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Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird as adapted by Christopher Sergel: a thesis in directing

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HARPER LEE'S *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*
AS ADAPTED BY CHRISTOPHER SERGEL:
A PRODUCTION THESIS
IN DIRECTING

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
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of Theatre

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ABSTRACT

This thesis describes the directorial process of a production of Christopher Sergel's adaptation of Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It follows the process from pre-production through rehearsals. It makes use of the influences of the prior personal history and the recent educational experiences of the director. Throughout it accesses the choices made and concludes with an analysis on the final product.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Forty years after its publication, *To Kill a Mockingbird* ranked as the 68th best-selling book in America for 2000. Why? Harper Lee looked at the face of evil and saw that if you looked at it for a little while you could possibly see the good in that face and if you looked a little longer you could possibly see your neighbor's face. Well, Harper Lee's neighborhood is Alabama where I have spent most of my 38 years. Every day of my life I have been confronted with the horror and the beauty of what made up the struggle for civil rights in my state. It is so easy to hate and so hard to understand. But understanding is what Atticus Finch demands of his family and what Harper Lee asks of her readers. We should all spend a few moments walking in another person's skin.

Director's Notes, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, February 2001

In 1979, I attended my grandfather's funeral. For years I had heard about the Stabler spawning ground located in South Alabama, but save for going to a wedding as a child I had never been to the South Alabama Butler County seat of Greenville. The appellation of the hospital that had cared for my grandfather in his last days was composed of four names, three of which were the same as mine. Over the next few years, I became closer to the second cousins that I had met at the funeral and who had existed previously only in almost lyrical tales told to me by my grandfather and aunt. I grew curious about this town born of the old plantation South whose society still had thick lines defined by blood and skin color. As I became more and more involved in Greenville, I soon realized that it was a world completely constructed on relationships. The ties that everyone had in Greenville were so powerfully apparent to an outsider, it surprised me how invisible they were to my cousins. To a person, every one of my kin longed for the day they could leave and they could not understand my fascination with the

town. But the idea of a tightly contained system of societies that were forced to live together every day and to develop a social contract specific to their world was new to me.

I was raised in Birmingham, two and a half hours north. Unlike Greenville, Birmingham did not even exist until a decade after the Civil War. It had grown from a sleepy village into one of the fastest growing cities in American history because it was situated in one of the only places in the world where all of the raw materials needed for manufacturing steel could be found in a single location. Northern industrial money created what would become the Southern working class Mecca of the early 20th century that earned the nickname “The Magic City”. This rough and tumble, wild west-like, town would eventually pay for its violent personality in the second half of the century when horrific civil rights battles were waged by the likes of Eugene “Bull” Connor would fill headlines the world over. To this day Birmingham has yet to atone for its sins of these days in the eyes of the American media. But in spite of the world’s singular view of Birmingham, the city was incredibly diverse by Alabama standards. And the size of the town even in the 70’s made it possible for someone to live in any little sphere of culture you chose with relatively little involvement with the rest of the town. Not so Greenville, you may hate the man in the house on the top of the hill but you knew him well enough to tip your hat to him. You may avoid the family across town but you knew the names of all the children. And you may go to the segregated private school but you rooted for the public one when they went to the state football playoffs. And lo and behold if someone got to play football for Bear or Shug they were the whole town’s hero.

I attended a non-segregated private school south of Alabama’s largest city that considered itself progressive. So progressive was my school that we read Hermann Hesse and James Baldwin and Luigi Pirandello and Gabriel Garcia Marques, but we did not read Harper

Lee. Everyone read Harper Lee. I sometimes suspect that I went to the only school in the state of Alabama that didn't. With the urging of my cousins I bought a copy of Harper Lee's 1960 Pulitzer Prize winning novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Sitting next to Butler County was the County of Monroe, famous for its powerful politicians, the writers it spawned and an old courthouse sitting in the middle of its county seat, Monroeville. In her novel, Harper Lee would take her hometown intact, change a few names and turn Monroeville into Maycomb, Alabama.

I remember turning the second page of the book and reading a childhood tale of Scout Finch that so reminded me of Greenville that I laughed out loud. I had not expected to laugh. The only book I really laughed at in school was Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* and that was after it was explained to me. Soon I was laughing so much my New Jerseyite roommate at the University of Virginia was asking what I was laughing about, when he saw the book he said, "Man, that's a great book, you mean you never read it? Everyone has to read it in New Jersey". As I read I was awash in tales that touched my soul so deeply that I could feel the love with which Harper Lee used to pen each word. And I knew these people. Never had a book rung so true to me. As soon as I finished it, I began to reread it. There was something so Alabamian, so Southern, so American about it. Since then I have always considered my first reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird* the greatest reading experience of my life.

Harper Lee had grown up the daughter of a widowed lawyer who despite a progressive attitude was regularly reelected to the state legislature. Much like my cousins she looked forward to the day that she could leave her small town and move to a world that was less oppressive. After leaving the University of Alabama Law School six months short of a degree she moved to New York where she found work at a ticket counter for Eastern Airlines. With her close childhood friend and sometime neighbor Truman Capote she would travel America's

Heartland as he researched his ticket to fame, *In Cold Blood*. During this time she harbored a story she wanted to tell. Then as a Christmas gift, friends offered to support her for a year if she quit work and wrote her book. She did just that. After extensive rewrites, she published her story in what would become a literary sensation. To this day it appears on the bestseller lists every August. Last year, over forty years after its initial publishing, it was still listed in USA Today's best selling books of 2001. It was also the basis of one of the most beloved American movies and a stage version that is yearly among the most produced plays in America.

What stands out to me in the book today is the love she writes with for her past. Many Southern writers who have left home to find their muse have written about their birthplace with a scathing vitriol. In contrast, Harper Lee's work oozes with regional charm. She balances her love and horror for her hometown to create a novel that is more immediate and recognizable. As much as the infamous Scottsboro Boys trial influenced the sad story of the wrongfully accused black man and his hate filled accusers, the love of her family and friends inspired the humanity that flows throughout the work. Harper Lee maintains a home in Monroeville to this day and is their most beloved (sometime) citizen. Much like Harper Lee, all of my second cousins have found their way back home.

The book was adapted for the stage by Christopher Sergel in 1970. The Sergel family had founded Dramatic Publishing in Woodstock, Illinois in 1885. They have a somewhat quirky selection that leans heavily towards adaptations and plays for schools. But their selection has gotten stronger over the years and I found myself during my last years in Birmingham more and more applying to Dramatic Publishing for the rights to do shows. The recently deceased Christopher Sergel had acted as both head of the company and their chief adapter (other family members, including Kristin and Sherman Sergel, were also busy adapters for Dramatic). While

To Kill a Mockingbird it was first produced in the United States at the Paper Mill Playhouse in Millburn, New Jersey in 1990, I have been unable to find any references to productions of the script between its writing in 1970 and this production.

During the spring of 2000, the directing students met with Barry Kyle (head of the LSU M.F.A. directing program and former Artistic Director of Swine Palace Productions) about our assistant directing assignments at Swine Palace for the coming academic year. The Swine Palace season was firming up with a three full productions and a concert version of a local musical on the slate. We knew that Tina Packer and members of her Shakespeare and Company were going to co-produce a work (possibly *Coriolanus*) for the season opener, then Barry would direct *Jesus Christ Superstar* in the late fall and *To Kill a Mockingbird* at the beginning of the new year.

When I came to LSU there were three things outside the set curriculum I wanted to achieve: 1. I wanted to direct on a traditional proscenium stage; 2. I wanted to learn to direct Shakespeare; and, 3. I wanted to learn more about movement. At that point, I had been told my probable thesis project would be a summer 2001 musical production at the Reilly. So I really hoped my AD position would be on Tina Packer's show. While I had learned a tremendous amount about directing Shakespeare from Barry I had not been involved with it first hand. My second choice was to AD on the *Jesus Christ Superstar*, because, while I have directed several musicals they have been relatively small in scale, and I wanted to make myself marketable as a director of musicals. Besides it would help me prepare for my thesis project the following summer. Oddly, my last choice was to assistant direct on *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I had always felt that the play was inferior to both the novel and the movie. The reason I believed this was because of the type of companies that would usually produce the show. This script was a staple of local dramatic societies, high schools and children's theaters across America. My judgment on the stage

version was a gross example of my snobbishness because I had neither read the script nor seen a performance of the play. (When I later took over directing the show my concerns about the adaptation would evolve into something more complex. But I would develop a grudging respect for the script.)

My biggest concern about working as assistant director on *Mockingbird* was rooted in my reason for coming to graduate school in the first place. After ten years running a small theater, I decided I either had to grow or quit. I had spent the nineties running a small community theater in Birmingham that mainly produced small cast off-Broadway type dramas. Following a hugely successful production of an adaptation of Birmingham born novelist Elizabeth Dewberry's (at the time Dewberry-Vaughn) *Many Things Have Happened Since He Died* about a young couple in Birmingham, I successfully co-founded a Southern new play festival. Over five years we produced 15 plays, brought in several one-person shows and held over a dozen readings on five different stages. Much of our success was based on adaptations of Southern women's novels by the likes of Lee Smith, Rebecca Wells, Vicki Covington and Elizabeth Dewberry. I directed four of the shows and acted as Artistic Director. Working on *Mockingbird* seemed like returning to my past not moving towards my future. I have always felt that Barry thought I was the lesser of our directors. Alexander Harrington was the smart one, Anthony Winkler was the avant-garde one and I was the one who joked around. I probably did little to help my cause while I used much of my first two years in graduate school to reevaluate the last 15 years of fighting the professional and personal battles in my life.

So needless to say, the *Mockingbird* AD assignment came my direction. I do not fault Barry from a professional perspective for the choice. Alec was the obvious choice for the Shakespeare. I doubted Barry wanted a Shakespeare neophyte working for a renowned guest

director. Also, Anthony wanted experience working on musicals as well. Besides if he needed an Alabama expert my New York and Seattle colleagues were unlikely choices. The one conceit I did get was a workshop production of the anonymously written Elizabethan play *Arden of Faversham* in the fall of 2000. This flawed but enjoyable production proved a very productive learning experience for me about works of the period. It turned out to be training ground for a low budget outdoor production of *Macbeth* I would direct during the summer of 2001.

I took solace in the fact I loved the book. I was also very interested in seeing what Barry would do with it since he had already directed the script once before for the Actor's Theater of Louisville. The whole assistant director's job was still a mystery to me - both as a director and as an assistant director. My second day at LSU I entered Barry's rehearsal of Dewberry's *Four Joans and a Fire Eater* as the outsider. Having directed some 30 shows I did not know when and/or if I should interject. During this ultimately enjoyable process I made a fool of myself about 50 times. I now realize that Barry was used to this situation and did a great job of letting me feel embarrassed only a couple of times. The second time I was AD at LSU was on *Waiting for Godot*. Barry at the time was very involved with other issues and on occasion would ask me to block a scene. While this unsettled the cast to some extent it was a great exercise for me. My self-consciousness and my lack of comfort with the script led to some horrible ideas, but it was very rewarding to watch Barry change my work. This probably was the best learning experience of my first year. While Barry was generous enough to give me a nice credit on the show, my most important contribution to the project was helping one of the actors get off book. I was hoping for a more traditional role as AD for *Mockingbird*.

As fall rolled around *Mockingbird* was the least of my concerns. I read the play, had a short chat with Barry about the script and planned for *Arden*. While my cast later expressed

happiness with my preparation for *Mockingbird*, I still wish I had known earlier that I was going to be fulfilling a larger role so that I could have used the summer for more research. Over the first few weeks of the fall, school clicked along as before. At Swine Palace I was moved into the box office. The box office phones chimed with activity. Efforts at an audience friendly season were paying off. Following a disastrous miscalculation by the architects and builders of the new theater over the amount of legroom required, some of the Swine Palace audience had been alienated. If you want to hear what audiences feel about a theater, work in the box office. But extremely popular productions of *Romeo and Juliet* and especially *Jesus Christ Superstar* brought back the doubters and more. While the ticket volume made for hard times in an ill-prepared box office, it set the stage for *Mockingbird*. I realized then that only a major artistic failure could make *Mockingbird* a flop. This would lead to some self doubts down the road about both my approach to the project and a true evaluation of the success of the final product.

Then in class one day Barry told us that he was going to leave in March to direct *King Lear* at The Globe in London. At the time, our biggest concern was what would happen with our classes. Around the same time period, LSU Theatre department chair Michael Tick had approached us about the undergraduate's Directing II class. Professor Femi Euba had been slated to teach it but asked to take off the spring semester. While we had come to LSU with an assistantship focused on the administration at Swine Palace, I had hoped to teach so that working at a university could be an option after I graduated. Alec and Anthony opted out of the Directing II class and I happily signed on. This would turn out to be a rewarding experience but it also would become an obstacle in the way of my work on *Mockingbird* once my role changed. Likewise my work on *Mockingbird* would make it difficult for me to finalize the form of my class until a good three weeks into the semester. I can still see the evaluations at the end of the

year from the students that said he did a good job but was weak on explaining the grading and the assignments at the beginning of the semester.

The rumor began to circulate that Barry was no longer going to direct *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It was said that because his *Lear* project would keep him busy a major director was going to be brought in to do the show. Before coming to LSU, professional friends in the field had told me that the only way to get good jobs as a director was to get a graduate degree. So I came to graduate school. Upon my arrival in Baton Rouge, Alec Harrington said that you need to work as an assistant for well-known directors to crack into the business. I had worked with Barry twice (who was the most renowned director I had ever met), and while I regretted Barry's possible departure from the project, I was excited that I could add another name to my resume. (Since that time friends have told me I had to work with a well known regional company to break in the business, then I was told I needed to work in Chicago or New York to have any chance; just last week I was told that I would really need a Broadway credit to get an interview - I have recently decided to see if I can get work as an apostle for a Messiah in hope of getting a job with a school with less than four names.) Marilyn Hersey was at the time the Swine Palace General Manager and a dear friend of mine during my first two years at LSU. Ironically, a woman whose coldness in my initial interview almost led me not to complete my application turned out to be one of the kindest and most supportive people I met in Baton Rouge. Marilyn even gave me a party with her daughter on the birthday we both shared. Marilyn was always a soft touch when it came to the three of us ("Marilyn's Boys" as she affectionately referred to us) so I badgered her to let me know who would be the new director. Who would be my ticket to the rarified levels of the American directing scene? She resisted at first.

Swine Palace was considered the Promised Land among the students. Any student that walked on the stage was immediately elevated in the department. Any performer who came from out of town would not have to worry about going home alone at night. Any director who was engaged there was one of the best. (Sadly, my position on *Mockingbird* would probably demystify the job.) It also claimed the title of regional theater. It is probably for this reason that Alec wanted to direct there so much. I made the unfortunate decision to bug Marilyn about the potential director while Alec was in the office. With much goading and a heavy dose of Southern charm I got Marilyn to the brink of telling me. As Alec, Marilyn and I huddled in her office she smiled and said, “OK, but you can’t tell anyone you know until it is announced”. We eagerly agreed. (Of course, the fact that I not only talk to myself when I am alone but also when I sleep gave me internal pause. A spy I would never make.) She then looked at me and said, “It’s not final but they are going to get Vastine to direct”.

She said “Vastine” like it was an exotic director from out of town who was not in the room at the time. For less than a second, blood rushed to my head and I floated about a foot off of the ground. By the end of the second I had glanced at the look on Alec’s face. You might as well have told him he was going to have to move to Tupelo, Mississippi and work the late shift at the Piggly Wiggly for the next two years. Alec’s self-professed Jewish guilt had nothing on me. I felt devastated for him. I wanted to kick myself up and down both sides of my face. He composed himself to congratulate me. And we all went back to work. The first thing I did that night was to call my parents; the second was to call Alec. My parents were elated and Alec and I tripped over ourselves apologizing to each other. Who says an Alabama ex-protestant Republican and a New York ex-socialist Irish non-practicing Jew can’t be friends?

It was late in October and I was deep into *Arden* when Barry said he wanted to see me after class. I had not finished my reading that day after a long rehearsal and had muddled through class. I had been waiting for this meeting but was convinced I had screwed it up. Barry started the meeting saying my work had been a little lacking of late (it had) and then he said he wanted to talk about *Mockingbird*. He said prep work on *Lear* made it hard for him to commit the time required for *Mockingbird* and he wanted me to direct it with him. He said the moment he decided it was right for me to direct *Mockingbird* was in a discussion we had about Alabama. I stopped him and asked him if he meant North Alabama or South Alabama because they were very different. He knew then I was right to do the show. I did not tell him then about my cousins. After the relief washed over me I made a weak attempt to act surprised and pleased. I felt I owed him this as the first time he had given a graduate student such news but I felt a little like a prostitute faking an orgasm - dirty and wondering how much longer I had to stay. He further defined the relationship saying that the credits would be listed as “Directed by Vastine Stabler with Barry Kyle” (the exact reverse of the credit in *Godot*) and this would be my thesis project. The way the work would be divided would be that I would handle the acting aspects and he would be in charge of the technical side. He also said that several of the roles had been pre-cast. Lacking his connections, I was glad to hear it.

