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The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek: A Play in Production

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THE TRESTLE AT POPE LICK CREEK
A PLAY IN PRODUCTION

A Thesis Presented

by

AARON J. SCHMOOKLER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
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May, 2009

Department of Theater

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ABSTRACT

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MAY, 2009

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THESIS: An investigation into my handling of the production's key challenges, and into what came of those efforts, will reveal a pattern: decisions made from trust – trust of myself as a leader and of my collaborators – yield a better, more satisfying harvest than do decisions made from fear.

KEYWORDS & PHRASES: *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*, by Naomi Wallace; theater; theatre; stage; directing; director; process; challenge; time; ritual; live music; heightened language; movement; physicality; casting; actors; designers; lighting; deviant sexuality; audience; conscripting; growth; lessons learned; depression; railroad; train; trust; faith; artistic process; collaboration; leadership.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2008, I directed Naomi Wallace's *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* in the Curtain Theatre at UMASS, Amherst. It was for me a great experience of fun, learning, and intimate collaboration, and, I think, overall, a successful production – engaging, enjoyable, moving, and thought provoking – if comments from the audience are any indication. It was also quite challenging to shape a coherent production true to Wallace's intentions, and one that carried to an audience the profound sense of hope I find central to the greater value of this dark play. At the helm, I bested some of the challenges I faced and fell short on others. An investigation into my handling of the production's key challenges, and into what came of those efforts, will reveal a pattern: decisions made from trust – trust of myself as a leader and of my collaborators – yield a better, more satisfying harvest than do decisions made from fear.

Setting the Stage

A synopsis of the play's characters, relationships, and action should help to provide a context for discussing the challenges encountered in production: Dalton is a bright, naïve fifteen year-old boy. Pace, sixteen, is a brash, train-obsessed tomboy with an undeniable allure. At the play's start, Dalton and Pace have just met and she has convinced him to come out to the trestle in order to “run the train” with her. This is a game of chicken in which they plan, when the train's whistle can be heard in the distance, to race across the hundred-foot-high bridge, running toward the oncoming train, in hopes

of reaching the safety of the far side before the train arrives. Because the bridge towers over a dry creek-bed and is wide enough only for the train, being on the bridge when the train arrives means certain death. The future for each of these youths does not look bright. Pace says:

You and me and the rest of us kids out here, we're just like. Okay. Like potatoes left in a box... The potato thinks the dark is the dirt and it starts to grow roots so it can survive, but the dark isn't the dirt and all it ends up sucking on is a fistful of air. And then it dies.¹

(Grammatical oddities are Wallace's.) While Dalton harbors some faint hope of going to college, or at least of leaving town, Pace tells him it's not going to happen.

Pace's hopelessness likely stems in large part from the death of her friend Brett. He died before the play's start, running the train with Pace. They raced across the bridge, Brett out front until he tripped and fell looking over his shoulder to check on Pace. Pace, thinking Brett would get right back up, passed him and crossed safely. Brett, however, was injured in the fall, could no longer run, and just stood there while the oncoming train slammed into him. Driven by a desire to redeem herself for failing Brett and causing his death, Pace presses Dalton to practice the run with her day after day for weeks on end. A romance buds between them, but is kept cool by Pace who teases Dalton, allowing physical and emotional intimacy between them only in carefully doled out portions – a glimpse of her in her underwear, a kiss on the back of his knee. Finally, one evening in the creek-bed below the trestle, having exchanged her dress for her brother's overalls, Pace instructs Dalton to lie on her dress. Then from some distance, while he masturbates,

¹ Naomi Wallace. *Trestle at Pope Lick Creek, The*. (New York: Broadway Play Publishing Inc., 2000) 14.

she talks him through a fantasy: Pace is the man, aggressive and hard. Dalton is the woman, penetrated by Pace. Stimulated by her narrative, he ejaculates on her dress, and their relationship is, in a way, consummated.

But neither of them is satisfied. Dalton says:

Tonight. Finally tonight. But not like a girl should. You fucked me but I wasn't even inside you. It's ridiculous. This isn't how I want to be.²

Moreover, Pace's main interest in the relationship has not been sexual but has centered instead on the trestle. After this sex act, she tells Dalton, "Tonight, god damn it. You'll run it tonight." For her, the relationship – founded as a vehicle for redemption on the trestle – has not yet been consummated. "We've been working on this for weeks."³ Dalton refuses to run. She begins to run it without him while he watches from the creek-bed below until he is driven by his anger about the strangeness of the sex-act to look away. She stops in the middle of the bridge and pleads for him to watch, but to no avail. He will not watch. Without his eyes on her to record her feat, she will not run. With time lost, she cannot outrun the train; doomed, she dives from the trestle to the rocks below as Dalton looks on. In his grief, Dalton scoops her up in his arms, and kisses her bloody, lifeless body. Covered in her blood, his semen on her dress, Dalton is arrested for rape and murder. Stunned into near catatonia, Dalton says nothing in his own defense, though his jailor, Chas (father to the train-killed Brett), tries fruitlessly to coax, cajole and bully him into saying something that might save him from the hangman.

Dalton's Father, Dray, meanwhile, has been paralyzed by despair after losing his job at the local foundry. With nothing to do with his hands, he stays home and makes

² Wallace. 52.

³ Ibid.

shadows on the wall, afraid to leave the house because of a fear of invisibility that comes of having nothing to contribute to society or family. Gin (Dalton's mother) has not yet been fired from her job at a chemical plant, but that ever-present threat and the danger inherent in her job loom. Unsatisfied with her job and also with Dray's despairing listlessness, she presses him to get out, even to join her and some others in their plans to reopen a glass factory that's been closed down. The first evidence that she's breaking through Dray's despairing paralysis comes in his visit, finally, to Dalton in jail. After that show of love and caring, Dalton's hopelessness sees its first major cracks. At last, Dalton tells the story of Pace's death and is therefore released from jail.

Trestle is a difficult play: difficult for a reader, difficult for an audience, difficult for a creative team working to put it onstage. Many of the difficulties it presents to a reader are the same as those presented to an audience. Some lie in the content inherent to the 1936 industrial town setting – despair born of death, isolation, Depression era hardship – a tough world in which to spend time. Some lie in content more idiosyncratic to Wallace's progressive politics – like her intention that *Trestle* be resistant, “to the brutally conformist notions of sexuality that are imposed upon us from childhood”⁴ – that make many folks squirm when discussed in detail. Challenges for the reader and audience do not end with content, however, but extend to a non-linear structure whose refusal to present cause linked with effect creates a murder mystery. This murder mystery is not of the classic who-done-it variety, but is mysterious even when addressing the questions of what is the crime; what happened; what is the nature of time?

⁴ Naomi Wallace. “Re: from Naomi Wallace.” (E-mail to Aaron J. Schmookler. 26 Feb. 2007)

CHAPTER 2

THE INVESTIGATION

Dealing With Time

Challenges I anticipated from the beginning of my preparation to direct this play included the bleakness of the script's content contrasted with my desire to accentuate the dazzling hope I saw beneath it; sexuality; the ghost that haunts the second act; the prominence and weight of a train that never appears onstage; the difficulty presented by the necessity of casting young actors in adult roles in this college setting. Looming large among these challenges was the critically important difficulty presented by the achronological organization of Wallace's plotline.

