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THE BELLE OF AMHERST:
DEVELOPING A SOLO PERFORMANCE

by

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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

This thesis will document the process of rehearsing and performing a one-woman show based on the life of the poet Emily Dickinson. The script is a cutting of the full-length play, *The Belle of Amherst*, written in 1976 by William Luce. This self-directed project will document the process that all actors use when developing a role. The first part of developing a role includes historical research, character analysis, and script analysis. The second phase is the rehearsal process. This includes developing the physical and vocal qualities of the character and staging the action of the play. Because this performance is self-directed and self-produced, this thesis will also discuss production aspects that a director or producer usually addresses: set design, lighting, sound design, costuming, publicity, and dramaturgy. A portion of the thesis is also devoted to analyzing the cuts made to the script, a task normally reserved for a playwright.

A one-person show has some unique challenges for a performer. These challenges involve making choices about how to interact with the audience, how to transition from scene to scene, and how to incorporate imaginary characters into a one-sided conversation. The question of how to portray an historical figure in an accurate and entertaining way will also be discussed.

Committee Chair Mark Brotherton will submit rehearsal reports documenting the last stages of rehearsals. Committee members Kate Ingram and Earl Weaver will submit their analysis of the performance. The thesis performance will take place on Friday, April 13 and Saturday, April 14, 2007 at in the Black Box Theatre at Valencia Community College East Campus.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all those who contributed their insight and expertise in the process of developing this one-woman show for performance. Many thanks to Mark Brotherton whose keen sense of casting led him to suggest *The Belle of Amherst*, to Kate Ingram for her vocal coaching and acting guidance, to Julia Listengarten whose guidance in Research Methods helped me tackle the written portion, and to Earl Weaver whose great gift was to believe in me. I thank my hosts at Valencia Community College, Artistic Director Julia Gagne and Technical Director Kristen Able, for their generosity in allowing me to use the college's Black Box. My deep appreciation goes to stage manager Kira Ackbarali for running the show with style and grace. My everlasting gratitude goes to my mother, Dorothy Raskin, and my sister, Carol Kaminsky, without whom graduate school would have remained a dream unfulfilled.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise*

- Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson contemplated the universal truths of nature, love, death, and immortality, and chose to present her perceptions in almost two thousand poems, most of them short, many of them humorous, some of them ironic, all of them touching the soul. She tells the truth, but tells it slanted through the persona of her poems, using a circuit of images, examples, and arguments to make her point. The reward for figuring out her semantic structure and making the associations of her words is the superb surprise of finding the truth behind the images. The beauty of Dickinson's poetry is reason enough to perform the poems. They make a lovely CD set. But my purpose in performing *The Belle of Amherst* is not merely to present the poems. It is to present the life of Emily Dickinson, whose personal truths will never be known. Like her poetry, she lived her life "slant". As an adult, she withdrew from her friends and community to attend to solitary occupations – poetry writing, gardening, and baking. She communicated to the larger world of friends, editors, and family by letter. Yet these letters are "slant". Dickinson does not reveal her feelings directly, but rather implies her feelings or gives no explanation for her actions. She is still a figure of mystery even though she revealed her soul in her poetry.

This thesis project is my portrayal of Emily Dickinson using portions of William Luce's 1976 play, *The Belle of Amherst*. I had read a variety of solo performance plays in my search for a

thesis project, but none were as moving as the life of Emily Dickinson. I was attracted to the script largely because of the incorporation of poetic language in a dramatic context. My undergraduate degree from Northwestern University in Interpretation of Literature (now called Performance Studies) included coursework in the solo performance of poetry. It seems natural to combine the poetry in the context of Dickinson's memories. Before this thesis project, I had not attempted to portray an historical figure, and so *The Belle of Amherst* seemed the right challenge. Piecing together the character of Emily Dickinson would involve biographical and literary research, as well as my own interpretation of how Dickinson presented herself to the world. I cannot ignore the strong appeal of doing an educational project such as this. I enjoy biographies, and I am enthusiastic about sharing the lives of real people. Call it reality theatre with a touch of entertainment.

The biggest challenge of the thesis project was applying the research to the character and production. As an actor, I had the opportunity to apply the acting, voice and movement work I did in classes to the character of Emily Dickinson. As a director, I had the opportunity to develop my personal concept for this show, drawing on the research skills I learned in my academic classes. With every detail of the production, I desired to share the fascinating life and writings of Emily Dickinson with my audience.

CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH

Biography

Reading Emily Dickinson's biography was a treasure hunt for an unknowable soul. As an actor about to embark on an interpretation of an historical figure, I was on a two-fold mission: first, uncover the facts of the poet's life, and second, build a physical and psychological portrait of this reclusive genius. Much of Dickinson's life is documented through her correspondence with friends and relatives. Letters tell us where she lived and traveled, what she read and baked, and how she dressed and played piano. What the letters cannot do is answer those mysterious questions about her behavior that reach into the core of her beliefs. Why did Dickinson withdraw from others? Why did she wear white? Who was the Master of her love poems? What was the terror that frightened her? It is not important that the answers to these questions will never be known, but it is important for an actor to answer these questions privately and base acting choices on a personal interpretation of Dickinson's words and actions.

Richard B. Sewall's *The Life of Emily Dickinson* is a complete collection and analysis of existing correspondence, photographs, and poetry. Sewall's book and Connie Kirk's more concise biography, *Emily Dickinson: A Biography*, are my sources for the following biographical information. The information which I have summarized here is essential to my understanding of the poet. By researching Dickinson's behavior in the events of her life and in her relationships with others, I began to build a character for *The Belle of Amherst*.

Life Events

Emily Dickinson was born on December 10th, 1830 in her family home, known as The Homestead, in Amherst, Massachusetts. She was descended from Puritans who came to New England around 1637 and settled in the area of South Hadley, Massachusetts. Her grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, co-founded Amherst College in 1821. He was a wealthy lawyer, though a less practical businessman. He managed to build The Homestead before he lost his money and the house; he died poor. The Homestead was sold when Emily Dickinson was ten years old, and her family moved to a house down the street. Her father eventually bought back the house and moved the family to The Homestead when the poet was twenty-five. Emily lived at The Homestead until her death at age fifty-five, except for two extended visits to Boston.

Emily's parents were Edward Dickinson and Emily Norcross Dickinson. They married in 1828. The first born was a son named Austin, born in 1829. Emily was born eighteen months later, in 1830. The youngest child, Lavinia, was born in 1833. In addition to her immediate family in Amherst, Emily Dickinson had relatives around central Massachusetts. She was particularly close to her Aunt Lavinia Norcross, her mother's younger sister. In adulthood, Austin was the only one of the three Dickinson children who married. Austin married Susan Gilbert in 1856. They lived in a house called The Evergreens built next door to The Homestead. They had three children: Ned, Martha, and Gilbert. Ned died in his thirties. Gilbert died of typhoid at age eight. Martha alone survived to eventually inherit the Dickinson estate. Austin also had a mistress, Mabel Loomis Todd, who was thirty years his junior. After Gilbert's death, Austin and Sue's marriage dissolved emotionally and Austin turned to Mabel as his true love. Mabel played an important role in publishing Emily Dickinson's poems after the poet's death.

Young Emily attended the West Center District School at age five and entered Amherst Academy at age ten. She received a rigorous education in science, literature, classical languages, history, and natural philosophy. Her studies in botany were of particular importance to her, inspiring a life-long love of nature. She collected and classified plants, which she pressed into notebooks. At home and at school, she was educated in music and became an accomplished pianist and singer. At church, religious fervor was high and many revivals took place, but Dickinson didn't attend and never committed herself as a Christian. This proved to be a stumbling block when she entered Mount Holyoke Female Seminary at age seventeen. After one year at this school for Christian missionaries, Dickinson ended her formal education and returned to The Homestead.

