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DEVELOPING NEW WORKS FOR THE STAGE:  
AN ACTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

by

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B.A. NOVA Southeastern University, 2010

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of Theatre  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
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## ABSTRACT

U.S. Theatre is often noted for its commitment to new play development. Since Eugene O'Neill, America has fostered a tradition of celebrating emerging playwrights and their bold, edgy new works through countless development programs such as festivals, new play readings, grant programs, workshops, and world premieres. Although in recent years new-play development has seen a steady decline in funding (Levitow 2), it remains a cornerstone of American identity and an essential medium for pushing boundaries in theatre, both culturally and artistically. New-play development is indispensable for keeping theatre relevant in our ever-changing culture.

For my thesis, I explore the process of developing a new play from an actor's perspective. The role of the director, dramaturg and producer of a new play is often discussed; however the importance of the actor throughout the development process is sometimes overlooked. There are many configurations of artistic teams assembled to develop a new play; therefore, I do not suggest there is one type of team that is best or one type of role for the actor to play within the team. My aim was to collaborate with the playwright, director and fellow actors to discover what is required of an actor in all phases of new play development. I applied the principles learned to my own work in the World Premiere of *The Exit Interview* by William Missouri Downs at the Orlando Shakespeare Theatre in Partnership with The University of Central Florida.

As I navigated my way through the artistic process of developing a new work, I discovered some 'best practices', which I employed throughout the rehearsal and performance

process to further my own skills. I will discuss the development process I experienced, as objectively as possible, outlining the key best practices for an actor working in a collaborative team to develop a new play.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

My love of new plays began during my undergraduate career at NOVA Southeastern University. I discovered the Humana Festival anthologies in the university library while searching through the stacks for a new monologue. I had no knowledge of the Human Festival of New American Plays at Actor's Theatre of Louisville before finding the 1999 publication of the Complete Plays, but upon reading it, I was hooked. I read through every Humana anthology my university's library had to offer. Eventually, my love of the Humana plays lead me to direct one at the NSU one-act festival in 2009. But, being involved in a new play after its premiere is not the same as being a part of the premiere team. I longed to be counted among the amazing artists who continue to push the boundaries and move the field of live theater forward. I became particularly fascinated with the idea of originating a role for a new play. There is something very satisfying about originating a role and having your named printed in the program in association with the world premiere. But beyond the magic and prestige of being in a world premiere, there is also the artistic opportunity to create a piece of theatre that is a reflection of our current time and culture.

My personal experience with new play development began in the summer of 2007 when I was an intern for NSU's professional company in residence, The Promethean Theatre. I was given the opportunity for stage time as a hotel attendant, bar guest, and guerrilla fighter in the world premiere production of *Cyrano*, an adaptation of Edmond Rostand's 1897 verse drama by Mark E. Hayes. The production had no development process (no readings and no workshops) jumping straight to a fully staged production of Hayes' script. The play was never published and

received pitiful reviews, one critic described the script as a good attempt at a “first draft” (Zink). However, the success of a production does not always dictate the value of the experience for those involved. Working on *Cyrano* was a tremendous learning experience for me. I was exposed to what is involved in the rehearsal and set/costume construction of a new play. I also learned the value of a reading and/or workshop production for a new play because the script often profits from an outside eye in its early stages. This is not to say that every play is in need of workshops and readings in order to make it successful, however, *Cyrano* may have benefited from some critiques before it was mounted as a full-scale production.

A few years later, I had the opportunity to work with Madcat Theater Company in Miami, Florida on a night of new short plays called *Mixtape: A Theatrical Stew*. I worked as the assistant director, alongside Paul Tei (Madcat’s founder, the production’s director and one of the many playwrights featured in *Mixtape*). The short plays and monologues selected for the show were selected from submissions from across the country. The show was a true ‘mixed tape’ - there was no clear theme or through line, it was simply a series of pieces that somehow worked together to create a whole. *Mixtape* had a slightly more involved development process than *Cyrano*. The cast did a great deal of table work - which is a full cast discussion about the text of the play which usually takes place around a table. Madcat operates much differently than the Promethean Theatre, because they are comprised of a company of actors who work closely together as a collaborative team. I noticed that part of this rehearsal process included the critique and discussion of each text, a step that was omitted in the *Cyrano* process. Perhaps the *Mixtape* cast was more open to critique because the playwrights were not present, however, I attributed their sense of collaboration to the harmony amongst the group. Even though *Mixtape* was a

more avant-garde production than *Cyrano*, it was far better received by the critics and public (in a community that rarely sees anything other than touring musicals). Although *Mixtape* probably had superior source material, I truly believe the success of the production was due to the workshop process and collaboration amongst the cast.

In May of 2011, I was asked to work with Madcat again on yet another world premiere, *So My Grandmother Died, Blah, Blah, Blah* by Paul Tei. Working with the Madcat team yet again made for a very comfortable and familiar experience. This time, Paul served as director of the production as well as the playwright. Unlike my experience with The Promethean Theatre, the cast of *So My Grandmother Died* was very willing to critique the play to make improvements and adjustments. During one of our final rehearsals, the decision was made to completely cut a scene from the play and replace it with a new scene. The actors were receiving new pages of dialogue up until opening night. It is safe to say that the show had quite a development processes, but it was only done by insiders (Madcat company members). Paul's flexibility was invaluable throughout the processes, and the play certainly grew and changed, however, the run of the play was not as successful as anticipated because the play did not appeal to a wide array of people. Perhaps more previews or even readings before fully staging the production would have helped in creating a more universal show. However, Madcat doesn't appeal to a wide audience base even as a company; they are specifically an avant-garde company who promotes new works and experimental theatre.

It was in July of 2012 that Jim Helsinger called me to let me know I was cast in *The Exit Interview* by William Missouri Downs. I was thrilled for the opportunity to collaborate with a

new group of artists on a new play and, furthermore, to be a part of a NNPN Rolling World Premiere and a member of the original cast in a Samuel French published play. I knew that being a part of *The Exit Interview* would be the most challenging and exciting project I had experienced thus far in my career, because I was cast in a more substantial role than any previous new play experience and the NNPN endorsement and Samuel French publication meant the play would receive national attention.

As I prepared for *The Exit Interview* rehearsal process, I thought back to my previous experiences with new plays, most of which were unsuccessful. Each project I had done was vastly different, both in rehearsal style and the genre of the play itself. My past experiences lead me to many questions about new play development: What does it take to create a successful production- is it all in the source text or is it in the development process? Do most new plays fail? Is there a standard process for developing new plays? Do you need a dramaturg in order to develop a new play? What relationship should the actor have with the director and/or with the playwright? Are there different techniques for an actor to apply when working on a new play? With these questions in mind, I applied my acting training and previous experiences to help navigate my thesis and the rehearsals and performances of *The Exit Interview*. I knew I wanted to hone my skills as an actor and discover if the acting approach differs in the rehearsal processes for a new play from the traditional rehearsal process. I also used my role in *The Exit Interview* as an opportunity to cultivate my skills as an artist by learning how to be a valuable asset to the director and playwright during the process of developing a new play. As an artist, I am passionate about new plays because without new work we cannot further develop and advance the field of live theater. It is truly a privilege to relate a playwright's message and affect an



audience on an intellectual, visceral, and deeply personal level. I believe it is the responsibility of artists to honor the tried-and-true plays of our culture but also to continue developing new works by pushing the boundaries of where theater can go. As Jason Loewith, executive director of the NNPN explains,

We always need to reflect on where we've been and where we're going, as a people, as a community. I wouldn't be doing theatre if I didn't think it was the best way of answering those questions. Our best playwrights recognize that their function is to shepherd that cultural conversation about the past and future- and to do it in little rooms of 100 and 200 and 300 at a time, where their words can be most impactful and their ideas most expansive. (Wren 151)

In the following chapters you will find my approach to the rehearsal and performance process of the NNPN World Premiere of William Missouri Downs, *The Exit Interview*. The character analysis, research, and scene breakdowns are included as a guide to my process. The rehearsal and performance journals give insight into my personal thoughts and development along the way. I conclude with a reflection on how I will move forward as an artist in the field of new-play development as well as some best practices for an actor approaching a new play.

## CHAPTER TWO: FROM PAGE TO STAGE

Before the rehearsal process for *The Exit Interview* began, I started researching the origins and context of the script. Because I was approaching not only a new acting role, but also a new collaborative development process, I wanted to be as well versed as possible in the play's back story- how *The Exit Interview* sprang from the playwright and furthers his cannon, as well as how it fits into the larger context of new play development in America's history. It is important to understand the history of theatre in order to truly comprehend how current work can move theatre forward. Gaining an understanding of how theatre has developed is an essential first step in contributing to where it can go.

*The Exit Interview* was initially work-shopped at the Orlando Shakespeare Theatre's 2011 PLAYFEST: The Harriett Lake Festival of New Plays in a ten-day theater event that focuses on the process of writing a play as well as presenting the finished product. Playwrights are able to work with directors and actors in the Orlando area and beyond to help them transition the play from page to stage, culminating in readings, workshops, and full productions for the public.

The Orlando Shakespeare Theatre submitted the play to the National New Play Network (NNPN), for consideration for the Continued Life of New Plays Fund. It was selected as one of six shows for the November 2001 Showcase in Washington D.C., where it was performed for the NNPN member theatres' consideration for a rolling world premiere production. *The Exit Interview* was presented as a rolling world premier by the Orlando Shakespeare Theatre, San

Diego REPertory Theatre, InterACT Theatre Company, Riverside Theatre, and Actor's Theatre of Charlotte for the 2012-2013 season. *The Exit Interview* is now published with Samuel French.

### New Play Development in America: Why Does it Matter?

American theatre has been noted for its tradition of new plays since Eugene O'Neill and has continued to celebrate the diverse writings of countless playwrights through a myriad of new-play development programs across the country. New playwrights have greatly enriched our American theatre tradition, not only due to the diversity in topic and style they bring to the stage, but also due to their desire to question our cultural ideals, shock our senses, and challenge our most hallowed beliefs. New plays have served as a key to American theatre's cultural identity, and are certainly theatre "of our time, in our time" (Levitow 1).

According to Douglas Anderson's article, *The Dream Machine: Thirty Years of New Play Development in America*, America's first attempt to support new writing in theatre began with the Federal Theatre Project in the 1930s. They created a "Living Newspaper" technique that promoted collaboration amongst artist - this collective approach has remained an important facet of new play development to this day. Sadly, the Federal Theatre Project's efforts only lasted four years. In 1949, commercial theatre showed their support for new writers with the establishment of New Dramatists, a laboratory style writers' workshop designed to allow new playwrights to experiment with their work. The organization helped many writers, including Horton Foote, Robert Anderson, William Inge, Paddy Chayefsky, and William Gibson.

However, it was not until 1957 that the modern New Play development movement really gained momentum, when W. McNeil Lowry of the Ford Foundation provided the money and

plan necessary to decentralize American Theatre. Lowry stabilized the workforce by issuing grants that would allow many theatres to pay a company of actors and provide them yearly contracts. Once Lowry stabilized the regional theatres and their employees, he created the Ford Foundation Program for Playwrights. The Ford Foundation received 750 plays during its first year of operation and with a budget of \$135,833 was able to produce eight of them either on a regional or university stage. By 1994, the Ford Foundation had grown to a yearly budget of \$325,000 and new play development had grown exponentially, with over 260 professional theater companies by the 1980s (Anderson 57).

As new play development continued to grow, so did a new dream, “The Dream of the Commercial Transfer” (Anderson 57). Two companies pioneered the success that a New York Transfer can bring, The Mark Taper Forum and Actor’s Theatre of Louisville, both winning Tony Awards and national recognition for plays that were developed at their theatres before moving on to a big New York productions. Led by the example of The Mark Taper Forum and Actor’s Theatre of Louisville, many other regional theaters worked to get their plays produced in New York. New York transfers became known as the mark of true success for a new play. Every company wanted to produce their play in New York, and thus the decentralization that had been so successfully achieved by the Ford Foundation reverted back to a New York dream.

The new play development scene continued growth in 1979, when Theatre Communications Group (TCG) implemented the Plays in Progress program. Each year, 100 nominees are selected from any not-for-profit theatre in America. Of those nominees, 12 plays are published. In addition to the Plays in Progress program, TCG publishes full scripts in

*American Theatre* magazine as well as their own anthology, *New Plays USA*, which is a collection of the Plays in Progress selections (Anderson 61).

Today, new works are produced by a wide range of organizations and programs; workshops, competitions, readings, and festivals are some of the most popular development formats, and hundreds of such take place each year throughout the country. Despite the overwhelming support for new writing, the common complaint amongst theatre artists is the stifling effect many of these programs have on a playwright's creativity. The recently published book, *Outrageous Fortune: the life and times of the new American play*, by London, Pesner, and Voss, explores the current state of new play development in America, through a compilation of interviews with over 350 playwrights and artistic directors at 94 different regional theaters across the U.S. In the introduction, executive director Victoria Bailey explains what they gleaned from their interviews:

As we talked and traveled, it was clear to us that the new play does appear on stages all over the country. But it was also clear that the ecosystem in which the new play is produced is not healthy. Playwrights cannot make a living from their plays. Artistic Directors are deeply troubled as they work to navigate the marketing and funding pressures facing their theatre. (XIV)

This scarcity of fully staged new work productions and the dearth in creative playwriting is attributed to all aspects of the development process, the actors, the dramaturgs, the funding, and even the theaters.

The lack of fully produced new plays can be directly linked to the goals of development programs and workshops. Although these programs are plentiful, they are not necessarily successful for the playwright, because they lead to, “readings, residencies and awards – the awards being more often staged readings – rather than full productions” (Bray 45). Many new play development programs celebrate the plays, but they do not nurture or fund the playwrights involved.

According to London et al, many new plays are not produced because of cast size, “Theaters continue to mount a certain number of large cast productions, though not usually of new plays” (185). Theaters are interested in mounting classics such as Shakespeare, musicals, and other well-known plays requiring a large cast, because they know audiences will support it, however, the risk of paying for a large cast of actors for a new play, that is highly likely to fail, is simply not worth it (London et al 186).

Paul Meshejian, founding artistic director of PlayPenn attributes the currently lack of creativity in new plays specifically to the theaters selection process:

Play selection at theatres is motivated by fear of loss more often than by passionate response to encounters with new and exciting work. It may be that not until theatres are willing to recognize that they are essentially living organisms that are born of passion, have a life, and die will see an increase in the embrace of new and challenging work. (DesRochers 11)

Many theaters are currently unable to take the financial risks involved in producing a new play. A failed new play in place of a tried-and-true classic may deter many subscribers and donors from returning, thus leaving the theatre with a frightening lack of funding for the next season.

As Meshejian asserts, “some new playwrights are writing plays that are insistently controversial, i.e., intent on challenging the assumptions and tastes of the bourgeoisie” (11). Controversial new plays are often not produced by regional theaters that rely on a more conservative audience base to stay afloat financially. However, plays with potentially offensive content are often thrown away without regard to how the play may further the new play development field, as Craig Lucas said, ‘A new work of art that offends no one, neither surprises, frightens, mystifies nor startles, is not a new work at all, but a clone of the past’ (DesRoches 7).

The creation of clones is becoming a major problem within the new play development field and is hindering creativity and progress. Many playwrights are noticing a desire to fix new plays rather than to transition them into a production. John Steppling, a playwright explains his frustration with development:

Various groups say, ‘Yeah, we’re committed to process, we’re committed to supporting this writer’ – and yet they won’t trust the writer’s work. It’s going to get dramaturged to death by this kind of middle management in the theatre. It’s going to get work shopped to death until that theatre approves of that play.

(Anderson 79)

Steppling’s frustrations are echoed by many of the playwrights interviewed by London et al as well as Steven Dietz who describes the current process as, “a trend in conferences and new play programs to *formularize* the development of plays” (43). The development process is forcing plays to conform to the guidelines, rather than nurturing the work to its full potential. The Goodman’s artistic director, Robert Falls explains the unfortunate homogenization of new plays:

As they go through the process, plays start to look like other plays. You start clarifying dramatic action, you start eliminating unnecessary things, you start talking about the arc of the play, and anything that's wildly original or wildly unrealistic is thrown out... What's interesting to me is that if plays did not come into the festival as realistic works, they left as realistic works. (Anderson 65)

By limiting and censoring what a playwright can create, we are hindering the development of the field and limiting the possibilities of the theatre arts. Dietz goes on to assert, "Writers should be grappling with the limits of *production*, not of *development*" (43).

It is not only the artistic directors and dramaturgs who are impeding the new play development process, but also the actors. Robert Falls discussed the actor's potentially detrimental influence on a new play:

...Actors are essentially realistic artists. Ninety-nine percent of them want to know how to get from A to B to C to D, which means they need psychological underpinnings in order to create a role. But if some playwright comes to them with a play which for some reason does not have those psychological underpinnings... well, at this festival, the actors were actually demanding that of the playwrights. So the playwrights were actually rewriting the plays to accommodate the actors. (Anderson 65)

The demands and restrictions imposed by theatre artists have discouraged playwrights from creating something completely original, and more importantly, kept new plays from developing beyond the standard theatrical conventions.



American New Play development has taken on many forms since its inception, yet an ideal process still remains unfound. However, it is clear, “that language is failing us. Writers and those who produce their plays are not talking honestly with each other... None of us are listening to the entire story, but rather only the piece we like, the part that confirms what we already believe. We must learn to speak together and to listen” (London et al XIV). A rethinking and reevaluation of the development process is necessary to determine how to best serve playwrights, directors, actors, and the audience. This desire for successful collaborations that yield unique and profitable productions is felt by all members of the theatre community, and is already being implemented by several theaters across the country. According to the research of London et al, many of the new play development ills are remedied by nurturing playwrights rather than mounting productions, promoting collaboration between theatres, discouraging “premiere-itis”, and educating and engaging audience members (250).

Changes in the field of new play development are just as inevitable as they are desirable and necessary to move the field forward. Whether the troubles of new play development are due to lack of interest and funding or the tendency to overdevelop new plays, there is no doubt that the field has changed since the “golden age of new play development” as Douglas Anderson dubbed the 70s and 80s. But, despite the problems, new play development is certainly not over; there remain a large number of companies and programs still committed to new plays and playwrights, theatre practitioners still passionate about creating new works, and audience members enthusiastic to see a new play. In his book *Off-Off Broadway Explosion – How Provocative Playwrights of the 1960’s Ignited a New American Theater*, Playwright David A. Crespy asserts America’s hunger for creating new works, “There is, and always has been, a

pioneer spirit for creating exciting new theater across America... Americans have been rebelling to create their own theater since colonial times” (12). This passionate desire to create new works that give a voice to the American people has always been an integral part of our culture, and remains just as vital today.

### The Playwright: William Missouri Downs

William Missouri Downs, originally from Bay City, Michigan, is a playwright, author, director, and professor. He is currently the head of the playwriting program and teaches in the Religious Studies Department at the University of Wyoming, where he has earned many teaching and research awards.

Downs holds an MFA in acting from the University of Illinois and an MFA in screenwriting from UCLA. He trained under Lanford Wilson and Milan Stitt in playwriting at Circle Repertory Theatre in New York. He has authored twenty plays, several published by Samuel French and Playscripts, and had over 100 productions from the U.S. to China, including prestigious theatres such as the Kennedy Center and the Berkeley Rep. Some of Downs’ writing credits include, *Innocent Thoughts* (Winner of the National Playwright’s Award), *Jewish Sports Heroes* and *Texas Intellectuals* (both began at the Mill Mountain Theatre’s Festival of New Plays), *Seagulls In a Cherry Tree* (Winner of the Larry Corse Prize for playwriting) and *Kabuki Medea* (Winner of the Bay Area Critics Award for best production in San Francisco and the Jefferson Award for best production in Chicago).

Downs was a screenwriter for several NBC television sitcoms, such as *My Two Dads* (starring Paul Reiser), *Amen* (starring Sherman Hemsley), and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*

(starring Will Smith). Downs movie, *Executive Privilege*, won the Jack Nicholson Award and was sold to Tri-Star.

Downs has also authored several books, including: an introductory theatre text used in over 100 universities, *The Art of Theatre* (Wadsworth), a writing guide, *Naked Playwriting* (Silman/James), and a screenplay writing guide used in the U.S. and Poland, *Screenplay: Writing the Picture* (Silman/James) (Moore and Ward 4).

In a recent interview by Moore and Ward, Downs discussed his writing process and his impetus for writing *The Exit Interview*:

I don't remember. I've written twenty plays and the original idea is sometimes lost in the sands of time. I do remember wanting to write something that let go of the Aristotelian rules of structure. Sometimes ideas spring into my head in a second and I know I've got a good idea. Other times they crawl in. *The Exit Interview* was a time-consuming process. I had bits, pieces, hints, ideas, a line, a title, and then after months of writing I gained traction. I don't write drafts; instead I start over each day at the beginning and find my way. When I was a writer in Hollywood the producers forced me to write outlines before I wrote the script. This made the writing process about as stimulating as following the directions while assembling a toaster. I avoid such a systematic approach when writing plays. I come up with most of my good ideas in the shower. I've often wanted to take off my hot water bill as a tax office expense because I solve so many problems there. (6)

Downs' approach to playwriting is varied with each project he approaches, but no matter the project, he is always a highly focused. Downs has even described himself as obsessed with his work. His own obsession with his art inspired the development of the character Mary in *The Exit Interview*.

During the rehearsal process of *The Exit Interview* at the Orlando Shakespeare Theatre, I had an opportunity to sit down with Mr. Downs. We discussed the play, particularly the offensive nature of the content and whether he specifically set out to create something controversial; he explained, "Too many plays are just entertainment, they say nothing. They just make the audience feel good...we have too much entertainment in this country, we need more art" (Appendix A). Earlier in his career, William Missouri Downs was a writer for several NBC sitcoms, which are exactly the type of 'entertainment' he is now trying to avoid with his writing. In his book The Art of Theatre he expounds on the differences between art and entertainment:

The fundamental difference between art and entertainment is that artists create primarily to express themselves, making no compromise to appeal to public taste, whereas entertainers create to please an audience by reinforcing the audience's values and beliefs. Entertainment is meant to amuse us and make us feel good about who we are and what we believe, not necessarily to challenge us or make us think. (19)

Despite Downs' roots in entertainment writing, his latest work, *The Exit Interview*, is focused on challenging audiences and forcing them to think.

### Exploring the Themes of 'The Exit Interview'

During an interview conducted by Dawn Moore and Danielle Ward from the San Diego Repertory Theatre, Mr. Downs responded to a question about the theme of *The Exit Interview*:

Themes are overvalued. I want the audience to think. I present them with thoughts that might add up to a theme, but it was not my overriding intention. In this play I make fun of faith, I call into question our lack of intellectual depth, mock small talk, poke fun at the sad shape of our news media, question scanty funding for arts, ridicule people who tap into their spiritual strength, contemplate epistemology, doubt the idea of an omniscient / omnipotent / omnibenevolent god, and ponder the high amount of sodium in V8 Juice. I want to bombard the audience with thoughts. (Downs)

Although Mr. Downs did not intentionally create a single theme, he certainly explores many controversial topics that add up to a harsh, yet clear message that Mr. Downs so beautifully articulated, "Pull your head out of your ass and face reality! Illusions do not help us with reality" (Downs). As I worked on *The Exit Interview*, I utilized the "pull your head out of your ass" theme as a basis for my work. His theme inspired me as an actor to feel free to shake up the audience and make them uncomfortable, not only because that was the playwright's desire, but also because the text demanded it. There is no need to sugar coat the material presented by Mr. Downs, it is designed to make the audience to feel uncomfortable and thus forces them into reevaluating their own beliefs.

