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The role of Killer Joe in Tracy Letts' *Killer Joe*: a production thesis in acting

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THE ROLE OF KILLER JOE
IN TRACY LETTS' KILLER JOE:
A PRODUCTION THESIS IN ACTING

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

Christopher C. Cariker

B.A., Southeastern Oklahoma State University, 2000

A.A., Carl Albert State College, 1997

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I would like to dedicate this Thesis to my Grandfather J.C. Don't worry, you'll see me through those goggles soon. Also to my late uncle Leonard. You're still my buddy.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis covers the experience of Christopher C. Cariker in his portrayal of the character Killer Joe Cooper in the play Killer Joe. It contains a character analysis, a daily record of the rehearsal process, an interview with the actor who played the original Killer Joe, Paul Dillon, a breakdown of the fight at the end of the show, acknowledgments, and thoughts/conclusions on the lessons learned throughout the experience of doing the play.

INTRODUCTION

When starting this thesis, I had to go back and look at all of my notes from three years ago when this play was first introduced to me. As a first year graduate student, I did not have the knowledge or ability to attack a role such as that of Killer Joe. I had heard of the script about two years prior, as an undergraduate, from an art teacher who knew the playwright. So, when I was assigned a scene from it in my first year of graduate acting class, I couldn't wait to get started.

John Dennis, my acting teacher, had handed the script to Libby King and myself. My first impression of the script was of shock and horror at how similar the characters were to some of the people I grew up with and to certain members of my family. I know these people; they are everywhere, not just in trailer parks but in the suburbs as well.

Skip ahead two years in my training to auditions for the show that had changed the way I look at theatre. I was dumbstruck at how much work I had done on the side, in the way of character research, by studying old friends and family, talking to old neighbors and just watching the news. All these things related to Killer Joe in some way or another.

When auditions began, I was ready, or so I thought. Two things that I have learned in my training, which always seem to resurface, is not to over-prepare or get locked into one choice. My audition was terrible. I was lost in the lines, couldn't remember the text I had been studying for at least a month, and I realized that if I had just relaxed and thought only of the moment I would have been alright. This is where I am very thankful for the callback process, which seemed to go on forever. It started as most callbacks do--cold readings. So I went in, I was relaxed, and felt very good about the work I had done.

We had four sets of callbacks to pair us down into our possible casting, after which I was exhausted. We had to wait for about three weeks for the casting results and even then we still did not know what the cast pairings were going to be. This double casting seemed to me to be the worst idea in the world.

After JD had cast all of us in our respective roles we still did not have a set cast list. We knew who we were playing, but we just did not know with whom.

Then we began the rehearsal process, which became nearly unbearable. The one thing that actors do--create a character--is hard enough by itself, but now we had another person trying to create the same character in the play, which can become quite the terror. As the rehearsal process continued, I discovered an amazing thing about the resilience of actors--all of the characters were headed in totally different directions. This alone was testament to me of the strength in an actor's heart to discover things at such a level of difficulty. I was proud of my craft the day I realized this.

Moving from one scene to the next was difficult because, again, there were two casts and not enough time to get rehearsal in for everyone, leaving us to do most of it on our own. As the process went on my classmates and I began to see a pattern of rehearsal surface: we were being put in the same grouping. This elated me. In my training here my classmates and I have grown together. The thought that we would have the chance to be on stage together one last time was exciting. Then came the news that we would all be together. Finally, a wish that I made three years ago was going to come true.

As an actor on the verge of a nervous breakdown, because of a three-year wait, and a long, involved audition process, I was not ready to share any limelight. This double casting bothered me. But as always, I don't know everything. Because of the days spent watching others attempt the same role over and over again, something occurred to me: my interpretation is not the only one, nor the right one. As an improvisation teacher here at the university, I constantly tell my students that there is no wrong answer, nor a correct way of doing things. Everything in this line of work is based on opinions and we all have different ones. (I would do well to listen to my own advice more often.) So I decided to put my differences aside and embrace the double casting.