Although Dickinson spent most of her life in Amherst, she did travel to other parts of the country to visit relatives. When one of her girlhood friends died at fourteen, Emily made her first trip to Boston to stay with her Aunt Lavinia to recover from the trauma. She visited Aunt Lavinia in Boston again at age twenty-one. At twenty-five, she and her sister Lavinia went to Washington, D.C. where their father was a Representative in Congress. On their way home, they stopped in Philadelphia to visit cousins. When Dickinson was thirty-four years old, and again when she was thirty-five, she spent seven months in Cambridge, Massachusetts where she received eye treatments.

Dickinson wrote most of her poetry during her early adulthood. Half of her 1,800 poems were written between the ages of thirty-one and thirty-five. Scholars searching for an explanation as to why she was so prolific during this period point to possible traumas in her life at this time.

Dickinson wrote about "a terror" in her life but never identified its source. There may have been one or several affairs of the heart with various men in her life. The identity of a beloved, whom Dickinson called "Master" in her poems, has never been established. It may have been family friend Judge Otis P. Lord, Philadelphia minister Charles Wadsworth, or friend and publisher Samuel Bowles. "Master" may also have been a fantasized man.

When the poet was thirty-two, she responded to an article in *The Atlantic Monthly* inviting young poets to submit their work. This began a life-long correspondence with writer/editor Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who she hoped would publish her poems. Higginson never recognized her poetic genius and refused to publish her work. He visited Dickinson twice in Amherst, when Dickinson was forty and later at forty-three. His visit, recorded in a letter to his wife, describes an odd woman who talked on and on at a rapid pace and left him emotionally drained.

Higginson may never have fully realized what genius he had at his hands, but he was not alone. Samuel Bowles also was reluctant to publish Dickinson's poems; only five poems appeared in the *Springfield Republican*, where Bowles was an editor, and all were published anonymously. One of Dickinson's poems appeared in a book of anonymous poems. Readers were asked to guess which poem was written by which poet. Dickinson's poem was mistakenly identified as belonging to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Only seven poems were published in Dickinson's lifetime, but she was not unknown among literary circles. Dickinson sent her poems to friends and family who shared them and sometimes published them without her knowledge. Her letters containing the poems acted as a kind of grass roots approach to publishing.

From the time she left Cambridge at age thirty-six to the time she died at age fifty-five, Dickinson remained in Amherst. Over these twenty years, Dickinson still wrote poetry, but not at the same pace as in her earlier years. She also began to withdraw from the company of all but her closest friends and family. There were several sources of strain in her life during this period. Her Newfoundland dog, Carlo, died. The family's Irish maid left, and the Dickinson daughters were required to take on the chores around The Homestead. Dickinson's father died when she was in her mid-forties, and her mother became paralyzed shortly thereafter. Family tension was running high between Emily and her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson. The source of the tension between Emily and Susan remains a mystery because Emily would not write directly about it, but Sewall writes that Emily discovered Susan was not the soulmate and confidante she had hoped for at the beginning of their friendship.

Emily Dickinson continued to bake and garden and write, but eventually she refused to see friends when they came to the house. She even refused to see Samuel Bowles who had been a close friend and a possible love interest. Perhaps just as odd was Dickinson's indirect visitation with people who came to the house. Mabel Todd, Austin's mistress, visited The Homestead many times but the two women never met face to face. Dickinson would sit on the stairs and listen to Todd play the piano and sing, and then send a poem or flower down to her on a silver tray.

Dickinson's peculiar reclusive behavior is the subject of much speculation. Was it a pose or self-created myth that Dickinson purposely devised? If so, was the device used to protect her privacy from conventional Amherst gossip? Was Dickinson a creative genius who felt no one could

understand her? Was her refusal to accept the religious doctrine on her community a bar to relationships with friends? Was she suffering from some mental disorder? It is difficult to understand this kind of withdrawal. Emily Dickinson's letters and poems don't reveal her true thoughts explicitly. Sewall refers to the Dickinson Rhetoric when he describes her manner of hiding behind a mask in her poems and letters (236). Instead of speaking plainly and directly, Dickinson used hyperbole, overstatement, and unusual words to speak indirectly and hint at her ideas. What was going on in Emily's head can never be satisfactorily described, but the pose she struck in her letters and poems can be analyzed and interpreted.

The last years of Dickinson's life are marked by the death of family and friends. Her mother, her eight-year-old nephew Gib, Samuel Bowles, Charles Wadsworth, and Judge Lord died when Dickinson was in her early fifties. Emily Dickinson died on May 15, 1886 at the age of fifty-five. Doctors at that time were not sure what caused her death, but scholars today think she may have suffered from high blood pressure. Dickinson left specific instructions for her funeral. Her coffin was carried out the back door, across the family property, and across three meadows to the West Cemetery where she was buried next to her parents.

Relationships

One of Emily Dickinson's most important relationships was with her father, Edward Dickinson. He was an austere and demanding man who worked hard as a lawyer and served in Congress. Sewall describes him as a powerful and imposing man who was difficult to know. Perhaps this is because he did not express his deepest feelings easily. Characteristic of his Puritan

background, Edward Dickinson wrote to his soon-to-be wife about their impending marriage expressing his feelings in rational terms by calling their life together a life of "industry, frugality, application" (Sewall 49). Sewall points out that Edward's household may have been, at times, like a dictatorship where Emily felt trapped and rebellious. Edward Dickinson loved his children, however difficult it was for him to express it, and made sure they had books and music. One of Emily's responses to her authoritarian father was to defend herself with humor. She makes fun of her father's public airs in some of her letters and in jokes she wrote to her brother Austin. Emily was proud of, but not awed by, her father's public success because, as Sewall suggests, she also knew his private failure to establish a warm, loving relationship with his family. The father-daughter relationship was a mixture of feelings that matured over time and included fear, pride, tolerance, devotion, humor, intellectual superiority, and pity for his inability to communicate his feelings. After her father's death, Emily was too devastated to attend the funeral. Her image of him changed, and she no longer wrote about him with humor. His death intensified her concern about death and immortality.

William Luce includes more scenes about Father in *The Belle of Amherst* than any other person in Emily's life. Though I cut some Father scenes due to the time constraints of the thesis, I kept the scenes that showed Emily's humor in dealing with the irritable, personal side of Father. In the play, Emily recalls her father as "austere" and "a bear". He loved his children but could not express it. This memory is juxtaposed with the story of how Father made an exception to his early rising rule so his daughter could write poetry at night. A mixture of Father's love and control is also apparent in the scene where Emily remains home after her year at Mt. Holyoke and Austin agrees to stay in Amherst because Father wanted it. Emily's perception of Father

changes in the scene where she describes his last day on Earth. The tone of this touching memory alters her recollections of the two other "mighty deaths" in her lifetime – her mother and her nephew Gilbert.

Emily Dickinson did not write much about her mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson, and some of what Emily wrote sounds condescending. She wrote that she turned to her father as one turns to a mother when she was troubled, and that her mother did not care much for thought. Her mother was an educated, intelligent woman, but she was not an intellectual or a writer. As a Puritan parent, she did not have an intimate relationship with her children. She took care of the house and family. She was an expert baker and gardener and passed these interests on to her daughter. She was kind and compassionate, but not a strong force within the family. Emily Norcross Dickinson may have been a bit of a hypochondriac and might have been fearful of death. She suffered a stroke four years before her death, and Emily and Lavinia took care of her full time. At the end of her mother's life, with the parent-child roles reversed, Emily learned to love her mother by caring for her.

There is only one memory devoted exclusively to Mother in *The Belle of Amherst*. The memory of her mother's death follows the narration of Father's death. These two deaths seem very different. Father's death is a sudden shock and an awakening to the fragility of life. Mother's death is observed as a slow slipping away while the heart prepares itself.

The first child in the family, William Austin Dickinson, was born fifteen months earlier than Emily. She was particularly close to Austin and remained close to him all her life. They shared

a love of nature and books. Within the family, they had an understanding about how to deal with their authoritarian father with humor and rebellion. They snuck books into the house while their father was occupied with work. When Austin went off to college, Emily missed him terribly. He was attractive and fun - the bachelor catch of Amherst. He generally caused an uproar that Emily loved. Austin was perceived by others sometimes as a social snob, sometimes as a roughly spoken administrator, and sometimes as a competent public servant. To Emily, he was the one person who understood her better than anyone else. Emily and Austin's relationship is quite complex and is further complicated by Emily's relationships with Austin's wife Susan and Austin's mistress, Mabel Loomis Todd.

