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# The creative development of the one-person play, "Turkey Boys," a production thesis in acting

Nicholas Andrew Hamel

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

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THE CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ONE-PERSON PLAY, TURKEY BOYS  
A PRODUCTION THESIS IN ACTING

A Thesis

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

In

The Department of Theatre

by  
Nicholas Andrew Hamel  
B.F.A., Illinois Wesleyan University, 2004  
May 2013

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis details the writing process and performance of the author's partially autobiographical one-person play, *Turkey Boys*. The play presents varying points of view on events in and around the small community of Atalissa, IA where, in 2009, 21 mentally disabled men were removed from the building where most of them had been living communally for more than 30 years. The men's employer, Henry's Turkey Service, was accused of mistreating the men, paying them at a sub-minimum wage level, providing inhumane living conditions, and verbally and physically abusing them. The piece is told in a documentary theatre style from multiple perspectives including the author's own, and incorporates 18 characters played by the same actor, with limited technical elements. The challenges and difficulties throughout the writing and performance process are detailed, theoretical and practical implications are examined, and a written copy of the script is included.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Master of Fine Arts in Acting program at LSU culminates in the creation and performance of a one-person play. The requirement is that each candidate will create a piece that demonstrates that they have the ability to “hold the stage” as a lone performer for a substantial amount of time. For my own performance, I chose to write and perform a piece centering around a town in which I spent a brief, but significant amount of my childhood. The play initially developed around my own feelings about my “hometown” and came to incorporate multiple perspectives on the place, all steeped in the context of the national scandal that it experienced in early 2009. The play became a way for me to explore, if not clarify, my own relationship to a place and people that I consider intimately bound up with my own identity. While the process presented a sequence of challenges and a number of failures, it ultimately succeeded both as a performance piece and a provocative work of art designed to actively engage its audience with questions about how best to effectively approach neglected communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT AND INITIAL RESEARCH

While my experience and training as an actor prepared me well for the performance aspect of this project, the more daunting task was the creation of a performance text that I would find both artistically stimulating and dramatically viable. Prior to this effort, I had no formal training in playwriting, and what experience I did have was limited to a handful of short, experimental plays written more for exploration of stylistic limits than for the presentation of a successful dramatic event in front of an audience. I decided early that I needed to explore material to which I had tangible personal connections in order to sustain my focus and effort for what I knew would become a lengthy and grueling creative process.

A few years earlier, I had produced a few abortive attempts at writing a satirical novel in the vein of Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street*, based primarily on one of the small Iowa towns where I lived during my childhood. My impulse to write had been an outlook I perceived from some of my artistic colleagues that implied a lack of respect or understanding for small-town and rural attitudes and lifestyle, particularly in relation to their more cosmopolitan, 21st century worldviews. While this impulse remained an active driving force that I was interested in exploring, my early attempts lacked any coherent story that I felt was sufficient to addressing the scope that I wanted to explore. As a result, I shelved the concept in the back of my mind, until I started considering what I would use as material for my required one-person play.

In 2009, the town of Atalissa, Iowa, the place I had given up writing about, was written about, photographed, and argued over by dozens of people who had never known the town existed before it became a national scandal in the disability rights community. I followed this story from a distance as it developed, first from my home in Chicago and later from Louisiana when I started training for my MFA in 2010. By December of that year, I had decided that the scandal and the national attention focused on it were rife with dramatic potential and that this situation, and my personal connections to it, would serve as the basis for what I wanted to explore with my performance project.

My initial impulse was to explore the Atalissa situation in an exclusively documentary theatre style. I had seen Jefferson Mays perform in Doug Wright's play, *I Am My Own Wife*, in 2004 and was greatly moved by the treatment in that play of actual people and events in a way that still contained an overtly theatrical quality. In addition, my own experiences acting on plays such as *The Laramie Project* and *Working* had piqued my interest in the dramatic effect of speaking onstage as a representation of actual people in their own words, all within a richly constructed dramatic framework.

My early impulse was to begin with my own family, as they would no doubt have personal experiences with the town, and the ensuing events somewhat along the lines of my own. In late 2010, I asked my sisters and parents for their memories and stories about living in Atalissa and their reactions to the more recent developments there. In an early email response to my inquiries, my father pointed toward many of the issues that I would come to explore in more detail as I researched and began to write from my own perspective.

**From:** Robert Hamel ([rhamel@westmont.edu](mailto:rhamel@westmont.edu))  
**Sent:** Fri 12/10/10 1:48 PM  
**To:** Nicholas Hamel ([barnabyhamel@hotmail.com](mailto:barnabyhamel@hotmail.com))

Wild and worthy topic. I will compose several stories over the holiday. I got a million of 'em. John Beck is a good friend and was my direct predecessor at Atalissa. He is also the Pastor who forced the congregation to vote on whether or not to welcome the Hill Gang Guys at Zion. That is a GREAT story! You know, thematically, the fact that the pastor who followed me curtailed the choir and stopped stopping by the bunk house, I believe contributed to the development of all the abuse the company took on the guys from shortly after I left until the stuff hit the fan several years ago. I was always welcome up at the bunk house and stopped by often, just to check on conditions. Also the on-site co-owner/supervisor, whose name I can't remember, died during that time and they turned over management to other folk.

The other theme that I most strongly remember was the fact that the townspeople who most criticized the inhumaneness of the hill gang guys; their clothes, their smell, their shaggy look, their terrible job, their stupidity, time and again where the ones who acted most like animals themselves; the drinking and drugs, fighting, shooting, rape, robbery, vandalism, theft and verbal abuse of everyone around them. Whereas no one in Atalissa had bigger hearts, stronger compassion, more sincere empathy, more prayerfulness, greater respect, stronger protection of the weak and vulnerable, and greater honesty than my guys up on the hill. They are always who I think of when I hear; "The meek shall inherit the earth."

You have an interesting conundrum between those who historically pushed from the first day they opened for closing down the place because of the low wage slavery they saw going on and the communal nature of the facility. Many argued that the state should put them all in nursing homes. Yet, as long as the facility was safe, weatherproof and clean, I was supportive of their program. Yes they had awful jobs at the turkey plant, but so did all the turkey plant employees who didn't have education. But at least while I was there they had jobs, income, three meals a day, clothing, paid vacations, a better place to live than many people in the community, no bills, no taxes, free health care, retirement plan. Yes, the money they had to spend was a fraction of what they earned, but the same is true most of us, really. And though some of them hated their job, being able to work gave them a sense of pride and ability to contribute to the community, that sitting around all day in a nursing home, or worse, a mental institution, could ever possibly give them.

These social, political, and moral implications of the situation became the primary themes that I hoped would take the play beyond the specific circumstances of the events within it. This appeared to be even more the case when I conceived of these themes with a theatrical approach from a wide variety of attitudes and perspectives. I spent most of my efforts over the course of the following year in assembling as much research as I could about the town, the court cases, the congressional hearings, and the nature of the press coverage itself.

## EARLY WRITINGS AND THEMATIC IMPULSES

As I put together my research file, I found myself being drawn more and more personally into the story, as I saw individuals in Atalissa who I recognized and understood, and so many others, largely from elsewhere, whose viewpoints I often saw as alien. The more diverse the ideas that I encountered, the more I felt that I needed to fully articulate my own approach and feelings about Atalissa. For Dr. Alan Sikes' Performance Theory class in the Spring of 2012, I assembled my personal writings up to that point and provided a description of my approach and desires about the piece.

**From:** Nicholas Hamel (barnabyhamel@hotmail.com)

**Sent:** Wed 3/28/12 6:55 PM

**To:** [asikes@lsu.edu](mailto:asikes@lsu.edu)

So here's what I got so far. It's not in any sort of defined dramatic structure and I have no idea how much of what I have here will make it into the script, but there are some images here, ideas, and probably too many words that are the beginning of what I am trying to say:

The country schoolhouse at the top of the hill is painted blue. Bright blue actually, I suppose it's what might be called periwinkle. I know this because I've seen pictures of it where it can clearly be seen to be blue, and the photo caption mentions that the guys in the house painted it that color themselves. I am simultaneously endeared and offended that they would print such a detail, whether or not it happens to be true. I have no good reason to doubt it. Except that I don't remember the blue. I remember a grey building. The kind of grey that bark gets in winter. That whitewashed, wood paneling grey after all the whitewash has flecked away. Blue isn't a color that associates for me with the guys, and certainly not with their house. They had a swimming pool there that could certainly have been blue, but even there what I see is mostly sparkling aluminum as it flails to and fro accompanied by heavily amplified country music. Grey glints shining in the dark, while the guys swam, and the town danced, as the acrid-smelling beer cans adorned the hands of guests and hosts alike. Inside, where it certainly was not blue, the guys had the biggest projection TV I had ever seen. The images flickering across it were full of festive holiday spirit or the latest of the guys' exploits, or karaoke lyrics for Elvis, Garth Brooks, or Hank Williams. The guys always wanted to show off their home to us, so that we could see where they lived and what they had acquired. Their bedrooms, even then, struck me as cramped: much less than I was used to myself, but their pride in them was undeniable. Among their prized possessions, most vivid to me were the nudie pictures they had tacked to their walls. What struck me most was their nonchalance towards such things, a posture unimaginable to my 10-year-old position, where the acquiring of pornography, by any means necessary, was among the highest of my daily goals. While I was obsessed with swimming pools and airbrushed images of breasts, the guys seemed to take such things as a pleasant, but by no means important, aspect to their lives.



I wish that I had stories about the guys. I don't have any. What I do have is images, feelings, connections. I remember this one's fingernails and that one's teeth, the slow Texas drawls, and the eyes that had an almost unimaginable depth. When you saw into their eyes, the sadness and joy were there side by side, and the well ran deep in both. In stark contrast to the stoic farmers and bubbly farmers' wives, the guys seemed to feel more directly, and all things at once. An unbounded appetite for life existed simultaneously with an undeniable history of pain and a recognition that both were not only possible, but to be expected from the world in equal measure. When I read the accounts of how they were moved from their home of thirty years, it's the eyes I see first. Their vulnerability is tangible; you and I aren't supposed to look at the world in their kind of constantly open way or we will get hurt, perhaps hurt beyond repair. I don't pretend to know whether the guys were capable of seeing any other way, or if they were hurt over and over again because of it.