What follows in this thesis is an analysis of the character called Killer Joe, a daily record of the rehearsal process, a piece of an interview with the actor who played the original

Killer Joe, Paul Dillon, a breakdown of the fight at the end of the show, some acknowledgments, and some thoughts on theatre in general related to Killer Joe by Tracy Letts. All references to the text are from Killer Joe by Tracy Letts; published by Samuel French in 1993.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

These are the things that Joe does onstage.

At the top of act one, the first sighting of Joe is when he walks in on Dottie practicing Kung fu with the TV. He then proceeds to tell her an anecdote about a call he went on, concerning genitals being set on fire, and laughs about the very odd nature of it. Then he speaks to Chris and Ansel about the job they want him to perform. He explains his ground rules, but they can't live up to them because they haven't got the money up front. So he begins to leave, sees Dottie, stops, and asks for her as a retainer. After making the deal he comes back to have a "date" with her. He then has sex with her.

At the top of act two: While naked, Joe jumps on Chris and threatens him with his gun. Then, after realizing who it is, he gets up, and goes back to the bedroom to put his clothes on. After coming back out, he sizes up Chris' injuries and goes back to bed. Chris calls him back out and tells him to leave his sister alone. Joe refuses, Dottie comes out, Joe comments that he finds her fun, and takes her back to bed. Then, a scene later, he is found in the kitchen with a large trash bag. He is sitting at the table and is smoking while Chris rants and raves about how he's sorry for wasting Joe's time, and says he wants to call the whole thing off. Chris finishes his rant and Joe asks him to help him carry Chris' dead mother, (in the trash bag,) out to her car. After the funeral, Ansel and Sharla come back in to find Joe waiting on them. Joe goes over the details of the insurance policy of the dead mother. He proves that Sharla was lying by showing Ansel a picture of her giving oral sex to Rex, the mother's boyfriend. He then proceeds to tell them both that since there is no money coming his way, he now owns his retainer, Dottie, and will take her away with him. He tells them that they must help him kill Chris. Joe forces Sharla to simulate oral sex on a chicken leg nearly killing her by choking her with it and beats her in front of Ansel. He then he asks Ansel if he is all right, tells Sharla to fix dinner, and leaves the room. Chris shows up, and the whole family, including Joe, sits down to eat. Joe tells everyone that he and Dottie are in love and that they are getting married. Chris tells Dottie to pack her things. Joe insists that she sit back down. She doesn't. Chris

pulls out a gun, aims it at Joe, Sharla stabs Chris, Joe attacks Chris, and the whole family breaks into a fight.

While offstage:

Joe conducts an investigation of Adelle, their mother. He has sex with Dottie and kills Adelle. He is friends with the man to whom Chris owes money. He goes through the family's things without asking and takes over the house. He also confronts Rex about the murder and kills him to get the insurance check.

Joe wishes to continue his job, to live past the night, and to have a family of his own.

Joe's character is integral to the play's spine since everything revolves around what he will do or has done. He takes over the family and is the force that kills almost all of them. He serves as a direct catalyst with everyone he comes in contact with and changes them forever.

Here are ten reasons why he is the catalyst:

1. He fathers Dottie's baby.
2. He kills their mother.
3. He can arrest all of them on the spot and they can't stop him.
4. He can kill any or all of them and they can't stop or report him.
5. He has very influential friends in the Dallas crime ring.
6. He beats and nearly kills Sharla.
7. He holds the insurance check and can forge it.
8. He convinced a father to kill his son.
9. He asked for Dottie as a retainer and got her.
10. He kills Rex.

His favorite colors are black and green.

His favorite fabrics are felt and cotton.

His animal corollary would be a mountain lion.

His favorite music: country and blues.

His center: Joe moves very well on his legs, but he carries his power in his eyes.

His rhythm is that of a methodical and slow groove, or beat.

His opposite would be a scatter-brained person.

A real life version of him would be my father with a twisted Old West Morality and a mix of Jay Hurst; my aunt's live-in sex-toy (that quiet cowboy thing.)

