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

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

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
Ronald William Smith
B.S., Clemson University, 2000
May 2003

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Abstract.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Preproduction.....	3
Rehearsal Process.....	7
Production Run.....	36
Postproduction.....	37
Conclusion.....	38
Vita.....	39

Abstract

This thesis will explore my development of the character Ansel Smith in Tracy Letts' *Killer Joe*. The thesis is in a journal format and it will chronicle the rehearsal process from preproduction, through the run, and postproduction. It will explore the progression of finding this character and the overall process of developing the show with two casts.

Introduction

The role of violence in our society is as prevalent today as it ever has been. We are bombarded with images of atrocities that men do against men. It is throughout our television shows, on the news, and in our theatre. We face the spectacle of ourselves everyday.

The play *Killer Joe*, by Tracy Letts, explores the reason violence comes to us with such ease. The play consists of five characters: Ansel, the father; Sharla, his wife; Dottie, Ansel's daughter; Chris, Ansel's son; and Killer Joe Cooper, the man hired to kill Ansel's ex-wife, Adele. The family has brought this killer into their home because they are unable to pay his money upfront. So instead of money, Ansel gives Dottie to Joe as a retainer. Dottie and Joe build a relationship that turns everyone against one another in the end.

The family depicted in the play could be judged as Trailer Trash but that just makes it easier to lay blame. We do not have to think it could happen to anyone we know. The truth is that these circumstances are going on in all classes in every neighborhood, from O.J. Simpson and Robert Blake to Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Angola prison is filled with characters from this play, people whose options have run out and the only choice left to them, or so they thought, was a criminal one.

Louisiana State University chose *Killer Joe* for the spring show in the 2002-2003 season. The play was directed by John Dennis, (JD); set design, Nels Anderson; costume design, Kjersten Lester-Moratzka; sound design, Louis Rhodes; and properties master, Marshal Kesler.

So why should we try to bring this world to life? Does it apply to the audience who comes and sees it? Yes. The ease of violence in our society is prevalent on T.V. and

on stage. The audience can see a man's head chopped off on the Soprano's, and we've come to accept it. But a lady takes her top off and we censor it for nudity. These issues will be placed into the audience's lap without the benefit of a remote to turn the channel. The violence and nudity are real and uncompromised. The Baton Rouge community is facing the results of horrible violence with a serial killer still loose in the city and the memories of 9/11 still fresh in everyone's mind. So this play has to have the edge of violence, but we must challenge the audience to see the relationships within the family, find the bond that keeps the family together in that trailer, and make sure the audience understands the choices we make.

This thesis will explore my development of the character Ansel Smith in *Killer Joe*. The thesis is in a journal format, and it will chronicle the rehearsal process from pre-production, through the run, and post-production. It will explore the progression of finding this character and the overall process of developing the show with two casts.

All quotes and references to the script are from the 1999 edition of *Killer Joe* published by Samuel French.

Preproduction

Spring 2001: Meeting Paul Dillon

While I was involved in the spring semester of my first year in the Masters of Fine Arts program at Louisiana State University, my acting class received a visit from Paul Dillon. He is an actor from Chicago who works in film, theatre, and improvisation. Because of his visit, the both MFA classes read *Killer Joe*. Paul had played Killer Joe Cooper in the original production in Chicago and performances off-Broadway. We worked with him, primarily on improv, for several days surrounding the Mardi Gras holiday. (We even took a special trip down to Bourbon Street while he was here). He showed us his reel, a resume of his film work, and some of his work with his improv troupe, Bang-Bang. He also shared with us some of the experiences of working on the play *Killer Joe*.

When I read this play I knew I wanted to be in it at some time in my career. It's one of those plays that inspires an actor. The characters were rich with depth and complexities, and yet they were so violent and almost unlovable. The play was a challenge, and I was very intrigued by it. It reminded me of an early Sam Shepard piece, but without the symbolism and with more violence. It has the qualities of a Jacobean piece, which embraces its violence. Those emotions and energies push the play from one scene to the next.

When Paul first talked about the play, he brought up the love between Joe and Dottie. Their connection is surreal and not the norm. It challenges the audience to see their relationship as a good thing. This is what I thought was the wonderful thing about the play. This family is most unusual and surrounded by remote moral values, perhaps

even non-existent values. The challenge of making this family believable and worth watching was enormous.

Paul said that many of the actresses playing Sharla, the stepmother, had trouble with the role, specifically the rape with the chicken bone. In this scene, Joe makes Sharla give oral sex to a chicken leg on his crotch. He told us that several of the actresses quit the show during the runs because the scene and the play itself wore them down. It was an emotional nightmare. Now I had to do this play.

Spring 2003

The university had talked about doing the play during the second year of my MFA program, 2001-2002. But it was pushed back to the spring of 2003 and the cast was to be comprised of MFA students. Right before the audition, the director announced that there would be two casts.

The audition called for a monologue from the play. Looking at the casting, I knew I could only play two roles, either the father, Ansel, or Joe. Ansel didn't have a monologue in the play so I used one of Joe's from the end of the play. Since I had worked so often with the director, I felt my challenge with the audition was to reveal something completely different in my work. I made Joe darker and more sinister than he needed to be but in the process I didn't give him enough power. It was a chance I took to try and surprise the director instead of just playing the monologue as I felt it read. In the end, I was called back for the father, and we read from the script. Two weeks later the cast list went up:

Ansel: R.W. Smith/Shاون Halliday

Sharla: Jennifer Kelley/Michelle McCoy

Dottie: Libby King/Tara MacMullen

Chris: Brace Harris/Adam B. Hose

Joe: Chris Cariker/Preston Davis

We did not yet know who would work with whom. The director wanted us to focus more on our own characters and be surprised by who would be in our family. The idea that the family could look different every time you saw them. This pushed us to live more in the moment and to listen.

Finding Ansel

My initial research into finding the character of Ansel was within my memories. I remembered the people I grew up with in rural South Carolina. My grandparents on both sides were tobacco farmers. The people in their small community, Hebron, were the characters of this play. Most people in Hebron wouldn't kill their wife for insurance money; they have that small town belief system. Everyone knows everyone. You see them at the store or at church.