I don't have any stories of my own. I'm good at telling other people's stories, but I don't have any. Not that are worth telling. Sometimes I question whether it's worth communicating, because I can't escape this gnawing skepticism that no one will get it. I don't really know anyone anymore that grew up in a place like Atalissa; all my friends lived in big cities or small cities or suburbs [a condition that I always feel myself expected to understand but have a great amount of difficulty grasping, or rather people seem to get that not everyone grew up in New York/Philadelphia, certainly everyone was not raised in Birmingham/Columbus, yet somehow if I don't quite understand at least the Schaumberg/Palo Alto view of the world I must be some kind of crazy person].

At the same time, I've lost any connection with rural Iowa if for no other reason than I don't even speak to anyone who lives there anymore. But inescapably, that is where I am from and that is where I am drawn. To draw a human being. To define them and confine them. To say, "From this you have been created, and to this you must return..." And it is this truth that peers down at me as Colossus would look at an ant between his legs and asks, "Did you imagine that I wasn't here? You can't possibly forget me, as much as you might try." I can't possibly escape Atalissa, or Andover, or Hawarden, but somehow it is still Atalissa that not only won't allow itself to be forgotten, but audaciously refuses to be ignored.

Atalissa is and was and ever shall be 7 blocks long and 3 blocks wide.

In 1975, a group called Hill Country Farms brought about 60 developmentally disabled men from various places in Texas to the town of Atalissa, Iowa, where they lived dormitory-style in an abandoned schoolhouse outside of town and were employed by Henry's Turkey Services on the poultry disassembly line. Atalissa had a population of about 350 when I moved there in 1990, and by that point the town had come to, if not an understanding, at least a routine that incorporated the men into the landscape. They would walk through town on their days off, buy candy and magazines at the gas station, and some of them were regular members in the church where my father was preaching. In church was where the distinctions appeared most strikingly between the regular townsfolk and the men

they referred to as the “Henry Boys”. Drawing on more flamboyant regional worship traditions, the Texans would play tambourines, dance in the pews, and engage in calls and responses in a way that was quite at odds with the Midwestern German Protestant congregation members. Indeed, some ten years earlier when the “boys” started attending the church, many of the regular members wanted to forbid them from doing so, and it was only after an impassioned plea from the pastor during a membership meeting that a vote passed, by slim margins, allowing them to stay.

My father continued to preach, and my family continued to live, in Atalissa for the next four years, in which time many of these men became my playmates, babysitters, and in a couple of cases dear friends. Though I haven’t returned to Atalissa for more than fifteen years, the town and the guys have remained firmly in my memory as influential at a particularly formative stage of my childhood. My sense of identity has consistently been tied to the rural environment of Atalissa more than it has to any other place where I have lived.

In February of 2009, acting on the suspicions of one of the men’s sister who was concerned that her brother’s bank account had only \$80 in it despite decades of full time work, agents from the state of Iowa inspected the schoolhouse where the men were living, and by the next day determined that the conditions were unacceptable and had all of the men removed into state custody. The scandal that broke drew national attention from advocacy groups and politicians from all over the country, particularly when it was revealed that the school’s boiler had been inoperative since 2002, the building had major cockroach infestations, and the men would take home as little as \$65 dollars a month even while working full time. There were huge amounts of vitriol directed at the people in the town who had let such shocking exploitation occur for so long, and in April of 2011 an Iowa state judge ruled that Hill Country Farms pay the men \$1.7 million in back wages and damages.

I’ve been wanting to write this play for more than a year now, because it incorporates certain ideas about my childhood that have been haunting me from the time I became an adult and have only seemed to become more prevalent as I continue to age. The more I try to tell this story, the more personal it has become, which is a far cry from how I initially conceived it. Part of this is from necessity, as the research interviews necessary for a documentary drama approach, that I still very much want to conduct, have not yet happened. Instead, though, I’ve been able to explore my own view of the story and how it operates in my memory and as a writer.

The aspects of it that I find most interesting are the fragmented ways that the town, and the guys’ situation, have been and are being viewed. I want to emphasize that not only by presenting a variety of conflicting and conflicted perspectives, but to emphasize that structurally in the performance. As of yet I’m not certain what form that will take, though I am interested in revealing the narrative qualities in fragments rather than in a clearly linear way. My early impulse for an approach was to work in a style similar to Doug Wright’s *I am My*

*Own Wife*, where what struck me the most in performance was how, all of a sudden in the second act, the entire premise of the story and the honesty of the narrator are turned upside down. I've been particularly interested lately when reading Heiner Müller discuss how his plays actively contradict themselves even as they are being played, and the ability of a play to say both something and its opposite simultaneously. My goal would be certainly to create a piece that involves an audience journey to, as Brecht says, "see differently", yet at the same time I want something that is accessible to a wide audience likely suspicious of anything that smells too much of high art. Ideally, I want to tell Atalissa's story not merely in a way that Atalissa would tell it, but definitely in a way that they would recognize it as their own.

I was focused, at this point in my writing process, on the possibilities of internal contradiction in the theatre of Heiner Müller. I hoped to create active and engaging questions for the audiences in a way that would not seem pedantic or dictatorial. Like Müller, I sensed that my own opinions on this, and any, subject were highly mutable and I wanted the audience to share at least a part of that sense.

Very distant from any orthodox communist theology by the end of his life, Müller viewed art as "a space of irresponsibility... [and] freedom – a dangerous and libidinally occupied field" [18/20] in which ideas were simply "material" to be played with. But unlike Duchamp and most other precursors to what became winsomely nihilistic postmodern thinking, he nevertheless confined himself most of the time to the serious, grounded, and ostensibly responsible subject-matter of history and politics. Half of his prodigious artistic effort went into formulating sensible-sounding social and political ideas while the other half went into throwing up smokescreens to prevent close rational scrutiny and extended argument of them. His famous hit-and-run aphorisms, a sort of conversational terrorism, were, in this sense, his compromises with himself. (Kalb 11-12)

In order to achieve this effect, I was skeptical of actually employing Müller's formal styles in my own work. I was fearful that such an approach might be too alienating to constructively engage with the "un-erudite" worldview that emerges when considering the community of Atalissa. My inclinations were to gesture toward this multiplicity of meaning in an explicitly understandable fashion by following Bertolt Brecht's description of spectators to a street scene.

It is comparatively easy to set up a basic model for epic theatre. For practical experiments I usually picked as my example of completely simple, 'natural' epic theatre an incident such as can be seen at any street corner: an eyewitness demonstrating to a collection of people how a traffic accident took place. The bystanders may not have observed what happened, or they may simply not agree with him, may 'see things a different way'; the point is that the demonstrator acts the behaviour of driver or victim or both in such a way that the bystanders are able to form an opinion about the accident. (Brecht 121)

I had articulated an approach, but at this point it still remained somewhat intangible. I knew the sort of goals I wanted to achieve and had some theoretical, if not explicitly formal ideas on how I might proceed. Dr. Sikes' reactions opened up a number of new possible directions in

the work, particularly in regard to identifying the limits of my own perspective, and creatively engaging with these concepts.

**From:** Alan W Sikes ([asikes@lsu.edu](mailto:asikes@lsu.edu))  
**Sent:** Sat 4/21/12 6:07 PM  
**To:** Nicholas Hamel ([barnabyhamel@hotmail.com](mailto:barnabyhamel@hotmail.com))

Here are a few initial questions:

- 1) You have a very personal stake to this town and the people in it; whose “story” do you want to tell? You say that you have no stories of your own, but something is already coming from those encounters with the nudie pictures on the walls (think Tim Miller)—how can they be “prized possessions” to the “Boys” if they are so nonchalant about them? Who is prizing the pictures—them or you?
- 2) You also say that you want to tell the story of the town itself; who makes up the town? Are the “Boys” part of the town, or a separate group now that they have left the town? Were they ever a part of the town? Is the town composed only of the people in it? You have vivid memories of certain places and objects (think Kantor and autonomous objects) so what is their story? What would the broken boiler say to the enormous projection TV about their respective roles in the household?
- 3) Of course, these “Boys” have stories of their own, and here you might confront the productive “failure” of performance (think Phelan) to capture their experience; how does the fact that grown men are called “Boys” mark them as “other” from the very beginning? How might you use the mediations of performance to gesture to the fact that you cannot see the world through the eyes of a developmentally disabled person—and do it without sentimentalizing them and thus turning their experience into spectacle?
- 4) Then there is the story of this process as it unfolds. The IRB process might provide you with ample material for performance, though as I said you would have to proceed carefully when approaching the IRB about this protected group; how might you fold your encounter/non-encounter with IRB into the story? Would you dare ask IRB representatives if you could, for instance, record your conversations with them to use in future performance work??

From my discussions with Dr. Sikes, I refocused on the documentary aspects of the piece with an eye toward identifying the limitations of each point of view as well as how each person creates their own version of the Atalissa story, while I myself was doing the same thing.

**From:** Nicholas Hamel ([barnabyhamel@hotmail.com](mailto:barnabyhamel@hotmail.com))  
**Sent:** Thu 5/10/12 8:45 PM  
**To:** [asikes@lsu.edu](mailto:asikes@lsu.edu)

Thanks for your responses to my theory ideas. They have helped begin to crystallize the direction that I want to pursue as I write this play, or rather more importantly the questions that I want to ask through the work. This question of “whose story” has become

central to what I am interested in looking at. By writing and performing the play myself, I can't escape the story being my own whether I make that an overt statement of it or not. What I find troubling, and therefore interesting to explore in writing, is to what extent I am entitled to take ownership of the story in any sort of meaningful and responsible way. The concept of "story" implies for me a sort of narrative closure that I simultaneously recognize as necessary for communication and inescapably artificializing the people and issues involved.

I'm interested, at the moment, in exploring how a myriad group of people with various degrees of personal connections to the events not only choose how they "read" the story of Atalissa and the Boys but also "write" their own stories from their individual relationships to the events. There is an automatic insider/outsider dynamic that begins to emerge in that process, as I find myself judging the "authenticity" of each story based on their perceived closeness to the people and the town. How do we judge who is allowed to tell the Atalissa story? The "boys" themselves are the most central characters and perhaps the only group that has an undeniable right to the story, but due to their disability any attempt for them to tell their own story would be substantially dismissed. The need to define these multifarious borders of ownership is what I would primarily want to subvert with the piece, at least in the way I am looking at it right now.

I worked on creating a series of "monologues" taken from newspaper articles, testimony, and blog posts, and soon found that although much of the material I was developing was, at least to some extent, dramatically viable, there was nothing for the play to move toward. I was looking at a variety of perspectives in an interesting academic way, but as of yet in doing so I was missing a sense of connectedness to any of the people speaking. I decided that before I could go much further with constructing the play, I would have to return to the town of Atalissa itself and speak to people there directly about their experiences to escape the filters of the various sources that I had been utilizing.