Joe doesn't have that many things to forget. He has no feeling towards the dead or the people he has killed. It's a job and nothing else: a paycheck. Human life is valued in dollars and cents.

Joe is very proud of what he does. Not many can do what he does; this gives him satisfaction in his work.

Casserole is one of his favorite foods. The man loves a good meal, especially when prepared for him, "gift wrapped," if you will. Joe keeps a lot of things to himself; no one needs to know what he does and in his opinion he is at the top of the food chain. He doesn't tell anyone what he's doing, or whom he's doing it to, when he will do it, or why. He just does it. This mystery is one of the reasons that people are scared of him.

Joe has smart taste in clothes. He always has a gun on him.

FIRST PERSON VIEW

I've killed many people. I also enjoy my job. It helps me with the aggression issue. I will kill again for the right price, but never for a cause. There's no money in it.

I am attractive, very intelligent, and probing. I am generous. I have a bit of temper which I keep under control most of the time. I happen to have a dull sense of humor, but I find myself very funny.

Order of importance: money, sex, power, food, friends, music, literature.

Suicide is for the weak hearted. I never considered it.

I handle details very well. The facts just pop out distinctly. It's my job, after all. When I hear something, it sticks in my head. I rarely forget a fact or a detail.

Three things I fear in this life are being without a weapon, cigarette prices going up, and most importantly, the facts of my life being discovered.

I am always early for an appointment; the day is too short to waste.

I am indifferent to the plight of another person's life. My life is too important for me to worry about someone with whom I have no real connection. I'm kind when I have to be and cruel when I want to be. But I'm really a nice guy off the job.

I love to fish. It reminds me of my childhood. Those long summer days on the river were some of the best times of my life.

My mother raised me to be kind, tip my hat to a lady, and to always open the door for a lady. She also told me if a woman hits me once, take it; twice, warn her; three times, knock the shit out of her. Three strikes and you're out. My father taught me not to take

shit from anyone; always look out for number one. I always get what I want and I have a good time doing it. If you know more than one thing about me I could get upset. I always say “please” and “thank you.” It’s just good manners.

On the job I have very simple rules. They are very easy to follow and if you don’t, I will hurt you in a way that you will not like. Since I am rarely off the job, it’s best if you just do what I say. If I show up at your door with the intention of killing you, don’t try talking me out of it; I have a reputation to uphold.

I am a detective; I am endowed with certain powers above the law.

DAILY JOURNAL

Here is a daily account of the rehearsal process in which I list notes, questions, and some of my thoughts on the process.

Day one

First Killer Joe meeting with the new script.

Texas dialect from top to bottom.

JD wants us interviewed after we leave the scene about the character. It will be taped.

Paul Dillon will be coming here to do the fight.

Still don't know the cast.

Redo aids to characterization.

Clothes are mandatory for rehearsal.

Need to quickly find out what it is we are all wearing and how we live in the trailer.

What would be something that Joe would always have with him?

A lighter? Something personal and important to him.

JD has double-cast the show. We will be mixed and matched until something happens for JD to find a spot to put us.

Possible combos:

Smitty	Shawn	Smitty	Shawn	Smitty	Shawn
Jenn	Michelle	Michelle	Jenn	Michelle	Jenn
Libby	Tara	Libby	Tara	Tara	Libby
Brace	John	John	Brace	John	Brace
Chris	Preston	Chris	Preston	Preston	Chris

Day 2

Finally got the set taped off.

Started off with everyone in the room. It was very strange; I never had to deal with this before. I'm not very comfortable with this.

JD doesn't want us locking into any choices too soon.

Rex, an unseen character, has just been given a voice. We'll see how long that lasts.

Just did my first scene with Dottie, and switched with Preston.

Still don't feel this double casting is the best idea.

It seems like all the choices I make are going to be stolen from me, but I can't worry about that right now.

Just need to focus on the now and find something new--moment to moment.

Questions:

- What rituals do these people have?
- How do they walk into a room?

Day 3

So far I am off book. Can't say the same for everyone else, but we just got the rest of the new script. It's getting tougher for me to keep up.

