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# A Cleansing Breath: A Journey of Creation on the Hard Road

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A CLEANSING BREATH:  
A JOURNEY OF CREATION ON THE HARD ROAD

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of Theatre

by  
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B.F.A., Missouri State University, 2009  
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## ABSTRACT

To adhere to the structure of Louisiana State University and Swine Palace's Actor Training program, the M.F.A. candidates are required to develop new work. This project is in place to cultivate the individual actor's sensitivities to his/her own process in theatre making, grow as an artist, and begin the long journey of devising and constructing work, in this case a solo play, that has the potential to continue to grow after graduation. My piece is derived from several of the classic Greek plays and myths but told with a twist on the traditional stories and entirely from different women's perspectives. This thesis will detail the process of research, creation, production and reflection for the project that I call *The Weight of Smoke*.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Still  
If I were to say anything to you  
it would be:  
do what you love  
not what you think you should do  
or what you think is all you can do  
what you think is possible for you  
no  
do what you love  
and let the rest follow along behind it  
or not  
or not  
because  
even if it doesn't follow along behind  
you will have done what you've loved  
and you know what that is  
you know better than anyone what you love  
and a life centered around your love  
cannot be wrong  
cannot finally be disappointing.  
- Charles Mee, *Hotel Cassiopeia*

### 1.1 The Creative Impulse

When I started my M.F.A. in Acting at Louisiana State University in the summer of 2013, I was well aware that the two-year program culminated with a devised solo performance. However, in the spring 2014 semester, when development and ideas were expected, I had nothing in my corner and I started to panic about finding the right idea. My mentors were encouraging me to pick something and stick to it, but it had to be something I loved and cared about enough to develop over several months. The only things I felt unapologetically passionate about were my dog and Harry Potter, both of which seemed like poor thesis topics.

Something nagged at me, and I kept returning to the above excerpt from Charles Mee's play *Hotel Cassiopeia*.

In addition, I was co-teaching a script analysis class that semester and one of the plays we was Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice*. It's a modern adaptation of the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, the lovers who had a second chance at life together when Orpheus was granted the opportunity to rescue her from the underworld after death, so long as he trusted her to follow him without looking back. Spoiler alert: he didn't, and she returned to the underworld. This play has had a hold on my heart since August 2012 when I read it the first time, but reading it with my students who appreciated the history of the story because it was written to be accessible to their generation struck a new chord with me.

The real moment of inspiration came a few weeks later, while listening, during a run, to the torch-song "Bottom of the River" by Delta Rae that laments "hold my hand/oh baby it's a long way down to the bottom of the river/Hold my hand/oh it's a long way down/a long way down". The combination of hearing those words and having just re-visited *Eurydice*, who finds her peace at the bottom of the river of forgetting, made me ask why I couldn't write about more women from Greek myths and plays, but update them and tie them together with a loose through line. By the end of the run, I was making a list of which women would make the cut and the problem solving side of my brain started constructing the logical clusters and ways to tie them to one another.

There were two aspects of this approach that were especially appealing. First, I wanted to write a piece that highlights and celebrates women and prove to

myself that it is possible to create multi-dimensional characters that happen to be female. Greek mythology made this somewhat easy for me, because their culture celebrated female gods and the plays were the first in Theatre History to celebrate strong women. The most appealing thing about the characters I settled on, though, was that although their stories were somewhat well known, it seemed to me like the struggles these women faced in their myths and stories were only half told, like a part of their experience was missing, and the omitted parts were my way in to accessing a more modern approach to the worlds in which they live.

Second, I learned pretty early in my undergraduate training that Greek plays sit really well in my body. The freedom I felt in the work was something vastly different than the world in which we live now. I had the opportunity to work physically, which granted my brain permission to let go and follow impulses that come from a place inside my instrument and not calculated in my brain, a problem I often confront as an actor. Greek plays are seldom professionally produced in America, and I had to acknowledge that there was a distinct possibility that outside academia, I would never have the opportunity to breathe life into my dream roles if I didn't create the work myself. I made the decision to write my favorite ones into my show so I would be able to take a stab at telling their stories on my terms.

The difficulty in transforming stories that were relevant in 400 BCE started with asking myself questions about accessibility. Will my audience know the more obscure characters that aren't gods? What is the necessary balance of giving exposition and keeping the characters active? Will this feel like a theatre history class? Can a feminist write a feminist play that doesn't feel aggressive and preachy?

Is it interesting, engaging, and reflective of my work while remaining true to who I think these women are? Do I have the emotional availability to access the depth and love these characters need in order to tell their stories? The questions helped me identify the focus of each movement, whittle away the extraneous material, and helped me to discover why I felt I needed to use these eight women to explore who I am as an artist and how I fit into their world.

### 1.2 Description of Content

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will cover the experience I had of researching, exploring and writing the world of *The Weight of Smoke*. This chapter also covers the best way for me to create my own content from the beginning stages of preliminary research that includes reading and writing the history of many myths in order to flesh out a world that I understood with diagrams and family trees; reading source material by Homer, Aeschylus and Euripides, and adaptations by Jean Racine, Rainer Maria Rilke, Charles Mee, Sarah Kane, and Sarah Ruhl; shaping and incorporating public domain text in my writing process outside the rehearsal room. Then, in the second chapter, I will dissect the rehearsal process for the development of the script, the differentiation of characters and style of their voices, the implementation of dialect work, editor/collaborator feedback from working rehearsals, the need to say the words I wrote, why late re-writes were necessary, and finally the working script that I used in the actual performance. In the third chapter I will analyze the production from the perspective of my own experience post-performance and include: peer and audience reaction assessment from my mentors, and how this experience changed my acting. Finally, I will discuss the next



steps in my process and future development for *The Weight of Smoke*, draw conclusions about the creative process of writing and performing the show, and provide the answers to my research questions that I discovered through this experience.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE TEXT PUZZLE

### 2.1 Unpacking the Research

I spent the first few months of development reading a lot about Greek traditions, unconventional adaptations of the myths, original translations of Greek plays, and academic textbooks about Greek mythology. The research I did in this phase gave me far less fodder than expected when I embarked on the process of devising a solo play based on that much history. Building a family tree on which to base my skeletal script on was also difficult. I had snippets of stories, a few archetypal goddesses without many substantial source texts, and an overwhelming amount of reading to tackle. I work the best with pictures and diagrams, so I found myself drawing a lot of word clusters to connect my thoughts and ideas. The pre-planning phase on paper included terrible drawings of not-to-scale set designs, names and arrows, and pictures of Mount Olympus, Earth, and the Underworld. Because I know enough about myself as an artist, I can say that I did what I do best: pre-plan how I want something to go, and start to plug in the pieces that fit into that structure. In this case, I think this model worked well and effectively; to work this way as playwright was an asset, but to work this way as an actor it is a killer of creativity. But, my skeleton drawings and word clusters were the visual stimulus to keep my loose idea of a thru-line connected to the research. Below is a sample of my word clusters and questions that made it from paper to word document in August, 2014.

Title: Hellenikon; Agathe Eris?<sup>1</sup>

- READ<sup>2</sup>
  - Electra
  - Aphrodite
- What is this UP<sup>3</sup> about for me? To Cling to Love?
- What question am I trying to answer?
- What is the experience going to be like for the audience?
- Look for images
- Establish each woman's loss
- What concrete thing leads to the next story?
- MDQ:<sup>4</sup> How does a person confront and cope with profound loss of identity? What identifies us?
- What space will communicate the magnitude?

