in some basic tenets of directing. I believe that a good director respects her actors and earns their respect in return. I believe that a good director does not take herself too seriously. A good director possesses a sense of empathy toward her cast, crew, and collaborators. She should be clear and articulate. She should possess at least a basic knowledge of the other theatrical arts, including acting, design, and stage management. She excels at casting. A good director recognizes the importance of team building within a cast. She knows how to create an effective rehearsal schedule. In academic settings, the director is sensitive to the actors' academic commitments. She attends theatre and reads plays and periodicals. The director is a close reader. She is creative and enthusiastic. A good director believes in collaboration. She knows when to praise her actors and when to demand more from them. A good director understands her art and practices it often.

I realize that I am working in a male-dominated field. I understand that my age and gender may, at times, put me at a disadvantage. I am not particularly charismatic. I do not possess a booming voice or looming stature. I often appear socially awkward. I am, by nature, a soft-spoken twenty-eight year old woman who does not enjoy conflict. I am aware that I do not fit into the typical director mold, but I love what I do. I love to direct because I enjoy working with creative people. I may not shout the loudest, but I stick to my convictions. I pride myself on my director's eye, and I always work hard to produce the best show possible. I direct because it allows me to experience artistic joy, and it is always my hope to pass on some of that joy to my actors and other collaborators.

## CHAPTER 3 MEDEA REDUX

### THE PLAY

The play *medea redux* is the third play in Neil LaBute's collection *bash: three plays*. Collectively, the plays recount three horrific acts of murder. In each play, the character or characters are looking back on their foul deeds. In *iphigenia in orem*, for example, a father recounts the suffocation of his newborn baby girl. In *a gaggle of saints*, the crime is the beating and murder of a homosexual stranger in a park bathroom. Finally, in *medea redux*, a woman confesses to the murder of her teenage son. LaBute provides us with vivid descriptions of these terrible acts, and the audience leaves the theatre supremely disturbed.

The lines in *medea redux* are all given to one character, simply named Woman. She is in a police interrogation room, having been recently picked up in Las Vegas and charged with the murder of her son. She speaks directly to the audience.

It is important to note the definition of "redux." The Latin word is an adjective that means "brought back" or "returned," and the play certainly pays homage to its namesake, the Medea of Greek mythology, in its modern dramatization of her tale ("Redux").

In the play by Euripides, Medea, the wife of Jason, is a stranger in a strange land. Prior to the play's beginning, she has aided Jason and the Argonauts in their quest to steal her father's prize possession, the Golden Fleece, and she has now returned with him to Corinth. Medea and Jason have two sons, but soon after the play begins, he announces his plans to take another wife, supposedly for political reasons. This new woman is Glauke, the daughter of Creon, King of Corinth. Medea feels betrayed, and in the ultimate act of

vengeance, she slaughters not only Glauke and King Creon, but also her own children. At the end of the play, Medea flees Corinth unpunished. She has exacted her revenge and left Jason to suffer alone and childless (Jacobus 134-135).

LaBute's Woman is herself a Medea figure. In her monologue, she reveals the illicit relationship she had with one of her junior high school teachers. She relates how at fourteen she became pregnant with his son and how before she gave birth he suddenly moved from Chicago to Phoenix. The Woman tells how she eventually reestablished contact with Billie's father. She explains:

i just wanted him to have, if he wouldn't mind so much, a sort 'a relationship with billie, through the mail or whatever...i'd send pictures and stuff, we ended up doing it through a postal box, and he got to know his son that way. that's how it happened, a few presents now and then, and he had a son, and the son's mother loved him, and kept the secret all while the father was away. (LaBute 90)

The Woman tells us how, on Billie's fourteenth birthday, she rented a car and drove with her son to Phoenix so the boy could meet his father. By this time, the man had remarried, but he and his wife were childless, supposedly due to the wife's infertility. The Woman comments how emotional the man was at this reunion with his son. She remarks, "i saw something there, there in his eyes...he loved that boy, all that shit he'd said to me years ago, it was true about kids. he loved 'em. but also...he was satisfied...because he'd gotten away with it all" (91-92).

Then, we learn how she electrocuted her son by throwing his favorite tape recorder into the tub that night while he bathed. In a strangely fitting twist, she performed the heinous deed as he was listening to a tape of Billie Holiday, his namesake and his father's favorite singer.

His father was, of course, devastated, just as Medea's Jason was, at the murder of his son. This Woman, this modern-day Medea, claims that her only solace comes to her in her vision of Billie's father "yelling up at the sky, these torrents of tears and screaming, the top of his lungs, calling up into the universe, 'why?! why?!' over and over" (94).

## CASTING: TAKE ONE

Playwright Neil LaBute's *medea redux* is filled with vivid imagery and sometimes long and awkward sentences. The monologue is eighteen pages long and clocks in at around thirty minutes. I knew I needed to cast a skilled actor with an exceptional work ethic. I had someone in mind. In late September I spoke with an undergraduate actor with whom I had worked before. I asked her if she was interested in working with me on *medea redux*, and she responded with a resounding "yes." I gave her a copy of the script, and we met once or twice to rehearse. Everything seemed to be falling into place.

In early October, however, I realized I had made a grave mistake. I had assumed that my actor was academically eligible to perform in my show. After all, I had worked with her before, and I viewed her as a good student. I was mistaken. When I asked professor Barry Bell to verify her GPA, we discovered that she did not possess the minimum GPA required. I was forced to recast.

By this time, the show was less than two months away. I felt that I no longer had enough time to rehearse the show adequately. I told Danny Devlin of my problem, but we agreed the show must go on. I played around with the idea of dividing the show among several actors. While it would decrease the memorization burden on any one actor, I was not altogether keen on the idea, and I was worried it would sacrifice the integrity of the show. Danny was also unsure about bringing in more actors. He wanted us to stay true to the script. Then I had a brainstorm; I knew what to do.

## **THE BRAINSTORM**

With the late-November show dates coming up quickly, I knew I had to act quickly. I decided to do something drastic. I decided to cast three actors. I settled at this number for two reasons. One: I knew I could create aesthetically pleasing, dynamic compositions with three actors; and two: I believed I could keep the script intact while skillfully assigning the lines to the three actors.

I began to think of the play as a choral piece à la the ancient Greek chorus. Sometimes I wanted the women to speak alone; other times I wanted their voices to overlap or for them to speak in chorus. I divided the character of the Woman into Woman 1, Woman 2, and Woman 3. Woman 1 was the central character, the physical person in the interrogation room who was confessing to the murder. Woman 2 and Woman 3 would voice two disparate aspects of her personality. Woman 2 was the cynical, bitter version of the central character. She understood how her teacher had exploited her, and she wanted revenge. She was the older and wiser version of the Woman. Woman 3 represented the young, naïve version of the Woman. She recounted the early days of their relationship, sometimes voicing fear and other times voicing elation and childish glee.

It took me a week to divide up the script. I kept reading it over and over again, constantly reassigning bits of text. I wanted to get it right. I wanted to make sure that the risk was worth it. Would the audience be distracted by the addition of two actors? Would the lines still make sense? How would I stage the play? I had many questions, and I knew the answers would come in time. Until then, it was time to hold auditions.