At the time, I was directing a production of *Arden of Faversham*. And I want to take a little time to talk about *Arden*. In my years in community theater I was used to doing shows back to back. I have directed as many as five shows during an eleven-month period while still holding a 9 to 5 job. But this was different. Some of the things I experienced in *Arden* would be carried on to *Mockingbird*. So in spite of the complete differences between the shows I see them

as connected. In fact, many of the things both productions taught me came to fruition in *Macbeth* the following summer.

Arden of Faversham is the perfect example of an Elizabethan version of what CBS would air Sunday nights throughout the 80's and 90's. It was a true crime drama about a wife who took a lover and together they killed her husband for his land. I would even call it a middle class tragedy but of course I learned in high school none of those were written until Arthur Miller wrote *Death of a Salesman* (take that Stindberg). The play was filled with roles both comic and tragic and I was forced by a limited acting pool that lacked experienced performers and men to make it inclusive and very post-modern.

I tried to approach the rehearsal process with the same sense of discovery that I had begun to work with on *How I Learned to Drive* during my second semester. Andrew Kimbell, who played a wonderful Peck in my opinion, was a snob about his process. Instead of rejecting it I delved in and decided to learn from it. While I was a theater major who had taken many directing classes I have always felt I was largely self-taught. I always suspected there was this magic system that all real directors knew and I was determined to discover it. (I would learn through time there are tools I don't have yet but it basically comes down to making a script work on stage. The audience could care less how you got there.) Much of Andrew's process was based on improvising the scenes that were not written in the play. This tended to be very successful when I worked with Andrew and Cricket McCloud (who played Lil' Bit). I thought it must be the magic answer to directing. But it was less effective with the rest of the cast. When the rest of the cast became involved the other actors had the bad habit of imposing a past on the other cast members. It did little good to the development of the show when you improvised a soda shop scene to see how Lil' Bit acted with her friends and the performer playing a teenage

friend opens the scene by coming up to Lil' Bit and saying, "So you were raped?" During the next show I directed the following summer in Birmingham, a new play called *Stepwidows*, I quickly forgot improv and found myself in my old routine of challenging my actors to justify each of their actions.

I was determined to find ways to use exercises in *Arden* but soon found it would be equally problematic. *Arden* auditions had a turn out of 15 people. The cast called for a minimum of 17. I told everyone that showed up they would be cast. Quickly two cast members left - without telling me - because they were asked - after accepting casting in *Arden* - to take extra roles in *Jesus Christ Superstar*. After much begging I filled out the cast. But I was in the terrible directorial position of having a cast who felt they were doing me a favor. Many people have accused me over the years of being too easy on my cast and that is directly attributable to my community theater background, if I acted too mean they would never come back.

Over time I had cut down a long list of rules for rehearsal to three

1. Show up on time.
2. Show up with your lines learned in a timely manner.
3. Show up sober.

I would get a great lesson on how hard it was to enforce these rules once a show began during *Mockingbird*. During *Arden* all three rules were broken constantly. In ten years and twenty shows at BFT I can still recite the few times that a rule was broken. I have no idea how many times this has happened at LSU. During *Mockingbird* rule one was a big problem, two was a small one and three was not a problem at all. But rule number four, one I never felt would ever need to be said was broken on six occasions. This was the rule that said to never ever miss a performance.

During *Arden*, the first time that people showed up late I wrote it off and made small remarks. Then when it became worse and rehearsals were missed I had small talks. But it was like dealing with young kids who were reproached by an adult and five minutes later thought all was okay. Dedicated members of the cast were horrified that I did not kick members of the cast out but I knew that I was in a position that made the show almost undoable if I kicked them out. If I had made a stand then I believe it would have made the situation better in *Mockingbird*. My substance abuser in *Arden* was loved by the audience in his first scene but no one realized that the dreadful weakness of his second scene was based on his inability to handle the much more subtle comedy of the scene because of his chemical state. That says nothing about the fact a non-sober actor completely undermines all other performers on the stage.

The biggest mistakes I made in *Arden* were time management and script control. We started rehearsals so late that while some scenes were great others just laid there. This was to some extent due to a lack of work. I think I found it easy to avoid scenes that were a problem especially near the end. I also would avoid scenes that had actors that were not up to the task. These were the scenes that of course needed the most work. I sometimes would fantasize that those little elves that fixed the shoes for the old cobbler at night would come fix the scenes. But in my experience it is the scenes with good actors that magically seem to grow between rehearsals and the others just get worse. What I mean by script control was my unwillingness to cut scenes that the show could survive without. I do believe a workshop production should allow for students to have the opportunity to explore big scenes whether they work or not, but with cutting this enjoyable little lark would have been a blast. Both of these issues would come up again in *Mockingbird* and would affect the final product.

CHAPTER 2

INITIAL PLANNING

My main concern at this point in the process, as it had been laid out to me, was the casting. Barry had already cast several of the roles. As Bob Ewell, he put on the table the idea of casting J.P. DelaHoussaye a former LSU M.F.A. and now a current Baton Rouge resident and a Swine Palace regular. I would eventually cast him and J.P. would prove one of my most fortuitous casting choices and one of the most problematic. For the role of Mayella Ewell (the daughter of Bob Ewell who claims to have been raped) he had cast Andrea Frankle. Andrea was a friend of mine from my Birmingham days who in my opinion was the star of the current M.F.A. class. We had never worked together before and I had even passed over her in one of my auditions for Southern PlayWorks. But this time, she was perfect for the role. Her boyfriend Tony Molina was cast as the wrongly accused Tom Robinson and I could think of no one better.

Lara Grice was cast as the narrator and the grown up Scout. I was not sure of this choice because I had only seen her in the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* as Mary Magdalene. A very attractive woman, she never exhibited to me a level beyond her beauty and her voice. He also had approached LaTangela Sherman to play an undefined role outside the scripts named cast. LaTangela had the voice of an angel and the options she presented to the show were endless. The final precast performer was LSU law school professor John Baker who would play the Judge. This was a choice that would cause problems because of his lack of experience and his limited talent. But at the same time he was a man I would come to like very much. For the pivotal role of Atticus Finch, Barry was trying to sign up the actor who played the role in his production in Louisville. But it was looking shaky.

One of my biggest concerns was the casting of the children. Three of the children - Dill, Jem and Scout - dominated the first act of the script. The Reilly Theater is a cavernous space that has defeated a few adults in its first year as a theater. Though seating problems had been solved, sound was still an ongoing complaint from the Swine Palace audience members who called the box office. Expecting child actors to fill a 110-foot by 40-foot space was almost impossible. I also had little experience working with child actors. In the early eighties, I spent three years directing a Christmas pageant with over sixty kids and I never learned how to deal adequately with the parents or the kids. During my years at BFT I only had two child performers in my shows and both times the final product was limited by their performances.

With a very short time frame I tried to set up auditions. There had been a feeling in the community that local actors could not get roles in shows at Swine Palace. This had led to a certain level of resentment born to some extent out of jealousy. Barry said this show would represent an outreach to many of those actors. In particular, I had been told to cast local regular Nancy Litton in a role. She would prove a rock in the months to follow. Otherwise, I quickly got out press releases and put up notices all over campus. I spent an afternoon tacking notices on bulletin boards with special attention to the law school at Barry's request. The whole time I felt less like a director and more like an assistant director. Ironically, in one of my first truly professional directing gigs I was doing more of the legwork than I used to do at my community theater. The auditions were set up for the Saturday before Thanksgiving.

At the same time Barry was setting up the technical staff for the show. April Clements, a recent graduate of the North Carolina School of the Arts, would become the stage manager. Nels Anderson, head of the M.F.A. design program, would design the set. And Arthur Oliver who had recently done the design for *Romeo and Juliet* in the co-production with Shakespeare and

Company would do the costumes. No one had been selected for lighting design. No mention of sound design was made but Lewis Rhodes was the staff member in charge of sound so I assumed he would take that role

Arthur was a mystery to me. While I often dressed like a picture from an 80's L. L. Bean catalogue he more resembled the 80's icon Boy George. Now everyone loved Arthur from his previous work for LSU but my narrow mind just wanted to be sure he would not impose his personal style on 1930's South Alabama. I was somewhat pacified when I learned this New England based designer was actually from the South Alabama town of Montgomery. But I was tentative around him. This tentativeness would lessen but never disappear.

Barry then told me our first design meeting with Arthur and Nels would be on the Saturday before Thanksgiving. This was the date that had been set for auditions. Luckily from that standpoint, the turnout was meager for the auditions. Every twenty minutes or so I would rush through an audition if I knew there was a break coming so I could run into Barry's office. I had to fight off an instinct to knock before I entered. Eventually, because of the paucity of the turnout, I was able to join the meeting for a longer stretch of time. I was first struck by how little the designers knew about the show. I am not sure they knew the script at all. They did not, including Montgomery native Arthur, understand Alabama at all. It worried me a little about how the Baton Rouge audience would respond to those aspects of the production.

We then discussed what to do about the prominence of children's roles. We came up with the innovative idea to have adults replace the child actors for the most challenging scenes. This seemed both theatrical, in the most Swine Palace sense, and practical. Eventually this idea was dumped because we could not sign up the actors we wanted and because it would have required extra paid performers outside our given budget. The next decision helped alleviate, to

some extent, the problem that the double casting was trying to solve. It had been decided that *Mockingbird* would be the first show to use a new seating arrangement.

When we met in Barry's office, the initial plan was to do the show in a three-sided thrust layout with the west wall acting as a background. The option was left available to do the show in the round. One of the last shows I directed in Birmingham was *The Threepenny Opera*, which we performed in the round. I fell in love with the arrangement. One of the biggest problems in theater today is that shows feel distant. The arena-seating configuration allows the director many opportunities to bring the show closer to the audience. Also, *Mockingbird* is a book filled with a humor that is sometimes lost in the play. The bulk of the comedy in the book comes from the reader's recognition of the people and the situation. In my opinion, recognition humor is sometimes the hardest comedy to evoke on the stage. But when it is successful it brings an audience closer together. An audience separated is an audience that does not laugh. Eventually, it was agreed, as a group, that the show would be done in the round with seats installed on risers at each end of the stage area.

While I would not change this decision, it was not a completely successful choice. The sound problem, while better because of the proximity of so much of the audience, was multiplied by the need for amplification to so many areas of audience. Aside from the sound, the performances often had to fight awkward entrance and exit positions at important moments in the show. And the humor was never able to completely break free in the room. While I blame some of this on the room, I know in retrospect many of these problems were directorial.

The first decision we had to make before going further was the setting of the play. First we had to decide when the play was set. This seems like an obvious point. It is the thirties during the depression. We had always been planning for this to be an archival show and it

would be hard to present otherwise. Somehow it was hard to imagine setting this play in the Gamma quadrant on a small spaceship with various alien races dealing with prejudice. Atticus would not be a Vulcan. But it was not as simple as that. The original novel published in 1960 was narrated by the contemporary voice of the grown up Jean Louise Finch. She definitely speaks with the voice of experience of life after the events of the book. How do we handle this?

Having dealt with stage adaptations of novels on many occasions I was well aware of the well-used device of the narrator. Usually in well-written novels much of the charm is in the voice of the writer outside the dialogue. Adapters have always struggled with how to get this voice on the stage. One of my favorite novelists is Raymond Chandler. What make his sleuthing tales of Phillip Marlowe so wonderful are the wry observations of the hero in his inner monologue. Virtually every film version of his novels has included the narrated voice of the hard living PI talking about things like the “orange sun burning holes in the pavement” to the point it has become a cliché of detective film fiction. Christopher Sergel also could not avoid the voice of the grown Scout and uses it to manage and comment on the play. But it is no longer the 1960’s. So in 2001 do we have a narrator in her late seventies or do we set the narration in the sixties. It is interesting to note that Sergel had another adaptation of the script that used Miss Maudie, a contemporary of Atticus in the book, to narrate the action from a vantage point a little after the action of the show. The narrations are simply bastardized musings of Scout in the book. This version was quickly rejected because it completely undermined the whole theme of learning and discovery that makes the novel so poignant. So the decision was made to keep the narration in the sixties.

Frankly, how the next decision was made I do not remember. But I am confident that it would not have been made at such an early point if Barry were not still heavily involved. I

started talking about the sixties in Alabama and the suggestion came up to frame the show around some of the seminal moments in Alabama's civil rights history. Jean Louise, who was now a journalist, would be returning to Alabama to cover the events in her home state and would have the horrors of the present rekindle memories of the past. One of the beauties of this approach is that it made the audience remember that the tragic events of this tale did not represent the last battle but just a very early one. Most of the true battles were yet to come. Barry felt we should even take it a step further and set a final scene in the 90's with depictions of David Duke and a seventy-year-old Jean-Louise. This would make the Louisiana audience realize they were not immune to the sins of its neighboring state. We could even possibly touch on the Baton Rouge school desegregation case that still lingered in Louisiana courts. He even knew the actress he wanted to use for this nineties segment. Pat Snow was a popular local actress who had done work for Barry at Swine Palace before but who had line memorization problems. If we did her scene on tape we could work around her shaky memory. Ultimately, this intriguing component of the framing story was let go because of my problems with integrating it within the script as time and financial demands made the video segment problematic. Ironically, Pat would play an important and even more prominent role in *Mockingbird* much later.

All four of us were excited about this idea for a framing device and I began to click off what I considered were the most famous historical moments in Alabama during the Civil rights era: the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Selma to Montgomery march, George Wallace trying to prevent a forced integration at the University of Alabama by blocking the door to the admissions office, the attack on civil rights protesters in Birmingham by Bull Connor using fire hoses and German shepherds, Martin Luther King's letter from the Birmingham Jail and the bombing of the Sixteenth Baptist Church. This was the primary heritage for the relatively young

Birmingham. I had heard each of these stories a hundred times. At the time, I felt I could easily integrate several of these scenes within the play. I loved the idea because, while I was doing an archival piece, this would give me the opportunity to give the show that “Swine Palace feel”.

While we reproducing these scenes on the stage, projections of photographs of the actual events would be shown. In the end, I would only use two of the events, one to open each act.

Interestingly, these two scenes were the most praised moments in the show.

We next went about designing a town. I had gone to the library prior to the meeting to gather books about Alabama during the depression. Many of the books that focused on Alabama were written by Wayne Flint, a noted history professor at Auburn University. I also picked up a few books of photographs of the landscapes of Alabama. There was a perfunctory glance through by the designers but they proved of little use to them. I especially enjoyed Wayne Flint’s scholarly work in his acclaimed *Poor but Proud* about Alabama’s poor but the written word did not interest the designers. (In the end, the books would cost me \$150.00 for overdue fines when actors who borrowed them were less than diligent in returning them.) I told them of plans to visit Monroeville during my Thanksgiving vacation and promised photos. This trip would provide my best and most useful research.

One of the design goals for this meeting was to lay down the broad but specific outline of the set. Details would be defined later. The script splits the show into two very different scenic elements. The beginning and end of the show takes place in various outdoor locales around Maycomb. The middle portion of the play portrays the trial of Tom Robinson which takes place in the famous Monroeville Courthouse. (There were a few small exceptions to this structure in scenes involving the kids during the trial. We largely ignored these short interludes planning to solve them, in the age-old theater clichéd way, with lighting.) This dichotomy of a symbolic set

that is interrupted with a realistic scene was troubling. The solution of this problem would be eventually discovered during one extraordinary night of rehearsal with the help of the whole cast. Aside from these problems inherent to the script, we added to our difficulties by including scenes from the sixties that did not even take place in Maycomb.

The Reilly Theater's design was the brainchild of Barry Kyle. It is an epic theater space that would mimic the energy of athletic facilities that abound in the South. It is a unique vision of a theater with possibly no match in our country. Originally it was laid out in a runway configuration. The stage floor was dirt. I was, and still am, a fan of the dirt floor. I believe the problems with the dust were exacerbated to an unacceptable level because of the lateness of the completion of the building. Also people tend to rebel against things that are against their expectations. A pro golfer will throw a fit if any noise interrupts him as he addresses a stationary ball, while fans that don't yell at an opposing batter when Randy Johnson throws a 99 mph fastball inches from his rib cage are attacked for their lack of support for the home team. What I loved about the dirt floor was that it gave a freedom for the cast to run and fall and roll and love and just live on its playing space. It takes this one part of the theater away from being artificial. The audience is always aware that the traditional stage is not reality and that knowledge, to a small extent, constrains them. But audiences in Baton Rouge seemed to need the safety net of the artificial. I sometimes believe the audience would have accepted the dirt floor if it had been raised a few inches above the stage edge because it would no longer look like the dirt that was below the building. Across the street, the Ag Center would have a very successful rodeo each year and I heard of no movement to have the event staged on a plank floor. In another irony, the play that would probably be best served by a dirt floor was *To Kill a Mockingbird* and this was to be the first play, according to Barry, that was under a mandate to

not even have a square inch of the boards removed to expose the dirt. The rural south of the depression was one without paved roads and life was spent to a great extent outside. The land, the earth, was a part of the everyday life. I longed for Scout to be able to rub the face of her childhood antagonists in real dirt. I consoled myself by thinking the courtroom scenes would play better on the wooden floor (though after a year and a half studying with Barry I felt guilty for thinking in even this traditional way).