Items:<sup>5</sup>

- Bathtub
- Table/chair
- Red fabric
- Dagger
- Wrap
- Mask

## 2.2 The Structure

The play structure that made logical sense was a series of vignettes featuring a different prominent woman, and each movement was tied to one of the three significant locations in Greek Mythology- Mount Olympus, Earth, and the Underworld. I knew I needed to tie each vignette to the previous and following piece to weave the different worlds and stories together, and this was where the research

---

<sup>1</sup> I had this idea I wanted a Greek title, and Agathe Eris means “good strife” In Greek.

<sup>2</sup> Not only was this a structure to build my script ideas, but also my personal assistant and to do list.

<sup>3</sup> The “UP” is the Unifying Principle in my script analysis background- this is the active through-line that ties the play together. I hadn't answered what I really wanted the story to tell just yet.

<sup>4</sup> MDQ is Major Dramatic Question- it is the question posed early in the script that we should see differently at the climax of the story. This is difficult with so many different vignettes.

<sup>5</sup> I began early planning the needs for props and scenery because as I mentioned, I work best with images and pictures. These were concrete things I could justify in the story.

was crucial to my development. Here is an example of the early stages of development from April, 2014.

*The Profound Impact of Loss*<sup>6</sup>

(pre-production ideas and characters):

~~Athena~~

Artemis

Aphrodite?<sup>7</sup>

Beauty, love, pleasure, procreation

Dove, Apple, Mirror

Canvas/Easel

Deep water-mirror images

Remembering

Dreams

Hated by Hippolytus, who vowed to stay pure and devoted to Artemis

Hera

~~Hippolyta~~ died for the love another, influenced by Hera's jealousy. Strength

~~Jocasta~~ killed for her betrayal of the fates and the love of the wrong man

~~Arachne~~ hanged

Eurydice- stung by a viper, died

Persephone<sup>8</sup>

After selecting these characters early in the process, I was able to weed out some of the really interesting women who I couldn't find a home for in my story and weigh the god/demi-god/mortal balance so all the characters had distinct importance. The months of research led me to a group of women who, although they may not have succeeded in getting what they wanted, by and large persevered in the face of adversity rather than succumbing to death. Here's who made the cut:

---

<sup>6</sup> Here is another title I tossed around, but this was more in the vein of what ended up being one of the unifying principles.

<sup>7</sup> I couldn't justify using Aphrodite at this stage of development but also couldn't justify cutting her either. She stayed in limbo for a long while because I could only come up with one reason to use her- she made Phaedra crazy with love.

<sup>8</sup> When I looked at this layout, I realized all the mortals I chose finished their story in death and the characters didn't speak to me very well.

- Hera, the queen bee. She got top billing for her commitment and control, because she is Zeus' partner and loyal other half. Yet, despite her love and dedication to him, the two never had children together.
- Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty and love. Aphrodite calls to me because she is iconic for her looks, but like many beautiful women, gets little credit for anything else. She was dangerously calculating and manipulated situations to her benefit.
- Phaedra, for her guts and tortured soul. She drives herself crazy with unrequited love, and her desire for something she shouldn't have is a feeling not unknown to me.
- Artemis, the Gemini twin. She is stuck between the feminine and masculine as the other half of a fraternal duo. She is the goddess of wild things and lives better with beasts than people.
- Iphigenia, the eldest daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon. She is painfully devoted to her father and a staunch advocate of doing what is right.
- Clytemnestra, Iphigenia's mother whose maternal instinct outranks rational behavior.
- Persephone, queen of the underworld, who longs for freedom to make her own choices.
- Eurydice, the lover who never found her song in life.

After several weeks of obsessive arranging, rearranging, and drawing more diagrams to visually understand how the characters would stick together, I settled on the above eight: two who live on Mt. Olympus, three who live on Earth, one who lies somewhere in between Earth and the Underworld, and two who reside in

Hades. The logical side of my brain tells me I chose them because that structure gives peace to my playwright instincts, but in reality I think it really has more to do with feeling like I can identify with the feelings of displacement, loss, longing and love that they each experience.

### 2.3 Text and Music

Finding the text to support these characters was a challenge. From the myths, I gleaned some of the staples that helped me tie the world together, but by and large, these women played secondary roles in the myths and stories, having influence but no spotlight. Because Homer's *Iliad*, Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and many of the academic texts about Greek Mythology are more emphatic on recounting from a male perspective, I sought substantive adaptations that supported the feminine point of view on the same events. These original texts provided the information that the Greeks told stories with a lot of exposition, through epic poetry, and often the protagonist's story was told through a secondary character after a tragic event took place off stage. While this research was imperative to my process and informed the way I structured the language, it didn't fuel the play I was writing as much as I desired. My characters needed to be active and tell their own truths.

Because the many stories/texts I referenced with the original material were several hundred years old, the works from the original poets are in the public domain and thus free for re-imagined use. I did a lot of reading while listening to music with an ethereal quality, haunting lyrics and simple but beautiful instrumental support like Sara Bareilles' live albums, Anais Mitchell's *Hadestown*,

and The Antlers' *Hospice* album. This was a significant experience for me because it speaks volumes about my process. I truly believe music does something to the creative brain and can communicate in ways that words, thoughts and actions sometimes cannot. In my process, music plays a very important role. First, the music provided a model for lyrical writing that worked its way into the structure of the text and second, the scoring of musical swells helped justify the magnitude of experience necessary to pay homage to the original tales that inspired the play. This was where Charles Mee, Sarah Ruhl and Rainer Maria Rilke really moved my story forward. Of all the modern adaptations of the epic Greek tales, these three writers had retained the classic Greek structure but utilized more beautiful lyric poetry.

I realized fairly quickly in my writing process that although it was important to me not to alienate my audience by doing a play about Greek characters they may never have heard of, I couldn't obsess over making sure the play was likeable. Instead I needed to access why it was important to me to tell the stories, which ultimately made the whole piece more approachable. Writing the play was the best part of this process because it put my insecurities and habits under a microscope and forced me to examine what is helpful and what is hurtful to me as an artist. I was able to identify that even though my task was to write a play for one actor, this piece has more potential if it is expanded into an ensemble show, it begs for dialogue. I think that's revelatory of my work- I find solace in scenes, but comfort and ease in my body on stage alone is something I've struggled with in my career thus far.

## 2.4 Influences

My writing began to take shape with different styles, drawing from the modern interpretations to chunks of text from Charles Mee's *Agamemnon 2.0* and *Trojan Women*. Mee is an advocate for free access to his work so long as it is reinvented and credited, so I was thrilled to draw the majority of my text for Clytemnestra out of his words. Because I always look for opportunities to collaborate, I reached out to a playwright friend of mine and asked her to write my text for Phaedra. My friend, Jessica Teliczan, who is a beautifully tortured writer, concocts dramatic worlds that are haunting and leave the reader feeling empty, so I thought her point of view would be really thrilling and raw coming out of Phaedra's mouth. I felt like I was in a good place when I was writing my other characters because I knew these two were in tip-top shape and were really solid vignettes.

## 2.5 Unifying Principle

In my first meeting with a tentative draft in hand, my then advisor, George Judy, suggested I look for an event that I could use to justify all of these women coming together in the same room at this time. He suggested it might come across as some sort of women's support group as a way to unify the text and that way there would be some continuity in place to help clarify the story. He also suggested constructing some sort of choral ode where all the characters speak together as homage to the classic structure of a Greek play and as a way to introduce that unifying event. I willingly agreed, knowing that his experience with heightened text and historical works far outweighed mine, and I set out to construct an ode for the start of the play.