## **CASTING: TAKE TWO**

I held auditions and callbacks in early October 2007. One of my fellow directors, Paul Wurth, recommended that I ask Michelle Rogerson, a talented undergraduate, to audition. I emailed her, and I posted a public audition notice. The turnout was decent. About fifteen women auditioned. Ultimately, I decided to cast Michelle Rogerson, Elise Edwards, and Katie Dingle. Michelle would play Woman 1, Elise would play Woman 2, and Katie Dingle would play Woman 3.

I picked Michelle for the central role, because in her cold reading, she had been spot on. She had the ability to wrangle with LaBute's sentence fragments and inverted sentence structure and make it all sound natural. She also possessed the perfect amount of muted sexuality.

Elise was a natural choice for Woman 2. I had met her the year before when she was a student in a class for which I served as teaching assistant. Elise was sassy, and she was sexy. She smoked cigarettes and swore like a sailor. She was not one to back away from a fight. I knew that she could pull off the badass attitude necessary for Woman 2.

I cast Katie Dingle, a second-year transfer student, as Woman 3. She was a top student in my section of Introduction to Drama, so I knew that she was a hard worker. She was slim with a rather childlike physique, and her acting had a marvelous subtlety to it. I knew that in the right costume, she would look like that fourteen-year-old girl LaBute describes in his play.

After I assembled my cast, I was pleased to discover that they possessed some similar physical attributes. They all had brown hair and fairly pale complexions. I had hoped

to somehow cast actors who looked a bit similar; however, I had not anticipated such a degree of success. My concept of the three women forming a unified whole and comprising a single person could thereby be reinforced by the actors' appearances. I was thrilled at my luck and excited to start rehearsing.

## REHEARSING

We began rehearsals for *medea redux* in mid-October. I met with all three actors for a read-through of the script, complete with the new line assignments. We discussed the woman of *medea redux*. I asked them what motivated her act of revenge. Their answers included “blind rage,” “the teacher’s betrayal,” and “unrequited love.”

I then asked them if they had ever experienced what I termed a “Medea Moment.” The idea of the Medea Moment grew out of a class discussion that took place in Tragedy Class my first semester of graduate school. My instructor, Dr. Noreen Barnes, proposed that each one of us had at one time, whether we knew it or not, possessed the potential to kill a person. At first we scoffed at the idea. Us: potential murderers? She continued. Surely we had experienced rage of that magnitude at least once. We, however, unlike Medea, had suppressed our murderous tendencies. That was what made us different. After some thought, I realized I indeed had a Medea Moment. It was in late 2005 when my current boyfriend nonchalantly confessed that he had been cheating on me and that he was moving in with another woman. It was around four in the morning, we had been drinking, and we were sitting on the third-story roof of the restaurant where he lived and worked at the time. I remember slapping his arm. I was livid as well as hurt. For a split second, I contemplated pushing him off the roof. It was only for a second, but it registered. Of course I did no such thing. I yelled at him, cried a little, and got down off the roof. I wrote a poem about it for Tragedy Class in which I confessed my own Medea Moment.

I shared this experience with the women of my cast and asked them, if they felt comfortable, to volunteer their own. We talked for a while, and, by the end of our

discussion, we seemed to have a better handle on the Woman in our play. She was not simply a head case. She was a woman with a painful past. Her teacher had molested and impregnated her. Then, before little Billie was born, he had hightailed it to Arizona. He had hurt her, and she wanted him to understand the hurt he had put her through. Certainly she took drastic action, but her act of revenge gave her the peace of mind that had for so long eluded her. The thought of her teacher out there on some playground crying and grieving the loss of their son gave her satisfaction. In her mind, the world, so long out of balance, had returned to a state of equilibrium. To her, incarceration was a small price to pay for revenge.

If my actors could see the Woman as less of a monster and more of a woman scorned, they could see the sympathetic side of her. She needed to be multi-dimensional, and, in my show, she needed the support of three strong actors.

Because the actors had such different schedules, I arranged for a lot of one-on-one rehearsal time. This also allowed me to work extensively on character development.

Michelle Rogerson, as I have mentioned before, played the primary Medea role, and I designated her "Woman 1." We worked tirelessly on making her lines sound natural and off the cuff. LaBute's language is filled with incomplete thoughts, pauses, beat changes, and a whole lot of "umms" and "you knows." Her character had a nervous quality about her, but at other moments, she was focused and intense. Initially I had Michelle fiddling with her cigarette during the interrogation, but due to fire codes, I had to scrap the cigarette. I think it worked out for the better, and her hands turned out to be just as expressive without the cigarette. She also occasionally played with her water bottle and cup or glanced at the tape recorder in front of her. After consulting with costume designer Alex Klein, we decided to

dress Michelle in a plain, three-quarter-length-sleeve white t-shirt, blue jeans, and simple black flats to underscore her lower-middle-class roots. We determined that her character had had a rough life as a single mother. She had lost her innocence. Her love of learning had ultimately taken a backseat after her pregnancy.

The Woman had, however, maintained a keen interest in the Greek mythology her teacher had taught her, and she references it several times in her monologue. I assigned these lines to Woman 2, played by Elise Edwards. Her cynicism manifested itself in lines such as the following:

and its the fault of people, or “mortals,” that’s what my teacher said, “mortals are to blame.” see, he said it was simply the fact that—and i never could understand this, maybe i just didn’t listen good enough, that was the usual problem but he said it all stemmed from just our being mortal, right? (BEAT) so, then every problem we got is from being mortals...or humans, that’s what “mortals” means...and just because we are what we are, these “mortals,” it’s like, our fault, explain me that... (79)

Still, she had treasured the lessons she had learned from him, and they had stayed fresh in her memory. But now it was her plan to turn the lessons against him. The Woman decided to make him the victim of own Greek tragedy. She would make him Jason to her Medea.

Elise’s character also portrayed the Woman’s sexy side. I put Woman 2 in charge of detailing their intimate moments. Sex appeal oozing, she describes their first kiss. She says:

he kissed me. jesus, he kissed me like, i guess, you imagine how it must’ve been when they first invented it, like back in the days of myths and shit, when, you know, men were heroes and you could get kissed like that and you’d wait a lifetime for him to return, you would, and you could still taste him on your lips, years later, because then kisses still meant something, that’s what he kissed me like... (84-85)

Lastly, she voices the turning point in the monologue, the moment when she decides to go through with her murderous plan. She describes her former teacher's reaction to seeing his son for the first time. She sees love in his eyes for the boy. Love, however, is not all she sees in his expression, and she is quick to remark that "also...he was satisfied, I could see that, satisfaction on his face...because he'd gotten away with it all. that's what I saw, shining in his eyes, as he moved forward to kiss me. he'd beaten fate...and gotten away with it" (92).

