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# The Chemistry of Change: a production thesis in directing

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**THE CHEMISTRY OF CHANGE:**  
**A PRODUCTION THESIS IN DIRECTING**

A Thesis

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

in

The Department of Theatre

by  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an account of the production process involved in directing *The Chemistry of Change* by Marlane Meyer. Particular attention is paid to the Suzuki and Viewpoint methods of actor training used in rehearsal; periods of discussion with the playwright regarding the script; negotiations with designers; and an evaluation of the audience reception of the public performances. These aspects of producing a play for the theater are recorded from the point of view of the director and described with the intention of revealing the learning process for all involved in the collaborative process.

## INTRODUCTION

The desire that drives my action as a theater artist is unification. Great accomplishments can be and have been made when humans unite in pursuit of a common goal. Theater is a forum that has been used throughout history to rouse people and unify them in favor of certain goals. From the Greek festivals of Dionysus to the Nazi rallies at Nuremberg, theatrical events have served as communal gatherings for groups of people to evaluate the workings of their societies. As both of those examples illustrate, there is always some prejudice inherent in the prevailing attitude of the community. Though I believe and hope for a possibility of greater human unification, I realize that an artist can't simply jump to that ideal place and work from there. In order to create something useful I must be clear about my own prejudices. The theatrical process requires the director to lead his collaborators toward a coherent product that will communicate clearly that point of view, or prejudice, to the greater community of the audience. The irony of my particular prejudice is that it is in opposition to the prevailing culture of my audience community and in favor of values that have yet to take hold on any large scale in Baton Rouge. I want to produce theater that speaks in a clear voice of new possibilities.

From my point of view the dominant Baton Rouge community is parochial, conservative, and patriarchal. I realize these labels are generalizations, and I could embark on an entirely different, anthropological project to defend my reasons for labeling Baton Rouge in this fashion. Instead I only offer this description to highlight my own prejudicial opinion of my community. I am always aware that my values, which I would describe as liberal, humanist, and environmentally concerned, are in conflict with those

of the prevailing culture around me. I take this conflict very much to heart when preparing my work to present to the public at large. It demands my attention because in the end I hope to neutralize it. As an artist I want my ideas to be received by the community. If I were to present them in a belligerent way, they would most likely be dismissed by the people I most want to reach. My choice to direct edgy, contemporary work is based on the desire to share fresh ways of thinking and feeling about human issues that affect us all. In order to complete the circuit and get an audience thinking about our social order in new ways, I want my work to be approachable as well as provocative.

Another aspect of my work that I try to keep consistent from project to project is the formation of ensemble casts that mirror the ideal of cooperation and support that I hope for in the society at large. An audience begins its appreciation of work presented by an ensemble cast in a different way than if it is responding to work with one or two leading roles at the center surrounded by sundry supporting players. I believe the energy of unification that a tight ensemble emits from a stage is a palpable quality to an audience, one that promotes a strong response to the material. The audience may not be unified in its response, but a committed group of actors working tandem to present original ideas is a medium that is difficult to ignore.

Working with these beliefs as guiding principles, the productions I have directed for the LSU Department of Theatre have consisted of training and rehearsing with casts of students in ways that most of them found somewhat unfamiliar, then presenting unconventional, contemporary works of theater that generally prompted more questions from audience members than delivered answers about their subject matter. A general

summation of the effects of my methods would indicate success with the actors that I've worked with, who have for the most part been inspired to think about and prepare for performance in new and exciting ways, and a mixed response from audiences ranging from the ecstatic, generally characterized by students who have responded well to seeing the possibilities of live performance expand before their very eyes, to the abysmal time had by viewers who have come out of shows I've directed with complete incomprehension or been utterly offended by the subject matter. What this summary does not include is a description of the effect the process of directing these shows at LSU has had on me. I would be a very poor artist if I remained untouched by the collaborative process that I believe in so strongly and work so hard to foster. By recognizing how I am affected as an artist and a person in the act of creating theater, I believe my prejudices may change, may possibly diminish, and I may make a positive step on the road to unification.

Directing Marlane Meyer's play *The Chemistry of Change* as my thesis production afforded me the opportunity to examine my practice with minute scrutiny. As the recording of the production process is essentially a self-analytical endeavor, the personal element of subjective observation runs through this entire document. I have cast myself in the role of reporter with the understanding that I must report on myself as well as my production partners. In this instance of directing a play for the theater, the frame of the academic setting and support network is undeniable. The work is very consciously colored by its educational value to all participants. Correspondingly, I have chosen to center this journalistic endeavor on the learning process for all involved with particular focus on my own development.

I begin with a discussion of the play itself: my process in selecting the text, understanding the cultural implications of the text, dramaturgy and discussions with the playwright. My personal vision of the production evolved from this pre-production work and fueled the next phase of the process. In Chapter Two I provide a brief history of the Suzuki and Viewpoint techniques and how I used them in rehearsal. I describe the development of the staging of the show as well as the implicit script work: character study, developing relationships, etc. I worked with the ensemble of actors on a definition of ‘company’ for the length of the rehearsal period, and our discussions of that subject and their repercussions weave in and out of this record. The story of my successes and failures in my collaborations with the design team is the subject of Chapter Three. I go into particular detail regarding my association with Stephen Haynes and the work on the scenic design. I found that relationship particularly rewarding, in that we were working together on a show that was the thesis production for both of us. Chapter Four describes the audience reaction and various feedback I received once the show had opened. I hope this record of how I personally met and responded to the particular challenges of this production gives the reader an idea of how I have developed in my belief of and practice in the transformative and unifying power of the theater.



## CHAPTER ONE: LEARNING FROM THE PLAY

### THE PROPOSAL

What made *The Chemistry of Change* stand out as a play when I was in the decision-making process for my thesis production? The question can be expanded to become even broader. As a director, I was given great leeway by LSU Theatre in the selection of a play for the 2001-02 season, so with no external requirements to fill, what ever draws any director to any particular script? The answer is necessarily very personal. The vast array of dramatic literature in the world holds a wide enough variety of subject matter, ideology, opinion and style for each individual director to have different, distinct reasons for his or her choice of play at any one time. As I have already hinted, my desire was to present something that might inspire a new way of thinking in my audience, but thinking about what and in what way new?

In conversation with Professor Barry Kyle, my program head, I had determined that my education and preparation for a career outside of LSU would be best serve by continuing the work with new scripts that I had been doing all along at LSU. This choice would automatically present me with contemporary issues to consider as an artist, to offer to other artists for collaboration, and to introduce to audiences. *Kid Twist* by Len Jenkin and *Polaroid Stories* by Naomi Iizuka were the two previous published scripts I had directed for the Theatre Department, and both playwrights had demonstrated stylistic ingenuity in the dramatic construction and plot development of their plays. Having tackled, not to say mastered, the challenge of formal innovations in those texts, I wanted

to turn to material that was more traditional in its presentation. Also I knew that I would be putting the production on the proscenium stage of the Claude L. Shaver Theatre, a venue that I was unfamiliar with, indeed this would be my first effort at directing a play for a proscenium environment, so I was looking for material that would fit well into that arrangement. I welcomed the opportunity to direct within the bounds of such a restrictive surrounding, hoping to find some way to innovate within a traditional format. I believed the establishment structure of the proscenium, with all its attendant history, was a rigid background that would highlight any fresh ideas that might blossom from this production. The question remained: where to find something new? If I was going to play within recognizable realms of style and form, then the content had better contain some novel ideas that might provoke creative discussion and reaction among artists and audience.

I had first read *The Chemistry of Change* when it was published in the September 1998 issue of *American Theatre* magazine. I enjoyed it so much upon that first read that it stayed in the back of my mind, waiting for the right time to speak up and present itself as the option that best fit the opportunity. Spring of 2001, when proposals for the following LSU Theatre season were due, turned out to be the right time. I reread the play, and its entertaining combination of gender politics, variable morality and sharp, witty dialogue seemed to me to be the perfect match. If I wanted to inject fresh ideas into what I felt to be a restrictively devout, patriarchal, conservative culture, then Marlane Meyer's new comedy would be an opportune vehicle.

Structurally *The Chemistry of Change* follows a tried and true format. Split into two acts that are further divided into five and four scenes respectively, the action follows a strict, forward-going, linear chronology. It is set in a real place and time, Long Beach

California in 1955, a setting that readily calls to mind associations of wholesome fun: sunny California beaches and the classic, post-World War II, Eisenhower-era notion of American security and prosperity. The story is organized around the familiar dramatic convention whereby a stranger arrives in a community and affects the lives of all of its inhabitants. In this case, the community is a family. Although by no means do Meyer's characters comprise an average family (one wonders what indeed that might be), yet family dynamics of some sort or another are a fact of life that everyone has had the pleasure of enduring. Of the nine scenes, six take place in the same location, the backyard of the family home, two occur on the stranger's turf, and one brief, solo scene takes place at a hospital, a neutral location that can be successfully staged with the merest suggestion of a scene shift. All in all, the vital statistics of this play seem, on the surface, to be straightforward and approachable, two aspects that I appreciated, as I expected a relative lack of sophistication from the student body that would make up the majority of the audience.

In fact, a fantastic world rife with dramatic possibilities pulses just beneath the familiar exterior. It is full of material that I could count on to challenge local conventions. Meyer opens up her world to imaginative interpretations in the first line of her stage directions by using the term "non-naturalistic" to describe the backyard. More of such obvious urging away from "realism" becomes unnecessary once the family relationships at the center of the play are perceived. The majority of the action of the play concerns the mother/daughter duo of Lee and Corlis. These two along with Lee's sister, Corlis's Aunt Dixon, are the female contingent among the cast of characters, and they represent the "matriarchy" that is the foundational system of governance within the

family. Lee, however, is the matriarch herself, which means no decision can be made or action undertaken by any of the other family members without her approval for fear of risking her wrath. Lee's sons Baron, Farley and Shep round out the brood, the male contingent in a family that frequently chooses sides along gender lines.

Conspicuous in its absence is any sign of a father, and we soon learn that there have been many, in fact Corlis and Baron are the only two children who share genetic patrimony. They are children of Lee's first husband. The others are offspring from Lee's business of marrying men and divorcing them for nice cash settlements. In this enterprising way, Lee manages to be the breadwinner for the family. When she finds herself running out of cash without a fresh matrimonial prospect at hand, she proves equally industrious and adept at performing illegal abortions out of her home. Remember this is 1955, and all abortions are illegal, but she attempts to gloss this fact by referring to her services as "helping girls out of trouble." As it happens, the play opens with a scene that follows a particularly bloody late-term procedure, and Lee enters determined to marry her current boyfriend Gerald, "the scrap metal king." Frightened by the prospect of a jail sentence, Lee is ready to begin the cycle of her other business for the eighth time.

By this time, the cycle is familiar to the entire clan whether they like it or not. All of Lee's children have grown up with a long line of surrogate fathers. They continue to live at home, however, while the husbands shoot through the revolving door. As a matriarch, Lee likes to keep her kin close. Her children range in age from Shep, the youngest at 18 years of age, to Corlis and Baron, 39 and 40 respectively, and they all still live at home, unable to escape the control of their domineering mother. Some habits are hard to break.

Into this model of disfunction walks Smokey, the stranger. Lee meets Smokey on the way to rendezvous with Gerald at City Hall to complete the required paperwork and ends up married to him instead. The uncontrollable urges that led to Lee's rash decision are uncharacteristic and unsettling to her, and her sudden change of plan is equally off-putting to the rest of the family. They may be accustomed to conforming to Lee's whims, but Smokey is not the type of man that Lee usually brings home. He exudes a raw energy that ignites the basic, animal urges in everyone he meets, and he possesses an amazing clairvoyant power that gives credence to his most shocking claim: that he is in fact the Devil. Over the course of the play, Smokey becomes the catalyst that provokes everyone in the family to change their lives, mature, gain independence from Lee, and move on in a positive direction.

This brief summary of the inhabitants and actions of the play is intended to give the reader a framework with which the rest of my account can be better understood, but I hope my description also serves to indicate the madcap energy and quirky sense of fun in setting up the characters' relationships that I keyed into when I first read the script. My prior two directing projects had been dark, bleak, violent stories, and I was ready to work on a comedy. The light touch that Meyer employs helps balance the charged social issues that her dialogue raises. For example this exchange between Lee and Dixon in Act One, scene one:

Lee:       A few weeks of living with Baron will send Gerald straight to Reno where he'll make a nice settlement and we'll be in the clear for a while.

Corlis:     That money never lasts.

Dixon:     And it's so goddamned calculating.

Lee: Yeah, well, everybody's got an opinion, fine ... we could all get jobs? How about that?

Dixon: What about my system?

Lee: What system?

Dixon: I have a system for picking the horses that involves converting your name to numbers, all you have to do is be able to add.

Lee: And you want to support us with this system?

Dixon: It doesn't work, but I could sell it for a buck in the back of *Field & Stream* magazine? The way I sold Farley's poker secrets?

Lee: That worked great till the bunco squad came calling.

Dixon: You know, I haven't seen those guys in a long time. One of them had a crush on me ...

Corlis: Tim.

Dixon: Maybe I could get married?

Lee: He was only making up to you to get next to me.

Dixon: Maybe at first, but not after I slept with him.

Lee: You slept with a policeman?

Dixon: And I made him wear his gun when we did it.

Lee: You'll never be successful with men as long as you enjoy sex.

Meyer uses many comic devices to their best advantage. Quick rhythms and deft line construction, notice the repetition of the word "system," the use of funny words like "bunco squad," and hilarious images like the fully-armed, love-making officer of the law flow through the script like nitrous oxide. An overwhelming sense of giddiness in the scene is avoided by providing the ballast of the notion that a woman's options for self-

support were extremely limited in the 1950's. And Lee's zinger that finishes the beat indicates the character's serious intent to win the battle of the sexes while still managing to deliver the goods as a punch line.

Throughout the play, Meyer turns her razor sharp wit and whip crack style on many social "sacred cows." All manner of sexual mores from celibacy to promiscuity and in between; notions of motherhood, the traditional nuclear family, and patriarchal social structures; religion, the sciences, the debate between evolution and creation myths, our relationship with God and Satan; all come under question as Lee and her family learn to deal with their own personal, inner demons. I found the breadth of scope of the social commentary in the script extremely exciting and particularly apropos in a community that takes its religion as seriously as its partying, a region that spawned the over-sexed yet innocent Britney Spears. In the final analysis, the wide-ranging references may be a weakness in the script, but that possibility didn't become clear to me until later in the process.

There is one other aspect to *The Chemistry of Change* that prompted me to choose it as a thesis project. I knew it would be a piece of work that actors would get excited about. All seven characters are supplied with full histories, great scenes and rich journeys through the play. The characters are also all intricately connected, and the two largest scenes, at the end of each act, involve all of the players onstage at the same time. The play is a great platform for ensemble work, which was something else that I was looking for in my thesis project. As I mentioned in the introduction, I was concerned with developing a strong sense of company, so I needed to have a text that could support a number of actors fairly equally.

I had found the play I wanted to direct. It carried many interesting social issues in its text and expressed the importance of dealing openly with others in negotiating how to live together in a society. The theme of adaptation and change fit the overarching message I wanted to impart to my audience community. The play's traditional structure and comic appeal convinced me that it would entertain and welcome audiences to ponder its challenging ideas, rather than alienate and offend them. Additionally, the cast requirements were ideal for the type of close company work that I wanted to practice. I finalized my decision, submitted the proposal and began to delve more intently into the specific challenges of the text.

## THE SCRIPT

The text that appeared in *American Theatre* is the only published version of the script, but I learned from Meyer's representative at the Kersh Agency in New York that she had made some significant alterations for a New York production in 1999 that was co-produced by The Women's Project and Playwrights' Horizons. I had suspected that there was an alternate version, as I had seen the play done at Main Street Theatre, a community theater in Houston, in the autumn of 2000 and noticed some textual differences between that production and the *American Theatre* script. So my first big decision was before me: which version of the script to use? I procured a copy of the later version and made a line-by-line comparative analysis of the two scripts. In the interests of the reader's time, I won't replicate the entire catalogue of differences here. A summation of the salient characteristics that distinguish the two versions will serve to illuminate the thinking behind my choice of script and hint at the way Marlane Meyer works on a new script between productions.



Act One is essentially the same in the two versions. There are almost no cuts from the earlier script to the later. The vast majority of the changes are minute additions of no more than a few lines at a time. The reasoning behind these additions can be categorized into three types: clarification of a plot point, refinement or insertion of a joke, and character/relationship enhancement. An example of one of the larger additions fulfills two of these qualifications. The example comes from Act One, scene three, Baron's homecoming. Corlis has just reminded Baron that he was with her boyfriend the night that he died. First the earlier version:

Corlis: I have the police report if you want to see it.

Baron: The police report.

Corlis: All there in black and white in a birch frame next to my dresser.

Baron: Isn't that a little grim?

Corlis: What?

Baron: The black and white version of your lover's murder, Corlis, is grim.

Corlis: Quit talking like you know me. You don't know me.