The play jumps backward and forward in time. Dalton and Pace's first visit to the trestle is juxtaposed directly with Dalton's first days in jail and the threat of hanging, but without any hint of what he's doing there. The chronology's parts are stingily dispensed (and out-of-order) for painstaking reassembly in the mind of the viewer. I imagine it is this last challenge that prompted Mike Dobbins, director of a 2007 production at the Heartland Theatre in Normal IL, to say that it asks audiences to "work a little harder than they usually do."⁵ This demand for audience involvement (one that I think is vastly understated by Mr. Dobbins), is one of the primary aspects of the play that excites me as

⁵ Tricia Stiller. "Review *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*" *The Scene*. 10 March 2007.
<<http://www.tcstyle.com/articles/2007/04/12/thescene/doc45da2528416cf090629058.txt>>

a director. And it's one for a creative team to grapple with as they plan a strategy to build the experience they hope to give an audience.

The scenic designer's advisor, Miguel Romero, shared with us that upon first reading he had not successfully reassembled the plot-line as I had. I respect Romero for his intelligence and quick wittedness, so this revelation had a significant impact on me. If he hadn't pieced the chronology together upon first read, then there was a strong likelihood that many in the audience would not manage the jig-saw puzzle upon seeing a production that did not take this challenge well into account.

My hope, my vision for the audience experience included providing a visceral experience, not only of the bleakness and despair endemic in the Depression-era play, but also of the emergence of hope, dazzling and bright with promise, from the depths of hopelessness. An audience's experience of this hope emerging hinges on their experience of that sequence – hope out of despair, not the reverse. It hinges too on their open state of mind – something it is my duty as director to invite, invoke, inspire.

Here was born one of many fears I'd face in this process. My gut instinct had been not to worry about the audience's apprehension of chronology; now, however, I was worried. If, as the play comes to a close and the sense of hope swells to its highest, the audience is frustrated by incomprehension of chronology and of the cause and effect relationship of events, they might by some miracle grasp the immergence of hope *intellectually* through cues fed to them in the final moments. They would not, immersed in their own agitation and despair at having been unable to understand the basic narrative, be open to an experience of that hope in the *gut*. We would have to ensure a clarity of narrative in order to foment an openness in the minds of the audience.

The first task in creating this clarity for the audience was to decide what would be our mark of success. Clarity is a subjective term suggesting a continuum of degrees rather than a yes-or-no dichotomy. Were I watching this play for the first time, I'd be satisfied to leave the theater with a basic sense of the cause and effect relationship between Dalton's and Pace's actions at the Trestle on the one hand, and Dalton's landing in prison on the other. If I were secure in my understanding that Pace raced the train without Dalton and jumped to her death, if I knew that Dalton had been blamed for her death because he had held her body after her fall and was therefore covered in her blood, and especially if I had managed to piece together that the play's final "sex scene" had occurred prior to Pace's death and had left Dalton's semen on her dress further implicating him in her death, then I would actually leave the theatre *more* than satisfied. I'd be proud of myself for astute observation and nimble mind. I'd be satisfied and proud, even if I could not make chronological sense of the scenes following the side-story of Dalton's parents, even if I never put together the connection between Chas's jailor, his son's history and previous death, and the intimate link between those details and Dalton's current predicament. So, the mark of success needn't be absolute and universal clarity. In fact, I have more appreciation for works of art that are not apprehended completely in one sitting. Careful and repeated experience should yield greater riches even when one viewing is satisfying in itself.

In considering this mark of success for sequence comprehension, I was also reminded by a whisper rising from my past of a lesson taught me by my 9th grade writing teacher. Mrs. Kershman told me when I was fourteen, "write for your most intelligent friend." It's fun to piece together connections only hinted at. When everything is

presented on a silver platter, when there's no work to do, when we're spoken to as though we can't be expected to add two and two on our own, we're bored if not angry for having been condescended to. This is why I was excited by *Trestle*'s call for the audience to work harder than usual. If those who weren't terribly quick or who weren't paying attention were left in the dark, I could live with that.

Even with that immediate sense of right-fit, throughout the process of working with designers, I was haunted by whispers of unrest that occasionally played at my mind. But I reminded myself to trust. The closest I'd ever come before to directing a play with so much mystery inherent in it was a production of Pinter's *The Birthday Party* in which thugs from an unidentified group show up and terrorize a boarder in a seaside boarding-house, claiming he owes them allegiance, until he loses his mind and they drag him away. Who are these people? Why are they after him? Does he actually know why they're there haranguing him despite his protests that he doesn't? Does he deserve this treatment? I had decided as quickly then as I did with *Trestle* how much the audience would need to understand of this mystery. In that case, my answer was, "I don't care. Pinter provides no answers." Any answers the *creative team* might contribute would be ours alone, and therefore an anathema to Pinter's vision; any answers the *audience* came to would be their own creations, invented to fill a deliberate void of explanation. Certain that Pinter knew that nature abhors a vacuum, I decided only answers created in the minds of viewers would be consistent with Pinter's intentions. We gave no clues to the answers to these questions. Having made this decision, I never looked back.

Unlike Pinter's mystery, however, Wallace's mysteries have concrete and specific solutions. Are we failing her vision, I wondered, if we don't make sure our audience has

a *full* understanding, not only of cause and effect in Dalton's imprisonment, but also with Chas the Jailor's involvement and of Dalton's parents' chronology as well? These doubts rose a few times in my mind over the course of our process, and each time I answered myself this way: Like Pinter, Wallace has provided the answers and clues she wanted an audience to have.

Having determined what degree of clarity was needed, my fears told me to devote my attention to devising a strategy for guiding the audience to the understanding I hoped they would have of cause and effect. Because of a need to jump back-and-and forth though 22 scenes with cinematic efficiency, alternating between three locations, the set would have to be an essentially static unit, unchanging. Its stasis would not help the audience piece together the timeline. Cue fears.

I turned to time-based media to fix the problem. Laura Schoch (the sound designer), James MacNamara (the lighting designer), and I played with various thoughts about how these two temporal design elements might help connect the jig-sawed chronology. We talked about putting the scenes together on paper in chronological order (with some input from me, production dramaturg, Ayaan Agane did just that) and devising a flowing sequence for lights and sound that could then be cut apart and reassembled with their commensurate scenes in Wallace's achronological order. The resultant disjointed design flow would, we theorized, provide clues for an audience as to how to piece the scenes together. In this model, the audience would perhaps be able to recognize the disjointed final edge of an earlier scene and relate it to the disjointed leading edge of a scene just beginning, thereby making a sequential association akin to

insert TAB “A” into SLOT “B”. Far fetched. This idea fell by the wayside as it seemed an impossible struggle.

We tried a couple of times to put our minds to relating temporal events in the action of the play to some temporal design concept, but never made much headway. We couldn’t get a hold of the problem. Other concerns took our attention. Sometimes this kind of slipperiness indicates a need to work harder to crack it. Sometimes, however, slippery is a hint that the problem isn’t a problem. Such was the case here. Success would not require lights and sound to create Ikea-style time-assembly instructions.