Nels Anderson, the scenic designer, liked the idea of the arena configuration. We quickly agreed that we would place building fronts in each of the four corners of the stage. There would be entrances from each of these buildings that led to a clear center of the stage that would become the town. We decided that the set buildings would represent Atticus Finch's house, the Radley place, an unspecific storefront and a junk area that would represent the Ewell's home. This last choice concerned me because the script did not call for the Ewell home to be seen on stage while both Miss Stephanie and Miss DuBose's homes were. My ultimate solutions for these problems were born in our next decisions. First we decided each building would have a second story outdoor area that would be an acting space. The use of these spaces would be defined later but they would continue the scenic elements from below. Also we would build platforms over the North and South vomms that could be used as acting areas. The primary drive for this choice was the need for the courtroom's "Colored Balcony". Now none of this was written in stone and the balconies in particular caused logistical concerns for Nels. The courtroom itself was to be brought into the empty space in the center of the stage. But its exact configuration was not discussed. The Radley tree was never even considered and this oversight would come back to haunt me. We also decided to reinstall the screens used for *Jesus Christ Superstar* over the East and West ends for a multitude of possible purposes. Also, we decided to

keep the last row of the imported risers in the East and West empty to allow for fluid movement around the set. Steps would be installed behind each building to allow actors to easily appear and disappear from these levels. There was even talk of building a ramp to give easier access to the behind the seats area above the north area of the stage. While this set did have disadvantages, I would not realize until rehearsals began how much flexibility it gave me.

Arthur Oliver, the costume designer, chimed in on numerous occasions but his familiarity with the script (like that of Nels) seemed weak. Arthur's flamboyant nature made me fear that he would want an equally flamboyant costume design. My feeling was that we would take what was basically a traditional show, possibly do some untraditional things with the set design and the acting styles, and then root the show in the costumes. I was very relieved to find that this was Arthur's opinion as well. I have always liked the idea of super realism in design components. You design realistic costumes, sets, props, etc. and then take it one step, any step, further. In the case of the costumes, maybe it would be a very small step.

I must digress for a second to talk about costumes. I hate them. To this day I am looking for the perfect all nude script. My hate of them is based on my inability to express or even know what I want. When I visualize a script I fuzz over the costumes in my mind. I do not know how many times after I have been pressed to make a decision that I realized how wrong my forced choice was after the correct answer was presented to me. Once I spent a whole day finding a pair of pants for my lead actress. When I gleefully showed my selection to the cast I was greeted by horrified stares. Thankfully, my set designer had a crush on the lead and went and found the appropriate choice without even telling me. Much of this dislike for costumes comes from years in community theater when we rarely had a legitimate costume designer. The best solution was always the best compromise of our goals. The rest of this disdain for costuming comes from the

battles I have had with performers over their costumes. The most destructive fights I have had in theater have been over costume decisions when I have been pitted between an underpaid costumer and an egotistic actor. Maybe my distaste for costuming is really rooted in the fact that I find shopping for clothes the most unpleasant chore in the world. Determined to break myself of this block I made it a goal to pay attention to costumes once I entered graduate school. My first show at LSU for *How I Learned to Drive* and my costumer was a sweet woman who seemed adrift at times. I was forced to tell her no on many occasions after my cast was close to revolt. Unfortunately, I agreed with the cast so her authority was completely undermined. When I did *Arden* I was able to have a clearer picture of my vision because the costuming was so post-modern. With no attention to period, each costume piece was supposed to represent a single facet of the person. I felt free flipping off bizarre ideas and having them accepted by the cast. I hoped to take this newfound confidence in visualizing costumes to directing *Mockingbird*. But Arthur was a professional. What would he think about what I said? I was just a student with a history in community theater. I once again found my head blank. Arthur did not help the situation by constantly bitching about the inadequacy of directors he had worked with before. Luckily this show was very straightforward because I did little to enhance the design. I often imagine Arthur talking about the show later saying, "Oh, I did this show once where the director told me nothing!"

We ended the meeting with Arthur sketching some initial ideas and Nels loping off to draw some renderings of the preliminary set concepts. Surprisingly, this meeting would form the foundation of many of the best ideas that would appear in the show. The successes of this meeting are directly attributable to Barry's leadership as the head of the technical aspects of the show. But this was not a perfect meeting by a long shot. Foremost was the fact that Barry

would not hold that position much longer. Also, as a design meeting it lacked important components - lighting and sound. To a lesser extent it lacked a musical director since it was decided music would be a part of the show. But at least it was a beginning and that felt good. The process had truly begun.

CHAPTER 3

CASTING PART I

I have always enjoyed auditions, even back when I played at being an actor. The energy and excitement in the theater during auditions is only surpassed by the energy on an opening night. When I began directing I learned that auditions were a time of anticipation not fear. Auditions are the one time in the process that all of the actors treat the director with complete respect. It is the first step down the road that begins with “Yes, sir” and often ends weeks later with “Fuck you”. When I am holding auditions I often feel like the actors are performing for someone else in the room. It is like there is another person right over my shoulder. This is the person all of the actors are actually expending all of this incredible nervous energy for in an effort to impress. It is like I am Peter Pan with a super theater genius sewed to my feet but in this case I am the shadow. It is hard at this early point to check my ego from drifting into the director’s false vision of absolute importance. Many directors I have known in Birmingham shored up their personal insecurities by taking on the bravadotic front of “Herr Director”. If a director looks long enough he can find any number of patrons and performers to feed this vision.

While I find myself susceptible to these rushes of ego at times, I have been stripped naked on the stage too many times to believe it long. While many egotistic directors have used their confidence as a force in the creative process, it would probably run counter to my style of directing. Besides, anytime that I have tried to become the omnipotent one I would trip on my shoes, forget the name of my lead, and have a nosebleed. I do believe there is a need to keep cast members on edge to maintain a sense of control. Instead of dazzling them with my brilliance I have chosen to confuse them with my eccentricities. From the moment a performer

walks into the audition room I try to bring them down. Now I know many directors say they try to casualize the relationship but they remind me of a politician who smiles, clasps your hands, says how wonderful it is to see you but all the time is thinking, “I am the man, I am the man, aren’t I wonderful, where’s the next hand that longs to touch mine.” Whereas I am thinking as an actor comes in the room, “Wow, you are taking out time from your day to see me? That is just so sweet. I hope and pray I can live up to your expectations.” Of course, there are those auditions that make me think, “What is this? Does he think I have all day to indulge his actor fantasies? This is the worst piece of crap I have ever seen in my life! Crawl back in your cesspool of sub-mediocrity!!!! - Now hold on a second Vastine. Don’t judge this person as a whole just because as an actor he lacks certain skills, don’t assume he is not an overall talented and charming human just because he...sucks the shit out of rat asses as an actor!!” Actors often ask me what directors think about during auditions, now you know, the asses of dead rats.

Working exclusively in the South, one of the first things I have to deal with in the bringing down process is this “Yes, sir” stuff. So whenever I would hear, “Yes sir, Mr. Stabler”, I would say something like, “I’m not in my grave yet, call me Vastine.” This would always get a laugh. (I know, I know, but one of the perks of directing is that no matter how lame the jokes you make during auditions you get peals of laughter. Of course, these are the same people who weeks later will be saying behind your back, “I wish he wouldn’t joke half as much and get to work. I could deal if he was half as funny as he thought he was.” You shouldn’t have laughed at me so much during auditions sister! Actually I believe humor is a very important part of the process and have used it to energize a flat rehearsal on many occasions.)

Before *Mockingbird*, I had never really auditioned kids. So when the first child came into the audition room and politely threw the “sir” and “Mr. Stabler” in my face I tossed off

some little quip about dropping the “sir” and “Mr. Stabler” and calling me Vastine. Instead of the laughter that I expected, I received a blank stare of confusion. She had not learned to read my tone of voice well enough to giggle at the appropriate time. But when I turned to grab my notebook I noticed her mother glaring at me. I could read what she was thinking, “How dare you. I spent nine years teaching that child to have good manners. What’s next? Crack cocaine breaks?” I would eventually cast this child. The “sirs” would never leave but she would take to calling me “Mr. Vastine” her version of a compromise. She also learned to giggle when she thought I expected it. Needless to say, I had to change the way I handled the younger actors during auditions. This was just the first of many ways I would have to adjust my directing style because of the children in the show.

Let me go back just a little. I want to spend some time talking about auditions because it is so important. The choices you make will dictate much of your artistic vision in rehearsal. I have heard people claim that casting is 90% in making for a successful play. That little bit of theater lore is an exercise in hyperbole. Various casts can make the same play work and other plays would never work no matter how well cast. *Mockingbird*’s source material is so rich that it someone defies the talent quotient. Now the script did call for three children to carry over a third of the show and the central adult character in the show had been imprinted on the national consciousness by one of filmdom’s greatest performances. Audiences, as a rule, are very forgiving to children and the words of Atticus Finch would survive almost any performance.

That was not what I was thinking then. In fact, I was panicked. I had believed that just having open auditions at Swine Palace was enough of an opportunity to draw out every would-be Lawrence Olivier and Sarah Bernhardt in the metropolitan Baton Rouge area. I knew there was a pool of local performers who, wrongly or rightly, had felt slighted by Swine Palace in the past.

I had hoped to tap into this pool with open auditions. I felt that I needed a minimum 35 actors to fill both the requirements of the script and the space. So I waited for the expected wave of phone calls for audition slots. There was very little in the way of an audition mail-out list at Swine Palace, but Andre Dubroc, in his position as Education Director, had kept a good list of child actors. These children received audition notices in the mail and they represented the bulk of the calls I received. Quickly over twenty children had signed up for audition slots. We then sent out a notice to local High School and had a moderate response. I also placed audition notices around campus and had about a dozen LSU students sign-up. Then the phone stopped. If there was pent up desire to act at Swine Palace I was not seeing it. I felt hopeless. In Birmingham, I knew where to go looking to pump up an audition, but here I was at the mercy of the locals. A press release had been set out but it seemed to have little effect on the phone. When I did talk to local actors I could hear a let down in their voice when I told them that I, not Barry, would be handling the acting part of the show. Needless to say I went into auditions panicked, first I had to deal with two dozen kids; second, the vast majority of the rest of the auditionees were aged 15 to 24, for which there was not one scripted role; third, I had almost no actors over twenty-four and I still had at least a half dozen major roles to fill in that age range. To make matters worse, I would have to try to hold these auditions while sneaking out periodically to join the design meeting in Barry's office.

Over the years, my auditions have not changed a whole lot. You are not going to get a lot of goofy stuff with me. You will never hear me say, "Pretend you are a tree who is in terrible fear of the approaching woodsman with an axe. But remember, you can't move, because you are just a tree." Just because an actor can come up with a clever solution to an oddball request does not mean he could bring me to tears as Atticus Finch. In my dreams, I would love to throw the

actors on stage, toss them scripts and tell them to come out acting. At the end of the night, the actor still standing would have the role. While at LSU, I had gotten into the routine of having a round of prepared monologues followed by a day or two of callbacks. This worked fine. Most directors will tell you that after ten seconds you can usually tell whether an actor reaches the minimal level to deserve a callback. I can usually slice a casting pool pretty deeply with prepared monologues. (Now this is not always the best way to judge young actors who are shaky on monologues. A freshman gave an audition for *Mockingbird* that embarrassed me and I did not call him back. But in the year that followed I would cast him in large roles in two of my subsequent shows. He turned out to be one of the most talented and trustworthy actors I worked with at LSU.) Eventually, I would hold callbacks that would consist of readings of scenes from sides in the script.

This whole issue of the appropriate procedure for auditions had been bothering me for years. Actors with seemingly more experience than me would often tell me that this or that was not the way they did things in the real theater world. I would not be able to respond to the statement because my exposure outside of Birmingham had been limited. On one occasion I had been talking to a woman about the role of Jenny in *The Threepenny Opera*. She was a singer who specialized in German cabaret music, especially Kurt Weill. My music director had worked with her before and said she was very good. So after many phone calls we set up a meeting. She sang a few songs and then I handed her the script. While her voice had an operatic beauty, it lacked the sass I wanted for the role. Also, she could not act. Within a week I was hearing through the grapevine that she was running me down all over town because I had had the audacity to have her read. I was sorry it offended her ego but I had never seen her act. She told me that she could possibly understand why I did not know who she was because I lived in

Birmingham, but she wanted me to know that she was very famous in the upper Midwest and this was not how a star was treated up there. Now she may have adorned the pages of many scrapbooks in Minneapolis, but frankly BFT had had very little luck in bringing Minnesotans to our shows. But she fueled my insecurity about how I worked. I would bring this insecurity with me to every aspect of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Later, I was to tell New York based actor David Sitler (who would play Atticus Finch) about my insecurities about the correct procedures during the New York auditions from which he had been cast. I said actors were often telling me, for usually different and contradictory reasons, that the way I conducted auditions was wrong. I was so “small town”. He laughed and said the last time he checked I was the one doing the hiring. He said I could audition it any way I wanted to and that my auditions were exactly like hundreds of others he had attended. God I love that man.

CHAPTER 4

A TRIP TO ALABAMA

Following a trip home for Thanksgiving, I planned to take the long route back to Baton Rouge, a route would take me near Monroeville, Alabama, the birthplace and inspiration for Nelle Harper Lee. Thanksgiving in my family is always a trip both in mileage and in experience. My three sisters have done a good job in reproducing over the years and the holidays were never a sedate happening. My family has always been ever present and important in my life. Living in Baton Rouge had allowed me to more completely develop my identity beyond their sphere. But being around the chaos that is my family for three days brought all those feelings, both good and bad, back. I felt like the Nelle from Monroeville, Alabama who could not completely tear herself away from her roots after she had become Harper.

During our first meeting about the play, Barry had told me what he thought *To Kill a Mockingbird* was about. Typical of his life and his beliefs, his views tended towards the political and social implications of the story. When he asked what I thought it was about, I said family. Republicans of the early nineties would say this was the case for all of America, but I can only speak for Alabama - family is the primary unit in society. Family can mean many things. In the novel the immediate family is more wide reaching, but in the play it includes a father, his son and daughter and their housekeeper. Beyond this first circle was the family of the neighborhood. The neighbors knew what everyone was up to and watched after each other. The next circle was the town as a whole. *To Kill a Mockingbird* deals with the strength of the immediate family, the murkiness of the extended family and the betrayal of the town family. Now was it political? Of course, the play demanded Scout to examine for the first time in her young life the implications

of these structures. And beyond that, the town of Maycomb would come to represent the sins of a region and those of a nation. I worked from the center out. The center was based in a town called Monroeville, Alabama and there I hoped to discover the truths of the play.

Over the break, my father put me in contact with Bert Nettles, a Birmingham lawyer who had been raised in Monroeville. He explained that the novel was a thinly veiled fiction of the realities of Monroeville. While the trial had some very tenuous connections to events that had happened to Harper Lee's father, the stories of life in Maycomb that dominate the book (but not the play) were grounded in a very real civic history. He then told me the story of a rich man's son in Monroeville who had been caught joyriding in a "borrowed" car. When the sheriff caught him and brought the boy to his father, the father said if the sheriff would leave the boy in his hands he would punish him in an appropriate manner. This man was known as a very serious person and the Sheriff took him at his word. The father then decided his son was to serve the sentence that any car thief would receive and he incarcerated his son in the house for years. When his father finally died, the now grown son had become so uncomfortable with the outside world that he would not leave the house in the light of day. Legends grew up around this unseen phantom. Their house abutted the elementary school's athletic field and teachers barred the students from retrieving balls that had been hit into the yard. This would become the story of Boo Radley. The real family threatened to sue over the fictional depiction, but was dissuaded by a lawyer who told them the trial would expose them to more scrutiny than the book already had. During my trip to Monroeville, I asked about the validity of this story and was greeted by a conspiratorial glance and then I was sternly told that to this day that they could not talk about the Radley story openly because family members still lived in town.

I had often considered a side trip to Monroeville during my travels through Alabama, but unlike Greenville that straddled interstate 65, it was a good 45-minute drive from any major road. As I pulled off the exit that led to Monroeville I got very excited. I sped down the two lane highway past cotton fields, cheap hotels, ramshackle houses and new BP gas stations. As I passed into the city limits of Monroeville I was confronted with two sights. The first was a cotton field that crossed into the city limits. Then across the street in a used car lot I saw a large billboard that proclaimed, “NOT ME, NOT NOW! What smart teens are saying to sex before marriage!” While this is a sentiment that may be felt throughout our country, its juxtaposition with the town’s entrance came across as more of a warning than an admonition.