Compared with the revision:

Corlis: I have the police report if you want to see it. All there in black and white in a birch frame next to my dresser.

Baron: Where you can see it everyday. The black and white version of your mother's murder.

Corlis: Mother's murder ...?

Baron: Lover's murder.

Corlis: You said mother ...

Baron: I meant lover, he was your lover, he wasn't your mother, or was he? Psychiatry suggests we marry our mother, but since neither of us are married, or maybe we're married to our mother?

Corlis: See, this is the talking ma doesn't know about, if she did ...

Baron: Your eye is twitching.

Corlis: Quit talking like you know me! You don't know me.

The additional lines reveal more about Corlis and Baron's sibling rivalry as well as add a couple of jokes. This example demonstrates another type of adjustment that Meyer made several times in Act One: a reordering of existing lines to adjust the rhythm of the scene. Occasionally she even redistributed lines to different characters, altering the knowledge that an individual character has about a given situation from one script to the next.

There are three instances of major differences, as I classified them, between the two scripts in Act One. These include the insertion of a character into a scene where he had not been before and two occasions where material was cut. In the revision, Shep appears in scene one, which in the former version features only the three female characters. In both versions the women spend much of that first scene talking about the relative virtues of men and the ways in which the genders manipulate one another. The intrusion of a man into that discussion, even though he appears briefly, has only two lines and is immediately ordered off the stage, monumentally alters the overall tone of the scene.

In scene four, Lee and Smokey's first meeting, Meyer cut several sentences from the end of Lee's long speech at the center of that scene. The discrepancies between the versions of that scene also include a good deal of reordering of dialogue, to little effect in my opinion, but the elimination of the end of her speech strikes me as a terrible loss. The

function of this speech is to give the actress playing Lee the opportunity to display the softer side of Lee, a side that the character has repressed to the point of denying herself any softness, fearing that it is a sign of weakness. Up to this point Lee has been a brash, snappy, Rosalind Russell type of matron who rules with a fist of iron in a satin glove. When she meets Smokey, without her knowing it, he releases something in her that allows this speech to come forth. It begins as a description of the types of women that she helps with her abortion service, women who have been neglected by the patriarchal society, “poor women with too many kids, responsible for families, who know what it is to be up all night for a week running with a new baby.” As she moves through the speech, the subject subtly shifts until we realize that she is now talking about herself in the third person, and the baby she refers to is Baron. Finally, she expresses a sense of the lack that her son must have felt and the effect that had on his development. The neglect that she has felt at the hands of the society was passed on to her son, and she realizes, “He’s missing something that should have been given to him in the first few years of his life, a sense of his own importance, but instead he was looked on as one more mouth to feed.” It is this final realization that is cut in the alternate script. The character is denied the ultimate revelation that the speech initially promises. That the edit consists of a straight cut of five sentences off of the end of the speech indicates that Meyer, perhaps prompted by a director, thought the speech accomplished what it needed to accomplish earlier in the text, or maybe it just felt too long. My feeling is that the character goes through such a complex transformation within the beat that the entire speech, as it appears in the earlier version, can be used to great success by the actress. In addition, the character’s rambling past a comfortable point to unconsciously reveal her history before

this strange man invites a director and his cast to create a stronger dramatic moment. It also helps endow Smokey with greater mystery and power, having prompted this confessional from Lee, and it gives Smokey more knowledge about Lee, which only causes him to fall more in love with her.

The other drastic cut (and these two are the only ones in Act One that are more than one sentence long) occurs at the end of the act. After Smokey's big confrontation with Lee's sons, Lee invites him into the house for a cup of coffee. Not wanting to be around the newlyweds, Dixon, Corlis and Farley disperse, the latter two to sleep outside in the car. Baron and Shep are left, and in the *American Theatre* version they share a wonderful exchange before Baron launches into his act-closing story:

*Farley exits*

Baron: Too bad we don't have another car.

Shep: We used to have one. You crashed it.

Baron: You know, everybody thinks Corlis is the rock, but you know who the rock is?

Shep: The doctor said you were lucky to be alive.

Baron: It's me, I'm the rock.

Shep: You told him, "God won't kill me yet, she's waiting for me to start having a good time." Do you still believe that?

Baron: That God is a woman?

Shep: No, I know she's a woman.

Baron: Hell, I've had plenty of good times. She's had plenty of chances.

Shep: Tell me just one. One good time.

Baron: Okay. Sure. That's easy.

And then he tells Shep about a drunken roller-coaster ride that left him feeling, “in the right place at the right time doing exactly what I’d been intended for.” He then wanders off into the night, leaving Shep alone at the end of the act. His roller-coaster speech is a great way to end the act, and Meyer keeps it in the alternate version, but she puts it immediately after Farley’s exit, eliminating the dialogue above. Admittedly, there is nothing essential to the story lost in the cutting of those lines, but my personal judgment is that in the amended version, the transition into Baron’s speech is awkwardly abrupt. More devastating is the loss of the notion of a female deity, which appears nowhere else in the play. Meyer works this grand idea into the script with the barest mention in an off-hand remark and just leaves it there, for a quick listener in the audience to pick up and mull over the implications or simply chuckle and think, “Of course! In this matriarchal world, the boys were naturally raised into a feminine theology.” These few lines perfectly illustrate Meyer’s brand of casual iconoclasm that attracted me to her script in the first place. The delivery of the idea is too innocuous to cause offense, yet the concept is rendered so clearly and efficiently that it still packs a punch. I’m still at a loss as to why this exchange was ever considered a possibility for a cut.

By now I’m sure that my preference for the version of the script that I first read is apparent, if only for my favor shown for the material that was eliminated in the later version. I will here do away with any pretense for an equitable, non-judgmental comparison, so that the reader can access more closely what I was thinking as I progressed through my initial reading of the second version. The additions made to Act One are, I feel, extraneous. The supplemental character insight that some of the changes provide is not so extraordinary that it would cause an actor to deviate from a portrayal

derived from working with the *American Theatre* material. Extra exposition burdens the quick progress of the story, belaboring points about the characters and their histories that I feel are adequately explained in the earlier version. This is true of purely informational lines as well as lines that are intended to add more humor and fresh bits of comedy.

Though some of the new gags and puns are effective, over the course of the entire act, the original version has plenty of humor. There is no need to inject any more. The balance between the well-crafted comic lines and deeper explorations of motive is well struck in the *American Theatre* version. Even the reorganization and redistribution of certain lines works to the detriment of the pace of the dialogue, both in terms of the timing of revelation of certain bits of information as well as simply the sound and structure of the flow from one sentence to the next.

If the differences between the two first acts fall in the main under formal consideration, the alterations to the second act are considerably more wide-ranging. In both first acts the character relationships, the beginning of each character's journey, the inciting action and the climax of the act are consistent. The set-up, in other words, hasn't been altered. In both second acts the characters challenge each other in a variety of ways, prompting a process of growth and change, the ultimate result of which is a happy ending for all. Thus, in the sense of the general outline of the plot, not much changes between the two versions. The major differences, as I conceive of them, are twofold. The first lies in the characters' attitudes toward each other as they create and confront the challenges in the act, particularly Baron and Corlis and their estimation of their mother. The second has to do with where and how the origin of the characters' impetus for change is perceived. Meyer made extensive adjustments to the script in order to achieve

these results. Correspondingly, in the interests of space, my comparison of the two versions of Act Two is more descriptive than citational.

In scene two of Act Two the exchange between Baron and Corlis is the portion of the play that has been most enhanced. The siblings' relationship is much more conspiratorial in the later version. Where in the earlier version they agitate each other in much the same rivalrous manner exhibited in Act One, scene three, in the latter brother and sister display much more goal-oriented character traits, and they happen to share the same goal: to see their mother brought down a peg. Baron starts the wheels turning by hinting that Smokey might harbor a latent desire for Corlis. For her part, Corlis rises to the invitation to burst her mother's romantic bubble, going so far as to make a deal with Baron. She'll willingly give him the keys to the cabinet where the silver is locked, enabling him to pawn it and finish drinking himself into oblivion, if he'll wait to disappear until their revenge is complete. She has some undisclosed role for him to play in the plot. He agrees, and the game is afoot.

The conspiracy is revealed to Lee in the final scene, just as in the earlier version, so the only lasting effect of the changes in scene two is to make Baron and Corlis seem much more malicious. Meyer has sacrificed the innocence in her characters to the feeling of a need for more driving action in the play. While a case can be made that the earlier version of the play is somewhat unfocused in its through line, pushing the plot along in such a blatant fashion lessens the complexity of the social commentary. As a further example I offer the conceit by which Meyer concludes both Dixon and Farley's stories.

These two characters' fates are identical in the two versions. They both transform from lagabout good-for-nothings who rely upon Lee's benevolence for their survival into

active members of society, able to earn livings for themselves and gain independence from the matriarch. The difference in the given circumstances is that in the *American Theatre* version, Dixon and Farley find jobs of their own initiative. In the rewrite, Smokey provides both of them with references to employers, and one gets the feeling that these are people who, thanks to nature of their connection with Smokey, can't refuse to hire them. One possible summary of the revised action could be that Smokey is calling in some favors in order to get Lee's family out of the house. Of course this is Smokey's goal in both scripts, but by making his role so explicit in the alternate text, some of the subtlety and mystery of his machinations is lost. Equally, Farley and Dixon are robbed of a complete, independent transformation. Their journeys are much more rich and satisfying to the actors in the first version. In the second, they resolve into Smokey's pawns.

There are many other changes to the second act, but I will finish my detailed comparison by listing a few of particular note. Three weeks rather than one have elapsed between the acts. Dixon's job search is introduced earlier in the act, although the character keeps the specifics of her actions shrouded in mystery until she is able to announce her successful employment. Lee and Smokey's offstage behavior is described by everyone else to a greater degree, the love-making as well as the arguments. Smokey comes back onstage at the very end and finishes the play in a brief scene with Lee. All of these so-called refinements bespeak a reworking that is struggling to draw the plot more tightly to a single arc. In the revised version, the central drive of the play is gathered more around Lee's journey. The rest of her family explain their actions as they pertain to the changes that Lee goes through as a result of Smokey's arrival. We may get a more



complete version of the chemistry behind Lee's change, but the rest of the ensemble looses out.

I prefer the *American Theatre* version because it preserves a Chekhovian element<sup>1</sup>. The characters have rich inner lives, full of desires and wishes that they feel powerless to fulfill. Over the course of the play they all find some way of accomplishing some sort of achievement from which they can derive strength, joy, and hope for the future. In the earlier version, each character reaches his or her accomplishment despite the other characters rather than through any alliances. Smokey does act as a catalyst, and he helps Corlis explicitly, but his activism is more subtle, less coercive in the *American Theatre* text, leaving more room for the other characters to develop their stories more independently.

I have admitted that these judgments are entirely subjective, and I recognize the practical value to the changes that were made in the rewrite. If the playwright's intent is to explore and display the surprising ways in which we may change and grow, the result may be more clearly achieved by following the arc of one character's story that is supported by the other characters instead of weaving many stories together. The result may indeed be more clear, but the product may also be less interesting and less insightful. Marlane Meyer is able to write detailed dialogue that expresses a wide range of personality and that seems, to this reader, very close to the variety of expressiveness in life. It seems only natural that the scope of her story should strive to encompass the fullness of life. The attendant danger with that approach is that life is often messy and difficult to figure out. Very few playwrights in history have been able to successfully

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Barry Kyle first described the play with this term. It very succinctly characterizes one of my favorite aspects of the script.

weave together many points of view on equal footing with one another, with equal resolution and penetratingly clear insight. Such is the work of the master dramatist. Chekhov and Shakespeare spring to mind as accomplished practitioners of this art. I believe Marlane Meyer set out to create a similar work, perhaps not on such a grand scale as Shakespeare, or even Chekhov. Chekhov's plays are populated by folks who shared the geographic span of a village. Meyer is working within the space of the home. Her desire to achieve some sort of harmonic resonance through the interplay of several distinct tones, as played by her characters, is apparent in *The Chemistry of Change* as it appears in *American Theatre*.

To desire is not the same as to accomplish, however, and Meyer's play admittedly falls short of the balanced masterwork that it could be. Admittedly in the sense that I had to accept working with a flawed script in order to recognize those flaws and hopefully minimize their impact on the production; also in the sense that the flaws are recognized by the playwright. In preparation for rehearsals, I had the pleasure of communicating with Ms. Meyer via several e-mails culminating in a telephone conversation. At the outset of our discussion she made sure that I knew there was an alternate version to the one published in *American Theatre*. I said that I did, and we discussed in brief some of the points that I've laid out above. She was impartial to a particular version and very open to discussing the material objectively. As regards her opinion of my choice of script, she did agree that the second version, "does explain too much." She wouldn't go into a detailed description of what she felt particular weaknesses were; however, she did relate the story of the first two productions of the play. She said she had a "bad time" in Providence, where the play premiered at The Trinity Repertory Company, claiming that

she did not get along with the director. She felt the director was too rigid in his vision of the play, which, in her view, was overbearing in its moralizing, missing much of the playful subtlety of the script.

Her frustration with the first production provoked her to take a good deal of advice from the director of the New York production, which was co-produced by Playwrights' Horizons and The Women's Project. This collaboration resulted in the over-explained, less complex version that I rejected. In the course of our conversation about the two versions, she volunteered that I was free to select sections from both scripts and piece together a telling of the story that was most to my liking. This license was an enormous boon, and one that in the end I feel that I underused; however, I received the permission late in my preparation phase, so I felt that I didn't have enough time to make large scale adjustments. Ms. Meyer was in effect giving me the right to make choices as a playwright, and I was not prepared to undertake all of the responsibility that came with that prerogative. I did make one series of changes, but overall I was more preoccupied with my duties as a director and the work of building a unified company spirit within the group of young actors I had cast.

The portions of the rewrite that I selected and inserted into the *American Theatre* version concerned the resolution of Baron's story. In the earlier version, he is the one character who is unchanged in the end, his final exit is rushed, and I never felt that his story reached a satisfactory conclusion. In the final scene, after watching Lee's mistrust of men get the better of her and prompting Corlis to reveal the fiction behind Smokey's imagined infidelity, he departs with the following exchange:

Baron:       Corlis? You've imagined yourself eloping with Freddy,  
                  going down that ladder instead of closing the window.

You've imagined it a hundred times. Isn't there something you'd like to tell Ma, something you should have told her that night? Standing in that window? Isn't there something you should have said?

Corlis: Yes. I'm never doing one damn thing you say!

Lee: Okay, OKAY! Look, you want an apology, I'm sorry.

Corlis: You're not sorry.

Lee: Yes I am.

Dixon: No, you're not.

Lee: No, I'm not. That's because I don't want to think about the pain you've been enduring ... Because thinking back to that time, I'm certain that, that Freddy, well, he really did love you Corlis.

Corlis: Yes, he did.

Lee: That is why you must go into that house right now and fix this thing for me or I swear to God ...

Baron: Corlis ...?

Corlis: I'm not going.

Baron: I've waited a long time for this.

Lee: Damn it, Baron, this is your fault, you're the one who should go in there ...

Baron: I have a bus to catch. I can just make dinner at the hospital. It's chicken cacciatore night.

*He picks up his bag, waves and exits.*

And he's off to finish the play in the same place that he began it. His last two lines are also extremely contradictory. If he's waited so long to see his mother regret her attitude toward a man and be put into a situation where an apology is required, why doesn't he stay to see it through? He leaves just as things are getting hot. The amendments to

Baron's story in the alternate version provide him a more dramatically satisfying resolution.

My selections included portions of the revised scenes two and four in Act Two that involved Baron's relationship with a woman named Caroline. Though she doesn't appear physically in the play, the audience learns enough about her relationship with Baron to believe that he has something concretely positive to go to when he leaves the family home. She is introduced in Act Two, scene two as the girl that Baron used to bring around before he went off to war. He hasn't seen her since he returned from the war, but in the scene he learns from Corlis that she was pregnant when he left and that Lee and Corlis, who didn't think highly of her, talked her into having an abortion. This news prompts Baron to find her again, after more than ten years (As the play is set in 1955, the war referred to must be World War II. Participation in the Korean War would not have allowed Baron time to do the other activities accounted for in the script.), and when he reappears in scene four he makes a long speech recounting the generous spirit with which Caroline received him after so long an absence and the peace that he felt upon being reunited with her. The speech is not only a nice formal bookend, mirroring his introductory speech in Act One, scene two; it also enriches his emotional journey and bolsters a major theme of the play: that love is a state of being in which humans accept each other for who they are, warts and all, and the "good" and the "bad" create a balance instead of trying to cancel each other out.

I was glad to have the playwright's permission to make changes, but I didn't go any further than I have described because I believed in the script that I had initially read in *American Theatre*. Despite the fact that it was less direct in the way it presented the

central story, I understood what it was about and felt that I could communicate that, first to cast and crew, who would then take over the task of communicating to audiences.