As we moved forward through the process, Schoch and MacNamara concentrated increasingly on space, not time. At the top of each scene, Wallace’s script simply names the setting without providing temporal signposts of any kind. Lights and sound, we then decided, would do likewise. Lights, within the Scenic Designer’s (Sean Cote) foot-of-the-trestle set, would create the spaces: Trestle, Home, Jail. Sound would thematically identify those places as well. Just as musical motifs identify characters in Prokofiev’s *Peter and the Wolf*, so would musical motifs identify settings in our production.

How, then, my fear insisted, would we help guide the audience through the task of assembling sequence and causality? As we worked to solve other problems, I got a handle on the fears plaguing my mind. And I was reminded of my initial gut impulse – not worry, but trust. I’d trust to Wallace’s craft. I’d trust to my experience in reading the play of having succeeded for myself in assembling enough of the narrative to be moved by the emergence of hope. I’d trust to the intelligence of the audience to do as well as I had, and trust that the visual, aural, and tactile richness of live theatre (which the printed page does not have) would make that task easier for the audience than it had been for me.

We'd trust, and whatever else we did to put our individual and collective artistic imprint on our production, we'd have to make sure that it didn't get in the way, obscure or distract in any way from the clarity of Wallace's blueprint. Fear slowed me down, but in the end, Keep-It-Simple would be the solution to providing our audience with the information they'd need to make sense of the puzzle.

The Place of Ritual

Keep-It-Simple, however, is a plan of what not to do – not to get in the way, not to complicate the storytelling – and begs the question: Ok, what then? What *will* we do? Though others had told me they don't see the hope that I see in this play, and that they don't recognize ritual as a central part of it either, they were central to my experience from my first reading. I referred also to those things that strike me in the gut and excite me most about the script. There's the mystery, the puzzle that requires that audiences "work a little harder." Those things also led me to ritual and hope.

While I seek to foster an active participation from the audience, I don't want to put them on the spot, asking them to speak or to step onto the stage. Conscripting an audience into participating by asking, instead, that they complete their experience within their minds rather than allowing the "show" to wash over them in a passive TV-audience-like stupor is arguably the duty of artists in the theatre. The audience thereby becomes complicit in the event, co-conspirators, more like a congregation, perhaps, than like a movie audience – having hired us to involve them in what we've prepared. *Trestle*, with its inherent demand that the audience work for its supper, is uniquely strong in potential for such recruitment.

I've hinted already at my sense of the theatre as a ritual space by invoking "congregation" above. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ritual as, "a prescribed order of performing religious or other devotional service."⁶ The *Unabridged Random House Dictionary of the English Language* lists as one of its definitions of ritual, "any practice or pattern of behavior regularly practiced in a set manner."⁷ Both of these definitions appeal to me, though to the latter I would add that the practice takes on a meaning or significance beyond the mere performance of it. Thus, brushing one's teeth every morning and every evening for the purpose of cleaning one's teeth would not constitute a ritual while brushing one's teeth at a prescribed time in order to assure one's sense of normalcy and that all-is-right-with-the-world does. By either definition, ritual is inexorably tied to hope. There is no reason for ritual without it.

Surely, a theatre audience goes through prescribed "motions" – ticket buying, program holding (and maybe reading), cell-phone off-turning, play watching, intermission milling, hand clapping, etc. Grotowski suggests a significance of theatre beyond the mere performance of these actions, describing the potential for an experience in the theatre thus:

First of all, a place and our own kind; and then that our kind, whom we do not know, should come, too. So, what matters is that, in this, first I should not be alone, then-we should not be alone. But what does our kind mean? They are those who breathe the same air and-one might say-share our senses. What is possible together? Holiday.⁸

⁶ "ritual, *n.*" ^{1.a.} *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, 17 Apr. 2009, <<http://dictionary.oed.com.silk.library.umass.edu:2048/cgi/entry/00181778>>.

⁷ "ritual, *n.*" ^{8.} *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd ed, unabridged, Random House, inc. 1987.

⁸ Jerzy Grotowski and Boleslaw Taborski. "Holiday." *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Visual Performance Issue (Jun., 1973), 114.

So a sense of kinship, a frisson of holiday excitement, may be a part of the ritual of theatre. That aura of ritual is present not alone for the audience. The performers have their daily rites, invested with the greater significance of being with “our own kind,” generating a camaraderie and affinity among viewers, and a sense of holiday as well

Congregational gatherings for ritual have always involved narrative – readings from the Bible, sermons from the pulpit, enactments of a successful hunt. My duties as director of this play, as a guide for the narrators and through them for the “congregation”, include defining a purpose for this narrative within the gathering of players and spectators. Since Wallace has set a form for the narrative, let function follow form.

I was struck by the prevalence of private ritual within *Trestle*, and had a sense from the first that ritual would be key in my approach to production. *Trestle* is a drama replete with idiosyncratic rituals performed fervently by each of the characters singly and in pairs. Pace has her train – the repeated cycling of watching, study, and racing of the train connect her to a means of redemption. Dalton gets caught up in her contagious zeal, participating with her for the proximity to her that it offers. He also has with his mother a daily ritual of grooming, and with his father a lighting of candles. Dray in turn occupies his hands, devoid of work, with the ritual casting of shadows instead of steel. As Wallace says of this repetitive practice, “[It is] also creative in its own right. He can no longer ‘make’ labor with his hands, but he can create shadows.”⁹ He ritually replaces the productivity he’s lost in order to *be something*. “You are what you do,”¹⁰ his mother has

⁹ Naomi Wallace. “Re: from Naomi Wallace.” (E-mail to Aaron J. Schmookler. 26 Feb. 2007)

¹⁰ Naomi Wallace. *Trestle at Pope Lick Creek, The*. (New York: Broadway Play Publishing Inc., 2000) 48.

told him. Do nothing, and become nothing. Dray and Gin have replaced physical and conversational intimacy in their marriage with a game of catch that ends when the plate they are tossing breaks. Chas, Dalton's jailor, does surprising and seemingly aimless imitations of animals as a part of his attempts to get through to Dalton. Each of these rituals involves some attempt on the part of the person performing it to break through the despair that separates the characters from one another.

Along with my excitement about a script that demands a high level of internal participation from the audience, my own passionate regard for hope and intimacy as key qualities for a meaningful life, this potent motif of people mired in despair, still striving for hope and connection strikes me as crucial to my understanding of what is vital in (and vital to) this play.

Hope and intimacy were a potent part of my experience of reading *Trestle* for the first time, not only intellectually, but viscerally as well. After reading page after page of dysfunctional relationships, Dray finally says yes to his wife. Dalton finally frees himself by telling his story and recognizes a hint of innocence and intimacy in the sex act with Pace. No great steps have been taken, but these first small steps seem dazzlingly hopeful after a long immersion in despair and destruction. I put the script down with a renewed and invigorated commitment to being intimate with people I loved. The cynical reasons I had for keeping my distance in the ways that I did were made insignificant by my reading of the play. I saw upon first reading, and was reminded upon considering how and why I wanted to tell this story, a potential in production for inspiring an audience to greater intimacy in their lives. Let this play, then, be a ritual we perform each night for the

dissolution of cynicism, the greatest single obstacle in the mind of humanity (or so it seems to me) to hope, creativity and intimacy. Though the audience was not privy to this notion of ritual, it provided us as artists with a framework in which to operate.