William Missouri Downs includes a list of 'banners and slogans' he would like to appear on the walls around the audience, as well as several others that are mixed into the show. These

banners and slogans are simply the many themes explored throughout the play. Mr. Downs includes the signs as one of the many Brechtian Alienation devices employed throughout the play. Mr. Downs explains his rationale:

Brecht thought that most theatre affects the audience on an unconscious level.

The audience absorbs a play, they really don't think about it. Brecht was trying to make the audience do more than just absorb, he wanted them to reflect and consciously consider. The moment the audience walks into *The Exit Interview* they should be pelted with signs to consider (and a few jokes). Brecht was saying, 'Wake up! Think! Reason! Apply the thoughts of the play to your life!

(Downs)

Mr. Downs consciously created a play full of Brechtian alienation devices, all designed to help the audience grasp his theme, "pull your head out of your ass," be it consciously or subconsciously.

Throughout the initial table work process, Mr. Downs expressed to the cast that the play was about challenging beliefs, mixing up ideas, and questioning. He explained to us that some of the themes presented are often perceived as important (e.g. Nature vs. Scripture) while others are seen as trivial (Pepsi vs. Coke). The point is who cares? And who determines that one debate is any more essential than the other? These themes (or debates, if you will) are assigned a level of importance based on societal viewpoints, and Mr. Downs is attempting to challenge our beliefs by exploring topics, no matter how big or small, with the same amount of importance. For example, the two mothers on the bench discuss the creation of the universe with the same level

of conviction as they discuss whether a cheetah or an antelope is a faster runner. By giving each debate the same level of importance, the audience is able to see the absurdity of our differences- we are fighting wars over religious differences, but not about soda preferences. Who decided religion was more important than soda?

Below is the list of themes Downs includes at the beginning of *The Exit Interview* script.

- Nature vs. Scripture
- Create your own purpose vs. Follow God's purpose
- Human Needs vs. God's Needs
- Humans are capable vs. Humans are imperfect
- I did it! vs. God did it!
- I did it! vs. The devil made me do it!
- Many books vs. one book
- Research vs. Revelation
- The world happened vs. The world is designed
- Observation vs. Theology
- All people vs. Chosen people
- Now vs. Later
- Pepsi vs. Coke
- Boxers vs. Briefs
- Mac vs. PC
- Honda vs. Toyota

- Big Mac vs. Whopper

### The National New Play Network: Rolling World Premiere

The National New Play Network (NNPN), based in Washington D.C., was founded in 1998 by David Goldman, who was the special programs director for the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center. At its first meeting, the NNPN had only 13 member theaters, but has grown to boasts 26 core member companies, which may seem like a small number, but leaders assert that “the group draws strength from its modest size” (Wren 36). The core members combine to form a coalition of theatre companies committed specifically to producing new works. NNPN’s current executive director, Jason Loewith, is committed to growing the program, but slowly. The managed growth of the NNPN is twofold, level of service and level of collaboration. Currently, all members know one another so well that they can communicate on a personal level; they look out for one another and even suggest plays they know would be appropriate for another member’s theater. The NNPN is also committed to serving their members. Loewith points out, “For every dollar in membership dues that our core members ply, they currently get about \$5 back, in grants and stipends” (Wren 38). By keeping their core membership group small, the NNPN is able to maintain the excellent collaborative relationship and financial support needed to get new plays produced across the country.

The NNPN sponsors a host of initiatives designed to cultivate playwrights, rather than to produce individual plays. Each year the NNPN works in conjunction with the Kennedy Center’s American College Theatre Festival and the National Center for New Plays at Stanford University to match MFA students with directors and dramaturgs in order to workshop new plays, during



what they call the MFA Playwright's workshop. Core members of NNPN can also participate in the Playwrights-in-Residence and Producers-in-Residence programs.

The NNPN is probably best known for the Continued Life of New Plays Fund, which inspires three or more theatres to participate in what the NNPN has coined as a 'rolling world premier' – a debut process in which several theatres produce a world premiere production of a new play that has been hand selected by the NNPN from thousands of applicants. Each participating theater is funded by a grant, which the NNPN provides in hopes of considerably reducing the risk associated with producing a brand new play. The first rolling world premier recipient was Thomas Gibbons' *Permanent Collection*, in 2002, and the program has since featured such playwrights as Quiara Alegria Hudes and Dan Dietz. The NNPN has funded over 100 productions of over 30 different world premier plays.

However, the NNPN is more than just workshops and world premier opportunities; it is network of companies, playwrights, artistic directors, and literary managers all sharing information about artists and their work. The NNPN member communicate in various ways, such as their annual conference and National Showcase of New Plays, their monthly "literary chats," as well as online (via the virtual script library) and email conversations, and even phone calls. The NNPN keeps in touch with every playwright who attends one of their programs, and is thus an excellent professional resource for writers who are looking to have an ally in the business (Wren 37).

### CHAPTER THREE: CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Playing Actress #1 in *The Exit Interview* presented me with the exciting opportunity of creating multiple characters within a single play. Although this task seemed daunting, it is one that I was thrilled to undertake. My focus was on making each character distinct and dynamic, while ensuring all of these characters could exist in the same world of the play I was creating with my fellow actors and director. Because Downs is emphasizing the Epic Theatre style, it was important to remember that Brecht felt that the point of theatre was to present ideas for the audience to debate. Brecht's focus was not on character development, but rather on the ideas themselves. Characters in the Epic Theatre style should represent the opposing sides of the argument and serve as archetypes. *The Exit Interview* veers off in many different directions, switching plot lines and employing the use of alienation devices (as part of the Epic Theatre style Mr. Downs explores), therefore, it is essential that each character fits into the tumultuous and often hyper-real world of the play, while still serving the truth of the text and circumstances in each moment.

As Actress #1, I played Cheerleader #1, Mary, Dr. Dobson, Samantha, Businesswoman #2 and French girl. To explore each character, I borrowed from Uta Hagen's Nine Questions and also created my own questions based on the text.

#### Cheerleader # 1 (with pompoms)

Who am I? Claire Hennings, a senior at Los Osos University in Orlando, Florida. I am the proud cheerleading captain and have been for all my years at Los Osos. My only habit is gum chewing, but I don't consider it a real problem because I read online that Trident gum is

recommended by nine out of ten dentists, so it must be healthy. Besides, my teeth look fantastic, so I doubt it's an issue. I am currently dating the quarterback of the team, Bobby Chapman, who is as handsome as he is athletic. I am blonde, ambitious, outgoing, loud, peppy, excitable, flirtatious, and fun. The biggest thorn in my side is the new girl on the squad, Jannie Stein. My favorite movie is *The Notebook* and my favorite magazine is *Cosmopolitan*. I currently study fashion merchandizing but would love to make professional cheerleading my career. My mother is a stay at home mom and wife, as well as leading many ladies clubs around town. My father is a successful podiatrist. My parents are happily married and have been for 17 years. My younger brother Tommy is now six years old and is a little odd (he enjoys dressing up in my clothes and make-up). I am an all American girl who loves her daddy, her university, her boyfriend, and her horseback riding lessons.

Most attractive and unattractive qualities? How are they exhibited? How are they hidden? I am super cute, excellent at doing make-up, and a fantastic cheerleader. I show off my cheer talents and fabulous fashion every day in school. My weakness is math. I really can't get a good grade no matter how hard I try. I am also really addicted to caffeine pills- but I only take them so I can do everything in my busy schedule and not get behind. My parents cannot know that I need the caffeine pills in order to succeed, or they will take me out of cheerleading in order to give me more time for studying.

What is my physical rhythm? I am very physically fit and energetic. Most of my energy comes from the caffeine pills, but I am generally peppy. I am excellent at tumbling and rarely feel lethargic. Physically I am precise, athletic, sharp, and energetic.

What time is it? It is 8:00PM, the time to start the show by pepping up the audience and getting them excited for what they are about to see. I take cheering very seriously so I know that my job is incredibly important.

What surrounds me? I am surrounded by the stage set, the lights, and the audience. The set has many levels and is painted in blacks and grays. There is a desk and chair upstage of me that is used for another scene. The lighting fixtures are above me and some are situated on the sides. I am almost blinded by the lights that are fixed on me, so I can barely see the audience that is in front of me- A sold out house. The audience looks excited, many of them are smiling, and a few are checking their cell phones or whispering to the person beside them. I am also standing beside Jannie Stein, who is the most irritating member of the cheerleading squad since coach made us include that girl in wheelchair. Jannie looks ridiculous tonight. She attempted to copy my hairstyle, which was an epic failure. I also noticed that she stole my lipstick and used it, which means that most people in the audience probably think we're friends or something.

What are the given circumstances? I am cheerleading captain (four years running) and absolutely love to cheer. I am excited to be the opening act for a new play, *The Exit Interview*, but I am highly disappointed that the other girls on the squad could not do it, so I am stuck with Jannie. I am beyond excited to be doing my first professional cheerleading gig- this may be the start of my career!!!

What is my relationship to everything? My relationship with Jannie is a bit of a “frenemy” relationship. She is obviously my friend because we cheer together, but I loathe her and her lack of talent. She always makes the squad look terrible and she is frankly a terrible

cheerleader. I am frustrated that coach demanded she be on the squad because she certainly doesn't have the looks to fit in. But, coach said it would make us look more inclusive if we added a "nontraditional" student to the squad – She is 38 and takes night classes because she has a kid or something. She is always trying to copy my look. Tonight, she copied my side ponytail and red lipstick. She actually used MY lipstick in the dressing room. Jannie refuses to learn her lines, so she just repeats everything I say. Not only is it annoying, but it messes me up because I have to remember double the lines. Ughhhhhhh- she's such a loser.

My relationship with the audience is amazing. They obviously love me and think I look amazing. There is one super hottie guy in the second row, I might wink at him when I come back to introduce act two.

My relationship with the gunman is fine. His name is Aaron Westfield and he is a really weird guy. I've seen him around campus; he mostly just sits by himself. I know he gets really good grades in World Literature, because he sits in front of me and I always notice A's on his papers.

What do I want? I want to introduce the play with pep and spirit. I want to get the audience pumped up. I want to thank our sponsors. I want Jannie to stop acting like such a spaz. I want to hit on that hottie in the second row. I want to launch my professional cheerleading career.

What's in my way? Jannie is in my way because she looks like such a loser, which by proxy makes me look like a loser.

Function in the play? At our first read through, when I asked the playwright, William Missouri Downs, his rationale for including cheerleaders at the top of show, he replied, “Because it’s funny.” At opening night of *The Exit Interview*, he was asked by an audience member why he chose to include cheerleaders for the opening announcements. He replied that he was in the shower (which is where he gets all of his best ideas) and that the idea to include cheerleaders just came to him. He said that he knew the cheerleaders would be a ridiculous way to open a play, which is exactly what he was going for. What better way to kick off a show than with two crazy and illogical characters? It would be easy for an audience member to think the cheerleaders are just a creative way of introducing the play and giving the standard “turn off your cell phone” reminder. However, I believe the cheerleaders are the first of many illogical characters and scenes the audience is about to experience. The cheerleaders seem out of place in a theater; therefore they create an alienation effect- a reminder to the audience that they are watching a play. The cheerleader’s interactions are also direct address to the audience, which helps to instantly establish a rapport and encourage audience involvement.

Mary (Dick’s Ex-Girlfriend – an Oboe Player)

Who am I? I am Mary Jane Meredith. I am the daughter of Joanne Meredith and Robert ‘Bob’ Meredith. I was raised in a lovely home in rural Pennsylvania, not too far from Philadelphia, in a town called Fort Littleton (no, there is no actual Fort there). I am an only child who was a bit spoiled in her youth. I can still depend on my parents to help bail me out if I ever get into any financial trouble. My ex-boyfriend is Richard Fig, a Brechtian scholar who teaches at Los Osos University in Orlando, Florida. I currently work transcribing audio texts into typewritten texts, but my true passion is the oboe. I often spend eight to ten hours a day

practicing my oboe. I value absolutely nothing over my oboe. I am willing to give up other job opportunities, my relationships, and friends, even family in order to practice my oboe. It is my dream to be a first chair oboist at the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington DC. I have a son, Ben, who is the product of a fling I had with my Gestalt therapist, Raul Hunjabi. I often misplace my son's baby carriage and I find it hard to keep track of him. Being a mother is not something I thought I'd love or be good at, but I am doing my best and I truly love my son. I am thrilled that Fox News showed interest in my story- about when Ben accidentally rolled under that commuter train and survived. I would be incredibly excited to be on TV, mostly because it seems really cool to say you've done it. And who knows somebody might be seeking an oboist and see me!

Most attractive and unattractive qualities? How are they exhibited? How are they hidden? I am dedicated, loving, and honest. I show great love to my parents and my son. My worst quality is actually wrapped up in my best, meaning that despite how great it is to be dedicated, sometimes my dedication to the oboe takes precedence over my relationships and other commitments. I would never admit that I value my oboe over everyone else in my life, I would rather just break up with someone than admit to them that I'd rather play my oboe than be with them, which is why I broke up with Richard. I am also a manipulative person. I tried very hard to change Richard (particularly in his hatred of small talk). I even chose to give him back his manuscript immediately before entering my parents' house so I wouldn't have to deal with his anger about it and because I wanted to teach him a lesson that small talk isn't vile, it's an important part of social conversation.

What is my physical rhythm? I am physically medium-paced and methodical. Some may describe me as OCD, because I need to have everything in a particular order and I am very clean. I am graceful with my movements and completely uninterested in physical exercise or exerting myself in any way. I move with a gliding quality.

What surrounds me? In act one scene three (A Train Ran Over My Baby) I am on the Fox News set. I am seated in front of a hair and make-up stand near the back of the set and I can see tons of crew people busily moving lights, plugging in cameras and other equipment, delivering coffee, and talking on cell phones. I can see the news desk- it seems to glisten under the bright stage lights- it looks magical. When Walter Kendall walks in I am a bit star-struck. I had always dreamed of being on TV and seeing a real news anchorman makes this TV dream a reality. He texts throughout our conversation, which seems a bit rude, but I assume it is important business. The make-up lady seems a bit aloof. She doesn't seem to like me and won't smile. She chews gum like a cow and smells of very strong perfume. I really like her boots- I wish I could wear shoes like that.

In act one scene five (No Religion, No Politics) I am outside of my parents' house. It is the same little house I grew up in as a child. It is a white house with a picket fence and a lovely front porch. My mother has put out a jack-o-lantern for Halloween, and has obviously forgotten to take it down because it is now Thanksgiving. I am standing beside Richard, trying to calm him down for meeting my mother. Inside the house I am surrounded by all the familiar objects of my youth. My mother's china, the floral upholstered furniture with plastic covers, my mother's decorative cat collection, and many family photos on the wall- mostly of me.



In act two scene four (Fox News Alert) I am at Los Osos University surrounded by many concerned family and friends of those trapped in the building with the shooter. There are hundreds of police officers, paramedics, ambulances, and police cars around me. Many of the officers have their weapons drawn and are awaiting the gunman's exit from the building. I am standing in front of the news crew camera with a boom mic over my head, bright lights in my face, and Walter Kendall to my right. I have Ben beside me in his carriage and my oboe case in my hand. I later realize that Ben is not beside me and run off to find him.

In act two scene six (The End is Near) I am back on scene outside the University where the shooting is taking place. This time, I have Ben with me in his carriage. The scene around the University is still chaos- people running around looking for family and friends, and many police officers, paramedics and other officials debating how to best handle the situation with the shooter.

What are the given circumstances? In act one scene three (A Train Ran Over My Baby) I am at the Fox News station preparing to tell the story of how my son fell in front of a commuter train and lived. I have broken up with Richard, because I felt that he was bad luck for my fingers and he would ruin my audition for the National Symphony Orchestra oboist position. I am in good spirits because I am still waiting to hear back about my audition and I assume that I will get the job. I am excited to be on TV because it is something I've never done before and I hope my family and friends will see me and be impressed.

Act one scene five (No Religion, No Politics) is a flashback scene that takes place back when Richard and I were together. I am introducing Richard to my family for the first time on

Thanksgiving. I know he despises small talk, but I have advised him that it is a necessary part of life, especially when trying to impress my mother (who adores small talk). I have been keeping his edited manuscript in secret for about two weeks, mostly because I don't want to deal with him once he sees how many changes his editor has requested, and also because I want to use it to show him how universally accepted and important small talk is. I hand it to him right before we go inside my parents' house to avoid a conflict over the edits and to remind him to make small talk with my mother. I really need my mother's approval of Richard because she still supports me financially when I get in a bind, and the typing job hasn't been too hot lately. I know that Richard is a wonderful person with lots of brilliant ideas about the world and I sincerely hope he can show his best side to my family.

What is my relationship to everything? I met Richard Fig (my ex-boyfriend) at the University's production of *Hello Dolly*. I was playing my oboe for the orchestra, and Richard was coming to see some of his students who were in the production. It was clear to me that Richard didn't think much of the show, in fact, he looked absolutely miserable. During intermission I was at concessions getting my favorite candy bar (100 Grand) when Richard came up beside me to order a glass of wine. He asked me about my oboe (as he had never really heard one before) and then asked for my number. The weeks that followed were lovely. We went to concerts, poetry readings, and even joined a few book clubs together. I knew I loved Richard, but his obsession with Brecht became troubling. All he ever talked about was the "objective discernment that autonomous artworks presuppose" and I began to get fed up with all of the questions about existence on Earth and his obvious lack of social skills. If there was anything Dick hated, it was small talk. He simply couldn't do it. He was so terrible at it, that I often had

to remind him before we entered a social setting, “no religion, no politics.” I currently work from home transcribing audio recordings, but my true passion is the Oboe. I have been playing Oboe since I was about six years old. A few months ago, I developed OS (Overuse syndrome) in my third and fourth fingers. I felt so much pain that it was impossible to practice. Unfortunately, not being able to play my oboe brought on a terrible depression. I felt so lost without my oboe; I couldn’t even get out of my bed. The doctor had prescribed in a series of anti-depressants, but they didn’t seem to be helping. Richard attempted to cheer me up by taking me on a trip to Yellowstone National Park. But, being surrounded by all that beauty and realizing that my ability to create beautiful music may be gone forever just made my depression worse. I realized that I had lost my purpose in life and that I needed to end it. I chose a cliff that looked to be an ample height and I flung myself off. When I hit the ground, it hurt, which made me realize that I was alive. I had broken my leg, but I was certainly alive. I think I may’ve survived because of the puffy down jacket I was wearing to keep warm; it seemed to cushion my fall. When Richard found me lying there, he tried to pick me up, but when he did, he twisted his testicle. Lucky for us, I realized that I had my cell phone on me and I called 911. Richard doesn’t believe in cell phones. When the ambulance arrived, they loaded us in and headed down the road. Unfortunately, the ambulance hit a moose, which untwisted Richard’s testicle, but rendered the ambulance useless. They rolled our gurneys out of the ambulance, and while we waited for another to come, we were forced to watch the moose suffering. Eventually, one of the paramedics took a tire iron from the back of the ambulance and started beating the moose to death. It didn’t die quietly; it took a long, long time and many hits before he finally died. I couldn’t help but scream and cry while I watch the event unfold. I have never seen something

more brutal and disgusting in my life. I will never forget the look on Richard's face, he was white as a ghost, and I don't think either of us will ever get over it. The paramedic was so caught up with this moose that he didn't even notice the ambulance rolling backwards towards Richard and I, who were strapped to gurneys and couldn't move. The ambulance rolled over us both, breaking my arm and severing Richard's leg. It wasn't until the moose was dead that the paramedic finally noticed Richard and I lying in the road, even more mangled than we were to begin with. When we recovered and returned home I began seeing a Gestalt therapist named Dr. Raul Hunjabi. Most of our sessions consisted of me looking at pictures which could be one thing or another, for example, one picture could be a rabbit or a duck, depending on how you looked at it. I found most of Raul's techniques to be a complete waste of time, so we spent most of our sessions having sex. There was something sexy about Raul – maybe it was his knowledge about the human mind, or maybe it was his amazing ability to use small talk, something that Richard could not do if he tried. I also wasn't getting any from Richard, because he was told to abstain from sex for three months due to his twisted testicle and a scrotal ultrasound that found a lump. I was on the pill during my affair with Raul, but apparently it didn't work, because nine months later little Ben came into my life. When I discovered my pregnancy, Richard and I broke up. I understood that it was too painful for him to watch a little life growing inside of me that wasn't his. After I gave birth to Ben, my overuse syndrome cleared up! It was a miracle. I started playing my oboe again, more than ever before. Some days I practiced over ten hours a day. Richard and I got back together and he forgave my fling with Raul. But, the next day, I got a call from the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington DC, offering me an audition for a first chair position starting immediately! I knew I had to take it, and I also knew Richard was bad

luck for my oboe playing. I had never had any trouble playing before I met Richard, so it must've been him who caused the overuse syndrome. I broke up with Richard that day and Ben and I headed for DC for my big audition. When I arrived in DC, I had to wait for a train that would take me into the city. I was standing at the metro station platform and I had my oboe in my left hand and Ben's bottle in my right hand. I was thinking a lot about Richard that day. I knew how much he hated his job, full of red-tape, disgruntled students, impossible coworkers. I was thinking about the interview that awaited me at the National Symphony Orchestra. I was in a daze, watching the commuters passing me by, some headed to their first day of a new job, some headed to their exit interview. I couldn't help but reflect on what it all meant, this life, these jobs we have, these roles we play, and what does it all mean in the end? Just then, I realized that the baby carriage was rolling toward the metro rails, and then I saw the train speeding toward the platform! I watched in a complete paralyzed horror as my baby Ben tumbled over the edge and onto the tracks. In a flash the train was rushing in, right over Ben's tiny body. I saw the train collide with the carriage, smashing it into thousands of pieces. I closed my eyes tightly because I couldn't bear to see the bloody mess that I was sure was waiting for me. I heard other commuters screaming and gasping. The train pulled out from the platform after only a few moments. I stood there, eyes still closed and unable to move. Then, I heard a man say, "ma'am, is this your son." I opened my eyes to see my darling Ben with only a small scratch on his head from the fall. He had landed between the two tracks and the train gone right over his body. He was small enough to remain unscathed by the metro train. I couldn't believe Ben had been so lucky. I was so grateful to have that little boy back in my arms.