As I drove past pecan trees, I headed towards the center of town. Monroeville was famous for the courthouse that would be central to Harper Lee’s story and its famous movie version. As I followed the signs that pointed the way to the courthouse, I noticed a historical marker. I pulled to the side of the road to read it. It noted the location of the childhood home of Harper Lee on a plot that was now a hotdog stand. It also indicated the home of Truman Capote’s Aunt next door which was now a grove of mostly dead pecan trees. Across the street were the locations of the original homes of other players in the story that had been replaced by a Moore’s Discount and its large parking lot. From this spot I could see the top of the courthouse two blocks away. I could close my eyes and imagine Scout and Dill and Jem running down what was then a dirt road to sneak into one of their father’s trials.

I drove into what can only be described as the center of this sleepy county seat and parked next to the courthouse on this early Saturday afternoon. Like most county seats in the South, there was a square formed by rows of small businesses that surrounded the courthouse. The buildings, many of them from the twenties, were small storefronts. Like many small towns

in our post Walmart world, the local stores that had supplied every day life just a few decades before had been replaced by lawyers offices, used appliance stores and antique boutiques. None of the businesses were open, but luckily the old courthouse was. In the sixties, an unattractive new courthouse was built next-door dripping with its ugly modern arrogance of design in what was an otherwise handsome setting. The old courthouse had been saved and turned into a museum. While it portended to be a museum about the colorful literary and political history of the area, it was really a museum to Harper Lee's opus. It is amazing what worldwide success can do to hurt feelings. Harper Lee, the "airer of dirty laundry" was now the favorite sometimes citizen of Monroeville, Alabama. To this day they produce yearly *To Kill a Mockingbird* with local citizens in and around the courthouse. This three-week run usually sells within hours of the tickets becoming available.

The restored courtroom, exactly copied in the movie, was an odd shrine to something that had never really happened. As I sat quietly in the courtroom I began to believe that it really had happened here. I began to hear the restless crowd and the heroic words of Atticus Finch. The original furniture on the floor of the court and the partitioned colored balcony above were echoing with events that never happened. That was until I saw a poorly executed portrait of Martin Luther King next to the judicial bench. Suddenly reality infringed on fiction. I worried then if my historical reproductions of true painful events within a fictional tale would have an equally numbing effect.

I chatted with the assistant curator of the museum about the history and purchased two locally produced books. One book was a history of Monroeville and the other explained connections between the real Monroeville and the fictional Maycomb (minus the true origin of Boo Radley). Next I followed a map that she gave me that outlined the locations of the events in

the book. I felt oddly like a tourist in Hollywood with a map of the homes of the stars. I went from the still standing but much changed jail, law office and newspaper building to the long destroyed homes of the principal players. The oddest part of the walking tour went past the set they used for the final scenes of their yearly production of the play. It was just outside the courthouse and it consisted of three repainted children's playhouses. The truly awful set pieces and the embarrassingly bad production photos I had seen before reminded me how hard I would have to work to make the Swine Palace production an unpopular show.

I ended my journey with a trip to the cemetery. The large Methodist church that stood across the street from the city's largest Baptist church first struck me. My sister is a Methodist minister who had to hone her skills in small town Alabama before making it to the big city. The practice in small towns of placing the two largest religious entities in town across the street from each other had always struck me as odd. But it was it was just as Harper Lee had described it in the book. It reminded me of Jem's unheard pleas to his father to join in the yearly Methodist-Baptist football game. I picked up acorns from the lawn of the Methodist Church and would keep them on my table throughout rehearsals.

I wandered through the cemetery and found the grave of Amasa Coleman Lee. A.C. Lee was the beloved father of Harper Lee who had died shortly before her book was published. A.C. Lee was the acknowledged template for Atticus Finch. I also, by accident, came across the grave of the man I had been told was Boo Radley's model. Suddenly, this fictional story began to become real for me. Here were two graves to prove it. The town no longer was simply a research destination. It started to represent a South Alabama that I had grown to both love and abhor. Now I knew that I could justify in my mind the framing device.

CHAPTER 5

CASTING PART II

When I returned to Baton Rouge casting was my primary concern. I had promised everyone I would post a callback list soon but after the weak first round of auditions I was at somewhat of a loss. If I felt that this pool was going to be the beginning and end of my choices then the cut-off level for callbacks would be at a dramatically lower level than I had envisioned. These auditions, at a professional theater, produced significantly lower talent than I would have on a regular basis in Birmingham. First, these were Baton Rouge community actors, and two, by looking at their credits; these were not the ones who got roles around town. So once again I was about to begin the onerous chore of “actor hunt” but this time in a town where I did not know under which rocks the actors were buried.

I made several decisions right away because of the light turnout. First, I would incorporate more of the children in the play as townspeople. I had had a relatively large turnout of children and a half dozen of them were quite good. Whatever my concerns about the rest of the casting, I felt confident that I could find a workable group of kids. I started playing with the idea of having the show begin with kids at play whose childhood serenity would be torn apart by the violence of the civil rights era. The second decision I made was to stage a scene that showed events leading to the deaths of the four girls in the bombing of the 16th street Baptist Church. I felt I easily had the girls to cast it. Such a scene would help to develop the theme of duality. I was hoping I could connect the plight of those girls with the three children in Harper Lee’s story. Next I decided to go ahead and cast J.P. DelaHoussaye in the play. Barry told me the decision of about whether to cast J. P. was mine. While some of J.P.’s actions off of the stage during a

prior Swine Palace show concerned me, I was not in the position to turn away anyone with talent at this point. It would cost me one of my six Equity contracts, but it would save me money on lodging since he was local. Finally, I decided to draw Nancy Litton on board early. Barry had given her an unofficial offer for a role to be named later. Nancy had a résumé that included over seventy local productions. She had recently been treated for cancer and was still wearing a wig during our production. She had some limitations as an actress but she was limitless in her support and the model of generosity. She also represented an entrée into the local community theater world. She began to provide me with names and phone numbers.

The script's major roles include:

Jean Louise Finch - Jean Louise, the narrator of the tale, is Scout as an adult. While confronting a dark present, she digs back in her memory to a both wondrous and traumatic period in her life. In the process she will create the show we are watching.

Scout - The precocious six-year-old “tomboy” who must use all of her intelligence to grapple with ethical questions the adults of her town are afraid to meet head on.

Jem – Scout's older, protective, athletic brother. He must deal with the issues as well, but sees them in a more emotional light.

Atticus - One of American literature's best known characters whose portrayal by Gregory Peck will always make it a difficult part to pull off. A lawyer, widower and father of two, he has come to represent the ideal for each of these roles. His deep and forgiving view of humanity dominates the morality of this work. But he exhibits a naiveté to the dangers of evil when his optimism almost costs the lives of his children.

Calpurnia - The black housekeeper who acted as surrogate mother. The role in the play is very much a cliché (less so in the book) of the black housekeeper running a middle class white

household. But the cliché is one based in strength not weakness. I also related to the character from my childhood. I unashamedly let Sharon London develop a Calpurnia that was free of modern commentary.

Maudie Atkinson - The unmarried contemporary of Atticus who was their neighbor. She gives a voice to some of Atticus' actions. A sympathetic character, you can tell her admiration for Atticus goes far further than his willingness to take on lost causes. The play never really allows the sexual tension to build like it does in the book. But Nancy took these tensions to heart.

Stephanie Crawford - A counterpoint to Miss Maudie. She is the town gossip (who stays on the stage most of the time in our production) who harbors much of the prejudice that infects this town.

Mrs. DuBose - She is a complex and wonderful character in the novel. Suffering from terminal cancer, she is battling to defeat an addiction to painkillers before she is to face her final justice. Her taunts and torments of the Finches are only second in viciousness to those of Bob Ewell and for this she incurs the wrath of the kids. But Atticus, wearing his permanently installed rose-colored glasses, admires her strength in facing her last battle

Nathan Radley - The cold and creepy older brother of Boo Radley.

Arthur "Boo" Radley – Literature's most famous agoraphobic. Another role made difficult to play because of the screen version's famous portrayal. In this case, it was the screen debut of a non-talking Robert Duvall. (A choice we copied by dropping the only line of Boo in the script.) This is another character that reminds us of the danger of pre-judgment.

Dill - A young friend who Scout has decided will be her future husband (what a surprise she will get when he grows up to be Truman Capote). He is Scout's equal in imagination and intelligence and the instigator of much of the mischief.

Heck Tate - The Sheriff in Maycomb who brings Atticus into the trial of Tom Robinson. This friend of Atticus is treated more kindly in the stage version. In the book Heck clearly lives in a more morally ambiguous position.

Mayella Ewell - The woman who had rape cried for her. A vision of "poor white trash" this lonely, uneducated caretaker of a brood of kids is very complex. Andrea would explore the complicated reasons why this woman would tell lies that could lead to a man's death to protect her abuser. It is one of those great characters that you want to despise but cannot help but feel empathy for in their plight.

Bob Ewell - There is little evidence that either writer intended any sympathy for this character. While Atticus defends his actions because of hard times and a difficult situation, he comes across as the man in the black hat. (Frankly, the path we followed for the performance did little to bring him closer to the gray areas and that may have been a mistake.)

Tom Robinson - The mockingbird that does nothing but sing is as sympathetic as Bob Ewell is unsympathetic. This maimed gentle giant has been punished because he has the audacity to feel sorry for a white woman. There is not a single wrong within this man. I suspect if the story were written today there would be a slight bit of ambiguity in the character. But this somewhat simple device of using the trial of a truly wronged man as a prism for separating out the unstated beliefs the town of Maycomb allows the issues to come more clearly into focus.

I began the actor hunt in earnest. What followed was a series of phone calls that produced no results. I heard responses that seemed filled with convenient excuses. I was quickly moving in a direction I had hoped to avoid. I would soon be begging people to act for me. So I started casting some students who wanted to be in the show. I had held back before because of their age not because of their talent. Preston Lorio would play Mr. Cunningham and Gerald Kimble was Reverend Sykes. A recent graduate, Ebony Turner, was offered the small but emotionally charged role of Tom Robinson's wife Helen. She had worked at Swine Palace before and wanted the job to be a professional one. There was very little room for extra expenditures in the show. Our contract with Equity had only specified five roles even though the budget had planned for six. Marilyn said I could split-up the money allocated for the sixth role to give small salaries to several people. I offered Ebony what amounted gas money. She was offended at first. I was taken aback by her reaction but I appreciated her ability to stand up for herself. This was a trait she would need to survive in the most cutthroat of professions. Eventually, she would agree to play the role. Per dollar it was one of the best expenditures in the show. Her dedication and professionalism were extraordinary and I look forward to the day I can pay her what she is worth.

Back in Birmingham I learned that sometimes you are better paying nothing than paying a little. I had seen cast members use this whiff of a professional status to whip up dissent. Suddenly, the actor who had worked for free for years would say, "I have to take this shit for only twenty-five bucks a week? I figured it out, I am making less an hour than children in Taiwan do for sewing sleeves on shirts for Kathy Lee Gifford." What was even worse was that I could only pay a few of the non-Equity performers anything. Nothing can rip apart a cast faster than a hierarchy of community actors dictated by salary. So I told Ebony that even this small

paycheck had to be between us. I had to have this uncomfortable conversation with two more actors and I never felt right about it. I would next read Tony Medlin a former LSU Theater Ph. D. student. I offered him the role of the prosecutor, Mr. Gilmer. The ante was upped a little because he had signed a contract to teach a night class. We had to pay him enough to cover his replacement. While Tony did everything I wanted and I was happy to have him, it always bugged me that I was spending valuable budget paying for what was essentially a volunteer performance. I would have been much happier if Tony was pocketing the money himself.

The women who showed up at the initial audition, aside from Nancy, were almost unusable. Katy Maxwell had a certain personal energy that I thought may be transferred onto the stage but her skills were very undeveloped. I had little choice but to cast her. So I cast her as Miss Stephanie, a role that was built more on bluster than subtlety. Her daughter, who was much more interesting as a performer, was cast as a townspeople. I was left with the hard chore of finding a Mrs. DuBose. I remembered that Alec had used LSU theater department professor Dr. Jenny Jones in his epic staged reading of *The Brothers Karamatzov* and she had proved excellent. After much cajoling I signed her on board. I must admit that I was apprehensive in asking her because I suffer from an insecurity of casting someone obviously smarter than myself. (That's not to say that most everyone else was not smarter than me as well, but in this case I knew it.) If events had not intervened to pull her from the production, she would have been fantastic.

For the role of the good ol' boy sheriff, I tapped local actor Scott Thomas (referred to me by the girl who would eventually play Scout) who had worked in Los Angeles some and had done commercial work. Resumes dominated by commercials always send up a red flag. Commercials are a different beast. In my experience, actors with this background tend to look at

theater as a playground and lack true depth as a performer. He also worked at a local television station and I have found that the unpredictable nature of local news can play havoc on a rehearsal schedule. But Scott had worked locally as an actor and a director and seemed to love the stage. Aside from my lack of other options, two other things sealed my decision in casting Scott. First, he still carried with him the South in both his manner and his voice. I could have stuck him in Monroeville and no one would question his roots. Second, Marilyn, who had watched his audition, thought he was “so good looking”. A few head turners in a cast is never a bad thing.

The casting of Calpurnia would take a lot longer. Tony Molina, pre-cast as Tom Robinson, lived in New Orleans and knew most of the professional actors in Louisiana. He and his girlfriend Andrea Frankle (Mayella) would feed me names and numbers for weeks. After lead after lead went dry I settled on Sharon London. I was concerned because Sharon had travel and schedule issues. Also she had a bad leg that would restrict her movement in a space that demanded a lot of it. But I cast her anyway, and aside from a few unexpected schedule difficulties early on, she was a joy. The funny thing was that she could chase those kids faster with one good leg and a cane than I could with two legs.

Judge Taylor was to be played by LSU Law Professor John Baker. I cast his daughter as a townspeople. After much thought, and pestering by my girlfriend, I cast the too young Steven Kabel as Boo Radley. With the effort he put into preparing for this role you would have thought I had cast him as Hamlet instead of as a non-speaking character who enters for just a brief bit at the end of the show (coincidentally, I would cast him as Hamlet a year later). As his cold and gloomy brother, I cast the novice Chester Phillips who was suffering from serious health problems. I knew of the concerns with his health and I cast him aware of the possible

consequences. Later, he would misinterpret my frustration when other cast members missed performances and think it was directed towards him. Aside from lacking a clear understanding of theater etiquette during the rehearsal, he was a pleasure to have involved. In what was quickly becoming the family hour, I also cast his daughter and wife as townspeople.

This left the kids. It was apparent from the beginning that there were a handful of front-runners. For the boys I was down to three. While I cast all three, the final choice of roles was dictated to some extent by their size. I felt Patrick Wallace was the most enthusiastic and talented of the group so I knew I could cast him as either Dill or Jem. The script called for Dill to be smaller than Scout so I was forced to put Patrick, who was larger than either of the girls in the running for Scout, in the role of the athletic Jem. This meant Cameron Walls would play the diminutive Dill. So Robert, who had given one of my best auditions, would be left to play a small role that we created for him. I often regretted I did not have more use for this enthusiastic and athletic boy in a larger role. That's not to say the other kids did not do a great job. The biggest plaudits in the show went to Patrick. But gosh, I wish he knew how to throw a football.

In the initial auditions one girl jumped out at me the first moment she walked in the room. She looked like central casting's choice for Little Orphan Annie. When my girlfriend Christina went through the headshots she stopped on this girl's photo and said, with no prior comment by me, "I do not need to see any more. This is your Scout." The girl also gave a great reading of her prepared monologue. Another girl, Maggie Joyner, was close behind. She was a little small in my estimation but she read a wonderful monologue she wrote herself based on the novel. I was tempted to hire her as a dramaturg. But things would change during the second round of auditions. My preordained Scout became tentative and confused. In the Reilly's intimidating setting she was frozen. Maggie, however, came in and took to the stage like she

was playing a scene in her den at home. I have never had an actor come steal away a role so completely in callbacks. There was no question - it was Maggie. And in this case, I never looked back.

Note that in my continuing theme, I cast both Patrick's father and Maggie's mother as townspeople. I had heard horror stories about some of the activities of parents backstage during previous Swine Palace shows. I thought that there would be nothing better for keeping parents out of trouble than putting them on the stage.

This left the casting of the four girls for the framing scenes, especially the bombing scene. But none of the girls I offered roles to would return my calls. A fifth girl who had had discipline problems in previous shows I had not offered. Finally, I bit the bullet and cast her. This was a decision that would come back to haunt me. One of the other girls, an excellent young actress named Whitney, just appeared at an early rehearsal. Even with Whitney and the other girl I was still two actresses short of staging the bombing scene. I cut it before rehearsals had even begun. This was just the beginning of a paring down of ideas.

