

2015

## Prisoner in the Darkness

Joseph Lee Morris

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool\\_theses](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses)



Part of the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Morris, Joseph Lee, "Prisoner in the Darkness" (2015). *LSU Master's Theses*. 844.  
[https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool\\_theses/844](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses/844)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Master's Theses by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [gradetd@lsu.edu](mailto:gradetd@lsu.edu).

# PRISONER IN THE DARKNESS

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

Joseph Lee Morris

B.F.A., Stephen F. Austin State University, 2003

May 2015

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would especially like to thank Naghmeh Abedini, who gave me permission to adapt her husband's words and story into a solo performance. Her graciousness and support contributed greatly to the process.

I want to thank my faculty mentors (Stacey Cabaj, Nick Erickson, and George Judy) for their encouragement and feedback.

I want to thank my fellow colleagues from my M.F.A. class of 2015 for their participation in *Prisoner in the Darkness*.

With all my heart I want to thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He is the Light of the world and our hope.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER	
1 CREATING THE SCRIPT.....	6
Creating the Prison.....	9
2 REHEARSAL PHASE.....	13
Creating the Prisoner.....	13
Creating the Darkness.....	14
3 PRISONER IN THE DARKNESS.....	17
4 PERFORMANCE REFLECTIONS.....	23
Performance Feedback.....	23
Developmental Feedback.....	25
CONCLUSION.....	28
WORKS CITED.....	30
APPENDIX: PERSIAN DIALECT ACQUISITION.....	33
VITA.....	36

## ABSTRACT

This thesis details the writing process and performance of the author's one man show, *Prisoner in the Darkness*. Adapted with special permission from Naghmeh Abedini, *Prisoner in the Darkness* is based on the letters, correspondences, and reports of Saeed Abedini, an American citizen, imprisoned in Iran. Pastor Saeed went back to his homeland to work on humanitarian efforts; however, he was wrongfully arrested and sent to Evin Prison in September 2012. In January 2013, Saeed was sentenced to eight years in prison for conspiring to undermine the Iranian government. His crime? His Christian faith. This thesis will explain the different aspects of creating the script, creating the world of the play, and creating the character of Saeed Abedini. The author shares the joys and difficulties of the rehearsal period, reflects on the final performances, and entertains possible script adjustments towards the future development of the play. A written copy of the script is included.

## INTRODUCTION

I vividly remember my short audition with Nick Erickson in Chicago of February 2013 for Louisiana State University's M.F.A. Acting Program in front of a recording camera and a blinding light. I walked into a small, stifling hot hotel room where I could still hear the commotion from the hallway from other actors auditioning down the hall. Mr. Erickson was the Associate Head of LSU's M.F.A. Acting Program, my point of contact, to whom I already sent a detailed application packet asking him to consider me for the incoming M.F.A. class. I hoped he would recognize my name and face as I walked into the room for my audition. I was the last actor to meet with him that day, and he was already running late from prior appointments. He was a pleasant man who apologized about the time as he affixed a small microphone to my heavy sweater. Following my unbelievably quick audition, Nick appeared open to questions...yet the camera continued to roll and record our interaction. I do not recall having any questions about LSU's M.F.A. curriculum since I thoroughly researched the program before auditioning. However, I remember questioning him about the scary idea of devising a solo performance as the thesis requirement. I considered myself an actor, not a playwright. After all, there were special M.F.A. programs for aspiring writers of the theatre all over the country. He smiled and told me not to worry since the thesis performance slowly develops throughout the training. I left the audition confident and excited about his feedback.

A few weeks later, I received a promising e-mail from George Judy, Head of LSU's M.F.A. Acting Program and Artistic Director of Swine Palace, about his interest in my work from the filmed audition. He asked me to keep LSU in mind as I made my final decisions about a graduate program, and closed his letter with a postscript addressing my apprehension towards the thesis requirement. "Don't worry about that thesis show thing...it is an organic part of what we do and builds over time...no sweat" (February 8, 2013)! Shortly thereafter, I accepted an official offer letter to train at LSU. As I put my life in order the following months to move from Arizona to Louisiana, I already started to brainstorm ideas for my thesis topic.

Being awarded with a full scholarship and assistantship to LSU was an answer to a prayer. I knew God opened the door for me since I prayed that I would only go back to school if I received a scholarship. His guiding hand was with me during the whole process from finding a tenant who agreed to a two-year lease to rent my home in Arizona, to finding an affordable apartment near LSU in Baton Rouge. He blessed me with friends who provided a going away monetary gift to help with my travels and settling into my new home. A verse from the Bible, Colossians 3:17, entered my mind as I thought about the challenging work ahead. "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father"(New American Standard Bible). I dedicated my next two years of training and my final thesis, whatever it may be, to God.

My first year of graduate school eerily raced by. The fall semester of 2014 started with the usual excitement for the upcoming year. A new voice professor, Stacey Cabaj, with a strong background in performance and theatre pedagogy joined the LSU faculty. Professor Cabaj was

also a certified instructor of the Meisner Technique and she was leading a Meisner “workshop” class with the graduate students. The semester was looking bright with the promise of an epic adaptation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* at Swine Palace, Baton Rouge’s premiere Equity Theatre associated with LSU’s Department of Theatre, where I was cast in a few roles to stretch my character work as an actor. But looming ahead was the ever-present reminder that the M.F.A. thesis performances would be showcased at the end of the semester. From the beginning the class was encouraged to brainstorm and develop our ideas for our thesis performances; yet, I did not have a strong, passionate connection to the only idea I was able to muster from the prior year.

It was really important for me to create a thesis with an evangelical slant, to share my beliefs with a diverse audience, and to somehow merge my inner spiritual life with my work as an actor. The only idea I was working with at the start of the fall 2014 semester was a biographical take on some of the most influential evangelists of the Protestant Great Awakening. Reformers like George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and Charles Spurgeon caught my interest. That past summer, I purchased biographical books about these men, and researched famous sermons like Edward’s *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* and Spurgeon’s *Compel Them to Come In*. Somehow I wanted to take excerpts from their most noted sermons and incorporate biographical information to stir the audience to a response...just as they did. I wanted the audience to question their faith, or perhaps lack of faith, and have them observe me transform into these enthralling characters before their eyes. These reformers were considered some of the best, most articulate, anointed preachers in Christian history.

A rough draft included myself as a character introducing these three giants of the Christian faith to the audience. But why was I there and how was I connected to these preachers? My mentor, George Judy, suggested that I connect these men to my work as an actor--perhaps they were the best of performers in a time that needed their message. I believed their message was just as important today as in their time in history. Yet, I didn’t think them to be performers, but humble servants touched by the Spirit of God. I didn’t want to trivialize or even come close to blaspheming their message. So after receiving a deadline for a rough draft of my thesis, I scrambled for a new topic. I came to realize that my initial idea needed further development and research. I needed something that I passionately connected with and could spend several weeks developing with a purpose.

I remember waking up one morning, before class, only to see a disturbing story linked to Facebook. An American journalist, James Foley, was pictured in orange, prison-like attire kneeling next to a creepy figure, with a black ski mask, that was holding a knife. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), an Islamic terrorist group, filmed an execution of an American citizen. I had to search the Internet for the actual execution since it was too graphic to post on Facebook, however I never found the entire clip. A few weeks later, another story about American journalist, Steven Sotloff, appeared in the media with the same execution as James Foley--a violent beheading. I finally found a clip, on Military.com, which showed the stoic Sotloff reciting political propaganda forced on him by ISIS. Suddenly the mysterious figure begins to saw off the head of the American before the camera. The recording cuts from the action to show a terrifying image of Sotloff sprawled on the ground with his head decapitated

on his chest. Then the video cuts to the mysterious figure, who strangely has an English accent, as he points to another figure ready to be executed. "The life of this American citizen, Obama, depends on your next decision!" ISIS was growing in strength and gaining attention through the news media, not only in the Middle East, but also in our own country! There were reports of ISIS loyalists living in the United States!

These bewildering and chilling accounts invaded my thoughts, and I found myself scanning the Internet for more stories. I discovered that ISIS was not only terrorizing Americans, but Christians as well; they were viciously slaughtering women and children from their own country. I could not help but express that terror through writing, and over a weekend I found that I wrote a short, rough draft of a play. I used a previous nightmare that I shared with one of my classmates where a woman comes home to a celebration party and finds the whole house full of slaughtered guests. As she struggles to figure out what happened, she finds herself hiding in the corpses, pretending to be a dead victim, when she discovers that the killers are still in the house. Subconsciously, I used the ISIS figures from the media as my source of terror in the play. And the play soon became political when the reader learns that the killers know the main character, a Christian woman, and have come to kill her and her baby if she doesn't return back to Islam.

Excited to hear the reaction from my professors, I sent them a copy. George expressed interest in my script, but explained that it was too late in the process to coordinate this idea with my classmates since a fellow colleague of mine was already directing his thesis creation. George encouraged me to keep on writing and try to develop a solo performance piece. I felt like I was getting close to something amazing--a powerful thesis topic to spend a few weeks of rehearsal on--but I did not quite have a solid idea to work with yet. I knew something was going to come from this idea, and I continued to research the Internet about American and Christian persecution in the Middle East. I discovered stories about the U.S. hikers (Sarah Shourd, Joshua Fattal, Shane Bauer), Arizonan ex-marine (Amir Hekmati), CIA agent (Bob Levinson), and American Pastor (Saeed Abedini). All of these Americans held something in common. They were being wrongfully held as prisoners in Middle Eastern countries! The United States was not protecting its own citizens!

I was especially drawn to the story of Pastor Saeed Abedini. Not only is he an American citizen, with an American wife and two children, from Boise, Idaho, but he is also a Christian, who converted from Islam, being held captive in his homeland of Iran. According to multiple news reports, Saeed returned back to Iran in 2012, with permission from Iranian authorities, to engage in humanitarian work and help build orphanages. But he was kidnapped off a bus and detained in his family's home and soon sent to prison thereafter. Because of prior charges of building an underground network of home churches from 2000-2004, when it was not against Iranian law, he was sentenced to eight years in prison for conspiring to undermine the Iranian government. This U.S. citizen was imprisoned for his Christian faith. He was sent to Evin Prison and later transferred to Rajai Shahr Prison--two of the most brutal prisons in the world. Saeed was not held in the political ward, but held at times in solitary confinement and imprisoned in wards that housed rapists, murderers, and other dangerous criminals.