Advent of Live Music

Having set this framework, designers and I began to talk about implications for design. Design might, I conjectured, help to garner a sense of community and inclusion among the audience, even transport them as they entered from the world they'd come from into a ritual world of our making. And then I began to fret over how to do so. My first thoughts led me to Scenic Designer Sean Cote. "I want the set," I said, "to surround the audience, to envelope them. They should be in the world of the play." Cote was dubious, and his advisor, Miguel Romero was staunchly opposed. Those things we considered doing to envelope the audience into the world of the play, including painting the floor beneath the seats, Romero suggested would do little in a dark theatre to achieve what we were after, and would likely distract, calling attention to gleaming chrome chairs and drawing attention away from the stage. Here was an opportunity for us to avoid "getting in the way" of the storytelling. Cote and I were convinced by Romero's arguments and the set remained onstage.

My desire to transport the audience, and to foster a sense of community remained, however. I remembered a moment a few years ago, walking into an elementary school and being immediately transported by the smell of some industrial cleaner to a summer-camp from my childhood. Odor is a very efficient transporter. And considering *Trestle*,

the smell of creosote soaked railroad ties rose into my mind's nose. The faintest whiff of creosote always carries me directly to the tracks, to childhood walks along the rails with my father, my friends. It conjures the roar and rush of a passing train. I began a plan to import the smell of creosote into the theatre. Technical Director Michael Cottom brought up the small matter of creosote's toxicity. Back to the drawing-board.

I sat, still pondering the problem of transporting the audience from the moment of they enter the theatre. When fretting over such problems, my worry, at first, often obscures the solutions that come to me intuitively. Rather, a solution's first appearance feels more like a distraction, a wandering mind's daydream. In this case, just as I asked myself, "How are we going to do this?," an Aerosmith's song, "Hangman Jury" popped into my head. I shoved it aside and returned to my problem solving brainstorm. I started inadvertently humming Aerosmith. I shoved the song aside again, frustrated to have it seemingly stuck in my head, distracting me from the problem at hand. I would have done well to remember an article by Jonah Lehrer about the value of daydreaming I'd read in the Boston Globe a month before:

Many scientists argue that daydreaming is a crucial tool for creativity, a thought process that allows the brain to make new associations and connections. Instead of focusing on our immediate surroundings... [or on the problem at hand] the daydreaming mind is free to engage in abstract thought and imaginative ramblings. As a result, we're able to imagine things that don't actually exist.¹¹

I probably shoved the song aside almost ten times before recognizing the relevance of its instrumental introduction. Slide guitar and harmonica – railroad blues,

¹¹ Jonah Lehrer. "Daydream Achiever" *The Boston Globe*. 31 August, 2008.
<http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2008/08/31/daydream_achiever/?page=full>

popular in the thirties, texturally and thematically perfect: trains, hardship, depression and hangmen. And the notion of live music was born in my mind to the remembered strains of “Hangman’s Jury.”

Live music transports. Armies have long known this and used it to military advantage. Rock concerts’ success, the kind of cult following attracted by bands like The Grateful Dead, depend on it. Rituals have incorporated music since the dawn of civilization (it has been oft conjectured that music and ritual were born together). By happy coincidence – if in fact it is coincidence – I know nothing more effective at suspending, if not dissolving, cynicism than live music. Recorded music must be of a particularly high quality, has to strike a particular chord of harmony with my aesthetic in order to allow me to enjoy it at all. *Live* music, however, is somehow inherently more enjoyable than recorded music, its liveness mitigating its imperfections, and as if by magic it generates a sense of community among its audience.

Laura Schoch and I decided together, with a great deal of excitement between us, that live musicians would welcome our audience into the space. Through music our audience would be instantly transported. The cynicism, already weakened by the holiday frisson that comes with the decision to see a play, would immediately begin to melt apace. Through toe-tapping in time with one another, a sense of affinity, camaraderie, community, would begin to envelop the audience in the way that I had earlier hoped the set might do, but with much greater efficacy. And in happy synchrony, live musicians would help to create a setting through their playing of railroad style blues in alignment with the play.

The musicians, a guitarist and a harmonica player, touched the hearts of the audience before the play even began. So when they, with the words of the curtain speech, and with the music picking up again as the houselights faded, invited the audience to accompany them deeper into the world of the play, the audience gladly went, trusting. The Occasion, the Holiday, had begun.

The music added greatly to the richness of our production. In addition to providing preshow music and locale specific themes throughout the play, the musicians wrote and played underscoring. The music played not just under the action, under the actors, but played with them. It's an over-worn cliché to talk about some element of a play being "another character," and I never know quite what to make of that in any case, but live underscoring, in my experience, opened hearts in the audience, quickened hearts, and energized the viewers in such a way as to make them more open to the story and its journey, powerfully affecting the actors and their performances as well. Though my anxiety about finding a way to transport the audience tried to distract me, my intuition stuck with it long enough that I recognized the solution it had devised. And that solution offered far more in the end than I had known it could when I first discovered it.

Heightened Language

Playwright Naomi Wallace, a poet first, provided a music of her own in the language of the play. The dialogue has a heightened but broken rhythm to it that reflects the characters' own stilted emotional lives, their self-imposed distance from one another. Choppy though it might be, the dialogue does sing on the page. In my training and experience as an actor and director, I had never had much experience with extended table

work, and therefore was afraid of it. In retrospect, directing this play would have been an ideal opportunity to give it a try. Since we got on our feet almost immediately, we never really looked at the language of the play as a form in itself. It was only in conjunction with action, with blocking, with the logistical needs of the scenes that we dealt with the language. Even though I spoke often to the actors about the importance of language in the play, about the peppering of otherwise perfectly grammatical sentences with extraneous periods creating a rhythm of poetic distance between the characters, the concerns the actors had as a result of being on their feet overrode the needs of language and prevented us all from giving it the attention and the exploration that it deserved.

Though in the past, I've wondered what I'd even do with table work, were I to have *Trestle* to do over again, I'd indulge my inclination to view the language as poetry. We'd spend a week at the table, exploring the language as music. Experimenting with how it wants to be played. Playing, simply playing. I'd ask the actors to listen to themselves and to one another, not to worry about what's happening physically in any given moment of the play, even to let go of character, but just to hear how the language sounds. With that foundational work done, I think they, and I, would have had a better sense of what the music of the dialogue itself was. On that foundation, we could have layered the rest of our work.

Heightened Physicality

Though we never fully found the music of the language, I did know that it was music, poetry – a heightened sound-scape creating a heightened world. Heightened

speech, I was sure, called for heightened movement. From the first, I asked my cast for clean, crisp, specific movements, not intended to be purely naturalistic, but to represent natural movement as the dialogue, in some ways like the stylized dialogue of Mamet, represented natural speech without being quite so. Mamet's language is distinct, recognizable as Mamet because of the rhythms created by speakers who interrupt themselves mid-thought and who repeat phrases already spoken by other characters. I don't hear Mamet's language as natural speech patterns. It has taken certain unconscious aspects of natural speech and highlighted them, creating a kind of poetry that sounds like natural speech reflected back on itself. Wallace has done something similar with the language of this play, illustrating through fragmented sentences, the walls between people and intimate expression of their truest selves. It mimics an aspect of natural speech – a tendency that when we begin to share something deeply personal, we often stop. Too close. But this aspect of natural speech has been magnified and made musical.