With this suggestion I settled on an imagined event, the burning of Athens, which highlighted the destruction of home- a reoccurring theme in all of these women's stories. I wrote a structure that unified all their voices but also showcased slivers of what is truly important to what I felt all these characters wanted, and proceeded to write the rest of the text. After the several months of research, diagrams, and meetings I was ready to move forward. The next chapter will explain how I managed to advance as an actor and director, put the playwright to bed, and what unfolded in the rehearsal space. The following is the draft I took into the rehearsal room in October 2014.

## 2.6 Rehearsal Draft

### APPROACHING SOPHROSYNE<sup>9</sup>

(Prologue: An ode in video progression)<sup>10</sup>

All:

The city of Athens is destroyed.  
Consumed in flame and purged of sin  
The glorious light of the people extinguished  
With sounds that bring dread to those who remain  
The unfortunate few of us left behind  
To watch. To rebuild. To mourn.

Artemis:

On the steps of our remaining altar of Zeus I watched my city burn. It's apt the god of lightning stays; purging vile humanity with his rod makes for a peaceful beginning.

---

<sup>9</sup> Sophrosyne is an ancient Greek ideal that means balance and self-control. It encompassed what I was aiming for in my play, but I decided not to use it because no one could pronounce it and that seemed like bad marketing.

<sup>10</sup> The decision for video was decided by George Judy to clarify the confusion of switching rapidly between characters without transition and to allow for layering of voices in the unison lines.

Persephone:

I stood at the gates of the underworld as the souls who suffered came rushing through, sailing past me on the river Styx.

Aphrodite:

I didn't watch. Burning flesh isn't beautiful.

(Lighting transition into live performance)

Hera:

I saw from above the clouds and watched my people perish. They asked no favors of me but begged my husband for saving.

Our home is burned.

We all have suffered a great loss.

Our home is burned.

For sins against the gods all are punished.

The loss weighs heavier now than loss of love or child or life itself.

Without home, what is worthwhile? What is real? Who do we become?

Our hearts are empty. Our homes are void.

Our identities lost with that which we call home.

What remains?

Misery upon misery since the brilliant winged chariot of the Sun God turned from its path to set the brilliant city aflame.

Sorrow upon sorrow.

It left us charred. blackened.

Our fates are sealed with the rebirth of our city.

Now who do we stand to be?

I take pride in keeping it all together. My home is tidy, I have a loving husband to whom I am eternally faithful. But the truth is, I'm living a lie. In the centuries since the fire I haven't left Mt. Olympus. It is home, but it isn't mine anymore. The modern greeks have given up on our influence and I feel stuck trying my damndest to make lemon pie out of a rotten tomato. When the queen falls, her subjects follow suit.

Aphrodite:

(Tapping a cigarette on the table, takes out a lighter and brings them to her lips.

Looks up)

Can I smoke in here? Oh please, don't look at me like that. I'm the goddess of beauty, smoking isn't going to change that. (Puts them away OR lights one)  
Villanize me all you want, men will still adore me. It's their tragic weakness, they fall prey to beautiful women. I don't need more power, I don't have to exert force, it's a matter of fact. And the fact is, I get what I want. I became the representation of art and art is beautiful. They confuse me with Athene and

Artemis, with Hera and as many roman goddesses as I could name, but I am the one who began it. To spread beauty was to spread art. But in the years following the fire, I've watched my influence lose the hold it had for centuries. I became a muse, a figure of inspiration for art and music (mostly for men) but my reverence as a god is no longer in its prime. I'm used as a the justification for objectifying beautiful women, treating them as a gift rather than living and breathing creatures with thoughts and feelings and desires. \*Does something about Helen and Paris make its way in here?\* I may be the beautiful one, but we're all hasty to forget that it doesn't make me any less clever.

I am timeless, I can see how modern society treats young women, forcing them to feel shame for connecting to a desire that lies deep in our biological makeup. You're being socialized to stay chaste, and I have lost my power here.

Why, if women are supposedly predisposed to want sexual satisfaction less than their male counterparts, am I the representation of procreation and desire? We women are as easily influenced by the male form, pulled toward our carnal impulses and in search of sating an inane want to connect as a man is! See this woman in her agony- Phaedra. She is troubled. She is in pain. She is human. Phaedra saw her husband's son Hippolytus and her heart was filled with the longing of love. This was my work.

Phaedra: <sup>11</sup>

Drunk again. Wine and lust. No though, not so simple as 'lust'. This poison is called Love. Still not so simple. Don't call me villain. Gods, don't call me anything! [Have you ever thought your heart would break? Wished you could cut open your chest and rip it out to stop the pain? I can feel it beating through the walls, my heart.]<sup>12</sup> The sense of him consumes me. I can't cure me. This poison of love drips constantly into my veins and is making me mad.

Hippolytus. The name is a knife. Best not to name him Prince, never Lover, but Son. My husband's son is killing me because I must be tortured by something. The nature of women is not so simple, our violence underrated. Love denied is gutting me slowly. An icy slitting from belly to chin, tearing through my neck, leaves me without words. Only guttural howls in the night when I am alone. I am always alone now. I can have any man I want except the man I want. Here is where we are. There is where we will never be. Elsewhere is where we belong. Together. You think life has no meaning unless we have another person in it to torture us. Let me not starve between desire and death!

---

<sup>11</sup> This Phaedra draft is 90% by Jess Teliczan

<sup>12</sup> Bracketed section was my addition to the text

Moderns liken us to Christians but you forget we pray to "Pagan" Gods as devoutly and faithfully as you question yours. They deny my pleading the same as the Boy denies me for his devotion to the virgin goddess. Who hasn't wanted to punish a God? I am not good to live. Do not call me Villain, I am Phaedra.

Artemis:

She could not be helped. Her son chose me, and I protected him from shame in the end. The mortals call me a fickle god, teetering between love and hate, empathy and rage. How could I not be? Born under the Gemini sun, my other half in the form of a twin brother, I have half of him and half of me inside. I'm called the goddess of wild things, and wild things are unpredictable.

I wreak havoc on those who deceive me. I hunt those who disobey me. I slay those who defile me. But I reward those who are devoted to me.

I am the easel, not the painting.

I stand balanced, holding the tragically beautiful,  
The thing that needs work, until it is ready to be hung, displayed.

It's not perfect, no,

But it has a life, this canvas with a story.

And then what?

Where does that leave the structure?

I can feel love, I know the pang of desire. I have watched many men get drunk on power and lust for more, convinced they are like we are- immortal. They are unafraid of consequence. I refuse to suffer the foolish mortal, and they always pay a price. Agamemnon slandered my name, my skill. I do not take that lightly.

Iphigenia:

My father lamented my sacrifice. He did. I know this as I know my own name!

The atrocities of war make no difference to those of us far from it. We drink our wine and enjoy our dinner. We make small talk about how hard it must be. The generals, the heroes, the sacrificers, they have it the worst. To stare into the face of death from every angle- it could not be easy for these men. My father battled with this. To sacrifice one for thousands to live or to save his child?

My betrothed, he also was above the sacrifice of an innocent. A valiant warrior, he could not be slain by just any man. A fighter first and foremost because he was raised to be a beast, but his heart was just.