In this scene "looks hard", I believe Joe is touched by Dottie and he is sorry about scaring the poor girl.

Joe finds it cute that she's doing kung fu.

Joe likes the conversation with Dottie.

JD seems to be directing me toward a Clint Eastwood reenactment. I feel that you can't play that card this soon because there would be no place left to go.

This switching actors to do the same scene over again is hopping on my last nerve.

The dinner scene really won't work until all the rehearsal props are there: the casserole, flowers, hat, dress, and so on.

The dinner scene needs a DINNER.

JD is telling me to rent detective movies. I feel I watch enough "NYPD Blue" and "Walker Texas Ranger."

Questions:

- How observant is Joe of the room when he first walks in?
- Is mystery the word for today?
- I still need to find Joe's center. Where does he walk from, what leads him?
- Search for it, find it slowly, and discover where Joe comes from physically.
- Is detail that important right now?
- How does Joe light his cigarette?
- How does Ansel hit Chris and so on?
- The "women" line in the dinner scene, what does that mean to Joe?
- Do women really seem that way to him, or is it a joke?
- Why pick Dottie?
- Why make this bad decision? (Outside of a good dramatic device.)

Day 4

Today started with three different pairings for the first three scenes.

Still acting without props or set.

For some reason we seem to be spending a lot of time on opening beats with the first year graduate students.

Scene 1.2 went well with Libby. She got a little too anxious on the line; “he set his genitals on fire.” It went ok, it seems like we are the best Joe/Dottie combo.

Using the picture of Viva, Dottie’s aunt, as a comparison between the two of them holding it up to Libby is a good choice.

The only real note I got from JD today was not to touch Brace or “Chris.” To let my standing there be enough.

Maybe he’s right; he is directing.

I believe that will be the only time I get up today.

Need to try something different on the “let’s make a deal” line. The beats still don’t seem to be sitting right; it’s possibly a joke to Chris or just that he needs to be slammed into place with those words.

Questions:

- Am I wasting my time in this room with Ansel and Chris?
- Why does he sit there that long in this pit of a house?

An interesting point about these double-cast rehearsals is that it seems nothing is sacred here; Preston just did the exact same thing I did. I don’t know yet if it’s a compliment or an annoyance. It’s only the fourth day, I need to relax. I’m still not as solid on my lines as I should be.

There seems to be a problem with Libby and the dress. We shouldn't stop for that now.
We don't even have the real dress.

I need to be paying more attention to the behavior of those in the scene with me.
This is going to be tough.

Day 5

Good things happened today. Brace and I worked together.
We found some great moments together. Both of us really opened up and listened to each other.

Flicking his nose on the first "I don't care" line is definitely a good one. I also like pulling the chair over him on the "shoot" line.

Be sure to watch out for clichés and indicating during the Chris monologue.

Question:

- What does my character want?

Day 6

JD's mother has passed away and he will not be here for a few days. Madison and Nathan are taking over. Smitty is also gone, he is shooting a commercial, so Shawn is pulling double duty.

The groups for the next few days are:

- Myself, Libby, Shawn, Brace, Jennifer
- Preston, Tara, Shawn, John, Michelle

Scene 1.2 was no good today. Everything was too easy to do - no challenges.

Questions for this scene:

- Why do I sit down?
- Why did I speak to her for so long?
- Am I taking too much for granted?
- Did I warm up beforehand or was I cold?
- Was I relaxed and available?
- Did my partner and I know our lines?
- How important are props?

(These are questions for the whole show.)

Day 7

Paul Dillon is scheduled to be here sometime next week.

With JD not being here, am I making bolder choices, or am I scared of making the wrong choice? I need to be freer with my body and not worry about what JD thinks. I need to worry about how my character flows with the show and let JD do his job.

While JD is gone these are the things I need to remember.

- BE BRAVE
- Specifics
- Attention span
- Precision
- See the room
- Is Dottie a decoy to trap me
- Get solid on all lines

Questions:

- What is my life offstage?
- Where am I coming from and going to?
- How did I find out about Rex?