My little boy, Benjamin Robert Meredith was born on December 19<sup>th</sup> at 7:55PM. It was an easy delivery and I was only in labor for about an hour. Ben is a charming little boy. He is now ten months old and loves playing peek-a-boo. Ben's arrival in my life caused a lot of turmoil between Richard and me, but I've never taken that out on Ben. When I discovered I was pregnant, I must admit that I was not quite ready for motherhood. I believe I am an excellent mother, but I often misplace Ben when he is in his carriage. He is so quiet and well behaved that it's easy to forget he's even there. I named Ben after a beautiful painting I once saw in the Philadelphia Museum of Art called "The Oboe Player (A Portrait of Dr. Benjamin Sharp)" by Thomas Eakins. There aren't many paintings of oboes, or oboe players for that matter, so Mr. Eakins' painting was always very special to me. I feel truly blessed to have little Ben in my life and I would not trade him for anything in the world. I never thought I could love something as much as my oboe, and now I do.

Walter Kendall from Fox News has always been a man I admired. Although I don't think much of Fox News as a source of balanced news, I had to jump on the opportunity to be on the news myself! Walter Kendall seems to be a nice man, but we don't agree on much in terms of politics or religion. He is an excellent newscaster and has a very attractive smile.

My relationship with my Mother, Joanne Meredith (referred to as Mrs. Meredith throughout the play), has been strained at times but has really become close in my adult years. As a teenager, I wanted to defy my mother, but once I hit my twenties, I realized how important it was to maintain my relationship with her. She is a very religious person (Episcopal) and although I do not believe in the same things she does, I often pretend to in order to appease her.

I realize that she lacks sophistication and knowledge about film, music, books, art, and theatre, but I appreciate her simplicity and have learned to handle her well. I want her to approve of my husband because I want to have a functional family and a calm home life. I don't need the turmoil of a disgruntled mother.

What do I want? I want to get on the news. I want to look good on the news. I want to impress Walter Kendall. I want to shut Richard up. I want my mother to love Richard as much as I do. I want to get out of the room immediately. I want to teach Richard a lesson. I want to find Richard. I want to make sure Richard is safe. I want to find Ben and keep him safe. I want to find my purpose in life. I want to be cured of my overuse syndrome. I want to play with the National Symphony Orchestra.

What's in my way? Walter's attitude and beliefs are in my way of getting on the news and looking impressive. Walter's demands on what I say while on TV are getting in my way. Richard's hatred of small talk is getting in my way of my mother liking him. Richard's stubborn attitude is getting in my way of teaching him his lesson. My inability to keep track of Ben, my preoccupation with my oboe, and my concerns about Richard's safety are getting in my way of finding Ben and keeping him safe. My overuse syndrome is getting in my way of playing my oboe.

Function in the play? Mary is one of Richard Fig's many antagonists in the play, as well as his love interest. In many ways, she functions as a middle ground between the radical beliefs of Dick and the opposite beliefs of Eunice and Mrs. Meredith.

Samantha (A mother with a baby carriage)

Who am I? I am Samantha Masterson, 32 years old, and a stay at home mother and wife. I completed my bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education and went on to be a day care teacher for several years until my husband and I discovered we were expecting our darling son, Aden. Aden is currently fifteen months old. My husband, Andrew, works as an accountant at a local firm downtown. I drive a Porsche Cayenne and love arranging play dates for my son and me with other local mothers. One of my favorite mothers to get together with is Beth, because she knows so much about the world and politics. We live in Winter Park, Florida and absolutely love it here. My favorite television shows are Fox and Friends and American Idol. I also enjoy Rachel Ray and Oprah. My idea of a fun time is seeing a romantic comedy at the movie theatre. I love White Zinfandel and spinach artichoke dip. I watch a lot of news on Fox and never miss Dateline, so I consider myself very up to date on world affairs and politics. I am living my dream of being a full time mommy and wife!

Most attractive and unattractive qualities? How are they exhibited? How are they hidden? I am a very devoted mother and wife and I love cooking and cleaning and taking my child on play dates. My most unattractive quality is my lack of social or political knowledge. I hide this by listening to many sources such as Oprah, Dateline, and Dr. Oz, yet I never really learn anything of import from them. I feel that I am worldly and intelligent, yet most people consider me to be vapid and uninteresting.

What is my physical rhythm? Physically I am quick and twitchy. I bite my nails all the time and cannot sit without shaking my foot. I hardly ever sit still with all of the child care and cleaning I need to do around the house.



What time is it? It is 2:30PM on a spring day. The sun is shining and I am on a play date with my son and my dear friend Beth and her son, Sage.

What surrounds me? I am in the park just off of Park Ave in Winter Park Florida. I am seated on a lovely bench situated so that the lovely gardens are just in view. I can see people shopping and driving along Park Ave and many lovely birds flying from tree to tree. There are many squirrels rummaging around for the nuts I assume the buried before winter (which really isn't much of a winter around here). There are just a few big white puffy clouds spotting the brilliant blue sky overhead. The air is warm and a light breeze blows.

What are the given circumstances? Beth and I often meet for play dates so our sons Aden and Charlie will get to know each other and have a good playmate growing up. I absolutely adore our play dates, because it gives Beth and me a chance to catch up. I really enjoy talking with Beth; she is truly a knowledgeable woman and has many insights into world politics. Our discussions are usually about whatever issues we've seen lately on television. Beth is certainly my best friend in town, because we have so much in common and enjoy spending time together.

What is my relationship to everything? My son, Aden, is truly the love of my life. He is the little boy I always dreamed I'd have one day. He has his father's chin and nose, and my eyes and lips. He is fifteen months old and I spend every waking minute with him because I stay at home.

My best friend is Beth. She lives just down the street from me and also has a son just about Aden's age named Charlie. I consider her to be a smart and fun person, and I love play dates with our kids and wine dates for just us girlfriends. Beth and I love to discuss world issues

and politics and are both passionate about helping others. We often talk about volunteering together, but we never seem to find the time. We both love shopping together at Ann Taylor and Williams and Sonoma.

What do I want? I want to convince Beth of the validity of all of the interesting and shocking things I've seen on TV lately.

What's in my way? Beth has different opinions than me and she is not easy swayed.

Function in the play? Samantha functions as a cultural stereotype device. In this scene, Samantha and Beth discuss things they have heard on the news and from other media sources, and it is evident that they accept anything they hear as the gospel truth and never question the validity. Samantha represents the many Americans who blindly follow the political, social, and religious views promoted by their favorite celebrities and news channels.

#### Businesswoman # 2 (An expert on underwear)

Who am I? I am an actress portraying a "Businesswoman" for underwear commercial. I am myself, Lauren Butler, giving my best reading for a sexy underwear advertisement.

What time is it? It is 9:15PM and we are in the midst of act two.

What surrounds me? I am surrounded by the set, the lights, run crew, the other actors, and the audience. Alex is beside me, also in the commercial.

What are the given circumstances? I am myself, Lauren Butler, acting as though I am in a commercial for underwear. I am here because I play other roles within the show.

What is my relationship to everything? Alex and I are both in the cast of the show. Alex also plays Walter Kendall and John Calvin. I enjoy working with Alex and find him funny and easy to get along with.

What do I want? I want to convince the audience to buy this amazing underwear (as seen on Alex). As myself, I want to fully express the playwrights' intention of using this scene as an alienation device.

Function in the play? The Businesswoman functions as a Brechtian alienation device. The playwright included these alienation devices in order to remind the audience they were watching a play and to remind them to think about what is happening on stage. As the playwright explains, "I want the same thing Brecht wanted. To wake the audience and make them use their brains" (Downs).

#### French Girl (confused about her destiny)

Who am I? A lonely love-sick French girl named Genevive Jouex. I have recently been dumped by my boyfriend and lost my job and I have no idea where I belong in the world or what to do next. I am very confused about my life and my destiny.

What time is it? It is 4:30PM on a beautiful day in July of 1549.

What surrounds me? I am surrounded by the smells and sights of the streets of Paris. I can see the Eiffel tower in the distance; I can smell the baguettes, pastries, and other delightful baked goods being sold in the shops. I see women walking beautifully dressed on the arms of

handsome men. Everyone around me looks blissfully happy and totally in love. Just then I see John Calvin on the street walking toward me.

What are the given circumstances? I have just been dumped and lost my job. When I see John Calvin I realize that he may be able to tell me about the purpose of my life and my destiny, so I ask him.

What is my physical rhythm? I am slow, weepy, and lugubrious. I drag myself from bed each morning and mope around in life.

What is my relationship to everything? John Calvin, being the first to theorize on predestination, is a man I believe can tell me the purpose of my life and my destiny. I believe him to be a wise man and theorist and assume that he will have exactly the answer I've been looking for and will reassure me that my life will be okay.

What do I want? I want to know my destiny.

What's in my way? John Calvin doesn't really have any answers. The stage manager interrupts the scene.

Function in the play? This scene is one of two Brechtian alienation devices included in the play to remind the audience that they are watching a play. This scene is an absurd set up for the stage manager to interrupt with 'new pages' sent from the director.

Dr. Dobson (PhD in religious studies from Yale)

Who am I? I am Dr. Marsha Dobson. I earned my PhD in religious studies from Yale. I am punctual, exacting, and thorough. Most people would describe me as shy, perhaps even a bit

aloof, but that is because I pour myself into my work as a Lutheran scholar. I believe that God and Jesus designed me to carry out their message here on Earth and I have devoted my life to their service. I am unmarried and have no children. I am considered amongst the top in my field, if not the top myself, and take great pride in what I do.

What are my most attractive and unattractive qualities? How do I express them? How do I hide them? I am a very precise and straightforward person. I love detail work and finding finite answers to the questions of the universe, which is why I chose to study religion at Yale. My most unattractive quality is that I am completely anti-social. I hide this from the world by always being incredibly involved with my work and cats.

What is my physical rhythm? I am quick, sharp, and tense. I always walk as though I have a stick up my butt.

What time is it? It is 3:00PM on Monday, December 17, 2012.

What surrounds me? I am at a government panel on science and religion being filmed in Washington DC by C-SPAN. I have served on the panel before and am thrilled to have been invited back. I am to the left of Dr. Hubert who is president of the Latter-Day Saints Church. Much to my surprise, he has brought with him the golden plates.

What are the given circumstances? I am very devoted to the Lutheran Religion that I serve. I am also devoted to scientific research, and find that there is absolutely none to back up the Mormon religion. I bring this panel discussion in hopes of promoting the Lutheran message

I believe in so strongly. I have seen Dr. Hubert before and I find him to be a false person who is also a blind follower of a foolish religion.

What is my relationship to everything? My relationship to God and Jesus is number one in my life. I spend a great deal of time praying and reading religious texts.

I have met Gordon Hubert before and I have despised him since the moment I met him. I have forgiven him his sins of following the Mormon faith, but I know he will be damned to hell if he doesn't repent.

What do I want? To promote the Lutheran faith by getting the Lutheran message out to the entire world.

What's in my way? The overwhelming evidence that Mormonism does exist (Scientific studies, the Golden Plates, the photo of Jesus with the Indians).

Function in the play? Dr. Dobson is a character within a Brechtian alienation device scene titled "Science vs. Religion." In this section of the play, Mr. Downs juxtaposes the traditional stereotypes of scientists and religious scholars, by creating scientific zealots and religious scientists, meaning that Dr. Dobson, a religious scholar, who behaves according to the stereotypes of a scientist. She is calm, reasoned, logical, and objective- essentially everything a religious zealot is not. Dr. Dobson's character is the opposite of the religious stereotype, and functions as an exploration into the way religious debates and scientific debates are handled. When the audience is able to view religion (specifically Mormonism) from a scientific perspective, the evidence presented in the case of Mormonism seems incredibly absurd. By

creating a religious scholar determined for evidence to prove faith, Mr. Downs reminds us that there is absolutely no concrete evidence to prove the validity of any religion.

## CHAPTER FOUR: SCENE BREAKDOWN AND TEXT ANALYSIS

The script calls specifically for a screen on stage that displays a title for each scene. The scene titles serve a dual function of titling each scene as well as reminding the audience that they are in a theatre and watching a play (which is the aim of both Brecht and Downs). These explanatory placards, if you will, are one of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* techniques. I used the scene titles to inform my work, as each serves as a mini theme within the play, and therefore guides the actor towards the goal of the scene (the desired effect on the audience). As an actor in *The Exit Interview* I put my focus on thoroughly identifying all of the plot lines and Brechtian devices employed within the text and gaining a full understanding of all the topics referenced. The following is a description and analysis of each scene, my character's motivations, as well as some of the director and playwright's thoughts.

### Act One, Scene One: Warning Labels

*The Exit Interview* opens with "Raucous rock and roll. The screen above the stage doesn't just light up, it's a technical event as it oscillates to life. It reads: Warning Labels!" (Downs 1). The opening scene of the play sets up the convention of using scene titles to open each scene, which is included as a Brechtian alienation device. The Cheerleaders address the audience directly, giving the usual curtain speech style instructions as well as a warning about the offensive nature of the play. The use of direct address was often employed by Brecht as an alienation effect. We also see a ski masked gunman standing in the background of the stage, pointing his gun directly at the Cheerleaders, who never notice him. The unexpected appearance



of cheerleaders to give a curtain speech certainly excites and engages the audience, as Downs put it:

“Expect the unexpected. Wake up. There’s no slow fade up in this play. No bland expositional scene. No scene where the characters enter, take off their coats to get comfortable and start talking. The scene is designed to wake the audience up! Oh, it’s also absurdly funny” (Downs).

Pat Flick wanted us, as the cheerleaders, to bombard the audience - in a good way- with a combination of shock, comedy, and rapport building with the audience. The opening scene is a set up for the absurdity that will continue throughout the play.

The opening scene also serves as a social criticism on curtain speeches in general. The typical theatre curtain speech includes pertinent information for the audience, such as the locations of the exits, the running time, and the number of intermissions, as well as the turn off your cell phone reminder. A curtain speech may also include a thank you to sponsors and even a plug for an upcoming show. Much of the text is a rejection of social norms, and the opening scene is no exception. Downs is mocking the theatrical norm of self-congratulation and shameless plugging of upcoming events that is inherent in curtain speeches, through his use of vapid characters conveying unnecessary information.

Within the scene, the cheerleaders reference Bertolt Brecht, metaphysical isolation, existential uncertainty, Lutheranism, Realism, the Holy Trinity, Twitter, and school shootings. Although it may seem that the cheerleaders are nothing more than characters parroting their cheers as something memorized rather than something truly comprehended, it was essential for

each reference to be understood by the actors, as the job of an actor according to Epic Theatre Theory is to convey ideas for the audience's judgment.

### Act One, Scene Two: Last Day on the Job

*Last Day on the Job* is the audience's first glimpse at the main characters of the play, Richard Fig, a Brechtian scholar and University professor, and Eunice, an employee of the Human Resources Department. Because Downs jumps around in time (he incorporates flashbacks, dream sequences, and commercial interruptions) and also switches plot lines, I will be referring to the Dick and Eunice plot line as the main plot line of the play and the concurrent Mary plot line (which eventually intersects with the main plot) as the secondary plot line. The flashbacks, dream sequences, and commercial interruptions are all considered alienation devices.

The scene opens at the beginning of Mr. Fig's exit interview from the University. It is obvious that Dick has no interest in being there and finds Eunice immensely annoying. Eunice and Dick are foil characters. Eunice is religious, jolly, a stickler for rules, and a lover of small talk, while Dick Fig is agnostic, disgruntled, rebellious, and refuses to engage in small talk under any circumstance. The interview begins, much to Dick's displeasure, with small talk, instantly cueing the audience into Dick and Eunice's personality differences. Eunice systematically goes through each of the questions on her form while Dick unhappily answers. Throughout the interview process, much is revealed about Dick's life and interests, including his book, *No Religion, No Politics*, which he hopes will become a New York Times Best Seller. According to Dick, religion and politics are the two things that cannot be discussed in polite society, which is how he arrived at the title. It is also a quote from his ex-girlfriend; it was something she would

squeeze his hand and say before they entered her parent's house (as we will see in scene five).

When asked about Dick's book title, Downs said:

“Dick is in search of the rarest of all commodities – an intellectual conversation. This comes from my life. My wife is from Alabama – whenever we are in Dixie most of our acquaintances spend hours talking about the weather (sans global warming), Alabama football (Auburn sucks), how their snap beans are doing, and which new flavor Bluebell ice cream is introducing next; this is followed by more talk about what the weather will be like during the football game. This would be okay if at some point they talked about something, anything significant, original, or moderately thoughtful. We are all going to die and be forgotten. Perhaps we should give that a little more thought between our shouts of “Roll Tide!”

Mr. Downs explained in one of our table read sessions that he put a bit of himself in both Dick and Mary. Dick and William Missouri Downs both harbor contempt for small talk and a yearning for true intellectual discourse.

Although the scene is based in realism, it verges on surrealism when Eunice asks Dick a very absurd question, “If your bride said, “But my first love is the oboe,” would you still marry?” (Downs 14). There is no way for Eunice to have ever known about Dick's oboe obsessed ex-girlfriend, Mary, because this is the first time they have ever met, so why does Eunice ask that question? Downs claims that, “the oboe is just an absurd chance thing... its Kafkaesque (a senseless, disorienting, menacing complexity) just like life” (Downs). Eunice's ‘Kafkaesque’

oboe question also serves to introduce Mary, and thus transitions the scene to the parallel plot line, where Mary is meeting with Walter at the Fox News station.

### Act One, Scene Three: A Train Ran Over My Baby

In Act One, Scene Three, Mary and Walter Kendall are introduced. Mary has arrived at the Fox News station, with her son Ben (in his baby carriage) and her oboe, for a T.V. interview about Ben's near death incident. The audience learns that Ben's baby carriage recently rolled in front of a commuter train, and before Mary could retrieve him, he was run over by a train. Fortunately, this incident left Ben unscathed, because his body was between the tracks as the train passed by. Throughout the scene, Walter Kendall is constantly texting, as is the make-up lady who is preparing him for the interview. Mary reluctantly answers Walter's questions as he attempts to persuade her to claim that God saved her son because he had a purpose for him. At the end of the scene, Mary is left alone with the make-up lady, when Walter rushes out to cover a gunman story.

In this scene, Downs is highlighting the absurdity of Fox News' broadcasts through Walter's character- a Christian, conservative, pompous local newscaster. Downs chose to use Fox News specifically because, "The play is an absurd comedy – Fox News is one of the most absurd of the news companies that pretend to bring us our news" (Downs). According to FAIR (Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting), Fox News has recently been under a great deal of scrutiny, specifically from liberal Americans, for being a "biased" news source. Several studies, including one from the Project on Excellence in Journalism, have shown that Fox News has the highest

percentage of “personal opinions” in their stories when compared to other national news sources (fair.org).

Walter represents the stereotypical biased Fox News reporter and Mary represents the average American (or maybe a slightly smarter than average) who is skeptical about Walter’s beliefs, yet plays along to get on T.V. because she thinks it “would be kinda cool” (Downs 18). The make-up lady, a vapid and uninformed individual, represents yet another subset of Americans who are self-involved, ignorant, and iPhone obsessed. Her only actions involve texting and applying make-up. Downs uses these stereotypes to emphasize the absurdity of our media saturated culture - obsessed with smart phones and ignorant to the biased news we are fed.

#### Act One, Scene Four: The Secret of the Secret

The Secret of the Secret is titled after the 2006 best-selling self-help book by Rhonda Byrne. The book is one of Eunice’s favorites, and throughout the scene she exuberantly attempts to convince Dick of the book’s validity, much to no avail. We are also introduced to Eunice’s collage, which she created to ‘cure her cancer.’ At the end of the scene, we hear the first gunshots, which Eunice plays off as a car backfire. These gunshots bring Dick out of the Eunice’s office and into a flashback scene with Mary.

This scene serves as further development for Eunice’s character as well as an examination of the power of positive thought. We begin to see how deluded Eunice really is – she is able to completely buy into a belief that a collage cured her cancer! Downs is mocking all the mumbo-jumbo type remedies that people buy into- *The Secret* being the epitome of such. The scene is also an exploration of fate vs. free will, and whether or not our free will is

constructed by our actions, our destiny, or by simply wishing it to be so, “You can master your destiny by just thinking” (Downs 21). When Mr. Downs was asked about reading *The Secret*, he replied, “I read *The Secret*, it made me laugh” (Downs). Downs uses this scene to mock the validity of *The Secret* and all the people who follow it as though it’s scientific truth.

#### Act One, Scene Five: No Religion, No Politics

Dick is jolted out of reality and brought into a flashback when he hears the distant gunshots. Mary appears and responds to what he’s just heard, “You knew it was a gunshot. You weren’t being honest with yourself, but you knew it” (Downs 24). Mary is clearly in Dick’s mind at this point, until the scene transitions back into his memory of meeting Mary’s mother for the first time on Thanksgiving.

Mrs. Meredith is a similar stereotype to Eunice, a pseudo-intellectual who engages in small talk and attends church every Sunday. In this scene, Downs reveals more of Dick’s refusal to adhere to social norms and political correctness, but to the point where it is not clear if it is Dick or Mrs. Meredith who is too stubborn to relent. They represent opposite extremes, therefore presenting both sides of the issue for the audience to judge. After Dick breaks into a song about the lack of evidence to prove the power of prayer (a Brechtian alienation device) Mrs. Meredith loses any tolerance she once had for his continued rejection of social courtesy and religion, and eventually kicks him out of her house.

Downs uses the juxtaposition of Mrs. Meredith’s extreme conservative values with Dick’s rejection of all social courtesies to present the liberal vs. conservative argument for the audience. Both Dick and Mrs. Meredith are absurd characters in this scene, too stubborn to see

the other side or even feign interest. Mary chooses to remove herself from the situation by making carrot juice - although she encourages Dick to keep his mouth shut, “No religion, no politics”, she says before she enters the house (Downs 25). Mary is incredibly manipulative in this scene. She gives Dick the butchered manuscript of his book just before entering the house, because she knows he will be upset (and she doesn’t want to deal with it) and also because she wants him to realize that everyone engages in small talk (even his editor) and that he needs to let it go! Mary also chooses to excuse herself the minute she enters to make Dick’s carrot juice. She is testing to see if Dick will relent and small talk with her mother, and she is also trying to avoid the awkward situation that is inevitable between them.

Once Dick is kicked out, the scene transitions into yet another scene- Dick’s imagined fight with Mary about their break-up. Dick attempts small talk, but fails miserably, before Mary gives up on him and leaves to practice her oboe. Mr. Downs and I discussed this moment at length, because I struggled to understand Mary’s motivation for leaving Dick to play her oboe. Bill revealed that Mary’s oboe obsession actually came from his own obsession, writing. He explained to me that he is so passionate about his writing that he’s let relationships go because of it. This insight from the playwright really helped me to understand the character in a way I never could’ve understood without his input.

#### Act One, Scene Six: An Agonistic in a Foxhole

Dick transitions from his own thoughts on Mary back to Eunice’s HR office. The gunshot is confirmed by Chloe, Eunice’s work-study assistant, who received an alert on her iPhone about the campus gunman. Eunice climbs under her desk to seek shelter, where she

remains throughout the rest of the show. She continues her questioning, despite Dick's confusion.