Many say I am the true hero of my story, that my strength to choose death for the greater good stood as strong as the rest in the battle of Troy. I could do nothing else as the daughter of Agamemnon, I too was raised as a warrior.

Then again, everyone should be the hero of their own story. No man is blessed or happy forever. No life is born free of misery. I wanted my life to mean something. It made me immortal. Or so I thought.

Why did she spare me? The goddess Artemis, to leave me standing outside my world to watch the bitter destruction of my people?  
I am forever after stained in Greek blood. Cowardice is weak and shameful. It is not in our nature to disobey the gods, so I stood proud, staring into my father's eyes, awaiting my role as a lamb of death and yet I am damned to wash the sins of men from their bodies without impure thoughts, without satisfaction, and escort them to their death. This is not salvation, this half life, hidden away from my family, watching in silence as they turn upon one another. Who does that make me now? A traitor.

Clytemnestra: <sup>13</sup>

Our fates were Recorded in the doomsday book  
1000 ships launched for the ownership of one girl and the sacrifice of  
another for the claiming of the slave  
*Summoned on the falsehood of a loving union*  
*summoned by the father*  
*summoned to the shores and* the blood washed clean from his hands for battle  
10 years of rain wash the bones of 10 years of war from the ground  
The dreamer knows Troy has fallen  
To see a river in dreams is a bad sign. straight from the lips of the seer, a  
dreamer, a prophet. Fortune is on the side of savages. We thought you were  
wrong. *10 years ago you were wrong.*

*How can one person bring himself to kill another?*  
*Take a life*  
*snuff it out.*  
*destroy it forever.*

These words uttered sometimes without feeling from a mother or father to  
their child  
I love you  
so that your heart would break  
*could break*  
*should break with rage that could choke out of you*

These girls in war  
They look at their fathers with innocence and trust  
Expecting them to be the first to come to their aid  
What these young girls don't see slits their throats in front of their mothers.

---

<sup>13</sup> The majority of this draft is taken from Charles Mee's Agamemnon 2.0, italicized text denotes sections I added

War starts first in the homes of the soldiers  
They destroy first what is dearest to them  
First so their victory can be ensured  
So they are first to conquer  
That they first succeed  
One should never trust a warrior with her daughter.  
These are the things one sees in her dreams.

I'll tell you about the disturbing visions this past night has brought to me.  
I want to utter them to the light of the Day. Perhaps this will bring me some  
sort of remedy.  
In that dream, I had escaped from this land and was back in Argos.  
It was night and I was asleep in my own old quarters. The quarters assigned  
for little girls.  
Then the earth shook terribly and, afraid, I went outside.  
Then I saw the eves, the roof, the whole palace tumbling down.

What I didn't consider in this act was how my other children might fare  
through all this slaughter. A sister and a father- of course the mother would  
be next. Perhaps that is my biggest regret.

Persephone:

Welcome to the Eternity of lost souls.  
They acknowledge their inability to change the past.  
There are the building blocks of one's memory to re-create things exactly as  
we want them to be.  
The beauty of a remembered moment re-imagined into reality.  
Man has a memory for keeping things the same.  
To ease their fear, we submerge them in the river of forgetting. Everything  
that exists destroys itself when it comes to that. Some aren't so lucky. Wading  
through the four rivers crossed do not strip the memory of before. The  
before can linger with consequences. Orpheus, who followed Dionysus,  
charmed rivers and trees, yet could not escape the river Lethe.

We are not unaware, we gods of the underworld, and his words, close to  
hubris in nature, bore a fated descent.

'With my song  
I will charm Demeter's daughter,  
I will charm the Lord of the Dead,  
Moving their hearts with my melody.  
I will bear her away from Hades.'

His song did move me.  
Oh come and go, Eurydice, an almost child still.  
Complete, for a moment, the dance.

She was stirred to total hearing only when Orpheus sang.  
Move forward without doubt, facing the future, trusting your love to follow.  
To look back would be defeat.

Eurydice:

Our second chance.  
Don't look back.  
Do not look behind.  
Don't look back.  
How deep is your love?  
Wrap me up in your arms  
Feel my breath on your skin  
taste my words on your lips  
I never let go in my dreams

Persephone:

'You know me so well' she whispered, and tears dripped off the "L's"  
'I know you like I know me.' And a smile dove off the "E" he breathed as he  
turned to look.<sup>14</sup>

And she returned to me. Broken for a second time,  
tears streaming down her face, crying to me  
*Open hands are hard to hold onto!*  
With a look of longing toward all that was lost,  
Eurydice turned to me and begged  
*Untie the string from my finger. Help me forget.*  
Forget what?  
*That I couldn't help but love him. Forget his music, forget his name. Orpheus.*

With these words we dirge toward her forgetting, back to the river Lethe, to  
cleansing her of her past. At the bank of the still water she untied her wedding  
ring and with ease began to wade in. Turning back one last time, as lovers  
often do, she sang one last lament:

Eurydice:

He was a nice guy  
But he couldn't get it right

---

<sup>14</sup> The quoted text here is a slight modification of a Tyler Knott Gregson poem. I did not obtain permission to use it in my script so it was removed in later drafts.

I loved him so  
He didn't know  
Please let me go  
To find release

He was my guy  
He made me heave and sigh

Please sink me down  
Lay me down  
Let me drown  
I beg for peace

(Emerging from the pool)

The Artist:

Sometimes I have this dream  
In this dream I'm following my dreams  
My dreams are warped in this dream with blank faces and missing lines

This dream becomes a nightmare with checkpoints expected to be met, but missed  
Choices, regrets from the past, Casual juxtaposition of frantic paces and crawling through nets

The splash of an impact wakes me and the road is no more clear.



## CHAPTER THREE: THE BIGGER ISSUES

### 3.1 People Who Make Art

I walked into my rehearsal process feeling apprehensive but confident, because I already knew what the space needed to look like- I wrote my play around an image in my head. And although our assignment was to create a one-person show, I have never identified as a solo artist so I took it upon myself to seek out students anxious to create work and who are also developing their skills as artists. I recruited Alexander Adams, a sophomore in the department, to sit in on my rehearsals and watch what it was like to develop an original play. His emphasis is in dramaturgy, so although I brought him so he could observe my director's process, his dramaturgical skills were incredibly valuable to me.

I discovered during the first week of rehearsals that I couldn't really commit fully to the story because many of the words didn't feel right in my body. It was a strange discovery, because the sections of text that I was so certain felt complete (mostly Clytemnestra and Phaedra) were the most foreign when I took on their point of view. After a lot of deliberation, Alexander and I sat down together and talked through each movement to see if we could whittle away anything that didn't speak to me, rearrange the things that were necessary, and find a better format. This was the time that I affectionately refer to as "killing my babies". It was difficult to cut and change many of the things that became sacred to me and felt necessary to the development of the play, but ultimately the changes we made worked better. I rearranged the format to highlight the lyrical quality of the text, explored the use of

dialects to differentiate the voices that came to each woman, and extended the prologue and all these changes seemed to come to life.