## RETURNING TO THE SOURCE

My class and work schedule at LSU only allowed me limited break times between semesters and my financial resources were not enough to allow me to make multiple trips between Louisiana and Iowa, but I was able to schedule a trip for the weekend of June 1-3, 2012. I quickly realized that as a result of not living in the area since I was a child, I no longer had direct connections to anyone who lived locally or had in the recent past. Through a church connection in Iowa City, I was able to get the phone number for Lynn Thiede, the current pastor at my father's old church and a woman whose comments I had seen in multiple news articles covering the story. I left messages for her trying to set up some time to meet and discuss the church and the town from her perspective, but by the time I arrived I had still not heard anything back from her.

In late afternoon on Friday, June 1st I drove into Atalissa and parked my car in the center almost word for word transcription of my recordings from this first day:of downtown. I spent a few hours walking around the entire town with a portable voice recorder, trying to tape the reactions and memories that I was experiencing as I went through the town. Although only small pieces of this material made it into the final version of the play, it served to crystalize much of my connection to the town and my memories of it. An early draft, excerpted below, includes a nearly word for word transcription of my tape from that day.

I'm the corner of 3rd and Cherry Street, whatever that means. Addresses are unnecessary here since everybody gets their mail at PO Boxes, or at least used to. One of my chores was to walk to the post office and get our mail from the box. Most of the time I can't remember my own address or phone number, let alone anyone else's, but I remember the Atalissa PO number for whatever reason.

I look at a park that came in maybe the last year that I was there. It appears that it's been updated a bit since then, pretty plastic things that were not really there when I was, kind of a jungle gym thing with lots of slides. It looks like there's a sort of bus stop, if I didn't know any better, but it certainly isn't. That looks much the same as it was. Across the street there's a place with a fence around it, used to have a very angry dog. There's still a sign that says, "Beware of Dog," lots of junk on the porch, looks kind of boarded up. Across the street from that there's a big old house with swing on the front porch wrap-around patio. That's where the lady used to cut my hair, ran it out of her place. There were a lot of mobile homes here and there's still some, but it doesn't seem to be nearly as many as there used to be.

I walk up to the creek, yeah, it's very shallow right now. It probably always was, but you know, things were deeper then. This used to be a part of the creek that was hard to wade through. Creek stomping would drive my mother crazy because I'd come home covered in mud and creek water, but when I caught a crawdad I was the most popular kid in town for at least a week, so I would return to the water just about every day. It looks like it's either gotten shallower, or I was just scared of it then.

I come up to the old parsonage, it is big. The playset's gone, which shouldn't be a surprise, I suppose. Big old tree, yeah. I remember trying to climb inside that thing, I could only climb a little bit. The garden's gone, completely actually, the whole big old garden that used to be back there just isn't there anymore. The swing's gone from the parsonage, it looks like there's been some new stairs, but the patio

looks about the same. The trees on the side next to the church look about like they did. In fact, I remember, yeah, that branch was certainly one that I could easily get enough to climb on. We climbed a lot of trees, and there was a kid who liked to hide at the top and then spit on your face if you were underneath him, so you always had to be careful before you started climbing.

A lot of it looks the same, except that I'm gone. I'm not from here anymore, and I don't know anyone who is anymore. I've been gone twenty years and it's only really the people who've changed.

As I walked around town I saw nobody who I recognized, nor did I really expect to, but what did strike me was how foreign the people felt, compared to how familiar the place was to me. Taking the time to live in my own memories as I rediscovered the area simultaneously connected me to the town and separated me from it. People would wave at me and smile as I walked or drove past, but the human connection ended at that. I no longer had relationships here, except as memories from almost 20 years earlier.

I went to the town's restaurant at dinnertime, hoping perhaps there to find something resembling the human connection that I was perhaps too timid to find as I wandered through town. I was able to speak to a few people sitting nearby, mostly about things that had nothing directly to do with my project, though I did mention that I was interested in writing about the town and got some polite, if distant encouragement from some of the locals. I wrote about one episode from the restaurant that I tried for quite some time to fit into the play, but ultimately cut as a distraction from the main story.

I go into the bar/restaurant that used to be called the "University of Atalissa," but now it's called "The Old University." The bartender looks at me and asked if I wanted a PBR. I look at her and tell her, "Sure, that sounds great." Now, I'm a beer snob: I drink almost exclusively foreign or American craft beers, when I am not brewing my own. But now, I'm back in Atalissa, and I'm 7 years old again in this same bar/restaurant, and the lady there asks what kind of pop he wanted. What I wanted was a Diet Coke, but instead I ask what they have.

"Well, we've got two kinds of pop. We've got the blue pop, for the boys, and the pink pop, for the girls." I order the blue pop, and it's pretty lousy. My 4 year-old sister gets the pink pop and I thought hers is a little better, but what I really wanted was a damned Diet Coke.

But I'm back in Atalissa today after more than 20 years, and the bartender is still telling me what to order, and I guess that I look like some kind of broke hipster that stops in Atalissa and orders a PBR and no one ever sees again. She laughs and says, "Figures. I could tell as soon as you came in." I want to tell her that a PBR is the very last thing that I want and that the microbrew from Kansas City that I see is what I'd really prefer, because I am an erudite and cultured individual who appreciates the finer things in life. Instead I try to laugh as self-deprecatingly as possible and say, "Yeah, that's right, I guess."

I returned that evening to my motel room in Iowa City wondering what it was that I had accomplished in that first day of walking and talking to my recording machine. What I mostly experienced seemed to be a failure to find what I had come looking for, but I recognized that within that failure, I was finding material that indicated my own limitations as an active player in this community. I began to see my own role in the play as being defined largely by this limitation, as an outsider, who was once an insider but no longer could be an active participant, yet still needed to somehow.



## SEEKING ATALISSA'S PERSPECTIVES

When I returned on Saturday, I found a lot more of what I thought that I had come back to Atalissa to find, as I encountered the ladies of the Atalissa Betterment Committee. This organization is a group of Atalissa women who have been holding fundraisers within the community since 1991 in order to provide assistance for local children, the needy, and the elderly. I recorded my experiences with them as I walked from where they were set up downtown up to the schoolhouse where I was not able to spend much time the previous day due to an overabundance of insects.

Just spent an hour or so with the ABC's, the Atalissa Betterment Committee, or at least four of it's members. The ladies were having a bake sale as a fund raiser for a dinner they will be having for the senior citizens over Christmas. They sent me home with way more cookies than I actually bought, so we'll see what happens with those. I had two of them, and they were actually quite nice. They're really friendly. They were quite interested in what it was that I had come back for and what it was that I wanted to write about.

The ladies mentioned a few things about the guys, they said, "Since they left, the economy's really had a hard time, as far as things that the guys used to buy and things that were bought for them." They'd spend a lot of time dancing at the bars, and apparently if you danced with one, you had to dance with all of them. They gave me a book that their group put together that's a history of Atalissa: lots of great pictures, lots of cool articles including information about all the individual families. They gave me a post office box to send it back to when I'm done with it.

I'm back at the school now, poking around a little more closely. As I'm digging around through here, it looks like you can get back to where the pool was, but you gotta come roundabout way. I don't remember it being this blocked off. There's a satellite dish, so it looks like they had cable, and a great TV if I remember right, they always had great TV. Stuff's falling apart on the outside of the house, but it's been abandoned for a couple of years so no telling exactly when that happened. I'm trying to figure out where the parties would have been.

The ladies talk about it like they hadn't been in here. They talk about, of course, interacting with the guys and they were loving them. They said, "The town took care of them. If anybody came to town and gave the guys trouble, there would be a bunch of local boys who would get together and run 'em out." They felt that they'd been misrepresented by the newspapers, and all the journalists did stories about how they felt about what was going on. They thought it was a travesty how little the guys were paid.

And, I don't know if it's possible to get into the back without hopping the fence, which I don't think I'm prepared to do right now. We talked about lots of folks who have died or moved away. Most of the folks I remember have died or moved away... like me, I guess.

I was scheduled to fly out of Iowa the next day, and while I felt that now I had found some of what I had come looking for and quite a bit that I did not expect to find, I still did not have anything to

connect me to the town. Fortunately, that evening Pastor Thiede returned my call and indicated that she would be happy to talk to me after church services in the morning. In church, I saw people that I remembered and recognized for the first time since arriving in Atalissa, and their presence and their reactions to my return begin to lessen the disconnect that I have felt up until this point.

On Sunday morning, I come to church. I'm bringing my mother and my sister with me, and we're running late. We walk in five minutes after church has started and I'm as embarrassed as I can imagine myself because I had personally contacted this minister ahead of time, and now I'm showing up late with my family in tow, and I'm not dressed particularly well because the iron at the motel sucks, and I haven't been to a church service of any kind in two years, and it's at least 5 since I've been to a Lutheran service, and my God, inside it looks exactly the same as it used to...

Pastor Lynn smiles at us as we come in and shakes my hand, "You must be Nic and his family. Welcome home." It's the first time I've really thought about this word in relation to Atalissa, and it staggers me for a second.

We come into the sanctuary and sit through the service, and when I sing hymns my throat gets all tensed up, and I think about everybody around me and what they're going to think about how loud I sing, and will they think it's inappropriate. Pastor Lynn has a lovely sermon and points us out as the old pastor's family, and there are a handful of people there who remember us, and there's an older fellow who is convinced that I am my father and comes over and shakes my hand vigorously and tells me what a shame it was about those boys on the hill, and how we used to go up and see them there and how it was just so sad.

I'm too overwhelmed by this experience to correct anybody, and maybe in the back of my mind I'm thinking, how great this will be to write about if I just let him keep going.

After the service, we have coffee with some of the folks who stick around, and they show us how the parsonage looks now after their renovation. And then everybody else leaves and I sit down with Pastor in my dad's old office, and she asks what it is I want to hear about. I tell her I don't know really, except about the town, and the church, and the guys, and how it's different now, and how it isn't different at all.

Pastor Thiede and I had an approximately 90 minute conversation in her office at the church, most of which was tape recorded with her consent. I sensed from early in our conversation that she was providing some of the richest material that I had encountered so far. In addition to being more open than anyone I had yet encountered to discussing even the most uncomfortable details of the town and the Henry's situation, Pastor Thiede possessed a quality that was inherently dramatic. Her personality combined with her emotional stake in the situation gave me the first real indication that I had something that I could put on stage. I knew from this interview that she would play a large part in what I hoped to write, and indeed her section of the play is both the longest continuous monologue and falls very near the climax of the piece.