My conversation with Meyer was the root of my confidence in my conception of the play. In talking with her, she revealed to me that Corlis and Lee are modeled after her mother and grandmother and that the inspiration for Smokey was an old boyfriend of hers. She described the play as, “a big love letter” that she intend be addressed to these people who had been close to her. These personal facts gave me an increased sense of identification with the characters and the world of the play. Indeed, in our brief correspondence and conversation, I believe I got the best situation I could have asked for in terms of working with a playwright. I was able to consult her about certain issues and yet not have to carry the responsibility of discovering a rendition of her play that would satisfy her directly. Of course this meant that I would be solely responsible for this production’s development, but after receiving Ms. Meyer’s assurance that my cast and I would, “have fun with the play” I felt that my vision would fit her text exceptionally well.

I knew I had a play that had powerful, positive ideas at its center. I felt they were ideas that prompted people to examine structures that they may take for granted: religion, family, patriarchy, gender roles. Yet they were presented in a way that was entertaining and not threatening. Most attractive to me, the play didn’t preach any alternative dogma. It simply asked for its audience to consider broadening its view, recognizing some preconceptions, and it did so in a humorous way, ultimately characterized by a spirit of loving care. This was the play that I set out to direct. I knew it would be a challenge to get the balance just right between humor and pathos, but I was prepared to lead just the right cast down this tricky road.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LEARNING FROM REHEARSAL**

### TRAINING: A BRIEF HISTORY

One of my fundamental beliefs about theater is that it draws its power, its palpability from its communal nature. It is through the fact of togetherness that theater works on the psyche and emotions of all participants, actors and audience. Even in the case of solo performances, the characteristic of sharing the same space, the same air, as the spectators endows the experience with the feeling of being a group. Members of the audience may not even be aware of this group energy and the effect that it has on their experience. The story or plot of the play may be so gripping that they don't consciously think of the "liveness" of what they perceive, or many experienced theater-goers may take it for granted. Either way, the potential for exceptional stimulation in the theater is most palpably tapped into via the energy that passes between live bodies.

With this precept in mind, another focal point of my thesis project was to cultivate an attention to this energy in the young actors that I knew I would be directing. I wanted to increase their awareness of what it means to simply be onstage, prior to any words being spoken or plot development in any conventional sense. In order to incorporate this task into the production, I secured seven weeks of rehearsal time from the department and planned to spend a portion of that time training the cast in the Suzuki and Viewpoint methods. These are two training methods for the theater that were conceived separately, in Tokyo and New York respectively, in the 1960s and have been developing and changing ever since. Both methods incorporate series of exercises designed to maximize

an actor's vocal and physical expressive capabilities and focus her ability to perform in a live setting with an increased awareness and sense of interactivity both with her fellow performers and the audience. Before an account of how I used these methods in rehearsal for *The Chemistry of Change*, the reader deserves a more thorough history of the two training methods, my experience with them, and how they compliment one another.

Though created entirely independently of one another, both the Suzuki and Viewpoint training techniques were developed by individuals working in the Avant-Garde of their respective performance communities. Theater director Tadashi Suzuki is the man nominally responsible for the method that bears his name (I say nominally, for the majority of the exercises were actually constructed by actors in his company). Choreographer Mary Overlie is the originator of The Viewpoints, though Director Anne Bogart is responsible for adapting them for use in the theater, and it is her version of the training that I incorporated into my rehearsals. At the beginning of both of their professional careers, Mr. Suzuki and Ms. Bogart were concerned with making work that cut against the prevailing grain of contemporary performance, which in both cases had largely to do with American method acting.

In the Meiji Restoration of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Japanese began welcoming and all elements of Western culture that they could discover and assimilate. Graduating from Waseda University in the late 1960s, Mr. Suzuki found himself entering into a world of Japanese theater that had been heavily influenced by a style of acting imported from the United States. He wanted to create theater that could be identified as distinctly Japanese. Ironically he had to go to France to find his inspiration, where in 1972 he attended a series of traditional *Noh* plays. The extreme stylization of movement and



speech, and the intensity required of the actors to perform in this manner, pointed him in a direction in which he continues to work. He wanted his performances to be distinctly modern as well, so rather than become a director of *Noh* plays, he drew around him a company of actors who were willing to work in a unique way that was as physically precise and demanding as *Noh* performance and in addition had a uniquely contemporary dynamic. In 1976 the Suzuki Company of Toga (SCOT) was formed, and a new style of Japanese performance was born. The exercises that became the training were developed in this company, and rather than continue with a history of the company, I only want to quickly report that the original exercises were just as much a factor of the company structure as Mr. Suzuki's style.

SCOT was a repertory company, and as it grew in popularity it also grew in size. Mr. Suzuki kept developing new works, and as the first company members would develop these works with him, they would train new actors to take their places in the shows that were already in the repertory. The new actors had to develop the ability to perform the highly abstract and extremely specific vocal and physical styles that Mr. Suzuki called for in performance. In the course of passing the roles from one cast to the next, the original company members developed a series of exercises based on certain moves and speeches from the plays they performed in order to help the new actors prepare for the intensity that Mr. Suzuki demanded in performance. Mr. Suzuki regulated these exercises and made it mandatory for every company member to train using them. As the company added more shows to the repertory, new exercises would be developed and added to the training regimen, keeping the company members in top conditioning. SCOT is now defunct, but Mr. Suzuki has a new company and has continued employing

this method of actor training, both within his new company and in workshops around the world<sup>2</sup>.

This account of the career and development of one of the most internationally respected theater directors of our time is obviously woefully inadequate. In order to offer as complete a description as possible of my motives behind my thesis work, I find it necessary to give a glimpse of the origins of the training methods I employed. What is important for the reader to understand, if only to recognize a source of my inspiration, is that the training came from a company environment, in particular a company that had a desire to create a new style of performance, one that is distinctly theatrical. Now I need to provide at least an equally brief sketch of Anne Bogart's career and the development of the performance vocabulary known as The Viewpoints that has become so popular thanks to her.

Anne Bogart's professional career began in 1976, soon after moving to New York, with an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In 1977, after earning her MFA from New York University, she was hired as a faculty member at NYU's Experimental Theatre Wing, and while there created several works that established her place among the forefront of artists exploring the frontiers of performance in New York in the 70s. Her peers and influences included Robert Wilson, Richard Schechner and the Performance Group, The Wooster Group, and, perhaps most influential, The Judson Church Gang. The latter was primarily concerned with dance, but it was where Mary Overlie was working, and the vocabulary that she had developed to describe elements of performance was of particular interest to Ms. Bogart. With Overlie's permission, she took the five

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<sup>2</sup> I've compiled these facts from Suzuki's *The Way of Acting* and a seminar on SCOT given by the SITI Company that I attended in June of 2001.

original Viewpoints and refined them for use in the theater, coming up with six Viewpoints that focused on the aspects of space and time. Over the course of several years working with the Viewpoints, Ms. Bogart and her collaborators have expanded the vocabulary to include nine Viewpoints of space and time as well as nine Vocal viewpoints<sup>3</sup>.

The Viewpoints, which are enumerated later in the chapter, describe live performance in terms that any actor should be able to understand. The style that they invoke incorporates attitudes toward an actor's body and voice that are not in themselves unique, as such it is not a method that should be thought of as antithetical to acting as it has been practiced throughout most of the Twentieth Century. The Viewpoints simply provide alternative means of talking about elements of performance. In so doing they allow for an increased spectrum of expressive possibilities to come to acceptance in a culture that for so long has been in the thrall of The Method espoused by Lee Strasberg and other members of The Actors' Studio. One of the ends of Viewpoint work is the empowerment of actors to be able to have greater control over the process of creating a performance as a company. With the understanding of performance provided by the Viewpoints, each actor becomes more responsible for the entire performance. No longer are an actor's responsibilities restricted to her role.

I realize that this claim is difficult to accept without a more detailed description of the process. I intend to use my production of *The Chemistry of Change* as a case study to illustrate the method of creation that I attempt with the employment of these techniques as well as describe some actual results from the process. In the description of this

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<sup>3</sup> This history is drawn from Bogart's *A Director Prepares* and a seminar given by the SITI Company that I attended in June of 2001.

process I hope the reader comes to an understanding of at least how I have used the Viewpoint and Suzuki methods, and hopefully is inspired to discover more for himself about the use of these methods, as they can only be fully understood through practice. They are active practices and should be used as such. Before moving on to the direct study of my use of them on my thesis show, the reader should know how I first came to use them and how I have developed my use of them since then.

While an undergraduate at Williams College in 1988 I participated in a series of Suzuki workshops led by Eric Hill. Mr. Hill was at that time the Artistic Director of Stage West Theatre Company in Springfield, Massachusetts. The interesting thing about Stage West at that time is that several American theater artists were employed there who had worked and trained with SCOT, Mr. Hill among them. That company was one of the first, if not the first, to practice Suzuki training in America. Anne Bogart was also at Williams in 1988 as a guest instructor. It was then that I first learned about Viewpoints; at that time there were six. So these relatively new approaches to performance were both part of my early development as a theater artist. There were elements from both camps that inspired me, and I began using a selection of the exercises in my work, both as an actor and director. I was fortunate enough to be working with three other students who felt as I did about the incorporation of this pastiche of training into our productions, and after we graduated from Williams in 1991, we started a theater company in Seattle together. We named the company Theater Schmeater, and trained and rehearsed and performed together until 1996.

The two styles of training compliment one another. Suzuki is rigorous, exact and focused on individual ability. The Viewpoints help increase awareness of group

dynamics and encourage freedom of expression and improvisation. My Theater Schmeater friends and I weren't the only people to appreciate the symbiotic nature of the two methods. Ms. Bogart and Mr. Suzuki had met several times in the late 80s and early 90s to discuss the feasibility of creating a new company that would meld their approaches. In 1992 the SITI Company came into being. Comprised of actors who were familiar with one or another of the two directors' styles, the company developed a strong internal bond very quickly, as the members depended on each other to learn the aspects of one another's training. The hybrid company had soon developed a third, altogether new approach to performance that was the result of the two approaches to training and how they influenced the actors' bodies and imaginations as they worked together.

I can't honestly say that the same thing was happening at Theater Schmeater. Though we were discovering very exciting ways to create and energize performance, our company fractured as it grew. I believe the root of the cause that brought our training to a close lies in the fact that we were an amateur company. We all had to have other employment, which cut into our training time, and as we invited other artists to join the company, in order to share the work load, we had to allow them their artistic prerogative which did not always cohere with the training ideals with which we had started the company.

I am now a long way from *The Chemistry of Change*, but I believe this bit of history is important, not only for the reader to understand how I came to the particular approach I made to the production, also for my own process of learning. Each production I work on is a fresh collaboration with new individuals. Each time I draw on the Suzuki/Viewpoint techniques in the rehearsal process for a show, I learn just as much

about the techniques as I do about the individuals who practice them. As the training is an active thing it only comes into being as people perform it. When different people use the exercises, different results are achieved. This document is meant to be an account of my directing approach to one particular production, yet as an artist, I am concerned with my development over the course of all my productions. I will continue to use the Suzuki/Viewpoint techniques to prepare works for the stage. This remains a constant in my work, yet as I have just pointed out, it is a fluctuating constant; therefore, it is of interest to me to observe how my use of the training changes as I use it with different groups of people. My use of the training with the cast of *The Chemistry of Change* is of greatest interest, as it is the most recent project on which the methods came into play. I will return to a description of that particular process shortly. In order to arrive there, I must trace my path from 1996, the year that I stopped training at Theater Schmeater.

I kept working at Theater Schmeater, and using some Viewpoint based exercises in rehearsals for shows that I directed. I found that the exercises, even used sparingly, helped to build a sense of ensemble among actors, even those who had only just met and were only going to be working on one show together. A free sense of play, increased trust, and a greater awareness of the space and other actors were all results of the introduction of the six viewpoints as I knew them at that time. These by-products were palpable to the actors as well, and casts generally were excited by the new language they were learning. This excitement, as much as the other physical attributes I've mentioned, helped foster a powerful group dynamic within every cast that I've directed using the Viewpoints. In this period, between 1996 and 1999, when I was introducing Viewpoint exercises only tangentially to rehearsals, I became aware of how much they enhanced the

live energy that is activated among the members of a cast, even with minimal use. I continued to use Viewpoint training more and more on all of the shows I directed at LSU up to *The Chemistry of Change*, but I always felt that I was falling short of a completely integrated use. With this show I was determined to get the most out of it.

I stopped training in the Suzuki method entirely during these years, but was prompted to return to it by collaboration with Alec Harrington, one of my colleagues at LSU, on a production of Seneca's *Trojan Women* that he directed in the winter of 2001. One day in the previous autumn, Alec casually told me about his interest in finding some way to develop a visceral quality to the choral sections of the Seneca piece. In his previous work on Greek tragedy, he had never quite attained the level of ecstatic ritual from his choruses that he desired. I mentioned my experience with the Suzuki training and that Mr. Suzuki himself had staged many adaptations of Greek tragedies. I had an interest in returning to the training, and was excited with the prospect of introducing an entirely new technique to the undergraduate students in Alec's show. I expressed to him that I was by no means a Suzuki master, but I believed that I could teach his chorus members elements of the training that would lead them toward a performance energy that might resemble the visceral, ecstatic ritual he desired. He was happy to have my input, and for three weeks in December of 2000 I instructed and trained with a chorus of eleven women using several fundamental Suzuki exercises. To quickly sum up, I will only report that the results were positive. Though they found it extremely physically challenging, the women overall felt that they had increased their emotive ability, and Mr. Harrington got closer than in previous attempts to the type of choral energy he sought. I was reminded of the powerful energy that the training helps actors tap, for although most

of the women only accessed a fraction of what could have been possible had we trained for more than three weeks, I trained with them, and within that three weeks I was able to recover a good portion of the ability that I had developed between 1988 and 1996.

Early in 2001 coincidence conspired with fate to bring Leon Ingulsrud to LSU as a guest instructor in the MFA Acting Program. Mr. Ingulsrud is a member of The SITI Company and had formerly been a member of SCOT. My rekindled interest in the Suzuki training prompted me to take part in his classes with the MFA actors and briefly get to know more about The SITI Company firsthand. He suggested that I attend the Summer Workshop at SITI, four weeks of intensive Viewpoint and Suzuki training, and I took up his suggestion. Those four weeks in June of 2001 shaped my approach to *The Chemistry of Change* as much as my conversation with Ms. Meyer. The experience of working with the leading proponents of this particular combination of approaches to performance was inspirational to say the least. The members of SITI Company are on the cutting edge of experimentation with what types of theatrical expression become possible when actors are able to harness their expressive energy and direct it toward any of the broad spectrum of possibilities that can be discovered in the ways that Suzuki/Viewpoint training makes possible. By participating in that workshop I caught up with the developments that had been made by the most experienced group of theater artists to bring the two methods of training together. Not only that, I was encouraged by those artists to continue to adapt the training for my own use, which was exactly what I intended to do upon returning to LSU to direct my thesis production.



## TRAINING: IN PRACTICE

I knew what I was setting out to do was a big task. I had seven weeks of rehearsal in which to introduce entirely new performance techniques to relatively inexperienced actors and train them in these techniques while simultaneously directing a two act comedy that contained no shortage of challenges on its own right. I had a few allies already committed to the project before auditions, who made me feel that the undertaking was achievable. Stephen Haynes was the scenic designer for the show. I had worked with him twice previously at LSU with good results and continue to have a good relationship with him. I describe our working process on this show in a later chapter. Ann Dalrymple played the role of Lee, and she agreed to take the role after taking part in a read through of the play that I conducted in the spring of 2001. She is a mother of three who had returned to LSU to complete her undergraduate studies, and as a student she was eligible for casting. I had worked with her on two other scenes, and we had developed a nice rapport. I felt it was crucial to secure her participation, as Lee was the one role that I believed must be played by a more mature actor. Additionally, she demonstrated a real understanding of the character at the read through and a desire to play the role, which in the end helped her cope with the frustration she experienced with the Suzuki training. I made her aware at the outset of the grueling nature of the training that I intended to incorporate into the rehearsal process, and she accepted the role.

My third ally at the outset of this endeavor was perhaps the most valuable. Ellie Sturgill was my stage manager on the production. We had worked together on *Kid Twist*, my first show at LSU, and I knew I could trust her to competently fulfill all of the necessary duties and more. She managed a very busy and varied rehearsal schedule,

didn't brook any disruptive behavior from anyone (from the beginning making it clear to me that the director wasn't exempt from her reprimand), and made sure the entire cast was ready to rehearse when called. She went beyond the call of duty on this last point more than once, taking it upon herself personally to do the undoable and attempt to bring actors to rehearsal who had missed their calls under extreme circumstances, but more on this later. Ms. Sturgill was with me from the word go, and her capability throughout made the entire process all the more rewarding.

I had one additional ally in Barry Kyle, who encouraged me to attempt the production of this new, unproven play. Professor Kyle remained a ready advisor when needed, and thankfully untroublesome when I was in the midst of my great endeavor. Confident in the partnership I had begun with Stephen, Ann, and Ellie, a trio of practitioners with whom I already had good collaborative experience, I was ready to seek out the rest of the cast. I needed to find people who would have to be prepared to take on the training that I was intent on making a centerpiece of the process.