From my actors, I asked that one movement not flow unimpeded into the next. I asked for stillness, when it came, to be complete. No "California stops." No choices somewhere in between. I asked for this when, on the first day of rehearsal, I learned simply by experiencing in my gut a need for it, that I wanted the actors to move or speak, but almost never both at once. I observed that simultaneous walking and talking obliterated the music of the speech for me. If they were to move within a speech, it would be only to punctuate a statement and their speaking would pause for the physical movement to complete, reinforcing Wallace's periods with action. I found a muscularity, a straining of a strong beast against ties barely able to restrain it, in the halting, pressing mode of Wallace's dialogue that echoes the muscularity of the train:

Okay. She's pulling eight cars at seventy tons apiece at eighty five. Not a big one, as for as they go. But big enough. The Engine herself's one hundred and fifty three tons. And not cotton, kid. Just cold, lip smackin' steel. Imagine a kiss like that. Just imagine it... And you can hear her cold slathering black hell of a heart barrelling towards the trestle and it sounds like this.¹²

The action onstage would have to match the dialogue and the train for its muscularity.

The fights written in (and one fight we added) would need to be sweaty and scrappy.

Even the moments of intimacy, both aborted and achieved, would have to have a sense of muscle to them. I asked this from my cast. And as we went along, finding that my impulse was bearing fruit, I insisted on it with greater and greater consistency.

Frustrated at times with what seemed to me to be pedestrian movement choices by actors, I tried to dictate specific movements, reminding myself of Robert Wilson, and found that my mind could not invent movement to fit the unique physiologies of the actors themselves. At those times, I had to let go my frustration and try something else.

The something else I eventually discovered by necessity is a tool I intend to use with great frequency in the future: to identify for the actors the problems I see and to simply trust them to find solutions. For instance, after trying in vain to describe in detail how I thought Chas's mock airplane crash should look, I finally decided to enlist the help of the actor instead of trying to fix him. "That moment feels too airy," I said of the instant that the plane touches ground. "That moment requires a greater sense of gravity." The actor playing Chas first took that to mean that he had to adopt a somber attitude, and changed his tone of voice, altered his facial expression, and lost some of the honesty he had possessed before then. "Let me clarify," I tried. "I'm talking about actual, physical

¹² Wallace. 4.

gravity. If you did it on the moon last time, this time, let's see it on Jupiter." The next crash was a delight to me as I saw the plane's wings (the actor's arms) transition from supporting flight to straining under the sudden force of gravity.

Our commitment together to a sense of heightened movement, made communal by my enlisting the actors in the solution, yielded what I found to be great success. Smith College theatre professor Len Berkman agreed. In a kind email to me he said of the action onstage that it could just as easily be called, "exalted choreography as blocking."¹³ I take that as high praise.

Tricky Casting

Chas, with his imitations of another prisoner's imitation of animals, of the above described airplane crash, would call for the most stylized, heightened movement of all *Trestle's* characters. This need presented a unique casting challenge. The actor playing Chas would need to be willing and able to take physical risks outside the everyday human motions of walking, jumping, sitting and the like, in order to imitate the motions of stag beetles, weathervanes, and windmills. He would furthermore need to be able to switch from tenderness to profound hostility in the blink of an eye with heartbreaking honesty. In auditions, I found two actors who could and would take the physical risks I was looking for. I found one actor who could convincingly portray the reaches of the tenderness-hostility continuum. What I did not find in auditions, however, was both

¹³ Leonard Berkman. "Trestle wrestle triumph." (E-mail to Aaron J. Schmookler. 8 Nov. 2008)

capacities in a single actor. Through my Stage Manager, Heidi Denning, I was aware of the Theatre Department's eagerness to post a cast list. My suggestion that perhaps they could post a partial cast list was met with little enthusiasm. For two days, I tried without success to solve this casting problem. Few possibilities surfaced, none of them suitable. Driven by concerns that the department might finally say, "choose now," and that the actors I had chosen for other roles might lose interest, and that I might never find a more suitable person to play Chas, I began again to consider my favorite of the original auditioners. He was a focused performer, seemed to have a strong work ethic, knew me (and I him) from having been a student of mine. But his physical choices were stiff, timid, and safe. I was strongly ambivalent about choosing him. I took a deep breath.

My deep breath told me to take a walk. The walk reduced the physical manifestations of stress plaguing my body and made clear that my temptation to cast him was based more on fear of finding no-one than it was based on a proactive creative spark and care for the production. Taking that walk was the best decision I made in the whole of the casting process.

I would need to broaden my search. That simple, calm choice cleared my mind making space for an actor I'd worked with before whose physical choices nearly always were bold, with whom I have a good working relationship, and who'd graduated from the UMASS theatre program a year before. I was certain he could handle the physical needs of the character, but I wasn't sure he had the acting chops. A voice in my head I've come to think of as my best advisor – perhaps the closest thing to god I know – told me to have faith: faith in myself and my abilities as an acting coach and faith, too, in this actor. He's a passionate, committed artist. He is a very hard worker who puts in the time, the

focus and the soul it takes. He, perhaps most important of all, is committed as a spiritual practice to intimacy in his work, to showing himself to his collaborators and to an audience as he is and without pretense. That commitment to intimacy, in addition to resonating with my vision for the production, carries a high likelihood of honesty and vulnerability in performance. Ok, I said, I'll have faith.

I called Troy Mercier and asked him if he'd like to join the cast. At first, he seemed reluctant, saying it wasn't the kind of work that piqued his interest, so I explained why I thought he was good for the role, and also why I thought the role would be good for him – in terms of his growth, but also in terms of the ritual for dissolution of cynicism at the heart of my passion for the play. At the end of my brief pitch, he didn't hesitate in saying, "I'm in."

Though casting the role of Chas was difficult, time consuming, and offered me opportunities to meet myself and try my integrity, casting Dalton offered a challenge I failed to meet. When auditions and callbacks had concluded, there seemed to be three options for filling the role of Dalton. Actor number one was my clear favorite. Though the decision of whom to cast rests in my hands, I consulted others to learn hear insights that I may not have considered, and Everyone on my side of the audition table – myself, Ayaan Agane (dramaturg), Heather Aulenbach (Costume designer), and Heidi Denning (stage manager) – liked him best for the role. The trouble was, another graduate director was casting another show simultaneously from the same pool of actors. Actor number one was also her first choice for a major role. By a process I won't describe here, it was decided that the other production would cast Actor number one, leaving me to choose from the remaining two.

I didn't feel confident in my sense of which of the remaining two options was best for the role. I favored actor number two for his boyish innocence – a trait critical in casting Dalton. My three consultants all favored actor number three for Dalton almost without hesitation, citing his energetic work in both his audition and his call-back. Even after I made a pitch for number two on the basis of his innocence, my collaborators were unanimous in their preference for number three. In the face of their enthusiasm, I began to doubt my own convictions on the subject and made the casting choice, not with my gut, but with their preference. This was an error in judgment. Though his performance was commendable and his work ethic almost beyond reproach, number three did struggle, as I thought he might, with Dalton's innocence, playing at youth and innocence rather than attaining a genuine vulnerability. My error in judgment lies, however, not in having chosen an actor who was not as good a fit. There's no certainty that actor number two would have fared any better. Rather, my failing was in confusing deferring with collaborating.