Day 8

Group one: all first year graduate students.

Group two: third year graduate students plus Brace.

JD is still gone.

Madison watched our group and what he said seemed to be right. There isn't enough danger in the scenes between Joe and Chris. I'm being too light on Chris. Before today there was a palpable danger between us, yet today seemed way too nice.

Questions:

- What is it about Chris that I have to worry about?
- How could he fuck this up for me?
- Am I jealous of his relationship with Dottie?
- Do I need to be on alert with Chris?
- Everyone has a boiling point, so where is Joe's?

Day 9

Note:

- Can you believe this Chris kid standing up to a gun like that?

Day 10

Same groups--I think that we are set on a cast. I hope so.

Scene 2.4 will prove to be the bane of my acting career; it's a doozy. Jen and I need to run that scene every night. The timing needs to be on.

Day 11

Act one.

One of the reasons why I love live theatre--accidents and mishaps can make the scene come to life in ways I never thought possible. Everything went wrong today in the dinner scene and showed me things that I never saw before, so it took Libby and I to a much-needed place. Dropping the casserole and both of us catching it on the “do you trust me” line made it so much clearer. The “women speech” made more sense when Libby made me laugh by falling over the chair after I said it. Brilliance occurs when stupid things happen.

Day 12

JD is back.

NEWS: Libby and I are definitely together. Preston and Tara are also together. So that much is for sure.

Notes:

- Thank Dottie for the “drink” instead of “coffee.” She got me a beer instead.
- Don’t forget that the casserole is still hot when I pick it up.

Day 13

I haven’t touched my book since day nine and I think I’m suffering for it. Tonight, I will hit the book and go over lines again.

Words for today:

- Action.
- Business.

Day 14

Note:

- Watch the ends of my lines.
- Make sure I'm not dropping in volume.

Day 16

Notes:

- Watch out for dropping cues and pacing.
- Volume.
- Objective for scene 2.1 with Chris is to get back to bed so I can sleep with Dottie.

Day 17

For the dinner scene in 2.4, I wonder if having real pornographic photos will help.

We really need to work the chicken bone scene. It still has not been blocked.

Note:

- Interrogation really needs to fly.

Day 20

Paul Dillon has finally arrived. Now on to the fight scenes in the play.

Day 21

John Lambremont has been fired and Adam Hose has replaced him. Now that our casts are set, I think we can get started.

Still finding new things all throughout the play, which amazes me. With such a short rehearsal time we have really not been focused on the acting as much as the style or look of the show. Now without having to wait on the other cast to finish up we can all get on stage quicker and get to play with each other more, which is wonderfully beneficial.

Day 22

One thing about a fight rehearsal is that no matter how small the move or hit we pay the utmost attention to it. Thankfully so.

Paul is an intense fellow. He works with both casts in the room so he doesn't have to repeat himself. The only blocking in the show that is set to be the same for both casts is the fight scene. Otherwise, it's two totally different shows.

So far each of the fights have and will run (until performance) at ¼ speed, no faster. This way we can see each beat in the fight, each decision made by the actors, fix problems as they arise, and work safely.

By the way, we officially have the cast list for each show:

- Chris: Brace Harris
- Sharla: Jennifer Kelley
- Ansel: R.W. Smith
- Dottie: Libby King
- Joe: Christopher C. Cariker

- Chris: Adam Hose
- Sharla: Michelle McCoy
- Ansel: Shawn Halliday
- Dottie: Tara MacMullen
- Joe: Preston Davis

Day 23

Today we finally tackled the chicken bone-sucking scene. I had thought since JD had originally said he wanted an edgy show that this scene would make Annie Sprinkle squirm. But, to my surprise, he had Jen and I turn it upstage to mask the actual sucking which helps the actress by making her not actually suck the bone. This keeps her safe. It could have been done the other way with a bit more preparation. The scene lets the audience off the hook, so to speak, by taking away the actual sight of the danger while keeping it right in front of them.