I still felt stuck, though. Because my advisor was overwhelmed with seven other projects to juggle, I didn't feel like I was getting the feedback I needed so I sought outside counsel. My friend and PhD candidate at LSU, Evleen Nasir, was the first of my peer support. She pointed out to me that, while the idea of "the artist" at the end of the play was an interesting one, she didn't know where it came from and suggested I move the text to the beginning of the play and re-write the ending in order to show the change in that character. After she watched a rehearsal I mentioned to her I didn't like my title. I'd tossed around a few Greek phrases but I was concerned that if an audience couldn't pronounce it, they wouldn't be interested. We talked about what the play was ultimately about, and our conversation ended with clarifying that everything these women identify with- their problems, loss, and unfulfilled dreams were like scars that you couldn't see, like the smoke that is present after a fire. The smoke has a density and weight to it, but will eventually evaporate and leave the air clean. From that conversation emerged the new title, *The Weight of Smoke*.

After that conversation, I stepped back from my rehearsal room and thought that I finally knew what my story was doing as it unfolded. The other major problem I needed to embrace was Phaedra and Clytemnestra still weren't residing in my bones. In a bold move just three weeks before performance time, I sat down to write both sections from my own point of view. This change was in no way made to discredit the work Jessica Teliczan did for the play, nor is it to say that Charles Mee

isn't a genius, but I identified with what came through my spin on the words and experiences to tell their stories. I was nearly finished fussing with the script once these changes were in place, but I couldn't wrap my head around what was going on with Persephone. She was the first passage I wrote and I knew she had some trouble but I couldn't figure out why. Another member of my cohort, scholar and theatre historian Weston Twardowski, emailed me the simplest answer: "she is telling Eurydice's story, but it is more about Orpheus than Eurydice." This sparked the final script adjustment I had to make, and from there I dove back into the doing.

From that point, final script in hand, I scheduled several one-on-one coaching sessions with Stacey Cabaj, our voice professor, whose background in phonetics, dialects, and acting training in the Meisner Technique fit my needs at this stage of development. Stacey took the time to work with me on each character's movement, line by line, to specify not only the work for which I sought her expertise- the vocal choices- but through the slow work, she coached me to pay attention to each word, how it sounded, and what it meant from an actor's point of view rather than a playwright's. The process of detailing the dialects for all these women on words on a microscopic level deepened the meaning of the words in my body and made each passage more specific and significant in the long run.

These sessions were vital to my final product because they were the turning point of moving from playwright/director to actor. Stacey has the energy everyone wants in a collaborative process- she is attentive, focused, and excited to shape the work an actor brings into a rehearsal space, but has the sensitivity and pedagogical tools to approach the work from a place that preserves the impulse rather than

changing it. I felt safe and supported in my workshops with her, and with several development rehearsals together I finally started to see my play from an actor's perspective.

### 3.2 Designer Needs

After the help of my outstanding colleagues, I had to touch base with my design team. These collaborators were Justin Nicks, a junior who is beginning his focus in Costume Design, Kate Brittingham, an MFA student in the Props department, and Seth Di Salvo, a budding filmmaker. These relationships were paramount to the world I envisioned for various reasons- in Justin's case, I needed a few simple items to transition in and out of each vignette, and I am an advocate for using each theatrical production I do as an educational experience for someone who deserves a chance. Justin has a design aesthetic that is just a little off-beat, and with a script like mine, he was the perfect costume designer<sup>15</sup>. To further fill out the world in my head, I enlisted Kate's help as a props master because her skill in painting and building was precisely what I needed for the mask I wanted to use for Artemis, and she painted the mask to match Justin's costume concept. The last of my team was filled with Seth's film expertise. His attention to detail, experience behind a camera, and interest in collaboration made him the ideal partner for the prologue video, and his diligence and eye had us wrapped after a two-hour work day. Figure 1 is a still from our morning of work together.

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<sup>15</sup> Justin created a fur sleeve to add to Artemis, a toga piece that I wore for Persephone, and designed the use of stage blood for Iphigenia.



Figure 1: still captured by Seth Di Salvo on our morning shooting together

My team and I communicated often during the development phase, and they were all incredibly patient with me while I explored the space and the text, but I felt one thing was really missing in my rehearsal space. I needed a tub. Because I'm inspired by plays that aren't based in realism, I knew from the get go that I was going to need a container large enough to fit my whole body that would represent the river Lethe, one of the rivers in the Underworld, which erases human memories after death. This was a central design and script concept in my piece, and I was committed to getting it.

There were several times throughout the process where I was told, "we'll see" in regard to the tub. A mentor asked me several times if the show could be done without water or without a tub and as much as I wanted to be flexible, this was something I was married to so I stood my ground. This was one particular element I knew I had to have to bring my story to life, and I feel very fortunate that I had a

mentor who listened (even if he didn't agree with my request) and made it a reality. Two weeks before we began tech rehearsals I had a silver horse trough that I was using as a tub and it was perfect. By this point I had my script in order, I had the props I needed, and I was ready for an audience.

### 3.3 The Production Draft

#### THE WEIGHT OF SMOKE

The Artist:

Sometimes I have this dream...  
In this dream I'm following my dreams  
My dreams are warped in this dream with blank faces and missing lines  
This dream becomes a nightmare with milestones expected to be met, but missed  
Choices, regrets from the past,  
A fire burns beneath the surface, a longing for something. For what?<sup>16</sup>

(Prologue: A Video Ode)<sup>17</sup>

All:

The city of Athens is destroyed.  
Consumed in flame and purged of sin  
The glorious light of the people extinguished  
With sounds that bring dread to those who remain  
The unfortunate few of us were left behind  
To watch. To rebuild. To mourn.

Hera:

I saw from above the clouds and watched my people perish. They asked no favors of me but begged my husband for saving.

Artemis:

On the steps to the altar of Zeus I watched my city burn. It's apt the god of lightning stays; purging vile humanity with his rod makes for a peaceful beginning.

Persephone:

I stood at the gates of the underworld as the souls who suffered came rushing through, sailing past me on the river Styx.

---

<sup>16</sup> This was the poem from the end of the play that I put at the beginning, it felt bleak and lacked the freedom and release I wanted for the end of the play. It also set the scene for this dreamlike exploration where I played 8 other characters.

<sup>17</sup> I moved some of Hera's text about the fire to the other characters in order to unify everyone's experience losing the things they hold dear.

Aphrodite:

I didn't watch. Burning flesh isn't beautiful.

All:

Our home is burned.

Phaedra:

The loss weighs heavier now than loss of love

Clytemnestra:

or child

Iphigenia:

or life itself.

All:

Our home is burned.

Hera:

Without home, what is worthwhile?

Persephone:

What is real?

Artemis:

Who do we become?

All:

Our hearts are empty. Our homes are void.  
Our identities lost with that which we call home.

Clytemnestra:

What remains?

Iphigenia:

WHO remains?

Phaedra:

It left us charred. Blackened.

All:

Our fates are sealed with the rebirth of our city.

Eurydice:

Who do we stand to be?

(Transition into Hera)

Hera:

I take pride in keeping it all together  
My home is tidy, I have a loving husband to whom I am eternally faithful.  
But the truth is, I'm living a lie.