All that was left was the starring role, Atticus Finch. Barry had wanted to cast the actor who had played it for him in Louisville. Now I must admit I had a little trepidation about the idea. My control over the show was already limited due to Barry's involvement and the idea of using someone who had played Atticus for Barry made me nervous. I had no doubt he was extremely talented. I was just worried about my ability to mold a new performance. And I was just as nervous about my courage to do it. This would become a non-issue for reasons I never completely understood. While it may have been because he had conflicts, in my paranoid brain it was because he did not want to work with me. Several other leads dried up so I started to make feelers with my few connections. By this time, it was about a month before the first

rehearsal. Asking someone at this late date to make plans to spend eight weeks in Baton Rouge for a relatively modest salary was becoming problematic.

CHAPTER 6

THE ROAD TO NEW YORK AND BEYOND

The directing students spent the last week of the semester at the North Carolina School of the Arts. NCSA is a respected conservatory whose acting program is run by septuagenarian Broadway director, Gerald Freedman. We were putting together a series of interviews with Gerry about the track and philosophy of his career. Being around a man with such a daunting résumé was both inspiring and unsettling. By my age he had already had a career I would dream of having. Realizing how far I had to go made me more determined to make this show work. I was also heartened by his numerous stories about twists of fate that had led him to where he was.

When I was a 1st year at the University of Virginia I went out for fraternity rush. Fraternities were an important part of college in the society I was raised in and success in rush was extremely important to me. Two of my friends from Birmingham went through rush with me. We were leaning towards Pi Kappa Alpha and both of them received early bids. On the last day bids were extended I was given one. I was so hurt by the lateness of the bid that I was seriously thinking about turning it down. My father told me that it was not a matter of how long it took you to get to a place; it was just a matter of getting there. This was a story I would remember often when actors would tell me they were reluctant to take a good role simply because they were not the first choice. I was suffering some of these same feelings about *Mockingbird*. Yes, it was honor to do the show, even in a limited fashion, but it was freak of circumstance that had put me there. Now, as I listened to Gerry I was determined not to look this gift horse in the mouth anymore.

While in North Carolina, Barry and I met for a short time about what I needed to do over the next month. Although, he was a little frustrated by some of the incomplete aspects of my preparation, we seemed to be on the same track. The main thing was to find an Atticus. As we headed back to Baton Rouge, Barry headed to England to do prep work for *King Lear*. The next time I would see him would be on the day before my first rehearsal. I was inspired by Gerald Freedman and determined to make it work.

I returned to my job of putting the show together. One of the major jobs in the show had not as of yet been filled. We still lacked a lighting designer. Barry had first asked me to contact the assistant lighting designer we had used on *Godot*. I left her a message that she never returned. I did not push to follow up because, probably in paranoia, I sensed she did not like me after I got frustrated with her when she ignored lighting notes that Barry had given me to give her. Though I did nothing but raise my eyebrows, she would never talk to me again. So at that point Marilyn called a New York agent and got the names of three designers to approach.

The Reilly Theatre is gargantuan and demands a lot from the lighting. And in the case of *Mockingbird*, the show had to be lit from four sides. With little in the way of sets, the light held a tremendous responsibility in creating the scenic mood of the play. This was exacerbated by the fact that the audience was above the stage. The majority of the actor's background on stage to the eyes of the audience was this vast field of wooden planks. I would later beg the technical director and the set designer to let the floor be painted and was soundly rebuffed. The theater was fully equipped with state of the art lighting equipment. But the vastness of the stage meant most of the instruments would be dedicated to simple area lighting. Limitations were also caused by quirks in the grid. One of the most troubling aspects of lighting at the Reilly to me had been the spotlights. While Barry had always been a big advocate of spotlights during his

time at LSU, they played a more practical role at the Reilly. With a stage this large and the sound at times iffy, it was often hard to determine who was talking. The spots were an extremely useful tool in focusing the audience's attention. But above the stage was a jungle of wires and speakers that impeded the path of the spots throws. I had often watched performers washed in light except for a dark hole on their face in the shape of a speaker. For these reasons, an experience designer was desired. Swine Palace had also been hiring designers with a national reputation to help elevate its name in the national theater community.

One of the names on the list provided by the New York agent was a friend of Alec's with a lengthy New York résumé. With Barry's approval we approached him. After returning from North Carolina we received word he could not do it. I was starting to get a little panicked about how many things seemed to refuse to come together. Alec's friend suggested another name on the list, Richard Winkler, who had an equally impressive résumé, whose recent work had included the Broadway production of the musical *Fame*. After several days, I receive a short e-mail from Barry telling me to go ahead and pursue Richard Winkler. I contacted Richard and explained the situation. I would direct but Barry would work with him. I am sure I came across to Richard as a bumbling fool. He found the situation odd but was interested enough to look into it. I told him I would be in New York in about a week and he said we could meet then. It was not a yes, but at least I had a maybe.

The other topic of growing concern was the lack of an Atticus. I had run out of leads. The best I could do was to cast the friend of someone else's friend without an audition. I was desperate, but not that desperate. Marilyn suggested that we hold one day of auditions in New York. I asked Barry and he said to go ahead.

We found an audition room on the east side of Manhattan because it was too late to book something at Equity. We announced the auditions in the Equity lounge that is referred to in New York as the Loser's Lounge because it only draws the most desperate of the desperate. Thankfully, Alec helped us announce it through a breakdown service that sent notices to all of the agents. Marilyn reserved the room for four hours. At ten minutes each, I could audition 24 people. As it turned out, exactly 24 people showed up to the audition.

I had never cast an Equity show before and I was not ready for the phone calls. Many of them were from people unable to make the audition and somehow hoped I would cast them on the phone. Many wanted to know the specifics of the job. I even had a woman calling to see if there were other roles available for her. She said she had met Barry in New York once and was sure her would know her. I never asked. I was heartened by the enthusiasm of these calls and was convinced every one of them was perfect. I probably promised half of them I would cast them in a future show. I even had a call from a friend who had made it successfully to the New York stage. He was shocked to see my name on the audition list. I was embarrassed on how hard this man I had cast as a lead in three shows in Birmingham worked to sell himself to me. Thank God I am not an actor.

Because of the trip to North Carolina, Michael Tick had allowed us to take an incomplete in his American Theater History class. But at this point, I was not just one assignment short of finishing like my fellow classmates but two. I was becoming more and more worried about my incomplete take home final. When I get stressed about one thing I allow it to spill into the other shaky aspects of my life. Christina convinced me that I needed to finish the final. So I stayed up until 3:00 am on the morning of December 19th finishing it. My plane left for New York from New Orleans at 7:30 am.

It seems hard to believe now but the media was filled at the time with tales of overcrowded skies and half-day delays. They called it Air Gridlock. I was petrified that I would be late to my first Equity audition. I had a two-hour layover in Charlotte then I was to arrive in New York two hours before my first appointment. I landed at LaGuardia 45 minutes before my first audition. Following the most harrowing taxi ride of my life, I made it with 15 minutes to spare. The woman at the front desk looked at me like I was crazy. It seems that when a room is rented at 3:00 you show up at 3:00. So much for my plan to arrive early and prepare the audition space. While three auditionees sat in the tiny waiting area I carried through a table and two chairs to set up the room.

The experience of sitting in a small, poorly lit room with only a table and two chairs with traffic blaring in the background while two dozen men parade in bearing photos of themselves ten years before may be old hat to the veterans of the professional world, it was a new and odd experience to me. I come from a world of conversation. I remember first coming to Baton Rouge and noticing how distant people seemed at first. If you stood in a line for a few seconds in Birmingham you would be tempted into more than one conversation about the mundanities of life, the weather and, if you looked game, your family. Over time I learned Baton Rouge was just as chatty as Alabama, but just not in August. Conversation was one of my chief tools in directing. Through simple talk you could open up some of the most obscure doors. I carried this process into my New York auditions. I had ten minute slots and about five minutes of audition material prepared. I talked with each person explaining the situation. I listened closely to their response to the job and to me. I was looking for signs that they felt the job was beneath them. I was also looking for signs that they thought I was beneath them. I was overly insecure. Now

either most of these actors were really excited by the job or years of sitting through auditions had made them hide their true feelings because I felt they almost all wanted the job.

The audition was full of older actors who had survived the lure of real jobs and by the looks of their resumes had taken enough roles in obscure theaters to maintain the dream. There were others who had been cast in one great role and seemed to use it to maintain a career. Some of them I even think I recognized as bit players on soaps or television dramas. More than one seemed to either have had a drink before coming or were just suffering from a life of them. One fellow showed up in a navy blue pea coat and looked like he was playing an extra in a movie about the IRA. He did his reading with a thick Irish brogue and never once looked me in the eyes, and then he turned around and walked out. I decided the welfare agency was threatening to cut him off if he did not show proof of more attempts at getting work. Amongst the many awful auditions, there were four very good ones. I wrote off one of the best at the beginning, he was well into his sixties. Not only did he look too old for the role, I was afraid he would have problems handling the physicality that such a large space would require of him. That left three. One was a man I recognized from my undergraduate days when watching *All My Children* was a big fad. He had a wonderful résumé and gave a nice reading but he was a little old for the role. I must admit I was a little intimidated by his credits and had concerns about my willingness to push him. Another actor gave a pretty good reading and absolutely looked the part. He would be perfect for *The Gregory Peck Story*. He had family issues that concerned me a little and he implied we would have to negotiate over his salary and the amount of time he would be available for rehearsal. David Sitler was my final option. David gave a great reading and had even done the show recently - not as Atticus Finch but as Bob Ewell. There rested my one concern. David's balding head and deep-set eyes were not the picture of Atticus Finch. He looked more

like a Bob Ewell. But his looks did have the advantage of making it easier to sell him as a man ten years older than his forty years.

Richard Winkler was waiting for me at the end of the auditions. I had, of course, left the ground plan at a friend's apartment on the other side of Central Park -- one more mark against the novice. I was so exhausted at the time that I was spewing gibberish. We conversed about the project in the cab and he once again expressed a qualified interest. He would be putting in a light plot for the touring production of *Fame* in New Orleans at the beginning of the New Year and he could easily come up to Baton Rouge. I was reminded that I was no longer in the world of community theater when he asked for cab fare back.

A planned short nap before exploring New York was ended by an alarm the next morning. I had slept through the night. I felt so professional. I had literally flown to New York to just see some actors and a designer. On the flight back I was flipping through the headshots and the woman next to me started a long conversation about her career as an actor. I left with her card. I have since lost it.

The next day I met with Alec and Marilyn about casting and was torn. It was between the look, the experience or the talent. A long e-mail from David saying how much he wanted to do the show clinched it. I went with the talent. I also wanted someone who was really interested. So I e-mailed him the offer and he accepted immediately. He would arrive on January 2nd.

I headed home to Alabama for the holidays. I survived chaos of the week but I came back very sick. I was able to get a few things done before New Years but felt I was losing time because of my flu. I could only take solace in the fact that I could get rid of my yearly bout with the flu before rehearsals started the following week.

New Year's Eve arrived and so did snow flakes in Baton Rouge. There was not enough snow for even a good snowball, but the oddity of snow in Baton Rouge seemed like an omen. I was not sure what kind of omen it was; I just thought it was an omen.

On the first day of what some people considered the new millennium, I received an e-mail from Barry. He said that due to the current situation at Swine Palace he felt he could not do the show. I had been afraid of this possibility. He said that I should approach preparations like I was going to direct the show alone. He also expressed his confidence in my ability to handle the project. Then he said he wanted to meet the morning of the 2nd. This was also the day scheduled for my first rehearsal.

We met at Starbucks on College Drive. It was odd to think my interview with Barry for a spot in the M.F.A. directing program had been at another local coffee house less than two years before. Both the number of events and amount of coffee drunk in the past 22 months made it seem like two different worlds. That first day I sat at the table in awe and confused on the protocol. I was wondering if I should pay for my coffee.

Barry said he was officially resigning as Artistic Director of Swine Palace. I said I would love for him to stay and that I understood his decision. I said I planned to continue with the project.

When I returned to the administrative office it was abuzz with activity. Barry's choice for Jean Louise, Lara Grice, informed me she was resigning because Barry was no longer involved. In the green room sat Richard Winkler but I was never given an opportunity to talk to him. He would also drop out of the show without ever saying a single word to me. So much for professionalism. Eventually, Tony Molina would resign as well.

I decided to solve the Jean Louise issue immediately. Jill Balch was a friend of mine from Birmingham who had received her acting M.F.A. from Florida, she was currently working in New York doing productions for children at schools throughout the Bronx. Jill is as southern as they come and she has personality coming out of every pore. She has one of those appearances that on first sight seems plain but when you see how it works she becomes adorable. If she enters a room she fills it. She has a strong southern drawl, but unfortunately one of North Alabama not South. I did not worry too much about it since she was a voice specialist. She also has a lot of experience working with children. Finally, she was one of Andrea's best friends. So I called Jill and said if she would leave her husband for two months, I would give her an Equity card. She said yes.

CHAPTER 7

REHEARSALS BEGIN

On the night of January 3rd we had our first rehearsal with the remaining Equity members (minus Jill). A reading of the script seemed out of place. My stage manager would end up reading most of the show. Even in the scenes these four performers were in did not overlap much. (Except for the trial scene.) The discussions I like to handle at the beginning of the process worked best when the whole cast was involved. Well so be it. They were being paid to be here so they could sit through my presentation twice. But, I hated giving away my best material early. Nonetheless, I discussed a little the story and the production. I told them my personal history and began to realize that I was acting as if I were auditioning for them. In a way I was. I started to lay out how I would work over the next five weeks.

Over time I have basically developed a Socratic dialogue method of directing. I worked by questioning each and every aspect of the show in ways that implied some viewpoint on my behalf. I wanted the questions to be open enough so that the actors would not feel it necessary to agree with my ideas. But when they did not agree they would have to defend their choice. I certainly knew that I was fallible and simply wanted the best result. I would spend much of the early part of rehearsals analyzing the talents of my actors and using their strengths to my advantage. I have a tendency to give more freedom to the actors I trust. It becomes a delicate balancing act when some people are given more freedom than others so I try to reward the others when their work is good.

In this case, I listened intently to the actors to get a sense of what they were thinking. We discussed their individual roles and I listened for signs of stubborn prejudgment. I also listened

for goofiness in their views. So many actors want to build their performance based solely on their personal history. More often than not they will include a heavy dose of some recent experience. They will then try to impose this personal situation on the role. Most of these traumas tend towards issues of victimization. The problems of our present were cultivated by an act performed against us when we were younger. While it may make the role more interesting to say Bob Ewell's actions are the result of how he was treated by his parents, it was not written that way. I wanted him to simply be the villain. His daughter, Mayella, was the one who shows the victimization of poverty and abuse. When I would hear such statements early in the process I would usually say something like, "That is a very interesting idea and definitely worth exploring as we continue. But remember the potential repercussions such a choice could make." Then I would end the session with a statement like, "I like to talk in details about each of these characters but I don't want any decision made here to be sacrosanct. The purpose of today's discussion was to start discovering the different possibilities of exploration. Never let anything I say or you say close you off from radically different choices down the road." That was how I ended my first rehearsal.

On Friday night I met with the main kids. We began by trying to get to know each other. I have often used what is my definition of charm to warm adults to the process, but I quickly found out that my repertoire of sarcastic and self-depreciating humor was completely beyond their pre-pubescent minds. I also found myself constantly watching for any off-color remarks. I had no idea of how I was going to win over these kids. So I decided to give them a tour of the theater. Nothing excites a kid more than seeing what they think is off limits. Unfortunately, most of the Reilly is the stage. There is a ratty Green Room, a dressing room that more resembles a locker room and a space that acts as an adjunct to the scene shop in the other

building but looks more like a storage area. Their lack of awe was staggering. So I threw caution to the wind and said they could tour the catwalk forty feet above the stage. They were completely unafraid of the height and found it “neat”. I, on the other hand, was petrified. I had visions of Finches falling from the skies. And of course these were flightless Finches. I quickly rushed them back downstairs and said that this was their first and last visit to the catwalks and they were to never even to ask me to go back up there again.

Next, I explained to them that this was a professional show and unlike shows that they had done in school or church, this show demanded a level of commitment equal to a professional. It would probably take a lot more work than they had been used to. In this case, they were not just children in the show, but were also the stars. At the same time, I did not want them to be scared of the theater. I explained that this was a place of play and that at all times they would be both working and playing. Then I introduced a friend from Birmingham who was in the M.F.A. acting program, Jennifer Kelley. Jennifer had taught kids at a dance foundation for years and I asked her to come play games with the kids so they could get used to being free in the space. I had invited David to join us and he jumped right in. Within minutes I heard the squeals of laughter as these young actors ran throughout the room. My fears of these kids being intimidated by the space were unfounded. Throughout the rehearsals all the kids would play football or run and hide from each other during the breaks. If anything I would have to calm them down.

As we started reading through their parts I quickly learned Maggie was a star. She took to the role like a stage veteran. David also did a nice job. He was very straightforward but it was a great place to begin the journey. He had the ability to be both giving and tough with the

kids. I started to find a little too easy to use David with the kids. Eventually, it would get to the point it frustrated him.