Most of my work with Elise involved making her larger than life. I reminded her that she was representing not a whole woman, but an aspect of a woman. She needed to be bitter but not broken down. She needed to bring attitude and sexuality to the piece. Woman 2 was smart, she knew it, and she offered up more than a healthy dose of sarcasm. (She was also much like Elise.) During some rehearsals I would tell her to be grotesquely large in her acting, and then I would slowly have her draw back. I had her experiment with different ways of sitting in her chair. Sometimes she would sit with one leg up. Other times she would sit in profile, turning to the audience only when she spoke. I also played with the way Elise's character interacted with Woman 1 and Woman 3. I directed her to reenact the teacher's fondling of the Woman during the class trip to the aquarium. I asked her to slowly come up behind Michelle Rogerson, while Katie Dingle, the personification of the woman's inner child, stared into the shark tank and relived the event.



In front of the shark tank: “suddenly I feel all this weight up against me.”

The costume designer and I decided to dress Elise in a lacy black tank top that had a small section of white just below the bust and slim, black dress pants. Her outfit provided a nice contrast to Michelle’s. It was dark and sexy, like Woman 2.

Katie Dingle portrayed Woman 3. She represented the innocent child, the remains of whom still existed in the Woman’s memory. This woman joyfully retells the field trips her teacher chaperoned. Her youthful innocence is well illustrated in the following description of one of these trips:

we went there, maybe twenty-five or so of us, the school bus, and i remember we were going along that one road, runs past the lake up there...god, that was beautiful! he looked back, my teacher did, sitting up by the driver, and saw all of us kids smashed up against our windows and staring out, every one of us with our eyes glued to that water! so, he had the driver pull off at an exit and we got, maybe, fifteen minutes or so to run around on the beach...this was november...chase each other, throw rocks, whatever, but all i did was stand there, stand down by the edge of the surf and watch the waves coming in. there in my little red windbraker, and i dunno, i felt like an astronaut. or a kind 'a time explorer, maybe, some scout or something, sent on ahead, down to earth to see just what the fuck all the fuss's about...and taking it all in for the first time. (79-80)

Woman 3 also talks about the buildup to her "relationship" with her teacher: the times after the class trip to the aquarium—the trip when he first molested her—when he would meet with her individually during school hours to share slides of sea life and pieces of coral. She remarks then that they "were starting to be friends" and that "it was good, umm... 's good, that's all" (82-83). She reveals that once she discovered she was pregnant, part of her coping mechanism, after she spoke to her teacher, was to go home and "[watch] hogan's heroes on tv, like [she] did every afternoon" (88). The poignancy of this moment is undeniable, as the Woman's inner child reveals herself, without pretence, to the audience.

In my mind, Katie Dingle was the perfect actor to play Woman 3. Her petite stature and young looks lent support to her words. I coached her into developing a younger posture. When Woman 3 is frightened, such as when she is simultaneously viewing the shark coming toward her in the tank and feeling the teacher come up behind her, her shoulders should be curved inward. When she is speaking about the happy moments she shared with her teacher, such as when he took her on a special day trip to Chicago, she must simply radiate with excitement and glee. Her happiness must stem from her center but



extend out through her extremities. Katie picked up the physical traits quickly, and her honest vocal quality lent credence to her performance.

Her costume consisted of jeans, a white t-shirt, a hooded red sweatshirt with a zipper front, and black rain boots. The large front pocket in the sweatshirt gave her somewhere to hide her hands when she was feeling vulnerable. The patch of white t-shirt that peaked out from under her sweatshirt connected her to the white on Elise's shirt and to Michelle's t-shirt. I selected the boots because I had imagined her wearing them on her school trip to the lake.

Shortly before the first performance, I decided to give all three of the women an accessory that would link them together more strongly. I found three thick green and gold patterned bracelets. I wasn't sure whether the audience would notice them or not, but I thought they added a nice touch and a clue to the careful onlooker about the women's shared identity. The bracelet itself was an item given to the Woman by her teacher on one of their trips to Chicago.

When I was able to rehearse with all three actors together, we focused on creating balanced compositions around the central character, Woman 1, and the table at which she sat. While Woman 1 never left her seat, Women 2 and 3 were free to move about the interrogation room. I positioned their chairs slightly upstage of Woman 1's table. Katie's chair sat stage right of Michelle, and Elise's sat stage left. Together, they formed an isosceles triangle. At these rehearsals, I also worked on getting them to say their choral lines in sync, while instructing them to personalize them through physicality and tone.

The first shared line began on the fifth page of the script. I decided that Woman 2 and Woman 3 should both speak about the “tragic nobility of sea creatures” (81-82). I knew that Woman 2 would embody the teacher at that moment, for they were his words, and Woman 3 would be the one reliving the incident. Their shared speech would imply a shared experience.

The next moment of choral speech happened a few pages later when the Woman recounted the first time she rode in his car. He had the radio on, and when she asks who is singing, he tells her it is his favorite artist, “billie holiday” (84). I had all three actors speak the singer’s name. The words are important. They are, according to the Woman, the first two words he’s said to her in five hours. Billie Holiday is, to her, a revelation. She is taken in by her sad, soulful voice. She eventually names her son Billie, and low and behold, she becomes his favorite singer, too.

Woman 2 and Woman 3 share another moment when they recall the day the Woman learned “by a fluke” that her teacher was moving to Phoenix (88). It was during the summer, she was pregnant, and she happened to be in the school’s general office. The secretary, while making small talk, reveals that the Woman’s teacher is moving. She says, “well, i suppose they need good teachers in phoenix as much as they do anywhere...” (88). Here, I have Woman 2 portray the secretary, a busybody who is innocent of the Woman’s relationship with her teacher. In contrast, Woman 3 speaks the words as if remembering them; her reaction is one of disappointment and disbelief. Her teacher has deceived her. This moment of discovery is a turning point for the Woman. She now understands that she

is in it alone. Her teacher, the one who had kindly said they would “make some plans” only weeks earlier, is leaving her to raise their child alone (88).

The final choral line occurs near the end of the play. By this time, the Woman has confessed the premeditated nature of her crime. She is explaining to her interrogators what gets her through the day. She says, “it’s him. my teacher.” All three women speak this line. It unifies them one final time. Then, together, they describe the teacher, his world now torn apart, wandering around on a school playground, alone with his grief. All three actors, at the final line of the play, stare directly out into the audience. Woman 2 and Woman 3 each put a hand on the shoulder of Woman 1, and three become one.



Closing tableau: “in my fantasy there’s never an answer, uh-huh, there never is...”

## PERFORMING

*bash* opened on November 26, 2007 and ran for three performances at the Newdick Theatre of Virginia Commonwealth University. *iphigenia in orem* was first, followed by *a gaggle of saints*, and then *medea redux*. *iphigenia in orem* starred Paul Wurth, and *a gaggle of saints* starred Danny Devlin and Madolyn Smeltzer. They played to capacity audiences. I was ecstatic with the outcome.

In my conversations with audience members about *medea redux*, Michelle Rogerson came up almost every time. People praised her “naturalness” in the role. Her words came out as if they were her own. She successfully embodied the hurt and revenge-driven woman. Many said her performance was the strongest out of all three of the *bash* plays. I agreed.

Elise Edwards also did excellent work. She had the power to “stare down” the audience. She was intimidating and brash. Her strong physicality made her one to watch, and she comfortably transitioned from sexy to brutal.