## AUDITIONS

I don't believe my audition process for this play was particularly unique, so I'll spare the reader what would be a tedious account to any person at all familiar with the theater. I will record that in the course of my introductory remarks to each group of actors I revealed my intention to use these training techniques, and as the vast majority of the actors were unfamiliar with them, I described them in terms of their strenuousness, stressing that my rehearsals would be more physically taxing than ones they had previously experienced. I was encouraged that my caveat did not deter any of the actors from proceeding with the auditions. All that I asked of the actors at the first round of

auditions was a series of cold readings from the script. This was followed by a call-back session during which I split the auditionees into groups and had them improvise a circus act. This might sound unusual, but I was looking for qualities that I imagine any director would want to have in a cast. By asking the actors to form circus troupes I instigated an exciting sense of possibility. They were suddenly all equally disarmed in an unquestionably theatrical landscape. People who participated successfully, in the sense that they impressed me and got themselves cast, exhibited an exuberant willingness to collaborate, were courageously silly, and despite having the surprise request sprung on them by the director, kept their wits about them and performed with a sense of conviction. I was not interested in cleverness or any particular circus talent that anyone may have had, and to be fair I let the actors know this when I charged them with their task. The improvisation also served as an ice-breaker. Actors usually are, as they should be, more anxious at a second round of auditions. The decreased number of competitors and the apparent closer proximity to a role increase the stakes for all involved, including the director. I was asking them to stretch themselves on short notice, and I wanted them all to do their best. The circus improvisation was fun and helped put everyone a little more at ease. The second stage of the call-back audition consisted of more readings from the script. At this point I was looking for particular combinations of people, “chemistry,” if you will. Additionally, as these actors had by this time become quite familiar with the scenes I had chosen for them to read, I was looking for actors who were attuned to the rhythms, style and language of this particular play.

Being on the lookout for these qualities helped me narrow the field further, but what ultimately brought me to my choice of actors was something far more exciting and

far less subtle. All of the actors that I cast displayed a raw, individual energy. They had presence. They were comfortable being on stage. Tadashi Suzuki has said, “There is no such thing as good or bad acting, only degrees of necessity for being on the stage.”<sup>4</sup> Everyone in the cast of *The Chemistry of Change* possessed an energy that I instinctively felt could be tapped into via the training. This energy would be the key to their performances. It would be the root from which grew their need to be onstage. They were all competent enough speakers, and I trusted that I could lead them to a common understanding of the story told in the script. The energy that separated Muhammad Ayers, Preston Lorio, Ann Dalrymple, Jillian Vedros, Joel Sunsin, Amy Arnold and Christian MacDonald from their fellow auditionees is something that they were born with. My high school basketball coach used to say, “You can’t teach height.” The sense of this aphorism applies similarly to those seven actors and their strength of presence. The level of individual performance experience varied greatly throughout the cast, but I saw in the audition process that they all shared an intensity of being that was right for the work I wanted to do.

The training was integrated into the rehearsal process almost from the very beginning. After a few evenings of table work, physical instruction began on the fifth day, a Saturday, which allowed us a larger chunk of rehearsal time for an extended introduction to the techniques. At that time I set aside the script to focus entirely on the actors’ bodies and voices and how they worked in consort. Over the next two weeks of rehearsals, thirty-six hours total, I instructed the cast in the fundamentals of Suzuki and Viewpoint training. The cast met these days with excitement and trepidation, fearful of

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<sup>4</sup> A comment passed on by Anne Bogart at the SITI Company seminar.

the physical challenge that I had built up over the previous four days, yet anxious to begin a process that they all believed would ultimately improve their performance.

## SUZUKI TRAINING

The Suzuki training is directed at the individual. The practitioner should develop increased vocal power and the ability to focus his energy within a space. To illustrate this second aspect, imagine a person writing a letter. The writer has a certain relationship with the recipient of the letter. She could be writing to arrange a meeting with her lover or it could be a 'Dear John' letter. She could be writing a cover letter in an attempt to secure a job or she could be the president of a company composing an address to the board of directors. She could be writing her congressional representative to express her position on an upcoming vote or it could be a plea for support for her chosen candidate that brings her to put pen to paper. Though the action is the same in all cases, there are variables to each relationship that determine a possible range of attitudes the writer has to her work. These attitudes create observable differences in the quality of energy with which the writer performs her task. In other words, an observer who knew nothing about the writer or the recipient of her letter could determine something purely by tuning into the information conveyed in the attitude of her action. In the theater, a performer wants to be very clear about the information she conveys with her actions. As well, she wants to be able to send the information out clearly to a large number of people across a big expanse of space. Suzuki training is intended to help actors develop this skill and help them understand that they can transmit information just as clearly physically as vocally. Both aspects involve using the entire body to focus energy.

The fundamental step in this training is finding your center. This is not meant in any fuzzy, emotional kind of way; nor does it refer to any spiritual, chakra-related entity. It is your actual center of gravity, a physical point within your body. The thought behind the practice is that any expression that is initiated from your center has the potential to be carried out with maximum energy. In the physical realm this translates into clear, direct, committed movements. In vocal practice the result is a speaking voice that is supported by the entire body. I want to be clear that the end result of the training is not actors who stride grandly about the stage declaiming their lines in booming tones, though if this is what is desired, Suzuki training would help to reach that goal. A full range of vocal and physical expression is still expected from an actor with Suzuki training. The distinguishing feature is that whether the actor is called to stride grandly across the stage or adjust the angle of his little finger extending from the delicately held teacup, whether he is shouting commands to his troops across the battlefield or whispering sweet nothings into his lover's ear, he will have the wherewithal to endow both extremes with his full capacity of energy.

The second important aspect of the training is controlling your energy. Once an actor has found her center, and developed it into the foundation of her actions and the wellspring of her voice, she must attune the rest of her body to be able to gauge the use of her energy. She must use the training to become a human valve and control the flow of expression fueled by the same training. Leon Ingulsrud has crafted a homily to describe the desired balance between these two aspects of the training. "Power is irresponsible without control; control is worthless without power." Similarly, Suzuki's exercises help

actors develop ways to understand and implement Zeami's advice for them to, "Feel ten, express seven."<sup>5</sup>

These are the blunt, dual aims of the Suzuki training as I understand it. There are more refined elements for the advanced practitioner, but even these are rooted in the actor's abilities to pull energy into her center and control how she then uses it for expression. In any case, with only seven weeks of rehearsal, I didn't expect to train the cast beyond this basic practical formula. As I have stated, the training is an active experience. I have tried to express to the reader my hopes for the actors, just as I expressed to them the goals at the outset of the training. The difference is that the actors actually participated in the training. Simply reading about the exercises won't transfer the potential impact of the technique; however, for the sake of thoroughness, I include a rough, technical description of the exercises used in rehearsal for *The Chemistry of Change*.

Four exercises are known as "The Basics." Each basic is a repeatable movement phrase that is broken down into several steps. Basic One consists of four moves: beginning in a standing position with the heels together, toes at a 45 degree angle, move one is a stomp to the side on the right foot; two is sliding the left foot to meet the right; three is a squat, keeping the heels together; four is a return to the standing position, prepared to repeat the move to the left. Each move must be done instantaneously, in what is referred to as "zero time." The other three basics are variations that involve different combinations of stomping, sliding and squatting. Basics Two and Three involve

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<sup>5</sup> A popular translation of Zeami's teaching that I found in both Anne Bogart's *A Director Prepares* and Yoshi Oida's *The Invisible Actor*.

traveling across the floor, while Basic Four, like Basic One, involves a back and forth movement.

Stomping may be the element of training that gains the most attention in the United States. When people with limited exposure to Suzuki think of his training, stomping tends to be what comes to mind. Indeed, the stomp is integral to many of the exercises, not least one that goes by the title, “Stomping and Shakuhachi.” This is a two part exercise that embodies the essence of Suzuki training. It is “performed” to prerecorded musical accompaniment. The first part of the exercise is three and a half minutes of stomping to the jazzy, up-tempo rhythm of the music, moving at a constant rate of speed through the space according to no predetermined route. The second half of the exercise is separated from the first by the group lining up, facing the space, and collapsing to the floor. At this point the music changes to a slow, soothing melody (the Shakuhachi portion, which takes its name from the Japanese flute that is featured in this accompaniment). The trainees slowly rise and walk the length of the training space. The goal is to move at a constant rate of speed and finish at the opposite end of the space on the last note of the music. There is just under two minutes of Shakuhachi music, so the challenge is to move slowly and keep the breath under control while the heart is racing after three and a half minutes of stomping.

I must describe the stomping in more detail here, so the reader understands how this exercise essentializes the goals of Suzuki training. While stomping, the trainee aims to split her body in two at her center. The lower body engages in the stomping action, lifting the knee as high as possible and bringing the entire sole of the foot down together in one aggressive stomp (to prevent injury, it is important that the sole arrive as a unit,



just as the knees should stay slightly bent throughout the exercise). As one foot is planted on the floor, the other is drawn up directly under the torso. Each stomp only moves the trainee the distance of one half the length of her foot, so the whole motion retains a piston-like, vertical movement. While the legs are busy generating all of this energy, the center acts like a fuel cell, grabbing it and keeping it from spreading into the upper body. As in the walks, the trainee should move her center along a flat line, keeping it from bouncing up and down with each stomp. This makes it easier for the upper body to remain relaxed, as if it is floating along on top of the center. The practitioner directs her gaze at an imagined focal point outside herself and holds her hands at her sides, as if she's carrying two poles that must remain parallel to each other and the floor while she is stomping.

While a novice might be concerned with the leg strength needed to keep the stomping consistently aggressive for the duration of the first section, what the trainee discovers over time is that in order to control the churning, energetic movement of the legs and keep it from infecting the tranquility sought for by the upper body, the muscles around the center must become active and strong in a way that is not often called for in everyday life. Athletes and physical trainers call this “core strength,” and it is essential to Suzuki practice. One thing that good core strength does is help the trainee control her breath in Shakuhachi, following the stomping. It is involved in all areas of Suzuki training. In order to keep the center moving along a flat line in all of the walks and stomps, the core muscles must engage. Similarly, to accomplish the “zero time” precision moves sought in *The Basics*, a trainee must continually improve her core

strength. It also comes into play in the other exercises used in my rehearsals: Walks, Slo Ten and Statues.

There are a series of special walks developed for another aspect of the training. I taught nine different styles of “walk” to the cast. There are more than that, and Suzuki practitioners are continually developing new ones. I felt that the nine I chose offered enough of a challenge to the new trainees and enough variety to work the leg muscles thoroughly. The walks are performed to the same piece of quick tempo music as the stomping. The practitioners cross the training space on the diagonal in one style of walk, return to the starting point, and repeat the cross in each of the nine different styles. The training group may cross the space in one line or in pairs in two lines. The variables that distinguish the walks from each other are born out of the different ways the feet come into contact with the ground. As in *The Basics*, stomping and sliding are part of the vocabulary, as are walking on tiptoe, walking on the inside and outside of the soles, and walking on the heels. The position of the foot on the floor naturally effects how the rest of the leg moves, and additional determinations are made as to whether the leg is straight or bent at the knee, whether the path of the foot is straight or curved, whether the hands are held to the side or behind the back, etc. The characteristics shared by all of the walks are the intention to move the center of gravity along a flat line parallel to the floor, keeping in step both with the rhythm of the music and the rest of the practitioners, and maintaining an equal and constant spacing between yourself and the other practitioners. When performed in a single line, each person has only to pay attention to the person in front of him. When done in two lines, the trainee must be aware of the person in front as well as his partner to the side. The walks help the practitioner develop a more

sophisticated ability to use his core strength for expressive movement while keeping his focus alive to his surroundings.

Slo Ten is another exercise done to music. Its accompaniment features a regular, deep, bass drum beat that sets a very stately tempo. The trainees face each other in two lines across the training space. At a prescribed point in the music they all cross the space simultaneously, the two lines passing each other in the middle of the room. Just as in the Shakuhachi walk, they must fill the entire length of the first section of music with their cross. A bridge in the music marks the point at which they all turn together, face one another again, and re-cross the room. It is a deceptively simple sounding exercise, but again the aspects of moving at a constant rate of speed, keeping the center level and timing the cross to the music create enough of a challenge. The other wrinkle offered by this exercise is that it is not as physically taxing as the other exercises, so it is easier to observe yourself while doing it. As the parameters are fairly clear, it is easy to determine when you are not performing it as it should be done. This transparency is one of the strengths of the exercise, as one of Suzuki training's best uses, once learned, is as a gauge for one's internal energy tanks and level of focus.

The two types of statue exercises, standing and sitting, were the final aspects of Suzuki training for *The Chemistry of Change*. Both exercises involve movement in “zero time” from a neutral position to one of three active positions on a cue given by me. In standing statues, the neutral position is a squat with the feet flat on the floor, head hanging down facing the floor, arms outside the knees. The cue is a command to move to either a “high,” “medium,” or “low” position. These commands refer to the position of the center in relation to the ground. On the cue, the trainees move their centers to the

appointed position, going onto tiptoe, and raising their torso upright over their centers. The arms rest at the sides, “holding the poles” as in the stomping exercise, and the gaze activates an imaginary focus. From this position, the cue is given to return to neutral, and the cycle is repeated several times. I would select high, medium or low in no particular order, so they would have to respond in the moment without knowing what was coming, but they returned to neutral after every “statue.”

In the sitting variation, the neutral position is sitting on the floor, feet flat on the floor, pulled as close to the butt as possible, knees together, arms draped around knees, head bowed forward, resting on knees. The cue comes for positions One, Two or Three. In all three the hands move to the side, “holding the poles” just off the ground, and the head comes up, engaging the imaginary focus with the gaze. The differences are determined by the leg action. In One the legs stay bent and the feet are simply pulled off the ground. In Two the legs are extended straight ahead and the feet are held off the ground. In Three the legs are extended out, opened in a “V” shape, again with the feet held off the ground. As in the standing version, the order of the positions is random and each is separated by a return to neutral.

In both statue exercises the trainee attempts to hold her body as still as possible in the cued position, thus the name “statues;” however, she must continue to breath. Breath control is very important in all Suzuki exercises, but it comes actively into play in the statue exercise, as practitioners are asked to speak when holding their statue positions. I gave the cast two speeches to learn: Macbeth’s “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow” speech, from the eponymous play by Shakespeare, and Menelaus’s “Oh splendor of sunburst” speech from Euripides’ *Trojan Women*. Speaking these speeches

in the course of this exercise makes clear how Suzuki becomes a vocal training method. The breathing points in the speeches are prescribed for the actor, and in order to successfully support the voice through the entire speech, the speaker must breathe from the center. The goal is to use the breath to tap into the energy that is activated in the lower body, then direct that energy into vocal expression. The difficulty arises when trying to use the full core musculature, which includes the diaphragm, for maximum vocal support while maintaining the strenuous position demanded of the body by the exercise. In the sitting statues particularly, how does one keep the full range of use of the core muscles needed for breath control when these are the very muscles being used to hold the position? Suzuki training is filled with paradoxical situations like this. By asking the impossible of practitioners, a psychological element is added to the training. Just as it can be used as a gauge of one's energy and focus, it can be used to determine, and with practice improve, a trainee's attitude when faced with a difficult situation. The training demands that the practitioner keep his cool when put in a hot spot. The reader should be able to see how this psychological component is helpful in actor training for the stage.

To return to the voice, what the statues exercises ask, simply, is for the trainee to speak with the voice of the body. When the body is put into an extraordinary position, and the person is able to support her voice with her whole body, an extraordinary voice will be the result. What the training reveals is that we tend not to speak supported by our whole body. It is easy to speak just using our "head voice," but we cannot achieve the broadest range of expression with such a voice. What Suzuki training offers the practitioner is the ability to speak in a voice that is connected to the body. The vocal

expression matches the physical expression in an honest, powerful way. Also, it shouldn't go without saying, the training does improve an actor's conditioning. With practice, the trainee's vocal and physical capabilities will increase, especially vocal and physical stamina and precision, vocal dynamic range, and pure physical presence; however, Ellen Lauren, one of the Suzuki teachers who taught me, very wisely says, "The training is not simply a conditioning program – it is a mirror. It is not simply about increasing strength – it's about knowing where you are." I don't claim that I inspired any great philosophical epiphanies in my cast, but I do believe they were all enhanced by the training. Before exploring their achievements in performance, let me offer an abridged account of the Viewpoint training used in rehearsal.

#### VIEWPOINT TRAINING

The most convenient way to write about the Viewpoints is as a vocabulary. The danger is that the understanding garnered from reading this type of description may be more clinical than exact. Just as the English vocabulary can be studied clinically in terms of nouns, adjectives, verbs, and verb tenses, yet words can be strung together to elicit complex concepts and describe deep emotional states, so the Viewpoints can be described in terms that generate a fundamental notion of how they might be used, but only with use and practice will they reveal the marvelous possibilities hinted at in the description. The analogy holds together fairly well, even when observed through a post-modern lens which says that a vocabulary is only a representation of things, not the things themselves, for the Viewpoints are simply terms that performance artists agreed to use in order to share a way to describe their use of space and time and sound in their work. They describe the basic essence of what live performers are dealing with in the moment, and

they can be understood equally from the points of view of the actor or the director/audience. Thus they become a very democratic way of working, a tool that I find very useful in the creation of a company dynamic.