Today is Paul's last day with us. He gave us a few notes, said his goodbyes, and left. I will never get over the fact that we actually got the chance to work with the actor who played the original Killer Joe. I want to talk with him more and pick his brain.

Day 24

Notes:

- Keep it new
- Keep it fresh
- Be alert
- Listen
- Attack
- Prepare
- Warm up
- Make a connection with Dottie

Day 25

We suffered today because of no fight call. This can't happen again, because Brace, Jennifer and I were hurt.

Day 26

Adam has the stage with his cast today so they can catch up.

We are in 150 doing a speed through rehearsal. A much needed one.

Today is the first day of tech and the last day of my notes for a while.

Notes:

- Things always seem to drag when you add crew.
- Remember to stay fresh and keep trying to find new things in the holds.
- Find the good and interesting in all events.
- Stay alive up there.

Day 30

Notes:

- No character exists in a box or on an island.
- The actor must stay conscious of his or her surroundings.
- They ALL live in a world that is real and palpable, especially these folks.
- All characters have a life off-stage.
- A “character” must react to the situation, not the “actor” and his or her technical awareness.

These are things that I must constantly remind myself.

INTERVIEW & FIGHT BREAKDOWN

I had the distinct pleasure to speak with the actor who played the original Killer Joe, Paul Dillon. In our talks over the five-day period when he was here, I learned that a lot of the script we were working with came from improvisations that the original company did in 1991. Lines like “his eyes hurt” and “everything has a place” in scene 2.4 all came from improvisations the original cast did. Paul had been asked to come in to do the fight choreography for the show. He kept affirming that he was not a certified fight captain, he only wished to give us some of the original combat and let us run with it and make it our own. We all jumped at the chance.

Now with Paul at rehearsal I had the opportunity to pick his brain about his performance of Killer Joe. He told me his show went through at least three Sharlas and two Dotties. Some of the problems they encountered were broken bones, noses, guns misfiring, and vomiting, all of which just fed my hunger for doing the show. The following is an excerpt from a conversation I had with Paul Dillon. Also in this interview I have included differences I found in performing the role of Killer Joe.

How did you handle the dinner scene with Dottie?

Paul: Well I was standing right beside her looking at her as she undressed and my eyes never left her. We did the scene and on the “how old are you” line she said “Twelve” which was not originally in the script and I just went with it, “So am I.”

(Difference: I turned away as she undressed which seemed to give Joe a softer side.)

So you’ve got this scene with the character Chris where Joe does not speak.

Paul: Yeah, so all I did was let him talk. I figured if I let him go on long enough he would just get tired and give out. Then after his rant I’d hand his mother to him in a garbage bag. Plus, I think Tracy was getting tired of writing at that point.

(Difference: We used a different script, one that had a paired down version of Chris' speech and I actually egged Chris on by listening and participating in the scene instead of ignoring him.)

So how different is this fight from the original production?

Paul: Well not much. All JD asked me for was a fight, so I gave him the only one I knew, and the one that worked the best for our run. Your fight seems to be leaning in a different direction than ours but nonetheless it's basically the same as all the other productions. It's what seems to work best.

What follows is a breakdown of the fight after we took it over.

- Chris pulls out gun, stands, pushes chair in.
- Joe stands.
- Joe sits.
- Ansel pulls out upstage chair.
- Sharla stabs Chris while grabbing his left shoulder, applying the blood pack, and bursting it.
- Chris fires gun into floor.
- Dottie runs stage right.
- Joe throws stage right chair to upstage right corner.
- Joe grabs Chris' chest and pushes Chris to door.
- Joe gives two disarming slams against the wall stage right and the gun falls onto couch.
- Dottie retrieves gun.
- Joe spins Chris around.
- Joe grabs Chris' right arm.
- Joe slams Chris against glass window on door.
- Lowers Chris to knees. Joe grabs cord from Budweiser clock, twists it around his hands, and pulls cord around Chris' neck.