It is its collaborative nature that, in large part, drives my passion for creating theatre, and I am not a fan of working in a structure where the lines separating roles are clean, crisp, and uncrossable. I do not think that I have a monopoly on good ideas about blocking. I don't think that an actor cannot or should not supply a truly inspired notion about the lighting of a given moment onstage. I strive as the leader of a production to generate an atmosphere where all feel welcome, excited, even inspired to have and share ideas about any aspect of the production. That the dramaturge, costume designer and stage manager had and shared ideas and preferences in this casting decision I take to be a testament to my success in creating such an environment. Having received their input,

however, I confused my fear of shutting down the feeling of freedom I'd nurtured among the team with a love for the collaboration, and I used that to escape my own doubts about my casting preference. In hindsight, I believe the proof of collaboration to have been my openness to and their contribution of their thoughts regarding the best fit of actor to role. Having had that collaboration, the responsible thing to myself as an artist and to the production as an entity in gestation would have been to consider their input, add it to the scales weighing the decision in my mind, and to take up the mantle of my responsibility as a leader. In other words, to make the choice that seemed right to me. I should no more open the decision to some notion of democratic process than I should stage a play on a set that seems wrong because I don't want to tell the designer to show me another option. It's an abdication of my responsibility. The product may have been better – it may have been worse – with actor number two. Number three served ably enough. But my job would have been more capably executed and I'd not be second guessing myself in the way that I am now had trusted what 'god' was telling me. The benefit of going through this experience to me and my future as a leader is that I've grown in my discernment between collaboration and leadership. Having done so once, I won't confuse the matter in the same way again.

Overlooking Lighting

I failed in my leadership in one other instance that I am aware of – to a greater degree, and with very detrimental results. Perhaps the weakest element of the final production was the lighting design. It didn't distract or obscure meaning or storytelling through most moments of the play, but neither did it succeed in providing information

about the underlying spiritual action of the play. The story of the play is interesting and wonderful, but what really makes it sing is the transition from despair into hope – a transition small enough in scale that many who read the play don't see it. I made this idea clear to James MacNamara, repeating it a number of times through the process, but then I failed him. Though the production team had regular scheduled meetings to discuss progress with the designs, how they related to one another and to the story we were trying to tell, MacNamara (being the only one of us not currently a student), was not able to meet as often as the rest of the team. I did not do enough to try to bring him into the fold of communication that happened in those meetings. I asked a couple of times to hear some details from him about his design plans and to see some images that might illustrate his intentions. When those requests did not bear fruit, I failed him – I didn't press the issue. Again, I deferred my leadership. This time, I deferred not to a mistaken notion of collaboration, but to a fear that maybe he knew better what his process needed to be and to a fear of stepping on his toes. I deferred to a fear that he didn't have time to do what I'd asked. As tech-week drew near, what he finally told me regarding his plan was that (to paraphrase), in contrast with the set which was not naturalistic, his lighting would be in order to create clarity about the setting in each moment of the play. On the surface, I accepted this at face value, ignoring the voice of god in my ear telling me that naturalistic would not serve the best interests of the production.

Had I listened, I would have told the designer, as that voice was telling me, that Place needed to be more clearly differentiated through light, magnifying the differences that would be present in a naturalistic lighting scheme and heightening through light the emotional value of each setting. The sound designer and I were clear about the sense of

comfort but desolation required by the home-setting and about the sense of open space and adventure inherent in the trestle-setting. While MacNamara's lighting design dramatically set the jail apart from the other settings, highlighting the darkness, it did not strongly differentiate between trestle and home or create their emotional landscapes because I didn't insist that it must.

I also didn't insist early enough in the process that as the play reached its climax, and hope and intimacy pinnacled, the whole place needed to glow with the light of hope. As Pace says on the final page of the play, "we're in another place,"¹⁴ light must make us believe her. It did not because, while I asked for it early on, I only began to insist as the time with which to make it happen dwindled to nothing.

At best, therefore, instead of serving the vision, light stayed out of the way. The heart of the play in my understanding of it was an afterthought in the design of the lights. My failing to take up the leadership that was my duty didn't ruin the show, but it did teach me a valuable lesson. I owe it to designers, to all my collaborators, to my audience and to the production to be as demanding of my designers as I am of my actors. High expectations are a big part of what I bring to the table as a collaborator. I know that demanding of my actors that they meet those expectations brings out their best and even strengthens the creative relationships between us. I have taught myself in this collaboration that designers are no different. Like actors, they need and deserve my trust that they can withstand my expectations. As with actors, my steadfast and consistent honing of their work will bring out the best in designers' capabilities and foster successful working relationships.

¹⁴ Wallace. 68.

Actors Together and Severally

The foundation of my leadership with actors in a project is, right from the start to enlist the actors souls – to try to find them where passion lives and get them committed through their own soul-stirring passion. After welcoming them, I ask those of us who will be working most closely in the rehearsal room to devise a purpose for our being together that's rooted in why we do theatre. Every minute of every rehearsal, I tell them, will be bent toward this higher purpose. Our measure of success for each day, for the rehearsal process as a whole will be our integrity to this purpose. It's often with a bit of trepidation that I engage in this exercise, fearing that they will think me odd or ungounded, or that they won't be enlisted in my desire for a common focus as a team. I trust deeply enough, however, in our ability to find common ground to work through those insecurities and have been pleased by the response of my casts, and often delightedly surprised by the enthusiasm with which they greet this context for working. The cast of *Trestle* together devised the following and excitedly committed to doing nothing but this through our entire rehearsal and run process: Our purpose is to serve the creation of a great show by coming together in energetic, active and daring intimacy. As a communal context for working often does, this seemed to hasten the sense of community and camaraderie between us, to create an environment wherein we all felt safe in taking risks, and in which I could push the actors for more and be received as an open collaborator rather than a critic.

I too felt safe in taking risks within that context, and took a significant risk in my strategy for directing Troy Mercier in the role of Chas. Just as I expected, his physical work was wonderful – beautiful, risky, inspired, delightful. As I had feared, the other

acting choices he made were strange, incongruous, dishonest and almost clownish. It frightened me, but I did not allow my fear to goad me into pushing Troy for something different. From my past experience with Mercier, I knew him to be a bit fragile. Despite opening our process with the above agreement to purpose, I felt that hearing from me that he wasn't doing what was needed would have hurt and frustrated him, and he would have shut down. The honesty and vulnerability I wanted but wasn't yet seeing would have become inaccessible for him. I remembered the voice that had told me when I was casting to trust him, his work ethic, his passion, his commitment to intimacy (it was he who had brought up intimacy in our development of our collective purpose) that when he really took it up would get him past the clownishness. Perhaps the greatest rub in his acting choices was distance and a falseness he maintained in his relating to Dalton (Chas's primary scene partner). There was nothing of the actor in his choices because, it seemed to me, he feared being upset by relating to the despair of the character. By saying to Troy at the end of each rehearsal, "good work; where to go from here is toward a more grounded and intimate connection with Dalton. Find out why Chas talks to him," I gently pressed Mercier to let go the artifice and to let himself show through. He claimed to be trying, yet he remained false and strange. Day after day, week after week, he asked me questions about his character: his wants, his history, his motivations. His questions showed careful thought, hours of work outside the rehearsal room. So still I trusted. Still, I gently pressed.