My satisfaction with my experience in returning to Atalissa prefaced what would be multiple series of expectations occasionally met but more often frustrated and eventually creating more useful material than I had expected, though rarely in the same direction. I began to more fully appreciate Peggy Phelan's ideas about the limits and possibilities of representation, particularly inasmuch as they relate to the socio-political elements of art.

Representation thus follows two laws: it always conveys more than it intends; and it is never totalizing. The "excess" meaning conveyed by representation creates a supplement that makes multiple and resistant readings possible. Despite this excess, representation produces ruptures and gaps; it fails to reproduce the real exactly. Precisely because of representation's supplemental excess and its failure to be totalizing, close readings of the logic of representation can produce psychic resistance and, possibly, political change. (Phelan 2)

Phelan's description of the nature of representation continued to assert itself with ever-increasing forcefulness, and I was able to progressively view this as an exciting challenge to succeed rather than merely a sequence of failures.

## ASSEMBLING THE PIECES

When I returned to Louisiana, I transcribed the interview with Pastor Thiede and condensed the conversation into a ten-minute monologue, which then became the climax of a series of monologues that I labeled my “Guilt Arc.” This consisted of 5 monologues, all from characters other than myself, that worked in dialectical relation to one another, with alternating defenses and attacks culminating in Pastor Thiede’s section that I saw as standing in a synthetic relationship to the pieces leading up to it. The concept of using the “who is guilty?” framework to arranging the material was problematic from the beginning, mostly because it seems too totalizing to be engaging. Even if there is not a clear answer to the question, by imposing a structure that focuses only on the guilt or innocence of various parties merely reiterated and echoed the work that had already been done by newspapers, legislatures, and the courts. A majority of the pieces from the “Guilt Arc” made it into the final play script, with the major exception of an extended prosecutorial section that went into considerable detail about the financial aspect of the story.

UNITED STATES SECRETARY OF LABOR, HILDA SOLIS: Kenneth Henry brought the Hill Country Farms’ men with disabilities to the Midwest to work in Henry’s Turkey Service’s turkey insemination business and later to load turkeys on trucks. Henry’s Turkey Service was caretaker for the men with disabilities and referred to them as, “the boys.” During the entire period they worked at the turkey processing plant, the Henry’s Turkey Service turkey plant workers were housed in a converted school house in Atalissa, Iowa, known as the bunkhouse. During all times relevant hereto, Hill Country Farms rented the bunkhouse from the city of Atalissa for \$600.00 per month.

In 2007, the monthly amount drawn on each worker’s account was \$426.28. In 2008, the amount was \$487.00. Additionally, checks from each worker’s account were issued on a regular basis to Hill Country Farms to reimburse it for “ledger” expenses, such as doctor’s bills, clothes, and entertainment expenses, and also to “cash” with notations of “spending money” and “entertainment.”

From at least 2006 until February 7, 2009, the turkey plant workers with disabilities worked on the processing line, commingled with West Liberty Foods’ non-disabled employees. Specifically, the men worked in the evisceration department. Their work hours were dictated by the times the processing line started and ended each day. It started at 5:00 a.m. Every day, Henry’s Turkey Service crew chiefs transported the turkey plant workers in vans from the bunkhouse to the plant. The vans arrived at the plant no later than 4:45 a.m. each workday. After arriving at the plant, the turkey plant workers went to the locker room and changed into required work clothes. They were required to be downstairs standing on the processing line no later than 5:00 a.m., ready for the first bird to come by. West Liberty Foods’ line operating times and Henry’s Turkey Service’s time sheets record the turkey plant workers’ daily hours as starting at 5:00 a.m. The workers were given a one-half hour unpaid lunch. When the line stopped, the workers went back up to the locker room, changed into their own clothes and were returned to the bunkhouse in the vans.

The company's charges for in kind room and board and in kind care increased annually, while the workers' cash wages never varied. It was \$65.00 a month, month after month, year after year. Hill Country Farms chose to pay this amount because it was the maximum cash wage a worker could receive that would not reduce the amount of his Social Security benefits. The company reported only the \$65.00 per month to government agencies as wages. (U.S. Labor v Hill Country)

I felt that the dry, rational, prosecutorial approach was necessary to present the economic realities of the situation, but ultimately, the details of the money no longer seemed a tenable dramatic force, but the tone was preserved in what became the Christopher Godfrey monologue, focusing instead on the living conditions. While I sensed that the question of responsibility needed to be a significant part of the overall story, as it was clearly the way that many of the individuals involved had approached the situation, at the same time this could not be the entire piece.

I returned to my initial writings and transcriptions of material from my own point of view and edited, expanded, and constructed my own interaction with the story as a new frame. I had read about the starkly honest, direct address style of Paul Linke's one-person play, *Time Flies When You're Alive*, and sought out a filmed version of the piece, and was strongly influenced by his employment of unaffected personal narrative. My play by this point had drifted from the exclusively personal to the exclusively documentary, and now I sought to meld the styles, while still centering the piece largely around my own experience and struggle with it. It was around this phase of my writing that I recorded the extended interview with my father, and the transcriptions from that conversation reinforced my own personal connections to the material. Through a combination of all of the various monologues that I had written up until this point, I created the first version of what I sensed was a coherent, unified, if still rather bloated play built around my own perspectives and engagement with all of the issues involved.

At this point in the play's development, my colleagues in the MFA Acting class and I had the luxury of being able to work directly on our one-person plays with the guidance and input of award-winning playwright Leigh Fondakowski. I was particularly excited to get her take on what I was trying to produce, since many of Fondakowski's own plays, including *The Laramie Project* and *Spill*, often are driven by both personal narratives and a strongly documentary style. As part of our first explorations, she asked us individually to answer a series of questions, with a minimum of conscious reflection, about how we saw our own work as we understood it at that point.

LEIGH'S QUESTION: What are you writing about?

MY ANSWER: How my childhood was indelibly influenced by a community and group of guys within it that I am separated from and can now only observe

Q. What do you love about it?

A. The sense of emotional power that the situation elicits from a diverse group of people

Q. Who are the characters?

A. Me, my dad, t.h. johnson, pastor lynn, the guys, sen. harkin, gov. culver...

Q. What is one thing you know about any one of them for sure?

A. I've lost something by not living there anymore, but i have something from the place that a lot of people don't

Q. What are the texts or sources?

A. Newspaper articles, court and congressional testimony, personal interviews

Q. What is driving your work?

A. A sense that there is an untold story that has multiple misperceptions associated with it

Q. What motivated you to write on the subject?

A. How patronizing the newspapers were to a town i considered home

Q. What do you want the audience to leave with?

A. A fresh look at rural life and how it operates beyond and within their expectations

Q. How do you hope they might feel?

A. ...

Q. Specific theatrical image?

A. The house, the church, projections without people.

Q. Specific dramatic event?

A. Returning to a home long lost

Q. What questions are driving the work?

A. Will it be too narrative, how to limit the scope while keeping it open

Q. What is the greatest challenge?

A. Developing the me character into someone who is dramatically viable and accessible

Q. What question does the piece answer?

A. How do we create homes?

Q. What are 3 resonant or significant ideas?

A. Home, abuse, belonging

Q. Events?

A. Leaving, returning, blaming

Q. Images?

A. School building, church bell tower, railroad depot

Q. Moments?

A. T.H. in the basement, Harkin's tieraid, PBR

Q. Sounds?

A. Kazoo, amen, radio

Q. Smells?

A. Sweat, mildew, coffee

Q. Objects?

A. Newspaper, pork rinds, plaid

Q. Places?

A. University of Atalissa, Des Moines, Goldthwaite

Q. Language from memory

A. "I don't know where he is", "welcome home", "the bear's den"

Q. What would the story's texture be?

A. Calloused

Q. "The world of this play"

A. The show exists simultaneously in 1990, 2008, and 2012 with elements from each bleeding into one another. The town as it was and the town as it is both exemplify and veer drastically from "small town" stereotypes. The reality of the theatre is also viable as the only place where these can live side by side.

Leigh's chief reaction to my material and concept was that by focusing so much on my own perspective and identity, I was obscuring the guys' story, the more compelling and recognizable aspect from the audience's point of view. She suggested that I tell at least part of the story from the perspective of one of the guys themselves, something that playwright, John Guare, had also mentioned when we discussed my concept months earlier. I had been hesitant to embrace the idea when Guare first mentioned it, due to my own fear of misrepresenting a delicate community, but after hearing the same advice again, I created the Levi character as a way to bring the guys presence more tangibly into the play. Fondakowski also advised me to create an edited draft with all of my autobiographical material excised, and determine what parts of the play needed that perspective and what could function without putting anything back into the play. George Judy's comments on this draft version also echoed many of Leigh's thoughts about where to go from this point.

**From:** George Judy (gejudy@yahoo.com)

**Sent:** Mon 11/26/12 7:00 AM

**To:** Nick Hamel ([nhamell@lsu.edu](mailto:nhamell@lsu.edu))

Nic, you have such a wealth of material to work from, and much of it is beautifully written, but we have to find a clear focus that creates a dramatic event rather than a narrative event. It will need substantial cutting still... I can see a play starting to evolve with you as yourself speaking at the beginning and end...and allowing characters to embody the fundamental conflict throughout without as much "narrative." For me the MDQ starts to become...Who decides what makes a "home?"

Structurally, I would think about alternating "pro" Atalissa speeches with "con" Atalissa speeches...working that conflict back and forth as it struggles in your own mind...give evidence on both sides of the question...make the audience see both sides and ultimately have to make a difficult choice, as you have to do....merge those two realities rather than see them as either/or.

Right now it all reads too much like a travelogue...a hunk of information about this, then about that...and dramatically it will serve better to take us into Atalissa...show us the politician...back to A...next politician...back to A... Blog--etc. back and forth. I will talk this with you when we meet tomorrow and show you what I have in mind if this is unclear. Gej

After incorporating George and Leigh's structural input and splitting many of the longer monologues into smaller sections, I found that the only dramaturgically necessary sections for my own voice were at points near the beginning and end of the play. In order to frame the story as larger than my own first and last words on the subject, I felt it was important to give other characters those positions in the play, so that my own views were placed on a similar level as any of the other characters. The last step in the development of the script was to do some serious edits to sections that were repetitive or disrupted the tempo that the new structure had developed. By mid-December of 2012, I was reasonably satisfied that the script was ready for performance, and came to the important realization that if I was indeed going to perform it less than one month later, I needed to stop thinking like a playwright and begin looking at the play like a performer.