Here is a list of the viewpoints, with a description of each (for the sake of brevity, the descriptions are from the actor's point of view)<sup>6</sup>:

### **Viewpoints of Space**

**Spatial Relationship:** Awareness of your body in space. The space taken up by your body in three dimensions, the shape of the space you are in, your position in that space, the other actors' positions in that space, the audience's position in that space. Simple adjustments to nothing but the positions of bodies can entirely change the meaning of a moment on stage.

**Architecture:** Awareness of the physical structures in the surrounding space and their potential use. These include but are not limited to set pieces, props, other actors, architectural elements of the auditorium, the audience, etc.

**Topography or Floor Pattern:** Anne Bogart and her cohorts are in disagreement about what this Viewpoint describes, which leaves it wonderfully open to interpretation. Oh, the joys of a living, kinetic practice like the theater! I use the term topography to describe the quality of various zones of the stage. For example in *The Chemistry of Change* the topography of the porch was different from that of the rock. The porch was very much Lee's domain, and the rock was a place of rebellion. The topography of a region of the stage can determine the floor pattern of different actors (how they move) in that region.

**Shape:** The shape of your body. Simple, but naming it forces the actor's awareness to extend to the limits of her body.

**Gesture:** A repeatable physical expression. A gesture must have a beginning, middle, and end, which distinguishes it from Shape which is continuous. I think it can be helpful to think about Gesture as an extension of the Shape Viewpoint into time, as the timing of a gesture is as important as its spatial qualities.

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<sup>6</sup> I am more cursory here than with my description of the Suzuki exercises, as I advise the reader to consult an alternate source for a more detailed account of the Viewpoints, "Source-Work, the Viewpoints and Composition: What Are They?" by Tina Landau in *Anne Bogart Viewpoints*. I am not aware of such a thorough description of the Suzuki exercises.

## **Viewpoints of Time**

Tempo: The speed of an action.

Duration: How long an action lasts.

Repetition: Self-explanatory, but it is important to note that as a Viewpoint of Time it refers to when an action is repeated. It could describe simultaneous identical action or a return to an action seconds, minutes or hours later.

Kinesthetic Response: When an action happens in relation to every other action. This viewpoint is akin to Einstein's General Theory of Relativity and Newton's Third Law of Thermodynamics applied to acting. People perform and affect each other. Developing Kinesthetic Response keeps an actor alive to the events around him and aware of his constant ability to react.

## **Vocal Viewpoints**

Dynamic: Essentially volume, how loud or soft you are speaking.

Pitch: Corresponds to a musical scale, the key in which you are speaking.

Timbre: The quality of your voice. As you can see it helps to think of your voice as an instrument for many of the Vocal Viewpoints. Timbre lets you choose between speaking as woodwind or brass, percussion or strings.

Tempo: The speed at which you say something.

Acceleration: Increasing the tempo through a speech.

Deceleration: Decreasing the tempo through a speech.

Gesture: A repeatable vocal expression, for example, grunts, sneezes, hiccoughs, growls, barks, interjections, etc.

Pause: The use of silence.

Repetition: Self-explanatory, but it is important to note that a Viewpoint of Time has been repeated in the Vocal Viewpoints.

As a matter of fact, several Vocal Viewpoints share a title with Viewpoints of Space and Time. This is indicative of their interconnectedness. In reality it is impossible to separate out one single Viewpoint for observation. Every Gesture is a Shape that has a



Spatial Relationship to its environment, including the Architecture, and it is performed at a certain Tempo for a certain Duration. Every speech is spoken at a certain Tempo and Dynamic, in a particular Pitch, with a distinct Timbre, etc. Why then bother to individuate them? The vocabulary of the Viewpoints provides sign posts to the actor that facilitate awareness of all of the variables she plays with in performance. By identifying the different tools available in the vast tool kit of space, time and sound, she is able to catalogue a wide range of uses for each one. I generally find this to be the case: that thinking of the elements of performance in a finite way generates seemingly limitless possibilities when practicing various combinations. Working on a predetermined script like *Chemistry*, the Viewpoint training was helpful as an inspiration for improvisation, in particular toward the end of the intensive training period when the work was directed toward character building and relationships.

#### RESULTS IN REHEARSAL

On the first day of rehearsal, a Tuesday, I asked the cast to consider the notion of a company and come prepared to share their thoughts on the subject that Friday, the final day of table work. The ensuing discussion was an excellent way for me to observe the behavior and attitudes of the people I had cast in a situation that, even given three days notice, was unfamiliar to them. All of the cast were undergraduates, and four of them had never been in a Mainstage show, Muhammad and Joel had very little experience on any stage, they didn't feel qualified to comment on what a company should be. Even the experienced actors like Preston and Ann were unused to being asked to participate in such an all inclusive way. They were accustomed to acting according to a set of rules laid out by the director. Expecting this to be the case, and sensing the need at the start of

rehearsal, I broke the ice by sharing what I believed to be one important element of a company: the allowance for each member to express their ideas freely, without judgment, and the responsibility for all members of the company to discuss each of these ideas in order to understand whatever variety of opinions exist. I was able to refer to the news shared earlier in the week by Muhammad that he was the survivor of a suicide attempt and by Christian that he was terrified of the role he was given as examples of very personal information that may be difficult to speak and hear, but ultimately enriches the group as long as the news is heard. The broader the spectrum of opinions and values, the richer the company becomes, but only if each individual feels supported to share and discuss these issues, however difficult or banal. In such a way, I said, a company in the theater has the potential to become a microcosm of an ideal society.

I realize what a heady proposition this is, and were I airing it to an older, more experienced, broader cross-section of society (i.e. not a bunch of actors), I'm sure I could have generated quite an uproar. In my experience, any cast in the first days of rehearsal wants to believe that the experience ahead of them is going to be special, so I felt confident asking for the moon. In a sense I merely intended my introduction to be an invitation to speak freely, and I got what I was after. Thankfully, both Muhammad and Jillian, the first two respondents, contributed elements to the discussion that promoted positive aspects of company. Muhammad opened his remarks with the caveat that he was not an experienced actor and that Baron was only the second part he had ever played. He went on to say that all he expects in whatever he undertakes is respect in his relationships with others. Jillian added that she hoped that trust would be implicit in a company relationship. She related a story of a previous show she had been involved with in which

she felt that the expectation of mutual trust had been exploited to the point that she felt threatened sexually by another cast member. She wanted company trust to remain sacred in order to promote a comfortable working environment. I underscored both of these comments, saying that mutual respect and trust were inherent to the notion of responsibility I spoke of, but reminded Jillian that allowing a variety of views to be expressed and supported is not always a comfortable proposition. There is difficulty associated with a collaborative art like theater, and we as a company must be prepared to deal with it.

Of course I still intended to lead the company as director, and once Ellie had added the practical note that if anyone felt that trust was being compromised or exploited that needed to be shared, even if the affected party spoke just to her or me in private, I moved the rehearsal forward. There were murmurs of what I took for assent all around the table, so I felt that the company discussion had reached an effective conclusion. Knowing we as a group were only going to be together for eight weeks, the duration of one show, the notion of company was somewhat excessive, but I believed that surrounding the production with an aura of cohesiveness would help the production in the end, and I certainly believe it did. As Barry Kyle has said, “Every production has its crisis.” It turns out I was doing some advance work on the road to crisis management. In the meantime, all the company talk served to unite the group of novices in the face of the pending training.

Suzuki and Viewpoint exercises filled the second and third weeks of rehearsal to the extent that at times the cast may have felt as though they were repeating the SITI workshop I took in the summer. The Suzuki training had the overall effect I was hoping

for of increasing stamina, concentration and vocal ability, though it affected individual cast members in different ways. Muhammad is such a muscular man. He was able to rely on his sheer strength to get him through the rigors of training, but he had difficulty relaxing his upper body and releasing his voice. Ultimately his vocal training as a singer helped him to a point where he was able to break through his muscular tension and support his voice very well. Jillian is most naturally suited to the training. She has a very powerful physical core and a well trained vocal apparatus. She benefited most from the focusing aspect of the exercises, and the vocal training helped her sustain her voice through a vocally demanding role. Ann and Amy had similar physical difficulties that challenged them throughout the training process, but they took my advice to use the method to hear what their bodies were telling them about their capabilities. They excelled in their ability to focus, and if they were unable to completely break the physical barriers around their voices, they both increased their presence, becoming more grounded in the course of the training.

Preston made the most amazing vocal breakthrough of the entire cast. It came, as such breakthroughs do, at a moment of sheer exhaustion when the body's habitual defenses collapse. At one moment in the middle of a statues exercise, a voice came from him that had triple the power of his conventional stage voice. It was the sound of him speaking with his entire body. After the session, he acknowledged that it had happened, but lamented that it still wasn't something he could turn on at will. I have personal experience with this feeling, and for that reason I am somewhat troubled by the fact that I was only able to do a few weeks of training. Leon describes the effect of Suzuki training as something that will actually change your physique, and it's true, but it only happens

slowly over the course of an extended period of time. I have personally felt changes happening, but haven't kept constant enough with my training for them to take hold. The most that could happen in the course of seven weeks was for one very dedicated practitioner to have a glimpse of the possibilities that lie within the technique.

I maintain that everyone got some benefit out of the Suzuki training, even if only in a cursory way. Joel and Christian had the most mental trouble early on in the training process. Their ability to focus was non-existent. One prominent distraction for both of them was a desire to impress me. They got stuck on the physical form of the exercises and the notion of "getting it right." It is true that Joel is very physically awkward, to a degree that I had not anticipated. I was concerned that he would be unable to get over his self-consciousness and find a way into the benefits of the training. One of the great things about Suzuki is the variety of exercises, and I kept encouraging him to focus on what his body was doing, not on trying to determine whether I thought he was "getting it right." Sitting statues turned out to be the gateway exercise for Joel. After a week of training, his mentality finally adjusted to the task just as I was introducing sitting statues, and Joel's abilities are well matched to the demands of that exercise. He grasped the depth of concentration necessary, and from that point on he improved his performance of the other exercises as well. I don't want to give the impression to the reader, just as I hoped to reserve it from the actors, that I was judging their execution of the training, that I was holding out the possibility of rewards for the "best" trainees. My goal was to present the training to the actors in such a way that they would grasp the aim and earn the rewards for themselves. No one can dole out the wisdom of the training. It only comes with practice. This may be one reason Christian may not have progressed very far with

Suzuki. He suffered a back injury in a movement class at the end of the first week of training and was unable to participate actively for a few days. His desire to catch up physically may have prevented him from concentrating on the mental aspects of the practice.

The Viewpoint sessions were the more “fun” portions of the early training weeks. The cast was a quick study of the vocabulary, and the improvisational exercises, which were designed to be much more interactive than Suzuki work, went far in generating a strong ensemble bond. After the first five days of combined training I had the actors do a read through of the entire play on their feet, free to move around the stage as they pleased and play with the Viewpoints as they understood them. Of course they were encumbered by their scripts, but their increased awareness of, at the very least, spatial relationship and kinesthetic response made the read through exciting to watch. Barry was at this rehearsal and mentioned to me that they all seemed very relaxed with their physicality on stage. This comment from an outside observer confirmed my feeling that the training was having a positive effect. Watching the actors play with the text in an unstructured way inspired me with ideas about how to proceed with developing the physical life of the play. It also pointed out places where certain points made during the table work had not hit home with some of the actors. At this point I made what with hindsight I believe to be a crucial error in the direction of the rehearsal process. I chose to continue as planned with the second week of training and save my notes from the run for the end of that week, when we were scheduled to begin intensive scene work.

There are several reasons why I now wish I had taken another course. Most of them are in some way tangent to the notion that I have always had difficulty smoothly

transferring from abstract Viewpoint training rehearsals to the distinct physical life of a specific play. Just two weeks into the schedule I happened upon a rehearsal that presented several jumping off points for further direct work with the script. These points had been accessed naturally through a symbiosis of the early script work, early training work, and a willing and excited cast. I would add competent leadership by the director, but at this point that was a detriment. I was leading according to plan. The courage to change the schedule in order to investigate the fresh possibilities made available by this inspiring rehearsal may have generated some great results, but I stuck with the program. I believed that if this glimmer of potential was the result of a few days of the training process, then even greater magic would come from sticking to the plan. In truth, I was confronted with so many new possibilities that I was overwhelmed. I felt I needed to gestate with what I had observed that night, and I took too long in doing so. Looking back I hope I've learned something that both Barry and Anne Bogart have expressed as essential in the process of directing: proceed very carefully when you are confused with what is going on, for it usually means something very important is happening. Of course it could be that you are very near disaster, which is why the safe, practical alternative is often chosen. That is what I did. I stuck to the plan, and when I got back around to my notes they were stale, made obsolete in a way by the intervening week of work, and I still ended up with the familiar difficulty of transitioning from Viewpoint instruction to application.

I don't mean to put an entirely dark cast on the ensuing rehearsals. Perhaps I'm being a bit dramatic about learning from my mistakes. The second week of training did generate some good results. I incorporated more specific improvisations into the

Viewpoint sessions, which helped the cast see how the vocabulary could describe concrete aspects of character and relationships. The more fruitful improvisations included gestural life stories, in which the actors isolated seven moments from the life of their character that they felt displayed the arc of that character's journey. They enacted these seven moments as a series of tableaux expressed physically. The Viewpoint vocabulary enabled them to be very specific with their bodies in space. Jillian discovered a couple of beautiful, abstract gestures that helped her define Corlis's deeply unfulfilled desires, and Muhammad found a physical state to express Baron's drunkenness that carried directly over into his performance. These are just two examples of the bounty that was created in this exercise, but I share them specifically to show the range from the abstract to the mimetic that thinking about and acting with the Viewpoints can generate.

In another, more purely abstract improvisation I asked the actors to think of their characters in terms of different animals and explore the physicality and behavior of that animal. This exercise was provoked by an idea I had about the family in *The Chemistry of Change*. It seemed to me that the inhabitants of the house were living in a sort of primeval den. They treated their home like a zoo, and they all had very specific character traits that I thought could be exaggerated in animalistic ways. This exercise helped the actors tap into these ideas physically. It prompted them to explore exaggerated behavior that helped all of them find comic moments later in the script work, and, when I asked them to start interacting as their animals, the different status relationships that were understood mentally from the table discussions began to be demonstrated in exciting ways on a purely physical level. Of particular note were Muhammad's Baron/gorilla in a turf war with Preston's Farley/orangutan and Joel's Shep/dog trying to find a friend in



either Ann's Lee or Amy's Dixon, who were both preening cats that couldn't be bothered. This mode of exploration was so successful that we repeated it later in the process with my added condition that they each choose an animal that reflected an entirely different side of their character's personality. It was just as worthwhile the second time around.

I also had them, as their characters, improvise various mundane situations that we imagined in the home life of the family: waiting in line for the bathroom, around the breakfast table, a pot luck Thanksgiving dinner, etc. These were fun, but ultimately the discoveries they prompted were made fairly quickly and they rapidly became repetitive. We were working on these domestic improvisations toward the end of the second week of training, and I could sense a growing impatience in the cast to get back to work directly with the script. At the time I considered it well-timed that the cast's enthusiasm for the training was waning just at the point we were scheduled to switch back to scene work, but I see now that in our collective ferocious desire to leap into the next phase of rehearsal, we may have abandoned some of the creative work accomplished in the first two weeks.

It may be that my desire for complete integration between training methods and scene work on an established script is a pipedream. I have already recounted several instances of the actors' work being facilitated by the training, and I do believe that any work done in rehearsal can't be undone and is ultimately manifested in performances somehow, to their nourishment or detriment as the case may be. I can point to at least one specific aspect that I know I need to develop for my own greater satisfaction with my Viewpoint work, and that is the blocking process. When we returned to scene work,

actors working with script in hand, I felt an unstated demand from them to direct them in their movements, and I was unable to use the vocabulary to get them to find the physical life of the scenes themselves. There are a couple of reasons I can think of why this may have happened. As I've stated, the transition from training to scene work was very abrupt. The cast may have been aching to return to a more familiar way of working, and I felt a sudden pinch of time. I worried that if I didn't put something in place, we would get to the technical rehearsals, and the play would be a shapeless blob. Looking back, I keep wondering what other directions the second week of training could have taken after the active read through. In the future, if I ever again have a luxurious seven weeks in which to rehearse, I hope to be more courageous and let the actors discover the physical life of the play more organically, even if it means the stage pictures are messy for a while. I think that is the method I am looking for, rather than what happened on *The Chemistry of Change*.