One story that leapt into my head was the story of a wealthy family right down the road from my grandparents. In fact, my uncle dated their daughter. The father of the family, we'll call him John, had had some troubles with a local auditor looking into his business affairs. One day there was a fire at the auditor's house and he perished in his home. The autopsy showed he had died of smoke inhalation and the Sheriff on the scene said it was an accident. The family of the auditor hired their own investigator who had the body autopsied again. What the Sheriff and the coroner missed was the fact that the auditor had been tied to a chair and shot several times before his house was burned down. John, the Sheriff, and the coroner were all eventually charged with murder.

This story is about people I know. I swam in John's pool. They seemed like regular people, but when faced with a difficult situation they chose violence very easily. They felt it was the only option. That is Ansel's world.

Ansel seems grounded in his home. The irony of the mobile home is that it does not go anywhere. Each home is moved into place and then just sits there until it rots, burns down, or gets knocked over by a tornado. Ansel is as mobile as his home. He seems locked in place. His love for the television is an addiction. He can't pull himself away from it. It comforts him and lets him escape to a world of infomercials, monster truck rallies, and *Girls Gone Wild*. In the most horrific scene in the play, the rape and beating of his wife, he tries to turn on the T.V. Is that where he finds the violence? That's too easy of an answer. The potential violence comes from within. It is not new nor is it original. The violence in Ansel is there from the beginning but it lies dormant, as most of his emotions, and it has to be pulled out of him. That struggle has to be apparent from the start. He must not appear eager to give away his daughter, kill his ex-wife, or help kill his son. The inner struggle he must go through to come to those decisions must be made clear to the audience. If they do not see the struggle, they can just write-off the family as poor and ignorant. If they see the circumstances of the family and they see it's a decision that becomes inevitable, then they may accept it.

Rehearsal Process

Spring 2003

1/08

A Beginning

We started the day off discussing the play with the director. JD did not tell us our specific cast yet. He wants us to work with different people in each scene. It's like the characters don't know to whom they are talking. Their own family can be foreign.

The director laid down some rules for the rehearsals. The actors are to use a Texas dialect whenever in the space. He wants us to live in these characters as much as possible. Since rehearsal time will be shortened due to two casts, the time that is not on stage can still be used productively by watching scenes and taking notes on what the other actors are creating.

One of the assistant directors will interview the characters after each scene. The character will respond to what just happened in the scene. They can explore what everyone else in the scene was doing as well.

We talked about the characters, the rawness of them. They exist in a world much different from ours. It's easy to be violent. It is the best answer to a problem and can be embraced as a good idea. They have their own morality.

The director pushed us to be in the moment. The play is about what this family wants and wants now. Feel free to scratch, eat, drink, or touch whatever comes to you. JD described it as a Chicago style of acting. Grittier and harder. Down and dirty, not technical. He also challenged the MFA's to show him things he'd never seen from us before.

JD felt the family was orally fixated. Each one was “sucking on a nipple.” This weekend I’m going to focus on finding out what that is for Ansel. I also will make a list of what he wants from his wife, his family, his job, his life, etc. One of the last things we did before reading through the play was discuss clothing. JD put Ansel in boxers and a wife-beater T-shirt at home and overalls/mechanics outfit when coming home from work. I might try to go without the T-shirt. They often walk around the house naked. This is an ugly family, and they are comfortable with themselves.

We finished rehearsal by reading through the play, switching actors every scene. The play has such a nice feel to it. It’s a quick play and the action has to push it through. There can’t be ugly pauses and analytical thinking onstage. The moment comes in the words.

1/09

Tight Spaces and Intimate Scenes

We started the second day with the layout of the trailer taped to the rehearsal room floor. My first impression was how tight of a space it was going to be. There was very little room to move and that seemed perfect. This space is a pressure cooker for these characters. They are crammed into this aluminum house. They are forced to be on top of each other, they can’t escape. Movement through the house was difficult, so our blocking had to be specific. The actor had to have a purpose and be focused on being in the moment. Living in the house was difficult. Nothing was easy for the family. Lighting the stove, getting a beer, turning on the T.V., all become monumental tasks.

The Rituals and Touch List

The rituals and touch list was an idea of the director for the cast to keep up with the rituals we were establishing as we rehearsed. He wanted us to keep track of the items we touched and how they became a part of the landscape or the scene. Some of the rituals we created were: lighting the pilot light on the stove, finding a cold beer in the fridge amongst all the warm ones, slapping Chris on the head, stepping on refuse on the floor, getting the T.V./remote to work. The touch list included: tools, beer, pillows, potato chips, perfume, and the remote. These combined to tell part of the story of their lives. We were creating this day-to-day existence. These were the basics of their lives, which would be ripped apart by the end of the play. They are the underpinning of living in the house. The audience wants to see the action of the characters. What we are creating now is what makes them enjoy the wait for that action.

We worked through Act I switching casts periodically. One scene in particular stood out today, scene 3, the scene in which Ansel tells Dottie about the dinner with Joe. Ansel has agreed to “give” his daughter to Joe as a retainer for his services. She has put on a dress at her father’s request. There is an obvious layer of sexuality between the two in the scene. Ansel moves to a forbidden place when he sees her all dressed up for Joe. His feelings make him attack her when she threatens to change clothes. Chris breaks up the two and the next dynamic begins: a confrontation between the two alpha males of the house. Who is in charge? By the end of the scene it appears it is Chris.

Then Joes arrives. This scene will be a challenge. How much does Ansel like his daughter? How far would he go with her sexually? Would he hurt her? Does he lose the battle to Chris or is he just waiting to reassert his dominance?

1/10

To Steal or Not To Steal

Today's rehearsal was a general run through of Act I, first one group in a scene and then the other. Shawn was Ansel first. I watched the scene and I listened to the director as he gave notes on his performance. I began to wonder what the director wanted from me. Am I supposed to take notes on Shawn's performance and apply them to my own? Shawn is naturally funny, whereas I have to find the humor. I'm spending my time right now exploring that in each scene. I feel more natural when the stakes are higher, so I don't feel an urgency to explore the intensity of emotion in the scenes right now. In these initial rehearsals I'm finding my Ansel, but how much should I let Shawn's Ansel bleed into mine? His ability to find that humor makes it easier for him. So when I see him discover things in a scene, am I stealing it if I use it? Would I have found it? In some instances I think so, but I don't have the time of discovery now to find out. I'm being shown a character but I prefer to discover it.