When audience members spoke to me about Katie Dingle, they remarked at her ability to play a young girl so convincingly. They were impressed with her acting abilities. I am happy to say that this production was only the first of many for her at VCU. After *medea redux*, directors clamored to cast her. She was, in the words of my fellow director Danny Devlin, “a revelation” (Devlin 78).

My three actors worked immensely hard, and I could not have been more proud of their performances in *medea redux*.

My decision to divide the script among three actors received mixed reviews. Danny Devlin, as I have mentioned, was at first skeptical of my bold move. After the performance, however, he wrote in his MFA thesis:

In some ways this [Sarah's manipulation of the text] improved upon the script. It created a more diverse palette of physical possibilities; it showed, physically, many different sides of the Woman's personality, and allowed for a rather powerful closing moment, wherein the three aspects of the Woman stand side-by-side in solidarity, affirming their choice to kill the boy. (78)

Some audience members, especially those who had already read the script, commented that they would have preferred a standard performance with one actor. They argued that my direction of *medea redux* strayed too far from the direction of *iphegenia in orem* and *a gaggle of saints*. These audience members had wanted to see the emotional build happen in one character. They thought that the separation of personalities resulted in a diffusion of the narrative power.

Others, including many who had not read the script, remarked that they were unaware of the changes I had made. I was, of course, flattered by these comments. While I know it was not the performance LaBute envisioned, it was one in which I took immense pride.

## CHAPTER 4 SOMEONE WHO'LL WATCH OVER ME

### THE PLAY

*Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* by Frank McGuinness is a play about three men who, despite their differences, band together in the face of adversity. What complicates their plight is that their adversaries are Islamic militants. The men, Adam, Edward, and Michael, have all been taken hostage by these militants and placed together in a makeshift prison in Beirut, Lebanon. They are all chained to a wall, like dogs. The only time they may leave their cell is when they are led outside to use the outhouse. They are routinely beaten. They have received no communication from the outside world. The men do not know the names of their captors, nor do they know if the news of their kidnapping has reached their loved ones.

Adam is the American. He is a doctor from California who came to Lebanon to provide medical care and aid to its people. He was the first to be captured. Edward, the Irishman, was the second. He is a reporter covering the conflict in the Middle East. Michael, the final member of their cell, is from England. He is a professor of Old and Middle English literature who came to Beirut because he had lost his old university post. Upon his arrival, he knew little of the country or its problems; he simply wanted a job, and he found one at the local university.

Throughout the play, the men tell each other their stories. They exercise, they act out invented films, they relive famous moments in sports, they write imaginary letters home,

they sing songs, they dream of their release, they comfort each other, and they do their best to keep each other sane.



Shooting a movie: “They swoop in their throng down on the dead body.”

About halfway through the play, Adam is taken away, and the audience is left to assume that he has been killed. With Edward and Michael alone in the cell, the onetime adversaries grow close. They put their Irish/English differences aside, and they embrace the other’s company. In the final scene of the play, Edward must say goodbye to Michael. The Irish government has negotiated for his release, and he must leave his friend alone to languish in his cell. As the play ends, Michael collapses in anguish.





Preparing for Edward's departure: "We should be let go together."

## THE RESEARCH

When I made the decision to mount this play, I knew I would need to do some significant research. In November 2002, back when I worked on the show as an assistant director to my friend Tūlin Khalid, I had great confidence in her interpretation. I blindly trusted that her background as a Muslim Pakistani woman raised by an ambassador and his wife would give her an automatic in-road to the show. To her credit, Tūlin directed a spectacular show, but I personally did not leave the experience with a full, working knowledge of politics in 1980's Lebanon.

For the 2008 production I decided to assemble a team of dramaturges to research a whole slew of issues relating to Frank McGuinness's script. My dramaturges included Erin Moss, Tony Sanchez, Michael Sater, and Matthew Shifflett. Erin researched all of the English, Irish, and American pop culture and film references, Michael looked at the literary references, and Tony and Matthew reported on the history and politics of Lebanon. I decided to delve further into the music of the play and eventually also found the proper pronunciations of the text's several Old and Middle English verses.

The dramaturges all shared their findings with the cast shortly after rehearsals had begun. The research on the history and politics of Lebanon, particularly the information on the sociopolitical situation there in the 1980s, had a profound impact on the cast. For instance, when they learned that Frank McGuinness had based the character of Michael on a real person, the entire play acquired a deeper significance.

As I wrote in the program, "Irishman Brian Keenan taught English at the American University of Beirut. In 1986 he was kidnapped by a band of Islamic extremists. He was

locked away, in shackles. He endured years of confinement and abuse. His story was the inspiration for *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*.” Brian Keenan, however, was only one of hundreds of Westerners kidnapped by groups such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization and Hezbollah during the 1980s. Some hostages were killed if the demands of their captors were not met; others were released. Brian Keenan was one of the lucky ones. He was released in 1990 after four and a half years in captivity.

Much of dramaturge Tony Sanchez’s research was incorporated into the following historical note, which I inserted into the programs:

As the men in our play sit in a cell, a war is raging outside, one in which they are pawns... The Lebanese Civil War of 1975-1990 was a multilateral war fought between the National Front and the Lebanese Front. The National Front was comprised of several Leftist Muslim militias, including the PLO, the Socialist Front, the Arab elements of the Provisional Lebanese Army, the Communist Party, and, later in the war, Hezbollah. Alternately, right-wing Christian militias, as well as some Christian Palestinian refugee groups, comprised the Lebanese Front.

Like so many violent confrontations, the conflict was about the defense of a country for one side and the guarantee of human rights for the other. To complicate matters, there were often as many as 6 or 7 factions fighting independently for power, and by the end of the war almost every like-minded faction and not only allied but also betrayed one another.

Between 1979 and the mid-to late-1980s, kidnapping was a popular way for the National Front to fund its operations. The most frequent targets were Westerners. While in many cases all hostages were released unharmed, many fringe groups preferred to dispose of their hostages whether or not their demands were met.

International statistics put the number of Lebanese war-related deaths, both civilian and combatant, between 150,000 and 300,000. Between 45,000 and 100,000 Palestinian refugees and Syrian forces also lost their lives during the conflict.

The origins of the war go back as far as the first Crusades. Many questions still go unanswered, and a general lack of primary documentation limits the available facts about this war. (Program Note)

Other important research involved the compilation of a compact disc for the actors, as they were unfamiliar with most of the songs. I burned Ella Fitzgerald’s “Someone To

Watch Over Me,” James Taylor’s “The Water Is Wide,” Sufjan Stevens’s “Amazing Grace,” Flanagan and Allen’s “Run Rabbit Run,” and the Original Cast Recording of “Chitty Chitty Bang Bang” onto a compact disc for each of them, so that they could listen to and learn them at their leisure.

The research we acquired shaped not only my interpretation of the play but also the performances of the actors. Without the help of our dramaturges, we could not have done the play justice.

## CASTING

I held auditions for *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* on the evening of Monday, February 4, 2008 in the intimate Kenneth Campbell Theatre Library on the campus of Virginia Commonwealth University. Approximately twelve students auditioned with prepared one-minute contemporary monologues. During the callbacks that Wednesday, I had them all read from the script. On my audition form, I had asked them to indicate whether or not they had experience with Irish or English dialects, and during the callbacks, I asked them to give me a sample of their best dialect work. While a fellow graduate student, Thomas Cunningham, would be serving as dialect coach, I wanted, if possible, to work with actors who already had an inclination toward dialects.