## THE PLAY SCRIPT

### Turkey Boys

A Play Based on Actual Events

By Nic Hamel

WARREN DAVIS, FORMER CARETAKER: I never saw anyone mistreated. I saw a bunch of people come and go, and boys come and go. It was like a party in here, there was always something going on. Used to, when they was all younger, have a wrestling match and everything else in here. Some of 'em get along better than others, but as far as fussing and fighting, that didn't go on here.

They had their own little chores that changed every month. Except to cook, the cook cooked every day. But some would mop the floors, some would sweep the floors, some would vacuum all the carpets here. That's just the way it went. A couple carried out trash, everybody worked with everybody and it rotated each month. One room done a certain thing this month, next room done it next month.

In 1976, it looked a little different than this, but basically it's the same. I'm not embarrassed by any of this. It is rundown, but it is a hundred year old building. I can see every day that there's little things that need to be done, but it's like my house, there's just two of us living there and there's little things need to be done there. So I can imagine what it would look like if 40 or 50 were running through it every day.

They haven't suffered from cold weather. We got people all over the United States living in a cardboard box and going hungry. These men have never lived in a cardboard box or gone hungry. I know it's not a Holiday Inn, let's just leave it that way. This is home to them. It's kind of spooky now, being so empty. This place used to be filled with guys, all laughing and cutting up. There was always the sound of the TVs and stereos. Now they're all gone.

\* \* \*

Atalissa is and was, and ever shall be 7 blocks long and 3 blocks wide.

In Atalissa today, there are two bars, two churches, and a grain elevator. Twenty years ago, there was a lady who would cut my hair in her living room, but she got too old to do that anymore. There was a gas station for a long time, but it couldn't stay open when business got slow after the guys were taken away. On Christmas day the train horns honk out Jingle Bells as they chug through town, but the trains don't stop anymore. They haven't stopped for more than fifty years at the depot Atalissa was built around. What Atalissa has now, according to the colorful sign with the Indian princess painted on it just outside of town is "281 people and two grumps."

On the other end of Atalissa's seven blocks, at the top of the hill, the country schoolhouse was built around the turn of the last century. It hasn't operated as a school since 1957, when all the Atalissa kids got sent to the much more sizeable facilities over in West Liberty, ten miles away. Today the building's painted blue: bright, garish blue that stands out against the faded colors of the cornfields all around it.



The pictures in the papers catch this awkward presence and gave it a sort of gothic menace. The photo captions will often mention that the guys in the house painted it that color themselves. It is endearing to think of the guys outside in their work clothes, joking with one another while slopping ridiculous colored paint onto a century-old building. At the same time though, I can't escape the impression that it's offensive to print that detail, whether or not it happens to be true. I have no reason to doubt it; I remember how the guys were proud of having such a remarkable looking home, and it's difficult to believe anybody else in rural Iowa would paint their house bright blue.

But when it's in the newspapers, the building doesn't look sweet so much as it looks grotesque, horribly out of place. It's proof that the guys who lived there were not actually from this town, or an acceptable and accepted part of it. "Periwinkle paint has no place next to the austere, muted tones of Iowa small towns," the articles seem to say, "and for these guys to be allowed to flaunt such difference is surely proof of the town's failure to let them belong."

I wasn't in Atalissa for a very long time: I moved into the parsonage with my family in 1989 and left about two years later. Most of the guys had gotten to the Atalissa schoolhouse in the 1970's, and so they were an established facet of the town by the time I showed up. But, like me, they weren't really from Atalissa either: they all came up from Texas. Two guys, named T.H. Johnson and Kenneth Henry, brought them up to Iowa so they could work over in West Liberty at the Louis Rich turkey plant. They worked there full-time, eviscerating turkeys, pulling feathers, skinning, cutting guts and organs, and all of them lived together in the school building that Johnson and Henry rented from the city. They worked hard at their jobs and were fed, clothed, and seemed to be well cared for up there by Henry's Turkey Service. Everybody in town knew that much.

\* \* \*

T.H. JOHNSON, OWNER-HILL COUNTRY FARMS/HENRY'S TURKEY SERVICE-1979: That's ol' Artis drivin' the tractor over there. He's just a big ol' cutup. A big pet. He's 38 years old and he's been here 10 years. He was rated a 41 IQ when we got him but you can tell by looking at him that he's a lot better off than that.

We're not an institution and we don't want to be treated like one. Government red tape just costs a lot of money and doesn't do anyone any good. The bureaucrats and do-gooders would rather see these boys doing Mickey Mouse things like packing little plastic forks and spoons into little plastic bags. These fellows know the work here is real. They resent being put in there with the vegetables.

We'll take 'em into town for a few beers with their friends. We establish an environment for the development of heterosexual relationships for those men who show an interest.

We treat the boys in a normal way to help them all become integrated into the mainstream of society, personally, socially, economically, and in every other way. All we're trying to do is represent a bunch of people who've been left out in the world, and we'll help them as long as we can.

I got a paddle in my office three feet long and four feet wide that's a gift one of the boys made for me... for discipline. (*Laughs.*) It's never been used, I don't even spank my own kids. I'll stand in front of the same judge as the rest of them stand in front of one of these days.

\* \* \*

GOVERNOR CHET CULVER, DEMOCRAT: Since late last week, several state agencies along with federal, and local officials have been working on what can best be described as a deplorable situation in Atalissa, a community in Muscatine County. I am extremely concerned about this residence, managed by an out-of-state company, known as Henry's Turkey Service, and the employment relation it had with the men who lived there.

Last week, it was brought to the state's attention that 21 men, all of them individuals with mental retardation, were living in what could best be described as a bunkhouse, and working at nearby West Liberty Foods. The various concerns range from how these men were being paid to the unsafe living conditions.

Let me be very clear, the state of Iowa is not going to stand for this type of treatment to people who deserve our support and protection. And other unlicensed residence facilities should be on notice: we are going to find you and shut you down.

I want to extend my appreciation to all of the state employees who responded quickly and worked to this matter. We also want the victims to know that our thoughts and prayers are with them.

\* \* \*

To us kids in town, they were just "The Henry Boys," on account of their working for Henry's Turkey. Me and my friends treated them the same way we treated our younger siblings: sympathetic, with a touch of annoyance. Except of course when we wanted to use their pool, the only one in town. We'd find one of the guys wandering around town, and talk him into letting us go swimming with them up at the house, or sometimes we'd just go while they were away at work. The caretakers chased us out a few times, but so long as we weren't screaming too much nobody seemed to mind.

I shared the pity that most everybody had for their limited ability to communicate, but mostly I envied all the things they had and the things they could do. In Atalissa, my family had cable for the first time, but my mother monopolized that with soap operas, the Gulf War, and the home shopping channel. Meanwhile, the guys had control over what got shown on the biggest projection TV I had ever seen, they had their own pool to swim in whenever it was warm enough, more spending money than me, access to alcohol, pornography, and the liberty to walk around town pretty much as they pleased, at least when they weren't at work.

Their pool's gone now, and nobody remembers exactly when it left, but the basketball court where me and the guys and all the neighborhood boys would play is still there. The church is just across the street and looks much the same today as it did, at least from the outside, it looks a little brighter somehow. The wooden shutters on the basement windows haven't changed, and the stained glass windows are the same too.

A group of at least five or six of the guys came down the hill to worship at church every Sunday. Unlike the Midwestern farm families in the congregation, the guys would clap and play kazoos and tambourines

during hymns. They'd yell "Amen" and "Hallelujah" during my Dad's sermons, or really whenever the spirit moved them, which happened quite a lot. They had their own Sunday School class and were always the last folks to leave after services, standing around and drinking coffee and talking to anybody who even pretended to listen to them. I learned to drink coffee with the guys, and followed their recipe of three creams and four sugars to make the stuff palatable.

At church, the congregation treated them as if they were about my age. Most folks called them "The Boys" like everybody else, but at church some of the people called them "The Hill Gang." They called themselves that sometimes. My friends outside of church always got confused if I referred to them as anything but the "Henry Boys", so I suspect that nobody else ever called them that.

\* \* \*

GARY HOLMQUIST, ZION LUTHERAN CHURCH PARISHIONER: They were all individuals. They were all unique and there was always acceptance, acceptance for who they are and acceptance for who we are. Levi was the singer. He grew up with a gospel tradition. The pastors taught him different songs but he would always make up his own songs. He had a voice like Tom Waits and a real rhythm talent. He brought that gift to us. He'd make up a song and every time he'd say, "This song is for you." Raymond likes to color in pencil. He also liked to have an extra coffee to take with him. Last night he wanted to be a fireman. Preston was the puzzle-maker. He could read and he loved doing word puzzles. Preston called me one night. He said they have enough freedom to go to church and walk around. He sounded okay. He's kind of a funny person anyway, he's more on the grumpy side. He's one of the higher functioning men. I'm worried about the others without his capabilities.

\* \* \*

PASTOR BOB HAMEL, FORMER MINISTER-ZION LUTHERAN CHURCH IN ATALISSA: It was a very strong spiritual sense of call to go there. I had attended the bishop's conference, and he was talking, or rather pleading, with the clergy about how impossible it was to fill the small parishes. The clergy were caught up in a "success means bigger church" mentality, and he said, "We really have to have a different attitude toward the small church." I remember being very, as the evangelicals would say, "convicted" about that – just a really strong sense of, "You should listen to this man and take on the call to Atalissa."

I knew that it would be a challenging parish like I'd never had before: serious poverty, serious violence, all that kind of thing. I knew the demographic, I mean I knew it intellectually, I didn't really know it emotionally. I knew what was happening in small town Iowa. I did not know about the Hill Gang Guys, however, until I came for an interview.

After the interview was over, some of the younger members of the call committee asked, "Have you met our Hill Boys yet?" And I said, "Like... Who are they?" and they told me about them and talked about how important they'd become in the life of the parish. I was quite impressed, because that's a population that... well, it's rarely accepted, particularly in that day and age, and the age I was growing up with, you know.

The town was dingy. I don't know a better word than that. When I got there, the interior look of the sanctuary sort of described the whole place, there was that awful, grey-brown asbestos board, I think is what it was. Being a poor community, there's no mental health resources in the town, or in the county, so the former pastors really had filled that role. I called them before taking the call to see, you know, what their thoughts were, and they asked me outright, "Well, how are your counseling skills? Because you're gonna have to be the support of the community."

Typical of going into a congregation, you're going to have people giving you advice all the way around, and the people who were not that thrilled with having the Hill Guys there came down on them on the side of the music and the way they dressed. I just wouldn't play that game. I said, "These guys need to worship the way they can, and most of the congregation appreciates it even if it's a tambourine, or a kazoo, or even a little ukelele sometimes." If that's what they do, it's worship, and far be it from us to limit their ability to participate. Coming out of that Texas culture, they came out of an oral tradition anyway, but not being able to read particularly, and they weren't able to express themselves very well.