\*If I could have it all,  
I would build a house  
With a porch swing  
And sit in the early morning quiet hours  
Enveloped in crisp, autumn air  
before the noise

before demands for breakfast,  
searching for lost socks or laments over unfinished homework begin.  
But my children are not my children.  
My husband sought others to fulfill those needs, and when those children are  
born adults, what chance is there to build a lasting relationship? I'm just the  
first wife.  
And there are no seasons on Olympus  
Here it is always perfect  
With a chance of sunny.<sup>18</sup>

In the centuries since the fire I haven't returned to Earth.  
Centuries later I still feel a yearning for what mortal mothers have.  
This place is home, but it isn't mine anymore.  
The modern Greeks have given up on our influence and I am stuck trying my  
damnedest to make pie out of a rotten tomato.  
Can the Oracle help a god?  
When the queen falls, her subjects follow suit.  
\* It is time to reclaim an order.  
To find balance.  
Rebuild from the ashes.<sup>19</sup>

(Transition into Aphrodite)

Aphrodite: <sup>20</sup>

(Tapping a cigarette on the table, takes out a lighter and brings them to her lips.  
Looks up)

Can I smoke in here? Oh, don't look at me like that. I'm the goddess of beauty,  
smoking isn't going to change anything. I'm immortal, it's not like it'll kill me.

(Puts them away or lights one)

Villainize me all you want, men will still adore me.  
It's their tragic weakness  
They fall prey to beautiful women.  
I don't need more power,  
I don't have to exert force,

---

<sup>18</sup> This section was added to give dimension to Hera and deepen what it was that I felt she wanted most- a sense of family and her own children. This is the place where I felt I was saying "the grass is always greener"- She's the queen, but she longs for something more.

<sup>19</sup> This is another place where I wanted to reiterate that the play is about letting go and starting again.

<sup>20</sup> Her biggest change is the structure of the text, which fed into the rhythm of her speech pattern.



It's a matter of fact.  
And the fact is, I get what I want.

Some confuse me with Athena  
Artemis  
Hera  
And as many roman goddesses as I could name,  
but I am the one who began it.  
I became the representation of art and art is beautiful.  
To spread beauty was to spread art.  
It all comes back to me.

In the years following the fire, I've watched my influence lose the hold it had  
for centuries.

I became a muse,  
a figure of inspiration for art and music  
mostly for men  
but my reverence as a god is no longer in its prime.  
I'm used as a the justification for objectifying beautiful women,  
treating them as a gift  
rather than living, breathing creatures  
with thoughts  
and feelings  
and desires.

I have remorse for abetting the fall of Troy, for in some respects I began this  
trend. I offered Helen as an object. And now I can see how modern society  
treats young women, forcing them to feel shame for connecting to a desire  
that lies deep in our nature. You're being socialized to stay chaste; and I have  
lost my power here.

Why, if women are supposedly predisposed to want sexual satisfaction less  
than their male counterparts, am I the representation of procreation and  
desire?

We women are as easily influenced by the male form,  
pulled toward our carnal impulses  
in search of sating an inane want to connect  
as a man is!  
We too have a need  
And that could drive any of us to madness.

(Transition into Phaedra)

Phaedra:

Hippolytus.  
Your name is a knife.  
Shame makes me whisper the words

I want to cry out  
But they get caught in my throat-  
The name of rejected love, Hippolytus.

You stab me with each uttered no,  
but I know  
each no  
has meaning.  
You protect your purity, your chastity.  
You protect your father,  
but who protects me from you?  
This must be madness, for passion doesn't drive a sane woman to these  
thoughts.

**A poison of love drips constantly into my veins<sup>21</sup>**

Madness is a plague of its own  
It takes over a person  
Like a moth to a flame  
and the gods give me no answers to my pleas!  
Have you ever thought your heart would break?  
Wished you could cut open your chest and rip it out to stop the pain?  
I can feel it beating through the walls, my heart  
It lives outside my body  
It has buried itself in your chest.

**The sense of you consumes me**

**I can't be cured**

The gods deny my pleading while this venomous love takes over my senses

**Love denied is gutting me slowly**

Does it show on the outside?

The language of no speaks so loud  
I never stop to question what yes would mean  
Who has the most to lose  
the son or the father?  
Or is it the woman who yearns to bed her husband's child?  
A CHILD.

He's practically a child, Phaedra!

**Is the nature of a woman so complicated?**

WHAT DO I GAIN?

Gods?! Answer me!

---

<sup>21</sup> The italicized section was an important late addition because that addition highlights the decision to take her own life was carefully considered and the only way out.

Will I be forgiven?  
Will I forgive?  
I can have any man I want except the man I want.  
Here is where we are  
There is where we will never be  
Elsewhere is where we belong.

*There is a salvation in claiming my own fate, but do I dare?  
A love drunk existence or a peaceful ending?  
A balance must be restored.*

*It takes courage to do this for you, as your heart beats separately from mine.  
Protect him, Artemis  
Keep him safe from madness  
Be good to my heart<sup>22</sup>*

(Ritual of hanging which transitions into Artemis)

Artemis:

(Untying the noose from around her own neck, ritual breathing into mask to become Artemis)

She could not be helped. Her son chose me, and I protected him from shame. She desired to make me the enemy, as if I couldn't understand her pain. I can feel love, I know the pang of desire; my desire to feel whole goes back to my origin- I was bisected at birth and only one man can complete me. The mortals call me a fickle god, teetering between love and hate, empathy and rage. How could I not be? Born under the Gemini sun, my other half in the form of a twin brother, I have half of him and half of me inside. I'm called the goddess of wild things, and wild things are unpredictable.

I wreak havoc on those who deceive me.  
I hunt those who disobey me.  
I slay those who defile me.  
But I reward those who are devoted to me.

I am the easel,  
not the painting.  
I stand balanced,  
holding the tragically beautiful,  
The thing that needs work,

---

<sup>22</sup> The italicized section was an important late addition because that addition highlights the decision to take her own life was carefully considered and the only way out.

until it is ready to be hung,  
displayed.  
It's not perfect, no,  
But it has a life,  
this canvas with a story.  
And then what?  
Where does that leave the structure?

I have watched many men get drunk on power and lust for more, convinced  
they are like we are- immortal.  
They are unafraid of consequence. I refuse to suffer foolish mortals,  
and they always pay a price.  
Agamemnon slandered my name, my skill.  
I do not take that lightly.

(Transition into Iphigenia)

Iphigenia:

My father lamented my sacrifice.  
He did.

The atrocities of war make no difference to those of us far from it.  
We drink our wine  
We enjoy our dinner  
We make small talk about how hard it must be.  
There is no frame of comparison between "red or white" and "life or death"  
The generals  
the heroes  
the sacrificers, they have it the worst.  
To stare into the faces of death from every angle- it could not be easy for  
these men. My father battled with this.  
To sacrifice one for thousands to live  
or to save his child from an unjust death  
at his own hand?

Many say I am the true hero of my story,  
my strength to accept my fate  
for the greater good  
was more courageous than the battle of Troy.

I could do nothing else.  
As the daughter of Agamemnon, I too was raised as a warrior.  
Everyone should be the hero of their own story.  
No man is blessed or happy forever.  
No life is born free of misery.  
I wanted my life to mean something.

I wanted my death to mean something.  
It made me immortal.  
Or so I thought.

The last moment of death was stolen from my lips  
the final breath hangs here  
between present and eternity.

Why did she spare me? The goddess Artemis pulled me from the underworld  
to stand here, outside my own just to watch the bitter destruction of my  
people.

(At the tub and furiously scrubbing her hands)

I am forever stained in Greek blood  
Cowardice is weak  
Shameful  
It is not in our nature to disobey the gods,  
I stood proud  
Staring into my father's eyes  
Awaiting my role as a lamb of death  
Yet I am damned to wash the sins of men from their bodies  
without impure thoughts  
without satisfaction  
and escort them to their death.