I poured over his letters and discovered filmed correspondences online. I started to adapt a script based solely on his words. My first draft of the piece was created within a few days, and I requested that Dr. Shannon Walsh, a theatre history professor at LSU, give me feedback on my rough draft. She instantly suggested that I get permission from his family to produce the script, among many other insights. Though the action of the script was not totally clear at the time, she could not help but agree that Saeed's words were powerful. She liked the "Brechtian qualities" of the piece and encouraged me to develop it further.

The following Sunday I went to church service at Calvary Christian Fellowship. Calvary has been my church home since moving to Baton Rouge in June 2013. Somehow, the story of Pastor Saeed Abedini was mentioned in the pastor's message that morning, informing the congregation of an upcoming prayer vigil scheduled at the capitol building. I shared my interest in Saeed's story with Pastor Paul Hammontree, and he quickly referred me to a member of the church who has corresponded with Saeed's wife, Naghmeh Abedini. I e-mailed Heather Cutrer, a friendly woman interested in theatre ministry, who was happy to contact Naghmeh to introduce my idea. Naghmeh responded quickly, "Yes! You have my permission! Thank you for your e-mail and for bringing awareness!" I felt in my heart that I was on the right track. With the encouragement of Dr. Walsh and the friendly support from Naghmeh, I continued with the work ahead of me.

I wanted to explore how I could share my faith without shoving, or forcing, it onto the audience. I didn't want them to turn off during the performance due to Saeed's very open faith. Yet, I didn't want to compromise his character trying to be politically correct. Saeed is suffering in prison because of his faith. I desperately wanted the audience to connect with him. If they didn't connect on the grounds of being a Christian, I wanted them to remember that a fellow American citizen was suffering in another country being denied his constitutional right of religious freedom. I was ecstatic that I found the topic that inspired me to press forward in my work, but I soon realized that my thesis performance needed to be more than just a story. It really needed to be a plea for help and a call for action. The performance needed to be a disturbing experience for the audience as well as the actor on stage. Not only would I build the world on stage, but I would also extend that atmosphere into the audience's experience of the performance.

This thesis paper will not only include my final manuscript, but will detail all my steps in the creation of the script and performance atmosphere. In Chapter One, I will elaborate on my research and process of developing my script that helped define the event of the story. The research, which shed piercing light on Saeed's current conditions in Iran, assisted with understanding the psychological effects and physical manifestations of solitary confinement and prison brutality. I will share my specific ideas in creating an actual atmosphere for the world of the play. In Chapter Two, I will briefly explain my process of acquiring a Persian dialect and building the role of Saeed Abedini. I will reflect how I was able to get into the required mindset for rehearsals as well as discuss the difficult dress rehearsals leading up to my performance. The final draft of my thesis solo performance, *Prisoner in the Darkness*, will be included. In Chapter Three, I conclude by assessing my execution of the piece and reflect on the feedback from audience members, faculty advisors, colleagues, peers, and family. I will

explain the future development of my work and entertain possible script edits, my growth as an actor, and conclusions about the whole creative process of devising this play. My prayer for this paper is to inspire as much action to its readers, in bringing awareness to freeing Saeed Abedini, as the performance hopes to provoke in its audience.

## CHAPTER 1: CREATING THE SCRIPT

The story of this innocent man, Saeed Abedini, stirred my heart and inspired me to devise a solo performance about his conditions as a prisoner in Iran. I stumbled across three of his letters to his wife, and some YouTube clips about Christian persecution that were ironically filmed right before his arrest. His letters were beautiful, offering hope in a seemingly hopeless situation. He was a man of great faith hoping to serve God in whatever circumstance, depending on his Savior every moment of his imprisonment. Saeed's story appealed to my original desire to elicit a response from the audience, not only to question their faith, but also to see this man living out his faith, and, hopefully, to inspire direct action to save him.

The first draft of my thesis script was really a short play that featured a small ensemble that included fellow prisoners in the same cell, guards coming in and out, and another prisoner to whom Saeed primarily speaks. George Judy, my acting professor and mentor, suggested that I make the script more into a solo performance because he thought the story would be more powerful that way. I agreed with his assessment since I wanted the audience to really feel Saeed's isolation. However, I needed Saeed to talk to someone--to have a purpose of why he was sharing his story. Saeed is a father, husband, son, and American citizen; however, he is also a Christian pastor, so I definitely wanted to keep the evangelical thrust of the gospel presentation in the piece.

The story also needed a reason why Saeed was alone on stage. During my initial research, numerous Internet articles noted that he was being held in a ward with rapists, murderers, and other high profile, dangerous criminals. Prisons in Iran are different from prisons in America. In Iran, prisoners were kept all together in a blocked off ward, rather than individual prison cells found in America. This left Saeed exposed to the death threats he received from other prisoners, ISIS terrorists, and Al Qaeda members in the open ward with him. Saeed is moved from the prison ward to solitary confinement several times throughout his detainment in Iran's brutal prisons. At times, he is moved in order to protect his life from other threatening inmates, but other times he is moved to psychologically torture him to renounce his faith (ChristianityToday.com, "Release Depends on Abedini Renouncing Faith"). He was even transferred from Evin Prison to Rajai Shahr Prison, known by human rights groups to be one of the "harshest prisons...of serious violence, overcrowding, torture, and denial of medical attention" (Porrchardsnews.com, "Moved to one of Iran's 'Harshest' Prisons"). Saeed described solitary confinement in his letter to his wife (AG.org, "Abedini Letter"):

When for 120 days you are asleep in a room with one big light that is constantly lit and does not separate day or night and when you can only see true sunlight for a few minutes a week, that's when you are becoming His workmanship and you can be a vessel in bringing His Kingdom in a dark place and you are able to share the Gospel of Peace and Life to the dying world. And this is where you learn you can love your enemies with all of your heart.

Even though solitary confinement in Iran appeared to have a constant source of light in its isolated cells, I wanted to bring in the element of darkness that was thematic in his letters. In the first letter I came across, which was introduced to me on “International Day of the Martyrs” at Calvary Christian Fellowship in 2014, Saeed closes, “We will start with Christ. Pastor Saeed Abedini, Prisoner in the Darkness in Iran, but free for the Kingdom and Light” (ACLJ.org, “Easter Message”). This motif of darkness and light is not only present in Saeed’s letters but deeply rooted in the biblical theology of his faith.

In another letter, he describes an experience of calming down a fellow prisoner throughout the night. The prisoner was a young, badly hurt war veteran who was thrown in solitary confinement next to Saeed. In fact, 80 percent of his body was disabled. The young man was furious about his government’s mistreatment and shouted through the cell, “Why did they do this to me? I will take my revenge” (ACLJ.org, “I did not Recognize”)! Though this letter does not give specifics of what exactly Saeed shared with the young prisoner, I could only imagine he shared some of the same thoughts, fears, and experiences he humbly presented in the letter to his wife--ultimately the Christian Church worldwide. This true event gave me the perfect opportunity to portray Saeed’s character and create the premise of the script where he ministers to those around him and shares his testimony.

I needed a believable reason why Saeed would speak English during the performance, since his wife, Naghmeh Abedini, confirmed through e-mail correspondence that he only spoke Farsi while in prison. So I made the angry prisoner in the next cell an American. This dramatic choice is not at all unbelievable for the circumstances. During my search of finding the perfect thesis topic, as noted in the Introduction, I came across stories of Americans that were being imprisoned overseas. The American hitchhikers (Sarah Shourd, Joshua Fattal, and Shane Bauer) who have already been released, the former U.S. Marine (Amir Hekmati), the U.S. CIA agent (Bob Levinson), a Christian missionary (Kenneth Bae), and the U.S. contractor (Warren Weinstein) were all held captive overseas. Most of them were thought to be American spies by foreign governments and detained in different countries.

On the flip side, I stumbled across the news story on NBCNews.com about Don Morgan, an American who tried to travel to Syria to join ISIS, but was caught at JFK airport in New York City on the charges of selling a rifle online (due to a prior felony, he was not allowed to possess a weapon). This American didn’t see himself as a radical, but revered ISIS for always putting “Islamic Law as priority and the establishment of an Islamic State as the goal” (Engel, et al. “Exclusive: American Extremist Reveals”). Don Morgan never made it overseas, yet the story of him desperately wanting to be a part of a terrorist group made me question what would happen if he did. How many Americans feel the same way he does? Though in the script I never articulate who the other prisoner is next to Saeed, I was inspired to make him an angry American who has loyalties to ISIS, a terrorist group that even Iran wants to dispel. I chose to keep this part ambiguous so as not to confuse the main story plot. I wanted to add a common uncertainty that the audience experiences with Saeed.

Amir Hekmati caught my attention, as he was a young American that was held captive in Iran even longer than Saeed. Hekmati, a native Arizonan who visited Iran to meet his grandparents and return to his roots, was accused of spying for the CIA and sentenced to death

in June 2012. His confession on Iranian TV appeared under duress, but his sentence was later overturned and he was instead charged with “cooperating with hostile governments”. He is still in prison awaiting his new sentence (Taylor, “Seven Americans being held overseas”). Amir became a reference that Saeed brings up in the story to relate to the fellow prisoner, bringing more attention to the prevalence of other American citizens in a similar situation. My intention to include news clips in the pre-show, a clip of Saeed’s children asking President Obama for his release at the end, and the inclusion of Amir into the plot was transforming my piece into a relevant, political cry for help!

I deeply wanted my thesis performance to be a realistic, truthful look into Saeed’s experience. I decided that having an Iranian guard present in the story was vital to convey Saeed’s erratic circumstances. Saeed would speak Farsi to the guard, but he would also speak English to the prisoner. I asked Naghmeh to help translate what I found in an article from ChristianityToday.com. Saeed stated that prison officials threatened him by saying, “Deny your faith in Jesus Christ and return to Islam or else you will not be released from prison. We will make sure you are kept here even after your eight year sentence is finished” (“Release Depends on Abedini Renouncing Faith”). Naghmeh quickly sent me, via e-mail, a voice recording of the officials’ remarks to Saeed, as well as other short phrases that I requested to filter throughout the script.

The script became a mish-mash of most of his words, adapted into a dramatic form, which explained his arrest, treatment and sentence in Iran, his conversion from Islam to Christianity, his interactions with the prison guard(s), introduced his family to the audience, and expressed his Christian faith. Saeed’s words were powerful, but I wasn’t sure if my script had enough action to propel the story forward and keep the interest of the audience.