This scene is a turning point of the play - the focus moves from Dick's man vs. himself conflict to the Dick vs. gunman conflict. Downs creates yet another absurd scenario by having Eunice continue her questions from under her desk.

#### Act One, Scene Seven: Gravity is Not Mad at You

Act One, Scene Seven begins as a jump to the secondary plot line (Walter and Mary's plot line). It is an interview between Walter Kendall and the Dean of the university where the shooting is taking place, but is promptly stopped by the stage manager, who says, "Hold Please! ... The playwright has re-writes" (Downs 37). At this point, the actors drop their characters and become themselves (an actor in *The Exit Interview*), as the scene immediately transitions into "The Alienation Effect."

#### Act One, Scene Eight: The Alienation Effect

"The Alienation Effect" is seamlessly connected to the scene before it- the only real change is that the actor's drop their characters and the screen changes. In this scene, the actors should be playing themselves reading a new scene for the first time. Obviously, the scene has been rehearsed, yet the actors perform the scene as though they've never seen the new pages ever before. This scene is designed to remind the audience that they are watching a play, and to set up the next scene, which has absolutely nothing to do with either plot line the audience has been watching up until this point. The scene entitled "The Alienation Effect" is an alienation effect in



itself, as well as a way to familiarize the audience with Brecht's background and theatre techniques.

#### Act One, Scene Nine: Wenig Gespräch (Small Talk)

"Wenig Gespräch" comes from the new pages introduced by the stage manager. It does not further the plot line nor does it include any characters that will reappear, but it does further explore the theme of small talk that has been presented previously in Act One.

Downs chose to make the characters two women on a park bench for a very simple reason, "I only have six actors. They were the ones not in the previous scene. Nothing deep, it's just staging. In this scene characters are not as important as what they are saying. We want the audience to think about epistemology. There's no deep character development within the scene – the actors are there to make a point (just as Brecht sometimes did). The baby carriages continue the baby carriage image throughout the play" (Downs). Downs intention with this scene is not to contribute to the plot, but to purposefully diverge from the plot in order to jolt the audience and provoke them to listen to the conversation taking place, rather than focusing on the character development.

#### Act One, Scene Ten: God Found Me a Parking Space

Act One, Scene Ten brings us back to the main plot line between Dick and Eunice in the HR office. In this scene, Downs explores the concept of Fate vs. Free will, and how/if God controls our daily lives. Throughout the scene, Dick asks Eunice questions about why God would handle humanity the way he does and Eunice fires back with devoutly religious and faithful answers. Eunice has an answer for any question Dick throws her way, because she truly

believes that, “God has a bigger plan” (Downs 48). As Dick’s questions become more and more difficult, Eunice’s answers become increasingly ridiculous and unfounded. At this point in the play, Downs has established his main characters and deviated from the plot line with the alienation effect, in hopes of bringing the audience to the point that they are open and engaged enough to listen objectively. This scene is the last seen before intermission, and it presents a lot of God questions for the audience to ponder during the break.

#### Act Two, Scene One: Towards a Poor Theatre

When the audience returns from Intermission, they are again bombarded by the cheerleaders. This time, the cheerleaders are promoting their Non-Profit Theatre agenda and bashing Jessie Helms, who fought to cut NEA funding. The cheerleaders also inform the audience that Act Two has been sponsored, so the scenes may be interrupted by commercials. When the cheerleaders exit the stage, the gunman follows them off and shoots them.

Downs has created a ‘TV style’ act two, with the drama and suspense of the play dramatically halted by news and commercial interruptions. I recall Mr. Downs’ comments during our first table read about the absurdity of our television programs being stopped by commercials and news bulletins. This convention is very Brechtian, because the audience is constantly taken out of the drama and reminded that they are watching TV. Commercial interruptions are expected during TV programs, but never during live theatre, so this convention will be jolting to the audience, but also comical, because it seems so strange.

### Act Two, Scene Two: What's it Like to Kiss A Girl?

This scene presents yet another religious question for the audience to ponder- whether or not God accepts homosexuality. Eunice reveals that she has had fantasies about her work-study student, Chloe, and that she believes the gunman is God's wrath for her behavior. Dick dispels this notion, but Eunice decides that praying for forgiveness will still be the best option.

Downs has presented the audience with a moral question about homosexuality; however he has couched it in the absurdity of a woman who believes that she could be killed by a gunman because she had a homosexual fantasy. Framing the issue in an absurd situation allows the audience to consider their viewpoint without great emotional connection to the characters.

### Act Two, Scene Three: Imagine Every Little Snowflake

Eunice's prayer transitions Dick into another flashback, this time with Father McCarthy, his childhood priest. Father McCarthy explains the Holy Trinity and reminds Dick about the importance of faith using bizarre analogies and confusing terminology provided by the church. Diet Coke product placement ads are peppered into the scene, which yet again reminds the audience that they are watching a play. Father McCarthy disappears from the scene when more gunshots are heard. Dick is jolted from the scene when the phone rings, he answers and hears the Fox News theme music.

### Act Two, Scene Four: Fox News Alert

Dick answers Eunice's phone to discover Walter Kendall on the other line with a Fox News Alert. Walter asks Dick about God's purpose for him before handing the phone over to

Mary. Dick bares it all to Mary, even revealing his hatred of her oboe and his attempts to destroy it. Mary runs from the scene once she realizes she has lost Ben.

This scene combines all the plot lines together; Dick and Eunice are on the phone with Walter and Mary (Fox News) and the alienation devices are not included as commercial interruptions. It is as though the audience is watching live footage of a school shooting. This scene, Downs serves to give us greater insight into Dick and Mary, both as a couple, and as individuals trying to find their place and purpose in the universe. This is also the first time we see remorse or emotion from Dick. This scene is yet another absurd moment in the play- Downs has created this incredibly private and emotional conversation between Mary and Dick and has set it in front of a Fox News camera with a newscaster standing by listening- reminiscent of a reality show. Downs brings back the comedy when Mary realizes her baby has rolled away from her again (just as he did when he fell in front of the commuter train).

#### Act Two, Scene Five: I'm Confident Cause I'm Comfortable

This scene is yet another alienation device, but this time is played as a commercial interruption from the campus shooting coverage. Both actors play the scene as though it is a commercial. This commercial is social satire for our cultural obsession with beauty products and the false nature of advertisement.

#### Act Two, Scene Six: The End is Near

This scene brings us back to the now intertwined plot, reminding us that Dick and Eunice are still trapped (and the gunman is shooting), Walter is still covering the story outside, and Mary has found Ben.

### Act Two, Scene Seven: A Car Chase in Sanford

This scene is yet another interruption from the plot- a car chase in Sanford (originally written as a car chase in San Bernardino). This scene reminds us of the nature of our news coverage- quickly switching to a new story if it appears more action-packed or bloody than the current coverage. The scene then quickly switches to a baseball player's story, which seems strange considering a gunman on campus usually trumps all other news. Downs explains:

“That’s right; the baseball story is totally inconsequential- that’s the point. Our media is absurd. Everything is given equal weight. With Fox, NBC, ABC (etc.) there’s no difference between small talk and unimportant talk. But also it is an alienation device. It pulls the audience out of the story with unimportant shit (just like our media does). It also typifies how crap is king – years ago my wife was watching Oprah and the starlet announcer in L.A. came on and said “Berlin Wall falls, details after Oprah and Rosanne”. She called me laughing through her tears at the absurdity. Modern life is just one constant Brechtian alienation device. Coming up next, we learn that we’re all going to die painful, meaningless deaths, but first a message from Veg-O-Matic the most user-friendly vegetable chopper on earth” (Downs).

Downs play is one constant Brechtian alienation device, which is reflective of our modern day lives – constantly switching focus and full of diversions, product placement, and commercial interruptions.

### Act Two, Scene Eight: Leave Her Guessing

Act Two, Scene Eight is yet another commercial interruption for an underwear advertisement. In American culture, sex sells, and both commercials feature a half dress actor showing off their undergarments that make them more comfortable, more confident, and more sexually appealing.

### Act Two, Scene Nine: God Ate My Homework

The gunman finally enters the scene and points his gun at Eunice. She attempts to dissuade him from shooting her first with the promise of God's love, and eventually by admitting she has no idea if God even exists. The gunman attempts to shoot her, but his gun sticks, several times, before Eunice runs out the door with her collage in hand yelling, "There is a God and he loves me!" (Downs 71). The police riddle Eunice with bullets as soon as she exits the building. The Gunman then turns his gun on Dick as the lights black out.

This scene is the culmination of all the religious questions posed throughout the play- the question of God's existence. Earlier in the play Downs explored the question of God's wrath, God's ability to control our fate, and the power of prayer, and now he poses the ultimate question- does God exist at all? In this scene, Downs is making a comment on the fragility of faith in times of crisis. Eunice seems firm in her beliefs until she is faced with true crisis (a gun in her face) and then she finally admits her doubt about God's existence.

### Act Two, Scene Ten: John Calvin's Theory of Predestination

The next scene is another alienation effect. Downs introduces two new characters who are never again seen after this scene - a young French woman and John Calvin. This scene is quickly interrupted by the stage manager, who announces more re-writes.

This scene follows immediately after a highly emotional moment in the play, Eunice's death. This scene serves as a device to remind the audience that they are watching a play. Downs is attempting to keep the audience on track to keep thinking, he doesn't want them to start getting emotional at this point.

### Act Two, Scene Eleven: The Alienation Effect – Part Two

Scene Eleven picks up where the first alienation effect left off, adding information about Brecht and introducing a new "completely different play" to the audience (Downs 72). Just as the first alienation effect required, this scene should be played as through it had no rehearsal and the actors had never seen the pages before.

### Act Two, Scene Twelve: Wissenschaft im Gegensatz zu Religion (Science vs. Religion)

Scene Twelve is an exploration of the objective nature of science and the subjective nature of religion. Downs has constructed two scenes, one between two religious scholars and another between two scientists, both locked in a debate about differing theories. Downs intentionally wrote the scientists as hostile and passionate about their beliefs, with little to no evidence to back up their theories other than their own personal opinions. The religious scholars are calm and calculated, armed with empirical data to back up their theories. This juxtaposition

highlights the absurdity of religious debates without specifically pronouncing that religious beliefs have no scientific evidence to confirm them.

#### Act Two, Scene Thirteen: The Exit Interview

In the final scene of the play we finally see the gunman's face and hear him speak. Many of the themes come full circle at this point, for example, the gunman's opening line is small talk, "Can you believe all this rain?" (Downs 78) and the gunman points out that "what's it all mean?" is actually a loaded question. Downs also brings us back to Dick's initial question, "What does it all mean?" (Downs 79). The scene is tense and dramatic, yet Downs keeps it funny, due to the absurdity of the conversation (the gunman started shooting because of the high salt content in V8 Juice). Downs also provides us with another Brechtian device - another song, sung by Dick about the meaning of life. As the gunman is about to shoot Dick, Eunice's cell phone receives a text (her ring tone is "What a Friend We Have in Jesus"). After looking at it, Dick tells the gunman that the text is from God.

Dick's reason for saying the text is from God was a topic of great debate throughout rehearsal. Mr. Downs would never say for certain why, but he did endorse a reason that I proposed during a table reading. I personally feel that at this moment Dick is making a change in himself, either because he wants to save himself from being shot or because after his phone scene with Mary he has realized that his life is worth something (I like to believe the latter). At the beginning of the scene, he engages the gunman in the small talk (which is highly unlike him) and then he tells the gunman the text is from God, either because he is manipulating him, or because he thinks that the text is (or could possibly be) from God. Up until this scene, Dick has



adamantly denied the existence of God, but once he sees the text, he changes his tune. It is never revealed to the audience what exactly the text says, so the audience is left to guess how Dick concludes it is from God.

## CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH

When I began working on *The Exit Interview*, I was provided with an extensive amount of dramaturgical notes compiled by Dawn Moore and Danielle Ward from the San Diego Repertory Theatre, all of which greatly aided my understanding of the play itself as well as all of the references within it. William Missouri Downs created a script full of references: some historic, some modern, and even a few obscure ones. Because the play is written in Brecht's Epic Theatre style, a style that specifically presents ideas to be judged by the audience, it was essential for all the actors to have a full understanding of every person, theory, place, medical condition and thing referred to throughout the play in order to fully express all the ideas written. The necessity for the actors to possess a thorough understanding of each reference as well as the social and political issues it raises was emphasized by the director, Pat Flick, and William Missouri Downs, just as it was by Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre Theory. The following is all relevant dramaturgical research I used to inform my work in *The Exit Interview*.

### Bertolt Brecht

Brecht is not only important to the text because of Richard Fig's admiration of him, but also because his Epic Theatre is the basis upon which Downs constructed the play. As John Gassner explains in his book *Form and Idea in Modern Theatre*, "Neither the play nor the stage production would be required to maintain any consistent illusion of actuality. On the contrary, such illusion was to be destroyed by fragmentation of scenes and settings, by the interruption of action, and by the deliberate severing of suspense" (17). All three of Gassner's mentioned points are upheld by Down's script. Many scenes spring up designed only to deviate from the plot line,

the action is interrupted by songs and direct address to the audience, and the suspense of the gunman event at the university is broken up deliberately by ‘commercial interruptions’ brought to the audience by local sponsors. All of Down’s plot devices force the audience to remember that they are in the theatre and watching a play, just as Brechtian Theory demands.

Bertolt Brecht, an influential poet, playwright, and director, was born in Berlin, Germany in 1898 to a middle class Catholic father and Protestant mother. He studied drama and medicine at Munich University, before being drafted. The Nazi party did not endorse Brecht’s work, and even interrupted a production of *In the Jungle* in 1923. The Nazi’s open disapproval of his plays contributed to his dismissal of the Nazi party, his rejection of authority, and his compulsion to create politically and socially controversial theatre. Brecht worked as a dramaturg for Erwin Piscator, and it is there that he began his interest in Marxism. He later worked with Kurt Weil to create *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) and *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahogony* (1930). In 1933, Brecht fled Germany due to his fear of Nazi persecution and wrote *Galileo* (1939), *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939), and *The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941). In 1941, he came to the U.S. where he wrote *The Good Person of Szechwan* (1941) and *Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1942). After being questioned by the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1947 for his communist sympathies, he returned to Germany where he founded the Berliner Ensemble, which still exists today.

Brecht is often considered the founding father of modern theatre due to his Epic Theatre theory. Brecht’s Epic Theatre promoted rational self-reflection and criticism from the audience rather than emotional identification with the characters. Brecht rejected catharsis of emotion

from the audience in place of waking up the audience to social injustices and inspiring them to take action against it out in the world. Brecht believed that by emphasizing the constructed nature of a theatrical event, he could remind the audience that their reality was also constructed, and therefore, changeable. One of the most important principles to Epic Theatre is *Verfremdungseffekt*, or the alienation effect. As Brecht describes it, “stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them” (Moore and Ward 12). Some of these alienation effects included actors’ direct address to the audience, harsh and bright stage lighting, the use of songs to interrupt the action, explanatory placards, and speaking the stage directions aloud. Brecht’s alienation devices served to remind the audience that they were in a theatre, which, as Brecht believed, would provoke people to think about the issues being presented rather than feeling emotion for characters.

### Existential Uncertainty

Existential uncertainty is the crux of Richard Fig’s emotional journey throughout *The Exit Interview*. Through Dick’s eyes, the audience is brought to question, “what does it all mean?” which is the essential question of both existential philosophers and the play. Down’s writing is distinctly American, in that its focus on existential uncertainty is a defining characteristic of American culture, both past and present.

In his book, *Existential America*, George Cotkin argues that an existential viewpoint is a defining characteristic of the U.S. culture of the twentieth century. Originally derived from many western philosophers, including Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers, and Jean-Paul Sartre, existential uncertainty is marked by a belief that one is entirely alone in the universe, and thus

that life has little or no meaning. Existential questions have furthered many fields including religion, ethics, philosophy, and psychology (3).

As Moore and Ward outline in their dramaturgical notes, Kierkegaard is considered the “Father of Existentialism.” (15). He focused on the importance of subjectivity in discovering truth (“Subjectivity is truth” and “truth is subjectivity”) arguing that truth is not derived from collecting objective facts, but rather from how one relates to the facts. Kierkegaard believed that how one relates to facts is more important than the facts themselves, which lead him to the conclusion that subjectivity is the key to finding truth, not objectivity. Kierkegaard’s view on subjectivity is directly reflected in William Missouri Downs’ text. The meaning and moral of the text is irrelevant for finding truth, because the key to truth lies in how the audience relates to the piece and what personal truth is found through viewing it. Subjectivity is also an essential tool for the actor. If we take the Meisner repeat acting exercise for example, it is not about *what* is said, it is about *how* it is said and how the receiver *relates* to it. It is essential for an actor to construct their character’s subjective experience, or point of view, just as we all respond to the subjective experience of our daily lives. Finding subjective truth is therefore fueled by reactions and visceral responses to facts, rather than facts themselves.

Cotkin’s book explains that it was not until the 1930s that Kierkegaard and Sartre’s philosophies were officially introduced to the American public; however Cotkin asserts that Americans were actually the first existential thinkers. Even before Sartre’s philosophies, Jonathan Edwards, Herman Melville, and Emily Dickinson all questioned the existence of human kind and the meaning of life. Cotkin traces the development of existentialism throughout

American history, including “its adoption by Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison to help articulate the African-American experience; its expression in the works of Norman Mailer and photographer Robert Frank; its incorporation into the tenets of the feminist and radical student movements of the 1960; and its lingering presence in contemporary American thought and popular culture, particularly in such films as *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, *Fight Club*, and *American Beauty*” (1). Existentialists believe that life derives its meaning through the individual’s personal choices rather than through religious worship. Often, the meaning of one’s life is found through a moment of existential crisis, when all hopes and dreams seem lost and the individual must push forward. Existential thought is an integral part of American culture, continuing today to inspire artists, scientists, scholars, and society at large to explore the meaning of life.

### Objective Discernment

In *The Exit Interview*, Dick specifically refers to objective discernment in regards to its most general definition, “Brecht felt the objective discernment that autonomous artworks presuppose in the viewer was inadequate while his didactic style reinforced his communist perspective. It’s loosely based on my PhD thesis. It’s called *No Religion, No Politics*” (20). Brecht believed that that plays were to be judged by the audience in a discerning manner, thus Dick’s choice to describe the viewer at utilizing objective discernment is a key into his understanding of Brechtian Theory.

According to the research compiled by Moore and Ward, Objective Discernment is the act of ascribing value to a specific subject or event. In reference to Christianity, discernment

may take on several different meanings, such as the process of determining God's will for one's life, the process of searching within oneself to choose one's purpose (specifically married life, single life, religious life, ministry life, or any other calling), or the process of "discernment of spirits" which involves determining which spirit the human soul derives its impulses from (good or evil) (16).

### Gestalt Therapy

In the play, it is referenced that Mary had a fling with her Gestalt therapist, which led to the birth of her child, Ben. Understanding Gestalt therapy was a great way for me to unlock another facet of Mary's character. Mary didn't really believe in Gestalt therapy, she gave it a try because her mother mentioned it and kept going because the therapist was hot. Gestalt therapy is one of the less scientifically verified psychological techniques, as it is a branch of Psychotherapy (which was originally created by Freud) and is considered "armchair" psychology because it was created by one man's observations rather than by empirical study. I feel that Mary's desire to continue to go to her gestalt therapist despite her lack of belief in his techniques is evidence of her willingness to conform, which we also see in her scene with Fox News caster, Walter Kendall.

According to Engle's book, *American Therapy: The Rise Of Psychotherapy In The United States*, Fritz Perls, Laura Perls, and Paul Goodman began developing Gestalt therapy techniques in the 1940s. With a focus on the individual, Gestalt therapy employs existential/experimental psychotherapy techniques in order to help the patient become more aware of themselves and their feelings. Gestalt means whole, and therefore emphasizes

organizing varying individual perceptions into a whole (e.g. the rabbit-duck illusion). There is a particular emphasis on seeing all sides of an issue, because many parts make up the whole. Gestaltists believe they can unlock the solution to any problem by seeing the issue from every angle, or by seeing the whole, if you will. One particular technique used by Gestalt therapists is the empty-chair technique. An empty chair is placed in the room with the patient and therapist. The chair is used to hold an imagined other that the patient may have a conversation with in order to reveal their innermost feelings (187).

### Religion

*The Exit Interview* explores and challenges many different religious viewpoints. Downs does not ever promote any one single religious belief, but rather, points out the weaknesses in all of them, and leaves the audience to decide for themselves. The research outline below is adapted from the Dramaturgical notes compiled by Dawn Moore and Danielle Ward.

#### *Lutheranism*

According to the research compiled by Moore and Ward, Lutherans, totaling 66 million worldwide, make up the largest branch of the Protestant denominations. Lutheranism was founded by a German monk named Martin Luther in 1517 when he posted his *95 Theses* which criticized the Catholic Church's sale of indulgences. Lutheranism spread throughout Germany, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Iceland. Luther believed that the Catholic Church was contradicting their own teachings (the Bible) and thus broke away to form the Protestant movement. Luther promoted his belief that salvation was only found through faith in God and that scriptures should be printed in the peoples' native languages so that they could fully understand the teachings. Although Luther rejected the Catholic church's practices he did not



reject the scriptures. Today, the Lutheran Church is represented nationally by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and internationally by the Lutheran World Federation. The Book of Concord contains many historical Lutheran Confessions and is considered to be the doctrine for all Lutherans (29).

Dr. Martha Dobson, one of my characters in *The Exit Interview*, is a member of the Lutheran World Federation and Lutheran Scholar. She appears within the science vs. religion alienation effect scene, and although she is a religious zealot, she operates from more of a scientific perspective (objective rather than subjective).

#### *Apostles' Creed*

In the text, Downs' employs the use of the Apostles' Creed during the 'Two Mothers' scene as another example of some of the facts that the two women have memorized. It is rattled off just as easily as one's own name and is immediately taken as absolute truth with no rebuttal from Samantha.

According to the research compiled by Moore and Ward, the Apostles Creed is a statement of Christian belief, which is used by many denominations including, Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Congregationalists, and Western Orthodox. It is believed that the Twelve Apostles dictated part of it, and thus is divided into twelve articles. Below is the Apostles Creed, divided into twelve articles based on the Catechism of the Catholic Church's English translation. The text in italics denotes the text used by Downs within *The Exit Interview*.

1. I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

2. I believe in *Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord.*
3. *He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.*
4. *He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.*
5. *He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again.*
6. *He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.*
7. *He will come again to judge the living and the dead.*
8. I believe in the Holy Spirit,
9. The holy catholic Church, the communion of saints,
10. The forgiveness of sins,
11. The resurrection of the body,
12. And the life everlasting.
13. Amen. (Moore and Ward 32).

### *Deism & Agnosticism*

Deism and Agnosticism are explored throughout the text through Dick's interactions with Mrs. Meredith and Eunice.