Some choices we have are very similar, and I feel a desire to change mine so we don't appear the same, but the character should be a reflection of my acting choices, so I shouldn't change what is natural for me just because of someone else's performance. That's the reason I don't watch other versions of a play while I'm rehearsing it. I want the performance to be based on my perception of the character, play, and story. Watching someone else rehearse the play is affecting the character I'm creating. My work feels like an amalgam of both of our choices. It feels dirty. I feel like a puppet and a thief. Right now, I don't feel like an actor.

1/11, 12

I Want

No rehearsal this weekend. I worked on lines and an “I want” list. This is a break down of what the character wants.

Ansel wants:

- New T.V.
- An end to this sinus pressure
- Some pills for his back
- To look at something different than the bottom of a car everyday
- To get Chris to stop borrowing money all the time
- Sharla to stop wanting so much, she seems to always be trying to improve things instead of letting things stay the way they are
- Dottie to get a job
- Arthritis to let up on my hands
- Get rid of this gout in my toe
- A new mattress
- A recliner

1/13

Changing Up the Beats

Today’s rehearsal was about breaking the scenes down into beats. The MFA I’s are still learning this process so the scenes sometimes have to be worked over and over. As they find these beats it gives me time to explore the beginnings and endings of beats. It’s nice to try to end a beat earlier and see if that creates a whole new dynamic for the

character. Maybe Ansel agrees to kill Adele earlier in the discussion with Chris. So why would he keep talking to him? Do I wish to find out if this plan can actually work? Chris has been known to fail before, with both his rabbit farm and as a dope dealer. Therefore, giving over to Chris' whims is not easy. Ansel needs to make sure that Chris has a good plan before he agrees to it.

I'm struggling to find trust with the cast because of the rotation. It still feels like an audition. That feeling causes anxiety and anxiousness. It feels like we could be cut at any moment, so is this a process of fear?

The exploration of character is coming though. I can feel Ansel. He's dirty, hungry, achy, and old for his years. He needs the world to proceed at his pace. If he won the lottery he'd just buy a nicer trailer and live in the same spot. It's easier. Easy is good.

1/14

The Trailer

Moved into the space today. We have the floor, which slopes toward the T.V. It's sucking us into it. The space is tight and intimate, perfect for this play. The audience will be on top of the performers and will sense the sweat and fear within the trailer.

We started into Act II. It's now eight days later from the end of Act I. Joe now lives with the family. He's the new Alpha male in charge of the family. Is this necessarily a bad thing for Ansel? On the one hand he has someone other than Sharla controlling his actions. When can he watch T.V., eat, and even sleep? (Joe and Dottie having sex probably keeps him up). He's lost control of his family, but did he want control? He let Sharla push him around so why would this change his outlook? At least now he knows the family is safe with Joe in the house. Nobody will mess with the family

if Joe's there. There are plenty of people who would like to see Chris messed up, so this could be a benefit as well. Maybe this was the best thing for them.

JD feels that when the family sees Chris after getting his ass kicked they should keep their distance and they don't want to help. I agree with not caring about him so much, and it would probably not be a good idea to help him since those boys may come looking for all of them. While there is a sense that this has happened before, this time seems to be the worst. I don't think Chris has ever been hurt this bad. It's like a car wreck, and I don't think Ansel can look away. Maybe he looks and moves away.

In rehearsal I tried to explore his face, even touch it. But as soon as I touched it, I got some of his blood on me. It seemed too real. It brought home the reality that all of the family could get hurt or killed by these men who want Chris. It was also a reminder that we have a killer in the house. He could very well do the same damage to all of them. There's a feeling that something could happen at any moment, and it permeates the trailer for the rest of the play after Chris walks in covered in blood. Adele is about to be killed, the killer lives in the trailer, and Chris was almost killed by the people to whom he owes money. There is no comfort left in the home.

1/16

Pressure

Had a meeting with JD. He stressed how much he wanted to see more physicalization of Ansel's beaten down state. He is slumped, sore, and sick. The sinus pressure he has from living under a car and breathing in all that oil and road dust has to be affecting his lungs and his head. The pressure is constant, and it affects his hearing as well as his breathing. He needs relief.

JD also wanted another beat in the Ansel/Dottie scene to suggest what might have happened in their past. Did Ansel touch her the wrong way in the bathtub one night? Did he make her touch him? Is that why he wants to get rid of Adele? Maybe she knows his secret about Dottie. Does Rex know? Could Sharla know? If she does, she's never said anything about it. Perhaps that's why she plans the whole scheme. She hates this family.

JD wants us to be more specific with our choices and raise awareness of the whole trailer. He wants us to think of more activities around the house and bring those into the living room from offstage in the bedroom/bathroom. What has the character been doing offstage before they enter? What daily routines are they engaged in, that they carry into the scene they are entering? The specifics of the entire trailer, what the audience sees, and what is offstage, will make the actions more specific and it will give the audience a more in-depth look into the characters.

Does the gum incident happen all the time? What's his affinity to gum? Ansel walks into the house with a pocket full of tools and trinkets. His pockets are filled with junk, like the trailer itself. This is just one more symbol of the weight keeping him down. The tools and crud he carries around with him are the symbols of his trade, but they drag on him like Marley's chains, and keep him leashed to the trailer like T-bone, the dog next door. Ansel is the pet of the house, and his doggie treat is gum.

1/20

Dashes & Ellipses

Spent the day running Act II scene 1 & 3. One of the stumbling blocks of the show right now is the incredible amount of ellipses and dashes. Tracy Letts stresses that “ellipses (...) indicate an incomplete thought, or trailing off”, and “dashes (-) indicate an

interruption and overlapping”. This makes script memorization so important and difficult. A cue line can be an incomplete thought from the other character, and your line may not make sense with what they have said before the ellipsis, but the scene as a whole makes complete sense to the audience. It means the lines have to be learned very well and endlessly rehearsed. We are still in the process of determining the casts so continuity may take a while.

This style of writing is very dramatic onstage. The characters seem more real because their constant interruptions are more like the normal conversations in every family. Their thoughts and ideas have been repeated so often that they know the end of each other’s sentences before they hear it. A scene that demonstrates this is the interrogation scene between Joe, Sharla, and Ansel. The interruptions are numerous, and they add tension and fear to the cross-examination. You can watch Sharla and Ansel searching for the truth in their lines, stumbling through explanations, and when they hit the wall of a lie, they backtrack and repeat themselves. Their survival instinct comes out, but in the end, Joe, the alpha male beats them both down.