Brian Gartland, a junior, was the strongest actor to audition. His audition pieces had a beautiful honesty to them, and he was highly skilled in both English and Irish dialects. Alex Gerber, a junior who had expressed great excitement about the show, even before auditions, had a strong voice and presence; however, he could not speak with either dialect. Actor Zach Betz was the surprise of the audition process. This tall and lanky first-year student impressed me with his emotional range, and his Irish dialect was quite strong. He, like Alex, possessed a contagious enthusiasm. I knew he was young, but I was willing to take a chance.

After much deliberation, I decided to cast the three of them. Their physiques played nicely off of each other, and once I had the three of them read together, I knew I had my cast. Together, they brought excitement and energy to the room, but they were equally

capable of portraying fear, anxiety, and depression. I cast Alex as Adam, Zach as Edward, and Brian as Michael.

## REHEARSING

I began rehearsals the week of February 10. For the first few weeks, we rehearsed Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings from 7 to 9pm and on Saturdays for two to three hours in the afternoon. I made sure to call only the necessary actors. For example, when I rehearsed the first two scenes, I called Brian an hour later than Alex and Zach, because Brian's character, Michael, does not enter the play until the second scene.

Having decided that each prisoner would be chained to a separate "wall" of the cell, I assigned each actor a separate area of the stage or—in the case of most rehearsals—the classroom. I envisioned their total acting space as spanning approximately fifteen feet stage right to stage left and ten feet upstage to downstage. Their chains, attached to their wrists, not only prevented physical contact but also heightened their sense of isolation.

I asked Zach to imagine that he was chained to an imaginary wall stage right. Brian's imaginary chain came from upstage center, and Alex's came from stage left. To designate their individual zones, I gave them each an acting block. I directed them to explore the area around their blocks, while being mindful of their imaginary chains. I instructed them to try sitting on, leaning against, and standing on their blocks. Also, I challenged them to consider when and why they might position themselves behind their blocks.

Throughout the rehearsal process, I reminded them that their characters inhabited a world of perpetually rising stakes. Every time they reenacted a famous sporting event or created a movie, they did so to escape the cruel reality of their day-to-day lives. Imagination was a method of survival for these three hostages. They went to sleep each night not

knowing whether it might be their last. Removed from the outside world, all they had was each other.

In our rehearsals, while we certainly spent most of our time experimenting with and establishing blocking, we also spent a great deal of time delving into the psyches of the play's three characters.

Adam, the American doctor from California, is an easygoing and even-tempered individual who often acts as peacekeeper between the bickering Edward and Michael. He studies the Bible and the Koran, the two books placed in the cell by their captors. During a discussion with Michael and Edward in scene 4, Adam speaks candidly—but with resentment—about his precarious position as an American hostage. He explains:

An American is a valuable asset. A prize possession. There is a price permanently placed on the American's head. And *in* his head the American believes the value of the price placed upon him, because his is a market economy, and in that economy everything has a price. But that same market decrees the price may differ in day-to-day dealing. So the valuable asset, the prize possession, this American, has no control over his price. Whoever has no control is fucked. I am American, I am Arab, I am fucked. We have that much in common. (McGuiness 33-34)

Here he is outraged, but Adam is, at heart, a sensitive soul, and he is, unfortunately, the first one to crack under the pressures of captivity. The scene in which Adam breaks down and cries out to his mother and father is heart wrenching. Unfortunately, it was the one with which Alex struggled the most. His usual declamatory style did not suit this moment of vulnerability. The more we rehearsed, however, the more his character blossomed. He was able to increase his emotional range and play the part convincingly.

Edward, the Irish reporter, is an outspoken fellow who knows how to push people's buttons. Early in the show, he explains to Adam the reason behind his constant sparring. He



says, “Whatever else about this place, we’re in it together, we have to stick it out together. We’ll come out of this alive. One favour—let me be able to do my worst to you, and you be able to do your worst to me....That way, as you say, they won’t break us, for we’ll be too used to fighting for our lives” (13). He also derives a sick satisfaction in his making fun of Michael, the Englishman. A fierce England versus Ireland mentality fuels Edward’s mean spiritedness toward Michael. It is not until Adam is gone that Edward and Michael become close. In the final scene, Michael gently combs Edward’s hair—an act inspired by the soldiers of ancient Sparta—as they say their final goodbyes.

Zach, as I mentioned before, had a strong Irish dialect. Occasionally, however, it was necessary to have vocal coach Thomas Cunningham come in and help him rein it in. Zach was a pleasure to work with, because he always brought a sense of excitement and openness to the work. He was off book before either of his cast mates, although he had the most lines. He worked hard both in rehearsal and on his own. He would initiate outside rehearsals with both Alex and Brian. Unfortunately, as I found out later, he may have worked too hard on the show. Toward the end of the semester, fatigue overtook him, and he got quite sick. He had taken on too much, and he ended up missing some classes. Problems aside, I could not have asked for a better Edward. He took risks in his blocking, and he did his best to get in touch with the character he portrayed.

Michael, the English professor, is the last to join them in the cell. We learn that he was kidnapped while shopping for pears in a street market in Beirut. He is at the receiving end of most of Edward’s verbal abuse. He is extremely sensitive and well mannered. He recites Old and English poetry for comfort and writes his imaginary letters to his mother in