Responding to the actors' needs, I supplied what I called an early framework, which I hoped could later be influenced by the training once the actors felt confident with the shape of each scene. I set my hopes too high, and forgot that actors tend to be creatures of habit. Once they had some sort of structure, they hung onto it. They constructed their emotional journeys on the moves I gave them, and that weight cemented the moves in place. Again I'm being a bit over-dramatic. When I wanted to change a move, the actors were able to do so with little fuss, but rarely did they engage in scene work with the same exploratory energy that had been generated in the training. I do take responsibility for this condition, as I was unable to find the language to inspire it, and I, just as much as the actors, felt the need to start seeing something concrete. It was a fine

way to work, a way many directors work, but it fell short of the unified, actor-empowered, shared responsibility in the creation of work that I desired. Needless to say, we were able to create a perfectly acceptable show working this way, and in many ways it suited the requirements necessary for establishing bits of comic timing, precise scene transitions and other elements of theater craft.

## SCENE WORK

The play gets off to a fast start. The first scene is relatively long and filled with exposition about all of the family members and their history. We hear a lot about Lee and her many husbands. We hear about Baron from several points of view, finding out he's a drunk who excels at driving away Lee's husbands. Corlis also makes plain her hatred of her brother, though we have to wait until scene three to discover the source of her loathing. We learn that Corlis has loved in the past, but for some reason Fred is no longer in the picture. All of these story lines weave through the rest of the play. Most importantly we learn about the power structure in the family. Lee is the matriarch and claims the final say on all matters, but all the women maintain special status in the family hierarchy. We also see how alliances are made and broken according to whim, as one moment Dixon and Corlis unite against Lee in their refusal to move in with Gerald, the next moment Lee and Dixon work together to convince Corlis that getting a conventional job is not an option for any of them.

Working on this scene was particularly rewarding due to the fact that all three women I had cast were very disciplined, smart and creative actresses. They brought developed ideas about each character into their play together, so that from the first day that we worked on the scene there was a strong feeling of sorority among the group.

They all took to the understanding of the power shifts that I pointed out in the scene. Setting the pace for the scene and getting the shifting rhythms right was the biggest challenge. To ensure the audience got all of the expository information, I had to have the actors vary the internal rhythms according to the text of the different sections. The overall shape was roughly a peak of high energy at the beginning and end with a lull of a valley between. The first peak corresponded to the big news of Lee's pending marriage and Baron's return. The energy shifted as the characters engaged in memory, sharing the history of Corlis's birth and her love for Fred. It rose again in the lively exchange about sex leading up to Lee's departure with Gerald:

Corlis: Mother, why not let me get a job?

Lee: Corlis, do you think I like getting married?

Dixon: Yes.

Lee: I DON'T like it, I never LIKED it. Men are DIRTY. This marriage business of mine is just that – BUSINESS.

Corlis: You tell the boys you're in love.

Lee: The boys are sentimental. If they became privy to our motivation it would make them cynical, that's why we create two worlds.

Dixon: Don't you think they can feel that?

Lee: They think it's part of our mystery.

Dixon: This is the trap that keeps the sexes en garde.

Corlis: But if you don't like men, how can you sleep with them?

Lee: Who says I sleep with them?

Corlis: You go in the same room and close the door.

Lee: That does not mean I'm sleeping.

Dixon: It doesn't sound like you're sleeping.

Lee: How do you know what it sounds like?

Dixon: Everybody can hear you having sex!

Lee: I am most certainly not having sex, whatever that is, is that what you think?!

Corlis: It sounds like sex.

Lee: How would you know?

Corlis: From inside myself.

Lee: What does that mean?

Corlis: It's a biological intuition.

Lee: Have you been having sex?

Corlis: Just with myself.

Lee: Then what do you know about it?

Corlis: (A defiant lie): Baron fucked me.

Dixon: He fucked me too.

Lee: That's not funny, it's sickening and don't ever say fuck in front of Gerald, we're ladies, we're not even supposed to know that word, in fact, I don't know it.

I asked the actresses to accelerate their tempo as they worked their way through this section, accenting the building pressure that Dixon and Corlis apply to Lee. The frank, sexual dialogue is something that characterizes Meyer's script, and I wanted to introduce the theme to the audience in a fun, lively way. I also wanted to play up Lee's hypocritical attitude toward sex, as it is that very trait that Smokey latches onto in his seduction of her in scene four. I was again glad to have a mature actress playing Lee.

Ann was not at all shy or embarrassed about the sexual nature of the dialogue. Her comfort level made her a good ally, as some of the cast, notably Christian, were less at ease with the level of prurience in the play.

Scene two required a lot of my attention, only because Muhammad was as inexperienced as he was. He is a dedicated, hard worker, but he doesn't yet understand that some characters function within the play as "bad guys" and as such need to develop a healthy antagonism with the audience. My reading of Baron as we first see him in scene two is as someone who is a free spirit only because he has lost any sense of belonging anywhere. He is a man with a deep understanding of the darker side of human nature who has stopped caring for anyone, even himself. Muhammad was eager to play what I asked him to play, and had plenty of experience with the type of person I described Baron to be. He told me he was using his father and uncle as models of the "good-for-nothing drunk." I believe it is because he has lived so close to people like Baron, people that he spent his life working not to emulate, that he had a hard time finding a way to portray the bleakness in Baron. Muhammad has a great natural charisma, and I was counting on using that to balance the dark side of Baron's character, but I discovered Muhammad also has an unquenchable positive energy about him since he survived his suicide attempt. Scene two required him to address the audience directly, and he couldn't help but want to charm them. I think any actor would want to do this, but Muhammad wasn't able to do it as Baron at first. He resorted to doing it as himself. After round and round of trying to help him find Baron's dark side in different ways, what finally worked was the conception of playing a game. Just as Baron plays his game with the women he sees, I asked Muhammad to play a game with the audience. We knew that Baron was very

private with his deepest emotions, and since he ostensibly reveals so much of himself to the audience with this speech, we decided he couldn't let them know if he was telling the truth or not. By capitalizing on Muhammad's natural tendency to want to be a winner, I was able to find a metaphor that got him to experience a broad range of emotion through the speech as he fought to keep one step ahead of the audience. As a side note, the Vocal Viewpoint training also came into play. We decided that he needed to find a dark Timbre to his voice and balance it with enough Dynamic to be heard throughout the auditorium.

Blocking scene three was one instance where Viewpoint improvisation did feed into the final product. After clarifying with Jillian and Muhammad their characters' respective attitudes to seeing each other again after almost two years, I let them play through the scene without active direction on my part, and much of what they found was ultimately used. They naturally found when it felt right to be close and to be far apart. I adjusted their spatial relationships to be more extreme and use the entire stage, and I coached the tempos in the scene to be conducive to Corlis's poignant revelation of Freddy's death and the humorous resolution to the scene, but the actors worked most of the scene out themselves. They both have a sibling of the opposite sex, and this may have contributed to their ease in playing the antagonism needed for this first scene involving both genders.

Mixed company also enacted scene four, but the difference in age and experience between Ann and Christian, coupled with the romantic nature of the mixing, made working with them more of a challenge. Ann was ready for anything. Christian, an ironic name for an actor playing the Devil, was understandably more awkward with the requirements of the scene. I worked with him alone, encouraging him to build a broad

expressive range that would help him through the different stages of Smokey's seduction. The key to enabling him to grab onto something playable with this supernatural character was convincing him that Smokey had to work to achieve his goals just like any other character. He simply had more tools at his disposal.

Greater intellectual comprehension of his character didn't provide him with all he needed to conquer his nerves about coming on to an older, married woman, and as I stated earlier, Christian never reached a comfort level with the physical work done in the training, so the physical exercises I had devised for this scene were of little help. I never came up with any key direction that helped Christian miraculously over the hump. The road to a satisfactory scene was paved with perseverance. Familiarity was finally bred through repetition. I give Christian the credit for being an actor who comes alive in front of an audience. I don't know if I can take any credit for the transformation he went through in the last days of rehearsal, but I do know that he appreciated the intellectual guidance I gave him in terms of how to begin his journey in this scene. Ultimately the fire he found to illuminate the role, though its intensity or duration may have been increased by the Suzuki training, was something all his own.

The portion of this scene that excited me was Lee's big speech. I know a director can't expect to have a good time with every aspect of a production, but working with Ann was always a pleasure. Throughout the rehearsal process I felt in synch with her development, and I feel particularly good about the direction I offered her on this speech. Ann was very nervous about it. We both knew it was a big turning point for the character, and as I described earlier, the speech has great poetic and emotional depth. Working on this speech, I reverted to a more Method based vocabulary. I wasn't looking



for any extreme physical expression, and I knew she had the vocal power to carry to the back of the house. She was my lead, and in this sensitive moment of her character's journey, she needed me to speak her language. I think I helped her most by describing how Lee's psychology differed from her own. She had always spoken of how close she felt to Lee, how much she wanted to respect Lee's story and portray her completely. This affection for the character was good in the sense that it drove her to work diligently, but Ann wasn't always able to go to Lee's desperate extremes by herself. I pointed out that when Lee says, "She has to put him down and let him cry because she's afraid she'll lose her temper if she picks him up. She's afraid something terrible will happen." Ann needed to know what that "something terrible was," and I encouraged her to make it as terrible as possible. Ann has three kids of her own, and her experience with motherhood helped her, helped the whole show, immeasurably, but even though she understands that children can push their mother to the limits of patience, she never would harm her own children. Once we established that Lee, as an abandoned, teenage mother, might have considered murdering her own son, Ann was able to distinguish more clearly between the aspects of Lee that she shared with the character and the elements that were foreign to her. When she had identified intellectually those elements, she had the guts to pursue them in performance. I'm glad that I got to be a cheerleader for her while she did it.

Scene five, the climactic and longest scene in Act One, is filled with challenges, but as it involves the entire cast and Meyer deftly moves her characters in and out of the scene, there was always an element of fun to be found as we worked on it. The first part of the scene was actually a breeze to stage. All of the family improvisations we had done fed directly into the cast's ease with each other from the top of the scene through

Smokey's entrance. They were able to generate the boisterous energy of the household that brought the appropriate balance of ribaldry and ribbing to bits like:

Dixon: You know ... I used to go down to TJ and get a scrape every couple of months. Nice clean hospital. Go in the morning, shop in the afternoon. Never thought a thing about it. But now that I'm a woman of a certain age living with my sister and her children ... I wish I had gone one time less, isn't that funny?

Lee: (To Baron) See what you're doing, you're making your aunt Dixon wistful.

Baron: Every couple of months?

Lee: She's misremembering.

Baron: Your uterus must be made of cast iron.

Lee: Don't say uterus to your Auntie Dixon!

Dixon: Oh, come on, let's talk dirty – testicles!

Baron: Ovaries!

Farley: Scrotum!

Shep: Fallopian tubes!

Baron: Penis, gonads ... labia major.

Lee: STOP IT!

Corlis: I told you what would happen if he came home.

The ensemble fell into the familial patter so quickly I was worried that the scene would lose its freshness before an audience got to see it, but the actors were so excited that they got to say those kinds of things in front of their friends and neighbors that they never stopped having fun with it. The licentiousness of the play was cathartic in a way, and I think we all hoped it would be for our audience as well.

Smokey's entrance was one moment that was enhanced by an understanding of spatial relationships. I asked Christian to make an entrance that took in the whole of the stage and everybody on it. He was, after all, arriving at his new home, his new castle, having married the matriarch since we last saw him in scene four. His boldness activated a cascade of reactions through the rest of the cast that spoke volumes about the aura of mystery that Smokey carried about him. Everybody spread out in a circle around him and Lee, unable to take their eyes off of him, yet unable to approach the strange intruder. The tension created by the balance of bodies in the acting space and the actors' intense awareness of each other infused the family's first encounter of Smokey with an appropriate measure of gravity.

Christian was much more comfortable with Ann in the portion of scene five that they played together. I believe his greater assurance came from the fact that his character has all of the power at that point. Smokey is no longer involved in the emotional negotiation of a seduction. He is confident that Lee will be unable to deny his claim to the household as her new husband. I worked out with the actors the specific different ways that Smokey increases Lee's agitation and established the physical rules that Lee must stay on the porch to defend her house and Smokey couldn't step onto the porch until he wheedled an invitation out of her. The actors played with the established conventions, and I let them break the rules when they needed to, and the french scene developed with sense and fun. Eventually the fun took over and the physical life of the scene became too boisterous and messy, but this was easy to fix. I selected a few moves that they had found and established choreography for the scene that the actors were able to enjoy, as it had evolved from their own play.

The blocking process of the next section in scene five was less organic. The long exchange between Smokey and Lee's male progeny involved many internal shifts as each son's feelings toward Smokey began to change. I was more forthright in the directions I gave to establish the physical shape of these pages, as I believed that free play among the four actors wouldn't deliver the same reward for the time spent as in the Smokey/Lee exchange. I wanted to work on some moments of physical comedy within this section, and that work was best served by specific direction. Moving through the scene, Smokey slowly wins Shep then Farley to his side. I gave Joel and Preston some physical schtick to demonstrate the effect Smokey was having on their characters. The elements of spatial relationship and topography were other tools I used to construct the picture of a confederacy in flux. In the end, Baron is abandoned by his brothers, left to attempt the eviction of the new husband alone.

The process of shifting alliances has a humorous beginning, but as the friction between Baron and Smokey increases and the threat of violence infects the characters, the scene teeters on a dark brink. I chose to end the clash between the two type "A" personalities with an abrupt, comic reversal. Sheo and Farley piled on top of Baron, subduing Baron in slapstick fashion as they called for their mother. This shift in tone set up the next sudden shift as Lee emerges from the house and, apparently having changed her mind about her new husband, invites Smokey to come inside with her. The series of rapid mood swings that form the climax of the act leave the sibling characters, and most likely some of the audience members, scratching their heads. Thankfully, the denouement is as calm as the peak is vertiginous, and the characters each announce how they are going to deal with the fact of the new man in the house as they make their

various exits. Thus, Meyer provides a wrap up of the situation for the audience, and Baron's final speech of the act serves as an allegory describing a feeling the audience might be having in the moment. Here at the midpoint of the play we've met the characters, viewed their relationships, and now, like Baron on his roller coaster, we've been tossed into a situation where we're not sure what's going to happen, but the heady aroma of possibility promises excitement to come in Act Two.

As I record this work, it becomes apparent that the Viewpoint work did affect the staging process of the show. The actors were comfortable with the vocabulary I used to direct them, and when asked to adjust their physical spacing onstage they often showed a good sense of how to improve it. They were adept at adjusting the tempo and duration of certain bits, but the instruction to do so came almost exclusively from me. That detail points specifically to the element of the training that I have yet to develop to my satisfaction. The ability to understand a vocabulary is one thing. Ability to use a vocabulary to construct one's own, individual expression is another, more complex activity. The empowerment that I expect from actors who use the Viewpoints obviously takes longer than seven weeks to generate. The use that my cast was able to make of the technique is only the beginning in terms of its extensive possibilities. The limits of its practice will only be found by a group like The SITI Company that can practice together over a long period of time. When working on a show-by-show basis, I suppose I should be content with the increased sensitivity to ensemble that Viewpoint practice encourages.

The Act Two rehearsals were programmatically similar to the way in which I approached Act One. In terms of the through line of action, the act begins with the exposition of what a typical day around the house has become after living with Smokey

for a week. Subsequent scenes follow a similar method of development as in Act One, only now it's Corlis instead of Lee who develops a plan of action. She's going to seduce Smokey and awaken her mother's jealousy. Just as with Lee's marriage plan in Act One, her plan changes when she reaches the Hell Hole. Smokey is now openly helpful, and he directs Corlis on a course of self-improvement. In the final scene, Lee's suspicion is aroused anyway, and the entire family deals with the fallout from Corlis's plan. The culminating structure of rising action, climactic exchange, followed by a sequence of exits mirrors the end of Act One perfectly.

In terms of staging and actor coaching I continued to employ an amalgam of techniques that drew from the Viewpoints, a traditional Method vocabulary, improvised scenarios and predetermined stage pictures. Once we had worked through the entire play, my work became focused on helping the actors flesh out their performances and adjusting the rhythms and tempos within the scenes. I continued to try to find the appropriate ways to nourish them individually and challenge them as a group. One of my primary concerns was stylistic in the sense that I wanted to be sure that they all looked like they belonged in the same play. The training did support this quite well. By the sixth week of rehearsal they all understood that a high level of energy commitment was required of them as well as a balance between focus and freedom to play with one another in the moment. What I hope they began to discover was that one enables the other. The more attuned to each other the cast members are, the greater the ability they have to play onstage, and the easier it becomes to keep the storytelling alive and fresh.

I believe this cast, though young and acting together for the first time, was able to generate a bit of that collaborative camaraderie and support that helped them through the

two week run. I have an anecdote describing a moment when I knew the cast still lacked this sense of togetherness. It shows how delicate the ties that keep a company together can be. I offer it in lieu of a detailed breakdown of the rest of the rehearsals, as I think it describes a moment that affected the development of the show just as much as the rest of the direction I gave over the final weeks of rehearsal. It was the biggest crisis of this production, and I believe how I handled it enabled the cast to find that communal bond that enhanced their performance later in the run.