- Joe pulls Chris up pushing him to face downstage and then into poles (center pole rigged to get knocked out.)
- Chris pushes Joe upstage. Joe pulls Chris back.
- Joe throws Chris into table.
- Chris sweeps stuff on table upstage left.
- Joe pulls Chris into stage right wall against calendar.
- Chris drags table along, holds on to stage left side so it falls on to its back.
- Chris drops to floor in front of TV.
- Chris switches hand to prepare for knap on TV.
- Joe drags Chris back to upstage left onto couch.
- Joe sits on couch.
- Ansel grabs Chris' legs.
- Sharla stabs Chris with potato peeler.
- Then goes back stage left and pulls stage left chair against sink.
- Chris kicks Ansel off Joe pulls Chris to his feet.
- Chris backs Joe up into the door.
- Joe releases cord.
- Chris hits Joe with elbow.
- Chris throws Joe into hallway.
- Chris then turns to Dottie and moves two steps.
- Ansel charges Chris and grabs him from behind.
- Grabs his waist and spins him stage left.
- Sharla smashes bottle over Chris' head.
- Opens refrigerator door.
- Ansel pushes Chris into refrigerator closes fridge door on him.
- Joe moves Ansel out of the way stage left.
- Joe slams refrigerator door into Chris once.
- Joe throws door open tackles Chris from behind.
- Both Chris and Joe grab blood packs and smear them on Chris' face.
- Dottie fires into wall above Budweiser clock.
- Joe falls back away from refrigerator and moves across the stage to downstage right.

- Dottie moves center.
- Dottie shoots Chris.
- Chris falls back into fridge.
- Dottie shoots Ansel.
- Ansel pops blood pack on ribs and falls to floor on the oven biting another blood pack.
- Dottie spins to face Joe and points gun at him.

(To be able to break down a fight like this is one of the most helpful ways of breaking down beats I have ever seen. To see spots where the units of action can be filled is invaluable. I was able at each moment to know where I needed to go and how to get there: a map if you will. Without it, I would have been lost.)

Ok, so Joe does get naked. Did you have a rough time with it?

Paul: Well not necessarily, I did have a couple of concerns with what it said about the character, but Tracy was right: it was a way to save writing 12 pages of exposition. Having the character come out nude says something. At the time I wasn't sure what, but it definitely said something.

(Difference: While I agreed with Paul I found the scene to be quite rough, I felt that, even though I did the nudity, it would have said as much if I was in a pair of white briefs. I was wrong. I discovered during rehearsal that the nudity is a necessary element.)

So the chicken bone?

Was it tough working with the actress on this scene?

Paul: (laughs) Yeah, which happened on purpose. Naturally our Sharla was mortified at the thought of this type of humiliation. As I said we went through a couple of Sharlas, which to me was to be expected. It's a tough scene. Of course, all we do is stand there while she does the work. It's still a bit unsettling.

During your run of this show, what did you find was one of the most rewarding moments?

Paul: Joe and Dottie's first meeting: how this girl is able to affect him floored me. I believe he makes the worst decision of his life and career in that moment. She hit him with a ton of bricks. When he says "retainer," that is where I believe his fate is sealed. That's why I think he's shot when the lights go down.

(Difference: I think Joe survives, takes the gun out of Dottie's hand, shoots Sharla, makes sure that everyone else is dead, takes Dottie, and then lives happily ever after, for a while.)

Thanks so much for your time.

Paul: Yeah, sure, it's what I'm here for.

I have the highest respect for this man. His dedication to this play and theatre in general gives me hope for my career.

Thank you Paul, for your grace, time, and honesty.

CONCLUSION

As an actor, I have inhabited the skins of many people. Looking back on the experience of Killer Joe has taught me that there is no correct answer when it comes to acting. Everything I expected to happen didn't happen: in fact, the exact opposite seemed to be true. I found that what you think you need in a show may turn out to be wrong for that experience. Had the show been what I expected, cast with just my classmates, and myself it would not have worked in the same way. I wouldn't have learned how to deal with such problems as distraction and jealousy. All of these selfish feelings I had worked against me, hindered the show and my progress as an actor.