George Judy suggested I try to make the dialogue more accessible. He commented that the script was more on the narrative than the theatrical. He noted that the script read too much like the letters penned by Saeed, that it wasn’t a dialogue taking place in the now. George encouraged me to go through the script to shorten some phrases and even cut some portions that seemed redundant. He also noted that the sections I used from the YouTube clips were very clear and sounded more like Saeed, however the sections I used from the letters seemed too formal. George even took time to read some of my script aloud with me, to discover how I (as Saeed) can find the need to be heard. We went beat by beat through the first couple of pages. Since I only had two YouTube clips that illustrated how Saeed actually communicated, I found it challenging to edit. I had to grammatically distort, basically guesstimate how his dialect influenced his expression, to bring him to life in the script. The YouTube clips gave me trends, subtle hints, on how Saeed communicated. Cutting what I included so far seemed impossible, but as I read through the draft several times I was able to edit out recurring thoughts and phrases. During rehearsals, I found that I repeated certain phrases again which gave certain moments a level of anxious energy.

As I revised the script, I e-mailed Naghmeh to gather more information about Saeed’s character. She described Saeed to be a worshipper at heart who spends six to seven hours in worship and prayer each day. Naghmeh further revealed that Saeed is a “very calm and gentle person, but at the same time persistent. He will not back down on what he believes or if he

makes a promise or commitment, he will do everything in his power to make sure it happens.” She also mentioned, from a prior inquiry of mine, that Saeed was not permitted to have a Bible in Evin Prison; however, when he transferred to Rajai Shahr Prison, his family was able to convince the head of the prison to approve for Saeed to have a Bible in his cell (September 4, 2014). I took note of what Naghmeh had to say about her husband as I further refined the script. I truly wanted to show his faith in the harsh circumstances--the hope it gives him to live and persevere each day. Naghmeh could not recall a favorite song or verse at the time of her e-mail, but I sought to incorporate moments of singing and prayer to give dimension to the character on the page.

Nick Erickson, my movement professor who helped me devise the physical torture elements and movement distinctions between Saeed and the guard, noted that the theology of Saeed was indeed very strong in the piece. He commented that the audience could understand his character, but currently Saeed wasn't relatable. Nick suggested that I include more information about Naghmeh and his children to tug at the heartstrings of the audience. He also commented that there wasn't an event that was driving the play forward. Nick questioned why Saeed was talking to the prisoner and what Saeed wanted or needed from him. I explained to Nick that Saeed believed he was in prison for the gospel; he feels a calling to reach out to fellow prisoners to share the hope of eternal life in Jesus Christ. Nick understood his calling but suggested that the violence in the story, where the audience sees Saeed get beaten, somehow bonds him to his fellow prisoner. The violence outside of his cell drives Saeed to help save the prisoner from being killed when the audience hears the screaming from the next cell. The intrinsic idea of “come and beat me, not him” engages Saeed more to his fellow prisoner. This way the audience sees his faith in action, rather than just hear him speak of it. I found that Nick's suggestions were a brilliant reminder on how to show Saeed living out his Christian faith. Nick sensed some apprehension on my part, and encouraged me to go all the way with Saeed's story, to not be ashamed or even embarrassed of what he has to say. His remarks took me off guard at first, but I pondered them as I developed the final draft of my script.

### **Creating the Prison**

“Dark matter” is a term that was introduced during the 2014 fall semester of the M.F.A. Performance Theory class, taught by Dr. John Fletcher. This captivating analysis tool inspired many moments in my thesis script; in Dark Matter author Andrew Sofur imposes the scientific term to a form of theatrical analysis. He relates dark matter, from ideas of physicist Frank Wilczek, as the invisible matter that holds the visible world together which can only be observed from the gravitational effects of moving matter in our universe (3). In the theatre, dark matter is the invisible matter that is literally unrepresented onstage but “un-ignorable” (4). Or simply, what is important but not there. It is making what is invisible, in the world of the play, visible. An audience senses the matter, with the aid of skilled actors and an insightful director, but does not see it physically represented. I wanted to bring what I couldn't bring on stage to the audience's experience.

The unseen prisoner that occupies the solitary confinement cell next to Saeed is a very real presence throughout the performance. The ambiguous, almost God-like, voice that calls out to Saeed after a beating, or the roaming prison guards (seen briefly at the beginning) which

are ever present in the Rajai Shahr ward who create the loud beatings are all examples of dark matter in the story. The dark matter is felt as it affects Saeed's every moment by its very presence. For it is that presence that holds what is seen, Pastor Saeed and his experience, together as the compelling "call to action" to free him from the injustice.

After hearing my thoughts about creating an atmosphere, a complete experience for the audience, George recommended that the guards I originally incorporated in my draft be only seen in the pre-show. He suggested that my classmates dress up as guards to help seat the audience, yet are not seen during the performance, only heard. I wanted the audience to enter into a prison-like atmosphere like visitors coming to see Saeed. To further add to the ambiguity, I wanted the guards to wear masks so the audience didn't see their faces. Naghmeh confirmed in an e-mail, that guards in solitary confinement wear black masks to further isolate the prisoners from human contact (October 18, 2014). I envisioned the guards would usher the audience to their seats, carry clubs, and wear black ski masks that eerily resembled ISIS terrorist attire. The audience would enter the space through two checkpoints, surrounded by guards. At the second checkpoint, a guard would search each "visitor" as another leads them to their seats. I instructed my classmates not to speak unless they had to, and asked them not to be necessarily harsh, but direct. I further instructed them not to be overly friendly or chatty with the audience as they entered the environment.

In Saeed's letter, he related how his "visitation ended and [the guards] put covers over our eyes and we returned to the dark room void of any natural sunlight" (ACLJ.org, "I did not Recognize"). At first, I wanted my classmates to blindfold each audience member and escort him or her to their seat. However, George recommended that the blindfolding be done similar to airport security checks by randomly picking "a willing audience member". This, I hoped, would add an unexpected threat to the experience. Moreover, the blindfolded audience member would be seated directly around the playing space, as if inside Saeed's cell with him.

The playing space needed to be small, almost enclosed on the audience. Saeed wrote, "The days are very cold here. My small space beside the window is without glass making most nights unbearable to sleep" (ChristianExaminer.com, "Pastor Abedini's Letter upbeat"). A smaller venue, perhaps a found space where the audience is almost touching Saeed would work best. But the playing space in LSU's Studio Theatre was unbelievably too large for what I had in mind. After all, when Saeed was transferred to Rajai Shahr Prison he was placed in a cell with five other inmates approximately ten feet by ten feet (PoorRichardsNews.com, "Abedini has been moved to one of Iran's 'Harshes Prisons'"). Solitary cells in Iran are indeed smaller according to Shane Bauer, the American hitchhiker charged with espionage, when he and his friends accidentally crossed the borders of Iran. He was kept four months in an eleven feet by seven feet solitary cell. However, seeing light move across the cell wall from a window brought him back from sobbing uncontrollably after five weeks of confinement. (Bauer, "The Cruellest Punishment"). Sarah Shourd described her experience in solitary, which was even longer than her husband, Shane Bauer, and best friend, Joshua Fattal, as long periods of deep depression with fits of rage (Rush and Collman, "Woman who was locked in Solitary"). Saeed must have felt some of these effects when in solitary. Though I believe him to have a very real and intimate relationship with Christ, Saeed is human after all. Sarah's interview with Michael Slate,

on Revcom.us, gave me a disturbing look into the effects of solitary confinement on its prisoners (“Surviving Prison in Iran”):

We’ve all experienced loneliness. I think if you multiply that by—I don’t know by what degree, but if you can kind of tap into that feeling of being cut off from the world, and just really make it as large and deep as an ocean, then maybe you can get a taste of what it’s like...the effects on your mental and physical health are very blatant. I had extreme insomnia, paranoia. I spent a lot of my time just crouched at the slot near the bottom of my cell door, listening for any kind of sounds. I fell into deep depression, and I had panic attacks where I screamed and actually beat at the walls until my knuckles were bloody.

George and I thought the guards would create an unsettling atmosphere, which later heightens, as the jarring sound effects suddenly provokes a response from Saeed and the unsuspecting audience. Screams, sounds of violence, and beatings are incorporated into the script but come to life as my classmates hide behind the seating bank to create them. I wanted them to actually beat the rails of the seating platforms with their clubs to enhance the dangerous, terrifying atmosphere of the prison. The audience would be right in the middle of the action, experiencing everything that Saeed experiences on a daily basis.

The lighting design needed to add a dark quality to the experience. The lighting coordinator was limited to a basic, studio light plot that allowed for a few specials. I wanted the darkness to remain throughout the performance, but only brighten during certain moments that illuminated the hope Saeed has in Christ. At first, the coordinator thought the lighting was originally set too dark since she was concerned about the audience not able to see my facial expressions. She worked with me as she added more light; we wanted to find a delicate balance of darkness and visibility. As the ambiguous voice calls out to Saeed, the light brightens. Is it the prisoner next to Saeed, is it Christ, or is it a guard? I wanted the audience to question where the voice came from. Another place when the light brightens is when Saeed steps out from the action and addresses the audience for the first time. However, the lights resolve back to the dark prison once he steps into the position of being tortured again. The prison alarm allowed for another lighting effect. I wanted the coordinator to use a red special to foreshadow what may happen to the prisoner next to Saeed. The blood red light flashes as the alarm pierces through the darkness of Saeed’s cell.

I set out to recreate an environment that many people cannot even fathom. Solitary confinement in Iran is not easily understood by research. I desired to make a harsh and intense atmosphere that weighed heavily on the audience as well as Saeed. The darkness enhanced the silence and isolation, the uncertainty of Saeed’s fate, and the evil pervading the physical and psychological torture. The environment became a prison ward, on the solitary block, where visitors became inmates with Saeed.

My professors often reminded the class to stop editing our work, to move beyond the research phase of our thesis. I was finally able to convince myself to move on to the rehearsal phase. The final draft was complete and the research reached its pinnacle of being useful. I looked forward to rehearsals, but was somewhat overwhelmed on where to begin. My lines

needed to be memorized as soon as possible since we only had a couple weeks scheduled for individual time slots for rehearsal spaces. I carried my script everywhere I went, in case I found time to memorize. Panic set in.

## CHAPTER 2: REHEARSAL PHASE

Some might believe that having an actual, living person to portray would be an easier process to take on for actors. Yet the more I observed Saeed online and rehearsed his words, I'm not even sure if I totally captured his essence. An advantage that leaned in my favor was I looked somewhat like the 33-year old pastor. We had the same receding hairline and balding pattern on the back of the head, similar crooked smile, and thick beard (I assumed it was thick since he probably can't shave every day in solitary confinement). I definitely chose a picture to display in the pre-show that mostly resembled myself. I wanted to create a fully developed, truthful human, not a caricature. And as I typically begin with character work, I started from the outside and worked myself in.