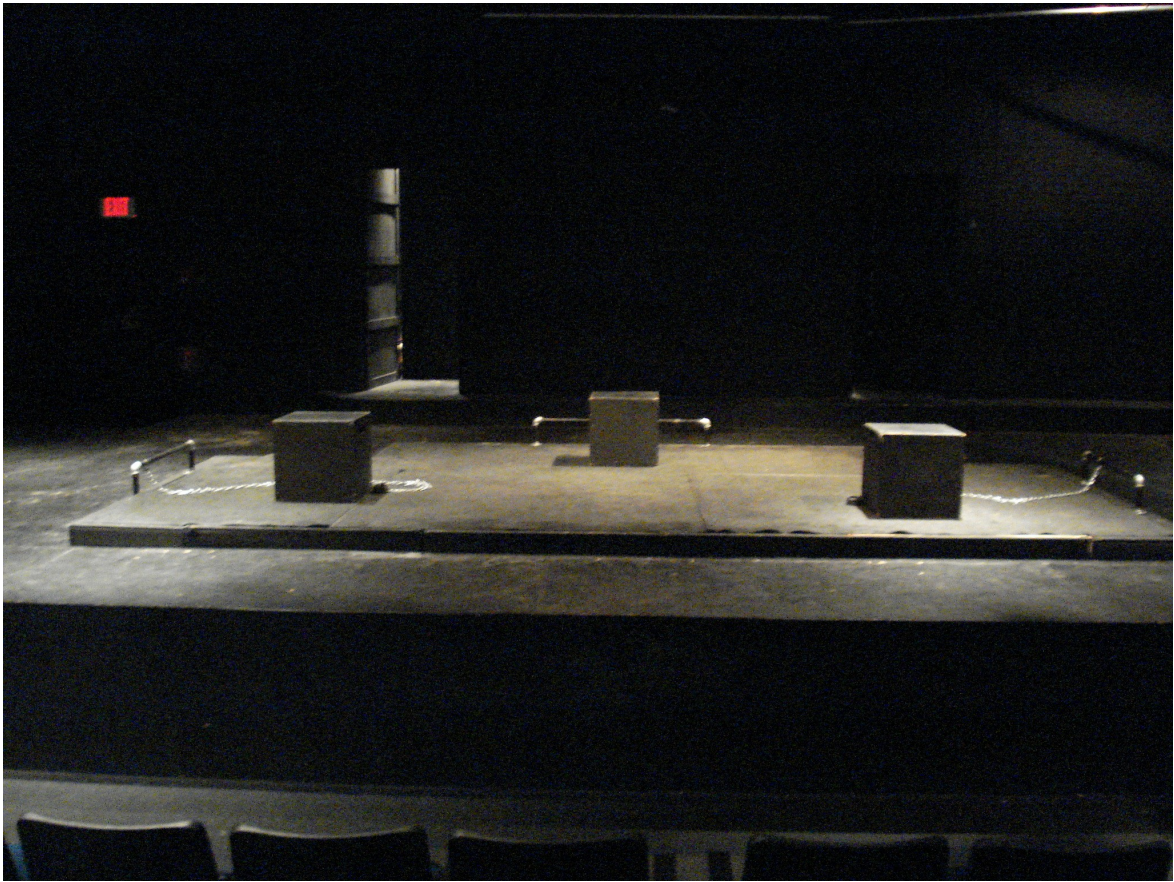
Peterborough. He consoles Edward after Adam's death. In the final moments of the play, after Edward's departure, Michael collapses onto the floor and recites his mantra of comfort, "*Oft him anhaga are gebideth. Wyrð bith ful araed....*Whither thou goest, I will go with thee, and whither I go, thou shalt go with me" (78).

Brian was certainly my strongest actor. In his performance, he displayed wisdom beyond his years. The twenty-one-year-old Brian successfully captured the forty-something Michael. His range was incredible. One moment he was huddled up in a ball, weeping; the next, he was cursing out Edward. He was convincing in everything he did. His dialect was extremely strong and needed little coaching. His block stood the furthest upstage, but he didn't need this strong position to gain focus. According to many audience members, he outright stole the show.

Early in the rehearsal process, costume designer K Stone met with the actors. She explained to them how their characters' street clothes had been taken from them by their kidnappers and replaced with shorts and t-shirts. She discussed the filth in which they lived. The summers in Lebanon would have been sweltering, and it is highly probable that the men would never have had the opportunity to shower. We know that they were only let out of their cell to use the outhouse. Also, they would not have been given a change of clothes, so their shorts and t-shirts would have endured numerous stains, rips, and tears. Before she distributed them, K ran the costumes through the washing machine with bleach, and she distressed them with a mixture of bentonite clay and graphite powder. She also cut a few holes. The actors decided, collectively, to never wash their clothes, and so this lack of care supplied an additional level of grunge.

For makeup, K instructed the actors to apply a grey mixture of clay and graphite powder to their flesh, focusing particularly on their joints. She also supplied a graphite stick that they could use to further darken their joints. Initially, the actors applied too little of the makeup, so we had to ask them to overdo it.

During our final weeks of rehearsals, our two set designers, Neil Reda and Katie Fry, were also hard at work. Using what small set budget they had, they built platforms, painted them a dingy black, and attached pipes to them just above ground level. Then they attached the prisoners' chains to these pipes. The platforms came in four sections, so it was easy to dismantle them and store them backstage each night. When the actors first rehearsed on the set, a problem became apparent. The chains made far too much noise as they banged and clanged on the platforms. Katie then had a brainstorm. She bought strips of thin, grey carpet, distressed them with black paint, and attached them to the platforms. These strips of carpet successfully muffled the noise of the chains. I decided to also use the original three acting blocks in the set, and we positioned them close to the pipes. I was quite pleased with the set. The outline of the platform created a smaller cell-like playing space, and overall the set fit my image of a dank and dreary makeshift holding space.



The set: carpeted platforms, acting blocks, pipes, and chains

## PERFORMING

*Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* opened on March 18, 2009 and ran for four performances at the Newdick Theatre of Virginia Commonwealth University. I invited my Introduction to Stage Performance class to the final dress rehearsal. In total, approximately eighty people saw the show, a letdown after the three hundred or so who saw *bash*. Some people missed the show because they were involved in the VCU mainstage production of *Cabaret* that weekend. Others said that they had simply been too busy to attend. There was also a small group of students who confessed to me that they hadn't gone to the show because they personally disliked one or more members of the cast.

I was very pleased with my actors' performances, with the exception of their Friday evening show. They had apparently stayed up late the night before, and their fatigue was obvious in their performances. Their pacing was slow, and their delivery was sloppy. Their best night, I am told, was Saturday. I unfortunately had to be out of town then, but I received rave reviews from the cast, the crew, and that night's audience members.

Alex, I believe, finally conquered his declamatory speaking style. He relaxed, committed, and breathed new life into Adam. He embraced his character's moments of both strength and weakness. Alex became so committed to his character that he did extra pushups and sit-ups before each rehearsal. He wanted to thoroughly embody the exercise-conscious Adam.

Zach also impressed me. Each evening before the show, he "checked" his dialect. Occasionally, vocal coach Thomas Cunningham would stop by to listen and coach. Zach made bold choices and performed with a sense of maturity beyond his years. Many

audience members complimented him on his performance while they marveled at his young age.

Brian, as I have mentioned, received many accolades. The warmth he brought to Michael was incredible. His dialect, like Zach's, was practically seamless. He, according to many people, stole the show.

I could not have been more proud of my cast. All of the hard work and long hours certainly paid off.



A lighter moment: "Cheers...cheers...cheers."

## CHAPTER 5 WOMEN AND MEN

I chose to direct *medea redux* and *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* because of the promise I saw in the scripts. I appreciated the complexity of the characters, and I knew I could stage both plays with very minimal sets.

The supposed masculinity of the plays did not affect my decisions in the least. While *medea redux* is a play about murderous revenge, the Woman's act is fueled by hurt, a very feminine emotion. While *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* is about men's survival in the face of extreme adversity, it's really a story about humanity. I did not feel that my gender put me at a disadvantage with either play.

I did notice, however, that I interacted differently with my two casts. I found that, in some ways, my directorial style paralleled my teaching style. When I teach, I find that the men are the ones who expect me to baby them. (I realize this may be due to my age. At twenty-eight, I am not that far removed in age from them.) If they are sick, they expect me to excuse their absence. They sometimes use mild flirtation to try and get what they want. Other times, the men will subtly challenge my authority or ask probing questions as if to test my intelligence. In one-on-one confrontations with men, I find myself referencing facts. For example, I might say, "Its due date is clearly listed in the syllabus," "My records show you *do* have four absences," or "Yes, Moliere was a playwright, but he first was an actor."