After discovering that there is no correct way to approach the craft of acting without honesty and openness in a moment-to-moment and beat-by-beat fashion, I was able to give it my full commitment and attack this role with the ferocity of a wild beast. While nothing is ever easy in this business, it is advisable to take it easy and try not to work so hard. I found myself "trying" to be scary or "trying" to be intimidating. It took me a while to realize that all I had to do was let my inner and outer life do the work for me. I learned that so much of the character exists in the way that the audience perceives him and the writing on which he is based. Yes, I did create a character, but I had an amazing script, cast, and director to help me do so. With these elements in tow, I was able to relax and "inhabit" Joe instead of "projecting" him.

All of us have elements of deviousness, malice, murderous tendencies, love, passion, fear, anger, anguish, and joy inside of ourselves. This is what made it possible to do some of the things Joe did in the show. I have nothing but respect and love for those in the cast with me. Yet I hit, screamed at, and violated the entire cast. It was in no way easy to do any of those things, but once called upon, any one of those tendencies that we as human animals have are valuable tools in the craft of acting. What makes for an interesting performance is how the character deals with all of the socially unacceptable things that he or she does. Joe spirals out of control. Why is that so interesting? He is the picture of control when you first meet him.

One of my first acting teachers, Molly Risso, once told me that there is no new human emotion. We are all just an amalgamation of our own experiences and upbringing, and that is why the aspect of change (in behavior) is so interesting to audience members. Joe changes in this play. He sees a rose in a desolate place and it touches him in the same way a sunset in the break of a rain cloud could change us, or seeing our child or nephew born. There are things that have altered our beliefs throughout our life and that is why it is so interesting to see where a person came from: what brought them to the place where they are now, how they dealt with adversity, and how they overcame it in creating the person they are today. It is not necessarily important what happened to them, what is interesting is what they did about it. It is interesting and amazing how Joe makes the decision to go against every rule he had set up for himself just to find out why he was affected this way by a chance meeting with Dottie. It makes for an interesting evening of theatre, to see how this guy falls in love in an instant.

Now with all this in mind, how do you do it? I had spent hours and hours of time trying to figure out a way to improve my performance when everything I needed was right in front of me. Just let the story take place. Tell it but don't push it. Never hit the audience with the two by four; let them hit themselves, it's a lot more fun. In this way the actor just does his job, portraying a character in a way that shows life on the other side of the fence: being honest and real without forcing it.

This project has shown me a new way of acting through adversity and not getting what I want. Double casting, fewer rehearsals, losing a cast member, chicken bones, fights, and cowboy hats: now that's theatre. Nothing could replace these experiences. Not to mention we broke the sales record for LSU theatre. A smash hit can't be wrong.

Without this show I would have probably discovered all of this sooner or later, but thank goodness it was sooner. Better to do it now in a safe setting where I'm allowed to mess up and experiment. All of my colleagues were expecting me to soar; yet I was sure I would fail because of the pressure on me. But thanks to a long process of not getting exactly what I wanted, asking the right questions, doing the research on my own, being

there in rehearsal mentally and physically, concentrating, committing fully, and putting my differences aside, I succeeded in giving an honest and real performance.

I learned that adversity and dedication can be powerful allies in the realm of acting. Thanks to Killer Joe I'm able to leave the LSU stage with the utmost confidence in my abilities as an actor and theatre artist.

VITA

Christopher C. Cariker, born in Ft. Smith, Arkansas, raised in the Sallisaw/Vian area in Oklahoma, carries two degrees: a Bachelor of Arts in Acting/Directing received in 2000 from Southeastern Oklahoma State University, where he received honors and two scholarships for acting and communications; and a Associate of Arts in speech/public relations/communications received in 1997 from Carl Albert State College, where he received the Scholars Dorm Scholarship and awards for cheerleading.

He is a three time Irene Ryan nominee. He has also received runner-up for the One-Act Playwriting Festival for the 2000 Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival for his play Laying Blame. Christopher has been well trained in acting, dance, movement, voice, gymnastics, playwriting, martial arts, the culinary art of pastries, and dialects.