Deism rose to popularity during the Age of Enlightenment, at a time when many Christians realized they did not believe in miracles, inconsistencies in scripture, the trinity, or even God, and thus, became Deists. According to the World Union of Deists:

“Deism is the recognition of a universal creative force greater than that demonstrated by mankind, supported by personal observation of laws and designs in nature and the universe, perpetuated and validated by the innate ability of

human reason coupled with the rejection of claims made by individuals and organized religions of having received special divine revelation.” (deism.com)

Deism rejects organized religion, but supports that the universe was created by an intelligent creator, or “Supreme Architect.” This creator never intervenes or interferes in the lives of humans, but rather allows the natural laws of the universe to continue on, uninterrupted. The Deist theory is known as the clockwork universe theory, in which God created the universe, and then abandoned it to run on its own (deism.com).

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, T.H. Huxley had many friends who followed various ‘isms’ and thus, founded his own theological ‘ism’ – agnosticism. Huxley wrote at length about agnosticism in several essays:

Agnosticism is not a creed but a method, the essence of which lies in the vigorous application of a single principle... Positively the principle may be expressed as in matters of intellect, do not pretend conclusions are certain are not demonstrated of demonstrable. (25)

Inspired by Acts 17:23, which describes an altar to an ‘unknown god’, Huxley determined that the origin of the universe could never truly be determined. Many agnostic arguments are hinged on the presence of evil in the world, because there cannot be a truly omniscient, omnipotent, and Omni-benevolent God if there is also evil and suffering in the world (Huxley 4-18).

### *Mormonism*

Mormonism is explored in the text when the Golden Plates are discovered and presented to Dr. Dobson. Dobson, a devout Lutheran, is forced to deal with this discovery in a scene that takes place live on C-SPAN.

As outlined in Moore and Ward's research, the Mormon faith took its name from their religious text, the Book of Mormon, which was dictated by the religion's founder Joseph Smith, Jr. from Golden Plates he received from the angel Moroni. Smith claimed to have seen God in the spring of 1820, and later discovered the Golden Plates. Before returning the plates to Maroni, Smith translated them (totaling over 500 pages) in approximately 60 days thanks to the "gift and power of God." Smith serves as the only witness to his claims; however, there are several witnesses who claim to have seen the Golden Plates. The Latter Day Saint movement is also included along with the Mormonism movement, both originating in western New York in the 1820s. Both rely on the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine of Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. Mormons believe in plural marriages (polygamy) and baptism after death (28).

### *The Power of Prayer*

In *The Exit Interview*, Downs has created an alienation effect around the power of prayer—a song sung by Dick Fig to Mrs. Meredith. The lyrics of the song are based on the below study, concluding with the line, "A study by six medical centers, concluded that prayer had no effect whatsoever, both studies were double blind" (28).

Prayer is considered by many to have powerful healing properties. A recent study at Brandeis University explored the effect of intercessory prayer (prayer from strangers). The study

of intercessory prayer dates back to the late nineteenth century, when an English scientist concluded that the King saw no health benefits despite the overwhelming number of individuals praying for his health. The most recent prayer study was conducted by Wendy Cadge in which she examined eighteen studies conducted on intercessory prayer published between 1965 and 2006. The studies included Protestant, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist and other prayers. Some of the studies showed that prayer worked while others claimed it did not. Despite the attempt to adhere to the scientific method, Cadge found that most of the studies have many confines, “With double blind clinical trials, scientists tried their best to study something that may be beyond their best tools, and reflects more about them and their assumptions than about whether prayer ‘works’” (sciencedaily.com). Ultimately Cadge asserts that there is no way to empirically test prayer because there are simply too many variables.

### *Humanism*

In *The Exit Interview*, Humanism is yet another religious belief presented for the audiences’ consideration.

In Joseph C. Sommers' article, “Some Reasons why Humanists Reject the Bible” Sommers asserts that, “Humanism is a philosophy of life that considers the welfare of humankind- rather than the welfare of a supposed God or gods - to be of paramount importance” (www.americanhumanist.org). Humanists deny the existence of any supernatural powers, and therefore put all their focus on how humans can change the world based on the wants and needs of the people. Service to others is the primary focus of Humanists, because according to their beliefs, it is only through human action that the world will change and grow. Humanists believe that the world was created through a long and complex evolutionary process. Humanists believe

in moderation in all things and in the limitless beauty, joy, and exploration of the natural world. Humanists lack definite answers about the afterlife, and thus believe that life should be lived as though it's the only one we have, because there is no evidence for or against an afterlife ([www.americanhumanists.org](http://www.americanhumanists.org)).

### *Fate vs. Free Will*

Fate vs. free will is the crux of a conversation between Dick and Eunice while they hide from the campus gunman in Eunice's office. Dick recounts the tragic story of his trip to Yosemite with Mary while Eunice attempts to explain God's rationale for everything that went wrong. The scene leaves the audience to ponder God's involvement in our lives and the purpose (or lack of) the daily events of our existence.

Sri N. Ananthanarayanan, a devout Hindu, discusses fate and free will in his book, *What the River has Taught Me*. Ananthanarayanan emphasizes Sivananda's argument that fate and free will are not two different entities, but rather are one entity. The exercise of free will (Purushartha) is how our future destiny is determined (123). Ananthanarayanan furthers the argument that fate and free will are intertwined theoretical concepts, and neither is more real than the other because they are merely philosophical formulations and are both fictitious. He goes on to explain that fate is a concept used to comfort those unhappy with their circumstances, because they are inevitable, while free will is used as a way to encourage people to change their circumstances because they have the power to do so. According to Ananthanarayanan, the only real will is 'God's Will':

There is neither fate nor free will. There is only God's Will. It is the human ego, it is mere vanity, which makes man claim for himself all the credit whenever he succeeds. It is his vanity again which makes him disclaim all responsibility for his failures and throw all the blame on a concept called Prarabdha. In truth, God is responsible for both success and failure. A man succeeds or fails, because God wills it so. God's Will is supreme. It is the power or force which upholds the universe. It is the substance behind the world-show. The man who understands this is wise. He will have no cause to complain. (127)

Ananthanarayanan's assertions of the power of God's Will negates the fate versus free will argument, because God's Will is above all. It is only if we remove God's Will from the argument that we can discuss the differences between fate and free will. Downs explores fate, free will, and God's Will throughout the play, but never make a statement on his position either way.

#### *The Trinity and Omniscient/Omnipotent/Omnibenevolent*

The concept of the Holy Trinity is considered a mystery of the Christian faith, and serves within *The Exit Interview* as a subject of great confusion and comedy. The priest tries repeatedly to explain the Trinity to Dick, however, his explanations get more and more confusing and thus, more and more comedic.

Moore and Ward's research explains the Holy Trinity as a Christian doctrine that describes God as three distinct, yet unified, persons: the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit. The three are considered the same (of one being), while also each considered as the entire (each person is God). God is often considered the creator and overseer of the universe.

He is considered to be (rather than to have) infinite knowledge (omniscience), ultimate power (omnipotence), presence everywhere (omnipresence), and perfect goodness (Omni benevolence) (27).

### The Secret

Despite the overwhelming success of *The Secret*, it has seen a great deal of scrutiny, and *The Exit Interview* is no exception. Downs mocks the absurdity of the book's laws through Eunice's character, who believes that she cured her cancer by wishing it and that all her dreams will come true because she makes a collage of her future dream life.

*The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne is a self-help book designed to help people improve their personal lives. The book, based on an earlier film by the same title, was featured on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, was a 2006 New York Times best seller for 146 consecutive weeks, was translated into 44 languages, and sold 21 million copies. *The Secret* is based on the law of attraction, which attributes the circumstances that occur in our lives to how we think and feel about the world around us. Thus, if you think negatively, negative events will come your way, because you attracted them with your thoughts and feelings (36).

### German Phrases

In true Brechtian style, he is of German descent; Downs' script includes many German phrases within the alienation effects. The German phrases that appear within the text are translated below.

- Amüsement – Amusement



- Arbeitsgerät mit einem harten Kopfteil - Hammer; Literally: working unit with a hard head
- Die Ausgang Interviewen – The Exit Interview
- Mutters- Mothers
- Untertauchen – immersion; figuratively: disappear
- Verfremdungseffekt – Alienation Effect, Distancing Effect (coined by Bertolt Brecht)
- Wenig Gespräch – Little conversation (small talk)
- Wissenschaft im Gegensatz zu religion – Science in contrast to religion

### Grace and Diplomacy: The Art of Small Talk

Debra Fine's book, *The Fine Art of Small Talk*, is the real life self-help source that Downs drew from to create the fictitious *Grace and Diplomacy: The Art of Small Talk*. Fine's book outlines the importance for small talk within our society as a way to make friends, further your career, and improve yourself as a person. Within the context of the play, small talk serves as a point of much tension between Dick and nearly everyone in his life- his girlfriend dumps him because of his refusal to engage in small talk with his mother, his editor rejects his book debunking the importance of small talk, Eunice uses small talk during his exit interview, and the gunman starts up a small talk conversation with Dick in the closing scene of the play. Small talk is an important aspect of Dick's life as well as all the other characters in the play.

### Loaded Questions

Dick is as equally disgusted by small talk as he is by loaded questions. Loaded questions are a theme throughout the play; Eunice asks, "Were you pleased with the parking?"; Walter

asks, “What is God’s purpose for you?”; and even Dick himself inquires, “What’s it all mean?”

A loaded question is a question that contains a faulty assumption. Loaded questions are considered logical fallacies and specifically attempt to serve the questioner’s bias. A loaded question is phrased to purposefully limit the replies to ones that will benefit the questioner’s agenda (Moore and Ward 52).

### John Calvin

John Calvin was a French pastor during the Protestant Reformation who is mentioned briefly in the text during an Act II alienation effect scene exploring the concept of predestination. In 1536, he published his reformation beliefs in his book, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*. Calvin promoted the concept of Predestination, which dictated that one’s destiny was determined at birth, either for damnation or salvation (Moore and Ward 58).

### Neurodegeneration, Proteins, and Seasonal Affective Disorder

Downs interweaves the neurodegeneration alienation scene into the main plot of the text by having the gunman discuss his seasonal affective disorder with Dick in the final scene of the play. Research compiled by Moore and Ward describes seasonal affective disorder as a depression that occurs at the same time each year (seasonally). Currently, testing for Seasonal Affective Disorder is focused on the H3 and H5 proteins, the same proteins Downs has the scientists arguing over during the Science vs. Religion alienation device (47).

The process of neurodegeneration involves the loss and/or death of neurons. Neurodegenerative diseases are often a result of proteins that fail to carry out their intended function because their structure has been miscoded (or modified). This is miscoding of proteins

is related to improper DNA sequences that lead improper amino acids to pair with proteins, thus causing misbehaving functions that ultimately lead to disease. Neurodegenerative diseases include Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, and Huntington's (Moore and Ward 41).

### Overuse Syndrome

Overuse syndrome affects Mary's ability to play the Oboe in *The Exit Interview*. Overuse syndrome is sometimes called repetitive strain injury (RSI) and is a result of using a muscle in a repetitious way, thus causing strain. Musicians are often affected if they practice for prolonged periods of time, hold their instrument in one hand, or maintain a hand posture that is out of normal alignment (Moore and Ward 46).

### Scientific Method

In *The Exit Interview*, the two women on the park bench create their own study to test whether a cheetah or antelope would prove to be the faster runner for short distances. They are very careful to adhere to the scientific method. The scientific method can be outlined by the following steps:

1. Ask a Question
2. Complete Background Research
3. Create a Hypothesis (Best Guess)
4. Test Hypothesis with an experiment (this must be reproducible)
5. Interpret Data: Analyze results and draw a conclusion (Accept or Reject Hypothesis)
6. Report Results for Peer Review
7. Peers replicate the study

The scientific method promotes empirical study that can be replicated as many times as possible in order to support a theory (Moore and Ward 42-43).

### Twisted Testicle

Dick Fig is afflicted with a twisted testicle in *The Exit Interview* and is unable to have sex, which leads Mary to seek out an affair with her Gestalt Therapist.

A twisted testicle is known medically as a testicular torsion and is a condition where the spermatic chord becomes twisted. The spermatic chord is made up of blood vessels and also serves as a pathway for sperm, thus a twisted testicle can cut off blood and sperm supply and eventually male infertility. If twisted, the scrotum may appear swollen and the patient may experience severe pain and nausea. Treatment usually involves reestablishing blood flow; however, many men recover without manual untwisting or surgery if testicle is able to untwist on its own (Moore and Ward 41).

### Winter Solstice

The solstice is an astronomical event that takes place twice per year, summer and winter, when the sun reaches its highest point in the sky. The winter solstice is on December 22<sup>nd</sup>. The meaning of the solstice varies based on culture and religion, but often involves a festival, ritual, gathering, or holiday (Moore and Ward 48). In *The Exit Interview*, Dick mentions that he and Mary celebrate the winter solstice, which is seen by Mary's mother as an indication that they are "heathens."

### Theater History

Dick, a Brechtian scholar and avid theatre supporter, explains to his mother-in-law, Mrs. Meredith, “I don’t celebrate Christmas because when the Christians took power at the end of the Roman Empire they cancelled the theatre for nearly four hundred years” (Downs 29). If we put the questionable logic aside and look at the validity of Dick’s statement, then it is indeed true, the Christians are considered to be one of the major contributors to the decline of theatre during the Roman Empire. Brockett and Hildy explain in their book, *History of the Theatre: Foundation Edition* that the theatre in Rome reached its peak in the fourth century C.E. But, as Christians gained power, the theatre faced great opposition. Christians opposed the theater for three main reasons:

First, it was associated with the festivals of pagan gods. Second, the licentiousness of the mimes offended the moral sense of the church leaders. Third, the mimes often ridiculed such Christian practices as baptism and the sacrament of bread and wine. (54)

Beginning in 300 C.E. the church actively sought to discourage theatergoers, and by 398 the Council of Carthage ruled that attending the theatre rather than church on a holy day was punishable by excommunication and that all actors would be denied the sacrament of the church. These church decrees were not lifted in many places until the eighteenth century (Brockett and Hildy 54).

Dick also enlightens Mrs. Meredith about why he doesn’t celebrate Thanksgiving, “We don’t think the Pilgrims are anything to celebrate. Before they came to America they were called the Puritans in England. It was Puritans who tore Shakespeare’s Globe to the ground” (Downs

29). Dick's history is yet again correct, as Brockett and Hildy explain, "During the eighteen years between 1642 and 1660, the Puritans sought to sop all theatrical activity... The King's Men sold its wardrobe, and its Globe Theatre was torn down." (219). A law was passed in 1642 banned all performances until 1647. Despite the Puritans attempt to end theater in England, many actors sought other performance spaces. Unfortunately, when the ban was lifted in 1647, it was only for a period of two years before a new law ordered all actors be considered criminals and should be arrested. When Charles II (reigned 1660-1685) took the throne, theatre was finally restored in England (220).

In the context of *The Exit Interview*, Dick's passion for theatre history and stubborn attitude leads Mrs. Meredith to kick him out of her home, completely destroying the Thanksgiving events and leading to a huge fight between Mary and Dick. Mary breaks up with Dick, because he just cannot keep his opinions to himself and have a simple small talk conversation with Mrs. Meredith in order to appease her. Understanding that Dick's knowledge is indeed factual contributes a great deal to his character. He is an intelligent man, but he refuses to allow other people believe what they want, and therefore alienates himself from others, particularly Mary and her family.

## CHAPTER SIX: REHEARSAL AND PERFORMANCE JOURNALS

The following journals chronicle the rehearsal and performance process of the NNPN Rolling World Premiere production of *The Exit Interview* by William Missouri Downs. I address my challenges, discoveries, and thoughts over several months as I rehearsed and refined my role. This journal is intentionally casual, as it is meant to help the reader understand my process in creating my role for the first time. I most often refer to myself, the actor, as I and to my various characters as she. My journals are not designed to be a guideline in any way, but rather an exploration of my process. These Journals span from August 2012-October 2012.

### Friday August 31, 2012

In mid-July of 2012, I received a call from Jim Helsinger, the Artistic Director of the Orlando Shakespeare Theatre who informed me that I had been cast in *The Exit Interview*, which was slated to be OST's first ever Signature Series production and was also an NNPN Rolling World Premier. I was beyond ecstatic! Since the casting news, I have combed over my script- I've already read it six times. It is an odd script, to say the least. The scenes are written in a vignette style- many little scenes that add up to the whole. There are even commercial interruptions, which I am unsure what to make of at this point. What is clear to me is that the play certainly has an agenda-- to 'trouble the issues' as Ms. Julia Listengarten would put it. Downs has crafted a script designed to inspire the audience to question their political, social, and religious beliefs.

As I considered the potentially offensive nature of the text, I began thinking about the friends and family I have that may be taken aback by the topics presented. Although I personally

agree with Down's liberal views, there are many who do not. How does an actor approach a role in which they do not agree with on a moral level? Clearly, it has been done before. I do not assume that every actor who has played a murder or a rapist actually aggress with committing those crimes, however, they must reconcile that within themselves and find some way to portray the character with honesty. However, it does not seem to me that an audience is easily offended by a morally questionable or even an evil character, an audience's bias to a play is most often when the material challenges their own beliefs. It is troublesome to me that often political and religious satire is more offensive to an audience than gratuitous violence or profanity.

As a theater artist, I feel compelled to create art that questions our ideals- political, social, and religious – which is why I am so thrilled to be a part of *The Exit Interview*. Obviously I am not setting out to upset the audience, however, I do hope that the audience is compelled to think about their own beliefs objectively, and perhaps even venture to see things in a different way.

Friday, September 7, 2012

Tomorrow will be the first day of rehearsal for *The Exit Interview*. I am incredibly nervous to be in a room full of professional actors whom I have never met, as well as an accomplished playwright and director. My goal for this process is to bring as many choices as I can think of with as much energy and enthusiasm as possible to every role I am playing. I am also navigating the new play development process as I go. I have been a part of a world-premiere production before with Madcat Theater Company, *So My Grandmother, Blah Blah Blah*, but I was already very familiar with the entire cast, so the process seemed much less intimidating. However, I am thrilled for the challenge, because I know that working with the



same people over and over again may lead an actor to complacency. I always wish to surround myself with the most talented people possible so I can learn from them.

Saturday, September 8, 2012

Today was our first rehearsal- a table reading in the McLaughlin studio space at the Orlando Shakespeare Theatre. We read through the play twice, the first time straight through and the second with stops to clarify any questions. I felt underprepared for the first reading. Despite the fact that I was very familiar with the play, I felt that I didn't have enough differentiation between my characters. I noticed that Janine Klein (playing actress #2) had a great deal of vocal and physical choices to differentiate her characters. I was incredibly impressed. I also noticed that Anitra Prichard (playing Eunice) and Michael Marinaccio (playing Dick) had a great chemistry- they even seemed a bit off book (they made eye contact throughout a few scenes). I was already intimidated enough before I discovered the rest of the cast was so talented! Much to my surprise, I discovered that Janine, Anitra, and Michael had worked on this play before, during a reading for Playfest 2011. Michael was the director and Anitra and Janine played the same roles they are currently playing. This news certainly made me feel better about my own performance not being up to their level, yet it made me feel a bit nervous about fitting in. It is always hard to join a cast that has created an existing relationship, however, I am excited to be a part of the cast and I know we'll all get along well.

I took this first read through as an opportunity to pick the playwright's brain a bit. I realize that working with the playwright is not always the reality for an actor, so I don't want to waste a single moment. Today I asked Bill about Mary's character, specifically how/why she

continues to lose her child. I can't seem to understand if she is supposed to be scatter-brained or ambivalent. It seems like she is a logical person who can feel compassion and love (she loved Dick), so it doesn't seem intentional that she is losing her child. But how could a good mother not know the location of her child? As a young woman who doesn't yet have children, I cannot comprehend the mother child relationship from the mother's perspective.

“Every playwright puts themselves into their plays, whether they admit it or not, whether they are conscious of it or not. I am preoccupied with writing (not the oboe) but I understand addiction. I never had children because I was too busy writing. I have an anemic social life because I get up every morning between three and four to write and so at night I'm just too tired to party. I cannot go a day without writing. I always go four to six hours and sometimes ten. It doesn't matter that I'm barely successful, or that I make very little money at it, I must write. If I were a father I would love the hell out of my child but would be the type who forgot to feed her because I had an idea and disappeared into the study for four and a half hours. How would I explain that to Child Protective Services?”

(Appendix A)

#### Sunday September 9, 2012

Today was our second table reading. We continued on with character discussions, as we still have the benefit of the playwright. We also made a few changes to the script today. Our director, Pat Flick, and Bill discussed a new ending. We've changed the ending to the following:

WALTER KENDALL: Yes, Dick?

DICK: I think...

WALTER KENDALL: We only have a few moments until Wheel of Fortune. What is God's purpose for you?

DICK: That's a loaded question.

*(Wheel of fortune theme song plays, Mary's baby carriage rolls on. Blackout.)*

The original ending was written to have the stage manager deliver the last line, "Hold Please" rather than Dick's new line, "That's a loaded question." The original ending reminded the audience, yet again, that they were watching a play, just as Bertolt Brecht would've wanted. The new ending brings back the loaded question joke, and hints that perhaps Dick hasn't changed at all by the gunman trauma; perhaps he is the same man he was at the beginning of his exit interview.

We also had a big group discussion about Dick's character development, specifically why he tells the gunman that God is sending text messages in the final moments of the play. Thanks to the collaborative environment that has been set up by the director, playwright, and cast, everyone felt comfortable contributing to character discussions. I've found that often actors can be very possessive about their character, and thus, reject any 'notes' or input from other actors. However, this cast is very open to collaboration, perhaps due to the individual personalities, or possibly because this is a new play and no one has preconceived notions about the text or the characters. Personally, I do not think it is appropriate for actors to give notes to one another,

however, in the context of a table reading, I do believe that having an open discussion with the cast can be beneficial for all, because characters in a play react to one another.

My contribution to Dick's character development today was actually inspired by my work on developing Mary. I feel that one reason Dick may tell the gunman that it is God is because he is simply trying to save his own skin by distracting him. Another reason could be that Mary has finally got through to him with her line earlier in the play, "People believe what they want to believe." Perhaps, Dick has realized that he needs to allow those around him to believe whatever they want, and that act, finally sets him free (literally, from the building, and figuratively, from the confines of his own beliefs). Downs has left it ambiguous as to who is actually sending the texts, just as he has left it ambiguous whether or not Dick actually believes God is the sender. I believe the matter is not whether Dick believes it is God; the point is that he is finally willing to acknowledge another belief and the possibility in a higher power.

#### Tuesday September 11, 2012

Before rehearsal began today, we had a meet and greet with the all of the company members. Our discussions included the sound, set, and costume design, (see appendix A) as well as introductions to the various members of the OST company. OST meet and greet events are designed to inform the entire company about a production, so that they can go out into the world and intelligently discuss and promote it. *The Exit Interview* is OST's first ever Studio Series production, which differs from their Signature Series in the budget, performance venue, and actors (non-equity versus equity). Theatres across the U.S. are simply unable to invest big

budgets, top venues, and expensive equity actors for new works, because there is little to no guarantee of monetary success, and OST is no exception.