Working on Act II, 3, I played with the dynamics of the power struggle today. There is a feeling that Ansel has moved up the chain in this scene. He pulls Chris down below him in an attempt to save the family. Joe is going to rip the family apart and kill them all, now that they don’t have the money. Ansel can only save himself by giving Chris to Joe. First he gave him Dottie and now, Chris. Ansel responds in II, 4, to Sharla when she says that Chris only thinks about himself: “Well, that’s all anybody really cares about, isn’t it?” Ansel’s survival instinct is to give up one of the family to save himself. He cares only about himself.

Production Notes

The production notes for the show are very specific. There is to be no pre-show music, only static from the T.V. In fact all music and sound should be sourced, with the exception of scene changes, curtain call, and intermission. So what type of atmosphere is that creating? It's a natural feel. The only sound is coming from the stage and not surrounding the audience. It emphasizes that the audience is watching a real family inside their trailer. It's not a dramatization of their lives; it is their lives. The reality of the experience must be in every aspect of the technical side of the production. The set we are working on is essentially a trailer. The lighting is restricted to source lighting plus filler instruments. The floor is raked toward the T.V. Their whole world is being funneled into the television. There are obvious connections between this play and T.V. violence but is that the only reason the T.V. is there? The play starts with a T.V. running with only static. Static. Stationary. Not going anywhere. No clear picture. White noise. If Chris doesn't come up with this plan would Ansel be content to just sit there? Probably. But it is Sharla who gets tired of the static. She's the one who can't stand it there and reaches out to another. How does she meet Rex and when do they conceive such a plan? That doesn't seem clear, it's not important. People who commit adultery do it because of the problems in their relationship. Sharla has problems with Ansel. Ansel is very content with his life. He is settled down in the truest sense. He's so comfortable with their environment he won't even get the huge limb off the roof that's crushing it. He's letting the world collapse around him. He's escaping into the T.V. and hiding from everyone. The set exemplifies this in action.

1/22

Animal Imagery

My first year in the program, Ann-Marie Davis worked with us on animal imagery. She had us watch a specific animal at the zoo for an hour and then bring it back into performance. We first moved as the animal. A literal interpretation. Then we gradually turned the animal into a human with the same characteristics. My animal was a warthog. This animal was sedentary and comfortable in its own filth. It wallowed in mud and laid about as much as possible, but when it was stirred up, it could attack with speed and ferocity. I've begun to implement this imagery into Ansel. The sounds came first. The grunting and rooting seemed perfect. They added to the gruffness of the character. He wallows on his couch, in his underwear. The warthog is safe in his burrow. He cowers from stronger animals, such as Chris, at times, and always from Joe. But he can attack as well. The scene with Dottie in her dress and with Chris after they lost the money, are examples of this. Ansel has nothing to lose at the end of the play, so you see his survival instinct take over; he responds as an animal. He is only focused on keeping his couch and his T.V. His environment must stay the same and he'll do what it takes to keep it that way.

1/23

Greed

Ran through Act I. I tried to explore the animal imagery but it came out as an old man instead of an animal. My warthog imagery was too prevalent and I lost the actions in the scenes and did not listen as well. The focus of the scene became the animal. I have to learn to blend the two together: animal imagery and staying in the moment. The director

said there were too many little movements. I guess I was working too hard on technique, instead of just being there in the moment. Also, there was too much activity during the pivotal moments in the scene. When Chris is convincing Ansel to kill Adele, I was busy with rolling a joint and smoking. JD wants to keep the activity to a minimum during plot points to help the audience focus on the story. The whole first scene needs to be dialed down a bit. The character can just be there. I had placed too much emphasis on coming out of the gate with too much energy, when the reality of the scene is it's the middle of the night and he's just woken up. He's not a bundle of energy running around the trailer.

JD gave us another focus for the characters. Greed. How much do they all want the money? Ansel seems the least interested in the money. He's content with his environment and meanders through life with a smile as long as he has a beer and a roof. But he faces two obvious points in the play where he comes to decisions to put the plan in motion to get the money.

The first point is when Chris tells him about Killer Joe. Earlier I explored: at what point Ansel agrees to Chris' plan? Now I can discover why he agrees to it. He agrees to Chris' plan, but only after a good bit of discussion. What is the factor that makes him decide to do it? In the text he agrees to it at the end of the scene with the line "okay," but I think he agrees to it when he asks Chris "How much does a thing like that cost?" His interest in Chris' idea is his tacit approval of the plan. What preceded this approval? Ansel finds out Adele has not left him any money. His ex-wife didn't leave him anything. He wouldn't have left her anything either but that's irrelevant. She was of little use to Ansel and now that she isn't leaving him any money she isn't doing him any good at all. I believe that is the point when he agrees to kill Adele, but he doesn't agree with Chris'

plan as yet. He knows Chris and his failed plans, so I believe the next part of the scene is really an interrogation by Ansel to see if Chris has really thought this out and if it really can be done. The money intrigues Ansel but he knows that Chris is desperate for money to pay back Digger Soames and Chris has a history of failed plots. So he keeps questioning Chris about the plan to see if they can actually succeed. So when he says, “okay,” he is agreeing to the plan. He already agreed to kill Adele. In fact I think agreeing to kill Adele was easy for him; the plan was the hard part.

The second time Ansel is faced with a decision about the plan is just after Joe has left from his first visit. Joe has said he will do the job if they give him Dottie as a retainer. Ansel needs to give Joe his daughter as a down payment for killing Adele. Ansel already wants Adele dead but the plan has now hit a huge obstacle. What incident pushes Ansel to agree to give up his daughter? In the stage directions it comes immediately after his T.V. dies. Is that the impetus? The death of the television? Is Ansel’s greed that great? He wants a new T.V. so badly he’ll give up his daughter for it? No, I think he agrees to give up Dottie for two reasons.

The first reason is Dottie herself. A life with Joe, a successful cop in Dallas County would actually be a step up for her. She’d be like Eliza Doolittle living with Henry Higgins. She’d live a better life and learn about the real world. He would definitely protect her and provide for her better than her own family can. I don’t think Ansel realizes Joe will move into the trailer, so Ansel really thinks it might do her good. But that judgment may be clouded by his thoughts of Adele and the money.