I was not saved because I am pure,  
I was saved to be an example,  
to atone for the sins of my father against my savior.  
This is not salvation, this half-life,  
hidden away from my family,  
watching in silence as they turn upon one another.  
Who does that make me now? A traitor.

(With open, pleading hands over the bathtub, Iphigenia transitions into  
Clytemnestra)

Clytemnestra:

Do not shout that I am traitor!  
You sealed my fate with the first drop of blood  
Drawn from my daughter's throat  
You etched your fate in my heart with that knife  
Do you see?

*With use of water in the tub she illustrates*

**1000 ships launched to claim ownership of one girl<sup>23</sup>**

---

<sup>23</sup> Highlighted sections are inspired by or taken from Charles Mee's text.

You sacrificed my own to claim a slave

You made me your accomplice

Our eldest child

Summoned on the falsehood of a loving union

summoned by her father

summoned to the shores like a lamb to slaughter

Then you washed the blood from your hands

*Taking the space, she comes to the altar*

Your people thought you were wrong.

Ten years ago you were wrong.

For ten years you pursued victory

I pursued an answer:

how can one person bring himself to kill another?

To take a life

snuff it out

destroy it forever.

With her, you killed part of yourself; the part of you I loved.

You failed to think how this would change me.

These words uttered sometimes

I love you

so that your heart could break

would break

should break with rage that could choke out of you

A father is his daughter's first love

You held her heart in your heart

She looked to you for shelter and you

You left her exposed

Emptied

Drained on the sand

And you sailed away.

For ten years I've been left with nothing but my dreams.

In my dreams I see the panes

shake from the windows of a broken home.

This is our home, Agamemnon!

I wake reaching for the shards of glass at the foot of our bed that you've made around me.

These broken pieces claimed what's left of your soul.

This is how it feels to be betrayed.

I make no atonement for my choice.

A life for a life.

Let the river Styx wash my hands clean.

(Transition into Persephone)

Persephone:

Welcome to the eternity of lost souls.  
Here we acknowledge an inability to change the past.  
There are the building blocks of one's memory to re-create things exactly as  
we want them to be.  
The beauty of a remembered moment re-imagined into reality.  
Man has a memory for keeping things the same.  
To ease that pain, we submerge them in the river of forgetting.  
Everything that exists before destroys itself  
when it dips below the surface.  
But some aren't so lucky  
The before can linger with consequences  
*Parted lovers end here, bound to the Field of Mourning.*  
*Eurydice made this her home on her wedding day*  
*She was stolen too soon*  
*She was not ready to move on*  
*Her memory repeats her death*  
*over*  
*and over*  
*pleading for rescue*  
*Pleading for her husband*  
*Like a single, solitary tune*  
*And he came through<sup>24</sup>*

'With my song  
I will charm Demeter's daughter,  
I will charm the Lord of the Dead,  
Moving their hearts with my melody.  
I will bear her away from Hades.'

This boy, who charmed rivers and trees, could not escape the river Lethe.  
There was no blessing from an Olympian for this pair  
But his song did move me  
And she was stirred to total hearing only when Orpheus sang  
His song was embedded in her memory  
My own pain for the world above made me weak  
Go on, Eurydice  
Follow your song  
But I warn your husband  
Move forward without doubt, face the future, trust your love to follow  
To look back would be defeat  
Take your second chance  
Don't look back.  
Do not look behind  
Don't look back.

---

<sup>24</sup> The italicized section was a late addition to make the story more about Eurydice

Trust is a tricky thing<sup>25</sup>  
She returned to me.  
Broken for a second time,  
Tears streaming down her face, crying  
'Open hands are hard to hold onto!'  
With these words we dirge toward her forgetting, back to the river Lethe, to  
cleanse her of her past. At the bank of the still water she began to wade in.  
Turning back one last time, as lovers often do, Eurydice begged  
'Untie the string from my finger. Help me forget.'  
(Becoming Eurydice)

Eurydice:  
(singing)  
He was a nice guy  
But I couldn't get it right  
(Stepping into the pool)  
Lay me down  
Sink me down  
Let me drown  
I beg for peace

(Emerging from the pool)

The Artist:  
Sometimes I have this dream  
And in this dream I'm following my heart  
My dreams are warped  
With loss  
doubts  
regrets  
"Will I be enough"  
And "this is who you are"  
A defining trait isn't so simple.  
Bones mend  
Hearts scar  
Minds forget  
Souls heal  
A Phoenix is reborn from ashes,  
The weight disappears with the smoke

(Exits the stage)

---

<sup>25</sup> In this section I decided to cut the back and forth between Persephone and Eurydice, so everything had to move from active to passive.



## CHAPTER FOUR: ENACTING PRACTICES

### 4.1 The Holy Audience<sup>26</sup>

When I started this project one of my biggest concerns was about audience isolation; I had no interest in writing a play that alienated individuals who weren't scholars in Greek history or preaching a "feminist agenda", which made my audience's reaction unpredictable. On one hand, many of my contemporaries and students were attending, but on that same hand, my students have very different interests than I and we live in the South. The nights on which I performed, I was the last of three plays in the lineup, which made our evening the longest. I was nervous not only that the patrons wouldn't be interested in the subject matter, but also that they might be antsy and ready to leave. I knew there was a good chance the project might just miss everyone in attendance, and that was a risk I was willing to take because, as my mentor Stacy Parker Joyce said when I was pursuing my undergraduate degree "If you fail, fail big. It will be a glorious disaster." On the night of my first audience, I waited back stage in anticipation of failing big. The experience up to the point of the first lights down was like nothing I've ever created before, and even though I hadn't felt butterflies as big as the ones on that opening night, I somehow knew I was going to be okay regardless of what happened on the stage because if I messed up, I wrote the play so nobody could tell me I was wrong. I knew it was time to take down the safety net and jump.

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<sup>26</sup> This term is taken from Peter Brook's book *The Empty Space*. Brook defines Holy Theatre as "The Theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible: the notion that the stage is a place where the invisible can appear has a deep hold on our thoughts." The Holy Audience takes that experience in and is an active scene partner in creating and sustaining the world they are observing.

I was lucky. From the moment I started the performance to the very end of the production, I was aware that the people who came to see our work were with me on the journey. Maybe it was the fact that I structured the play in an episodic fashion and each movement was only about four minutes long, maybe it was because all the characters were so different, maybe it was the use of projection between movements, or maybe it was because they were waiting to see what would happen with the giant tub of water, but I had a group of individuals with me, on my team, and to whose positive energy I couldn't help but respond to. Sometimes it is easy to forget that what we do as artists is important because we share an experience that is unique with a group of people that will never be exactly the same again, no matter how many times it is performed. Being in a play where the audience truly is your scene partner, that you can talk directly to them and make a case to be heard is astoundingly beneficial actor training. The possibilities are endless! The text they have to respond with is different every night and no matter how well I might know my lines, there is no telling what will happen. It is thrilling, terrifying, and ultimately totally rewarding. This experience allowed me to bear my soul on a stage and stand, completely drenched and vulnerable in front of a group of people who didn't make me feel ashamed or scared, but who had my back. There is nothing as rewarding as that kind of holy audience.