Today's rehearsal was our first on our feet. We spent most of our rehearsal time discussing the space, including the many levels and ramps, which are currently delineated by tape marks on the floor. Mike and Anitra, who play Dick and Eunice respectively, got the bulk of the rehearsal time today. While watching them run their scene, I have really been reminded of the importance of getting off book. Now, this is not to say that either of them are falling behind in the process, because we just begun rehearsals and are not expected to be off book for several days, however, it is so hard to gage the performers when their heads are down reading a page. Obviously, this is a challenge every director faces, because it is not too often that actors show up to the first rehearsal memorized. However, I do feel that the true acting work begins when the actors are memorized. It is literally impossible to connect visually or physically with papers in the way. With this realization, I am now determined to get completely off book as quickly as I can.

### Wednesday September 13, 2012

Today we touched on my first scene of the show, at the Fox Newsroom with Walter Kendall. Mary has arrived at the Fox New Station, with her arm is in a sling, her baby in tow, and her beloved oboe, which she could never leave behind. Mary is highly reactionary in this scene- she doesn't say much (probably because she is constantly getting interrupted) and she is trying her best to say the right thing to get herself on TV. Walter is a forceful guy and there is something really sleazy about him. Mary doesn't agree with any of his beliefs, but she knows

that she needs his approval to make it on the air. For this role, I am focusing on making Mary the most grounded of all my characters. I believe she is truly a good spirit who is calm, loving, and connected to the earth. I want Mary to have strength to her, so I am focusing on making her voice lower in my register and using structural vowels to emphasize key words. Physically, Mary is restricted by her sling, however, she glides when she walks and has a delicate quality to her. There is nothing rough or jarring about Mary, she is classy, but not quite sophisticated.

#### Friday September 14, 2012

Pat gave some specific focus to the ‘two mutters’ scene. Janine and I have really been struggling with this scene. I feel like I completely understand my character, however, I am playing her as a caricature rather than as a real person. The banter between the pair is incredibly inane, which is the point of what Downs is trying to say, however, it makes it difficult for the actors to find the conflict. Janine and I tried making the conversation a competition, each of us trying to one up the other with ‘facts.’ The climax of the competition is when we get our children involved, each claiming that our kid is more knowledgeable than the other. We both felt really good about this new discovery, however, our director did not agree. He asked us to remove the ‘hostility,’ as he called it, from the scene, and make it more of a nonchalant conversation between two women on a park bench.

Receiving this note was not frustrating because the director didn’t like our choice, it was frustrating because we cannot seem to identify any type of conflict in the scene, and the director doesn’t seem to want any. I think at this point, we both need to trust that the language and fully committed character choices will earn the laughs. It is important that the audience feels that

these characters really believe in what they're saying, so I am putting my focus on my character work, rather than on the arc of the scene. When it comes down to it, this scene is simply an example of inane small talk, so over-thinking it would be a disservice to the playwright.

We also really focused on the cheerleaders tonight. I am a former cheerleader, so Pat thought it would be appropriate if I taught Janine a few moves for our scenes. Tonight we discovered a really fun character dynamic. I will be the really excellent cheerleading captain, and Janine will be the incredibly inept cheerleader wannabe who only made the team thanks to her daddy's money. We're adding in lots of bits where Janine messes up the moves and I do a take to her. So far, we're having a lot of fun and making tons of discoveries.

Working with another actor who is constantly making choices makes your job so much easier. Janine is constantly making hilarious faces and body movements that motivate my disgust and embarrassment of her.

Working on comedy can be difficult, because it is so specific physically and vocally, particularly when it needs to be timed off another actor's movement. We're also finding that with the cheerleaders, it's very funny to just stand and stare for a moment, probably because they are stereotypically considered dumb. When Janine and I just stare blankly out into the house it seems to make our director and stage managers chuckle every time. That choice actually sprung out of neither of us knowing the next line; however, it works, so we'll keep it! Funny how often the best choices come out of something completely unrelated to the scene.

We also worked a bit on a new scene we decided to add during table work in place of the 'Salman Rushdie eats a ham sandwich.' Now, we are trying a scene entitled, 'Mitt Romney

Baptizes Anne Frank.’ In table work, we came to the realization that perhaps the Salman Rushdie joke wouldn’t work, so we went for something more relevant to the current political climate – the Presidential election.

While rehearsing the scene today, I was considering playing the opposite by making Anne Frank a happy little girl, rather than as a sad, Nazi-persecuted little child. I asked the director if he thought that Anne Frank was ever a happy little girl, to which Janine Klein responded, “Definitely Not.” The room was in an uproar of laughter - the cast is really starting to have a great time together!

#### Sunday September 16, 2012

Rehearsal was hectic today in preparation for the designer run that concluded our day. *The Exit Interview* is made up of many little scenes, and the script jumps locations and plot lines quite often, so it is difficult for the cast to maintain a steady flow. There is a part of me that believes William Missouri Downs had no regard for flow while writing this play, because it is designed to jolt the audience into paying attention, however, I feel that it is important as an actor to be able to smoothly transition from scene to scene and, in this case, from character to character. So, right now, my main focus is on the flow of the show. It is very difficult to transition from character to character and retain the character differentiation I have been so meticulously working on. I am finding that having very specific physical choices for each character helps me to instantly inhabit that character when on stage. None of my characters have dialects, so I cannot rely on my voice to help me make each character different. I have decided on a few physical attributes for my characters; Mary should be smooth, calm, and gliding,



because I believe she is a head centered person; Samantha is twitchy and on edge, which manifests itself in her constantly twitching foot, but puts on a façade of having it all together with a smug smile; Dr. Dobson is so uptight with her pursed lips that she is incapable of cracking a smile; and my cheerleader is bubbly and bright, with tons of energy to back up her loud yelling and bouncy cheerleading moves. As I continue to play with my physical character choices, I am finding them to be my most reliable source of finding my characters quickly.

#### Monday September 17, 2012

Today it finally happened! We've been hit with script changes! As anticipated, some parts of the play are simply too offensive for our Orlando audience, so we need to make adjustments. The 'Mitt Romney Baptizes Anne Frank' scene is apparently too critical of Mr. Romney, and thus, will be cut from the show. OST remains in operation thanks to donors, many of whom are quite conservative and may not approve of mocking the republican presidential candidate. So, all of the references to Mitt Romney in the cheerleaders scene in act II will also be cut.

I find the Mitt Romney cuts offensive for personal, political, and artistic reasons. Personally, I do not agree with many of Mr. Romney's beliefs, including his plans to cut funding for Planned Parenthood and PBS, as well as his wish to make birth control and abortions illegal. As a woman, I am offended by his obvious disrespect of women and their ability to make choices about their own bodies, and politically I cannot agree with his desire to cut arts funding for not only PBS, but also NPR and the NEA.

I honestly believe that as a responsible citizen, I have a responsibility to inform the public about potential cuts to arts funding. I assume that if you are at the theatre, you must support the arts, and thus would not approve of a candidate who intends to cut arts funding. For OST, I believe making cuts to the show is a bit of a catch-22, because if they offend the conservative patrons, they may lose donations and ticket sales, but if they fail to inform their audience, they may lose government funding if Romney is elected.

On an artistic level, the Mitt Romney cuts take away a great deal of meaning from the play. The entire piece is prefaced with a speech about how offensive it may be to the audience. By cutting offensive material from the play, aren't we cutting away some of the intention of the playwright? Obviously, pleasing your audience is incredibly important to keeping a theatre afloat, but should that come at a cost to artistic growth? How does a theater company maintain artistic integrity while keeping the audience happy? Perhaps being politically correct and always being wary of being offensive may be holding us back from revealing some truths about our culture and politics. Bertolt Brecht was right, it is time to wake up and face reality and stop worrying about someone being opposed to it!

Tuesday September 18, 2012

I've been spending a lot of time working on Mary's character arc. It is very important to me to honor Mr. Downs in my portrayal of Mary, because I know that he put a great deal of himself writing her character. At first, I couldn't understand why Mary seemed so absent minded with Ben (constantly losing his baby carriage), but now I am beginning to understand her obsession with the oboe and how it takes over her life. In my own life, I am becoming

increasingly more preoccupied with writing this thesis- constantly keeping journals and researching- which ultimately leads me to neglect my obligations to other people. It is easy to become consumed in a project and thus seem completely neglectful of other things, when in reality it is not neglect, it is just preoccupation. I am beginning to understand Mary on a new level; she is a good person who is obsessed with the oboe.

Today we tried out a few new replacement scenes for the 'Mitt Romney Baptizes Anne Frank' scene. Bill sent the scenes and Alex and I read them aloud to Pat today. Some of our favorites included, 'Buying Puppies Drunk,' 'Sarah Palin Reads Fifty Shades of Gray,' and 'John Calvin's Theory of Predestination.' Ultimately, the John Calvin scene seems to be the funniest, mostly because Alex and I are really funny with our over the top French dialect.

I feel so honored to be a part of such a cool process- I am helping a director choose which scene will appear in a world premiere production! It all seems too good to be true. It is an amazing feeling to be reading a scene directly from a playwright - I truly feel an integral part of this play development process.

### Wednesday September 19, 2012

Throughout the process the set has been changing and adapting to suit our needs. Today, we added a ramp to each side of the set to accommodate the baby carriages, which is incredibly helpful for me, since I'm always rolling a carriage around. We have almost all of our actual props at this point, and working with the real prop is very helpful. The rehearsal process is really getting exciting at this point, because we are all off book and really growing immensely with each rehearsal.

I am finding that pace is one of the weakest links in my work right now. I have often heard it said that comedy is all about the timing and that it often comes in threes (both of which I believe to be true). Right now, timing is the enemy of *The Exit Interview*. The show is incredibly fast paced - many short scenes with little time in between each (there are no major set shifts) - so keeping up the pace is essential. The scenes are also very sitcom in style, probably because Downs worked as a sitcom writer for many years in L.A. In fact, the play itself often feels like a sitcom, especially in act II when the commercial interruptions start. As a cast, we all need to work on keeping up the pace and energy throughout the show.

#### Thursday September 20, 2012

Unfortunately, I arrived to today's photo shoot a little shaken up. On my way to lunch this afternoon on my moped, I was clipped by a driver who just couldn't wait to pass me. However, I had a great time at the photo shoot and felt a lot of love and support from the entire cast and crew.

We only have a few more days left in the Santos Dantin Theater, which has served as our rehearsal space throughout the process. I am very eager to get onto the set! Today our stage manager, Melissa, brought us over the Mandell Theater, where the show will be performed, to give us a sneak peek of the space. The levels are awesome and it looks exactly like the drab basement space described in the text, with grey floors and minimal furniture. Eunice's office is two levels above the deck, so she can still be seen when she is hiding under the desk. The decision was finalized to use projections for the scene titles rather than a T.V. screen, so, there is

a screen hung all the way upstage just over Dick and Eunice's heads. The set is minimal and simple- just as Bertolt Brecht would've wanted it.

We made some more cuts today- specifically to the Science vs. Religion scene. The scene is incredibly redundant, so Pat decided to cut some of the text, so the joke is still apparent, without overplaying it. Honestly, a joke can only be reiterated so many times before it gets old. The cuts keep the show flowing without sacrificing any of the comedy.

#### Friday September 21, 2012

Today was our last rehearsal before tech starts tomorrow. It is a bitter sweet feeling, because as exciting as it is to get into the space, it is also terrifying to think that we will be officially open in one week! I still feel like there is so much more to do before we open!

I have really settled into my characters at this point, but I am constantly making discoveries. I am still working on Dr. Dobson, because I am struggling to find how her uptightness should manifest itself physically. In the science vs. religion scene, Dr. Dobson has very few lines and lots of reactions. Pat has been giving me notes about keeping her reactions as simple as possible.

#### Sunday September 23, 2012

Tech rehearsals are often an actor's nightmare - tons of sitting around for hours on end combined with a lot of hurry up and wait. However, tech rehearsals are even worse when you are in a show with a ton of lighting, sound, and video cues and the most specific director ever. Pat is meticulous about how each transition should happen, and rightfully so. The coordination is endless for each transition; lights out, sound up, video in, video out, lights up and sound out,

all occurring in various orders, depending on which transition we are working. Every transition is different and each seems more specific than the one before it. However, it is important to remember that technical rehearsals are NOT about the actors, but about the crew and all the technical aspects of the show. We only got through the first two scenes today, which has me a bit concerned, however, we still have two more ten hour days to complete tech, so it should all happen according to schedule.

#### Tuesday September 25, 2012

Today was our first ten out of twelve, which is essentially a twelve hour work day with a two hour dinner break from 4PM- 6PM. Our director was even more specific today as he was yesterday, changing his mind at least three times before finalizing a transition. Pat's specificity is leading me to reexamine my own acting work. In my downtime today, I went through my script and reworked each of my scenes on paper. I found a few lines that I had memorized incorrectly and then took the time to relearn them. As with any play, there is a level of care required with the text. It would be unwise for an actor to neglect learning their lines properly, because the playwright wrote it that way for a reason. It seems even more important to get it right with *The Exit Interview*, because William Missouri Downs will actually be at our opening, and I'd hate for him to hear words other than what he wrote. Although line cuts and changes often happen in theater, once the lines are settled upon, they must be memorized correctly.

#### Wednesday September 26, 2012

Our second ten out of twelve and last rehearsal before previews was today! We finally got through tech and then ran the play after dinner break. Earlier today we did a quick change

rehearsal, which proved to be incredibly stressful for our only quick changing cast member, Janine. She has tons of changes in a row, several complete changes that must take place in under two minutes.

Meanwhile, I have been caught up in Hairland, as I'll call it, trying to make decisions about different hairstyles for each character. Unfortunately, I have to switch from Cheerleader, to Mary, to Mother, back to Cheerleader, back to Mary, again, and finally finish off the show with Business woman and Dr. Dobson. All of the transitions back and forth mean that my hair changes need to be quick and easy. Who would've ever thought hair could be such an ordeal?

I was incredibly nervous for the invited dress we had tonight, but it seemed to go off without a hitch. There were a few slightly botched transitions, but that goes with the territory of a first dress. The cast was extremely high energy and our little crowd seemed to have a blast. I am thankful to finally be feeling the flow of the show and thrilled to be getting an audience response. It is so hard to know if what you're doing is working until you get the feedback from the audience.

#### Thursday September 27, 2012

Tonight was our first preview and it felt like a giant leap backwards. Pat gave some major character notes to our leads, Anitra and Mike, which not only shocked them, but really threw off their performances. Up until now, Anitra has been playing her character, Eunice, quite larger than life and very comedic. And despite Dick's brash attitude and displeasure with the world around him, Mike has been finding many sympathetic moments. Yet, Pat received some notes, based on last night's performance, requesting a more morose and serious Eunice and Dick.

When Anitra and Mike applied the notes to act I of tonight's show, the response was less than good and they both felt really distraught about it. For act II, they went back to their original character choices and the audience seemed to love it. During notes after the show, Pat agreed that the original characters worked much better.

Now, this presented quite a conundrum for me, the still growing actress that I am, in that I don't know if Mike and Anitra did the textbook 'right thing.' I honestly believe that they gave the note their best shot, but when it didn't work in act I, they abandoned it rather than following through for the entire show. I feel that they saved the show by returning to their original character choices for act II, but did they defy the director's wishes by doing so? Ultimately, Mike and Anitra made the right decision, because act II went well, but what if the director had preferred the new notes applied in act I? In that case, would they have been seen as unprofessional? I suppose it is up to the actor to gauge how an audience is responding and adjust accordingly, however, it is also important to keep the director's wishes in mind.

#### Friday September 28, 2012

Our second preview went even better than our first. This cast has really found an excellent sense of camaraderie and the show benefits from it immensely. I am feeling really confident about my work and excited for what I hope will be a successful run.

My only trepidation going to the run is about audience response. Throughout rehearsal I have lamented about many of the content cuts made to the script. One of the things that make this play so excellent is the way it shamelessly mocks so many aspects of American culture and religion. The text directly reflects this time period in America and so beautifully questions the



meaning of life with humor and honesty. I feel that it is a shame to take any of the political agenda away from it. America is a free country, so why not speak honestly without censorship for the audience's sake? The question of audience response is one that continues to perplex me, because I know that theatre cannot exist without an audience, but conversely believe that theatre should not set out to please an audience. Perhaps I am more Brechtian than I thought, because now I believe strongly that theatre should challenge the audience and provoke them to think and question, not merely entertain them. I am actually hoping to shake up a few audience members during the run of this show and maybe even offend a few. I just hope the cuts that have been made don't take too much of the point away from the script.

Saturday September 29, 2012

OPENING NIGHT! What a terrifying and exhilarating experience and opening can be. There is something magical about this cast; I have never felt more supported by other cast members in my life. We went into our opening with incredible excitement and it felt amazing to have an overfull house and a standing ovation.

When I first read the script, I was concerned that the play was just conservative bashing angst ridden ranting with no real substance, but throughout the process I realized that Downs had written something so much greater. Sure, the text is full of opinions, many of which are democratic in nature, but it is more so full of questions. I don't believe that Downs provides any answers. I think the lack of answers is what makes *The Exit Interview* so interesting. Downs leaves the audience to think about and question what they have seen.

As an actor in the show, I am still questioning and considering so many of the ideas brought up in the play. It is an exciting opportunity to be in a world premiere, but it is even more exciting to be a part of something that you believe in. It is truly a rare opportunity to find yourself amongst an outstanding cast in a show that you really care about – what a privilege!

There was a talkback after the show tonight with the playwright, OST's director of new play development, the director, and cast. It was great to hear so many positive responses to the show. The talkback was opened by William Missouri Downs, who asked the audience specifically about what they would say to their significant other on the drive home (he was obviously trying to get at their honest response to the play). One of my favorite questions came from a lady who inquired about the theme of the play, to which Mr. Downs replied, "Did you watch the play?" The poor woman was trying to sound intellectual, but Downs politely explained to her that the point of the play is whatever you take from it and that his only goal was to inspire the audience to question - or at the very least - to just simply think. I suppose this is a hard concept for an audience to grasp, because we are trained to search for the meaning or message in everything from a very young age (e.g. fairy tales). *The Exit Interview* doesn't have a clearly defined moral or point; it is up to the audience to glean whatever meaning they choose from it.

#### Sunday September 30, 2012

Show two! What a surprise, the two mothers scene is such a big hit with the audience. Janine and I have struggled to play this scene from the beginning. Neither of us could figure out why it was funny or even how to make it funny, but apparently the text speaks for itself. The

two mothers scene gets tons of laughs, especially when the pace is as fast as possible. We've discovered that it's all about picking up the cues. The quicker we are on top of each other's lines, the more laughs we get.

I had a thought today during intermission that Downs' script is really similar to a sitcom. Perhaps because he was a sitcom writer before he broke into playwriting. The text is similar to a sitcom in style because it is fast paced banter leading up to a punch-line. There are also the commercial interruptions, which are an integral part of television. Maybe the sitcom style of *The Exit Interview* is part of what makes it so accessible to our audiences.

#### Wednesday October 3, 2012

I was completely blown away by our senior matinee crowd today! I went into the show under the assumption that the seniors would be mostly conservative and thus, highly unlikely to enjoy the show at all. Oh, was I wrong! The seniors were FANTASTIC! They loved the show, laughing at every joke and even giving a standing ovation during curtain call! I was completely amazed and shocked. Obviously my assumption that all elderly folks are set in their ways couldn't have been more wrong. I always thought of *The Exit Interview* as a script targeted at young liberals, but perhaps Downs' has written something more universal than I thought.

#### Thursday October 4, 2012

Today Janine shared a promotional video from the San Diego Rep's production of *The Exit Interview*. I was amazed to see how many aspects of the play were interpreted differently from our production. The cheerleaders were played totally straight, they were actually good cheerleaders who were well choreographed, unlike our messy, dumb cheerleaders without any

moves. Dick was cast much older and came off as rather smarmy. Their Eunice was a completely different type than Anitra, she was middle-aged, stern, and sarcastic, which was very unlike the jovial, flighty, and young Eunice in our production. Although these differences may seem small, when added up they make for a much different interpretation of *The Exit Interview*. Differences in interpretation are something that I value in theater – I love that a play can become a totally different piece based on who is directing, designing, and acting in it. It was very interesting for us to sit as a cast to watch the San Diego Rep's video and then discuss it, because we all felt so differently about it. Of course, we all agreed that we preferred our interpretation, certainly due to our own personal bias. It was intriguing to see how different their production was from ours, considering that it came from the same source material.

#### Friday October 5, 2012

Much to my dismay, we received script changes today. The opening cheerleaders' scene is basically a curtain speech, so the theatre feels that we should use that opportunity to thank our sponsors. I completely understand that thanking sponsors is a very important part of keeping a theatre afloat, however, in this particular instance; it is in direct contrast to what the play is about. In act two, the cheerleaders mockingly announce that act two will be brought to you thanks to sponsors (all local businesses). It is supposed to be a joke that the theatre has no money so they've resorted to lame sponsors to keep the show going. I feel that the joke is a bit tarnished if we announce the actual sponsors at the beginning of the show, furthermore it may seem like a sarcastic thank you to the actual sponsors because the play is setting out to mock sponsorship. The overarching point of the opening cheerleaders' scene is to mock curtain speeches and warn

the audience that this play is not for those who are easily offended, so aren't we defeating the point if we turn it into an actual curtain speech?

Saturday October 6, 2012

Today I was reminded that once a show opens, it doesn't mean that the work is over. It is easy to fall into habitual patterns with a show once you hit the run; however, I feel that the sense of play and experimentation should continue all the way to the closing performance.

During the act two cheerleaders' scene I always choose one patron to point at when I say, "and patrons like you." But tonight, when I pointed at a gentleman in the second row, he got very uncomfortable when I pointed at him, perhaps because the woman beside him looked quite disgruntled. So, I kept my finger pointed at him for quite a long time, until he began shifting in his seat, at which point I winked at him and gestured for him to call me later. It got a huge laugh from the audience. This was a great example of an organic reaction that came directly out of the moment and fit perfectly into the context of the scene and into the character's motivations. I think I'll try it again next performance. My desire to continue to explore should not be taken as a desire to change aspects of the show, by exploring, I mean simply living organically in the moment but keeping the choices in line with what the director has done up until this point. Continuing to explore moments and develop character choices even once in performance is what makes live theatre so great – it's what makes it LIVE! Anything could happen!

Sunday October 7, 2012

Today I finally gave in and read a review of the show published in the Orlando Sentinel by Matthew Palm. I've heard conflicting advice about reviews, some actors never read them,

some actors love to read them, but either way, all actors' advice to ignore what they say and keep your performance the same no matter what. Lucky for me, it was a positive review, so I don't feel tempted to change my performance. Palm was complimentary of not only the show itself, but also of the acting. He pointed out what I love most about the script, which is that the text is easy to relate to for any audience member, because you simply, "just have to know people" (Palm 5) to find it funny. Palm goes on to say, "The laughter doesn't come from jokes or wisecracks or clowning. The beauty of the humor is that it springs from human nature. The personalities are funny- because they ring true to life" (5). Amongst many of the compliments about the acting, Palm mentioned the Two Mothers scene, which I've noticed gets a lot of attention from our audiences, "Lauren Butler and Janine Klein shine in a rapid-patter scene as two women who get all their knowledge — most of it conflicting — from television sources that range from "Fox and Friends" to "The View" to "Oprah" to "The Golden Girls"" (Palm 6). Obviously, Mr. Palm truly enjoyed the show and found it not only comedic, but also through provoking, "And the laughs keep coming — even as audience members might think with a twinge, "Ouch, that might be me." Some will no doubt be offended by one non-politically correct moment or another. But with luck, all will be forced to think" (Palm 6). Palm concluded his review with, "Bertolt Brecht would be proud" (6) - I am certainly proud to be in such a well-received production.