The next morning we began rehearsals with the full cast. There was a genuine excitement in the air. In spite of the five Equity members in the cast, this show took on the tone of a community theater production anytime the full cast came together. You could feel that everyone there thought they were doing something important. They were happy to be here. But of course, the reason they were so unjaded was because most of them had little to no experience. This was the type setting I felt comfortable in. I gave a speech explaining the situation with Swine Palace. I told them the show would go on but to always remember we were in the house that Barry built. I said Barry was my advisor and I looked forward to the times he would come to rehearsals in that role. The cast all expressed their support for both Barry and the show. Then I gave them the ground rules. I gave my version of a stern lecture on lateness spurred on by the fact that numerous people had shown up late that morning. After a meet and greet, I left them with April so she could explain how the rehearsals would be run and so she could gather the necessary information from them. After a break, we listened to a tape of a speech by renowned Auburn history professor Wayne Flint, on *To Kill a Mockingbird's* place in American literary history. Then I made my presentation of set designs, a ground plan and costume drawings. I laid down a historical perspective of the show and I passed around the photos I had taken in Monroeville. After spreading out books on the depression, Alabama, and the novel, I discussed my basic approach to the show.

After describing the framing device, I discussed the acting style of the show. In spite of the fact that this show would have more realistic scenic elements than in any previous Swine Palace production at the Reilly, the majority of the action would be placed on a large bare stage.

The actors would have to become the scenic elements. Ever since my first theater classes in Jr. High School, I had been taught that it was an unforgivable sin to split the audience's focus. I remember as early as high school dismissing a play because of the production's tendency to have bits in the background of major scenes. However, from watching Barry work in the Reilly I began to realize how much the space brought to mind a Ringling Brothers' three ring circus. It was a viable option to stage a show such that the audience could not see everything but everyone would see something worth watching. Americans had become experts at multitasking. Students would watch two television shows, play a video game, eat and listen to music all at the same time. So if I was going to allow this empty space to feel like a whole town, I was going to let the town live. Actors would go on with their daily activities while the primary scenes of the show would happen in their midst. The town gossip would rock in a chair perched above the town. Children would play games in the street. Young lovers would woo each other on benches. The Finches would have their traumas in a living, breathing town and we would present that town. At the same time, this was a tale told from Jean Louise's memory. Stylized scenes would happen at pivotal moments. The edges of the stage were the edges of her memory. I had decided to use LaTangela as a non-speaking African-American counterpoint to Jean Louise. She would be a free agent in Jean Louise's mind. Sometimes she would sing. Other times she would mimic. And then there would be times that her mere presence would act as commentary. Jean Louise would not only tell her story but she would also interact with her younger self. She would act as both as her younger self's best foil and her strongest supporter. The cast was excited by the whole concept. I asked LaTangela if she would go and sing a song from the grid to give people the idea of what may happen in the show. She happily ran up the stairs and

suddenly we heard a beautiful a capella rendition of *Amazing Grace* drifting down from the catwalks. Half the cast was moved to tears.

Then we moved a little deeper into the concepts. Immediately, Andrea challenged me on the use of the framing story. I was thrown a little off guard and stumbled for a response. I was afraid she was offended with the idea. She had been dating Tony Molina for over a year and had become extremely sensitive to issues dealing with race. I was afraid I was missing something that she was picking up on. I think she just was honestly expressing her artistic concerns. I could not completely defend the decision at the time because I was not even sure at that point how well it would work. Many times I find that in rehearsal you need to dive into an incomplete idea and see if you can make it work. You have to promise yourself that you will dump the idea if it does not work. I told her I was not completely sure if the framing device would make it to opening night, but that I wanted to see what would happen after we played with it. I left unsaid the other reason I wanted it in the show -- I wanted to find as many ways possible to keep these hordes of townspeople busy. A working cast is a happy cast.

We then read the play and began discussions about the various roles. After five hours we were done. I had survived. I was even starting to believe that I could possibly make this happen. Of course my Jean Louise was still not in town and I had no Tom Robinson.

The next day we spent the whole rehearsal doing a single read-through of the script. We stopped every half page and discussed every possible reference. Then we clearly defined the actions in the scene. I used to split up my script work by the different segments of the play. In each of these segments we would handle everything from language to character to setting to motivation. I have discovered that if you hold a rehearsal just dedicated to meaning of the words and the plot, your actors have a stronger base from which to work when addressing the more

visceral and theoretical aspects of the script. Actors will sometimes allow themselves to go through a whole rehearsal process without ever finding out what words or references mean. Here I would challenge everyone up front to admit what he or she did or did not know. The bad thing was that I had to admit my own ignorance on more than one occasion. Disagreements came up over the exact meanings of words or actions. I was lucky that so much had been written about the novel. I had a stack of reference books and dozens of pages of notes taken from web sites. Though occasionally I would find fault with the glossaries on the web written by people who obviously did not know the area. I found out quickly that I did not have a shy cast. In fact many of them, especially J.P., John Baker and Chester Phillips, were downright pushy about their views. Still, give me a loud voice over a quiet voice anytime.

CHAPTER 8

A DIRECTOR BEGINS TO LEARN HIS LANGUAGE

As we started our second week we began warming up at the beginning of every rehearsal. David would lead these warm-ups. Though I regretted the loss of the thirty minutes of scene work on more than one occasion I felt it was necessary. The space was so much larger than most of the cast was used to and I wanted them to be ready to push and push to fill the room from the first moment of rehearsal each day. There were still questions about how the sound was going to be handled. The area mikes had never worked as advertised and the number of body mikes was limited. I told them to rehearse as if there would be no mikes. I knew this would not be the case but with the eccentricities of the space the less work the mikes had to do the better the sound. I did not want them to fall back on the soundboard to cover them.

Because I had to make a decision about the framing device soon, I started working on the first of the civil rights scenes. This would be built around the forced integration of the University of Alabama. While national guardsmen escorted a student to the admissions office, George Wallace stood in the doorway defiantly making a speech. In my version, LaTangela would sing a hymn offstage, and then Jean Louise would enter the stage as birds sang. Lost in thought she would begin to reminisce about her youth. Then children would run on to the stage and begin to play. As the games built to a crescendo the mood would suddenly change and the children's laughter would turn into shouts of rage. Then as the children ran in horror, crowds of protestors would enter and George Wallace would perch himself defiantly at one end. Then guards would enter escorting LaTangela towards Wallace. The rest of the cast would be spread throughout the theater yelling at her. As she got to Wallace he would speak his famous lines,

“Segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever”. (Of course, as any student of Southern history would know, Wallace actually said this a month before the incident at the University of Alabama.) Jean Louise overwhelmed with sadness, would then bring herself back to the story she was getting ready to tell. During the whole scene, slides of the actual events would be projected at both ends of the theater.

The first time we roughed it through it showed a promise of power. The we plugged in the children. My inexperience with kids would show through. I explained what I wanted and waited for it to happen. Of course nothing went right. A simple segment of kids coming on and playing took over an hour to just get set in even a sketchy form.

I have always tried to set up my rehearsals so that no one has to spend too much time sitting around. This is imperative in community theater because the unpaid actors get restless quickly. This manifested itself that night by an onslaught of suggestions from the townspeople. It is not that I do not like suggestions but there are always numerous ways to do a scene and you have to stick with one. People’s feelings get hurt if you ignore their ideas. I should have put a stop to the intrusions then and there rather than let for another week. A good suggestion by Nancy Litton to have them sing “Oh, Susannah” got bogged down in an argument over the correct words of the song. I went to the Internet, printed up the words and made a dozen copies and that put an end to that. After we got through this segment we staged the beginning of the University of Alabama part of the scene with little difficulty, only to get bogged down again at the end of the scene. Earlier I had added six benches on the edges of the stage simply to give me options. I decided to use them in the beginning by having all the cast sit on them frozen in semi-darkness. These would be the flickers of memories in Jean Louise mind that she would bring to life. J.P. decided that the audience should not see him before his entrance as Bob Ewell, so each

time I did the scene he would disappear. I would say, “Hey, J.P. where were you?” And he would just apologize. Again and again it would happen. Then others decided that if J.P. did not have to do it, then they did not have to either. I was not ready for a fight at this point because I was still unsure of the choice but it sent a cold shiver up my spine as I removed the segment.

We would then attempt to stage a scene where Birmingham Police Commissioner Bull Connor released German Shepherds on civil rights demonstrators. I had a group of actors enter from one end shouting for justice while at the other end Bull Connor entered with several actors playing the dogs. We were trying to improvise the scene and see where it went. I had actors crawling on all fours and when released they went savagely at the protestors. It was horrific. And I don’t mean this in the artistic way. We tried to stylize it a little more and we had an even worse scene that looked like an obscene satire of a modern dance program. What was meant to move the audience was quickly looking like a Monty Python skit. I was beginning to think that Andrea’s concerns were legitimate. I put a stop to it immediately and cut the scene all together. I could see in everyone’s eyes that I no longer held the position of all knowing guru.

We spent the next few group rehearsals just exploring uses of the space. We looked at movement patterns and the creation of a town. Who were the townspeople in this city? How did they relate to the social structure? Soon groups naturally formed. Ways of traveling through the space were discovered. Miss Stephanie began to make her balcony her home. The Ewells began to create a life for themselves in the dump. We made Robert another Ewell and along with J.P. and Andrea they found some very interesting connections. While most of this was not set for specific moments in the show it would be used later to paint the canvas of Maycomb. We played versions of Duck, Duck, Goose and musical chairs to develop a level of play in the space. We tried various other exercises that seemed to energize the cast. I then put chairs in a big square

and told the actors to sit in them. Then as they read through the script they were to improvise their roles. I had seen this work in a rehearsal for Barry and I had copied the idea effectively in other shows I had done at LSU. It was a disaster. After about ten minutes only about four of the thirty plus cast was willing to stand. They were not as comfortable with acting as they were with playing.

One of the biggest issues I had at the beginning of rehearsals was scheduling. I had come from a world where rehearsals were almost never longer than three hours a day, five days a week. In this professional setting we were allowed 38 hours over six days a week. Most of my cast was made up of children or college students or members of the work force. Getting the non-Equity actors to rehearsal before 6:00 pm was virtually impossible. The kids would burn out at 10:00 pm on the nose. Though they offered to stay longer they would turn into some hyperactive beasts I did not recognize and who were incapable of receiving direction. David had just left a show where he rehearsed seven hours a day. I was also taking classes, teaching a class and bouncing from meeting to meeting. Added to this was the fact that a rehearsal could not go any longer than five hours without an hour and a half dinner break. I settled on a five hour a day rehearsal schedule. This meant we were only rehearsing 30 hours a week. I tried to fill in some of the other hours with daytime meetings with David and other professional members of the cast. But I never felt I used my time to its fullest advantage.

I began working with the lead children trying to set up some of their scenes. These three diminutive actors dominate the first third of the script. I would just sit and look at them on this large stage and shake my head at the absurdity of expecting them to fill it. When we first met alone I tried to discuss the script with them. I threw at them my best Socrates impression and received well meant but confused responses. When I would try to explain to them what I meant

by the arc of the character I would receive a look that said, “but I am only nine, I have no arc yet.” Having reached my mid-thirties childless, I had become that old cliché of the bachelor that did not understand kids. Maggie even professed to still believe in Santa Claus. (But I did not believe her; she was an expert at playing the cute card). Her mother pulled me aside one day in panic after the group had gotten into a discussion about the rape scene in the play and said that Maggie and her had not had “that talk” yet. It took me a second to understand what “that talk” was. David had a way with the kids and as he became more involved with their rehearsals I asked his help more and more in explaining the way the scenes should be played. I was amazed at his ability to talk to them in such a straightforward way and get his point across. I started to allow myself to let David talk with them about the specifics while I worked on blocking the scenes. I justified this because I wanted them to look at David as a Dad. But in my mind I knew I was taking the easy way out. After a few days, David said this approach was making him feel uncomfortable because it was confusing the issue of his role in the production in the eyes of the kids. He just really wanted to act.

The bluntness of his comment hit me a little hard. But he was absolutely correct. If I wanted to be a director at this level then I had to overcome my insecurities. I was worried he was also upset about my reliance on him to lead warm-ups (a role he would soon share with others). He said absolutely not. He said that was a role that more befits his position in the cast.

So I went back to work with David and the kids. I ran the scenes we had been working on from the previous days and they were awful. In my myopic state, I realized, I had not really been watching the show. I immediately scrapped everything we had done and began again. I thought I had just wasted three days. But actually it would serve me well in the long run. It

forced me to take charge and by seeing what was not working I began to see more clearly the path that should be taken. I was beginning to learn to work in the Reilly.

I had made an earlier decision to add a tire swing. It gave playfulness to the scene and it gave me an element that would cut through the massive dead space that hovered over the stage. Whenever that swing moved it seemed to redefine the world of the Reilly stage. I had placed the swing just outside the door of the Finch house and I had allowed its position relative to the door to define the scope of my blocking. In my mind, I had cut the stage into four quadrants that were defined by the four corner set pieces. When I looked at the scenes again I realized they were filled with subtle moves within the Finch quadrant. We were over two weeks into rehearsal and I was still directing like I was in my 110-seat black box theater in Birmingham instead of on an epic stage in a professional theater.

The first thing I did was to move that tire swing much closer to the center of the stage. Then I ran the scenes and asked them to move further and further out. Soon I junked all concept of relative space and had them move freely across the stage. This would cause problems with several scenes when the kids were journeying through the town and their distance relative to the Radley house or the City Jail was important to the scene. But I decided we could redefine these relationships each time it was needed. Of course, lighting would go far in helping solve these problems.

Then I started directing in a more straightforward way with the kids. I would explain what I wanted and work it until they were able to make it happen. No longer would I take a circuitous route in providing them with my ideas. Next I invited Leon Ingulsrud of the SITI Company, who was a visiting artist for the month, to look at the kids' movement. While Maggie was nailing it, her male companions were having more difficulty. Patrick was at that difficult

stage in life where the body is growing so fast that the brain has problems telling it how to move. (I saw that on a Discovery Channel documentary during rehearsals). Because his coordination skills were weak, he would trip on stage several times every night. Cameron had developed the modern walk of a cool teenager. While it was cute and it earned him the nickname of “the little man”, it seemed out of place in the 1930’s. Leon said the kids were better than I thought and gave them some simple advice. His advice boiled down to the fact that they had to remain focused and that I needed to remember they were kids.

I was getting more and more troubled because I had no place for them to go in the center of the stage. The tire swing and the benches gave them some places of refuge, but the benches were too far away and the tire swing both had sight line issues and was already being overused. Above the stage, Nels planned to hang a metal frame that would mimic the dome of the Monroeville County Courthouse. This large sixteen-sided three-dimensional piece would float just above the center of the stage. It would set the mood for the court scene, it would help condense some of the area that filled the room below the catwalks and it would give some centering to the stage. But I still felt the stage was going to be overwhelmed by the set pieces in the corners. I decided then I wanted two fairly small platforms with a design that mirrored in shape, but not size, the ceiling piece. They were to be stacked on top of each other in the center of the stage to create two more levels. It would provide a nexus for all of the movement of the townspeople as they wandered the town, it would break up the large field of the stage, it would provide a place for important moments in the show to be elevated and it gave a place for the kids to play. Its designed would be a completely abstract element within the other semi-representative pieces and this was a little troubling. If I had thought of including the platforms earlier I would have had the designers give me something like the confederate statues that reside

in the center of most Southern small towns to justify its purpose. Incorporating this simple structure caused enough resistance from a technical staff that was already behind schedule that I did not dare to push it further. Even with the problems presented by the new central platforms I would not change that decision now. It provided the actors, and the director, with a sanctuary on the stage. Eventually, it would become an important component in making the courtroom layout work.

CHAPTER 9

THE HEART OF THE PROCESS

I was becoming more and more obsessed with the lack of a Tom Robinson. The size of the problem seemed to grow bigger and bigger as each day of rehearsal was lost. I think Tony felt sorry over the position he had put me in and he was sending me names of possible actors for the role from time to time. By this point, the money set aside for Tony had been, to some extent, divided up between Tony Medlin and Ebony Turner. So casting for Tom Robinson was limited to non-Equity performers. (Though if push had come to shove I am sure we would have found a way to hire an Equity actor.) I have often felt, and others who I have talked to around the country concur, that finding adult black male actors is by far the hardest casting chore. While I have often discouraged young actors from pursuing acting vocationally, I have just as often told young black male actors that there are many opportunities out there. It may simply be because I have worked in what were perceived as predominately white oriented theaters that I have not been able to attract the talent that already exists.