At the end of the fifth week of rehearsals I had scheduled the first complete run of Act Two from seven to ten in the evening. Ten minutes before the rehearsal was to begin, Christian called Ellie with the news that he had just been in a car accident, was uninjured, but would obviously not be on time for the rehearsal. He informed Ellie that he needed to stay on the scene until the police arrived to give his statement. Ellie asked for his location and dispatched Missy Trahan, her assistant, to pick him up and bring him to rehearsal as soon as he was able to leave. Ellie made it clear that she wanted him to get to the rehearsal as soon as he could; however, Missy could not find him, and he didn't call again that night, nor could Ellie reach him by phone. This all happened on Friday night. The cast and I learned later in the weekend that he had attended a sorority party that evening. This revelation bespoke an unforgivable breach of trust. Most of the cast believed that Christian had in fact lied about the car accident in order to get to the party on time. Add to this the fact that Christian was already the target of disfavor, owing to a frequent problem of showing up a couple of minutes late to rehearsal, and one could believe that my collaborators more resembled a gang of pirates preparing to make Christian walk the plank than a tightly knit company of actors.

Fortune provided me with some time to plan a solution, as the next full cast rehearsal was not until Monday night. Over the weekend I did some corroborative investigation and determined that there had indeed been an accident. I also found evidence that indicated Christian met his date for the party at around 9:45, fifteen minutes prior to the end of rehearsal. I confronted him with this information, and though I conceded that for all practical purposes he had missed the entire rehearsal, I made the point that he had violated key principles of rehearsal etiquette. I explained that through neglect he had allowed misinformation to overtake his cast mates, and as a result he had alienated himself from their trust. Fortunately, he faced up to his mistake and accepted the responsibility of the necessary apology.

At the start of Monday's rehearsal I called for a cast discussion. Christian opened the discussion with a thorough explanation of his actions, including an admission of his misguided judgment, an apology to the cast, and a statement of renewed focus on the show. Muhammad contributed a forgiving comment and pled for the cast to put the dissension in the past and return to the task of preparing the play. Amy wanted to make sure the events of the weekend weren't so easily forgotten and reminded the group that for the work to be successful there must be equal commitment from everybody. Several other cast members took the opportunity to express their frustration with the lack of communication and seeming lack of respect that Christian had exhibited over the weekend. I had been careful to set a limit to the types of remarks to be shared in the discussion, asking the cast to keep from attacking Christian. Christian accepted the criticisms of his cast mates with grace and humility, which went a long way toward reintegrating him into the ensemble.



I wrapped up the discussion by returning to the notion of company responsibility. It was obvious to everyone that Christian had erred and made reparations. I felt it necessary to point out to the rest of the cast that they had a responsibility as well to respect Christian's apology and not withhold their trust. Recognizing the difficulty of my request, I appealed to the training and the idea that the ensemble we were all striving to create needed to hold different, higher standards of behavior within its group than are generally displayed in the department. Everyone acknowledged the culture of gossip, bitterness, and petty infighting that I alluded to and referred to shows they had been in previously as examples of the type of negative intra-cast dynamic that we all wanted to avoid. After half an hour of discussion the group was resolved to resume with the rehearsal process again united in its purpose.

At the end of the evening I felt that through swift, decisive action and by facing the problem head on, not only had I dodged a bullet that might have undone all the work leading up to this point, I had also reinvigorated the notion of commitment within the entire company. My hope proved true and the final week of work leading up to the technical rehearsals was enormously productive. No one was late to any rehearsals. Character relationships deepened. New physical bits and more sophisticated interpretations of the text were discovered. The timing of the show was whittled down to precise beats. The cast was working like a well oiled machine. *The Chemistry of Change* was the most together show I had ever directed going into tech week. Had I been as rigorous working with the designers as I was with the actors, the final week of rehearsals may not have been so disappointing.

**CHAPTER THREE:**  
**LEARNING FROM THE DESIGN PROCESS**

The opportunity to direct a show for LSU Theatre's Mainstage Season meant that for the first time in my experience I would not only have complete design and technical support, I would also have a budget of several thousands of dollars. This arrangement ended up being a blessing and a curse. It was a blessing as it allowed me to work more directly on the particular elements of production that excited me (working with actors) and merely oversee the other aspects of production. With hindsight I believe the relief I felt at this approach may have compromised my vision of the final production. Several aspects of the final appearance of the show were not what I had hoped they would be. As the leader of the project, I can only find fault with myself. In the final analysis, the opportunity provided a rich learning experience, as I can identify several personal mistakes that I will work to correct in the future.

One thing I learned from this design process is that I mustn't relax my attention to detail when surrounded by the luxury of increased financial and collaborative support. I have always been very open in my collaborations with designers. I like to establish a conceptual framework about the different elements of the production within which the designers have freedom to create and add their own ideas to the production. In the past, both at LSU and at Theater Schmeater, I had always filled at least one of the design positions myself on shows that I also directed. This double duty kept me more finely attuned to the decision making process throughout all areas of design. Entering into the work on *Chemistry*, I set myself up as more of an observer and commenter on the design

ideas that were brought to me. This was a position that I wanted to experience, and I found it less comfortable than the more active approach I had taken in the past. I don't necessarily want to return to having to design every show I direct, so I need to hone my ability to influence designers more effectively from the director's chair.

I had a preliminary, unifying, conceptual speech that I made to each designer, so the entire team would be working within the same world. I described the world as being infected with a kind of skewed realism. The elements that provided the off-kilter influence were related to the overriding comic tensions within the play. The play is very American. The location is southern California in the 1950s, a time and place that evoke dreams of the new, ideal America. The dreams in fact covered many insidious problems of the time that were equally American. The technological achievements that made life increasingly comfortable were related to the scientific progressivism that created the hydrogen bomb. It was "The Atomic Age." The American family was the fundamental building block of the society, and images of the perfect "nuclear" family pervaded the culture, belying the fact that the larger community structures were being rent apart by a fear of the strange that found its perfect incarnation in McCarthyism. By providing this background to a story written more than forty years later, Meyer achieves entirely different results than plays of the time. Her dysfunctional family is much more at home with its failures than Miller's Lomans or Inge's Flood family. Thus, they are able to reach a cathartic rather than tragic end as the characters reveal the painful details of their stories. Of course Meyer chose to make this an essentially comic journey, but it is a dark comedy. We laugh at the extremely harsh circumstances her characters live with because we're relieved that someone has it worse than us. We laugh to release the shock we feel

when confronted with the unfamiliar display of family values that are so unconventional. We laugh in commiseration with the characters, who laugh in order not to feel the strain with which they live. So the tension I wanted to create in the design of their surroundings was between a bright, lively center and a darkness underneath and at the edges whose presence would keep the audience from growing too comfortable with any one idea. Yes, it is a comedy, but there is a threat of disintegration. Yes, it is a family with dreams of an American ideal, but the values of the matriarch work against the values of American institutions. I worked with all of the designers to adapt this basic tension into terms that suited each area of design.

## COSTUMES

Kjersten Lester-Moratzka and I quickly came up with a couple of interesting ways to apply that tension to the idiom of costume in terms of color and silhouette. Every character had at least two costume changes. At the outset, everyone but Lee was dressed in clothes that gave them an unkempt look. Nobody cared about their appearance. The women wore men's clothes; Baron's suit was too small for him; Farley wore mismatched old pajamas; Shep was another exception, but he dressed in dark colors that didn't draw any particular attention to him. They all wore muted earth tones or cool blues except Lee. Her white outfit suggested a 1950s wedding dress and pointed up in no uncertain terms that she was the star of this family.

Smokey appeared on the scene in a red pin-stripe suit, and from that moment on, red and other hot colors began to work their way into everyone's wardrobe. The silhouettes became cleaner too, Dixon and Lee lost layers, showing skin and oozing sexuality. I encouraged Kjersten to make Dixon's end of Act One outfit especially trashy

looking, having discussed with Amy that Dixon may have supported herself at one time as a street-walker and probably still had some of her old hooker togs in her closet. I didn't want the changes initiated by Smokey to manifest themselves as clearly positive improvements without a transitional period that held the possibility of a worsening of their state. The four siblings had similar transitional outfits. Corlis, Farley, and Shep appeared in paint-spattered work clothes and Baron returned in Act Two smeared with the stains of a night of carousing that ended in the gutter.

Ultimately everyone smartened up. Farley donned a suit, Baron got his cleaned, even Corlis lost her manly garb, first for a loud flower print dress, and then a neat nurse's uniform. Shep led the way with the Devil costumes Meyer calls for in the final scene. Farley and Dixon arrived wearing red satin pajamas and a red satin robe respectively, but Shep went the whole nine yards, adding a tail and horned hood to his red union suit. Thus the journey through costumes was marked by an injection of sex appeal, cleanliness and playfulness into what was initially a very drab situation in clothing terms. I told Kjersten I wanted the style to be based in the 1950s American look, but encouraged her to find ways to adjust the traditional styles to indicate a Twenty-first Century lens was being used to view the era. She came through with the request, adding touches like Smokey's Devil bowling shirt, Corlis's loud print dress, and Lee's blue negligee.

## LIGHTING

My conceptual vision of bright centers and shadowy edges was directly applicable to the area of lighting. Louis Gagliano and I worked to specify the design by dividing the world of the play into two realms: Lee's home and Smokey's Hell Hole. The play began in the morning in the realm of the home, and each subsequent scene at the house in Act

One was later that same day. The lighting environment of the home realm began as a literal translation of my concept: bright, warm tones that filled most of the stage, leaving areas of shadow on the extreme left and right sides. In scene four, the first Hell Hole visit, the lighting environment was distinctly different. I asked for more saturated colors, hoping to punch up Smokey's side-showmanship, and contrasting levels of light from either side, hoping for chiaroscuro effect that would split the actors' faces into shadowy and lighter halves. Louis didn't exactly give me what I wanted. The mood of the lighting in Smokey's realm was different from that of the house, but I felt it was more dim than shadowy and overall had a muddy appearance. The only thing that was punched out of the dimness was the Hell Hole sign that was ringed in white Christmas lights. It was so bright it drew attention from the actors. Those lights were adjusted to be less distracting, but the ultimate look of the overall scene was still unsatisfactory.

There was some success to the way the lighting changed as the play went along. I felt that adjustments in the lighting would provide a subtle way of underscoring the increased influence that Smokey has on the family. Elements of Smokey's atmosphere of light could be worked into the scenes at the family home. The strongest facet of the lighting plot, the one that brought this idea home to the audience most apparently, was the use of a cyclorama that could shift through the spectrum from amber to blue to red or not be lit and appear black, as it was covered by a scrim. The cyc in the home scenes in the first act shifted from a light blue in the morning to a bright amber in the afternoon to a darker blue in the evening at the end of the act. At the top of Act Two, the cyc was bright red. Whereas the colors used earlier approximated perceived colors of the sky in real life, the red was distinctly theatrical and a color directly tied to Smokey.

The switch in realms of light worked the other way as well. In the Act Two visit to the Hell Hole, Smokey's realm was brightly lit from the front using the Act One home lights. His mystique has abated by this point, and the character is happy to be behaving in a much more human way. In the scene Smokey is repairing a mummy figure from the Hell Hole attraction. The inner workings are literally exposed. Smokey's discussion with Corlis in the scene is very frank and honest. The direct lighting supported the content of the scene very well. All in all, the balance between alternating scenes of brightness with shadow and saturated color with little perceivable color contributed well to the notion of worlds of conflicting values that come together and influence each other.

I was ultimately unsatisfied with most of the internal light cues. The ones that I asked for were related to the idea of Smokey's "sideshow" lights invading the home realm. I wanted the shadowy, chiaroscuro feel to, in a sense, corrupt the dictatorial nature with which Lee ran her household. Since I was never happy with the looks we could get out of Smokey's "sideshow" lights, we could never successfully incorporate them into the home looks. What did end up being successful, and ultimately were the only really detectable internal cues, were the transitions at the end of each act into twilight. Both times, as the characters exited in turn and the stage was slowly vacated, the diminishing amount of light brought a satisfying feeling of closure to the acts. These "sunsets" were a series of cues I had also asked Louis for, and it may be that he prioritized these effects, the cyc looks and the basic front light in his plot and ran out of enough instruments or circuits for a complete look for Smokey's realm.

I don't really believe this scenario. The fact is that once tech began Louis and I weren't able to talk the same language for some reason. I had never gotten a chance to

preview any lighting cues before tech rehearsals began. This was mostly due to the fact that the set was a long time in coming and Louis waited until the last minute to focus lights and build his cues around the set. The process is understandable, but I was disappointed, feeling that we had shared an understanding of the different looks I wanted, then in tech seeing that understanding vanish. I couldn't find a way to express my disappointment that would provoke him to make satisfactory alterations. His intransigence only affected the cues in the first Smokey scene looks and the attendant changes to the home, so when I ran out of attempts to try and express the adjustments I thought still needed to be made, I gave up and accepted what he had come up with rather than lose my temper, which at the time I felt was my only other option.

Ultimately my relationship with Louis was one that I should have paid more attention to throughout. Early in the production process I was focused on my work with the actors and he was unwilling to discuss specifics before the scenic design was completed. He welcomed my conceptual ideas when offered, and I believed that he would address them in his design, but I didn't check in with him enough in the crucial time leading up to tech, and once we had reached those days, he refused to make the changes to the plot that my requests required. As ever in this business, compromise was the result, but I now believe I could have been more proactive in assuring that I got what I wanted. Part of this lesson was learned as a factor of my first proscenium theater experience. It was not the only such lesson.

## SCENIC

In my initial discussion with set designer Stephen Haynes I brought up the notion that the visual environment should ground the world of the play in the 1950s. The



primary set called for by Meyer was the backyard of a house, and she declared that it should be “non-naturalistic.” Her direction gave us leeway to define 1950s style in our own terms, using period research as a springboard for an innovative look. I also expressed to Stephen the importance that I placed on smooth, quick transitions between locations. There is nothing I abhor in the theater more than watching laborious scene changes, except perhaps sitting in the dark and listening to them. As we were dealing with a comedy I felt it was especially important to minimize the gap between scenes. We decided that using the fly system would help circumvent this problem. I was keen on using the flies for conceptual as well as technical reasons. We incorporated a full stage black into the fly schedule as a master drape that was used at the beginning and ends of the acts and in transitions between scenes that included a change in location. I thought this use of a traditional proscenium convention would not only support the period setting of the play; it would also create a tension between the quaint theatricality that it evoked and the contemporary edge to the subject matter and text of the script.

In order to use the flies as planned, the house unit needed to be positioned further upstage than was usual for plays in the Shaver Theatre. Both Stephen and I heard from many voices in the department that the set was too far upstage. We were aware of the challenges that such a placement created. We brainstormed our way through many meetings, discussing alternate ways to facilitate transitions, and ultimately minimized the number of flies needed to fulfill the requirements of the design. The hospital backdrop and some of the Hell Hole flames became wagons, and we scrapped the idea behind a multi-layered “show drop” (the cut-out, 1950s-esque shapes downstage of the full stage black at the top of the show). Thus we were able to pull the house set to within eight feet

of the plaster line, which we felt was adequate. The main concern was that the performers wouldn't be able to carry the impact of their actions across to the audience when blocked that far upstage. I believed that the training would give the actors the power that they needed to use the entire space, upstage and downstage, without compromising their performances.

In the final analysis, the architectural structure of the proscenium was too much to overcome. The cast did benefit greatly from the training, and all of them were able to be heard throughout the entire auditorium no matter where they were onstage, which in itself is an accomplishment. I have never yet nor since heard any other performance in that space as well as *The Chemistry of Change*; however, the actors were unable to make up for the energy lost to the flies whenever they were blocked upstage of the plaster line. There was a distinct difference between the feeling of connection between actor and audience when the actor was downstage of the proscenium as opposed to upstage. Common sense should dictate this principle, but I was stubborn and determined to try and circumvent the architectural constraints with physical training. Taking into account the youth of the cast and their brief exposure to the training, I can't say that I would never try the same thing again with a different, more experienced cast. I would be less headstrong in the future; however, and make my decision with a judgment that has been more finely attuned to a proscenium space in light of this experience.

Considering the appearance of the set pieces themselves, as opposed to their arrangement in the space, another learning opportunity arises from being able to distinguish between elements that successfully made the transition from concept to design to the final appearance onstage and those that did not. The examples of the house

structure and the Devil head structure offer two different insights into how communication succeeded and failed at different junctures in the process. The shape of the house ultimately supported the concept that spawned the design. The idea behind its construction was that each of Lee's husbands had added a separate section to the house. The different architectural elements were left in various states of completion as successive spouses were run off. The result was a hodge-podge of materials, shapes and styles falling into disrepair due to neglect. The inspiration for the sundry accumulation came from research Stephen found on California architectural styles of the late 1940s and early 50s. I felt that the final product, in terms of shape, did well to reflect the ideas behind the design and support the world of the play. Where it failed was in the realm of color. Stephen and I had discussed various ways that the house might have weathered and how it could possibly display the neglect it had suffered. I thought we had decided on a sun-bleached theme, but that wasn't what I got. The variety of color that ended up on the set was fine. It supported the notion of different elements added at different times, but I felt that the colors were too rich, too saturated. The deep tones of the blue, green, purple and umber used on the house gave the structure a certain weight that didn't feel entirely appropriate for the play. I also believe that if lighter, bleached-out versions of those same colors had been used, the actors would have stood out from it in greater relief and wouldn't have seemed so far away.