Ansel wants Adele dead. He wants her out of his life. Once he gets that thought in his head he can’t stop. The money would be nice but Adele needs to die. She treated him

like shit and she didn't even leave him any money. His focus on seeing her dead, clouds his judgment. He even tells Chris, after Joe leaves, that they could do it themselves. Could they? Sure, but they'd certainly be caught. His decisions are based on Dottie and Adele. The money is the nail in the lid of her coffin.

1/24

The Walls Fall

Ran Act II, 1 & 3. In the first scene, it starts off like the beginning of the play. Chris is entering the trailer late at night but this time he has been beaten by Digger Soames' boys. How does this affect Ansel? Ansel has definitely seen Chris get his ass kicked before but this time the beating appears to be a lot worse. Also, we have Joe living in the house and the plan has still not taken place. So Ansel worries about Digger's boys coming over and finishing Chris off. Joe tells him not to worry.

Joe has become the alpha male at this point so Ansel seems calmed by Joe's calm. It's not Ansel's problem. The scene is filled with interruptions and incomplete ideas. As actors we struggle with the exact order of the lines but everyone pushes through it and the jumbled mess appears chaotic but real. Hopefully, as we become more comfortable with the lines we don't lose that sense of chaos. It gives the start of Act II a big push.

Scene three is set after Ansel has been to the lawyer and he finds out Adele's money goes to Rex, not Dottie. All of this was for nothing! He wanted Adele dead but he also wanted that money. Now it's going to her "piece of shit boyfriend."

And Joe won't get paid. That is a threat to Ansel. Ansel knows that Joe will kill them if the plan doesn't go well. Chris has screwed up and now they have to figure out a way to get Joe out of their house. In the end, Ansel gives him Chris. He sacrifices his

other child to save his own life. But when he first enters from the lawyers, I think it's the first time we see Ansel succeed in standing up to Chris. It is not in his physical strength but in his knowledge of the plan's failure. He knows that Chris' vulnerable point is the money. Now they don't have it. Chris will be unable to fight back. Ansel sweeps the rug out from under him and then pounces on him. He demeans him and crushes him with his knowledge of Adele's will. Further, Ansel separates himself from the problem. He puts all the guilt upon Chris. Ansel lets himself off the hook and now he doesn't feel any guilt because it was all Chris' fault. As Sharla later says, "I could have told you Chris would fuck it up."

1/25

Dottie

What happened between Ansel and Dottie? Whatever it was, it was enough for her to shoot him at the end of the play. The text mentions nothing specific. If there was something, it was perhaps inappropriate but not molestation. I don't think Ansel has that much filth in his soul. But he definitely could have found himself attracted to her once she was grown. It's a small trailer park with few women.

The transitional period between Adele leaving and Sharla's arrival is probably when Ansel experienced sexual feelings for Dottie. He was lonely and he had this young girl walking around the house, growing into her body. Maybe he watched her and had thoughts. Maybe he let a hand linger too long where it shouldn't, maybe he took ideas into his bedroom, but I don't think he acted on them. His bond with her is the least explored in the script. Tracy doesn't give the actor a lot of insight into their past. From the scenes they have together, there is a definite bond. She comes to Ansel when she feels

uncomfortable with her dress. She feels vulnerable and she comes to her Dad. She doesn't fear her Dad; she understands him and I think she knows his intentions better than he does. But she does shoot him...

1/27

Skinny Legs and All

The chicken leg scene has arrived. The scene is a roller coaster of action and emotion. There are many discoveries in the scene: (1) The insurance was \$100,000; (2) Sharla knew it was \$100,000; (3) Sharla cheated on Ansel with Rex. Then the violence takes over. Breaking the scene down into two parts, the discoveries and the violence can help me find the emotional range of the scene and which actions I can play.

Part one: The Discoveries

Ansel needs a beer more than anything when this scene begins. An easy urge. An easy fix. Joe interrupts that. This play takes these huge jumps all the time. At the end of Act I when Sharla and Ansel are arguing over telling Dottie what to expect with Joe, there is a comical flair to the scene that changes immediately when Ansel tries to seduce his daughter, and Chris interrupts them. The quick turns lead to quick explosions. So in Act II, 4, Ansel is faced with Joe wanting his fee as soon as Ansel walks in the door from the funeral. As much as Ansel wants to ignore Joe and any talk of the insurance money, Sharla won't shut up about it. Ansel is again trapped in his house. Ansel then learns that the money was twice as much as he was told, \$100,000. How does Ansel react to that amount and Sharla's knowledge of it? He's confused, and it adds to the building pressure in his head. The plan has gone to hell; Rex gets twice the money that Ansel hoped to get. He was so close to \$100,000 and now it's gone.

Next comes the major discovery in the play for Ansel; Sharla was cheating on him with Rex. Sharla was setting him up to lose all that money. She was sleeping with his ex-wife's boyfriend and planning on taking Ansel's money. She even had been part of the plan to set him up. This discovery determines his reactions to the violence that ensues.

I found the escape for Ansel during this scene, in the corner of his trailer, looking out a window facing the yard. With a foot propped on the cooler at his feet, he can stare into the yard and not face anything in the trailer. He can escape. I used this window for the scene in which Ansel tells Chris about the insurance money going to Rex, and I used it when Ansel finds out about Rex and Sharla. She crawls to Ansel for help but it's too late. Ansel's total focus is outside of the trailer. He's in the yard with the dying shrubs and the dust; blowing in the breeze away from this spot. He can stand at that window and leave the trailer, letting the violence happen all around him. Ansel's in his safe place.

Part 2: The Violence

The violence is preceded by Joe's interrogation of Sharla and her admitting the truth. Ansel's crappy shanty has fallen down around him. So when Joe punches Sharla, he wishes he was doing it. He wants to rip out her heart and feed it to T-Bone but he just stays by the window and watches the world. Ansel is not focused on anything in that trailer. He can't think about Sharla and what she was doing with Rex, in those pornographic pictures. Every time he looks at her during the rest of the scene, he has to picture Rex doing things to her that he saw in the pictures.

Rex is fucking Ansel's ex-wife and current wife at the same time. He has hatched a plan that led to the death of the mother of Ansel's children and he has taken off with the insurance money. Ansel just can't handle all of this at once. He can't find escape from it.