As the brother-sister relationship is portrayed in *The Belle of Amherst*, Austin is the fun-loving, popular big brother who receives valentines from all the girls, in contrast to Emily's empty mailbox. I retained this scene because it shows their early closeness and playfulness.

Although several other cuts involving Austin were made, I kept references to Austin's perception of Emily's "posing" as a mysterious figure in Amherst. It is a question at the heart of understanding the poems and life of the poet. Life in small town Amherst was not easy among the gossips. Were Emily's actions a deliberate attempt to distance herself from petty gossipers, as she states in the play, or were they manifestations of family problems or psychic ills? Was she playing with the townspeople or suffering from a crisis? When Emily presents herself to her audience, what mask is she wearing? Is she taking the audience into a truthful confidence or is she playing with the audience, teasing them the way she says she teased the gossips of Amherst?

Lavinia ("Vinnie") was born two years after Emily and lived with her all of her adult life. Sewall describes Vinnie as forthright, practical, and well-adjusted to her world. She was the "uncomplicated" Dickinson who had humor and wit (129). Vinnie was not an intellectual and did not share literary interests with Emily and Austin. She was a doer who took care of running the house by the time she was twenty. Emily called her sister her "Soldier and Angel" because she became a kind of protector. She ran the house, took care of Emily's health, and guarded Emily's privacy. Vinnie acted as her confessor, kept her calm, and allowed her to live life in her own way. It can be difficult, then, to understand how Vinnie was unaware of the extent of Emily's writing. After Emily's death, Vinnie was surprised to find almost two thousand poems in Emily's bureau.

Memories of Vinnie figure prominently in the full-length version of *The Belle of Amherst*. The full-length play has several scenes that include Vinnie. Emily recalls Vinnie's beauty as a girl. She tells the audience about Vinnie's cats. There is also a scene about Vinnie's reaction to Emily's possible marriage. However, I chose to cut those scenes due to the time constraints of the thesis performance. The domestic and family concerns which occupied most of Emily's life are of less interest to the audience than her emotional and poetic involvements. In the shortened version of the play, Vinnie's presence in the next room provides a slight frame for the play. Emily's reason for entering the stage is to prepare their tea and cake when the play begins, and she goes off to have tea with Vinnie at the end. Vinnie is spoken of in reference to the valentines and the trip to Washington, D.C., but otherwise Vinnie, like Mother, was cut from the script.

As previously mentioned, Susan Gilbert Dickinson was a source of tension in Emily's life. She is mentioned only briefly in *The Belle of Amherst* as a friend, confidante, and tremendous support in Emily's literary life. As Emily says in the play, "Sue was the only one who understood my need to write." William Luce then has Emily speak esoterically of her need for intensity in her friendships and her disappointment when no friendship lives up to her expectations. Research on this confusing section of the play led me to another complicated relationship in Emily's life. Susan and Emily were close friends for about four years prior to Susan's marriage to Austin. They shared an interest in books and writing. Susan was a very social and fashionable woman who enjoyed entertaining and kept Emily socializing in her early twenties. At some point after Susan and Austin's marriage, Emily and Susan's relationship soured. The nature of the hostility is not known. Vinnie is said to have talked of Susan's "cruelties" toward Emily. Even though there was tension between the family members, Emily was not completely cut off by Sue. Emily did ask Sue's opinion of the poem "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" which she sent in her first letter to Higginson, as Luce included in his play. They still gave each other books and sent notes between The Homestead and The Evergreens, but Emily did not visit Sue next door for fifteen years. Emily also did not confide much in her letters to Sue after the change in their relationship. The only time she visited The Evergreens in fifteen years was when Susan and Austin's son Gilbert died at age eight. In those letters to Susan, Emily expresses her grief and sympathy.

After reading Sewall's detailed analysis of letters between the women, as well as the poems that may refer to their relationship, it is still not clear what went on between them. Emily covered her feelings with the mask of civility or masked the truth by telling it "slant" so that no one could

definitively decipher what the tensions were about. Although I was tempted to second guess Luce as a playwright and insert more information about Sue, it was very difficult to do. The convoluted relationship is impossible to convey in the short space of the play.

It is also not possible to convey the complex mystery of the Master letters. Emily Dickinson wrote three letters to someone she called "Master" around 1858, 1861, and 1862 expressing her love. The play clearly states that Charles Wadsworth was Emily's main love interest, but this is not the case at all. Other scholars have argued that "Master" could be editor Samuel Bowles, Judge Otis Phillip Lord, Sue, or a fantasized man. While it may be inaccurate to give the audience the idea that the identity of "Master" has been agreed upon by Dickinson scholars, it is a useful dramatic device for the play. As an actress working with a published script, I have to accept an interpretation I am not completely comfortable with. My job is to justify the discrepancies, filling in an imaginary life that makes sense in my mind and in the context of Emily Dickinson's life.

Using the given circumstances of the play, Charles Wadsworth is the "Master" of Emily's love. In 1855, when Emily was twenty-five years old, she and Vinnie visited their cousins in Philadelphia. They may have heard Reverend Charles Wadsworth preach at his Arch Street Presbyterian Church. Three years later, Emily wrote her first Master letter. Two years after that, Wadsworth visited Emily in Amherst. Wadsworth visited Amherst again in 1880, after twenty years. In the intervening years, Emily asked for spiritual advice in her correspondence with him. Wadsworth's letters discuss counsel for an affliction she was suffering. Emily wrote letters to other people about Wadsworth that reveal she thought of him as a man of mystery who had

suffered tragedies in his life too. "He was a Dark Gem," she wrote, "born of Troubled Waters" (Sewall 453). She also admired his humor and perhaps, the spiritual self-doubts that caused him conflict. There may also have been a kind of literary influence between the two. Sewall notes that some of Wadsworth's sermons and Dickinson's poetry have a similar theme and tone (456). Even so, the letters between the two principals and their friends still don't make the mystery of their relationship clear. Wadsworth's letters don't shed much light on any romantic relationship. He was, nonetheless, an important figure in Emily Dickinson's life, whether he was a true love or an idealization of love.

Another undeniably important person in Dickinson's life was the editor Thomas Wentworth Higginson. He was a Union soldier and an activist for women's rights, the abolition of slavery, and rights of the poor. Besides his free thinking views, he was also a nature advocate and had visited Thoreau and other Transcendentalists. In 1861, while working as a contributor to *The Atlantic Monthly*, he invited young writers to send their work to him for publishing or comment. Dickinson sent four poems, including "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers", which she had earlier asked Sue to critique. Higginson's and Dickinson's correspondence about these poems is woven into the dialogue in Higginson's visit in *The Belle of Amherst*. For all his literary credits, Higginson did not perceive Emily Dickinson's genius as a poet. In fact, when he received Dickinson's first letter with four poems he complained that young contributors sent him "worse things than ever now" (Sewall 544). Higginson's first letter back to Dickinson inquired about her identity and education. Dickinson carefully skirted some of his questions and sometimes lied outright to him. She minimized her education and the amount of poetry she had written. Yet, she told him rather personal information about suffering a terror in her life, losing friends to

Immortality, and living with a mother "who doesn't care for thought" and a father "too busy with his Briefs." It seems that she is playing a game with Higginson even in this first letter. She hides her identity and reveals information that creates more mystery about herself. She asks Higginson to suggest how she might "grow" as a poet but, as scholars point out, she never took his advice and continued to experiment with poetic structure and innovate with words.