### Creating the Prisoner

Stacey Cabaj, my voice professor, assigned the M.F.A. class the United Nations Dialect Final Project in our voice class in the fall. She directed the class to pick a dialect of our choosing, to create a study guide with key sounds and substitutions with International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) notation, key words and phrases commonly found in the dialect, oral posture and vocal characteristics, as well as background history of the country from where the dialect derived. I was granted permission to work on Saeed's dialect for that project to give me extra practice towards my thesis performance. I immediately began work since I was not confident in my dialect acquisition skills. Saeed is from Iran and primarily speaks Farsi; Naghmeh confirmed that he also speaks English well (September 4, 2014). For the project, I used three different live sources on YouTube to serve as a model for the Persian dialect. I learned how to find the kinesthetic trigger from a short, informational YouTube video, "How to do a Persian Accent", from voice and speech coach, Andrea Caban. Of course, Pastor Saeed was one of the sources (I used the same clips to devise my script) as well as an elderly woman who had a thick accent and still lives in Iran, and a middle-aged woman who spoke better English than Saeed and has lived in America longer. Andrea gave the basics about the dialect, but listening and observing Saeed gave the specifics.

I watched those clips every day—even before rehearsing on my own. I studied how Saeed phrased his sentences, identified the pitch he was comfortable with, observed which words gave him difficulty to pronounce, and noted how the tempo and rhythm influenced his delivery. Stacey pointed out early in the process that his upper torso doesn't really engage too much when he spoke. Perhaps that was a subtle hint to monitor my use since I tend to overwork or push too hard. However, I observed that Saeed talks with his head, usually from side to side, and uses very little lip movement while emphasizing thoughts by elongating the words. My United Nations Project of vocal characteristics and sound substitutions for the Persian dialect is found in the Appendix for reference.

This assignment really prepared me for the role of Saeed. I found that I quickly connected with the rhythm and pitch of his idiolect; however, I felt that I went overboard on the sound substitutions by making Saeed's dialect too thick. Saeed treads on a fine line of

being really foreign and really American, so finding a balance was difficult for the time that was devoted to prepare the role. However, Stacey commented, after a dress rehearsal, that the dialect was specific and clear. The only thing I needed to give attention to was the clarity of certain words.

As I worked on the dialect, I brainstormed on the physicality of Saeed. I read through several news articles online which informed me of his physical and psychological challenges in prison. As a result of beatings, Saeed has stomach pains and possible kidney complications where he suffers from internal bleeding (CrossMaps.com, "Pastor Saeed Abedini Robbed"). He was denied medical treatment and pain medication for quite some time until finally he was granted treatment right before he transferred to Rajai Shahr Prison. Other inmates robbed Saeed of any personal possessions or hygiene products he was allowed. Due to the lack of basic hygiene, Saeed's body is "...covered head to toe with lice...He is also experiencing symptoms of urinary tract infections. There is no medication to stop the infections. He is now also experiencing significant joint pain" (CrossMaps.com, "Pastor Saeed Abedini Robbed").

I endeavored to include these physical ailments in my body, as Saeed, during the rehearsal and following performances. I would explore how these conditions would affect his interactions, his state of mind, his voice, and his movement. It was easy to find myself in a heavy state, a tormented attitude; however, I remembered that Saeed finds joy in suffering (AG.org, "Abedini Letter").

When I think of all these trials and persecutions are being recorded in heaven for me, my heart is filled with complete joy...Without the joy of the Lord we cannot live. It is this joy in our life that gives us strength to continue this life. Without strength, we cannot continue the work of the Lord and without joy, there is no strength.

Honestly, I had a difficult time finding the joy in rehearsal. It was physically challenging, emotionally demanding, and a lonely process.

### **Creating the Darkness**

I created the small space of Saeed's solitary cell with the aid of two gymnastic mats, three moveable periaktoi to act as the upstage wall of the prison cell, a rehearsal black box that was flipped upside down for Saeed's toilet, and a jump box with stairs to add levels. The mats gave me a perimeter to work with--an enclosed space that might be similar to Saeed's cell in Rajai Shahr Prison. They gave an eerie nuance of a padded room from a psych ward that actually worked with the piece. I would morph from Saeed to prison guard with combat-like choreography; the mats enabled me to fully explore the movement without injury.

It took discipline to rehearse as much as I did. Arriving to a dark room for a two-hour time slot seemed overwhelming. It took courage to deal with my failings and personal sins when I would somehow compare my current circumstances with Saeed's circumstances. I had to remind myself that Saeed wasn't perfect; he is as human as I am. But he had a profound faith and joy that lifted him from the misery, pain, and loneliness.

I found myself thinking about my relationship with God and how I felt so short of how I wanted it to be. I wondered if I was the right actor who should portray Saeed. In rehearsals, I desired to commune with God, reaching out for some sort of response. A still, small voice? A peace of mind or joy in my heart? But outside of rehearsals I seemed to fall back...further back. I would rehearse moments to myself, other moments to God, create moments with the people who were perhaps listening in the hallway. I wanted to elicit a response in the rehearsal room like I wanted in the performance.

I would leave rehearsals exhausted and in a dark mood. The severe mood swings were out of control, at times, but I connected them to Saeed's experience. I played around with possible ailments and symptoms he falls victim to. I looked for a pain in the gut, explored soreness in the joints, imagined a plague of lice all over my body, and experimented with extreme hunger. The sense memory approach from my prior training at Actors' Studio Drama School helped with the process, but I soon remembered why I didn't care for that Method. Strasberg's Method pulled me too much inside myself as an actor; whereas after training at LSU, I am finally starting to live and react moment by moment with a scene partner. Sense memory affects my nerves. I didn't feel healthy during my training in NYC, but like an old habit I returned to what I thought would bring truth to the stage. Perhaps if I engaged more of my imagination than my senses, I would leave the rehearsal room without the lingering baggage.

George would observe my progress and remind me to find the humor and search for places to lift the energy and mood. He would caution me not to get trapped in an attitude, and to look for the places to change my need for a response. George also had wonderful ideas and helped me set certain moments for clarity. He was excited to help me; I was excited to be there. I found the rehearsals in front of him were more successful than the rehearsals on my own. It was wonderful to have someone to watch and give me notes. It must be wonderful for Saeed to interact with someone in solitary as well. I found that I didn't do so well on my own in the dark rehearsal room. I remembered the side effects of solitary confinement from articles I read, and I laughed at myself for even comparing my rehearsals to that form of torture.

I would begin each rehearsal with a physical warm up of my movement pieces. I wanted to get them in my body. I needed to be engaged and present before starting the moment-to-moment work with the text. My combat moves and character switches needed to be precise, clear, and theatrical. Nick would encourage me to start slow and perfect each phrase before going on to the next. He would stop me several times during tutorials, but his pickiness was what I needed. I believe all the exhaustion from the physicality helped me achieve truthfulness in my acting. I didn't have to push and I felt much more present than I ever did on stage.

It was impossible to find out exactly what kind of physical torture Saeed goes through in prison. Nothing specific is really revealed about his abuse behind prison walls. I searched for sources to give me inspiration and stumbled across a disturbing YouTube clip. In a Russian video, guards were punching a prisoner in the face and kicking him over and over again. They would slap the prisoner on the back of the neck, grab his neck and pull him up, and punch his chest until he responded to their questions (YouTube, "Russian Prison Guards Beat Inmate"). I also thought about how prison guards could possibly throw Saeed around in the cell, against the walls, and beat him with their clubs. During one rehearsal as I was putting some of these

ideas together, I got the impulse to be thrown to the corner of the cell near the toilet. I explored the possibility of having the guard dunk Saeed several times. This ended up being a very disturbing, but effective moment during the performance.

When I wasn't in a rehearsal room, I went over Saeed's words in my head. I would say them aloud as I sat on the couch at home. His words affected me in an unusual way. I would swell up with tears from just saying them aloud between classes. Obviously I was closely connected to the project. I just hoped people would be open to his story. I found that when I spoke about my thesis topic to some classmates or undergraduates, a few shut down and seemed to get offended. That was the last thing I ever wanted to happen during the performance.

Technical dress rehearsals quickly arrived. The tech crew made it a point to inform me that I had more sound cues in my show than anyone else in my class. I also had difficult video clips that needed to be timed just right since the sound and videos were not synced correctly. I never realized how much I imagined for my thesis production! The director in me took over as the actor stepped back. I needed to be clear and assertive with all the cues since whatever we rehearsed was never the right execution. The two tech rehearsals I was allotted never completely got through to the end of the show. I was anxious and nervous. I beat myself up for not making a simpler, shorter solo performance. Yet, I reminded myself about the importance of the message. I thought about Saeed and his family without him. I had to do this piece! I needed to spread awareness and perhaps touch the hearts of the audience at the same time.

The crew was generous in coming in, during their day off, to run my show as an actual dress rehearsal. The syncing of the videos drove me crazy since it was different every time. The good news was the guards didn't need to open the house until the beginning news clips were running correctly. However, the ending clip of Saeed's children never worked. And I think that was one of the most powerful moments in the play! It hurt me that the ending clip was always somehow distorted.

The rehearsal period ended suddenly, but I'm glad I didn't have more time to experience the torture. I'm not sure if I would be able to endure it. I found myself at the edge of sickness and fatigue. I seriously needed some rest, but class and work assistantships wouldn't allow for it. The week of solo performances had finally arrived and I was terrified with excitement.

### CHAPTER 3: PRISONER IN THE DARKNESS

Adapted by Joe Morris, with special permission from Naghmeh Abedini, based on the reports, letters, and correspondences of Pastor Saeed Abedini in Iran.

(Before the show, clips of news reports and stories of Saeed Abedini, etc...Persian music plays and right before action begins, a message is read on the curtain:)

Saeed Abedini, an American citizen, was in his homeland of Iran helping to build an orphanage. While he was there he was wrongfully arrested and sent to Evin Prison in September 2012 (Abedini, "Saeed Abedini's Story"). In January 2013, he was sentenced to an eight year prison term for conspiring against the Iranian government.

He has since been transferred to the infamous Rajai Shahr Prison which is, described by human rights groups, an extremely brutal facility populated by Iran's most violent criminals.

(In a very dark cell. Solitary confinement. Pictures of prison, the conditions, etc...are displayed. Suddenly a masked figure is seen dragging something in. A struggle is seen. Silence. Suddenly we hear screaming, "Get me out of here! Why did they do this to me?! Get me out!" The man on the floor moves. He takes off his blind fold and sees where he's at. He tries to sit up, but can't at first. His eyes are swollen, has a beard, and appears to be badly injured. More shouts. "Get me out of here! Do you hear me?!" I said get me out of here! I will take my revenge! Do you hear?! I will take my revenge" (ACLJ.org, "I did not Recognize")!)