When my male actors would tell me they had forgotten about a rehearsal, I would direct their attention to their printed calendar. When they said they'd been sick, I would ask



why they hadn't had the respect to call or email me. When attendance at rehearsals became a problem for some of the actors, I came down hard on them. I scolded them not only for disrespecting me but also for disrespecting the time of their fellow actors. Once I expressed my displeasure—a departure from my usual easygoing self—they stopped missing rehearsals.

Also, I found that the surest way to relate the essence of the play to them was through facts. The more they learned about prison conditions, their respective nationalities, and the true stories of kidnap victims, the easier it was for them to connect with their characters. The dramaturgical research was of great benefit to them. Once they understood the play, they were able to let down their defenses and let their emotions out. As soon as they were comfortable in their characters' skin, they were able to be comfortable with each other. Performing moments of vulnerability became less and less of a challenge, the closer they grew as a cast.

I faced a different situation with the women of *medea redux*. In my classes, the women are generally quicker to respect my authority. They complain far less, and if they under-perform on an assignment, they generally accept the consequences without a fuss. If I present myself with confidence, they believe what I have to say. (This is not to say they accept it blindly. They are more than comfortable when it comes to asking clarifying questions.)

As I mentioned in an earlier section, I began rehearsals by talking about the concept of a Medea Moment. We talked freely about our experiences as women. My cast developed a bond early in the process, as they shared stories and got to know each other.



Like the Woman in the play, they were able to tap into similar feelings of hurt and betrayal. Medea is the ultimate woman scorned, and they understood her actions. They didn't necessarily agree with them, but they understood. In comparison to the men, I think their roles evolved more quickly. As women, we tend to be more in touch with our emotions and are more apt to express them freely. The women in my cast did exactly that.

I never had to discipline the cast of *medea redux*. They always showed up for rehearsal, and they came ready to work. When I gave them a date to be off-book, they all met it. They respected each other, and they respected the process. They worked hard, and their efforts paid off.

## CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

In her book *Women Stage Directors Speak: Exploring the Influence of Gender on Their Work*, Rebecca Daniels writes that “[t]he profession of directing has been heavily influenced and dominated by male artists since it first came to prominence in the nineteenth century, and most directing theory and pedagogy to date has been written by men” (1). To put it in perspective, women, as of 1996, accounted for only twenty percent of the members of the Society for Stage Directors and Choreographers (2).

I acknowledge that I work in a male-dominated field. I, however, do not like being defined as a “woman director.” Do I believe the gender of a director can ultimately determine his or her ability to stage a successful show? Not in most cases. I do, however, believe that the best directors draw either from their own experiences or, if their experiences cannot provide the proper in-road, from their research.

When I use the terms “masculine” and “feminine” to describe plays, I do so in very general terms. Admittedly, I am influenced by the dominant model of gender in Western nations. Broadly defined, femininity involves feeling emotions while nurturing others, and masculinity involves performing acts of reason while defending the home front. I believe that the two plays detailed in this thesis possess both masculine and feminine qualities. Both plays are about individuals who are living under extreme conditions, and so there is less chance for pretense. They are *people*, plain and simple.

The Woman in *medea redux* is a murderer. She bares her soul, piece by piece, to her interrogators beyond the glass. She knows she will be sentenced to significant time in prison or maybe even death, and in her mind, she has nothing more to lose. As the Woman tells her tale, she finds herself fluctuating between moments of strength and weakness.

The three men in *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* have found themselves in a godforsaken hole of a prison. They know that their survival is uncertain, and so, between their spats, they nurture each other. They ultimately put aside their differences and focus on the task at hand: survival.

Do I believe that gender can influence an individual's directorial style? Absolutely. Do I think my gender has influenced many of my directorial decisions? Certainly. As a woman, I gravitate toward certain methods of thinking and expressing myself. I may share a perspective separate from my male counterparts, but I never make that my focus while I am directing. I agree with director Rita Giomi who is quoted in Rebecca Daniels's book *Women Stage Directors Speak: Exploring the Influence of Gender on Their Work*:

I think [gender] influences everything, from start to finish...I never really stop to think about it while I'm working...I think the minute you do, you're sunk because your focus goes to the wrong place. It goes on yourself, and that's not where your direct focus should be while you're in process. It has to be on what's in front of you, and what's going on there. (35)

What's important to me is that I make my decisions based on what I, Sarah Mansell Yount, think is right and best for the show, the cast, and the crew. I let my artistic self be my guide and, if all goes as planned I have a success on my hands.

I do feel, however, that sometimes male and female directors have different battles to wage. They yield power in different ways. Male directors often command authority through

use of a strong voice and a commanding presence. This does not happen across the board, but it is the likely scenario. Female directors who utilize this same strategy, however, may find themselves labeled as overly headstrong or pushy. For women, a more successful route to power may come via successful collaboration with others on the production team. While men are an island, women are a village.

In an interview with Rebecca Daniels, director Pamela Hendrick addresses the issue of collaboration in theatre. She believes that “it [the collaborative instinct in women] comes from a life of wanting to share, an apparent sharing of authority” (Daniels 100). She goes on to say:

I feel optimistic in many ways that as more and more women move into the role of director, they will be changing the model under which theatre is produced and that it is going to become more collaborative....I really think the main reason is that a collaborative model takes the focus off individual personalities and power struggles and puts it on serving the play. (100)

I personally believe that collaboration is the key to any good production. I pride myself on the creation of strong teams and on my communication skills. My hope is for many more women to find their way to the director’s chair and for us, as a worldwide theatre community, to continually question what makes a good director.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **WOMAN 1**

you know what's funny? he hit on me, my teacher did, on one of those trips, yeah. not on that one, this was at the maritime center a couple months later...scared the shit out 'a me! i didn't even know what he was doing at first—i mean, okay, i did, but i was like thirteen—and that's just not what you're expecting at that age. well, maybe it never is...

### **WOMAN 3**

he came up behind me at the observation tank, right, where they've got the sharks and everything, see, this other teacher was with us and she wanted to take the rest of the children on down the passageway—'cause they have a place where you can handle different sea things, shells and crabs and stuff, and the shark tank has this dark room connected to it so that you can stand there and see without a glare all over the windows, and some kids were sort 'a scared—but i was always interested in sharks and all that, i was. you know, you have to pick a vocation in seventh grade, they make you do that in junior high, on this "career day," right? and i chose "marine biologist." i did. out 'a all the other kinds of things they had there, i picked that one, 'cause i love the water, always have...

so, my teacher said it'd be okay if i stayed and watched, we'd catch up later... (BEAT) well, i'm keeping my eye on this one big hammerhead, that's a species of shark—you probably knew that—and he's darting in real close to the glass, this hammerhead is...suddenly, i feel all this weight up against me. my teacher is pushing me forward with his body, up onto the observation windows, and i can't move. he never said anything while it was happening, i mean to me—i could hear him whispering something about the

#### WOMAN 2 & WOMAN 3

“tragic nobility of sea creatures”

#### WOMAN 2

some shit like that--

#### WOMAN 3

and all i can see, i can't turn at all, the way he's got me held there, all i can see is this shark, the one i'd been watching, coming out of the murk and sweeping past me, again and again...and it's not 'till he's right on top of me, and turned each time, that i can see his eye. he turns past the glass at the last second and his eye just sort 'a rolls back all white while he passes...