I find it interesting how moods are shifting in this country when it comes to casting and race. I remember how casting a black actor in a traditionally white role was looked upon as a statement. Now it happens with regularity. In my shows at LSU, I have cast African-American actors in the roles of a white racist Grandfather (*How I Learned to Drive*), Macbeth, Malcolm and Guildenstern. The race of my cast members in these roles was rarely mentioned to me. *Mockingbird*, the one show I have directed at LSU that deals with race as a primary issue, was my only show where race was a component in casting decisions. I felt being blind to race in the show would undermine the point of the play. I still find myself thinking about the possibility of

casting doing a *Mockingbird* without reference to race so that skin color becomes an attitude of the mind not a physical attribute. I keep coming back to Dr. Seuss' tale of the Sneeches, some with star bellies and others without. But this show was to be archival.

As I continued to search for a Tom, Tony kept pushing me to contact a man he knew who had very little experience. His name was Damian Ricks. I was reluctant to go that route at first because I was still waiting for responses from other actors who had more experience. I finally called him and of course we traded messages for days. Once the last lead had dried up, I made a concerted effort to contact him to set up an audition. We finally met. He was very attractive and had an easy charm about him that made you like him from the onset. His reading was fine but his movement was very weak. The role of Tom Robinson appears mainly in the courtroom and his most important moments happen while he is sitting in the witness stand. I felt I could work with him. Besides, my options were quickly running out. Also, he worked as a teacher and again I hoped he could be another good influence on the kids. I would soon learn how true this would be. After a week of rehearsal I came into the theater and saw the kids hanging all over him like a human jungle gym. From that point on I would refer to him as the Pied Piper.

I started spending more time working with Andrea Frankle. We had decided earlier to go back to the book and put the direct references to rape back in the script. I felt that this was a theater for adults and we should not hide behind simple allusions when a book that was assigned to most ninth graders in America says it outright. Thus began the exploration of her role. She began to ask if her father had not only physically abused her, but also had sexually abused her. I was not initially sold on this point. I feel that it is too easy to raise the emotional stakes in a play by simply making the sins more atrocious. In our world there are fewer more heinous crimes than that of the sexual abuse of women. I did not want to allow the audience to absolve her of

her culpability by virtue of the acts committed upon her. I wanted the reaction to Mayella Ewell to be a mixture of sad sympathy and anger. We did not resolve the issue then and I started thinking I would let her play what she wanted to as long as it was unsaid. There was little in the show that would tell the audience that this was her choice and I hoped I could skate past a confrontation with Andrea on something she deeply felt. I once again felt the old guilt of trying to avoid a problem by ignoring it. As time went on, I actually began to think she was right. The book clearly implied her father kissed her and we even changed the text of a more sterile script to bring home the implication. One of the things that helped change my mind was the portrayal of Tom Robinson. His plight became so moving that Mayella's guilt in helping send an innocent man to his death fought against the sympathy that you felt for her. Andrea also worked hard to make sure that her character sat clearly in a moral gray area. I think the choice turned out to be the right one. It just took me a while to get there.

Andrea is an extremely talented performer who will give you everything she has every time she reads a line. The one time extenuating circumstances led her to give me, maybe, 90 percent, in a rehearsal she apologized for days. There were many actors that I would have loved to have gotten 90 percent from just once. I had a hard time directing Andrea because of the breadth of her talent. She would show me so many options that I often was caught at a loss when she asked me which of two wonderful approaches I would like. I found myself working harder and harder to give her meaningful notes. I probably wanted her respect more than anyone else in the cast. I felt like I was letting her down.

Around this time I began having individual meetings with the actors who had speaking roles. This was the first show that I had directed where I specifically set up hour-long individual meetings with the cast two weeks after a rehearsal started. By that time both of us would have a

stronger feel on whom the character was and where it needed to go. I would have them describe their characters as they now saw them and then I would respond with how I thought things were going. Then we would read through their lines and I would challenge them on what they meant with the approach they were taking. It was a wonderful way to unearth concerns the actors had been either unwilling or unable to relate in the other settings. It also forced me to just focus on just one character at a time. It amazed me what we discovered. I specifically remember how much the characters of the prosecuting attorney, Mr. Gilmer, and Sheriff Heck Tate were helped by these meetings. In both of these roles, it is easy to take the path of caricature. Questions of their motivation and culpability led to hard answers. Most everyone in this town harbored some racist attitudes. How deep were these feelings in their characters and how did it influence their actions? Heck Tate would leave town, on what he had to know was a wild goose chase, in spite of rumors that something bad was going to happen to Tom that night. Mr. Gilmer was just doing a job. Or was he? Did he go too far when he led Tom into saying he felt sorry for Mayella? This was a statement he knew could hang Tom no matter what the facts were. And he would exploit this statement in an extreme manner. Both of these discussions changed the direction of these performances. This practice of holding meetings with individuals halfway through rehearsal has now become a regular part of my rehearsal process.

About this time LaTangela started to miss rehearsals. We had not completely defined how her role would play out and how we would rehearse on a day-to-day basis and I assumed it was just a matter of communication issues. April left some messages for her and they were not returned. Then I left messages for her and they were also not returned. I never saw LaTangela again.

While LaTangela's role was still being clarified we had started making progress on it in places. She would represent a duality that would run through the show. She was a mirror that reflected truth. She would help magnify the small family that sat within the large family. She would help delineate the similarities of the several aspects of love and the contrasting forms of hate. We had already set her part in the civil rights scenes. I had worked on using her as the rabid dog that Atticus shot. This was an important scene because it was an act that proved he was capable of executing violence with professional precision but chose to fight his battles in other ways. She would also be used as an omen. I was planning to use her before moments of terror to signal the events to come. She would also act as a magnifying glass to both the younger and older Scout as they dealt with moral issues. Finally her beautiful voice would fill much of the show. I do not know if this would have worked. I had serious concerns about some of the most radical choices. But I was never given the chance to find out.

Once I admitted to myself she was gone, I found myself with holes in the production. The civil rights scenes had been designed around a live singer and I was not willing to lose them. I finally had a Tom Robinson and suddenly I was looking for another cast member. Also, I wanted to keep the human component within the shooting of the dog scene. I immediately put Damian in the Civil Rights scenes to replace LaTangela. In this way, Tom could represent the wronged African-American in multiple time periods. I had already begun to stage a scene where Tom was killed in prison that was not in the script. As I struggled with the way to recast the role of the rabid dog I had no end of volunteers from my cast. Using someone known to the audience seemed to make a statement about their character. It just seemed wrong. Then I decided to use Tom as it would continue his place as the universal victim. Unfortunately, this would make the shooting of the dog by Atticus seem to make a statement that it was not making. I was trying to

refit an idea I had been working on with one character to make it work within another theme completely. It was a powerful scene that made a very confusing statement. When talking to classes that had come to see the play I was confronted by the confusion this scene caused often. I really did not have a complete answer. Perhaps this is why it did not work. I should have just cut the bit. I did, though, take a secret pleasure in playing like the scene had a deep meaning that I refused to explain.

Jill had joined the cast during the second week of rehearsals. I told her I was going to let her play. I wanted her to explore the space and the character as we went through rehearsals. I had a luxury with her character because in the script it was almost independent of the other performances. I did not have to tie her down because her blocking did not largely affect the others on stage. I wanted her to roam. I also told her to look for ways she could interact with her own tale of youth. We started looking into the issue of age and vocal presentation. Within our production the character of Jean Louise was around forty. While with make-up Jill could look older than her 30 years, she was livelier than most teenagers. She had a strong North Alabama accent that is much harsher than the more southern drawl of South Alabama. I connected her with Bert Nettles, the lawyer from Monroeville, and a cousin from Greenville. She used them to help model her voice and for some insight into the story. The main thing I wanted Jill to do was to tap into the tremendously exuberant personality she had. Her character spent most of the time narrating the show. There is a long oral tradition in Alabama and the best of these storytellers were successful because of the way they told the tale. It was surprisingly hard to get her to let loose and find these things I knew were already within her.

One of the most troubling aspects of the role for Jill was the big question of “Why?” Jean Louise opens by saying she has returned to her past for a reason. She says there was

something she has to do. Well, what did she have to do? These questions were purely an addition of the playwright. They were not in the novel. They had been imposed to give a form to the stage version and to explain her presence. I had done something similar. I had imposed the civil rights framing device to give her a reason to be there. These two imposed elements, however, had a hard time meshing together. She was struggling with the purpose the script hinted at. Was she there to tell her father she loved him? Or was she there to tell her younger self that all would be okay? Well, both of these options seemed gimmicky to me, for one she was talking to a dead father in her mind who never questioned her love. The other seemed ridiculous because she was telling herself something she already knew. Neither had the power of the reasons we had imposed on the show. The struggle over this issue would worry Jill throughout. I was little help to her in her process because I was aware that most of the roads led away from the framing device. I liked the civil rights scenes and I was determined to include grand visual moments in the show. I guess I had this need in some way to hint at the visual mastery that Barry had made the signature of Swine Palace. Jill would eventually resolve this need for the character to be honest with herself and the Civil Rights aspects, but one reviewer would note a sense of disconnection.

CHAPTER 10

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

Around this time we started dealing with some of the technical issues. The set construction crew had been spending time putting in the risers for the East and West ends of the theater. Once the planking was laid down on the scaffolding the sound started to become clearer. My excitement over the contributions of the risers to the sound and the feel of the space was dampened when I was told in a production meeting that 90% of the budget had been spent on the installation. This meant I had no leeway in making additions so what we had planned would most likely have to be pared down. We still had not made a decision on the tree. Nels proposed a large cardboard tube with a screen at the top on which leaves would be projected. I feigned interest in the idea but thought it was awful. The tree and the offering of gifts in the knothole from the mysterious Boo Radley trigger many of Jean Louise's memories. One of the most moving moments in the story was when she came to the tree looking for a message from the mysterious gift-giver only to find that Nathan Radley had covered the hole with cement. It would be easy to imagine a production that made the tree the symbolic center point of the show. In our case it was a side element that did not fit within the rest of the design. It never worked in my opinion and was the single biggest flaw in the design. We had put off making the decision on how to handle the tree until the last possible moment. When we finally got to the decision, money and time made a complex solution out of the question. I once again was reminded that large scenic decisions put off lead to scenic decisions that are ineffective. Our central design element was to be the replication of the dome of Monroeville courthouse hanging over the stage. I have found that many shops in theater are filled with "the cup is half empty" people. I lost my

temper once in Birmingham when I had been told again and again that things just could not be done. I said, “Fine, I understand that we cannot always do what I want but once, just once, could you tell me what can be done not what can’t.” All I have ever wanted was for someone to say, “No, we can’t do that but I think I know what you want to achieve so how about trying this...” I was told the dome would possibly be a problem but that they would see as they went along. Translation: “I am not telling you now because you seem to be in a bad mood but we are going to cut this in the final week.” So I stated emphatically my desire to keep the dome. I had based the small centerpiece on the stage on the fact that it would flow into the dome. In the end they modified a set piece used in *Godot* to represent just the base of the dome. It made absolutely no sense.

Louis Gagliano from the LSU Theatre Department had come in as my Lighting Designer and I was actually relieved Richard Winkler had left. Louis was one of the first people I had met in Baton Rouge. He had a nice, no nonsense, but easygoing way about him. I had liked his work during my time at LSU and felt comfortable talking to him. We met and went over the basics of the show. I told him about some of my more radical ideas and he said he was willing to try. One of these ideas was especially important to me. I wanted to make the audience the jury in the trial. I wanted to focus lights on different places in the audience that David could use in his final arguments to the jury. Of all these supposed radical ideas none even made it to the technical rehearsals.

Most of the costumes were set but how to handle the framing scenes was still not determined. I was getting stern warnings from the costume staff that they could not get me anything if I did not give them the final specifics yesterday. The problem was that the second civil rights scene (based on the Selma to Montgomery march) was not even blocked. Also,

issues with Damian's schedule made it so the death of Tom Robinson had not been worked either. I was a little frustrated by the need for quick answers, but I also understood the concerns of the shop. I would make decisions that were less than perfect but they would work.

About this time, Scott Thomas gave me the number of a friend that was a singer. I met with India Hawkins-Ross and cast her on the spot. Unfortunately, I had no money left for musicians or a musical director. Eventually, Alison McCubbin in the music department would work with her and we would do her songs a capella.

I started to focus on the group scenes we had not worked. First and foremost on the agenda were the courtroom scenes. We still had no idea how to set it up. I brought the cast together and said we were going to stay there until we solved the problem. I said I had two solutions that were straightforward and the germ of a third idea. We tried the courtroom set in a traditional layout with the audience on one side and the judicial bench and the witness stand on the other. A parent quickly chimed in that she could not see the witnesses. I had accepted the fact that people would miss parts of the play but the idea that a fourth of the audience would miss many of the most important points in the show was unacceptable. I then decided to put the four components of the court in different corners. Someone placed in a corner in an arena setting tends to cut off the fewest number of people. I had the judge in one corner, the witness stand in another, the lawyers in a third and in the fourth was the courtroom audience. The size of these components made it so almost as much of the audience lost the witness stand in this configuration as with the other setup and all of the audience would miss a significant amount.

I wanted to find an answer that would allow all of the audience to see both the witnesses and the lawyers questioning them. Then someone asked me what my third idea was. I said I do not know how to work it, but that I was thinking of putting the courtroom in the round. There

had been a Catholic Church that I used to go to in college that had the altar in the center. It required that the priest be very mobile but it brought the congregation together better than in any church I have ever been in. J.P. stood up and said, "Lets try it! Where do you want us to move the tables?" The most important part of the scene was the witness chair. We put it on the center platform. It became the altar. After much experimentation, we spread the audience seats around the witness stand like a congregation. Then we placed the judge in one vom and the colored balcony in the facing one (this had been preordained because it had to double as Mrs. Dubose balcony). The lawyer's tables would sit on the west and east ends of the stage. The wonderful thing about this set up was that it focused all of the energy on the stage at the witness stand. The lawyers could prowl in a circle around the witness stand as they examined the witness. They could dive into the center when they were going for the kill. The energy of the courtroom spectators flowed right into the witness stand much like that Catholic Church back in Virginia. The witnesses would be set on a stool so they could turn throughout the examination keeping them open to the whole audience. It worked wonderfully and I think it was the best decision I made during the whole process. Its only weakness was that the scenes in the colored balcony would come across as afterthoughts. Much in these scenes was superfluous anyway and I cut liberally. But even this positioning paid off when Atticus left after the trial and the members of the balcony stood up as he walked underneath to the sound of India singing "Amazing Grace". There was not a dry eye in the house.

CHAPTER 11

DAYS OF TEARS, TURMOIL AND TEDIUM

Then there were the days of tears. It was a Saturday and I had come in early before rehearsals. Nels, nearly in tears, pulled me aside. He said that he had heard that Pat, Chris and I had gone into Michael's office to complain about his work. Though I had the usual minor issues that a director has with any designer, as a whole I was very excited about the set. As far as I knew, this meeting had never happened. I was very irritated.

Later that day, we would be working in rehearsal on the courtroom scene and a woman entered and whispered something to Jenny Jones. Jenny got up in tears and suddenly left. We were all concerned and I soon learned that her mother had died suddenly. The next day I addressed the cast and told them about the tragedy. Everyone was upset and they all wanted to do something as a group. At some point, Ebony broke down in tears and ran out. She had been close to Jenny's mother and this was the first she had heard of the accident. Ebony would spend the week depressed over the death. She would keep beating herself because Jenny's mother had given her a necklace for her recent graduation and she had not gotten around to writing a thank you note.

Jenny and I had had wonderful discussions about the role of Mrs. Dubose. She was very interested in the effects of a person trying to overcome an addiction. She decided to use her roses as a tool to fight the withdrawal pains. The roses were on the stage for a scene in which Jem finally loses his temper over the verbal attacks that Mrs. Dubose threw at him and his family and retaliates by destroying her precious roses. In Jenny's performance, we saw a woman who spent time tending for the roses to help forget her pain. When Jem destroyed them we could

actually feel sorry for this woman who on the surface seemed an ogre. It was a wonderful start and I did not want to lose her from the show. So even though we had only three weeks left, I told Jenny I wanted her to spend the week before deciding if she was able to return. In the end, she, understandably, felt she needed to drop out.

Suddenly, with two weeks left I had to find another cast member. I contacted Pat Snow who Barry had recommended for a part in the show that I had cut. She said she was flattered and that she would love to do it but that her line memorization abilities were not what they once were. I told her that much of her performance was on a balcony with a book in hand and we could hide her lines in it if we had to. She agreed and we worked to put her in the play. She would have line problems and we had to scale back the role from Jenny's model but she was a trooper. In the end, while she had a few stumbles, she really saved me.

About the time of these outside emotional turmoils we were beginning to experience some turmoil within the cast. The second hand directing was reaching such a level that it was creating hurt feelings within the cast. I sat down and had a talk with everyone about the issue and I got positive responses from some of the most frequent "suggesters" of alternative choices. But it seemed to have little effect. We got to the point that some of the children were even trying to tell adults how to do their scenes. At the same time, lateness was becoming epidemic. And to top it off, J.P. (who was not the most prompt person himself) had taken to bringing his young child to rehearsals. This child, while sweet, was a terror and J.P. seemed to be oblivious to her actions. She would often wander on stage and talk to the actors while they were performing. J.P. also was getting more and more stubborn about his role. Some of this was my fault for not working more to craft a less characterized role. He sensed he was slipping into caricature and decided to try to fix it by underplaying the role in some of the most crucial scenes. This was a

stopgap approach to a deeper problem and just made it worse. It also forced other actors to adjust and completely change the way they were playing the scenes. I did not have the strength to solve this problem and it would never be remedied. That is not to say the performance was without charm and that J.P. was not a great guy to have around. I would always be thankful for his willingness to stand up for the show. But some of these discipline issues would return to cause problems during the run.