His own profound displeasure day after day with his performance frightened me. An actor needs confidence in order to strip himself naked in front of others, even (perhaps especially) if metaphorically, and if he were not able to find a confidence in this

role, he would never let his guard down. But, his displeasure also reassured me. I knew he would not rest in his search for the truth in it as long as he remained unsatisfied.

Tech week, and the inevitable opening for an audience that would follow, drew closer and closer. And then, with two weeks to go, on the night of a full run for designers, something shifted. Mercier came out on stage for his first scene and began *relating* to Dalton onstage instead of *posturing* around him. Mercier had tapped into something remarkable and honest within himself. He suddenly began to relate honestly to the motivations of his character and he moved me both to laughter and to tears. When the evening's run ended, I ran to him, hugged him and celebrated the "click" that had come two hours before. "I don't know what happened," he told me. "I just suddenly understood him. I let him in." At that moment, witnessing and reflecting back to him the beauty and success of his performance and of him as an artist, something else had shifted without my knowing. I'd trusted him, long and hard. He'd persisted long and hard. After five minutes in our next rehearsal, I somehow sensed that I had license, issued by a trust he'd grown both in himself and in me. For the rest of the production's rehearsal time, I pushed, demanding that he step it up still farther, that he not be satisfied with small shifts in texture, but that his choices be made in high relief. And he thrived under the pressure that only days before would have broken the trust between us. He felt his process had been respected; he experienced and trusted in my faith in him and was inspired to earn it. And he was left with a profound sense of ownership, not only of his role, but of the whole project, through his contribution of blood and sweat.

This wait and trust mode was a new approach for me. I'd never used that tool with any actor before for such an extended time. Bill Ball in his book, *A Sense of*

Direction, recommends to directors that they say yes to an actor's first two contributions, even if they seem off-base. That's a practice I've long employed to good benefit. It was not a conscious decision exactly to be the way I was with Mercier for so long. It was a decision made in the moment every day of every rehearsal every time I worked with him, never knowing if the next moment would be the time to start pushing. It was a hunch. I played it. I think it bore fruit beyond what any other tool I have at my disposal would have done.

The actress playing Pace presented me with a different problem. She too was reluctant to take a risk, in her case, vocally. She was reticent to explore the full range of volume and pitch available to her. She was unaware of the degree to which her delivery was a monotone. Even when asked to listen for it, she seemed not to hear it. She had no awareness of the inhibitions limiting her performance, and therefore, of course, she was not aware of the cause of the inhibition. I took a very different course with her.

Alexis Reid and I had also worked together before, and a foundation of trust between us was a forgone conclusion. After a week to settle in and find her balance with the cast and in her role, I put the pressure on. I challenged her to take risks vocally. On one day, at a moment in the script of profound significance in the relationship between Pace and Dalton, I heard in my mind's ear a necessity for a melodic delivery I call "singing it out." Reid seemed particularly immovable and reticent despite her professed commitment to going where I was asking her to go. When Reid seemed stuck in her safe delivery, I asked her, at the suggestion of my Assistant Director (Eliza Greene-Smith) to yodel her lines. "I don't know how to yodel," she told me. "I'm not interested in your succeeding at yodeling or in your yodeling well. I'm interested in hearing what happens

if you *commit* to yodeling your lines with everything you've got." She responded with, "you can't yodel consonants." I held fast, "I want to hear what happens if you try." She half-heartedly tried. "Again," I said, "but this time, *really* try." We went back and forth this way many, many times despite my growing concern that she might become demoralized. She grew frustrated, perhaps a little angry, and gave up *trying* to do what she thought I wanted. With a sigh that I interpreted as surrender to going all out, she went at it again, her heart on her sleeve, raw from the struggle, and something beautiful came out of her mouth. It was not on the scale that I was looking for in the long-run, but it was, in its innocent surrender, perfect for the moment. I thanked her and called for a break. She was a little teary. Calling her over, I repeated something I'd told her before: "I push because I have absolute faith that you can do it." I believe it's that message, which I'd both spoken to her before and demonstrated repeatedly by my refusal to take anything less than progress, which allowed her to take such pressure and remain cheerful. Experiences like this one cement in my heart my appreciation for and agreement with statements like this one spoken by renowned conductor Benjamin Zander: "It's one of the characteristics of a leader that he not doubt for one moment the capacity of the people he's leading to realize whatever he's dreaming."¹⁵

Later, Reid told me about her tears. Though I don't remember what she said, I do remember nodding in understanding and sharing with her a time when I'd gone to my chiropractor feeling fine, like nothing was wrong, getting an adjustment, and then standing up. Though the change was subtle, I felt profoundly straighter through my back,

¹⁵ Benjamin Zander. "Classical Music With Shining Eyes." TED.com. February 2008. <http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/benjamin_zander_on_music_and_passion.html>

like I had more space in my body cavity, and I cried from a relief I hadn't known I'd needed. "Yeah," she said. "It's kind of like that."

From my first reading of this play, I expected to come up against actor inhibitions in the final scene: Pace and Dalton are together beneath the trestle. Pace lays out her dress, stands aside and orders Dalton to open his shirt, and lie down on it. Then in a gender twisting sexual encounter, much like phone-sex, in which the two do not look at each other, let alone touch, Pace in domineering fashion leads them both to sexual climax through talk. I expected there might be some shyness from the actor playing Dalton in reaching into his pants in front of an audience and feigning masturbation. I expected he might balk somewhat at Pace's description of penetrating him: "Can you feel me? I'm hard... I want to be inside you... Does it hurt? Good. I can't stop."¹⁶ I thought inhibition might make it hard for him to sell the orgasm itself. With Reid, I thought inhibition might prevent her from taking charge. I thought she might have trouble in front of an audience boldly speaking through a forceful sex-act. I thought she too might have trouble selling the orgasm vocally and physically. In the first week plus of rehearsals, I steered clear of this scene altogether, deciding that rehearsing it could wait until the ensemble had a greater intimacy and comfort between them. On the day when we finally did rehearse the scene, I had an inspiration: Before every rehearsal of the "sex scene," we would rehearse the play's most playfully sweet scene (one in which Dalton and Pace blow a feather up in the air, keeping it suspended). Having laughed together, breathless with the feather, it was thrilling, touching, astonishing, how uninhibited they both were. When the run of the sex scene was through, they both laughed, blushed, acted

¹⁶ Wallace. 67, 68.

awkward and generally showed high signs of self-consciousness of the kind I had expected. When I called for them to do it again, however, incorporating a few technical notes from me, they each took a deep breath, shrugged off their self-consciousness and dazzled me again. I'm grateful for impulses like the feather rehearsal inspiration; they seem almost like a backdoor into an easier path than the one I've been looking down.