#### Thursday October 11, 2012

After reading such a glowing review from Matthew Palm, I decided to see if he was the only reviewer in town who felt so strongly towards the show. I picked up a copy of the Weekly

on my way to the show today, and read it along with the cast in the dressing room. Similarly to Palm, Schneider enjoyed the show and was very complimentary of the writing and performances;

Downs still has a way with a punch line, and director Patrick Flick has done a bang-up job of wrangling the play's almost farcically disparate performance elements – which include numerous flashbacks, fantasy sequences and even product-placement pitches – into a cohesive, hilarious whole. Pritchard is a proven hand at playing priggish administrative types, and Marinaccio fills the straight-man role ably while utility players Janine Klein, Alexander Mrazek, Lauren Butler and Nathan Sebens display their gifts for timing and dialect” (12).

He went on to discuss the opening cheerleader scene that specifically warns the audience about offensive content – a scene that I have often found unnecessary myself, because the play is hardly that offensive, or so I thought. As Schneider explains;

“It's kind of sad that, in Orlando, even a pleasantly middlebrow vaudeville outing like *The Exit Interview* has to be preceded by a content warning. As I listened to Klein and Butler goof their way through an extended preshow disclaimer announcing that the show would offend just about everybody you'd expect it to, I wondered how many fundamentalist Fox-watchers are known to support new works by American playwrights.

Shows what I know – after the performance, the house was buzzing about two audience members who had indeed walked out in a huff. Apparently, they were Germans who had been put off by a reference to Hitler. Point to Downs: It takes

daring theater indeed to make us Aryan types forfeit our hard-earned reputation as good sports” (13).

Yes, the Germans did indeed walk out, and then ranted to the box office, demanding a refund of their entire season passes, because this was not the first time they found OST’s content offensive. A week prior they had attended OST’s production of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare Abridged*, and found a German references within that script also worthy of them leaving the show in a huff.

Schneider’s review delightfully highlighted a quam I’ve also had, which is that the show is hardly offensive enough require a warning before it begins. Maybe Orlando audiences are a bit too easily offended, or maybe it is a problem with Americans overall. I think it’s time we wake up and face reality- and I’m proud to be an actress who is bringing that reality to the Orlando theatergoers!

#### Friday October 12, 2012

Mike Marinaccio and I were chatting before the show about the original reading of *The Exit Interview* during Playfest 2011. Mike was the director, so he had a copy of the original script. Most of the text was exactly the same; however, the original ending was quite different. Rather than the Dick and Walter scene that currently follows the text messages from God scene, there was a long monologue from Mary:

“A few weeks later, I was on my way to my first practice with the National Symphony. Was late - the baby sitter had failed to show and so I was forced to take little Ben. My first rehearsal and I’m showing up with a baby in tow. I was



already anticipating the looks from the other oboists – the condemnation. (She lets go of the baby carriage. If at all possible there should be a damn good violinist playing but if not it can be a recording of Bach’s Partita No. 2 in D Minor.) As I stepped from the metro into the station I heard it – “Chaconne” from Johann Sebastian Bach’s Partita No. 2 in D Minor. It was composed in the 1720s just as the French Enlightenment was dawning. It’s said to celebrate the breadth of human creativity and possibility. But this was no ordinary subway violinist. This was a virtuoso. He was standing with his case open accepting tips. And then it hit me. It was Joshua Bell – Perhaps the greatest violinist of our time. And the violin – a Stradivarius. Can you imagine – Beside a trashcan in a metro station – Joshua Bell – Playing his heart out – Thousands of commuters passing, all rushing toward the horizon, but nobody really listening. (Dick manages to pull himself to his feet. He puts his hands in the air and says, “Don’t shoot! I’m coming out!” Dick hobbles out. During the following the baby carriage slowly begins to roll away from Mary. She doesn’t see it.) Turns out the whole thing was staged by a reporter from the Washington Post for an article about modern life and how it gets away from us. And to be honest, if I hadn’t lost my I-Phone that morning, I too might’ve been one of the rolling masses- (The baby carriage picks up speed. She still doesn’t notice.) Some, rushing to their first day at a new job. And others... rushing to their exit interview. (Mary turns to see the carriage rolling towards the tracks.) Oh crap. (Blackout – Raucous Rock and Roll)” (84-85).

I was truly stunned by this monologue; it is such a different way to end the play. Unlike our current ending, the Mary monologue seemed to have a message for the audience; don't let life pass you by, don't be so absorbed in technology that you miss out on experiences, pay attention to the world around you. I suppose William Missouri Downs didn't want a moral at the end of his play, and our current ending certainly leaves the audiences with more questions than answers. I find that this monologue greatly influences my character work as Mary – it's exactly what happened to her the day Ben rolled under the commuter train, so it really helped me to fill in the gaps in the Mary and Walter scene in act one. I couldn't help but ask Bill why he cut the monologue from the final script:

“Too many readers, directors, and audience members said they were pulled out of the play by the speech - And at the worst possible moment - right at the end. Once they find out that Dick survives, the audience wanted to run for curtain. In Hollywood there is a saying, “Kill your babies.” It means that if the writer is emotionally attached to something then he is probably not being objective, (as people cannot be with their babies) so it should be cut” (Appendix A).

#### Sunday October 21, 2012

Today was our closing performance and it was certainly bitter sweet. I feel that it is rare to be a part of an amazing play, surrounded by a talented and wonderful cast, with an overwhelmingly positive response from every audience. This experience has felt too good to be true. It is so sad to leave the play behind and even more sad to say goodbye to this cast. We made it a great closing show, ending with yet another standing ovation. I'm truly proud and honored to have been a part of the world premiere of *The Exit Interview*.



## CHAPTER SEVEN: REFLECTION

Playing Actress 1 in *The Exit Interview* was an incredibly challenging and rewarding experience. Through my research, character explorations, and collaborations with the artistic team, I came to develop all of my characters with truth and integrity to the original text. As I worked through the process, I made many discoveries about how to approach new plays as an actor and how to effectively collaborate with the creative team.

I faced many unexpected challenges in approaching my role for *The Exit Interview*. As a young actor, it is often difficult to find your place amongst the more seasoned professionals, especially if they have worked together before. It was difficult, at first, to gauge my bounds in terms of commenting or offering suggestions about the play, so I did a great deal of observing. In time, I discovered that by bringing my hard-work, collaborative spirit, and sense of humor to every rehearsal I was able to gain the respect of the cast as well as the director. Once I proved my abilities as an actor, I gained the credibility necessary to really contribute to discussions.

Creating multiple characters in a very short rehearsal span put a great deal of pressure on me. However, I found that the playwright and director are truly an actor's most valuable reference for character development. William Missouri Downs helped me to tap into Mary's inner psyche and Pat Flick was a constant source of feedback about what was working and what wasn't. My relationship with both Pat and Bill kept me from getting in my head and forging through the process alone – I used them both as a source of information and feedback. By building a collaborative relationship with the director and playwright, I found that my own process felt less daunting, because I had allies to help guide me along. *The Exit Interview*

rehearsal process reminded me that willingness to collaborate is one of the actor's essential tools. I found my role, both on stage as a character, and off stage as a member of an artistic development team through my willingness to collaborate.

Script changes were stressful for me, but with a little extra time spent memorizing, the play really benefited from every adjustment and cut made to the script. Being flexible was my key to success with each and every change thrown my way. Navigating my way through the new play development process was often troublesome, but I believe I proved myself to be a talented and hard-working actor and valuable member of the artistic team.

I reaped so many rewards from my experience in *The Exit Interview*. I believe that it is a rare experience to be in crowd-pleasing play you believe in surrounded by an amazing artistic team, and I was lucky enough to find it. One the best aspects of the rehearsal process of *Exit Interview* was the playwright's involvement from the beginning. William Missouri Downs spent the first three rehearsals with us, discussing everything from the characters to the plot devices, and how he came to write the play. He was truly an open book, willing to answer any of our questions as honestly as possible. It was thanks to my connection with Bill that I made great strides on developing Mary as a character.

Pat Flick was also a great ally throughout the rehearsal process. As a director, he had a very clear vision for the play and a concise way of explaining it during rehearsals. Pat was open to suggestions, always encouraging a fun and collaborative work environment where the entire cast was free to explore.

*The Exit Interview* marks my fourth experience acting in a new play, and I certainly hope it will not be my last. As I move forward in my career, I hope work on many more new plays, not only as an actor, but perhaps as a director or producer. Throughout the process, I learned a great deal about being a professional actor in a new play – how to prepare, what is expected, and how to collaborate.

I came into the process with a preconceived notion that the actor's role in new play development is to act. However, through the process I learned that the actor is responsible for more than just their character development. The actor can lend a hand to help guide the play, offering suggestions for lines, scenes, and even technical elements. The key word is collaboration - the actor must never make demands or criticize the production, but must always work collectively with the team to solve problems, make adjustments, and better the production overall.

The most important discovery I made is that there is no magic formula for new play development or for the success of a new play. I have learned that two things are essential from everyone involved, collaboration and flexibility. The success of new play development in America lies in the hands of the artists who participate in it. There must be a sense of collaboration with everyone involved – between each member of the cast, between the artists and the producers, between the playwright and producers, and even between theatres that promote new works. New play development will flourish if the artists involved continue to work together towards the goal of creating a new play that honors the playwright's text, rather than pushing for a New York production or attempting to 'fix' a script to suit the needs of the audience. As new

play development moves forward, we must nurture writers, provide funding, encourage creativity, get audiences involved, and collaborate. Being in *The Exit Interview* fulfilled one of my career dreams - to have my name appear as an original cast member of a world premiere. It was an honor just to be cast in *The Exit Interview*, and it was truly humbling to share it with such talented and wonderful people.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: BEST PRACTICES

As I navigated my way through the rehearsal and performance process of *The Exit Interview* I drew upon my previous experience, advice from other actors and directors, as well as little common sense. The many victories, failures, observations, and discoveries I had throughout the processes led me to compile the list you will find below. It is by no means exhaustive or prescriptive, but rather a work-in-progress of suggestions based on my personal experiences and the advice of my coworkers and mentors.

### Working with the Collaborative Team

- Speak out bravely – as David Mamet says, “Act as if you’re on a hot date not giving blood” (Appendix A).
- If you don’t like the script, it shouldn’t show in your work- flaws will speak for themselves.
- Have fun! Remember that you will be more enjoyable to work with if you are having a good time.
- Keep in mind that everyone in the room is probably just as nervous as you. Keep your cool and trust in the playwright’s words, the director’s vision, your fellow actors, and yourself!
- Take ownership of your role! You are creating this character for the first time – be unafraid to fail.



### Script Changes

- Be open and ready for any script changes – they will happen! Don't get too emotionally attached to a line, if it is cut, it isn't personal.
- Learn to memorize as quickly as possible, you may receive an updated script at any time, even once the show is open.
- Trust the Playwright! It can be frustrating to have a favorite line, monologue, or scene cut or changed – Be flexible and open to possibility.

### Communication

- Be open and honest. Offer suggestions when appropriate. Remember that phrasing is important – it's about '*could*' NOT '*should*' - (E.g. 'We *could* try...' rather than 'We *should* cut this line')
- If you don't understand, ASK!
- Ask questions and offer suggestions based on your own personal character work, this will help you avoid giving other actors notes or trying to 'fix' the play.

### Preparation

- Do your research. If the new play you are working on is a world premiere, that doesn't mean there weren't earlier incarnations of the play or previous readings. Research all of the playwrights' previous work and research every reference in the text.
- Do your homework. You are originating a role! Know as much about your character as you possibly can, and write it down!

### Attitude

- Be yourself.
- Just as you would with any play, be willing to explore, take criticism, and collaborate.
- Never complain – You are in a new play, who knows where this opportunity may lead you!

### Technique and Training

- As with any play, use the playwright's words! Don't paraphrase or change lines – each word was written for a reason.
- The 'whatever works' method applies – use any technique or training at your disposal to explore and find your character.
- Try to find a common vocabulary with your director (Cohen 79)
- Act both physically and vocally - variations in physicality and voice will be particularly important if you are trying to create more than one character.

### Audience Response

- Don't worry! Do the best work you can throughout the rehearsal and performance process, and then forget it!
- Delight in the audience's energy. Not every audience will be great, so truly enjoy the performances with a responsive audience.
- NEVER take notes from the audience, particularly during talkbacks.
- If you want to read a review, read it! However, never allow it to affect your performance.



## **APPENDIX A: WILLIAM MISSOURI DOWNS INTERVIEW**

**LAUREN BUTLER (LB): Why is new play development important?**

**WILLIAM MISSOURI DOWNS (WMD):** All playwrights need to hear their work read out loud. Novelists assess their words by having friends and editors read them before they are published, television shows are evaluated before live test audiences, even standup comics try their jokes on their friends before they take the stage - Playwrights are no different.

The only problem is that at times the development process can actually make a play worse. For example, I had a reading of *The Exit Interview* in Denver several months before the first reading at the Orlando New Play Festival (Almost two years before it was produced), several seasoned theatre professionals told me I didn't need the alienation effects scenes in act one and act two (where the actors tell the audience about Bertolt Brecht). I took their advice and cut the scenes and that was a mistake. The first reading in Orlando showed that I was wrong to take their advice.

Today there is a lot of pressure on playwrights to have their plays developed no matter if the script needs development or not. Some playwrights privately resent the development process. They question why other theatre people don't have to publicly test their work. For example, why don't designers and directors have to put their half-finished projects in front of an audience and ask for opinions? But a play is different, it is the blue print for the entire production and if it's not right everyone else is in trouble.

The big problem for me is when the actors or director do a poor job staging the reading and the audience gives me notes based on the poor reading not the script. The playwright who doesn't take 100% of the blame for a badly staged reading gets a reputation of being defensive

and so I bite my lip and bear it. I don't always succeed. Last summer I had a reading of a script of mine in which one character was supposed to be a sexy Marilyn Monroe type. The theatre cast a rather masculine woman who told me she wasn't attracted to men and didn't understand the play. And the play died. No one laughed. But I had to sit there for a half hour while an audience told me how horrible the play was and gave me advice on how to be a better writer. What made it even more painful was that I had seen a production of the play in Denver that got great reviews and lots of laughs. I had to grin and bear it.

But, if the poor reading is my fault I have no problem, I can face the criticism because I know I can fix it. This is what happened at the very first reading of *The Exit Interview* in Orlando. It didn't go well, people walked out at intermission, but I knew it was my fault and that I could fix it so facing the music wasn't a problem.

**LB: Do you think a new play NEEDS to make a social, political, or religious statement? Do new plays need to be avant-garde? Do you find that most are?**

**WMD:** Too many plays are just entertainment, they say nothing. They just make the audience feel good. In my book The Art Of Theatre I write, "The fundamental difference between art and entertainment is that artists create primarily to express themselves, making no compromise to appeal to public taste, whereas entertainers create to please an audience by reinforcing the audience's values and beliefs. Entertainment is meant to amuse us and make us feel good about who we are and what we believe, not necessarily to challenge us or make us think" (19).

Art may also confirm our values and beliefs, but artists do not necessarily seek to confirm them. True, artists often desperately want their audience to understand and appreciate their creation, which is why they may pay attention to criticism and audience reaction. But artists do not always take an audience's opinion into consideration when creating work, whereas entertainers always do.

Here is the difference

### **Art**

- Lets us see another's point of view
- Is directed toward the individual
- Makes us think
- Is about education
- Demands an intellectual effort to appreciate it
- Requires active viewing
- Is about self-examination
- Has great potential as an agent of social change
- Challenges the audience
- Is about edification, transcendence, contemplation
- Does not compromise for public taste

### **Entertainment**

- Pulls us into ourselves, reaffirms our point of view
- Is directed toward the largest possible number
- Makes us think we're thinking

- Is about sameness
- Makes no intellectual or other demands on the viewer
- Can be done with passive viewing, is audience friendly
- May examine life but does not lead to criticism
- Is easily digested
- Has little potential as an agent of social change
- Flatters the audience
- Is about gratification, indulgence, escape

We have too much entertainment in this country, we need more art.

**LB: When evaluating a play in a reading/preview/world premiere, how important is audience response to you?**

**WMD:** I know 99% of what I need to know about a play just by sitting in the back and listening to the audience. I don't just listen for laughs, but I listen to them breathe, I watch them shift in their seats, I study their facial expressions. In my book Naked Playwriting I say that all readings should be done with the audience sitting in squeaky chairs and the playwright should be forced to count the number of squeaks. The more squeaks, the more problems the script has.

After perhaps forty developmental readings I'd say that there have been less than three audience comments out of hundreds that were helpful. I got everything I needed by just watching and listening to the audience's reaction. I think a theatre should be built with a peephole beside the stage where the playwright can watch the audience without the audience knowing it. That



would be very helpful.

Listening to the audience is even more important when it comes to comedy. I always say, if you write a drama and it fails, you fail. If you write a comedy and it fails, you are humiliated. The key to comedy is not to laugh at your own jokes, but to listen to the audience.

**LB: Do you see a trend in new play development that leans toward "fixing" new plays? Do you feel that your plays have been seen as needing to be "fixed" by an artistic director or director?**

**WMD:** I don't see a "trend" but I do run into some directors and dramaturges that get frustrated if the play is too well crafted at the beginning of the development process. They want to add their two cents and take credit for saving the play but can't. These people are really just frustrated playwrights who don't have the time or talent to write for themselves so they attach themselves to a project. Their reaction to the reading of a well-crafted play is frustration because they don't have a job to do. (No one at Orlando reacted this way, they were thrilled that the play was in the ballpark and never tried to change the play for change's sake.)

This becomes a problem for me because I write highly stage-able plays. I would estimate that less than 2% of *The Exit Interview* was changed in the development and rehearsal process. A few lines were cut, a few bits changed, and the ending rearranged but that's pretty much it. I think this happens because I've written twenty plays and by and large know what I'm doing now, but also because I am a slow writer. It takes me as much as a year to write a script and in all that time I pretty much consider every angle.

I e-mailed you a bit from Chapter 8 of my book Naked Playwriting about a director fixing a play and how it didn't work out. I do not mention in that section that the director who screwed up the playwright's play was Mark Medoff, famous for writing the play *Children Of A Lesser God*. So playwrights too can be guilty of wanting to fix someone else's play.

If a play needs to be fixed it is not ready for the development process. Making a play work is the playwright's responsibility. Polishing a play is what development is about.

**LB: Do you feel that a dramaturgy is necessary to the new-play process? Is it an obsolete job?**

**WMD:** Dramaturges can serve the director or the playwright - I've never worked with one as a director. As a playwright I've never had one who was any help when it comes to writing or rewriting a script. They are highly intellectual people and I always enjoy talking with them, but they have never given me notes or insight that made me come to understand my script. Again, this might be because I generally write produce-able scripts. I get most of my good notes from directors and actors - They are on the ground making the blue prints work. They have the true insight.

As I see it, I am a dramaturge! I spend many months researching and rehearsing my scripts long before they see the light of day. If the director, actor, designer want to know the history, philosophy or meaning behind anything I write, ask me. I know the answer. I've done all the Dramaturge's work.

So, I've never been in a situation where I needed a dramaturge, but who knows what

tomorrow will bring.

**LB: In your opinion, what is an actor's role in the new-play process? What relationship would YOU (the playwright) like to have with the actors?**

**WMD:** During cold or short rehearsal readings actors should do everything in their power to speak out bravely and, as David Mamet says, act as if they are on a hot date not giving blood. If they don't like the script, I should not know it from the reading. The flaws will make themselves known without their help.

During a longer development process I always listen to the actors. If there is an inconsistency in the characters that I have not thought of, nine times out of ten it is an actor who will find it. Not only do I listen to their opinions but I also listen to how they speak the speech. When they stumble on a line, get lost in a monologue, have trouble memorizing dialogue, or grow tired of a scene, I know I've got a problem with the words. Sometimes the actor isn't aware of it but I am.

Some actors don't want to play the character, but instead they want the script rewritten to fit their personal needs; these actors get in the way of the process but in all my years I've run into only a handful of such actors. Generally actors enjoy finding that part of themselves that is equal to the script, not imposing their character on the script.

I also enjoy directing my own scripts. Some say that playwrights should not direct their own work and they are right, some should not! But we must also remember that for thousand of years (going back to the ancient Greeks) playwrights directed their own work. Screenwriters

direct their own work, choreographers stage their own choreography, painters paint their own paintings. When I direct my own work I announce on the first day of rehearsal that the playwright is dead, the script is in public domain and we as an ensemble can do anything we want. This sets the actors free. And if I've cast the right people, rehearsal becomes a time of joint creativity, not just bringing actors up to speed with the script.

**LB: In "The Exit Interview" rehearsal process, we discussed how Mary's oboe obsession and Dick's hatred of small talk are both small pieces of your own personality- was that a conscious choice? Do you often put pieces of your own personality in your characters?**

**WMD:** Every playwright puts themselves into their plays, whether they admit it or not, whether they are conscious of it or not. I am preoccupied with writing (not the oboe) but I understand addiction. I never had children because I was too busy writing. I have an anemic social life because I get up every morning between three and four to write and so at night I'm just too tired to party. I cannot go a day without writing. I always go four to six hours and sometimes ten. It doesn't matter that I'm barely successful, or that I make very little money at it, I must write. If I were a father I would love the hell out of my child but would be the type who forgot to feed her because I had an idea and disappeared into the study for four and a half hours. How would I explain that to Child Protective Services?

I also hate small talk – *I am Dick*. Or at least how I think I am is Dick. When I was writing the play I kept saying to my wife that I was writing a play that would never be produced because it was too close to me. As I write this I'm sitting in a hotel lobby in Fort Collins

Colorado. The hotel's lobby front desk personnel has not stopped talking all morning. Subjects include: science fiction novels, cats, who works on Xmas day, will the Broncos win the Super Bowl, dogs, *Two and a Half Men*, snow, wind, winter, and the color of the walls. People talk about the dumbest things. I think they are just lonely and keep themselves company by babbling on about anything rather than facing the fact that we are small specks in a massive universe and our life story isn't going to end well. We have only a few minutes on this earth; I don't want to spend it talking about what was on *Two and Half Men*.

Yes, I am Dick. And this makes Dick obnoxious. He is a dick - Because no one wants to be around someone who is constantly considering the meaning of life. I'm proof of that.