SAEED

Hello? (Beat) Hello, my friend, what is your name? (Beat) My name is Saeed. Saeed Abedini. You are American too? (Silence) Are you hurt, my friend? You are in solitude confinement. No one can hear you only me. Can you hear my voice? Can anyone hear me...

(Silence. A loud bang is heard)

So you can hear me, my friend. What is your name? Have you been stung like me? (Beat) I have been stung so many times...I have become full of poison (ACLJ.org, "I did not Recognize"). What is your crime, my friend? (Silence) The Revolutionary Guards took me from a bus and held me in arrest at the home of my family. Then they took me and beat me all the way to prison--to Evin Prison first time--I didn't even know where I was. My family didn't even know what happened to me. My family here in Iran...being interrogated, tired, and under so much pressure. I finally saw my family behind the glass walls I could see my mother four meters away. She saw my face...she broke down crying and could not get closer. I looked into the wrinkled, tired eyes of my father. He must have ran around for months. He had no more strength left in him and after weeks of being in solitude confinement I got to see my face in the mirror of an elevator that was taking me to the prison hospital. I said hi to the person staring back at me because I did not recognize myself. It was very hard seeing my family...I understood what they felt. Our visit ended quick, you know, and they put covers over our eyes and I returned to the dark room void of natural light (ACLJ.org, "I did not Recognize").

(Silence)

Friend, do you have a family? I have the most loving wife...my beautiful wife, Naghmeh, she is the love of my life...on the other side of the world, alone with the kids...Alone and worried in Idaho. I live in Boise. Have you been there? So beautiful there the mountains and river...I remember all the trips we would take to the river. We have family time at the river and Naghmeh and I would watch the kids play by the water. And then after a long day we would take the children to eat ice cream. You know, I cannot believe it when I moved to America--so many choices to choose everywhere. I have difficult times choosing what to get at the store. That is why Naghmeh goes to store and not me...I would never get shopping done. And my kids know exactly what they like to eat since they are very stubborn like their mother. I have two beautiful children...Rebekka and Jacob. Rebekka asks my wife if I will come home for her birthday this year. I have missed three years her birthday. My son Jacob wants me to take him to Disneyland again. We had a wonderful vacation when we went last time. He wants to ride on the pirate ride again but I don't know why he was so scared. He cried the whole time. Naghmeh told my family he still talks about it. But now, I do not know when I will get updates from my family anymore. My mother had to flee Iran after getting threats for defending my innocence. It is safer for her to be with my wife and kids in United States. My father is in hospital now.

(Silence)

Do you know my friend Amir, he is an American, and he has been here in this prison longer than me. He came here to Iran to visit his family but the government thinks he is an American spy. He hopes each day that our government will come over, you know, to rescue us. He says to me, "We are citizens of the United States of America! Why doesn't Obama do something?!" Then he always says to me, "Does Jesus tell you when He will bust us out of here?" I tell him that our families are doing as much as possible. But I also tell him that God is in control and when you find Lord just stick to Him (Abedini, "Message to the Persecuted Church"). God is in control in the world and everything happening in it is for His good purpose. He never leave you alone. He never forsake you. He is always with you. He always has a plan (Abedini, "Message to the Persecuted Church). He has a plan for you, my friend. He has a plan for me...I am sentenced to eight years in prison for conspiring to undermine the State but I do not conspire. I am an American pastor, you know, an Iranian-American Christian pastor. They know I am a Christian and they arrest me. It is interesting that because I am a Christian pastor I am carefully watched. I am expected to smile at them despite of what is being done and to understand why they are doing all of these things. I see all these difficulties as golden opportunities and great doors to serve (OfficialACLJ, "Abedini's Letter from Inside"). (Beat) Do you know Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?

(An alarming, violent sound is heard...perhaps like an animal trying to get out of a cage. Saeed is shaken.)

You are offended, my friend? ISIS jihads, Al Qaeda terrorists, they walk by my cell each day and shout to me threats. One day I woke up and there was prisoners all around me, all of them staring down. I thought they were going to kill me...The death threats, actions committed to

humiliate me, insults, being mocked (OfficialACLJ, “Abedini’s Letter from Inside”)...Because I was a Muslim...a Muslim who converted to Christianity and because they say to me I am an unclean American. They threaten my life...even the Guards want to get rid of me. Extremists in the prison who create another prison within the prison walls (OfficialACLJ, “Abedini’s Letter from Inside”)...I cannot go into the prison yard or I will be killed. God give me some friends and they try to protect me from being attacking but they cannot always be with me. Are you hurt, my friend? Do you hear me? (Beat) Lord...do You hear me?

(Silence)

I hear the rats...the dirty sewer rats. I cannot sleep at night because of the loud noises and screeches. It sounds like laughter in a way (ACLJ.org, “I did not Recognize”). (Beat) Listen, my friend, I heard you screaming at Guards...we have been bitten by the snakes of this world so many times that...that all of the poison has collected in us and we are like the poisonous snake. But if we sting anyone, we will die. You must forgive, my friend. When we don’t forgive, we drink the poison ourselves and wait for the other person to die. And we take the knife that has hurt us and we stab ourselves with it again. But when we forgive, we pour out the poison of the enemy and of the devil and we don’t let the poison stay in us and we don’t let the poison make us into poisonous snakes! So we don’t become like the person we despise and who persecute and torture us. (Beat) I forgive the prison doctor who did not listen to me or perform me the surgery I needed. I forgive the nurses that did not give me the pain medicine that they would give to other prisoners because they say I am unclean. I forgive the interrogator who beat me (ACLJ.org, “I did not Recognize”)...a tall and muscly guy came to the room and was very angry and I just grabbed my face to protect my face when he was attacking me. So when I just grabbed my face Holy Spirit start talking to me. And He just remembered that verse to respect your official. So I stand up and I shake his hand and smile into his face and when I did this to him I saw his face was changed from angry face to this, you know, smile. And he likes that. And when he saw the respect he took me to a comfortable place and asked me why did you became Christian from a Muslim background and I start sharing my testimony with him and I told him it’s just about a love...loving God. God loves me and I’m trying to love him back so....And he said you are not scared to be killed or beaten with us and I said no. If God wants me to be with Him in Heaven, I’m ok. And when I start sharing my story with him do you know what he said he said if the whole world you’re on became like you I’m ok with that and he shakes my hand, you know (Abedini, “Message to the Persecuted Church”). Every day I would see the interrogator and for the last time when I saw him, I forgive him. The minute I forgive them and loved them, that second I was filled with joy. Love is as strong as death. Even though they would call me unclean and filthy and would not even want to pass me and were disgusted to touch me because they were afraid that they would also become unclean, but I know that in the eyes of Jesus Christ I am like a beautiful and loveable sewer rat—not disgusting and unclean—and like the rats I can scream with joy in these prison walls and worship my Lord in joy and strength (ACLJ.org, “I did not Recognize”).

(Saeed begins worshipping, singing, with abandon. Shouts from within. We hear the sound of a door opening. We see Saeed become the Guard; the Guard becomes Saeed. There is a struggle and beating. Finally Saeed reaches out to hug the Guard, but gets beaten again. The Guard

disappears. Sound of door closing. Silence. Saeed struggles to move. He looks around the cell and pulls himself across the space because he can't get up. He grabs the dish for water, it is empty. He tries to return back but faints from exertion. Silence. An unfamiliar voice, perhaps sounding like, "Saeed. Saeed." Is heard until Saeed wakes up.)

(Mumbling) Saeed, Saeed...go to preach my gospel...I am coming back soon Saeed (Abedini, "Saeed Abedini's Story")... (Saeed is coming to, realizing where he is again.) I'm still here by the grace of God I'm still here... When for 120 days you are asleep in a room with one big light that is constantly lit and does not separate day or night and when you can only see true sunlight for a few minutes a week...And this is where you learn you can love your enemies with all of your heart (AG.com, "Abedini Letter"). The guards tell me many times that if I go back to Islam then I will be free to see my wife and kids. But I cannot deny the one true living God. He never deny me. (Beat) I always wanted God to make me a godly man. I did not realize that in order to become a godly man we need to become like steel under pressure. It is a hard process of warm and cold to make steel. The process in my life today is one day I am told I will be freed on bail to see my family and kids (they are all lies) and the next day I am told I will hang for my faith in Jesus. One day there are intense pains after beatings, the next day they are nice to you and offer you candy. These hot and colds only make you a man of steel (AG.com, "Abedini Letter")...who do you call it in America? Superman? God is making me into a Super man. But all the powers come from Him. When I am weak then He is strong.

(Silence)

I was a very strong Muslim--part of the very strong family--but what happened to my life was I was practicing Islam Law and always praying—everything Iran—helping people and I was trying to do my best for God and every activities and everything they can do for God but to be honest with you...I didn't have eternal peace in my heart so I was always looking for God to answer my pray to give me peace and joy but there wasn't any joy in my heart and I felt alone and disappointed and I didn't have any plan for my future. I was like a lost...you know, so these things just broke me so much and I got a depression when I was just 20 years old. I wanted to kill myself and at that time I went to a church and the pastor was talking about Jesus and he introduced Jesus as a Lord and Savior which I know him as a prophet and good man. So he made me very angry and I decided to kill that pastor because I was thinking that he's preaching the wrong messages and lead the people to the wrong way. But in the other hand I was thinking to myself that I'm doing my best for God but God in my life is like a death God. There is no relationship between me and God. It's just like working for him and he's not always in his office to answer me back so I was thinking there's something wrong in it and in the other hand when I heard the gospel the pastor was talking that God wants to be a friend to you. He wants to lead you according to your needs and everything that you need in your life. He wants to be your friend like a Father and son and I was like that's the thing that I wanted. I'm hungry for that. I was waiting for that day that I can have to just find this relationship. But I feel that because of our sin, our problems, our mistakes...our relationship with God is like caught. God wants to help us. God wants to talk to us but there is not a good connection to us and we should repent our sin to God and ask for His grace in our lives. So I was praying for that and it was like the first time I was praying really honestly to God that God just please show me which

way is true—Islam or Christianity. Koran or Bible. And I was praying for that. And I went to sleep and that night it was like one minute to midnight I heard a voice...woke me up. He called my name. He said, “Saeed, Saeed, I’m coming back soon go to preach my gospel.” I woke up, look around, no one was in the room so I went back to sleep again. The second time and third time happened again, the same night. Three times I heard the sound. The last time I heard like a huge voice shaking the room and I woke up. I was scared I felt the first time in my life the prison of the Lord on me. It was very scary and heavy. So I saw a huge light in the room which I couldn’t look in it and the voice told me again, “Saeed, Saeed I’m coming back soon go to preach my gospel.” And when I just accept that I said Amen. I could look to the light, I was shaking, scared a lot, and I saw Jesus from the back and He went to the mountain and I fell down and went to sleep like a dead person. And that day, after meeting with the real God, with the live God, my life was changed and I was someone else. I found joy, peace, love in my life and everything was changed. I was someone else (Abedini, “Saeed Abedini’s Story”). You can be someone else too.