He can't stare out the window because the violence in the trailer encompasses them all. He tries to watch T.V. but Joe won't let him. In the end, he is forced to watch Sharla being raped with a chicken bone and it breaks him. Even Ansel can't wish that on anyone. As horrible as his feelings for Sharla are during this scene, he still finds compassion for her and tries to help. He does it to help himself as much as her. He doesn't want her dead and he can't watch that rape again. I think in their world, screwing around on each other is acceptable, just don't bring it into the house.

The thing about Joe is he can't be contained. Ansel knows that, just like T-Bone, once Joe gets started he might not stop with just Sharla. Once the chicken bone comes out Ansel is quickly brought back into the trailer from his "safe place." The oral rape of a woman with a chicken bone is a horrible image. Tracy Letts, through Joe, was demeaning this woman in the worst way he could. The whirlwind is too much. Ansel tries to stop Joe but he just doesn't have the nerve. He is accepting his own death at that moment by letting Joe continue to hurt Sharla. He can't pull himself away from the room. Joe won't let him. So he remains there trapped, watching Sharla do things to a chicken bone he has seen her do to Rex in pictures. Joe controls the world now.

So, now, I have to find the actions that release all of that anger, betrayal, confusion, and compassion. The focus of the scene has to be image oriented: the picture of Rex on Sharla, the thought of Rex cashing Ansel's check, T-Bone sitting outside the window licking his chops staring at Ansel while the violence goes on behind him, seeing the chicken bone, listening to Sharla "moan", seeing how much Joe's eyes really "hurt." The images should cascade through my head as the scene unfolds. The actions will come out of that emotional response and be fresh every evening. It won't be a scored process

with objective, intention, and obstacles. That isn't necessary for this scene. Those things are inherent in the lines and actions. The key is to find the internal struggle and maintain the intensity of the scene. Focusing on the images in Ansel's head and the images in the trailer surrounding him will drive the scene and keep it natural.

1/28

Nudity and the Excuse Me Dance

In my cast: Chris, Jennifer, and Libby have to be nude on-stage. Since we in our cast are the more experienced actors, we feel a responsibility to break the ice with the nudity and show by example how to handle this situation with professionalism. In theory that's great, but in reality, these actors have never been nude onstage before so they have their own fears to overcome. Being the example in this case is a sacrifice of personal feelings and timing. As I watched the scenes with my fellow actors, I noticed the show grew in reality. The nudity was a beautiful, intimate look into the lives of these characters. It wasn't sexy, gratuitous or out-of-place. It felt natural and it made the play more natural. I realized how much I change my perception of someone once I've seen him or her naked. They are exposing themselves as much as they can. As actors we have to do that. We have to open up ourselves to the world of the play in every performance.

The nudity is almost too easy in one sense. It can be cheating, if it just involves the removal of clothes. There also must be emotional work and an action to play. You take off your clothes and the audience may feel you have shown them something from within yourself if there is nothing else involved in the moment. It's the courage to walk on the stage in the first place that is the challenge. Once that's done, you're out there and the work is as real as any scene I've ever seen.

So when I entered at the top of Act II tonight and Chris was standing there nude, my response was...let's go back forty-five minutes.

The other cast went first tonight and this was one of the few nights we had to sit and watch the other cast. Finalizing the blocking on the scene so we wanted to see the changes and make sure it was set. So watching the scene open with the other Ansel making his entrance and seeing Joe naked I tried not to respond to the choice made by the actor. Immediately knew I had to choose differently from him. His reaction and choices were great but I couldn't honestly respond now when I entered. I had the performance I just saw still fresh in my mind. So I went with the opposite. Not an opposite but the opposite choice the other actor had made.

So back to Joe's entrance...when I walked out and saw Joe completely naked I did the opposite of the Ansel before me and I just stared...at it. There it was. In all it's glory. I tried to think of actions, choices, or some emotional response but my mind was blank. This was a first for me; I got out of my head. I had never just stared at someone naked onstage. I was sort of frozen, thinking someone else needed to make the next move. Well, Chris (Joe), made the next move. He crossed upstage to exit down the hallway. The only problem was that I was completely in the way and there was a moment when I was blocking his way, so we did the "Oh, Excuse Me" dance as we stepped side to side trying to get out of each other's way.

This is a long story to get to this final point. The moment was real and comical. It was created naturally through the process we endured and the whole scene is now a real piece of the characters' lives and not a staged naked entrance with some comic lines.

1/30

Entering With a Purpose

I entered the scene with a new purpose tonight. I was getting too caught up in circumstances and character. So in each scene I brought back the clear and precise purpose of that entrance. I started the play by driving through Chris, trying to find out why he's in the house at 3:00 in the morning. The lines and intentions were the best they had been. It was natural and JD commented on the clarity of the scene, even particular lines made more sense.

It's a great exercise to stop adding layers and go back to the core every now and again. Remember the essence of the character and the actions. The layers can be put back but they need to exist on the outside of a solid foundation.

One of the actors had a very off night this evening. We had a wonderful warm-up beforehand and all the actors responded well but one actor became too energized. He was out of control on stage. He knocked over a chair and almost hurt himself. He was adding line after line of text and he wasn't giving anyone else anything. He was just a ball of energy. He continued to push Ansel, and I finally just slapped him. He seemed to come out of it a little at that point. He was not responding to us, he was just feeding off his own energy. When the scene was over I told him to relax, shake it off, and remember to listen.

I was telling myself the same things. I could have been him. In fact, I have been in the past and will be again. I took the time to evaluate what had happened to affect him. Maybe it was the warm-up, or our perceived laid back feelings, or just too much focus. I'm not sure what pushed him over tonight, but I learned a valuable lesson about myself

in the process. Listen. Always listen. When you aren't listening; you're just spitting out lines. Listen. Respond. Drive it through with action.

2/2, 3, 4

The Fight

Paul Dillon flew into town to choreograph the fight. Paul was the original Killer Joe and he knows the fight and the play better than anyone. He brings with him not only knowledge but also a great edge. He appears dangerous and that's what this play, and specifically the fight needs; an appearance of danger. An edge. We jumped into it right off the bat. Paul told us from the start that he is not a fight choreographer. He just knows this fight. So at the start it felt like an ensemble process. We were going to recreate a fight from a picture in Paul's head. We would have to use his memory and trust each other. The initial move was a knife stab into Chris by Sharla. This starts the action. The following is the fight itself.