A house that was fading to white, remember this is a house in a Southern California coastal town, would have provided more contrast with the vibrant reds in the Devil head as well. The colors Stephen used in that scenic element were suitably gaudy for Smokey's sideshow attraction. What was out of kilter for me was the size of the

piece. I had asked Stephen that he design a head with a mouth that could be used as an entrance, and we both liked the potential tricks that could be played with practical eyes. These prerequisites demanded that the final result would be of a certain scale, but the final product couldn't even fit entirely within the frame of the proscenium. I had intended the scene change in which the Hell Hole first appeared to have an impact. I wanted to give the Devil head an "entrance." But the scale of the end product was so overblown that it jarred many observers off the tracks of the play.

Why did these things turn out the way they did? I've stated that I enjoyed my collaboration with Stephen Haynes, and I stand by that statement. We supported and provoked each other in the creative process as we addressed the challenges Marlane Meyer provided in her script. But if we spent so much time working out the various elements of the scenic design together, how could the results have been unsatisfactory in such fundamental ways as size and color? In answering this question I have put my finger on another set of mistakes that I can point to and understand in order to avoid them in the future. They roughly fall into two categories: organization and communication.

The problem of communication pertains to the lack of a physical vehicle for information. I talked about the design with Stephen and all of my designers until we reached a common understanding in terms of describing the elements with a verbal language. The disconnect between this step and the implementation of the designs occurred in the physical plan stage. Stephen built me a model of the house, and we were able to adjust the shape in three dimensions before plans were sent to the shop; however, the model was not done in color. I never saw a complete paint elevation for the house. I did see a paint elevation for the Devil head, but it wasn't represented in the same scale as

the model of the house. With hindsight I believe this problem of incomplete concrete designs was exacerbated by our frequent meetings. Stephen was able to prepare one or two portions of the design for each meeting, so on different days I saw rough renderings, models, elevations, ground plans, and we were able to adjust each facet that he brought until it gained our mutual approval. We never had an entire picture of how the whole set would work together, but since I had seen each element separately, I think I fooled myself into believing I knew how they would interact.

Another factor that contributed to the incomplete communication, and also feeds into the notion of organizational failure, is again my novice status working in a proscenium space. All of the productions I had directed previously had been in much smaller spaces, and as I have stated, I was more intricately interwoven into the design process by the fact that I was filling a designer role. In such venues and situations, I could easily adjust elements of design throughout the entire process, including the building phase right up until opening night. Working within the constraints of the Mainstage season on the Shaver stage, I was unsure how to address fundamental problems as I saw them materialize. Due to the increase in scale of my overall working environment, I knew the necessary changes as I perceived them involved many man hours of work, more than were available prior to the scheduled opening of the show.

I derive my definition of an organizational mistake from this situation. It refers to the overall capability of the organization to accomplish a certain number of tasks taking into account the parameters of time, available support, and the difficulty level of the tasks to be performed. A detailed description of what I perceived to be the shortcomings of the LSU Department of Theatre production staff would not serve to improve it when offered

in this medium, nor would it be the most efficient way to recount what I have learned, which is what this document aims to do. So instead, I shall describe the lessons I am able to take away from the experience.

A friend of mine in Seattle who designs for the theater has a saying, “Render your imagination to your limitations.” Another friend I made at the SITI workshop this past summer, when asked to offer a piece of advice in an acting exercise came up with, “Keep it simple, stupid.” While these aphorisms don’t explain exactly what I have learned, they point at the root of the mistake. I fell pray to the assumption that as I was now directing a fully supported show for LSU, whatever I wanted to happen could be made to happen. Of course I still did the work of developing a concept for the production that could be used as a foundation on which all the elements of the production could find common ground, but once I communicated that concept, I wasn’t a diligent enough overseer. When the size of the production grows, the responsibility of the director to manage all of its elements grows in direct proportion. I inflated my ability to imagine, but I did not increase my attention to the limitations. I trusted that the system of the LSU production department would stop the buck if it needed to be stopped, but the buck needed to stop with me, or else I needed to be more aware of when it needed to stop and when I needed to be more insistent that it be pushed on ahead. The facets of production that succeeded the most were the ones that benefited from the clearest communication and the greatest organization. Kjersten and I had clear conversations about the role of the costumes; she provided me with renderings and swatches and invited me to see the actual pieces as they were pulled, bought or built. She only had seven people to dress. Her organizational capacity was not over taxed. My communication with Stephen and Louis was

compromised in ways I've already described, and the organizational relationship between the shop and the scenic designer rushed the process to completion without room for adjustment at the necessary stages. As a result I was happy with the costumes and less so with the set and lights. Again, my point is to expose myself as a weak link in the chain in order to strengthen my resolve for the future. I placed much greater emphasis on my work with the actors and gave the designers more free reign than I now believe I should have. In the future I need to develop my ability to manage my appropriation of personal attention to all areas of production.

## CHAPTER FOUR: LEARNING FROM PERFORMANCE

My account to this point has remained concerned with elements of the craft. I have dissected my decisions and actions and those of my collaborators with the dual goal of illuminating the process for the reader and evaluating it for myself. The individual conclusions I have reached in each section were made with an eye toward future collaborations, but only in terms of negotiations with other members of a production team. I do want to become more aware of how I can clearly communicate and cooperate with other artists, from playwrights to actors to designers, and so far I believe I have isolated some specific improvements that I can incorporate in my projects to come. All of these adjustments would be in vain, however, if I neglected the final element in the equation of live performance. In order to determine if artistic aim is true, one must examine the target after the shots have been fired. In this section I analyze the various responses to the performances that I have noticed. As I set out to mount this production with a particular notion of how it might be received in the community, it is important to gauge what the actual reception was in order to enable a further refinement of my practice. I draw my data for this analysis from three primary sources: my own observation of the audiences during performances, Danny Heitman's review of the play for *The Advocate*, and word of mouth that I picked up around the community after the show had closed.

Sitting in the audience on opening night I must admit my strongest feeling was of relief. After seven weeks of rehearsal, which included an intense period of training,



detailed breakdown of the text, and in-depth character work, I was incredibly proud of my cast. I felt confident that they had created a particular group energy that would at least hold an audience's attention for the two hour and ten minute running time. I was aware of the possibilities of controversy or confusion from the text, and I knew that the depth of the stage gave a "long-shot" appearance to many of the group scenes, but I believed that the cast was confident in their understanding of what they wanted to present and strong in their ability to do so. I was excited to see how an audience would react but thankfully not in a nervous way.

Through the first half of Act One the audience was quieter than I had hoped. There were isolated pockets of laughter, but many of the jokes went by without a chuckle in response. The flip side to this disappointing reaction was that I could tell the audience was listening very carefully. I understood how much information was contained in the brief, opening scenes, and I appreciated that the audience was paying close attention to the exposition. There was another sound emitted frequently by audience members aside from laughter that explained another facet of response: the gasp. The unabashed sexual nature of some of the dialogue took many of the students in the audience, and probably some of the adults as well, by surprise. Lee's arrival at the Hell Hole in scene four was another surprising twist, but by the end of that scene I think most of the audience knew that Lee's decision to join Smokey was going to generate trouble for her in the future.

Scene five was where I hoped the comedy would really start rolling, and on opening night my wishes were fulfilled. Meyer's introduction of Shep and Farley is built-in comic relief, and Preston and Joel had created stage personas that charmed the audience. The audience's enjoyment of the developing situations between Baron and

Corlis and Lee and Smokey indicated their understanding of the established relationships. The character of the laughter in the crowd was still colored by a sense of shock at the audacity of the dialogue, though, and I believe that many people in the audience were scandalized by the domestic situation played out before them.

My perception of how the audience followed the play through Act Two isn't highlighted by any additional recognition. I was pleased at the continued attention; the spectators were obviously engaged. I was also surprised at how often I could hear someone in the audience whisper not quite under her breath, "I can't believe she said that!" At the curtain call, the cast received a very warm, heartfelt ovation full of cheers, and I think they were then able to share in my feeling of relief that we had opened successfully.

Audience reaction was similar at successive performances. I sat in on at least a portion of more than half of the shows, and the audience's energy and attention each time was directly proportional to the cast's energy and focus. One interesting comment I got from House Manager Don Whittaker was that he rarely heard the audience's reaction in the lobby as he was used to hearing when other comedies were playing. One factor that I'm sure contributed to this effect was the size of the audiences. On average the house was about half full for most performances. Though not what I would ideally liked to have seen, for a new play that was unknown in Baton Rouge, attendance was better than it could have conceivably been. Another more interesting cause behind Don's inability to hear peals of laughter was that rarely did the audience laugh *en masse* at any one joke. The laughter was more individualized, and it didn't always come from the same people throughout the night. Different groups found different things to laugh at, and though

much of the laughter continued to be prompted by shock or discomfort, there was also much laughter rooted in genuine hilarity. Overall, I was pleased at the variety of audience reaction that I detected during the performances. It reflected attentiveness and enjoyment, two qualities that I hoped fostered fertile areas in the audience members' minds for thinking about the issues raised by the play.

Danny Heitman was able to separate out his likes and dislikes of the play very well, which made his review helpful in my analysis of community reaction. Be assured I don't take reviews of my work at face value, whether positive or negative, but a reviewer that intelligently considers many aspects of a production when forming an opinion can offer insight to a director who is looking back on a production with an eye to judging its effectiveness within its community. Mr. Heitman exhibited an understanding of the art and thoughtfulness toward the material in his review that to my mind qualified him as a representative of the professional community outside of LSU. His overall attitude toward the production was a mixture of disdain for the script and appreciation for the performances, an opinion that I had expected from the preponderantly conservative community. Reading between the lines, I believe that the production may have presented the alternative values expressed in the play in a way that prompted him to consider them in a new light. Even if this light is no more favorable than before, I am content with the notion that the play may have promoted some kind of change. Noting a few examples from the review may do more to explain my feeling for it.

After the compulsory plot summary, Heitman gives his opinion of Marlane Meyer. "She has a flair for overkill, with monologues that seem less driven by character development and more a case of the playwright standing a bit too obviously on her

soapbox.” He then goes on to quote three of Lee’s one-liners, all of which point up the character’s unfavorable opinion of the male gender. His ultimate summation of the playwright’s style reads, “And so the play goes, a faint and often futile attempt at Wildean wit.” That he turns his attention so directly toward Ms. Meyer coupled with the fact that he accurately prints three direct quotations from the play makes me think he may have gotten a copy of the play before seeing the production. My theory is supported by a detail about Lee’s life that he shares in the plot summary. He writes, “She’s on the way to the altar with husband No. 10 when she falls in love with Smokey.” In the alternate version of the script that I considered Lee is on her tenth marriage. In the production that I directed she is on her eighth. If Heitman had indeed read the script before attending the production, his review may have more to do with a difference in values that he couches in a critique of the playwright’s style than his opinion of the actual production. I don’t see how else he could complain about Meyer preaching on her soapbox and write in the same review, “While campus actors often fall prey to hesitancy, the players here pull out the stops with intense and deeply affecting performances.” I can understand that Meyer’s dialogue seems preachy on the page, but I believe the actors were able to temper her dialogue with humor and pathos, and Heitner seems to agree with me in his assessment of them.

My notion that Heitner’s patriarchal conservatism may have been threatened, or at least beleaguered, by Meyer’s play was supported by Ann Dalrymple, who knows Heitner personally. Together, we rated our production a success if it rankled him and other conservatives. In providing a voice to minority values, theater retains its democratic bearings. I was not setting out in my production to convert the LSU student

population into supporters of a pro-choice matriarchy. I hoped to provoke discussion about social and gender arrangements that may be taken for granted in this community. Again, I think I reached a degree of success if I can put faith in reports of student opinions I heard after the play had closed.

John Wright told me of a particularly interesting discussion his Introduction to Theatre class had about the play. The most emotional and involving argument arose in response to one young man's opinion that seeing Ann in her negligee in Act Two, scene two was "gross" and that older women shouldn't be allowed to try and be sexy. According to John, the discussion ultimately involved very little of the production directly, but I was excited to hear about it, as the students were taking up sides about issues that were very much at the heart of the play. So much of the media that surrounds us reinforces norms of behavior, and college students can be particularly vulnerable to the pressure of popularity, especially when it comes to issues of sexuality. I was happy to hear that seeing *The Chemistry of Change* prompted a discussion that considered stereotypes and how limiting they can be.

Talking to other students about the play, I picked up the notion that another set of stereotypes drawn upon in Meyer's play might be rooted too deeply in this community's sense of itself to be engaged by my production. When I encountered students who didn't like the play, their feelings seemed most often to spring from confusion about Smokey. They didn't understand whether or not he was really the Devil. They understood that he had some sort of supernatural powers, but they couldn't conceive that he would use them to initiate positive change in the family. A morally imprecise Devil did not compute. Apparently, the religious and moral conception of good and evil are so rigid and

pervasive in this culture that the Devil cannot adequately serve as a metaphor for anything other than temptation to evil. I failed to take into account how seriously this community might receive a depiction of Satan, and so a major element in the allegory of change was lost to much of my audience.

I have learned that when offering a new play, a play that deals with many sides of many contemporary issues, a director should expect a varied response. Personally, I would go so far as to encourage a multiplicity of ideas. One thing I'm disappointed about is that there were no talk back sessions after any of the performances. Without these, the essential element of discussion is neglected. In the future, I plan to insist on these sessions after every play, not so that I can explain "what the play meant" or "why I did the play." Ultimately there's only one reason I do theater.

One day Neal Hebert, an undergraduate student, passed me in the hall and told me how much he liked *The Chemistry of Change*. He said he was glad that LSU Theatre finally had done a play that was *about* something. We were both on the way somewhere else, so I didn't follow him and find out what he thought it was about. If we had been in a post-play discussion I could have found out, not that it matters. I'm simply curious, and his is only one opinion. What does matter is keeping a lively exchange of ideas going. Theater must do this in order to transcend entertainment. Many people found *The Chemistry of Change* entertaining, and that's good. Many other people were confused or offended and not entertained, and that's fine as well. As far as I can tell, everyone who saw it had a strong opinion about some facet of the play. For me, that is the best result. I only hope that everyone who saw it was able to get their opinion in circulation somewhere.

## CHAPTER FIVE: WRAPPING UP AND MOVING ON

I have attempted to provide a production account of *The Chemistry of Change* that portrays the relationship between all areas of the production throughout the entire process. The report is naturally selective, though I hope the picture it generates is complete. It is also inherently subjective, even as I have striven to present as broad a view as possible. I believe that my account of my goals and actions is accurate, just as I believe that the production was successful. Of course I know that to determine both cases definitively is impossible. Everything depends on a person's definition of accuracy or success.

This relativism is at the root of my work. It is why I want to use theater to inject new ideas into a community. I hope to engender continuing dialogue about issues that affect us today. It's my way of driving against the particularly American ennui of apathy, cynicism and complacency. It's also why I embrace the Suzuki and Viewpoint training techniques. They empower actors to be interactive, energized, creative artists. The actors I worked with on *Chemistry* have absorbed at least some of my philosophy. In discussions with Ann, Preston, and Jillian after the show had closed I asked them for their honest opinions about the training and rehearsal process. All of them said that there was some aspect of the techniques that had enhanced the way they practice and think about theater and the theater's place in our society.

By focusing on the developing microcosm of an acting company, it's possible to make changes to the larger community in miniature ways. Each of the actors is a

member of the larger community, and they all interact with others offstage as well as on. If a show doesn't quite have the conclusive impact that all of the collaborators hope for, whether it's due to inexperience of the performers, bad communication between the director and the designers, or a miscalculation of the way certain elements of the show will be received by the audience, the method of collaboration within a company can still affect the public at large.

My thesis production was only one show, but it was practice for a way of working that I hope to continue. I taught my collaborators about a certain way of working and learned from them in return about how to improve that process. By keeping open to the exchange of information in the theatrical medium, many of the artists who worked on the production experienced a type of unification. Maybe the process creates echoes of itself as time passes. Just as my wish for the production of *The Chemistry of Change* was to introduce new ideas for discussion to its audience, I hope readers of this thesis have learned something new and find that it inspires more dialogue. All good theater should.



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## VITA

Anthony Winkler is a founder of Theater Schmeater, a theater company in Seattle, Washington. While there he directed Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love*, Jean Giraudoux's *The Madwoman of Chailot*, and several episodes of *The Twilight Zone: Live* by Rod Serling, among other things. He worked there from 1992 to 1999, when he came to Louisiana State University. At LSU he directed Len Jenkin's *Kid Twist*, Naomi Iizuka's *Polaroid Stories*, and Marlane Meyer's *The Chemistry of Change*.

He will receive the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre at the Spring Commencement, 2002.