(Another loud clang or noise is heard. A series of loud clangings begin and crescendo violently through the alarm.)

Do you know you are precious to God? Do you know that, my friend? You are so precious to God that He sent to us his only Son--Jesus took our poison and all the stings of the world on Him--and whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. Believe on Lord Jesus and you will be saved!

(Alarm goes off. Sound of jail door opening and Guards entering cell next to Saeed. Fighting noises are heard. Saeed struggles to the door and tries to stop them, to distract them.)

Do not hurt him! Stop that! Over here, Over here Guards! Open this door! (Speaks Farsi)  
(N. Abedini, November 10, 2014)

(Suddenly the chaos is over. Silence. Sound of door closing and opening. Saeed becomes the guard. The Guard speaks in Farsi (N. Abedini, September 13, 2014). Saeed is silent. The Guard tosses a piece of candy to Saeed, Guard seems nice. Guard speaks again and takes Saeed’s Bible. Guard starts ripping pages from Bible and finds a picture of Naghmeh to destroy in front of Saeed. Saeed scrambles to pick up the pieces and Guard jerks Saeed back by the hair. Saeed trembles and replies, but the words comfort him and give him confidence.)

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written: ‘For Thy sake we are killed all the day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’ But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:35-39; ChristianityToday.com, “Release Depends on Abedini Renouncing Faith”).

(Guard grabs Saeed by the head and pulls him back. Stillness. A light fades up on Saeed as he steps aside and addresses the audience directly.)

I am Saeed Abedini. I am sure you know exactly who I am by now and why I am appearing before you. And now, it is time for my message (NirvanaNews, "Beheads U.S. Hostage Steven Sotloff").

I was praying as I was handcuffed to my bed in my hospital room for my fellow Christians in the world. What the Holy Spirit revealed to me in prayer was that there are many dead faiths in the midst of Christians today. That Christians all over the world are not able to fully reach their spiritual potential that has been given to them as a gift by God so that in reaching that potential, the curtain can be removed and the Glory of God would be revealed.

Sometimes we want to experience the Glory and resurrection with Jesus without experiencing death with Him. We do not realize that unless we pass through the path of death with Christ, we are not able to experience resurrection with Christ.

We want to have a good and successful marriage, career, education and family life (which is also God's desire and plan for our life). But we forget that in order to experience the Resurrection and Glory of Christ we first have to experience death with Christ and to die to ourselves and selfish desires.

Jesus said to His disciples in Matthew 16:24: "Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me." This means that we should not do things that we like to do (that God does not want us to do) and to do things that we do not like to do (that God wants us to do) so that He may be glorified.

So in addition to spending our days and nights in doing the works of faith as described above, we should also transform our dead faiths into living and active faiths through the resurrection of Christ which is an active and constructive love that is effective. Then we are able to experience the Glorious resurrection with Christ. A Glorious life with Christ starts only after a painful death (to self) with Christ. We will start with Christ.

Merry Christmas,

Pastor Saeed Abedini

Prisoner in the Darkness in Iran, but free for the Kingdom and Light (ACLJ.org, "Easter Message").

(Loud, startling bang. Lights go out. A clip of Saeed's children, pleading to President Obama, plays.)

THE END

## CHAPTER 4: PERFORMANCE REFLECTIONS

My two solo performances felt completely different from each other. On opening night I felt excited, exhilarated that I was about to perform a solo piece very near to my heart, but was terrified at the same time. I arrived early to the theatre to rehearse the movement progressions of the show. I wanted to be sure they were clean and specific like Nick advised in his private sessions with me. I wondered how the audience would take my piece. I wanted them to be shocked, disturbed, touched, and even horrified. I wanted them to experience all the emotions Saeed goes through in the performance. Before I entered the space, I reminded myself to be truthful. I didn't want to strive for something that wasn't alive that evening.

With the first performance, I felt more emotionally connected—especially when Saeed sings out to God. I really felt that I was engaging a response from the fellow prisoner next to me throughout the performance. I wanted a response from anyone that would hear me. I took in the audience and felt their presence. Any sound or shift in the audience gave Saeed hope that he was being heard. I was shocked at how many instances I heard laughter, but was in awe of how I felt the audience follow the story. My transitions between guard and Saeed were crisp. There were some shocking moments where audible gasps were heard in the audience. For the majority of the performance I felt strongly present and connected.

On the second evening, Saeed seemed to be in a darker place than the first performance. My energy was lower and I felt like I took more time with each moment--perhaps too much time. I didn't have a chance to run through the movement components before the show began since I had a guest visiting me from out of town. I felt I was more desperate than the previous performance. There were brief moments where I, the actor, was more concerned about the dialect and executing the exact words from the script. I felt myself become disconnected in certain moments. I thought I felt the audience get restless, or even bored, at times. I would try to bring my focus and energy back to the other prisoner when I caught myself wandering. I always connected my thoughts to Saeed's thoughts to remain in the truth of the moment rather than get distracted out of second circle.

Looking back, I feel like I tried to create moments that were good in rehearsal but not necessary for the performance. I felt alive in certain moments of the show, but dead in others. The second performance felt like a first rehearsal after coming back from a long break. In the back of my head I was afraid that Saeed was talking too much, particularly in the last moment when he addresses the audience. He tells them that in order for them to really live, they must first die to themselves and follow Christ. Perhaps this was getting "too preachy", or perhaps this is exactly what the audience should hear since Saeed feels so strongly about it. I'm still struggling with the moment as I think about future performances.

### **Performance Feedback**

It was odd to experience the intensity of the audience during my show, yet hear them keel over with laughter in my colleague's performance immediately following mine. Tim Moriarty got such a huge, overwhelmingly pleasant reaction to his piece. It made me wonder if

my piece created a similar reaction with a different extreme. When I entered the theatre at the end of the evening, I received so many positive comments and feedback. Rick Holden, the Head of the LSU's Undergraduate Performance Concentration, commented that the pieces were a perfect pairing to showcase. He recommended that we showcase our work together at a fringe festival or in the regional theatre circuit. Rick loved how both pieces featured characters that were grasping with their faith.

Stacey Cabaj, Nick Erickson, and George Judy were all proud of my growth as an actor. Nick shared with me that he was impressed on how clear the movement vocabulary of the show became, and how I was one of the "actor actors" of the class. Stacey commented in a class journal entry that my "instincts for the piece were so on the mark." She later revealed in my "end of semester assessment" that I had grown in my emotional preparation, heightening the stakes, and exploring my impulses in the work. George was proud that I was able to produce a show that conveyed my faith. He stated in his assessment, "Joe clearly did a piece that came from his heart...it was moving, troubling, and funny in moments..." He later revealed in an e-mail, after my request for additional feedback, that my performance seemed to stay on the same note at times, "...an attitude, rather than a constantly evolving struggle with life. It will be imperative to keep making new discoveries throughout..." (February 15, 2015). George attended my final performance and I couldn't help but agree. Yet, as I reflect on their feedback, I could not have done this project without their help. My mentors gave me so much support and offered me top-notch guidance along the way.

My close friend, Heidi Foreman, visited Baton Rouge to watch my final performance. She was blown away with my work and deeply affected by Saeed's story. It made her question her faith, how "Christians have it so easy in America", and she immediately added her name to the petition on [beheardproject.com](http://beheardproject.com) to free Saeed. She told me that she wanted to jump on stage as Saeed painfully reached for an empty bowl without water. She shared how *Prisoner in the Darkness* was a powerful, dramatic work that made her feel an array of emotions.

A fellow colleague posted a memorable message to my Facebook page concerning the evening's pairing of shows. Camilla Morrison, an M.F.A. student in LSU's Costume Design Program, wrote:

I feel so privileged to witness your talent and the culmination of your incredible hard work on these shows. For both shows, I couldn't wait to hear what you would say next! Now I find myself reflecting about religion, how what we believe shapes our lives, and what ultimately is truly important and our journey to find just that. YOU GUYS! INCREDIBLE!

Even Jim Murphy, the Head of LSU's M.F.A. Technical Design Program, commented that my work had "serious balls". He usually is a man of few words, but he made the effort to share how he appreciated the courage it took to put up a piece of theatre so controversial. He even shared, nonchalantly, that my performance showed "good work".

Some members from my church family at Calvary Christian Fellowship attended my final performance. Although I did not see them immediately afterward, I received many Facebook

messages about the show. Lynelle Thomas sent me a message that especially touched my heart.

I was amazed and awestruck at EVERYTHING YOU DID and so was everyone else. Your performance was bold and passionate. Many of us were there from church. The time seemed to fly by. I don't know what God is going to do with your play but it has already impacted me for many days to come. Thank you for being obedient to God's calling on your life. You will never regret it.

I knew the performance would make other Christians question their faith, but I didn't realize how big of an impact it would have. Heather Cutrer sent a text message to my phone right after my final performance. She couldn't stay to congratulate me since she was moving to a new home that weekend. But she needed to share how she heard several audience members discussing how intense the play was during intermission, and even noticed a man, of middle-eastern descent, explain to his young son what prisons are like in Iran. That is exactly what I wanted to happen after my performance! I wanted the audience to leave the theatre thinking and discussing the story. I wonder if that continued to happen since Tim ended the evening on a much lighter note with his thesis performance.

### **Developmental Feedback**

Playing Saeed Abedini was the most difficult role I've played thus far in my career, yet the most satisfying. I can definitely see myself touring *Prisoner in the Darkness* to different churches across the country. Moreover, George Judy commented that it was "certainly worthy of production and could play in any fringe...with significant success" (February 15, 2015). His comment made me think about my future plans with the production. I definitely want to refine the script in some areas, but should I only share this story at church venues? I think it's an important piece of theatre that needs to be shared with diverse audiences, not just with a Christian influence.