#### 4.2 Feedback Aftermath

I wasn't sure what kind of response I would get immediately following the show. I have a real aversion to greeting people after performances because I, like many people, don't appreciate false praise and there is a lot of it in the arts. After I

changed into dry clothes, I made myself thank our patrons. As uncomfortable as I am in those situations, and though I wasn't sure I got sincere expressions of opinions in many cases, there were a few people whose words immediately made an impact. The overwhelming response that I heard from my peers and students was that they had no idea what to expect, but thought it was brave and exciting. Scott Kosiba, a friend and non-actor looked me in the eye and said "I've never seen you do anything like this. I'm so proud of you." My parents, amazing people who have no experience in the arts, both commented that they couldn't believe that it all came from me. After thanking them for coming, the first question I asked was always "could you understand it even though you don't know Greek mythology?" The overwhelming response was yes. Yes, it was accessible. Yes, it was engaging. Yes, it was personal. While there were flaws (it is live performance and the first inception after all), *The Weight of Smoke* opened and closed to an audience that supported and liked the work.

From the faculty in the Theatre department, I heard similar, although more fleshed out, feedback. Dr. Shannon Walsh mentioned that she felt I hadn't been used effectively during my time in the department and that my strengths as an actor live in non-realism. Both Dr. John Fletcher and George Judy said post-production that they initially thought my idea was too big and wouldn't be appealing to our audience base but were ultimately surprised by a production that was executed with ease, proving to be thoughtful and moving. In my ongoing work with Stacey leading up to the production, we focused on specifying choices that lived in my heart and guts for the characters I wanted to bring to life rather than overthinking everything from a

rational and intellectualized point of view. Her assessment of my performance spoke to how my writing process satisfied the intellectual and analytical work (brains), the rehearsal served a purpose for diving into the emotional life (heart), and the performance executed a fight for my characters' needs (guts), all of which addressed the work we did in tutorials and served my play in bringing each character to life.

There was one element in my show that had split reactions. Because the ode in the script is orated by all eight women, I made the decision to film it in order to minimize confusion. There were three errors in this process. First, I filmed it before all eight women had really found their voices, and the magnitude and weight of the event that they are reflecting upon wasn't yet alive in my imagination. Second, because I used dialects for each of the women, the shared lines didn't match up and layer together cohesively due to pacing and clarity of words. Because the words were as important as the women saying them, I made the decision to only use one voice in the layering of the shared dialogue, which didn't give the film the final effect that I desired in the conception of the video. Finally, our limited technical resources required that we separate the audio and video layering to play the projection AND text through separate systems, and because they were on different channels there was one chance to properly sync them. We only succeeded once. Because of these issues, the video was more underwhelming than I had hoped. However, the information I received from many of my faculty and peers enjoyed the use of multimedia and felt it added to the experience. The others felt that the energy of the

video was lower than the energy of the live performance, and it didn't "do justice to the woman that followed".

I have to agree with this critique of the video. I felt pressured to find a way to unite the characters and although an ode at the beginning of the play follows a traditional Greek play structure, it wasn't a choice that I made, but a direction I followed. I think the choice to commit to doing the video and take direction speaks to my nature of collaboration and taking direction, but I don't think it lives in this particular play the way I wanted it to, and that was reflected in the final product. This was the most valuable feedback for my process, because it was the most honest and thoughtful feedback from that particular mentor, and that comment may very well transform how the future productions function.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND THE NEXT STEP

### 5.1 What I Learned

I learned a lot about the way I work in this artistic endeavor. The first is that I don't always have to take a suggestion and implement it. I was eager to please, and in a true yes-man fashion, I put something into my show that I wasn't in love with, and that apathy is not the way I want to introduce my work. I know I have a tendency to say "yes" and as an artist that is a fantastic quality, but this was one project where a no may have led me to a solution that I could stand behind, rather than a choice to appease my own private audience.

As an actor, I realize how much work I have to continue to do in my own pursuit of truth in imaginary circumstances and deepening the meaning. Not only is it important for me to continue to pursue truth and depth, but also to exercise my imaginative brain in order to clarify who my audience is in order to pursue my actions with real specificity. In this case, I think found the need to say the words I wrote on the page and used amazing vehicles to say them, but I really only tapped the surface of my potential as an actor. It is terrifying to realize how much power I'm capable of, and in my continued education I will fight to regain a confidence in my abilities and maintain the need to affect my scene partner with words that have significance to me as an actor and as a human being.

I feel really lucky that I have actually had the opportunity to act in a production in my own aesthetic. I designed a performance space that utilized minimal costumes and props, implied set pieces and transforms from movement to movement with subtle changes. The challenge in this model is finding the off switch

for the director brain and on switch for the actor who wants to hide behind the intellectual wall of the director. If I had a do over, I would either turn the directing over to someone I trust aesthetically and give that responsibility up as soon as possible or find a different actor so I could focus 100% of my energy on solving the problems that lie in the transitions.

I stand by the decision I made to utilize dialects as a means to discovering the different voices of the women in the play, and I think in the model that we presented these works, a la showcase of talent, I was able to highlight a strength of mine as an actor. In a more traditional and fleshed out production however, I'm not sure utilizing a different dialect for each woman is justified or necessary. There is a fantastic opportunity for me as a playwright to play with rhythms and word choice for further distinction and imaginative work as an actor to keep all of them in the same region with subtle shifts as a mode to unify their experiences. It's an exciting problem to have and one that I would confront willingly were I to take another go.

These problems that seem glaring to me now that I've established some distance are far from disabling. I have never been so proud to take on this much responsibility, and I have never been so thankful for the artists who said yes to collaborating with me. The discoveries I made about the script, directorial and performance shortcomings were discoveries I made because I did the majority of this project alone. The moments of clarity came from rare shared rehearsals. Every step of the way is paved with hard work, and having a team to share the load is more enjoyable and productive for me as a theatre maker.

## Now What?

Where do I go from here? I celebrate what works. The writing works. The characters stand alone, with guts and hearts and spines. Now I have to figure out what comes next for this play that begins with a train wreck. It goes one of two ways: either I start killing some more of my babies and start with brainstorming a more effective prologue/ode/opening event, or the play expands and becomes a multi-actor full-length script. Maybe it takes on two forms as an opportunity to stand as a stripped down solo-version and has a longer, more ensemble piece that can benefit from more design-heavy production choices. Regardless of the direction I take it- perhaps it's both until I discover the more probable form- there will be some significant changes to the content before it sees a fully realized production again. The beautiful thing about this work in progress is that it is mine, and I have all the autonomy to change it and change it again until I find something that settles into a comfortable rhythm, and I'll know it when I feel it. There's art in the process.



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## VITA

Addie Barnhart is a native of Wichita, Kansas where she began her serious pursuit of an acting career in middle school. She grew her passion partaking in a young people's theatre company in Wichita alongside many of her lifelong friends and (now) Broadway actors, and followed her dream to college at Missouri State University where she graduated with a B.F.A in acting.

In the final year of her undergraduate degree, Addie found her love for teaching and spent a summer at Northwestern University's National High School Institute as a faculty associate and assistant director. Her summer teaching in Evanston was where she discovered her love for Charles Mee. This final year of college was her first experience performing one of the great female roles in Greek tragedy, Jocasta, in *Oedipus Rex*.

After graduation, Addie spent several years moving around the U.S. following teaching artist and acting contracts at many reputable and exciting companies, taking camera classes and working on small scale film projects in Los Angeles, but it was her love for working with young actors and teaching that inspired her to come back for her M.F.A. Upon graduating from the Master's program, Addie intends to pursue opportunities as an actor and hopes to find work as an educator on the college level.