Fight:

- 1) Sharla stabs Chris, gun goes off; Ansel runs down the hall
- 2) Joe grabs Chris and bangs him up against the door
- 3) Chris drops the gun onto the couch next to Dottie
- 4) Joe slams Chris into a breakaway bar and then the table, knocking all the food
into the kitchen
- 5) Joe drags Chris to living room, turning over the table
- 6) Joe slams Chris' head into the TV and then drags him onto the couch
- 7) Ansel jumps onto Chris' legs; Sharla stabs Chris with a potato peeler several
times

- 8) Chris kicks Ansel off of him and falls forward onto the floor
- 9) Chris drives Joe back into the door and then shoves him down the hall
- 10) Ansel grabs Chris and swings him into the kitchen
- 11) Sharla hits Chris with a bottle and opens refrigerator door
- 12) Ansel throws Chris into refrigerator and tries to crush him with the door
- 13) Joe throws Ansel off him and slams the door on Chris
- 14) Joe crawls on top of Chris and starts ripping out his eyes
- 15) Dottie fires a shot into the wall
- 16) Dottie shoots Chris; he dies in the refrigerator
- 17) Dottie shoots Ansel; he slams into the stove and slides to the floor
- 18) Sharla cowers behind refrigerator door

This fight is the climax of the play. The family was pulsing behind a dike waiting to burst out onto each other, and when the time comes the violence is extreme. The ease with which the violence comes to them is probably the hardest thing for the audience to handle. They may come away from the play wanting to believe these people don't really exist.

When I was breaking down the beats of the fight, I separated them into quadrants of space. I created sections of the trailer where Ansel was located during each beat and then I would fill that area with emotional and physical life. The trailer was such a close, intimate space that movement had to be precise and exact and yet we had to make it seem raw and unrehearsed.

Before the first move I had to move upstage and move my chair with me. This was actually one of the hardest moves to figure out. How do I get the chair off stage

when the fight begins and make it look real? In the end we depended on the movement and the noise of the fight to mask Ansel grabbing a chair and running down the hall. Once I was down the hallway, I could yell at Sharla through the opening in the kitchen wall while (2-4) were happening. I was also in position to grab the breakaway bar and throw it down the hallway. When Joe took Chris into the living room, I moved into the kitchen quadrant, continuing to yell at Sharla until Joe called me over to grab Chris' legs (7). After he kicks me off, I had to roll downstage to keep out of the way but still maintain that quadrant until I got up to grab Chris. I spun him into the kitchen where Sharla hit him with a bottle. This was a bit of a stage left cross with him in the air. I had to pick him up and carry him five feet to the kitchen. I tried to use his momentum to help. We hit a spot in the kitchen just as Sharla would bring down the bottle (11). Then I threw him into the refrigerator and rammed the door onto his thigh. It hit the muscle so he was safe inside of the fridge. Joe would grab me and throw me to the sink where two blood packs were stashed for me. I would place one in my mouth and the other I held to burst on my stomach. I maintained this spot against the stove until Dottie shoots me (17). The shot was aimed to my right and I would slam the pack against my stomach immediately. I could use the counter next to the stove to help me slide to the floor. I would burst the blood packet in my mouth as I slid down the stove so that I was coughing blood once I hit the ground. That was the fight.

We worked hard to make the fight real. We didn't want the fight to look like bad stage combat with slaps and punches that can look fake and rehearsed. So we filled it with rough grabs and slams into tables. The actor's entire body was thrown into a wall or table; no simple slaps of the face. The fight was ugly and seemed unstable and out of

control, when in fact, it was very controlled and felt safer than any fight scene I've ever done.

I was fight captain for my cast so I worked with Paul to recreate the fight his cast had done. Further, I choreographed the violence before the fight. Joe's punch of Sharla looked and felt too much like a stage punch. A slap had the same affect. So I worked with Joe and Sharla on a face grab. Joe would wrap his hand around Sharla's face and squeeze until she collapsed. The affect was wonderful. It was raw and dirty and it looked unlike anything I'd seen onstage. It fit nicely with the rest of the fight.

One of the interesting things that happened during rehearsal was that the props on the table, (chicken, plates, ashtray,) and the blood coming out of Ansel were spilling into the seats. The director said it was fine. I felt like it would be a nice finish to the play. The audience has been watching this family for two hours at this point and they feel safe and separated from them, but now the family is bursting out of the stage, through the fourth wall, and into their laps. The audience can't run.

2/6

The Hair

I had hair extensions applied to my hair this morning. It was a two-and-a-half hour process, during which strips of hair from a wig were glued to my own hair. It was placed in the rear and sides of my head and it looks like a big, stringy mullet. At first I was shocked. It is quite an experience to have your entire look changed so drastically within a two-hour period. I felt strange but I also thought the look was perfect for the character. As I stood looking at myself in the mirror, I could see Ansel standing there. That afternoon as I walked around campus, I was very self-conscious of looks from other

people. Their judgment of me because of my appearance was very obvious. The “audience” consisted of mainly college age people who responded with a smirk or laughter. They were judging my worth and value because of my hair. It makes me stop and think though that anyone who has this type of hair does it on purpose. They aren’t aware of people’s response to their mullet because they feel comfortable in the way they look. It’s not a statement; it’s who they are as a person.

So that night in rehearsal I put the hair down around my shoulders, put some water in it to “grease” it up some more and we ran through Act II. During the run I found so many new layers for the character. Was it the hair? Probably. It definitely added to the performance. I could feel it on my shoulders and around my neck. It draped onto my face at times and would stick to my beard. It even found its way into my mouth. So this weight of greasy hair was surrounding my face and me. It stuck to me and it was always there. There was no escape from it. How appropriate for this show. It manifested the dynamic of poverty and apathy in Ansel’s soul onto my head and kept itself present in every moment onstage. I can’t escape from the hair and I can’t escape from the character. It invades my space now. And Ansel now will invade the stage. It will not be contained, so as I struggle to free myself from this hair I can put that into Ansel’s struggle to break free from the trailer.

2/7, 8, 9

Technical Rehearsal

One of the hardest parts of the rehearsal process is when the technical support is added to the run. It not only disrupts the rehearsal schedule, but it adds new elements to the production that take a while for me to adjust. The lights and sound create the world

for the audience. The natural world of this play is that of a dark, dank trailer. It's a piece-of-shit home with crappy lighting.