William Luce took the content from Higginson's and Dickinson's correspondence to fashion their dialogue in the play. From several letters on both sides, he incorporates Higginson's criticism of the poems he received, calling Dickinson's work "spasmodic" and "uncontrolled" and telling her to "delay to publish." Dickinson's response in the play is formed from letters denying that she intended to publish or even sought fame. Once again, the words can be taken two ways. On one hand, Dickinson may have taken Higginson's suggestions as real criticism, or she may have rejected his suggestions but posed as if she accepted them and asked for further guidance. Throughout the years of correspondence, Dickinson thought of Higginson as an advisor and called him her "Preceptor." She also thought of him as a friend and said that he had saved her life and that he had stretched out his hand to her in "the Dark."

Education

Examining Dickinson's education can lead to additional clues about the poet's behavior in her world. She received an excellent education at a time when girls were often given just enough education to make them good wives and mothers. Dickinson attended Amherst Academy where the curriculum included instruction in science, English, classical languages, history, and natural

philosophy. It was here that Dickinson developed a life-long love of nature, particularly plants. She classified plants she pressed into notebooks. Her poetry is full of images of nature and flowers. She also loved Shakespeare and once wrote to Higginson that she didn't need any other writer but him. In *The Belle of Amherst*, Emily recalls an incident at school when a teacher asked students to cross out the "naughty" language in *The Tempest*. There is no reference to this incident with Tutor Crowell in Sewall's biography, so I must assume that Luce fashioned the incident to show Dickinson's love of Shakespeare and her lively, rebellious nature during her school days. Emily Dickinson's friends of this period describe her as a wit and a great writer for their school magazine. She showed no signs of being a recluse in those early years.

Religious training also had a great influence on Dickinson. She came from a Puritan Protestant background. It is said that her father wanted her to read nothing but the Bible. As the following section on music discusses, Dickinson certainly knew the hymns of the eighteenth century Protestant composer Isaac Watts. Religious revivals were common in Amherst and all of her friends and family became professed Christians. Only Emily Dickinson stood along "in rebellion" and refused to become a Christian. She was not able or not willing to fake a belief in God when she had so many doubts about religion. It is interesting that Emily could "pose" (as Austin might have said) as a character for the town or "pose" as an earnest pupil of Higginson's, but she could not pose as a Christian. She remained true to her perception of religion and her doubts.

In *The Belle of Amherst*, Emily describes her feelings on the topic of religion as she recalls her year at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Miss Lyon urges her to become a Christian, but

Emily is not attracted to duty. "Why is religion made so grim?" she says. Dickinson has an utterly different concept of religion as God's manifestation in Nature. Dickinson may have devised myths to ensure her privacy in her social life, but she did not falsify her beliefs on religion. Her deepest thoughts and concerns about God, immortality, and existence are truthfully explored in her poetry.

Dickinson's education in household matters came from her mother. Emily Norcross Dickinson was responsible for passing along two passions to her daughter – baking and gardening. Dickinson was known for her bread baking. She won second place for her rye and Indian bread at an 1856 Cattle Show, winning seventy-five cents. William Luce uses baking as an introduction just as Dickinson did in her life. *The Belle of Amherst* begins with Emily introducing herself with a slice of Black Cake. One of Dickinson's oddities was to send a flower, a baked good, or a glass of sherry to a guest on a silver tray with a note or poem while declining to appear in person. Perhaps Dickinson thought the results of her creative efforts spoke more authentically to others than she could herself.

Dickinson was also known as an expert gardener. Susan Gilbert Dickinson wrote that Emily's love of flowers was her "first attribute" and mentioned Emily's devotion to gardening in the obituary she wrote for the newspaper (Farr 2-5). From her mother's passion for flowers and her own education in botany, it seems natural that one of Emily Dickinson's main occupations was her garden.

Musical Influences

Music played a very important part of Dickinson's life. Cooley's extensive study of Dickinson's musical training reveals that she began playing piano at age two and a half with her Aunt Lavinia and continued throughout her life. She took piano lessons as a school girl. At age fourteen, her father bought her a piano. She practiced for two hours a day, playing pieces that would please her father. At Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, Dickinson continued her music studies with an hour a day of piano practice and a half hour of singing. Her personal volume of sheet music contained popular waltzes (some by Beethoven), quick steps, marches, and salon music. Two well-known pieces of salon music in her collection were "Auld Lange Syne" and "Di Tanti Palpiti, A Favorite Air from *Tancredi* with Variations for the Piano Forte." Dickinson also improvised her own music, as revealed in accounts by relatives who were awakened in the night by her "heavenly music."

Another form of popular music that Dickinson would have been familiar with is dance music. In *The Belle of Amherst*, Emily recollects a normal young life in which she went to dances and took "social graces" as part of her schooling at the Amherst Academy. Learning group dances such as cotillion dances and the quadrille would have been part of a girl's education. Because Dickinson's personal sheet music contained marches and waltzes, she would have been familiar with dance music, even if she was not a proficient dancer.

Dickinson also attended concerts, as Cooley notes in her book. She was said to admire the Russian pianist Anton Rubinstein (1829-1894), one of the greatest pianists of his day and a rival of Franz Liszt. She also wrote about attending a concert by the Swedish singer Jenny Lind.

Dickinson also attended concerts in her own home. Mabel Loomis Todd, Austin Dickinson's mistress, gave recitals at The Homestead for Emily. The two women did not see each other. Emily sat on the stairs listening to Mabel play Beethoven, Bach, or Scarlatti, after which she sent a glass of wine or a piece cake and a poem she had written while listening (9-10).

In addition to classical music and popular music, Dickinson was heavily influenced by Protestant church music, specifically, as Cooley claims, the music of eighteenth century hymn writer Isaac Watts (1674-1748). Watts wrote hymnals for the English Puritan service that included *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* and *Divine and Moral Songs for the Use of Children*. Cooley calls Watts' musical influence on Dickinson "pervasive and enduring" (71). Dickinson may have memorized his words and music in her girlhood. Dickinson used the Protestant hymn as a basis for the structure of her poetry. The majority of her early poetry is written in Common Meter or Hymn Meter: four lines of alternating eight syllables in iambic tetrameter and six syllables in iambic trimeter, with rhyme scheme ABAB. Dickinson also wrote in Long Meter (four lines of eight syllables each) and Short Meter (two lines of six syllables, one line of eight syllables, and one line of six syllables). Cooley points to Barton Levi St. Armand's analysis of Dickinson's use of these meters. "...the sing-song lines of common meter, long meter, and short meter reverberated in her mind and in her art almost until the day of her death" (72). While Dickinson may have picked up the meter of hymns, she freely varied from it and used imagery from nature instead of religion. Her ideas are far more complex than the hymn texts, but the hymn meters lend simplicity to the expression of complicated ideas. Dickinson referred to her poems as "hymns." Thomas Wentworth Higginson wrote that her "poems are like strains of solemn music floating at night from some wayside church" (75).

CHAPTER THREE: ANALYSIS

Character Analysis

Physical Characteristics

Some of the most important information about Emily Dickinson's physical and emotional characteristics comes from letters to Higginson. Dickinson describes herself to Higginson as a wren with bold chestnut hair and eyes like sherry. Higginson gives the most revealing description of Dickinson when he writes about his first meeting with the poet. In a letter to his wife, Higginson describes Dickinson as "a little plain woman with two smooth bands of reddish hair & a face...with no good feature." He says that she spoke to him in a "frightened breathless childlike voice." At first she seemed reluctant to talk, but then seemed to talk nonstop, "continuously - & deferentially – sometimes stopping to ask me to talk instead of her – but readily recommencing." In an essay in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Higginson describes the first meeting again and says Dickinson seemed to speak "for her own relief...without watching its effect on her hearer." She was given to overstatement and interspersing aphorisms at odd moments. She also spoke directly about personal relationships, especially with her parents, which seems unusual for someone who revealed so little about herself. The overall impression Higginson took away from the first meeting was one of "excess tension and of something abnormal" forced on the relationship by Dickinson's needs. Higginson writes that he was relieved not to live near the poet because the experience had been so draining.

Other friends who knew Dickinson remark on similar qualities from a different perspective. A contemporary, Joseph Lyman, described Dickinson's "expressive eyes", "rare thoughts", and

"winged words". Acquaintance Clara Bellinger Green, who sang for Dickinson in 1877, recalled a tiny figure in white "who spoke rapidly, with the breathless voice of a child." Green describes a pale face, great dark eyes and a little body "simple as a child and wholly unaffected."