I was always touched by how deep their compassion was, but also how deep were their fears. It could all disappear like that, and their welcome could go away just like that. They always walked on eggshells in that little town, because even though they were there years and years, the town never really accepted them. They just sort of tolerated them if they didn't come around much, particularly because many of them were black and there was a racism in the community. Although, I didn't see that play a huge role in the congregation, and that did surprise me. It was mostly their, how to say... their cleanliness, or lack thereof, their lack of clothing appropriate in some people's eyes. They'd wear something a little better than work clothes because their work clothes, believe me, were horrible: even when they went to work they were covered in turkey sometimes.

But, you know, even for a good 90% of the congregation, by the time I'd got there, the Hill Gang Guys had won them over through love, that amazing capacity they had to be honest and really present with people. One of the old guys said, "Boy, I never worry that people won't care when I get sick because I know I've got the Hill Guys praying around the clock." And they were, yeah, they were. So, I made absolutely certain that nobody could get passed any sort of dress code attitudes, by not so much focusing on the Hill Gang guys, but by saying, "Look at how poor our neighbors are. Are you telling me that you want to force people to wear expensive clothes when our neighbors don't even have them?"

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LEVI, CLIENT-HENRY'S TURKEY SERVICE: What a friend we have in Jesus,/All our sins and griefs to bear./ What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer. /Oh, what peace we often forfeit,/ Oh, what needless pain we bear,/ All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer. Me and Preston sing some songs. I play the tambourine. [*To an attractive lady in the audience*] What's your name? That's pretty. I wrote a song for you. [*He sings the lady's name a la "Barbara Ann"*]

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SAGRETA DAVIS, FORMER CARETAKER: Here Kitty, are you looking for your baby? I don't know what will become of them. I've been taking care of them and feeding them, but we have to go home

pretty soon, and I can't take them with me. I told Warren I was so glad we get to come up here from Texas and see the boys again. Then all this happened. It didn't last very long.

Some of them were just getting ready to go. And they were really looking forward to going home. They were scared. They didn't know what was going to happen to them. Those boys feel like they did something wrong. They're being punished for this more than anyone and they ain't done nothing wrong. These boys – I get so aggravated! They're so sweet. I wish I could take them home with me. I don't know what I'd do with them once I got them home, though. We were like their mom and dad. We told them, "If there's anything you need, you tell us."

They're just like kids. Henry's took these boys out of institutions and trained them. Years ago, they'd just forget boys like these. They don't do that now. They taught the boys how to work. The families knew all about the boys' wages and how much they were being charged to live here. There was no secret.

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PASTOR BOB: I organized the boys—the Hill Gang guys... I never called them "boys," I don't know why I keep saying that now. I always, in the parish, disciplined myself not to use that term. Underneath all of that is a perhaps well-meaning, but definitely racist overtone, certainly paternalistic, but there still is a reality of whites calling black men "boys," and I didn't want to play into that at all. And, you know, "guys" is probably my favorite word anyway.

I worked on putting together an activities group for them, every summer when they got their vacation money, and their vacation time off, we would take them over to Adventureland. We would occasionally take them to movies, you haven't seen *The Little Mermaid* until you've seen it with the guys, they were just total enchantment, total enchantment, all of them. I remember a couple of times, we took them to the university gym in Iowa City and they played basketball or talked to people—that was their favorite athletic sport.

And, you know, just even letting them hang around my house. Some of the guys wanted to garden, they just had a hankering to garden, and my garden grew more weeds than anything else. So I just let them have some of my plot, and, you know, they just got out in the mud and... I remember having some of the little old ladies come and warn me, "You've got young daughters, and you're letting these guys hang around your house?" And I said, "There's no one who will better protect my daughters than these Hill Gang guys," I said that square to their face, and they looked at me like, "One more crazy pastor, oh my God!" But it was true, you know. I remember times the girls would fall down and boo-boo and was the guys bring them in through the back door. So they had little sisters again for the first time in a long time.

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SENATOR TOM HARKIN, DEMOCRAT-IA: The recent discovery in Atalissa, IA, where the men were housed in what I have been told is substandard housing, and were working at the West Liberty turkey plant, starting work at 2:30 or 3AM in the morning, severely retarded—mentally retarded individuals who had been doing this for many years, getting paid about \$65 a month, or 44¢ an hour, living in intolerable conditions, one man who lived there for 30 years has \$85 to show for it.

This is shocking, this is absolutely shocking that in this day and age something like this would happen, and that everyone would try to wash their hands of it. The city of Atalissa is trying to wash their hands of it. I mean, this is inexcusable. And then for this company from Texas to hire these people, ship them up to Iowa, put them in this substandard housing... They're sort of like indentured servants, it's almost like... this is pretty closely akin to slavery, folks - the way this operation was run, where they worked for these people in Texas.

Something's not adding up here, that this could slip through the cracks for 30 years and no one would do something about it. Well, finally someone blew the whistle and we are doing something about it. To treat people with severe mental disabilities in this manner, is just inexcusable at any time, it would have been inexcusable a hundred years ago, or two hundred years ago, but in this day and age it is truly inexcusable. I am convinced that crimes have been committed and these people ought to be punished to the full extent of the law for what they've done, and somehow we have to make it up to these individuals.

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KENNETH HENRY, CO-OWNER HILL COUNTRY FARMS/HENRY'S TURKEY SERVICE: We haven't tried to hide from anybody. We've had 1,500 boys go through the program. It was a lot better than letting them rot in a state institution.

These boys cannot take care of themselves. I would liken it to taking care of about a 10-year-old child. How much freedom you give them would be limited because you'd fear for their safety. The constant care is the part that nobody wants to talk about, they don't understand the program.

Basically, each month the boys got a check for \$70 in their hand. They got \$70. And a few deductions out of that. So sixty-five dollars and something cents they got. So the guys got a check and they signed the check. The check was taken to the bank and cashed. And that cash money was put in a little small envelope, and they brought that back. And each boy was paid out of his individual envelope with his name on it. And he got a percentage of his money right then. He would basically get the biggest part of it on that payday and then get five or ten dollars the next three weeks, or if it was four weeks, it would be a little less.

As a boss, I'm looking out for the company, and I'm looking out for the dollars that are going out compared to what we're getting. You know, if we don't need but one person and we got three, that's wrong. People think that we got rich out of this deal, but we haven't.

The boys take pride in their work. They don't think they're being exploited. They were aware they could leave. These individuals were their own guardians. They were no different than you or I.

\* \* \*

DRU NEUBAUER, CARETAKER: To us, that just wasn't fair pay for all of the hard work that they've done. I know sometimes if Pete wouldn't do what T.H. wanted him to do in the kitchen, he would slap him up alongside the head or kick him in the butt. He was, in my opinion, a little abusive to them.

After T.H. died, my husband and I were told that we needed to stop making repairs for financial reasons, and that enough money had been spent on the building. I bought their food and clothes. I would spend about \$4,000 every two weeks to feed the men, but then I was told to cut back spending to \$2,000 every two weeks for groceries, cleaning and laundry supplies, toilet paper. We cut way back. Then it was \$1,000 every two weeks.

The building is in complete disrepair, dirty, it gets cold, and it is drafty like you wouldn't believe. We put plywood over the windows, and that helps. Cockroaches are a problem, they're everywhere, and we spray every two weeks. When I mentioned my concerns to T.H., he said that Randy and I would lose our jobs and our place to live if I reported anything. I didn't call the authorities because I was afraid the boys would just be sent back to Texas and not receive care.

Randy and I took them to doctors and dentists and chiropractors, to the movies, the races, the dances. We did all kinds of recreational things with them. I just treated them as though they were part of my family. They're fantastic boys. They all have big hearts. They're doing fine. They're being well cared for. They think they're on a big adventure. They're a little scared, but so are we. They're like our kids. We wouldn't hurt them for the world.

I've had some of them die in my arms. We had to take the bodies down to Texas, take them back to where they came from. We pulled the seats out of the van and loaded them up, you know, in the coffin, and drove their bodies back down to Texas. I don't know if I have any tears left. They call me Mom. I think of them as my boys.

\* \* \*

LEVI: My mama raised wild turkeys. That was in Texas. Orange, Texas. I know a lot about turkeys. At the turkey plant, I used to drive turkeys onto a truck. Chasing turkeys. I waved a rubber hose and scared them. For vacation, we go to Adventureland. Six Flags. I like the loop-de-loop. Atalissa Days, we'd go dancing. We marched in the parade. We're the grand marshalls. Our float won blue ribbon.

\* \* \*

PASTOR BOB: The other thing that I intentionally made sure that I did was get into their home as many times as I possibly could without irritating the boss, for many reasons. I had a certain curiosity, but one visit would have satisfied that, but I just wanted to make sure things were on the up and up. It took about 18 months, but by that time it was a really good relationship in terms of the boss seeing me as an ally, and not just someone out to get something from the guys, or some sort of policeman.

T.H. was absolutely in charge. I knew they kept strict discipline because the Hill Gang guys were adamantly afraid of him, they didn't like getting in trouble for any little thing. I just sort of assumed they didn't like getting yelled at or put on restrictions and that sort of thing. I never got any hint of anything else, and I was rather snoopy, I must say. There was one time that I needed to talk to T.H. that they took me into his inner sanctum, his room that was right in the middle of the bowels of the basement.

I stopped in and told the guys I needed to talk to T.H. to get this trip arranged to go to Adventureland, and boy, that was all they needed. They took me right into his bedroom. He was sleeping in his bed, and it was in the middle of the day so he'd obviously been up all night. I was embarrassed, the guys shouldn't have taken me in there while he was sleeping so I backed out quickly enough, but in that short time I just... It was kind of moldy, and the air was really dank, and creepy, and dark...dark, dark, dark, no lamps, no real light, no overhead light.

The excuse was just to do this wonderful thing with the guys, but the bigger lesson to me was that there was an animal side to this guy that I had to keep an eye on. That's when I stepped up my overtures to him, talking to him and checking on the guys, not so much to police him, but just to let him know that there was someone around who would know if something happened and would deal with it. If I'd found out something, I don't know what I would have done, frankly, I probably would have called human services.