There are also the light cues themselves. Turning on a light when you enter a room. Turning on the T.V. set. Changing the channel. Finally we added guns to the fight and the breakaway bottle. The added realism is a lot to take in. There are two casts so we alternate scenes onstage and the other cues must be picked up by watching the other cast. It's tough to remember the cues when you haven't done them yourself. The learning process only improves if you are able to do the cues over and over. A sort of rote memory exercise. So we have to make sure to announce cues to each other when we run lines. Keep the actions present with us even when we are not on stage. The tech is slow, as usual, but the final product is wonderful. The lighting and the sound make everything onstage come to life.

Sunday was our dress rehearsal. We had an off night. We had to wait four hours to run our show because the other cast went first, so our focus wasn't as fresh as it could have been. It was also the first time running the complete show with all the technical support. A lot of cues were missed and the pace slowed because of it. I think tomorrow we will pick up the pace, hit our cues and make the show better. A director once told me you have to earn your pauses and right now we aren't earning them.

2/10

Second Dress

The second dress went much better than the first. We hit our cues and used the technical support to help us into the world. It pushed the story and us. We finally put together a tight performance for the audience to see. The process has dictated that we

share the stage but tonight for the first time, the show felt like it was ours. It took on a new life. Now we need an audience. It will give it that nervous edge and energy.

Booya!!!

2/12

Preview

Energy. Excitement. Nervousness. Butterflies. Every feeling that occurs right before you put a show in front of an audience. Standing backstage, I could hear all the people in the audience, knowing that they had no idea what they were about to see. The expectations for this show are higher than just about any other show I've ever done, mainly due to the nudity and violence. I can't help but feel all of those expectations right at this moment. I have to force myself to relax, remember to listen, and play my actions. Focus on the people onstage, take in their words, respond to them, and what they're giving me. The process was a difficult one. The show was pulled back and forth between two casts. It always felt like they were stealing our show whenever they rehearsed and not specifically because of anything they did, it's just the primal nature of acting. You make a character and a show your own. It is yours. But tonight all that petty jealousy and grumbling are gone. It's our show tonight. Tomorrow it's theirs'.

So I focus on the audience again. How will they respond to the piece? Will they allow themselves to laugh? Will they laugh too much? Is the subject too rough?

During the run I was amazed. The audience responded much more than I expected. They made it an interactive experience. I ask Chris a rhetorical question in Act II scene 3, "Who told you about Killer Joe?" and an audience member answered the

question, “It was Rex.” They laughed uncomfortably at the risqué moments; the chicken bone in particular, but overall they seemed to love the show.

After the fight was done and we came back out for the bow, the audience leapt to their feet. In my five years of experience I’d never seen it. They got it. As I took the curtain call I was filled with an overwhelming sense of accomplishment. All the hard work and anguish had been worth it. We created a wonderful show, which was much deeper than the setting and the characters. It was a recreation of their lives and the audience was glad to take the journey with us. This is such a tough show and they seemed to appreciate the effort.

Production Run

2/14, 16, 18, 20, 22

Five shows. That's it. With a double cast and a two-week run there aren't a lot of performances, so you have to focus upon each performance. During the run of a show I'm always amazed by how much I discover about the character once I get in front of an audience. The energy of a show and the response of the crowd reveal more layers to the character. With this run it was very important to stay focused and find the discoveries every night.

After opening night there were only four shows left. It was going to be over so quickly. I pushed myself too hard going into the second show, a Sunday matinee. Sunday matinees are traditionally played to an older, more conservative crowd, and this Sunday was no different. I felt we wasted a show. We didn't have our energy as a cast and we didn't get any help from the audience. After that show we picked up our energy and our focus and we finished the week with three strong performances.

One of the biggest discoveries of the run was my hatred for Rex. This character is only mentioned by name and never appears onstage, but he is the worst thing to ever happen to Ansel. He takes both of Ansel's women and tries to swindle him out of \$100,000. I found I could forgive Sharla because all my hatred was focused on Rex. The idea of adultery wasn't as much of a problem for me as the idea of Rex screwing Ansel over. The final scene made so much more sense to me and I found the emotional drive to not only save Sharla from Joe but to console her after the rape.

Postproduction

The process of a play is always a roller coaster of emotion. This play was no different. I was frustrated at the double casting but I came to respect the process and learned to enjoy the other cast. They created a completely different show. The two contrasted well with each other. It enforced my idea that the show just isn't about one family; it's every family.

This show was also a nice reminder of basic acting skills. This play needed action to push it. I had to come into every scene with a purpose and an action. The physicalization of purpose was essential in every scene, as was the physicalization of Ansel. My image of Ansel as a warthog helped push my own body into movement and shapes different from my own. I received several comments on how different I appeared onstage and off. This final show was the best character work I've had a chance to do in my career.

A big help in finding Ansel came from the film class I am taking this semester. In film, acting focuses upon finding the inner life of a character. It's a recreation of an emotional life and a glance into the mind of that character. It's less theatrical than theatre and more real. I looked to find that simplicity in Ansel. I made many choices smaller and focused the actions internally. Due to the intimate space in which we performed, and the proximity of the audience, the actions were clear and gave Ansel's struggle more reality.

Conclusion

John Lennon asked us to imagine a world without violence. Our religious and political leaders push us to be better people and turn the other cheek. But our society embraces brutality. We surround ourselves with movies, video games, and television shows depicting man's cruelty. We cannot help but watch the wreck on the side of the road, and as much as we don't want to see anyone hurt, when someone is bleeding, the story is so much better to tell. Our news is filled with atrocities, and our shows are all "reality." We are surrounded by "real."

This play is real. It's dirty, ugly, vituperative, and real. It pushes the audience to look at themselves. Some may find it easy to separate themselves from this particular family and call them White Trash. But that's too safe, and the play doesn't let them do that. With the imagery and context of this play no one can escape its message.

I picture the audience watching us through two-way glass. When the lights go up, they can see through the mirror and watch this world unfold; but when the play goes dark, the mirror returns, the audience is faced with themselves, and what they have become. This is not a playwrights dream; it's society's milieu, and they asked for it.

Vita

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In March 1995 he was honorably discharged from the United States Air Force after four years as an Air Traffic Controller.

In May 2000, he received his Bachelor of Science degree from Clemson University. R.W. Smith is currently enrolled at Louisiana State University where he will receive his Master of Fine Arts in May 2003.