It is impossible to know anything about Emily Dickinson's actual physical movement. However, it is possible to imagine how she might have moved given the fashion of the mid nineteenth century. Long dresses with full skirts, tight-fitting bodices, and corsets restrained movement so that sitting, standing, and walking required a woman to maintain good posture. If Emily learned her lesson well in social graces with Miss Woodbridge, she would keep her knees straight and her shoulders back. The Emily Dickinson of *The Belle of Amherst* is not in the tightly-corseted clothing of the 1880s, but rather in a looser-fitting dress tailored with pleats. She was freer to move, but given her upbringing and nineteenth century etiquette, I thought it important to carry myself well in the performance and remember the constraints of a corset even if I wasn't wearing one.

During the play, Emily Dickinson relives moments of her life at various ages. She is fifteen when she sends valentines, seventeen when she attends a dance, thirty-two when she writes poetry, forty when she meets Higginson, forty-eight when her father dies, fifty when she last sees Charles Wadsworth, fifty-three when Gilbert dies, and fifty-five when she dies. I made specific choices for movement at each age. My first impulse was to let myself physically become the teenager, the young adult, and the middle-aged woman. Although there was some discussion as to whether I should be a fifty-three year old playing the various ages, in the end I felt it was right to fully commit to playing the ages that Emily imagines. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that I

perceived the different ages as different levels of energy emanating from Emily. The valentines and dance have a playful, youthful energy. Her excitement meeting Higginson and Wadsworth is intense, but mature. Her reflection upon the deaths of her father, nephew, and herself is energized with sadness and an intense love of life.

Psychological Characteristics

Scholars may describe Dickinson as shy, reclusive, sensitive, even agoraphobic, but for the purpose of performance, these words mean little. The audience has come to see how Emily Dickinson will creatively overcome her shyness to reach out to them. My job in embodying the poet is to find every way to deal with my guests who won't leave. On my first approach to the text, I explored ways in which Emily was shy and behaved as if she would like to avoid the audience. I soon discovered this did not work at all. When I began to explore how Emily might interact with the audience (put on her best face, trust the guests, tease them, confide in them) I learned much more about the soul of Emily. The adjectives in the biographies I read were a trap I fell into. Fortunately, I was rescued by verbs. I rearranged my way of thinking to include actions and objectives for every sentence I said. I stopped worrying about accurately recreating who Emily was. Instead, I created an Emily based on my essence of warmth, intelligence, sensitivity, and wit. When I spoke Emily's words as my own, the poet was recreated.

Vocal Characteristics

When I first approached the vocal work for this show, I thought I would try to recreate the breathy, child-like quality of Emily Dickinson's voice, as described above. Vocal coach Kate

Ingram and I worked first on the vulnerability in Dickinson's voice, but ultimately the quality of voice was not of major importance. I fared much better by finding my own voice with my essence as an articulate, educated, and passionate person.

My primary work on vocal characteristics was to develop a deeply personal way to have a conversation with the audience. When I began working on the text, memorizing lines, and doing the preliminary blocking, everything I said had equal weight vocally. This did not work at all. I needed to speak faster. I needed to toss some comments away or make the comments questions to the audience. As I worked on every objective in every line and engaged the audience with my words, the conversational quality emerged. Sometimes I experimented with my voice to tease or confront the audience, and the vocal experiments led me to discoveries about the objectives. Sometimes a new objective led me to make new vocal choices. The quick pace of the conversation infused the character of Emily with an energy she lacked in the early rehearsals. With more physical and vocal energy, it was easier for me to make transitions from scene to scene. Kate gave me many notes about lifting ends of sentences, relishing the words, and making sure my question inflections rose. With vigilant practice, the vocal work I did brought Emily to life.

Another key vocal issue I needed to work on was the separation of the poems from the narration and the dialogue. In the script, Emily bursts into poetry in the midst of telling her stories to the audience or talking to an imaginary friend or relative. When I first started working on the play, I didn't view the change from narration or dialogue to poetry as distinct. Emily Dickinson naturally thinks in poetic language. When her emotions run high, it is natural for her to speak in

poetry, just as Shakespeare's characters speak in verse. I thought the poetry should be a natural part of her conversation with the audience. However, every person who gave me feedback during rehearsal said the same thing. The audience wants to know when Emily is reciting her poetry. The poetry needs to be distinct from the narration or dialogue so that the audience can follow the poem better. Making the poems distinct was a bit of a puzzle. Vocally, I chose to take a beat before beginning a poem, say the words more slowly, poise on an image, or lift my voice on an important word. I also chose to change my focus during the poems so that I didn't look at specific people in the audience, but rather looked into the distance as the words I spoke took on a universal quality. Two examples of this were "I dwell in possibility" and "Because I could not stop for death." In one specific case, I chose to include the poem as part of the conversation with the imaginary partner, Mr. Wadsworth. "I cannot live with you" seemed to me to be delivered to directly to Emily's "Master". It fit, in this one instance, to incorporate the poem seamlessly into the conversation.

The conversations that Emily has with imaginary people were probably the most difficult part of the play. They were difficult to memorize, difficult to make believable, and difficult to pace. The audience hears only Emily's responses to an imaginary partner. This poses a problem for both the actor and the audience. The actor must imagine very specifically what the imaginary partner says and respond in a very specific way. The manner of Emily Dickinson's response must clue the audience about the unheard portion of the dialogue. When acting coach Mark Brotherton pointed this out, I went through the dialogues and heightened my reactions by selecting words that were triggered by the imaginary partner's comments. For example, at one point, Emily Dickinson's father finds her awake late at night. I imagined Father said, "Emily!" I

added a startled gasp before Emily says, "Oh, Father, I thought you were asleep." My physical and vocal reaction to the unheard "Emily!" tells the audience I am startled, fearful, and guilty. They can infer that Father sounded angry. I scored the one-sided conversations throughout the play in this manner. These included conversations with Austin, James Billings, Father, Miss Lyon, Mr. Higginson, and Charles Wadsworth.

Solo Performance Considerations

Developing a solo performance piece was similar in many ways to developing any role with other actors on stage. The life and times of the character have to be researched. Lines must be memorized. Wants and objectives have to be specified for every action. Objects in the environment need to be imaginatively endowed by the character's feelings. Physical and psychological obstacles must be imaginatively created for the character to overcome. Relationships with other characters, although unseen, must be completely fleshed out in the actor's imagination.

The biggest difference in a solo performance is that the audience becomes the acting partner. The focus of the character's energy is on the audience, and the character's deepest wants can only be fulfilled by the audience. It might be a logical choice for Emily Dickinson to run off the stage at the first sight of the audience, but then she would not have the opportunity to delight in them, tease them, confide in them, rally them to her genius, beg for their compassion, or inspire them to look into the face of immortality. To accomplish any of these actions as Emily Dickinson, I first had to characterize my audience and nurture a relationship with them. My audience became

the people of Amherst and out-of-towners who had heard of me as the Myth (as people called Emily). Some were snoops; some were genuinely interested in poetry. All were guests I could not turn away or escape. The relationship between Emily and the audience, as my imagination created it, was a progression from guarded distrust at the beginning to complete love and trust at the end.

It is ironic that in a solo performance the audience, the main acting partner, is missing until opening night. In rehearsal with no director or audience, I made my best guess as to how I might gain my audience's trust, poke fun at them, or tell them about a true love. With no one to nod or laugh, I imagined reactions they might have and let their imaginary shock or approval egg me on. By the end of six weeks of rehearsal, I was more than ready to have a real audience to complete the relationships I had been imagining. I did not truly become Emily Dickinson until I had my audience to play with. The choices previously made about the characterization of the audience made it possible to freely adapt and respond to my two audiences. From the beginning of my work, I knew that establishing a rapport with the audience would be of critical importance in making the play come alive.