Overall the show then settled into a two-week period of calm. Barry attended a few rehearsals. The first time he came there was a very moving moment. The whole cast gave him a standing ovation and everyone was clamoring to talk to him and express their support. He would pass on some very valid comments to me. Many I used others I did not. The main reason I rejected some was because I knew how hard it would be to make such radical changes in course with what was a very bulky ship.

I also had to deal with publicity meetings and interviews. I was vehement about the fact I wanted the press to make my position at the helm almost invisible. While I got the actors to handle the television interviews, I did go along for an interview at the local public radio station. After a rant by the host about how poorly the station was handling the technical aspects of his interviews, I informed him that the actors could not do a scene on air. Equity performers have to give permission and David had refused (though I did not tell the interviewer this). After a few tense minutes, the interview that the host said was now impossible went off without a hitch. The posters came out and I looked at my name printed on them with embarrassment. I was both excited and sad to see it by the words "Directed by A. Vastine Stabler".

The acting proceeded fairly easily and the incidents were at a minimum. I was beginning to believe the show would come together. David struggled with the courtroom scene in his

estimation, but, like Andrea, his bad stuff was good. The kids lulled a little and I worried that their scenes would drag down the show. Katie Maxwell did not agree with my view of her role and fought against it. I could not tell her that I agreed with her vision of the role but she lacked the skill to execute it. I was trying to accommodate her talents. Nancy Litton's sweet speech to the kids about the value of their father was not working. It was superfluous and slowed the show at a bad time. I loved Nancy and I did not have the courage to cut it. I would if I had it to do again.

The new issue that was popping up was the sound. Lewis Rhodes had been given orders to fix the sound difficulties in the space. A specialist was brought in to help reconfigure the set up. He would stay at the theater until the early hours of the morning working on making the show audible. What this meant was I had a sound engineer but not a sound designer. This left it to me to put together the sound design of the show. I had always loved using sound but the limitations of the facilities I had worked at in the past had made it such an onerous chore that I rarely fulfilled my vision of the sound design. I remember working on Barry's technical rehearsals for *Four Joans and a Fire Eater*. I was so jealous of his ability to drop in effects and underscoring during tech. I longed for that. This time I would have to gather the sound myself. With the advent of the ability to download music off-line I had filled the numerous transitions in *Arden* with music. Barry would refer to it as the unfortunate Napster aspect of my show. So while I looked to fill the show with sounds it would primarily be in the form of effects and underscoring. I would scour music stores looking for instrumental music that would fulfill my needs. But photos of landscapes and poetry on the cover of CDs gave me little indication of the content. I chose several CDs based on what I could guess by the CD covers. This did not

work as I had planned but I found two CD's with music that I was pleased with and they would provide ninety percent of the underscoring.

CHAPTER 12

THE FINAL WEEK

Louis Gagliano and I met to go through the play and to develop a clear vision of the lighting. Lewis Rhodes and I met at his apartment and laid down the sound that I wanted for the show as well. When I first sat through a Swine Palace tech I was amazed at how much time they had to not only insert the technical aspects, but also to create and explore. I watched in amazement as the cast would sit patiently as they waited for their next moment on stage. The tech for *Four Joans* took four days. Back in Birmingham my non-paid casts would get restless after just a few hours of this type process and would revolt after a day. I always came into the tech knowing exactly what I wanted and where. I would usually have a dry tech in which the designers and I would work through all the cues beforehand. Now mind you, the lighting instruments number less than forty at BFT, and the number of cues was usually measured in the dozens. I was concerned that my large cast filled with children would not afford me the luxury of time. So I tried to have as much preset as possible when entering our first night of tech. I was used to running my techs with an iron hand and having an Equity stage manager was new to me. Also, I was working in a setting where I did know the equipment as well as I would have liked. I was at the mercy of my collaborators.

We dove into the tech and spent a lot of time setting up the first civil rights scene. I was beginning to think this tech would take forever. The beginning of a show is always the slowest part to tech because it is usually cue heavy and you are defining the technical language for the show. We were hampered because the slides that I wanted to project were not done. I had given

the job to a student at the beginning of rehearsals, and without constant prodding she had done little of the work until the last second. I knew this forebode bad things.

After getting through the opening scenes, we started to make progress. We were able to present a warm and nostalgic world that was interrupted with stark and stylistic moments. Louis used colored glass patterns to give the stage texture. He also incorporated some devices that were used in other Swine Palace shows like hazers, boxes of light and spotlights. I found myself mainly dealing with changes that would either affect the scope or the mood of the lighting. I was somewhat frustrated in the inability to more precisely limit the lit areas. The next day we started with the courtroom scenes. There were many problems making the shift to the courtroom scene from the town of Maycomb. Unfortunately, the change happened during the act, not at intermission. I ended up having the actors ad lib the building excitement over the trial while they made the change. I was still having problems with inattention and found they were executing the change differently every time. Over the next few days, we would work the changes over and over until it finally moved cleanly and the cast realized that they had to keep the same jobs each time. The sound effects worked nicely and we added a live drum to add extra tension. I was excited by the swift progress until we hit the moment when Bob Ewell attacked Scout and Jem on their way back from a school pageant at night. I must admit that I was tainted by my memory of this scene in the movie. With the use of close-ups and shadows they were able to create a sense of confusion that I associated with the scene. In our case, we had children walking across a large bare stage. It seemed the only options we had were based on the level of light. It was very obvious that the mysterious attacker was Bob Ewell long before we wanted the audience to know. Also, Scout and Jem were having problems handling the timing of the blocking set to help build the tension. We tinkered and tinkered. When we made it too dark the

scene became dangerous to the kids. We ended up with an unsatisfactory solution. I would even meet with Louis and changed the lighting in the scene during the second week of the run to make the light sources come more from the sides. It was better but I think it was the one hole in an otherwise beautiful light plot.

As Saturday was our ten of twelve, I had made it my goal to finish tech that night so that we could have two runs on Sunday. While the show was coming together the timing and energy were nowhere near where they needed to be. I felt this cast would not be capable of pulling it together without a full week of rehearsals so I rushed the tech. I also feared the nerves of an inexperienced cast and wanted them to be completely used to the new technical components. We were scheduled until ten and I finished the acting notes at eight. I was already feeling guilty about finishing the tech so quickly; a sign of amateurism in my mind, when I realized I would likely not even need all of the rehearsal scheduled that day. I tried to hold a very in depth technical note session for the rest of the allotted time. Members of the tech staff started to complain that they were tired. I let them go an hour early. Frankly, I was irritated but irritation is my modus operandi come the last week before a show opens.

The week progressed and the anticipation built. The pieces were not coming together like I wanted. The humor was flat, the timing was off and we still did not have all the slides. At final dress we had about thirty people. The scenes with the kids seemed to take days and no one laughed. It felt like a disaster. At home that night I predicted this was the end of my directing career. Surprisingly, the word in the halls the next day was that it was a good show and I felt better.

CHAPTER 13

OPENING AND BEYOND

Opening finally came. It was to be a near sell out. The green room was filled with flowers, food and sugared up kids. The attitude of the cast was electric. Whatever anyone else felt, the cast thought it was a great show. I put on a good face and stopped myself from apologizing for my failures as a director.

We finally had all the slides but they had never been used. My instinct was to cut them then and there but in the audience were most of the Swine Palace Board of Directors and the departmental faculty. I felt my somewhat tacked on civil rights scenes would make no sense without the explanation that the slides provided. When they tried to install the slides the system jammed. For over thirty minutes we worked on them and nothing. Five minutes before curtain I cut them. I went and sat in my seat as a prerecorded pre-show announcement played. The audience got silent in anticipation. Then nothing happened. After a few minutes I began to get worried. I then noticed they were still working on the slides. I listened in horror as one by one the spectators around me started to complain about the delay. An audience always comes in wanting a good show. You have to prove to them it is a bad one before you lose them. This delay was seriously taxing our grace period with the audience. I was using frantic hand signals trying to tell my stage manager to cut the slides. Finally, I caught her eye and she stopped their futile attempts. At 7:45 the lights went down in the Reilly Theatre.

The show made a marked improvement over the final dress. The cast seemed comfortable and the audience took to them. There was still a stagnant period in the middle of the first act but as a whole they held the audience. By the trial scene I could feel these nearly four

hundred people riveted. Then as the show worked to the end I could hear sniffles throughout the house. As David entered for his bow the audience stood up. Now I know that a show that has kids is always a candidate for an easy standing ovation but after the months of trauma I decided to take joy in it.

Over the course of the run the houses filled up and the audiences continued to stand at almost every performance. The reviews were nice and I took special pleasure in one that said this seemed like the same old Swine Palace though I was not sure they meant it as a compliment. Now, I knew the show had none of the sophistication of the works that had preceded it but it was honest and it seemed to truly touch people.

After the first weekend I stayed away for a few days and then troubles began to emerge. First Chester's health worsened and he had to leave the show for a few days. I knew this was a possibility. April did a masterful job of plugging in another actor in the role. Then another actor got a sick and missed another performance. Soon a second girl who was getting bored missed one as well. After hearing these stories I returned to watch a production. That night J.P. showed up minutes before the curtain. He also had been staffing the concession stand, without my knowledge, and even when he showed up on time I was told he did not leave the lobby until just before places. Also, his daughter was using the audience as a mass babysitter and would wander the rows of the house while the show was playing. The young actress who had skipped two performances for no expressed reason sat that night and talked to J.P.'s daughter while he was on stage. Then she proceeded to take a nap on her bench. Even worse, the performances as a whole were flat. This was not the show that we had opened. I was hurt. I was reminded of community theater productions where the cast thinks that once the show has opened it is okay to sit back and relax.

I met the cast before the Sunday matinee the next day and spilled out my heart. I have never been so emotional before a cast in my life. I am not one to show tears but I was definitely sniffling by the end of my talk. We had come too far to give up now. I wanted there to be an end to skipping warm ups and an end to lateness. From this point on any absences would result in removal from the show. Some people were hurt, others, particularly Andrea and April, were very pleased. Finally, all of these problems came to an end. But of course, the girl who had been my worst offender had decided not to show up that day. After the performance we had a cast party that I almost skipped but once I got there all was forgotten. The girl who had missed the show that afternoon showed up at the party. Her mother said she was sorry but that her daughter needed to go to her aunt's house that afternoon. I made up my mind to kick her out of the show then and there but as fate would have it she burned herself on a candle at the party. I felt it was inappropriate to remove her then. April said she would be happy to fire her if I did not, so I promised I would handle it the next day. After several unsuccessful attempts to reach her I left a message saying that I was sorry but this was not working out and that she would not be needed during our final week. Come Tuesday's show she showed up again. She said she was sorry about the absences and quickly disappeared into the women's dressing room. I gave up. She never missed a performance again.

By the end of the week the show had grown tremendously. As the final lights went dim on February 25th, I allowed myself to relax.

CHAPTER 14

CONCLUSIONS

Evaluation of any project I do is difficult. I cannot help but see the faults as I watch my productions. This show is especially tough for me to evaluate. It would be easy to claim it was a success simply by virtue of the response of the audience. It would be easy to rest on the fact that virtually every performance sold out and the audience responded enthusiastically every night. But this is an unfair evaluation for the following reasons:

1. The two previous Swine Palace Productions shows that had sold out.
2. *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the show that proceeded *Mockingbird*, was received with even more acclaim by the audience. I learned a long time ago that you can carry the goodwill of the audience for at least one show.
3. People have a passion for Harper Lee's book. The stage adaptation has moved people, in spite of the quality of production, for over thirty years.
4. I sat through sub par performances and saw the audience still respond warmly to the basic elements of the script.

If I am to honestly evaluate the production I must look at it from its parts. I have separated those into ten areas.

1. Preparation. I came into the project with a personal history that served me well in understanding the work. Connections I had in Alabama gave me further insight into the play. The trip I took to Monroeville was invaluable. The further literary research I did was of little use in the final project. I feel that I could have fleshed out the work a little

more if I had used more of the tremendous resources available for this seminal work of literature.

2. Casting. Several pieces of the puzzle had already been set when I got involved. Choices like Nancy, Andrea and Tony Medlin proved to be a great addition to the show. That actors dropped out because of political situations was outside my control. The main aspect of casting I would change is the preparation that was done for the local casting. I spent much of my rehearsal process working around weaknesses in the local talent.
3. Set design. The over all concept of design worked well for my final project. The arena setting with its multiple acting areas led to a show that had 27 different entrance locations. While the addition of the central platforms was not a well-defined component of the set, the deficiencies were overridden by the flexibility it provided me as a director. The hanging centerpiece representing the dome of the Monroeville Court House did not match the initial design and was confusing in the end. The weakness of the scaled back dome as a scenic element was only surpassed by the poorly thought out Radley tree. What should have been a signature element was a confusing and unsuccessful sidepiece. The corner elements that represented buildings in Maycomb were wonderful. Many of my best decisions were influenced by the freedom Nels set gave me with his design.
4. Costume Design. Costumes fit the time period well. Arthur served the show as best he could with a costume shy director. Some of the framing scenes could have been better served by more fleshed out costumes but the audience seemed to accept them as they were. I do wonder if the whole costume design could have even been better if I had a clearer view of my goals.
5. Sound design. Issues of the sound in the space were somewhat corrected but never fixed.

There were still complaints that hearing was a problem. Certain actors lost audibility and nuance because their vocal range was ill-served by the sound that the cavernous Reilly provided. In particular, what I thought was an extraordinary performance by Maggie Joyner, was undermined by a sound system that made her sound shrill. The current system rewards voices in the middle range and unfairly punishes others on the extremes. Having to design the effects myself, while rewarding, probably meant that all of the avenues were never explored.

6. Use of space. To a large extent I am happy with my choices in this area. There was a wide use of the space that made the play vibrant. I was especially pleased with the choices made concerning the courtroom scenes. But I was hampered by the corner set pieces that were black holes that sucked the life out of the actors. Anything that happened there that involved more than one actor was dead. This is counter to the old theatre maxim that the strongest places on the set are the entrances. Writers know this maxim and write to take advantage of it. There was also weakness in the scenes that took place in the vomes. The Radley tree, the colored balcony and the judge's bench should be powerful places and they were not. I also found that I got caught up in a circular movement pattern during the Maycomb town scenes that became repetitive.
7. Interpretation of the work for the stage. When it came to the heart of the show I felt we were true to the script. Some of the additions, like the framing scenes and the killing of the rabid dog, were not completely integrated into the whole. I suffered throughout by trying to force moments when I should have stepped back a little and let my instincts tell me what I already knew.

8. The framing device. It was a powerful addition to the show that utilized the epic power of the space better than anything in the show. The two scenes energized both of the acts and gave a modern resonance to the play. Complete integration of the civil rights scenes within the play was never achieved. In spite of tremendous positive response to these scenes, I still wish I could work them one more time.
9. The handling of rehearsals. There was much wasted time. I was definitely directing on a learning curve. I found it easy to wash over some of the problems and I now wish I had some of the time back. But at the same time, we did a good job at bringing a largely inexperienced cast together to give life to the script.
10. The intangibles. My inexperience in the situation hampered me. A political situation outside the show dogged me. But I feel I learned and adapted throughout the process. Everything may have not been handled the best way it could have been but it was handled the best way that I knew how. In the end I was proud of the way I navigated the rough seas that raged around us.

The production lacked the breadth of innovation and political commentary that Barry would have brought to it if he had stayed on as an integral part of the play development. However, I cannot judge myself on that level. I realize that through this experience I have become a stronger director. In the two plays I have directed since *Mockingbird* I have been unashamed of my vision. Over the last year I have felt more comfortable making the radical choices that this production lacked. I had come from a place where even the resetting of a work by Shakespeare into another context was disdained. My distrust of the symbolic was almost religious in nature. Through my time in Baton Rouge I have found myself breaking from these constraints and I find

that many of my best talents lay in a place outside the range of the constraints. This production not only allowed me to roam a little further but also required it of me. The space itself demands non-conventional choices to even the most conventional of problems – how do you get from here to there. And like a diver on the cliffs of Mexico, I found the first step difficult. But once over the trip down can be glorious. You just hope the water is not shallower than it looks and you don't crash into the rocky bottom. Was this an artistic masterpiece? No. Was it a big step forward for me as a director? You bet.

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While living in Birmingham he directed around thirty productions. During that time he also was president of Birmingham Festival Theatre and Artistic Director and co-founder of Southern PlayWorks.

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