**LB: What made you decide to cut Mary's final monologue from the final draft of the play? (I personally found the monologue very helpful when I was developing Mary as a character).**

**WMD:** British Playwright Terrence Rattigan said, "A playwright must be his own audience. A novelist may lose his readers for a few pages; a playwright never dares lose his audience for a minute." Too many readers, directors, and audience members said they were pulled out of the play by the speech - And at the worst possible moment - right at the end. Once they find out that Dick survives, the audience wanted to run for curtain.

In Hollywood there is a saying, "Kill your babies." It means that if the writer is emotionally attached to something then he is probably not being objective, (as people cannot be with their babies) so it should be cut.

## **APPENDIX B: MICHAEL MARINACCIO INTERVIEW**

**LAUREN BUTLER (LB):** Why is new play development important... to you, to a theatre, to a community?

**MICHAEL MARINACCIO (MM):** New plays are the lifeblood of our art form. As our world changes, the theatre gives us an opportunity to learn about, reflect upon, and view the world through the perspectives of others. New plays are essential for the theatre to remain relevant and present in an ever changing world. For a community, developing new, exciting, and thought-provoking art is important because more often than not, these works do not have many productions nationally or internationally. Most of the time, the only opportunity a new play has to be seen is in its city of origin, or at a theatre festival that nurtures original works.

Communities that are lucky enough to have theatre and festival producers courageous enough to produce new plays tend to be more socially conscious, vibrant, and produce more art that can be exported and developed globally. All of this leads inevitably to a greater impact on the economic development of the community as a whole.

**LB:** Do you think a new play NEEDS to make a social, political, or religious statement? Do new plays need to be avant-garde? Do you find that most are?

**MM:** New plays don't NEED to say anything in particular. I do believe playwright should have a point of view however, and in my opinion they cannot be successful unless they have something important to say. That could be a political drama, a cutting-edge musical, an outrageous comedy that spoofs something in our popular culture, or any number of other genres making any number

of statements from any number of points of view. The only limitation on art should be that it is as limitless as our imaginations. Often, that leads playwrights to be constantly attempting to push the boundaries of what's been attempted before, and gives many new works the designation of "avant-garde". As the term literally means "innovative and experimental", by definition most new plays at the very least attempt to be avant-garde.

**LB: When evaluating a play in a reading/preview/world premier, how important is audience response to you?**

**MM:** Audience response and feedback are essential to the process of new play development. That is certainly not to say that a playwright, director or actor should be a slave to the whim of particular audience, or that one type of response is better than another (ie. laughter vs. tears). Sometimes a playwrights intention is to shock and disgust an audience, and that is just as valid as any other reaction. Another thing to consider in a performance or even the talkback after, is that some plays require days of reflection before they impact an audience, so while the immediacy of a roar of laughter is gratifying to creators of new works, often it is fleeting, and the most important part of an audience members experience has yet to reveal itself.

**LB: Do you see a trend in new play development that leans toward "fixing" new plays?**

**MM:** I think this varies based on individual Producers and Directors, and obviously on the stage of development of the play. Playwrights, however, tend to ultimately be the ones who decide the



process for their plays. The danger certainly exists for a finished play to be ruined by excessive tweaking and rewrites.

**LB: Do you feel that a dramaturg is necessary to the new-play process? Is it an obsolete job?**

**MM:** In my experience, a dramaturg is a luxury. Most playwrights and directors do their own dramaturgy. This is most often based upon budgetary restrictions, but outside of a few rare epic big-budget productions, dramaturgs are largely absent from new play development.

**LB: In your opinion, what is an actor's role in the new-play process?**

**MM:** The actors role in a new play development process is largely the same as in any other process: to present the character and words as written by the playwright as honestly as possible. This allows the playwright to see their work as clearly as possible.

**LB: How did you navigate the transition from Director to actor? Was it difficult? What did you do differently?**

**MM:** There are quite a few challenges when transitioning from directing a new play to becoming an actor in that play. My first challenge was putting aside my preconceptions about the character. I had a very clear vision of who Dick Fig was, and had hand-picked an actor to play that role. It

took some time to stop hearing that actors voice when reading the script. The next challenge is staying focused on the job of the actor, and suppressing my "director brain". I actually did this by not paying attention in rehearsals when I was not on stage. It may sound terrible, but I would bury my head in the script or play games on my phone when I was not working, so that I would not be tempted to give my input on a scene. I tried (and sometimes failed) to keep my mouth shut during the process, but there were still times when I felt so passionately about something that the director in me came out.

**LB: Should a director or actor use the playwright as a resource when developing a character?**

**MM:** If you have that resource available to you, the Hell Yes!

## **APPENDIX C: PATRICK FLICK INTERVIEW**

**LAUREN BUTLER (LB): Why is new play development important (to you, to theatre, to our culture)?**

**PATRICK FLICK (PF):** New plays are important to me for the same reasons they are important to our theatre and our culture. In order for a society to evolve, it needs the shamans to reflect back to the rest of us what we've all been up to. I think playwrights, like poets, visual artists, dancers, etc., belong in that shamanistic category.

New play *development* is important to me because it means there are some of us in society who are willing to pay attention to what these shamans are saying to us. We create great administrative support systems to make sure they are heard. We give them an artistic home, we create new play commissions, we hire dramaturgs to help them fine tune what they are trying to say. We feed, clothe and house them so they can do the work they were made to do.

**LB: Do you think a new play NEEDS to make a social, political, or religious statement?**

**PF:** No. But it better make some sort of statement. And it helps if it does it with humor.

**LB: Do new plays need to be avant-garde? Do you find that most are?**

**PF:** No. And most aren't. At least the ones that get produced.

**LB: When evaluating a play in a reading/preview/world premier, how important is audience response to you?**

**PF:** In readings, if there is an audience and they are given a chance to respond, they will more than likely try to rewrite anything they personally don't like about the play via suggestions to the author. Sometimes they are right. Sometimes they are very wrong.

In previews, the audience has usually paid less than full price and are thus often more generous with their laughter and tears. I am suspicious of previews.

Reaction to a world premiere is no longer important to me in terms of evaluating a play, because by that time myself or another producer has already decided it's good enough for production.

**LB: Do you see a trend in new play development that leans toward "fixing" new plays? Do you feel that your plays have been seen as needing to be "fixed" by an artistic director or director?**

**PF:** Yes to both questions. Sometimes a play needs to be fixed. Sometimes it doesn't. An artistic director almost always feels that a play needs to be fixed. And usually they need to fix what the director is doing as well.

**LB: Do you feel that a dramaturg is necessary to the new-play process? Is it an obsolete job?**

**PF:** No, a dramaturg is not NECESSARY, but it is very helpful - often more to the director than the playwright. It is a luxury in most theaters, however. It is not an obsolete job. As a matter of

fact, it is a fairly recent development in theatre. Personally, I find many dramaturgs are frustrated directors or artistic directors. But not always.

**LB: In your opinion, what is an actor's role in the new-play process? What relationship would YOU (as the director) like to have with the actors?**

**PF:** The actor's role in the new play process is to portray the character to the best of their ability and as closely as possible to the author's intentions. Just like any other play. If the author is open to suggestion, and is lucky enough to be in the rehearsal room, then it is perfectly fine to have an open dialogue about intentions, suggestions of changes, etc.

When directing a new play, I like to make sure the actors understand what they are saying and why they are saying it. Just like any other play. I also like to feel like a part of the team for as long as I can. When the director leaves a play on opening night, it is usually a new beginning for the actors.

**LB: How do new plays benefit a theatre? Is there a monetary gain?**

**PF:** There is a certain cache to theaters doing new plays. It makes them feel edgy and more creative. Funders sometimes like to patronize new plays more than classics, but more often not. Usually a producer of a new play will set lower income goals than for a more established and popular play. It also depends a lot on geography. There is a thriving new play scene in Washington DC, for example. Other, more conservative cities, not so much.

**LB: What made you decided to change the ending of the play?**

**PF:** I assume you are talking about The Exit Interview. I did not change the end of the play. The artistic director did - I believe in a conversation with the author during the previous workshop. I added the Wheel of Fortune theme song for irony however, as the baby carriage rolled across the stage. Sometimes it takes a village. Or an author who is maybe too open to suggestion.

**LB: What type of relationship should the director of a new play cultivate with the playwright?**

**PF:** They don't have to be friends or even like each other, but it helps. Ideally they should be willing to listen carefully to each other, try to see the other's point of view, agree on the basic points of the play, and above all respect each other.

## **APPENDIX D: MARK ROUTHIER INTERVIEW**



**LAUREN BUTLER (LB):** Why is new play development important... to you, to a theatre, to a community?

**MARK ROUTHIER (MR):** New plays are the reflection of what is happening today in our world. We examine and reflect the world around us and new plays do it in a way that may be innovative, or particularly prescient, or achieve a universality, but in any case, they are about our world today. (Even a new period piece has some resonance about today to the person writing it.) So allowing a playwright the space and time and support to develop their play also helps to develop their voice as an emerging playwright, and gives us all, hopefully, a new Sam Shepard, David Mamet, Tina Howe, etc. New voices for the 21st Century. It's important for a theatre that wants to be part of the theatrical ecosystem to be developing new plays and playwrights, otherwise we become museums, churning out the Shakespeare and Chekov and O'Neill. Those playwrights and their plays are in the canon for a reason, and those plays are well-worth producing, but if we're not creating new work, we're not staying present in the moment. And communities love to band around a common icon or idol. That's why sports are so popular. Entire cities get behind their sports teams. I think new play development can bring in new voices for communities to rally around. And those new voices can help the people in those communities see something of themselves in a new light, a different light. Theatre is a live craft completely dependent on a live audience experiencing a performance together. Together, an audience, a community, through a new lens can redefine itself, take in a new understanding of itself, be renewed and rejuvenated.

**LB: Do you think a new play NEEDS to make a social, political, or religious statement? Do new plays need to be avant-garde? Do you find that most are?**

**MR:** I find that very few new plays are avant-garde. I think playwrights are seeking a to find a voice and some are being trained or are predisposed to creating something new and fresh. But to find that new fresh idea that will be the next Post Post Modern Theatrical Pointillism for a New Age is difficult and won't be defined until it's already well on its way.

I do not think a new play must make a social, political, or religious statement. I think a new play has to first and foremost tell a story, and I frankly think some playwrights use the medium as a platform to proselytize for one thing or another. The more subtle playwrights allow the themes and 'messages' to emerge out of the story they are telling. I think playwriting, from the beginning, has been about story-telling. And if the story raises questions about one's political, social, or religious beliefs, then that play has been successful in making someone think differently for a few minutes, or change their perspective, or perhaps change their life. But I think it's dangerous to set out as playwright to force a perspective on someone else without the foundation of a well-told, moving story that entertains.

**LB: When evaluating a play in a reading/preview/world premier, how important is audience response to you?**

**MR:** The audience response is the gauge of a new play's footing. As theatre artists, we want the audience to cry when we think they should and laugh when we think they should. The audience

response in the moment of performance is more important to me, in most cases, than the talkback after a new play reading. I think it's healthy to hear an audience discuss their experience, but nothing is more telling than a moment when you can hear a pin drop, or a burst of laughter, or that five minutes when people were shifting around in their seats and getting restless, or that joke that met with the sound of crickets. We can tell before the talkback ever begins what moments were working and what moments were not. And it helps to have more than one shot to gauge that response because, as we all know, performers have on nights and off nights.

**LB: Do you see a trend in new play development that leans toward "fixing" new plays? Do you feel that the plays you have selected for playfest have been seen as needing to be "fixed" by an artistic director or director?**

**MR:** No, I think that time is over. I think there was a time about 5 to 8 years ago when playwrights were getting stuck in the never ending cycle of workshops and readings, without ever getting produced. There was a common notion that plays could be fixed. I think, in many cases but not all, that ADs and dramaturges have backed away from the idea that a play can be fixed. When working with playwrights and new plays, I think we tend to ask questions more often now. Why does this character do a particular thing? What is the nature of their relationship? I tend to ask them what they are trying for in a particular moment, and let them know that it is or is not landing. Sometimes playwrights think something that is clear in their head is clear in their play, and it is not. That's the moment that you let them know how you've experienced what's on the page. In the last workshop I had with a play about Katrina written by

John Biguenet, there were several stories about Katrina that were not motivated, so it turned into story time and the arc of the play flattened and sagged. I set out to make sure during the workshop to show John why the stories were not theatrically viable and help to find ways to motivate the stories in the context of the plot. It was extremely successful, as the actors and I and the playwright were in a collaboratively charged environment, and everyone had a stake. But never were any of us there to 'fix' his play.

And no, I don't think in those terms, so I don't feel the plays for PlayFest are needing fixing. I think this past year that all of them had potential to go to production, and all of them needed work. But show me a playwright that thinks their play is perfect, and I'll show you hubris. A play may be performance ready, but a play is never perfect.

**LB: Do you feel that a dramaturg is necessary to the new-play process? Is it an obsolete job?**

**MR:** It depends, quite frankly, on the dramaturg. As you know, there are dramaturges who write for the program, and do research for the play that already exists in the canon, and provide that research, and then there are new play dramaturgs. Some of them are incredibly good. Some of them are not. I have worked with some up at the Kennedy Center in our NNPN MFA Playwrights workshop that are incredibly sharp in knowing how to ask the right questions and gently guide a young playwright. And I have seen others work in ways that have shut a playwright down because of an overbearing style. The team also has to be right. It is a director working in concert with a dramaturg and a playwright that makes a winning combination. Some

directors love working with dramaturgs, some do not. Since I have played both roles, if I have the opportunity to work with someone who I know is excellent, then I can keep my head in the game as a director. But I'd rather wear both hats than work with someone who doesn't have a gentle touch and has the potential to shut down a playwright's creativity and sense of play.

**LB: In your opinion, what is an actor's role in the new-play process?**

**MR:** Again it depends, some actors have excellent new play vocabularies and know either through experience or through instinct how to talk to playwrights and directors, and then some do not. The workshop in New Orleans for the Katrina play I mentioned above, we had an excellent cast, led by a guy who had studied at ART and he knew his dramaturgy. He was enormously helpful in helping me to make clear and salient points that the playwright understood and respected. Most of the actors I've worked with in DC have very good new play chops. And again, in a collaborative spirit, where actors understand the difference between being prescriptive and asking questions about what their character wants, how they are getting it, and the tactics they are using, it tends to be more successful. Actors can be extremely important because they are the mouthpieces of the playwrights words. If they have the right language and the right decorum, they can be enormously helpful, particularly in defining the voice of that character.

**LB: How do new plays benefit a theatre? Is there a monetary gain?**

**MR:** Monetary gain only comes if the play goes on the have many, many productions and maybe a movie and your theatre has a contract that picks up world premiere rights and the tiny percentage of subsequent production payments to the playwright. The NNPN now signs a Bonanza Clause that allows the playwright to only pay subsidiary right after they have made their first 50K.

And as far as theatre box office sales, new plays are always a risk. Word of mouth and press are your best friend. if the new play is working and people are liking it, it'll do better than not, but it will never have the presales of a Shakespeare play or a God of Carnage or some recognizable title.

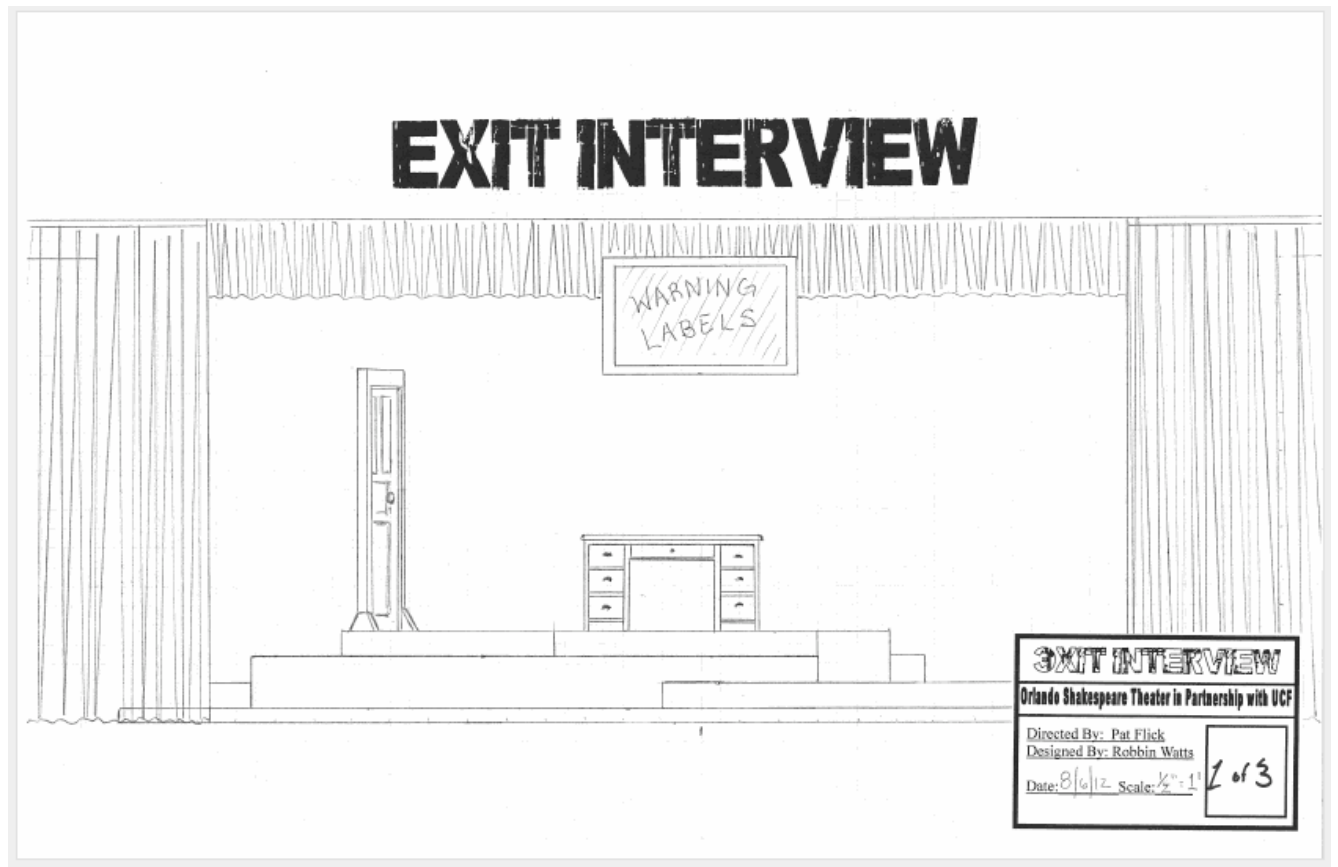
New Plays benefit a theatre in that the theater can certainly become a home theater for a new playwright and then the relationship becomes symbiotic. If the world finds out about Bill Downs, then the world will find out about Orlando Shakes. There is also a certain amount of good will in the theatre community toward theaters that support playwrights. It's so hard to get produced. Think of it. We get over 300 submissions for PlayFest and 6 of those plays are chosen, and then maybe 1 or 2 of those will go on to production. Those are some rough odds, so just being in the game is a boon to playwrights.

## **APPENDIX E: FIGURES**



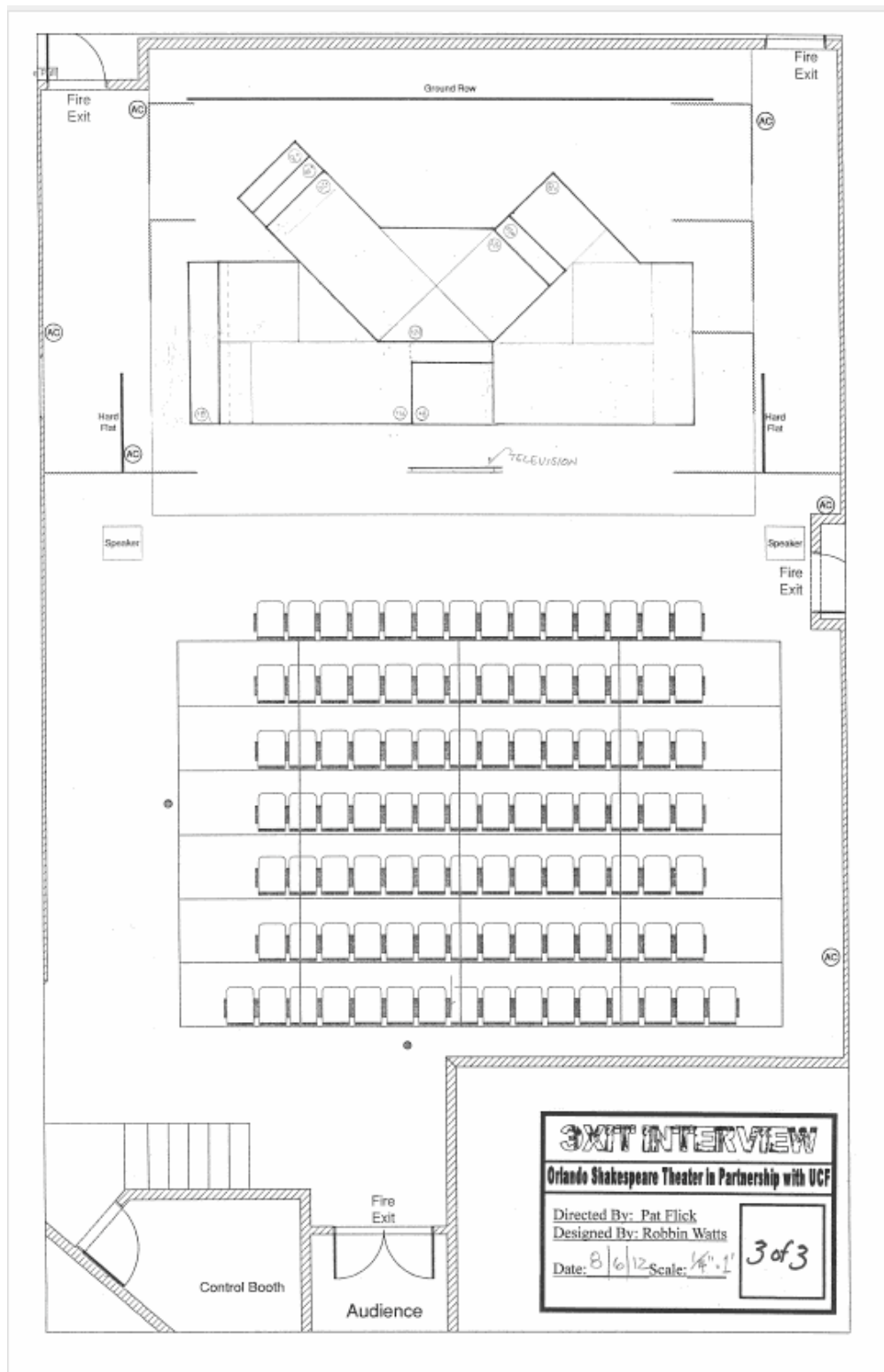
Figure 1: Mary Costume Rendering





**Figure 2: Exit Interview Set Design**





**Figure 4: The Exit Interview Ground Plan with Elevations**

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