Script Analysis: Cutting a Full-Length Play

The Belle of Amherst is a full-length play, which runs about ninety minutes. The suggested thesis performance time is about forty minutes so I was asked to cut the script. Rather than perform only the first or second act in its entirety, I chose to make cuts throughout the play until it met the desired time. I focused on retaining the arc of Emily Dickinson's life. I kept sections

about her school days, social life, college, poetry writing, publishing efforts, love interests, the death of her father and nephew, and her own death. I made sure to include the themes Dickinson dealt with in her poetry such as religion, nature, fame, and immortality. I also tried to balance the amount of narration, dialogue, and poetry recitation in the shortened version.

I cut small anecdotes, side commentaries, and short conversations with friends that were not part of the main events of Dickinson's life. Examples of these cuts included the story about Jenny Lind's performance, the Amherst gossips, Father's efforts to bring the train to Amherst, Vinnie's love of macabre newspaper articles, and Emily's trouble learning to tell time. Sometimes I rearranged portions of the text. There are several sections on religion throughout the play. I inserted a passage about the role of Nature as religion into the scene where Emily addresses Mary Lyon.

Although this solo performance piece does not follow a traditional dramatic structure, it is still possible to loosely outline the main dramatic elements. The dramatic question of the play is "Who is this enigmatic poet?" Throughout the play, the audience wants to know what inspired Dickinson to write, what made her withdraw, and how she felt about her world. The point of attack is the surprise arrival of the audience as "guests" at The Homestead. Once the guests have arrived, Dickinson is compelled to talk to them about her life. In the exposition given in the first three pages, Emily introduces the audience to her baking, her family, her pose as a myth among the people in her community, and her love of poetry. In the rising action of the play, Emily relates stories and conversations that show her development as writer. These events include her education, her observation of nature, her correspondence with Higginson, and her secret love of

Master. I view the climax of the play as the death of Edward Dickinson. After his death, Dickinson became even more withdrawn as she contemplated what lay beyond this life. In the falling action of the play, she faces the death of her nephew. Finally, in the resolution, she comes to an acceptance of death. She gives instructions for her own burial and implores the audience to remember her life and her poetry as a letter to the world. She resumes her preparations for tea with Vinnie as she invites the audience back another day for gingerbread. She has accepted that life continues beyond the life of the play.

CHAPTER FOUR: PERFORMANCE

Costume Design

Emily Dickinson was very interested in fashion. That may seem like a strange statement about a woman who dressed exclusively in white for the last twenty years of her life. According to Wardrop, Dickinson often discussed fashion in her letters to her friends and family. She wrote to Susan Gilbert Dickinson, in particular, about the latest fashions Susan wore. From a variety of resources, it was possible to piece together Emily's fashion history. In letters that Dickinson penned about her earliest clothing, she writes that her mother did not dress her children too fashionably in childhood. Her mother did not teach her daughters to sew and she calls her clothes from that time "apologies made up from dry goods" (Sewall 86n).

It seems that Dickinson fell into fashion by young adulthood, perhaps by reading popular women's magazines of the day. In the party scene in *The Belle of Amherst*, Mr. James Francis Billings compliments Emily on her dress. She responds that it is a Godey's *Lady's Book* pattern. Louis A. Godey began publishing the *Lady's Book* in 1830. It contained information of interest to women such as illustrations, fiction, editorials, literary notices, sheet music, and fashion and needlework patterns. The magazine also had patterns and instructions for accessories such as bonnets, headdresses, and hair bracelets. If Emily and Lavinia read the *Lady's Book*, they would have been very fashionably dressed for the party.

There is nothing of high fashion in Emily's college daguerreotype. In 1847, at age 17, Dickinson's picture was taken at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. It is the only photograph of

her. She is wearing a typical dress of the period – a fitted bodice with long sleeves, full skirt, and a bit of lace around the collar. The ribbon around her neck was her sister Lavinia's idea.

In 1855, Dickinson and her sister went to Washington, D.C. to visit their father. Although Dickinson was ill and missed some of the parties, she would no doubt have worn some of the nicest dresses. Ball dresses from this time, as shown in the Godey's *Lady's Book*, had fitted bodices with layered skirts. Necklines were sometimes scooped, other times crew.

In 1860, when Dickinson was 30, she seems to think of herself as a "plain Jane" of fashion. She writes about a cape that her cousins sent her and jokes that her "sphere is doubtless calicoes." Her usual garb is a brown dress with a brown cape and a brown parasol. Hardly a fashion statement!

Even if Dickinson was not the fashion plate that her sister-in-law Sue was, fashion was still important. Sometime around 1861, Dickinson began to dress exclusively in white. The one dress that remains, dating from the last decade of Dickinson's life (1876-1886), is displayed at the Emily Dickinson Museum at The Homestead. Mudge describes the dress as "made of men's formal shirting fabric of embossed cotton, fashioned in a severe but womanly tailored style" (179). It is a floor-length, long-sleeved dress that buttons down the front. There are wide pleats in the front and back which give the dress a neat, tailored look. The dress suggests modesty and simplicity, though the pleating is anything but simple. Dickinson's remaining dress is unusual in that it does not feature the tight bodice and full skirt that is typical of the time period. It does not have a waist at all. The pleated dress falls to knee length before a band of trim circles the dress

and anchors the pleats. The pleats themselves are quite typical of the time period, as is the lace trim at the end of the sleeves and flat lace trim around the collar. When Thomas Wentworth Higginson visited Dickinson in 1870, she wore a blue net worsted shawl over her white dress. There are no pictures of this shawl, but the description indicates a heavy yarn.

One other important clothing item is mentioned in Dickinson's letters. She describes her apron as a "grand old apron". Dickinson would have worn an apron for much of the time at home while she did the baking and gardening. The Sewing Central website features an Edwardian apron, which would have been close to one worn in the 1880s. It is a full-length apron with princess lines. The apron has over-the-shoulder straps that tie in the back.

Finally, there are shoes. The Brockton shoe industry in Brockton/North Bridgewater, Massachusetts had been making shoes since the 1700s. Shoe styles archived in the Brockton Shoe Industry Museum show that in the 1870s, boots and shoes were popular with women. Dark colors were worn in winter, but white suede, canvas, yellow, and ivory satin were popular in summer. Shoes were high cut and laced with three buttons up to the ankle (Stonehill).

From photos of the 1976 original production, it looks like Julie Harris wore a white, floor-length dress with a bit of lace around the neck and a rose-colored sash at the waist. The dress is not specifically 1880s style, but suggests clothing of a by-gone day. For my performance, I preferred to wear a dress that more nearly resembled dresses of the 1880s. Making a replica of Emily Dickinson's dress for the thesis performance would have been too difficult and costly. Instead I searched for an existing dress I could alter. My goal was to create a dress in the style

close to 1880, not replicate Dickinson's remaining dress. I found an off-white, full-length dress with a bodice pleated in the front. The sleeves are straight and trimmed with lace. Unlike Dickinson's dress, the costume dress buttons down the back and has lace across the upper chest and down the back. The dress also has a four-inch waistband and ruffle down the back that are not typical of the 1870s. To make the costume dress fit the time period and Dickinson's personal style, I instructed a dressmaker to make a facing for the lace so the dress was no longer see-through, remove the colored trim, and put lace around the neck. The dressmaker also removed the gathers in the skirt and inserted pleats. The finished dress had a simple, tailored look.

I sewed an Edwardian apron, dating from about 1910, for the beginning of the play. I was unable to find a blue shawl, and ended up using a cream colored shawl. I finished the outfit with soft white leather shoes that looked like ballet slippers.

Set Design

The set design for the original production of *The Belle of Amherst* had an open space with furniture suggesting two rooms at The Homestead. Emily's bedroom had a bed, a trunk at the foot of the bed, a window seat, a small, square writing table and chair, and a chest for Emily's poems. Emily's parlor was suggested by an 1850s piano, settee, books, table, tea cart, and hall tree. A backdrop showed the silhouettes of seven trees against the sky.