#### WOMAN 1

fuck, that was scary, i've never forgotten it. that feeling, his weight on me, and watching as that hammerhead just kept circling around...



WOMAN 2

well, what the hell, it's easy to scare a kid. right?

WOMAN 1

anyway, he wouldn't look at me after that, my teacher, not even a glance, the whole rest of the trip. and he was always real nice before, and funny to me...i mean, not in a bad way, not like inappropriately so, i don't think, but—no, i wasn't even a “teacher's pet” or whatever—he was just sort ‘a open with me.

WOMAN 3

jokes, and showing me pictures in magazines, like, after that career thing he would hang up undersea stuff in class, and bringing in pieces ‘a coral to look at...we were starting to be friends, i thought, at least sort of friendly, because it's hard, i think, for a teacher in school, like, junior high, where nobody cares, kids just wanna do sports, and dances, hang out with their friends, you know...so, if you meet a person who is actually interested, like i was, and i really was—i wasn't the smartest or remembered the most, like i said, but—i was genuinely interested in things, i wanted to learn, right, i felt i needed to comprehend a little about the universe, you know? i did. ‘cause it intrigues me. the way it works, yeah. (BEAT) and i think a teacher can pick up on that. and he just responded to it...so, we started to sort ‘a hang out a bit..., just at school, the library, or looking at slides in the resource

center, lunchtimes. (BEAT) it was good, umm...’s good, that’s all.

WOMAN 1

i mean, fuck, i was thirteen, okay, it was nice to have somebody look at you and not say to pick up your socks... something like that. let’s face it, thirteen’s a pretty shitty age, right?

*pause.*

but he wouldn’t look over at me after that...

WOMAN 3

he did give me a ride home, though, from school. he did do that. I mean, nothing, not a look on the outing, sits way away from me on the bus, but back at our building, see, he’s responsible for us, and all the parents are there, this is a friday, and my dad doesn’t show up. we go into the office, call his work, nothing at home, and he doesn’t come. half-hour goes by, nobody at school but us. sitting there on the curb, waiting for my dad. finally he says, my teacher, he can drop me if i want. he drove this late model peugeot---i remember ‘cause i once asked him to teach me how to say it—kind of a cream color peugeot, and he said he’d run me home if I’d like that.

WOMAN 2

‘s what he said, “if you’d like that.” (BEAT) in the car, like this was yesterday, i recall he had this woman singing on the tape player, real soft and painful, i remember, ‘cause i had to ask who this was. i mean, this was not the bee gees and i’d

never heard anything like it. so fragile-sounding, you know?  
he said it was

WOMAN 1, WOMAN 2, & WOMAN 3  
“billie holiday,”

WOMAN 2  
that was her name, and it was all he ever played,

WOMAN 3  
first thing he’d said to me, i mean, practically, in five hours is  
“billie holiday.”

WOMAN 1  
and he smiled, it was dark out, but i could see him smiling  
there, we’re sitting at a light, and he says, “she’s all i ever  
listen to.” and then “you kind of remind me of her, you  
know? you always seem just a little bit sad. Smiling, but sad.  
i like that...”

WOMAN 2  
(BEAT) the fuck did that mean? you know? because, listen,  
you don’t say stuff like that to a thirteen-year-old, okay? you  
just don’t, uh-huh, ‘cause she’ll be yours for life. i mean it. if  
you do, she will be...

APPENDIX B

**The Shafer Alliance  
Laboratory Theatre**

Presents

**Someone  
Who'll Watch  
Over Me**

**By Frank McGuinness**

**Directed by Sarah Yount**

## **The Time**

The mid-1980s

## **The Place**

Beirut, Lebanon

“It is a terrible thing to keep a man or woman from their family when they have done nothing.”

Irishman Brian Keenan taught English at the American University of Beirut. In 1986 he was kidnapped by a band of Islamic extremists. He was locked away, in shackles. He endured years of confinement and abuse.

His story was the inspiration for Someone Who'll Watch Over Me.

This play is dedicated to all those around the world whose freedom has been taken away.

## **The Cast**

(In order of appearance)

Adam Canning.....Alex Gerber  
Edward Sheridan.....Zach Betz  
Michael Watters.....Brian Gartland

## **Production Team**

Director.....Sarah Yount  
Stage Manager.....Lisa Kelly  
Vocal Coach.....Thomas Cunningham  
Dramaturgs.....Tony Sanchez, Matthew Shifflett,  
Erin Zimmerman Moss, & Michael Sater  
Set Design.....Neil Reda, Katie Fry  
Lighting Design.....Michael Sater  
Costume Design.....K Stone  
Sound Design.....Alex Gerber  
Dresser.....Sara Polton  
House Managers.....Tony Sanchez, Nicole Carter

There will be one 10-minute intermission.

Produced by special arrangement with Samuel French, Inc.

Please turn off all cell phones and other electronic devices.

No flash photography, please.

Handicapped accessible restrooms are located next door in  
Shafer Court Dining Center.

## **Special Thanks**

Dr. Noreen Barnes

Barry Bell

Ron Keller

Todd Lawrence

Kevin McGranahan

Matthew Shifflett

Ali Angelone

Luke Foco

Dan Dennis

Brian Bassett

S.A.L.T.

The Guild of Graduate Students

Elias Chamoun

Tülin Khalid-Azim

## Historical Note

As the men in our play sit in a cell, a war is raging outside, one in which they are pawns...

The Lebanese Civil War of 1975-1990 was a multilateral war fought between the National Front and the Lebanese Front. The National Front was comprised of several Leftist Muslim militias, including the PLO, the Socialist Front, the Arab elements of the Provisional Lebanese Army, the Communist Party, and, later in the war, Hezbollah. Alternately, right-wing Christian militias, as well as some Christian Palestinian refugee groups, comprised the Lebanese Front.

Like so many violent confrontations, the conflict was about the defense of a country for one side and the guarantee of human rights for the other. To complicate matters, there were often as many as 6 or 7 factions fighting independently for power, and by the end of the war almost every like-minded faction had not only allied but also betrayed one another.

Between 1979 and the mid- to late-1980s, kidnapping was a popular way for the National Front to fund its operations. Their most frequent targets were Westerners. While in many cases all hostages were released unharmed, many fringe groups preferred to dispose of their hostages whether or not their demands were met.

International statistics put the number of Lebanese war-related deaths, both civilian and combatant, between 150,000 and 300,000. Between 45,000 and 100,000 Palestinian refugees and Syrian forces also lost their lives during the conflict.

The origins of the war go back as far as the first Crusades. Many questions still go unanswered, and a general lack of primary documentation limits the available facts about this war.

—Tony Sanchez



## VITA

Sarah Mansell Yount was born in DuBois, Pennsylvania on May 27, 1980. In 2003 she graduated from Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania with a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre and English. While pursuing a Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia, Sarah taught undergraduate classes in Effective Speech, Introduction to Stage Performance, and Directing. She presented the paper “Beyond Koalas and Vegemite: A Course in Australian Culture” at the Mid-America Theatre Conference on February 28, 2008 in Kansas City, Missouri.