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DENNIS HEPKER, ATALISSA COUNCILMAN: I did personally make a call, as a concerned citizen. I've been a city councilman since 1992. I did observe the padlock and the chains on the doors. We were up there working on the shed, and I noticed that the front door was chained and padlocked, on the outside. And I asked about it, and the response I got from the caretakers was that the latch was broke, the wind had been banging it, and that he was going to fix it. Well, I thought about it for a day or so, and one day at work I started making phone calls and I ended talking with Human Services. I reported this to them. They wanted to know if I had any evidence, and I said, "No, I'm just concerned. I don't know what goes on in there."

As far as I know, everybody, when they were downtown they were happy guys, they had a beautiful garden, and I didn't think there was any problem with the way they were being treated personally. But, that concerned me about, you know, fire. And I explained that to them and I was informed that they were understaffed, and if I didn't have hard evidence, there was nothing they could do. So I called the local sheriff's department, and they were gonna check into it and that was 3, 4 years ago, so evidently they're still checking, I haven't heard from them...

I don't remember the name of who I talked to. You know, I can't sometimes remember where I live, I live in a very small town, so if they see me wandering around they come and pick me up. I didn't bother writing any of that information down, I guess it's like any other time you talk to somebody, it was just, that's the answer I got so I thought, "Well... That's the way it works..." I cared about their general safety and well-being, I sure wasn't concerned about them being malnourished, ill-treated, or beat or anything like that.

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JON TILLMAN, BLOGGER-SILENT IN THE MORNING: In thirty years, it never occurred once to these small-minded ninnies that something bad was happening to these men. You did not embrace them. You did not support them. You, and the rest of the sanctimonious swine in Atalissa ignored anything that might darken your conception of your locality.



You took no notice, no interest, in the hard facts of their existence. You took no time to learn anything about them at all, except for the insignificant trivia you “shared” with each other to soothe your guilt instead of working to find them decent living and working conditions in your community. You are no friends, not any worthy of the name. You are the reason, the mechanism by which, these men were exploited.

Had anyone at all, in the decades these men were in their midst, taken the slightest actual interest in them, as opposed to the childlike qualities they so fondly reminisce about, this situation would have come to light long ago. You are responsible. You are the reason these men were so easily exploited for so long. You are not the close-knit small-town community you likely pretend to yourself that you are.

\* \* \*

DENNIS HEPKER: I would say about five years ago, they quit having their open houses, they quit inviting us up to their... They used to have an open house and they had little snacks and everything. When they first came, my brother's daughter used to go over and play with the caretaker's children and it was just, it was just like any other home. And it just got to the point where, we'd go up to do our business around the outside to the water tower, and when I first started going up there we'd have these gentlemen come out and wanted to offer to help, and wanted to watch us do our job. It just got to where they didn't do that. The gate was never shut, but now it was. At the bottom of the hill there was a large sign that said, “Authorized Personnel Only” and all this and that, and like I said, that wasn't there until probably 5 years ago.

They still came downtown, they still went to church, and all of that, but as far as the... I guess as I look back, maybe we weren't as welcome in the building anymore even though we were landlords, but we got the \$600 a month, and we depended on their caretakers. I'd noticed the padlocks, but I never... the last time I'd been in the facility in... I assumed it was... I think it was very livable in there, I really do. You can tell by a person's dress about where they live, and these guys were always well dressed, and clean, and polite, and there was no evidence they were living in someplace nasty.

The safety part of it, well maybe we should have looked a little closer... but this had been going on all of our lives... They still had beautiful flowers, and they still came downtown... but we weren't invited inside. I can remember one lady who came up and got her brother and would take him back to Texas, and she said he would be down there for 2 or 3 days before wanting to come back home. To Atalissa, it was home.

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CHRISTOPHER GODFREY, IOWA STATE COMMISSIONER OF WORKERS' COMPENSATION: On the morning of February 5, 2009, state and federal law enforcement agencies presented themselves at a former schoolhouse in the small Iowa town of Atalissa. Locked behind the doors of the "bunkhouse," were 37 plus years of secrets, neglect, and deplorable actions.

A Health Facilities Surveyor for the state of Iowa investigated the living conditions at the Atalissa bunkhouse. The surveyor's report lists several observations of his physical tour of the bunkhouse, including: the main fire alarm system had been disabled, fire exits were blocked and/or padlocked shut,

the boiler was no longer functional, space heaters were used as the main source of heat for the bunkhouse, the space heaters were overloading circuits and were powered by extension cords, there were holes in the ceiling in the dining room and inside the main entry, a urine stained bed mattress was upright drying out and was moldy, mouse droppings were identified in the food storage cupboards, cockroaches were present, dirty and greasy kitchen floor, dirty and greasy surfaces near the stove, cockroaches scurrying in the kitchen during meal preparation, bathroom floors dirty with a strong odor of urine and flaking paint, shower floors very dirty with accumulation of refuse, bathroom stalls lacking doors or privacy curtains, dining room ceiling was stained with a large hole above the table, medication for laborers was sitting out on the table unattended, the medications were on a board with a string used to separate medications per laborer, the medication board was dusty with a white powder due to lack of cleaning, there were no medication administration records maintained in the facility, the medication cupboard was locked for those 12 men requiring medications.

The actions in exploiting persons with disabilities are depraved. What may have once had a seemingly benevolent purpose devolved into exploitation and a clear violation of Iowa law.

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LEVI: Last week, I slipped and broke my kneecap. They didn't believe me. Said I was trying to get out of work. We didn't go to work on Monday. They took us away from the schoolhouse. We all hollered and said, "Hallelujah!" I'm retired now. I'd like to take a music class.

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SARA SEDLACEK, NEWSPAPER EDITOR-WEST LIBERTY INDEX: I am not an expert, I will say that right off the bat. I am not a fire marshal or a health inspector. I am, however, a college graduate, and I have lived in much more "deplorable" conditions than these men did.

I have lived in places where the black mold was so thick in the bathroom nothing could take it off. I have lived in century-old houses that had working boilers and I can tell you that's far more frightening than a building without a working boiler. Yes, the bathrooms at the bunkhouse smelled terrible. What do you expect? You've got 21 guys who come home covered in turkey guts everyday. What should the bathroom smell like? I've smelled elementary school bathrooms that smell just as bad.

I'm not saying the conditions these men were living in were ideal. The bunkhouse was not the Ritz but it was their home. The men who lived in that schoolhouse lived there for more than 30 years and were perfectly happy there. They worked everyday and had a purpose. They felt they were contributing to society. They had a family in each other and in the people of Atalissa. They would not have had any of those things if they lived in a residential care facility. Their childlike innocence would have remained but I think the sparkle in their eyes would have been a little dimmer.

I think Levi will still sing his songs no matter where he is and Preston will keep doing his crossword puzzles. I hope they stay together and I hope someone is taking care of them and explaining to them what is happening in their lives. What I hope most of all, though, is that bureaucracies would learn to rectify their mistakes without flying off the handle.

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WAYNE FORD, IOWA STATE REPRESENTATIVE, DEMOCRAT-DES MOINES: I didn't grow up in a small town, I came up in a very large city. If something like this happened in a very large city, heads would be rolling as quick as we'd known about it. I don't want you to get the idea that because you're from small town Iowa that it's different from big town Iowa, or whatever. This is not about a city, or urban, or rural. This is about right and wrong to me, from my perspective.

There's blood on everybody's hands. Anybody who feels that there is not blood on their hands is just not feeling right. And so if we're gonna move with the future, then we've got to move toward it. Bjut to say, "Well, I didn't make a phone call because I didn't know who to make a phone call to," or "We don't have inspections because we don't got no money," I mean that's just too naive in the 21st Century.

So, for me to go back to my community... there were some minority people in the pictures we saw in the paper. One of the first questions I got from my minority leaders was, "Wow, where they abused? Were they called names? Were these the happy guys?" No, these are not the "happy boys," from my perspective.

So, I think we need to put a realness to this as we move on, not to run away from our responsibility, but to run toward it.

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PASTOR BOB: Part of living in Atalissa, in order to keep... While I was there, we had children molested by step-parents, and I remember training my Sunday school staff to keep their ears open, and if they hear things to bring the information to me so I could cope and help. I never had to deal with that sort of thing before, and that's what I mean about it being a violent community. And I think that was one of the reasons that I so quickly took my next call, because the town turned out to be more than I was willing to put my family through, it was just not fair. It had nothing to do with the Hill Gang guys, and it had very little to do with the church. It had everything to do with the environment of the town, and that's so sad.

I think sometimes about what Atalissa lost when the Hill Gang guys left, and the image keeps coming back to mind of a town losing its heart... and really not caring. You know what I mean? It was so... dependent, in terms of alcohol and violence dependencies that they didn't even know that those boys were their heart. And the church too, with the Hill Gang guys gone, most of that element that cared about activism, and social justice, and the welcome of scripture, left with them. And it's just so sad.

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PASTOR LYNN THIEDE, PASTOR-ZION LUTHERAN CHURCH IN ATALISSA: When the boys left, that was... so badly done. I mean, I don't even know if this was even clear in all the news: they were all slated to leave, within days. Their time here was done. We were planning parties, and a big community thing, we had already sent one wave of them off, and they had had they're goodbye. And I think it was like two days before they were slated to leave, when all of a sudden, in the middle of the night... Middle of the night. Really? (*Laughs.*) Insisting that it was such a horrible place, they were in

such danger living there, they had to get them out of there immediately. After all these years. (*Laughs.*) And so they were whisked away, and we were not let anywhere near them.

I've written letters, I've made phone calls. I was not allowed anywhere near them. Enough time passed that I thought, you know, guys like that... I have a daughter who is special needs and high functioning much like they are... The routine, and all of this, once you get a new one started... You don't want to mess with it again. I thought it would only hurt them more if I kept at it, so I let it go. I just let it go, and that is just so sad.

This was home, this was family. They were family to each other. And to suddenly be whisked away and not be able to say goodbye, and not understand why none of these people you've known as your friends for all your life can't talk to you, or aren't talking to you. I don't even know if they knew that we couldn't.

And the coverage, always asking the digging question, "Well, why didn't you know? Why didn't you do something?" Do what? (*Laughs.*) Don't judge by the look of that place, or the fact that they have space heaters up there. Judge by the fact, that's how everyone takes care of things around here. It's not that we didn't want more for them, we just couldn't give more than anyone could give themselves.

Not to mention the fact it wasn't the community's job. That's their home, it's just home. Who goes and pries into people's home, without a permit? (*Laughs.*) I had not been up there, but I was uneasy about going up there by myself, especially uninvited. Again, like going to anyone's home, I don't go to anyone's home unless I'm invited.