The open stage with suggested playing areas is a perfect fit for the random wanderings of Emily Dickinson's mind. In the original production, Julie Harris moved from room to room as Emily's memories wandered back and forth through time. The silhouette of trees is the perfect image for

the environment around Dickinson. She was surrounded by nature, which she saw in its simplicity and its complexity.

Emily Dickinson's home is now the Emily Dickinson Museum. The house and its furnishings have been preserved and are displayed at the museum's website so that all may get a glimpse of where Dickinson hid during her life. The most striking thing about the bedroom is how small the writing table and chair are. It looks like the surface of the table is two feet by two feet. The small wooden chair seems an uncomfortable place to sit for hours writing two thousand poems. The table and chair are placed by a window overlooking the garden and the church across the street. There is a heavy bureau where Dickinson kept her poems.

Although William Luce sets his play in the Emily's bedroom and parlor, I felt that part of my stage should also include a third playing area - her garden. I created a parlor in the down right area with a parlor chair and end table. The bedroom, with bureau, desk, and chair, was up center. I created the garden in the down left area with a wrought-iron chair and table surrounded by plants and flowers. There was a fourth playing area down center for Emily's intimate moments with the audience.

Props

A Certain Slant of Light, a video narrated by Julie Harris, gives a detailed look at the objects in Emily's room. This video was my best resource for props. Some of the items in the room included a long pen and an inkwell, an old clock on a night table, an old doll, and a kerosene

lamp on the writing table. The video also showed how Emily sewed her poems together in packets with ordinary household thread. These packets, called fascicles, are thought to be the volumes of poetry she hoped to publish one day. It is interesting to note that the word "fascicle" is used to describe a set of books being published in installments as well as a close cluster, such as of flowers or bees. In the parlor, the video showed The Homestead's furniture and piano. There were two sherry glasses and a pyramid-shaped decanter of sherry, a basket of cookies, and two tall, elegant candlestick holders with long white tapers. The camera followed Harris as she strolled around the garden and down the path between The Homestead and The Evergreens, where Austin and Sue lived. At one point, the video cut to a close up of Harris wrapping a piece of paper around the stem of a flower and tying it with a string. I assume this was the fashion in the nineteenth century to deliver a flower to a friend.

The play uses a small set of props that were fairly easy to find or make. I printed the poems on parchment-colored paper. The parlor was dressed with a photograph of Father, an old book, a teacup, and cake on a plate. A quilt was placed on the shelf of the parlor table until the end of the play. The desk had an inkwell and feather pen, a lamp, and poems. In the desk drawer, I placed more poems, writing paper and an envelope, and the daguerreotype of Emily. On top of the bureau was a large, old-fashioned box where Emily kept her finished poems. A doll in a white dress sat next to the box. In the drawer of the bureau, I placed two Victorian valentines and a fan. The garden furniture was surrounded by artificial plants and flowers.

Sound Design

In the introduction to *The Belle of Amherst*, Emily Dickinson warns her audience that her mind tends to wander back and forth in time as her thoughts flit from one association to another.

Auditory memories are, no doubt, an important part of her reminiscing. Bits of music and sound sometimes trigger her associations in the transitions from scene to scene. At other times, music and sound seem to come to her mind as she recounts a memory. The sound design for this thesis performance incorporates this concept. Music and sound are auditory memories flitting through Emily's mind. They are used to trigger some of the scene changes. Research for the sound design focused on the music Emily Dickinson listened to and the sounds she probably heard from her home in Amherst.

I selected an Isaac Watts hymn, *Give to Our God Immortal Praise*, for the pre-show music.

Dickinson used to sit on the grass at The Homestead and listen to the singing coming from the church across the street (Cooley 83). It seemed appropriate to start with the music that had the greatest influence on her poetry. This hymn, written in Long Meter, is one of the more upbeat hymns that contain nature imagery. The hymn came from a compact disc of Isaac Watts' hymns which I ordered from England. The recording featured a cathedral choir and organ.

I used a few sound and music cues in the course of the play to introduce new scenes when Emily's mind snaps to a new subject. To introduce memories of her young adulthood, I used some eighteenth century dance music, *The Lancer's Quadrille*, from a DanceTime Publications compact disc. Quadrilles were popular in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As the dance music faded, I used robins singing to segue into the next section where Emily tells the

audience about her love of nature. The sound of a hand bell ringing cues Emily's next scene about her school days. When Father dies, I used a church bell tolling a funeral song. After Emily's poem "Because I could not stop for Death", I used a church clock chiming slowly. In one sense, it sounded like another funeral song, but the six strikes marked the six o'clock hour that rouses Emily from her poem. I concluded the play with another Isaac Watts hymn, "From all that dwell below the sky". The song had a beautiful chorus of hallelujahs which I thought very appropriate praise for Emily Dickinson's life and work.

Lighting

Valencia Community College had lighting in place for their one-act festival during the weekend I performed my thesis. I was able to use the lights that were already set. The only addition I made was a garden gobo for the down left garden area. I was told I would be given lights up and lights down for the show with no internal cues, but the Valencia student techs generously volunteered to write cues for the fifteen scenes of the play. The lighting made the play really come to life. I had a full-stage general light used mainly for scenes in the beginning. As the play progressed and Emily shifted to intimate memories, the lights isolated the parlor, the bedroom, and the garden as she moved from scene to scene. At the end of the play, the lights isolated Emily down center with the box of poems she bequeaths to the audience. The lighting helped create the illusion of wandering among memories.

Audience Interaction

At the beginning of the play, Emily Dickinson introduces herself to her audience with a slice of Black Cake. She characterizes the audience as visitors who have come to call on her. The play is an intimate conversation with them. I decided to develop Emily's relationship with the audience even before they entered the theatre. I served Black Cake to the audience in the lobby of the theatre, as if the audience had entered The Homestead. Next to the slice of cake, I placed a notecard containing a quotation or a few lines of poetry by Dickinson. Each notecard was unique so members of the audience would be able to compare their notes and discuss which was the strangest one, just like the people of Amherst. The notecards were printed on parchment-colored paper to resemble Dickinson's fascicles.

Black Cake, also known as Rum Cake, Christmas Cake, or Plum Pudding, is a type of fruitcake made in the Caribbean, notably Jamaica and the West Indies. It is made with dried fruits, burnt sugar (or molasses), and soaked in plenty of rum and port wine. The cake is served at weddings, Christmas, and other holidays as a symbol of unity. Emily Dickinson's recipe for Black Cake has been modernized for today's kitchens. The Poetry Society of America gives a modernized version of the recipe by Margery K. Friedman on its website. My bakers used this recipe to make the cake served at the performances.

Publicity

The two nights of performances were advertised by flyers at the University of Central Florida and Valencia Community College. Friends, family, and the UCF theatre listserv were notified by email about the performances.

Program

The program for the performances included notes about Emily Dickinson, a list of cast and crew, my bio, and acknowledgements of all who contributed to their time and effort to the production. The program was printed on a parchment-colored paper to resemble Dickinson's fascicles.

Budget

I did not start with a predetermined budget for the show, but I knew I would have to make purchases along the way for items I could not borrow from the area theatres or friends. I ranked my priorities as 1) costume, 2) music, and 3) props. My expenses came to \$336.

Table 1: Budget

Dressmaker	\$115.00
Cake ingredients	\$ 60.00
Apron pattern and materials	\$ 25.00
Shoes	\$ 20.00
Box	\$ 20.00
Hymn music CD	\$ 26.00
Dance CD	\$ 18.00
Flowers and basket	\$ 11.00
Parchment paper	\$ 10.00
Table rental	\$ 18.00
Lamp	\$ 5.00
Script	\$ 8.00
Total	\$336.00

CHAPTER FIVE: REHEARSAL / PERFORMANCE JOURNAL

The Search for the Perfect Thesis: Summer of 2006

The search for a thesis project sends me in all directions. I want to do all the acting I haven't done in the last twenty years. I want to play every role before I lose my opportunities and sufficient numbers of brain cells to remember what I'm supposed to be doing. Should I put together an audition showcase of monologues and scenes of mature female roles? I read through plays to put together an historical journey of mature roles: *Hecuba*, Shakespeare's queens, Moliere's *The Learned Ladies*, Williams' women, even a musical theatre scene from *A Man of No Importance*. I'm also drawn to doing a one-woman show, a project I've never tried. Eve Ensler's *The Good Body* attracts my interest because the subject matter - eating disorders and body image are ever close to my heart. It also offers a chance to work in dialects I haven't tried yet. The Miami chapter of EDAP would like a performance of the play but the rights are not yet available. Still, I'd love to work on the play and be ready to jump when the rights become available. If I'm going to work on a one-woman show, I want it to be "reusable." I read other one-woman shows, but not *The Belle of Amherst*, since it is full-length. Many are appealing but they don't say what I want to say.