“Deviant” Sexuality

With this anticipated challenge happily proving to be no big deal, I was freed up to put my mind to the more profound challenges presented by sexuality in this play. Firstly, Wallace's strongly progressive politics concerned me. It's not that I disagree with her position:

I also wrote the play because I wanted to examine the confines of heterosexual culture and sexuality. Theatre, good theatre, can be a site for resistance, and this includes resistance to the brutally conformist notions of sexuality that are imposed upon us from childhood. Heterosexuals function within the absurd delusion that they are sexually free. That they can do what they want with their bodies, no holes barred. But this belies the fact that an extreme system of homophobia is functioning at all times, which censors us, consciously and unconsciously. In writing *Trestle*, I wanted to take a look at the heterosexual body, and how it is rife with censorship: where we can touch each other, where we are allowed to be touched, what sites are considered sites of desire, what sites are not. While mainstream culture tells us that our bodies are for consuming and labouring, we can resist this notion. Our bodies are alive with hungers and sensuality's that have been gutted since we were children. If we re-imagine the sites of desire on the body, we may possibly be able to re-imagine our selves.¹⁷

¹⁷ Naomi Wallace. “Re: from Naomi Wallace.” (E-mail to Aaron J. Schmookler. 26 Feb. 2007)

Rather, I was concerned that her manner of presenting those politics might strike an audience (as they sometimes did me) as overly didactic. Just the same, I wanted to be true to her play, and while not it's not *central* in my reading, the non-standard sexuality in the script is far too present to be ignored. There was a danger, it seemed to me, of turning the audience off with didactic preaching about celebrating sexuality that was hard for them even to swallow. My recognition of that danger, coupled with a refusal to allow it to daunt me (I gave fleeting thought to how I might alter the play to make it less "deviant"), showed me the way to the single strategy that would address all my concerns about how this scene would come across. In order for it to work, to be a moment of triumph, of intimacy, of dazzlingly bright light of hope, it would have to be an exchange of both profound innocence and genuine intimacy between two young people struggling to connect, to touch one another in some way that was genuine and from the heart. Wallace's own ingenious conceit of a sex act with no physical contact helps this exchange maintain an air of youthful purity, allowing it to be an act of intimacy and innocence. Somehow, we'd have to perform this act onstage without commenting on it, neither calling it perverted nor proclaiming its "deviance" to be important in our performance. Its innocence would live in the matter-of-factness of its deviance.

A testament to the success we found in this scene came from an unlikely source. The UMASS theatre department teaches a very large survey course full of students from every walk of life, from every department in the school, and particularly well populated by members of the sports teams. The students in that class are required to see all department shows, and so a few hundred of them came to see *Trestle*. Every night, I held my breath, hoping that their response would not make the experience harder for the other

members of the audience. At nine out of ten performances, I was thrilled to find them attentive, respectful and remarkably calm through a scene during which their collective reputation would have said they'd have been vocally disrespectful. I call that a win, a testament to our success.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION

Each of the challenges *Trestle* presented to me resulted from my commitment to serving the production to the best of my ability. Without that commitment to excellence, they would not have been challenges as I would have had no reason to solve the problems as they arose – cast anyone, design in any way, make decisions by apathy. Without commitment, without investment, nothing matters. The rewards for my commitment are the lessons in trust taken collectively from my successes and failures.

I grappled with the puzzle of creating clarity from achronology for the audience, scrambling in my fear to consider myriad impossible solutions; I took away a renewed trust in simplicity and the intelligence of my audience. This will not only make my work stronger, but it will make my job easier going forward.

Having decided to stay out of the way of the script, I felt bound and constrained; I found that returning to what had moved me to tears on my first read provided not only a point of view for the production, but also a unifying theme that struck a chord in the hearts of the entire ensemble and built a foundation of mutual trust between us upon which all our work was built. I am reaffirmed in my sense that a clear and well-articulated common goal can unify a company, generate trust and compassion, and shed barriers of self-consciousness.

Though I was determined to transport the audience from the moment they entered the theatre, my every thought about how to accomplish it bore no fruit; when I stopped trying to force the issue, no longer, in my fear, judging the thoughts I did have as

irrelevant, I discovered that my mind was far ahead of my awareness and had solved the problem. So often my daydreaming mind achieves wonders while I am mired in frustration. Consistently, however, I find I'm quicker on the uptake than I was previously. The days of my stubborn refusal to listen to my own inspiration are numbered.

The music inherent in Wallace's poetic writing never made it onto our stage; as a result, I have finally found one answer to a question I've long wondered about: What can be done with the table-work I hear people talking about? Having never been exposed to it either as an actor or director, I have feared to implement it. But the next time I've got a script to deal with that has heightened language, particularly if it holds a music unlike that of my cast's daily speech, I will explore it at the table, with nothing else to distract. Tablework may still intimidate me, but though every play I direct intimidates me, I always find the faith to step into the rehearsal room.

In trying to bridge the gap between the movement actors were providing me and the heightened, stylized movement I saw in my mind, I discovered my attempts to specify choreography often did not yield the fruit I hoped for; describing the problem to actors in more qualitative terms and trusting them to solve it, however, worked very well. This inclusive collaboration produced movement that not only had a beautiful sense of style, but also was the actors' own, physically suited to their individual bodies and emotionally connected with a sense of ownership. My trust in them in turn boosted their trust of me.

In working to solve two casting dilemmas, I held out in one case for what I knew I needed despite pressure to get it done quickly, and, in the other case, abdicated my responsibility as a leader to a misguided notion of collaboration; henceforth, I have a

keener ability to recognize the sound of my knowing, the voice of god in my ear. While this voice comes from god with a small 'g', it's the closest thing I know to divine inspiration. It may not always be Right with a capital 'R', but it's always the best guidance I have for making decisions. I find further that it takes into consideration, in ways my ego sometimes does not, the input of my collaborators and weighs it before voicing its thoughts. I can distinguish between this voice and that of my ego, because when my ego differs with my collaborators, it puts its foot down and speaks with a petulant tone, whereas the voice of god is calm and even. With every instance of saying yes to this voice of god, I find my faith in it grows.

I failed to provide the lighting designer with the same kind of assured, strong, insistent leadership that I nearly always provide actors, mistakenly viewing my relationship with him and with his contribution as somehow fundamentally different from my relationship with actors, with the inevitable result that the lighting didn't cohere with the production as a whole or with my vision for it; the mistake of the attitude with which I came to that relationship was thereby shown to me in stark Technicolor so that I could see it for the fear-based irresponsibility that it was. This experience affords me a clear understanding of my duties to designers that will make me a strong leader and collaborator in future endeavors. Often actors need prodding and encouragement to do their best work. There's no reason designers wouldn't be the same.

I faced two actors who were having trouble putting themselves fully into their roles and allowing the kind of vulnerability demanded by the play; my commitment to purpose taught me, in the moment, sensitivity to the disparate needs of each. I pressed one hard to jump off a cliff, and quietly, slowly, calmly encouraged another to take off

his protective suit – in each case to great effect. I gained not only a new specific tool in this long-game coaching strategy, but also honed and redoubled my confidence in my sensitivity to actors’ needs and confirmed that given trust, actors will strive to earn it. While there is often a temptation to treat all actors alike, this experience will help me to be still stronger in my ability to resist that urge. In this production, I also had affirmed my practice of specifying a common purpose with the company on day one. I believe it was a context of trust born of a purpose created together in our first rehearsal that allowed the final “sex scene” to be so smooth in rehearsal.

I’ve learned a greater trust for myself as a leader, seen many forms trust can take from waiting patiently to patiently pushing. I learned that leadership sometimes is as simple as trusting others to follow. And I learned that as in any relationship, asking, expecting and even demanding what I need from my collaborators is not a measure of distrust, but of profound faith, even support, in the service of a greater goal. And each time I act from trust, each time I fail to act from trust, but recognize that failure, my skill at choosing trust is made greater, and greater too is the likelihood of my choosing trust next time.

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