But a handful of the guys kept coming down, and they made no bones about telling if something's wrong or something's good. And you'd hear about it every week, someone's taking someone fishing, or to the ballpark, or whatever... It's not... They were not neglected. They were not neglected. And maybe it wasn't a lovely place, compared to a facility, but did anyone ever consider it a facility? You know, that's not quite what it was meant to be. Not to say that there weren't shady dealings, I don't know if any of them were intentional or not. Particularly where the financial end came around, because we had actually started to dig into that.

I don't know when that all started. I remember being told when I first came here that their retirement money was going back to Texas and it was building them a retirement home. So that when they were done up here, they would have a place to go and finish out their life. If they wanted to work, they would find them work, or if they wanted to fish in the fishing hole, they could fish, and they would be back on the ranch down there where they came from.

Ok, sounds great. I don't know. What do I know? And when they were starting to talk about running down and finishing up their operations here, we started asking, "Is this done? Are they gonna go?" And we found out that they had started. It was an actual project. They had started. The building was there... but it was never finished. Ok, so then what happened to the retirement money that went to build this? And... roadblock, roadblock, roadblock. You're not gettin' any answers, and then all this happened, and then... There you go.

We know where the last batch went, they went up to Waterloo, because that was all over the news. But I've got no idea where the first group is now, where they got scattered... which breaks my heart.

Tommy... He was mine. (*Laugh.*) He was my special guy. Big bear of a man, everybody was afraid of, but the man would walk out to the parking lot, and didn't matter if I had a big load of stuff to bring in, or it was just my purse, he would go out and carry it for me. He would come in, and he would robe me, and then give me a big hug. Yeah, that was precious. Yeah, and when he started telling me, in his way, he couldn't speak very well, but telling me about how he used to be abused, and hurt... He could remember, and tell me that... Yeah, that was powerful. And I don't know where he is...

He was in the first group, and we had given him a sendoff, and I gave him a little book with pictures of everyone from church, and put my name and my address and phone number and everything, figuring maybe someone would see that, and maybe help him keep contact, but...

You look at guys like Tommy and some of the others, and you can't understand them and maybe they're kind of scary because they are big and they can be violent, when you don't treat them well. But (*Laughs.*), they're wonderful individuals. Jesus was here when they were here, and he walked out the door when they left, and the people here haven't really asked Jesus back. Yeah... Life... this is not a place of life anymore.

There's no mission here. It's hard for me to talk positively about this place after seven years, I've tried so hard. So hard... because there is so much potential here. We could do so much if we could embrace who we are right now.

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I am from the town of Atalissa, and that is where I'm drawn. To draw a human being, to define them and confine them, to say, "From this you have been created, and to this you must return..."

I wish that I had more of my own stories about the guys. I'm good at telling other people's stories, but I don't ever feel satisfied with my own stories, my own experience.

Sometimes Hatfield would come over to our yard and share his pork rinds with me and my sisters while we swung on our swing set, and he'd get so worked up that he'd throw his head back laughing with his coke-bottle glasses and handful of teeth on full display.

At Adventureland, the line for the "loop-de-loop" was too long, so we rode the teacups instead. Preston and I shared our teacup with a woman who had down syndrome and I wondered if he found her attractive, or if he even thought that they were similar.

I remember this guy's fingernails and that one's knuckles, their slow Texas drawls, and the eyes that could look through you without even looking at you. When I saw into their eyes, I saw sadness and joy side by side, with the well running deep in both. Their vulnerability is tangible; you and I aren't supposed to look at the world in their kind of constantly open way or we'll get hurt, perhaps hurt beyond repair

I don't pretend to know whether the guys were capable of seeing any other way, or if they were hurt over and over again because of it. I put my own confusions and neuroses onto the guys, and presume to think that we share a special relationship to Atalissa, we are both of the place but not from it.

Maybe what I see in those eyes has nothing to do with the guys at all. I see what I miss from childhood and never actually had. Without the guys, Atalissa can't be the town that I grew up in. I see the world that I come from, a world that has long been disconnected and somewhat decrepit, lose that heart that gave it vibrancy and life.

I wonder if those lives were stolen, uprooted from their own homes once to give this dying community life for a while, only to again be uprooted and taken away to escape an injustice to them. Atalissa is home and it isn't.

One lady I talked to in Atalissa said, "If you've seen one small town, you've seen them all." I have a hard time convincing myself that Atalissa is typical. I'm scared that it might be.

Were the guys home here? I'm certain that it could have been less violent, more accepting home, but is that the most important question? How do we tell someone that they can't go home anymore? Who gets to decide?

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**CHRIS SPARKS - EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, EXCEPTIONAL PERSONS INCORPORATED:**  
WATERLOO, IA: Their adjustment is going swimmingly, much better than anyone, than I could have expected. Initially, they experienced so much change under difficult circumstances. That would have been hard for anybody. I think the guys were wary, happy and excited but wary.

We kept saying, "You know, you can work if you want to, but you don't have to, and there are other options to working." So once that really began to sink in, a number of them said, "You know, I'm not really interested in working any longer." And one of the funny things was a couple of the guys actually said to me, "I am interested in working, but not with any turkeys. I don't want to have to mess with... I don't want to have to plug turkeys anymore."

I worked with one of these gentlemen quite a bit, talked with him a number of times, and he was very concerned and afraid. About 2 months ago I saw somebody walk across our parking lot, and I kept thinking, "Hey, that guy looks really familiar, who is that?" And I realized that it was this gentleman, but he was smiling, and he looked so different smiling than he did those other times that I had interacted with him, with his frowning and those worry lines knitted on his forehead.

It really is a story of triumph, it is a story of optimism, it's a story of a resilient group of 21 people who overcame some very difficult times and experiences. I hope it seems like a long time to them. I hope they remember the last couple years in a more prominent fashion than the 20 or 25 that went before that. I don't know who we see about that lost 30 years in some of their cases, but I guess we rejoice in the fact that they're doing well today.

## IN PERFORMANCE

Because of the complexity of many of the ideas and story elements of the play, I wanted to present my performance of it in as simple a way as possible. I elected to utilize a stool Stage Left, two chairs Upstage Center, and a podium Stage Left, along with a blank back wall with projections of people and places mentioned. A tambourine was used as a property by the Levi character and held later by the Pastor Lynn character. I created sound cues to differentiate different ambient environments to be played at a low level at the top of certain monologues, though many of these were cut before the final performance as unnecessary. The lighting was a general wash that came up slowly at the top of the play and went down slowly at the end, while my costume consisted of a blue checked shirt, khaki pants, and black shoes. Distinctions between characters and scenes were made through physicalizations, changes in voice, and a fluid sense of areas corresponding to locations within the world of the play (the stool as the house, upstage as the town, the podium as the legislature).

From an actor's point of view, once an appropriate amount of time had been spent learning the material, characterization was relatively easy to approach, with the possible exception of my own character. Finding a way to present myself onstage in a way that indicated my own point of view in a way that incorporated solid physical and vocal technique proved more difficult than I expected it to be. Much of my work since arriving at LSU has been to create a "neutral" base from which to create my characters, so initially the character of myself was no more than this neutral figure, who consequently had very little dramatic interest. I got this feedback from professor Johanna Battles, who responded to my performance in rehearsals that my own character was the least interesting and, ironically, the least "me." When I attempted to bring more of myself to the role, I found myself recreating unhealthy physical and vocal habits, but I was eventually able to find success with the character by approaching it in the same vigorously "point of view" focused way that I saw the rest of the roles I played. The largest realization was that to play myself successfully, I couldn't expect myself to understand the motivations or the stakes implicitly, but rather had to work to identify these aspects of the character perhaps more specifically than in characters whose lives I only imagine.

Turkey Boys played for 2 public performances on January 18-19 in the LSU Studio Theatre as a part of the "MFA Thesis Showcase" which featured 11 one-person plays developed by the LSU MFA Acting candidates and presented in repertory with free admission. These performances were well attended and I was able to engage many audience members after the performance, most of whom provided welcome critical feedback. The reactions included being impressed by the length and range of the characters played, interest in further details about the events and what my "real" opinions were about it, and indications that there was significant potential for viable future productions of the piece.

I am certainly interested in revising the play and remounting it for different audience, particularly I would be interested in performing in a place that has some prior familiarity with the events in *Atalissa*. For future versions of the script, I would like to incorporate more personal interviews with the people directly involved in the events. There are many characters whose monologues were cut in the writing process who may or may not find their way back into the play, in particular I feel like the play as it stands leaves out many issues related to the guys' money and the behavior of the bureaucracies involved. I view the LSU production as a highly successful workshop of what I hope to eventually become a provocative one-person play that operates as a moving piece of theatre, not merely one that showcases a talented performer. I still hope that it will succeed in incorporating both Brecht's desire for the audience to see in new ways, and also Phelan's admonitions of the limits to what that sight can be.

## CONCLUSION

I do not know that I can ever be satisfied with the text of Turkey Boys, as the material is so intertwined with my own perspectives and experience, which continue to evolve. I am satisfied that the workshop performance achieved many of the goals that I wished it to achieve, and certainly more than I, at times feared it would not achieve. I remain slightly disappointed that many of the responses that I received focused more on my demonstration of skills as an actor, rather than on the ideas and feelings that the piece stirred in the audience. Perhaps future iterations will work to address this perceived shortcoming, but it may be the case that, as a playwright-performer, the performer will elicit more response than the play itself. However, a substantial amount of the responses that I received indicated that I presented something that has the potential to be a unique and provocative piece of art. I have faith that with time, revision, and additional resources, Turkey Boys may become a play that I feel confident presenting in multiple and diverse performance environments.



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## VITA

Nicholas Andrew Hamel was born in Hickory, North Carolina, and spent most of his childhood moving around and living in small Iowa towns as the son of a Lutheran minister. He earned his Bachelors of Fine Arts in Theatre with an emphasis in Acting from Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, Illinois in 2004. After graduation he worked primarily as a professional actor in theatres all over the United States including Florida, California, Indiana, Alaska, and in various touring productions including *Gypsy*, *The Producers*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *A Christmas Carol*, *A Wicklow Wedding*, *Davy Crockett*, *South Pacific*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *The Boys Next Door*, and *Biloxi Blues*. He was accepted into the LSU Master of Fine Arts in Acting program in 2010 and has appeared as an actor in multiple LSU and Swine Palace productions including *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*, *King Lear*, *The Metal Children*, *Heist!*, *Electra*, *August: Osage County*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Taming of the Shrew*, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare Abridged*, *How Do You Run With a Shell on Your Back?*, *A Free Man of Color*, *Spill*, and *All the King's Men*.