George offered a "theatrical adjustment" for me to consider as I look to refine areas of the script. He wanted me to think about the possibility of Saeed beginning the play as an address to the audience so it wouldn't seem as "jarring" when he confronts the audience at the end of the play. "This would establish a theatrical relationship with the audience, make it clear there is an overt theatricality as a convention that will make your choices about inhabiting both the guard and Saeed more immediately accessible..." (February 15, 2015). He commented how he liked my adjustments to the script since he last observed my rehearsals, but he felt unclear about the ending. He shared that he felt the play did not quite end for Saeed. However, I deliberately wanted to convey that feeling since Saeed is still currently in prison. His imprisonment, his loneliness, and his physical and psychological torture in Rajai Shahr Prison has not ended. Will it ever end? I wanted the play to conclude with a question mark for the audience. That is why I have Saeed return to his original position being tortured as a huge bang is heard when the lights go out. George suggested I perhaps return to the major dramatic question of the play by having Saeed say, "Can you hear my voice? Can anyone hear me?"

I asked a fellow graduate student for feedback on my script. Weston Twardowski is a sharp, insightful guy who is studying at the University of Houston for his M.A. Degree in Dramaturgy. He began and ended his e-mail with encouraging feedback on my “lovely” and “excellent” work. His main criticisms for me to think about was it “seems we watch Saeed go from a devout Christian, who is beaten and held to...a devout Christian being beaten and held. While this may be his story, dramatically it doesn’t tell us the story we want” (February 14, 2015). He offers up ideas to restructure the piece, even suggesting including a second character in the cell with Saeed to offer opposing viewpoints.

Weston felt that the story “isolated” the audience at times. He believed that “...the audience could not feel for Saeed” since he was thrusting his own beliefs on other non-believers. He especially noted the moment in the action when Saeed screams over the prison alarm for them to believe in Christ. He wanted me to think about adding another character for Saeed to mentor—perhaps a Muslim shaken in his faith where Saeed shares his own conversion story. He thinks a single focus, rather than Saeed targeting a whole prison, would mitigate the isolating effect. He loved how Saeed shared his relationship with God, but wanted even more of his personal connection to that relationship. Weston warned that “...if we are to truly connect, we need it not to be about converting us, but sharing how God impacts Saeed so we can see why he is willing to go through what he is...” (February 14, 2015).

I both agree and disagree with Weston’s constructive criticism. Saeed shares his testimony with those around him, and he receives constant death threats about his boldness in his beliefs. Saeed wrote, “The treatment by fellow prisoners is also quite cold and sometimes hostile. Some of my fellow prisoners don’t like me because I am a convert and a pastor. They look at me with shame as someone who has betrayed his former religion” (ChristianExaminer.com, “Pastor Abedini’s Letter upbeat”). I wanted to show the ongoing struggle trying to preach over all the violence, all the noise, and every complication he faces. That moment was also in a climactic part of the play where Saeed wasn’t sure if the other prisoners would have another chance. I can play with Weston’s note about “sharing” rather than forcing Saeed’s message on others. I will incorporate with further detail, whether with additions of Saeed’s words or personally developed, how much Christ means to him. I had thought this idea was already incorporated, but I can enhance it more to make it clearer in the script as well as my tactics in the performance. Weston gave some excellent feedback, probably some of the best feedback I received during this process!

Pat Lazovich, Senior Pastor at Calvary Chapel Sierra Vista, was able to view the recorded version of my performance over the winter break. He had a positive response to the show and even asked if I would consider performing *Prisoner in the Darkness* for his congregation. Pat shared that he was blessed by my performance and excited about the show’s future development. He suggested that I clearly present the gospel, and emphasize how Christ died for sinners by suffering on a cross and rising from the dead. He said the idea was basically in the story, but it wasn’t clear enough to him. He found that the good news was being drowned out by the prison riot. During a dress rehearsal, I actually planned for that to happen in the production to show the rejection of the message that Saeed presents; however, I agree this aspect shouldn’t be totally covered up by the action. He also wanted me to include somewhere

in the show that “Allah in the Koran is looking for slaves, but God of the Bible is looking for sons and daughters.” He studied Islam, with an apologetic interest, and thought this might show the strong contrast between the opposing faiths. His comments made me think about the purpose of the show. Do I want to evangelize with the piece as Saeed does in the prison, or show Saeed’s circumstances to inspire action for his release? Could they both be in the production? From Weston’s comments, the show appeared to be evangelically heavy. I was aiming to converge both ideas into a disturbing experience.

Nick suggested before opening, as well as during my thesis defense, that I should seriously think about what message I wanted to convey. He felt the piece shifted from my original intent by listening to feedback from my mentors and classmates. Nick believed my thesis settled on the evangelical side, rather than my objective as a call to action. He complimented how generous and open to criticism I am, but wanted me to take charge of what I wanted to convey. He strongly encouraged me to clarify the message and be passionate about the choices I’ve made then “...everything else will fall into place”. Stacey reminded me, during my thesis defense as well, to keep the target audience in mind since things may shift from venue to venue.

I set out to create an experience about a man who depends on his faith, but I didn’t want to alienate the audience too much or turn them off to the message. I think I can soften the delivery and pad in more personal touches so the audience can better connect to Saeed. Yet, the Christian gospel message has always created controversy. Jesus Christ was threatened numerous times throughout the New Testament because of the authority and boldness in His teaching. Christ said to his disciples that He “...did not come to bring peace [on earth], but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). Saeed wasn’t aiming to tear with the sword, but the gospel message itself is a dividing sword.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, I was extremely proud of what I accomplished. I can always grow as an actor by looking for the discoveries in every moment to prevent the piece from falling into the trap of becoming “one note”. I know there will be good days and off days during this show’s performance life. Yet I created a theatrical experience, which was deeply meaningful to me, with the purpose of raising awareness about a fellow American and Christian in trouble. I was able to work on a piece of theatre that connected to my faith, which brought focus to the hope that Saeed depends on in his unfathomable circumstances. I was unashamed of its message and purpose. This project has taught me that being passionate about a cause fuels every aspect in the process. I discovered that I could actually be a solo artist if I wanted to continue with this work. I never thought myself to be the type of actor who created solo shows, but now I have one. And it’s a show that has national, even international, prevalence and weight in our current political backdrop. However, as a result of the thesis performance requirement, I learned more about myself—my weaknesses, my doubts, and even my personal relationship with God.

I found that the process of devising a solo performance was lonely. It was difficult to rehearse without an outside eye or group of actors to interact with. In the beginning phases of rehearsal I felt paralyzed as an actor. I didn’t have any interactions except with myself. I quickly realized I needed to move forward and be more specific about my daily goals. If I had more time to play with, I would definitely welcome additional feedback from peers and faculty mentors. I found that I trusted my impulses; I enjoyed the goals I set myself to do. I was able to play and discover. I want to bring that liberating freedom and curiosity to my future projects.

Looking back, I seriously need to incorporate a “cool down” process after each performance—especially during rehearsals. I definitely will incorporate some constructive rest, perhaps say a prayer, or take a moment for meditation before I continue with my life after the show. The show reminded me of a Shakespeare production since I was physically drained. During the performance run, I was able to rest and reflect afterwards in the hallway behind the stage. I slowly recovered from the show’s demands and listened to the audience respond to Tim Moriarty’s performance. I realized how integral the audience is to a solo performance. I learned to be sensitive to the audience’s energy, engagement, and ability to follow the story. I discovered how their involvement influenced my work, and I grew to love that powerful dynamic more so than any other theatrical experience I’ve encountered. Even if I changed the audience with my performance, the audience definitely changed me during those moments on stage.

I know I still prefer to collaborate with a group of artists to create a piece of meaningful theatre. The solo artist must be extremely disciplined and have a detailed rehearsal plan. I also became the director and I feel that challenged my process as an actor. I don’t consider myself a writer by any means, but I grew as an adapter. I was pleased with how I put the story together, while incorporating my specific ideas and imagination. I assimilated many resources to influence the whole experience. I didn’t want the audience just to attend a play; I wanted them inside the prison with Saeed. Nick and George were invaluable assets since their directors’ eyes

were able to pinpoint and clarify my intentions with the show. Knowing exactly what needs to be conveyed and the purpose of the piece grounds the formation of the script.

Solo performances have always been a hit or miss experience with me. There is a danger where the actor just speaks without a deep, personal connection to the material. I knew this going into the project. Politics and religion are always touchy subjects, but I looked to find my voice, through Saeed's voice, in a hostile world where religious faith is regarded to be a threat. Weston commented that my play took that of "the right" while most people of the theatre lie on "the left" (February 14, 2015). But I believe this work is for both! I wanted the audience to connect with Saeed even if his beliefs were different from theirs. I wanted them to re-assess their religious freedom.

As I gather additional feedback before I graduate, I hope to incorporate more personal touches about Saeed's struggle with his faith, more connections to his family, and his sweet personality that the audience can become familiar with. During this process, I discovered what kind of theatre I want to make. I want to commune with the audience. I want to create art that makes the audience think and feel. Theatre needs to be risky! There needs to have more of a purpose than to merely entertain the audience. I want to be able to change the audience in some way. I desire to be theatrical and create unique moments that deeply affect them. Whether I continue towards the Brechtian aesthetic or experiment with other forms of verbatim theatrical styles, I want to test the bounds of what the theatre can be. Theatre teaches us about being human; it has the ability to change for the better.

I plan to correspond with Naghmeh (and hopefully her husband) very soon to further develop my solo performance. I plan to donate some of the proceeds to the Abedini family, and hopefully, other families experiencing the same situation. Even if Saeed were to be released in the near future, his story needs to be heard. This piece would feed my soul during times of dryness, encourage deeper commitment to my faith, and raise awareness of Christian persecution in the same situation. My hope for this play would be to draw more awareness about Saeed's story and influence our government by taking a more active approach in freeing him, and other American citizens, to safely return home. *Prisoner in the Darkness* is a work in progress, and I look forward to taking this show to the next level!

## WORKS CITED

- Abedini, Naghmeh. "Thesis Performance." Email to Joe Morris. 4 September 2014.
- Abedini, Naghmeh. "New Recording." Email with attachment to Joe Morris. 13 September 2014.
- Abedini, Naghmeh. "Re: Thesis Performance." Email to Joe Morris. 18 October 2014.
- Abedini, Naghmeh. "Re: Thesis Performance." Email to Joe Morris. 29 October 2014.
- Abedini, Naghmeh. "New Recording." Email with attachment to Joe Morris. 9 November 2014.
- Abedini, Saeed. "Saeed Abedini's Story: Depressed Muslim to Christian Humanitarian." Online Video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 31 May 2013. Web. 1 September 2014.
- Abedini, Saeed. "Saeed's Message to the Persecuted Church." Online Video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 31 May 2013. Web. 1 September 2014.
- "American Pastor Saeed Abedini Robbed, Life Threatened at Knifepoint, as Health Deteriorates In Deadly Iranian Prison." CrossMaps.com. [ACLJ.org](http://www.crossmap.com/news/acjlj-american-pastor-saeed-abedini-robbed-life-threatened-at-knifepoint-as-health-deteriorates-in-deadly-iranian-prison-7220/print).  
<http://www.crossmap.com/news/acjlj-american-pastor-saeed-abedini-robbed-life-threatened-at-knifepoint-as-health-deteriorates-in-deadly-iranian-prison-7220/print>.
- "American Pastor Saeed Abedini has been moved to one of Iran's 'harshes prisons'." PoorRichardsNews.com. [CBSNews.com](http://poorrichardsnews.com/post/66648215536/american-pastor-saeed-abedini-has-been-moved-to).  
<http://poorrichardsnews.com/post/66648215536/american-pastor-saeed-abedini-has-been-moved-to>.
- Bauer, Shane. "Solitary Confinement: The Cruellest Punishment." *TheWeek.com*. 13 January 2013. <http://theweek.com/articles/468881/solitary-confinement-cruellest-punishment>.
- Caban, Andrea. "How to do a Persian Accent: Accent Training." Online Video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 6 August 2013. Web. 13 November 2014.
- Engel, Richard, James Novogrod, and Michele Neubert. "Exclusive: American Extremist Reveals His Quest to Join ISIS." *NBCNews.com*. 3 September 2014.  
<http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/exclusive-american-extremist-reveals-his-quest-join-isis-n194796>.
- IzlenilesiVideolar. "Russian prison guards beat the inmate." Online Video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 28 November 2012. Web. 4 November 2014.

- Judy, George. "LSU/Swine Palace." Email to Joe Morris. 8 February 2013.
- Judy, George. "Re: Thesis Script." Email to Joe Morris. 15 February 2015.
- Lazovich, Pat. Personal Interview. Calvary Chapel Sierra Vista. 29 December 2014.
- Morrison, Camilla. Title. Facebook message to Joe Morris. 12 December 2014.
- NirvanaNews. "Islamic State 'beheads US hostage Steven Sotloff.'" Online Video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 4 September 2014. Web. 6 September 2014.
- OfficialACJL. "Saeed Abedini's Letter from Inside Iran's Evin Prison." Online Video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 22 February 2013. Web. 11 September 2014.
- "Pastor Abedini's letter upbeat, yet a grim reminder he's still a prisoner in Iran." *ChristianExaminer.com*. 18 December 2014. <http://www.christianexaminer.com/article/pastor.saeed.abedini.encourages.christians.from.behind.bars.in.touching.letter/47852.htm>.
- Roach, Erin. "Update on Save Saeed: Letter Says Iran Release Depends on Abedini Renouncing Faith." *Baptist Press*. 19 April 2013. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2013/april/update-on-save-saeed-letter-says-iran-release-depends-on.html?paging=off%23bmb=1>.
- Rush, James and Ashley Collman. "Woman who was locked in solitary confinement in Iran..." *DailyMail.com*. 29 April 2014. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2615682/Woman-locked-solitary-confinement-Iran-YEAR-spent-days-rage-pacing-cell-punching-air.html>.
- Sekulow, Jordan. "American Pastor Saeed Abedini Writes Easter Message as a Prisoner in the Darkness of Iran." *ACLJ.org*. April 2014. <http://aclj.org/iran/american-pastor-saeed-writes-easter-message-as-a-prisoner-in-the-darkness-of-iran>.
- Sekulow, Jordan. "Pastor Saeed after Beatings and Torture: 'I did not recognize myself'." *ACLJ.org*. <http://aclj.org/iran/pastor-saeed-after-beatings-torture-did-not-recognize-myself>.
- Slate, Michael. "Surviving Prison in Iran..." Interview with Sarah Shourd. *Revcom.us*. 4 August 2013. *KPFK Michael Slate Show*. 12 July 2013. <http://revcom.us/a/312/interview-with-sarah-shourd-en.html>.
- Sofur, Andrew. *Dark Matter: Invisibility in Drama, Theatre, and Performance*. University of Michigan Press, 2013.

Taylor, Adam. "Seven Americans being held overseas whom the White House has yet to free."  
WashingtonPost.com. 4 June 2014.  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/06/04/six-americans-being-held-overseas-whom-the-white-house-has-yet-to-free/>.

Thomas, Lynelle. Title. Facebook message to Joe Morris. 17 December 2014.

Twardowski, Weston. "Re: Thesis Script." Email to Joe Morris. 14 February 2015.

"Week of Prayer 2013: Abedini Letter." AG.org.  
[http://ag.org/top/downloads/Abedini\\_Letter.pdf](http://ag.org/top/downloads/Abedini_Letter.pdf).

## APPENDIX: PERSIAN DIALECT ACQUISITION

### ORAL POSTURE

The tongue is very heavy and flat in the mouth. Not a lot of jaw action with a fairly closed mouth. Resonance is primarily in the oral cavity, with a bit of nasality. Think of the sound moving forward, rather than back (Caban, "Accent Training").

Examples: hadn't, didn't, couldn't, etc...

Kinesthetic Trigger: Think of a small weight resting on your tongue, or your tongue spreading into a thick pancake (Caban, "Accent Training").

### MUSICALITY

The hesitation, or thinking, sound is an "eh" or elongated [ɛ] sound. The Iranian dialect has a monotonous, middle range sound, and there is not a lot of unstressed syllables. Syllables in words tend to have equal weight; however, many polysyllabic words end with a terminal stress since the Persian language most often uses terminal stress. Stress takes the form of a pitch change or longer duration, rather than volume. Vowels sound stretched, yet the dialect can sound quite staccato and intentional (Caban, "Accent Training").

Examples: activities, disappointed, humiliate, revolutionary,

Key Sentence: "He wants to help you according to you daily living needs and everything you need in your lives."--Saeed

### SOUND SUBSTITUTIONS (taken from YouTube clips of Saeed Abedini to create the role)

1. The trap sound, [æ], gets a more open treatment resulting in a forward [a] sound.

Examples: family, happen, answer, pastor, man, hand, rats

The rat ran across the man's hand.

2. The [ɪ] sound, as in hit, becomes an [i] sound as in feed.

Examples: kill, visit, which, in, him, prison, still, kids, forgive, stick

The kids weren't able to forgive him or visit the prison.

3. On the other hand, the [ɛ] sound, as in dress, switches with an [ɪ] sound.

Examples: Amen, ended, get, pressure, when, friend

My friend felt pressured to end the prayer with a quick "Amen".

4. Both the [t] and [d] sounds, the voiceless /th/, [θ], and the voiced /th/, [ð], results in a dentalized sound, and when preceded by an "s" sound, the unvoiced /th/ becomes an [s].

Examples: everything, with, birthday, mother, father, them, other, these things  
Mother took all these things to a birthday dinner for father, and everything turned out well.

5. The “h” sound has a more aspirated, pharyngeal [x] sound, or sometimes even dropped.

Examples: him, happening, home, hospital, hear, helping, hurt  
Thanks for helping him home from the hospital.

6. Terminal, and even some medial, devoicing is a signature sound with sounds including [d], [z], [g], [dʒ], [v]. Sometimes the terminal devoicing of [d] and [g] get dropped.

Examples: friend, God, guards, plans, poison, prison, happening, living, praying, lives  
The prison guards came running after the prisoners poisoned the man praying for their lives.

7. The [tʃ] sound, as in teacher, becomes a “ssh” [ʃ] sound.

Examples: torture, connection, natural, teacher, future, Christian  
His teacher was naturally tortured for his connection to his Christian faith.

8. There are basically three different “r” sounds in the dialect. Within words, “r” sounds like a voiced, uvular [ʁ]. However, “r” sounds at the beginning of words are rounder since the tip of the tongue does not raise as much as the general American “r”, but actually lowers. However, sometimes the “r” gets a tapped, velar [r].

Examples: dirty, heart, Iran, rats, river, revolutionary, sewer, pastor  
In Iran, the dirty sewer rats run along the river into the heart of the city.

9. The “l” sound in the Iranian dialect becomes a heavy uvular, [ɮ], sound in the back of the mouth.

Examples: daily, gospel, light, Bible, hospital, intelligent  
The intelligent police visited the hospital daily to speak a light interrogation.

10. Both the “v” and “w” sounds become the scripted, [ʋ], which is a labiodental approximate (non-muscular) sound. These sounds could also be dropped, with a slight rounding of the lips. The “w” sounds, especially within words, have more of a “v” color to them.

Examples: voice, every, vacation, verse, always, walls, world  
Her voice is always heard through the walls every time she sings that verse.

## DIPHTHONGS BECOME MONOPHTHONGS

11. The diphthong in face, [eɪ], becomes a long, [e:], or Canadian “eh!”

Examples: today, face, snakes, states, waiting, play, angry, place, grace  
Snakes always have an angry face when waiting in the cage.

12. The diphthong in goat, [oʊ], turns into a pure [o] sound.

Examples: own, goat, most, broke, alone, potential, know

She potentially knows who broke-in the goat I own the most.

13. The diphthong in thousand, [aʊ], turns into a stressed [ʌ] sound.

Examples: about, thousand, mouth, ourselves, mountains, background

The mountains are about a thousand miles away from ourselves.

14. The diphthong, [aɪ], as in find, becomes a [ɑ] sound, as in pauper. Remember to add a slight [i] sound to make the word intelligible.

Examples: smile, find, crime, light, wife, night, life

She saw a night crime and his wife couldn't find the life-alert bracelet.

## VITA

Joe Morris earned his B.F.A. in Theatre Arts, with a dual concentration in acting and directing, from Stephen F. Austin State University in 2003. During his last year of college, he was awarded the opportunity to work at the rigorous Internship Program at Milwaukee Repertory Theater as an acting intern. Joe later moved to New York City, where he received the highest scholarship available, to study at The Actors' Studio Drama School at New School University in 2004. The M.F.A. program at The Actors' Studio changed dramatically after his first year of training, and he decided to move back to Arizona to be near his family. Joe worked in a variety of jobs for the next several years from teaching soldiers how to operate unmanned air vehicles to selling and leasing real estate.

Joe missed the theatre and decided to return to graduate school to complete his M.F.A. degree. He was accepted into Louisiana State University's Professional Actor Training Program, and worked as an Adjunct Faculty member and Graduate Teaching Assistant. For two seasons, he was a member of the Swine Palace M.F.A. Resident Ensemble. Joe is a candidate for his Master of Fine Arts in May 2015. He plans to pursue a career as a professional actor for film and stage, and further his education by training to become a certified teacher of the Alexander Technique. Joe hopes to eventually teach at the university level where he can instruct other aspiring artists.