What do I want to say? I want to talk about what I perceive to be true about life through the voice of a character. I want to talk about life, love, death, food, friendships, loss, sadness, and hope. I want to use language to jolt an audience into a different awareness about life. I consider adapting *The Lilac Bus* by Maeve Binchy. I love the character of Judy who lost her children

because of a drug-trafficking charge. She laughs and cries in the same breath. And then I read *The Belle of Amherst*.

All through high school I insisted that I didn't like Emily Dickinson. I didn't like her life and I didn't like her poetry. *I would never live in the same house all my life and take care of an austere father. Who could understand her poems, except for a few transparent ones? They were always about death. And then I read *The Belle of Amherst* with a mature heart and mind and finally saw what Emily was on about. It wasn't about staying home and hiding; it was taking a journey into the soul. I sat and read and cried and cried and said, "Well, this is something of what I want to say. Perhaps I should say it with Emily."*

A forty-minute historical-figure show could be marketable too. I talked over my options with actor friends Marilyn McGinnis and David McElroy who liked the idea of *Belle*. They'd even seen Julie Harris do the role. They are thinking of doing a show of historical figures and might be looking for a group of actors.

November / December 2006

To begin cutting the play to forty minutes, I marked all the scene changes in the script and titled each section. That gave me a sense of how Emily's mind flows from memory to memory. Some of the memories are about events, others are about her relationships. Some of the scenes are narration, some are imaginary dialogues. I want to keep my eye on Emily's perception of the world and skip discussion of some of the family entanglements. Emily's suitors or love interests, her efforts to publish her poetry, her relationship to her father, and her irreverent attitude toward

religion are more important than the pages devoted to her sister's cat, for example. I have to be a bit hard-hearted to leave anything out. I'm not particularly good at "tough love" but when I think of trying to memorize everything, I am motivated to cut.

December 4, 2006

I started getting organized by making a props list, costume list, venue list. I emailed Chris N. about his set for the Black Box. If the set is rather open, I can do Belle on his dark nights, April 16 and 17. Emailed Mark to see if he wants to look over my cuts.

December 5, 2006

Mark is fine with letting me cut as I please. That's trust, I'd say. So today, I cut. Many times I have shortened sections rather than leave them entirely out. The introduction stays; the gossip is shortened. References to girlfriends and the maid are cut, but Emily's girlhood is kept. The circus is out. A nature section is cut; there are plenty more to come. The memory of the death of Emily's childhood friend is cut. Although this memory is significant in Emily's life, the play still has many of Emily's thoughts on immortality, especially in Act Two. Part of the section on Father's austerity is cut, but the dialogue with Emily writing her poems is kept. Father's sighting of the aurora borealis is cut so that the play jumps to Emily's departure from Father to Mount Holyoke. Part of the musing on religion is kept in the context of Mount Holyoke, but the main section on religion and Emily's refusal to go to church is cut. This was a difficult decision, but other memories were more important. The black humor of reading the obituaries is cut, though I love this part. Father's bringing the railroad to Amherst is cut and so are Vinnie's cats. This brings me to getting published and the end of Act One. I have titled the sections: Introduction,

Love of Words, Childhood, Early Adulthood, Paradise, School Days, Father Relents, College Days, Sue, and Publishing Attempts.

In Act Two, meeting Mr. Higginson is shortened and so is the description of Emily's disappointment with him. The love affairs are cut, except for the section on "Master". The play says rather definitively that "Master" is Charles Wadsworth, but I think this is a disservice to the truth. From what I read, the true identity of "Master" is not known. I shortened this section too. The nature section that follows about the poem "Snake" is cut, and I went right to Father's death. I've kept the description, but cut the dialogue so that the death of Father leads into the death of Mother. Will this make the play too heavy? I cut the section about friends who left Amherst and go into the children and Gilbert's death. This leads to Emily's last days. The act flows: Love, Father's Death, Mother's Death, Gilbert's death, Emily's Death. I am still open to suggestions and revisions, and hope Mark will have both for me. I typed the revised script over the next days and sent it off to Mark. He'll have feedback after break.

December 13, 2006

I finished reading Connie Ann Kirk's *Emily Dickinson: A Biography*. This is a 143-page biography that gives the basic facts of Dickinson's life. It was a quick read and gave me the chronology of Emily Dickinson's life. It also pointed me to areas of conjecture, controversy, and mystery in her life.

William Luce's play is mostly faithful to the facts known about the poet, but he has taken license with the "Master" section. According to Kirk, no scholar has yet been able to positively identify "Master" as either Judge Lord, Charles Wadsworth, or Samuel Bowles. Perhaps no identification will ever be made. The assertion in Luce's play that Charles Wadsworth is "Master" is misleading, and now the inaccuracy is beginning to bother me. Why did Luce make this assertion? Was that based on the best scholarship he had when he wrote the play in 1975? Did he take poetic license to make the play more interesting or provide a better dramatic effect than leaving the mystery intact? I think it is a disservice to an audience to perform the play as if Charles Wadsworth is positively "Master." This is quite a central scene in the play. I feel like rewriting this part to indicate that Master's identity is still a mystery.

The biography supplies information about Dickinson's physical and emotional characteristics. These are not in Luce's script, but certainly will be part of my preparation for the role. The written accounts of how Dickinson talked and interacted with others indicate that she talked almost non-stop and was overbearing to the point of discomfort. I was struck by Higginson's account of Dickinson as "intense" and someone who is difficult to be with for long periods of time. In what way did that intensity come out? Did she monopolize conversations? Did she have a strange, intense gaze at people? Did she make demands of people for attention? Was she physically overbearing? Was she childish? Apparently, she really was odd to people outside her own family, and her family knew it and tried to protect her. This makes me wonder in what way my characterization of Emily will seem odd. How will that oddity come out? How will I decide what physical and emotional characteristics my Emily will have? There are no old films of her. How can I know how she really was? As I read more books, I will have to zero in on any

letters from friends, family, and acquaintances who wrote about her personal characteristics or oddities.

I also have Sewall's full biography. Now that I have an idea of Emily's life, I can read the parts of Sewall's biography for more detailed information. These areas include the relationship with Sue, the poet's Father, and the death of Emily's girlhood friend which was very traumatic.

December 14, 2006

The search for a venue is on. Today at work at Valencia Community College, I stopped to chat with Julie Gagne and inquire about the availability of VCC's Black Box. It will be available April 13, 14, 15 and Julie offered to see whether I might be able to use the space for a night. Chris Niess is not sure what his set plans are yet for UCF's Black Box, but it sounds like it might be futuristic. That certainly wouldn't do. If VCC is available that would be great. It's about the same size as UCF's Black Box. Other spaces might be Theatre Downtown. There's also a parlor-like space in Woolsen House at Rollins that Playwrights Round Table uses.

December 18, 2006

Costume research is underway. I found Emily Dickinson's dress on the Museum website. With this photo, I can go in search of a basic dress in the costume shop at UCF or perhaps VCC. I might also try some consignment shops or eBay. An internet search on Victorian clothing in America also yielded some illustrations. I found the Godey's Ladies Patterns referenced in the play. Many of these dresses are too fancy for my purposes. Emily's surviving white dress has pleats down the front and back in a rather straight sack down to the knees. There is a pleated

skirt from knee to floor to give the dress a bit of interest. In addition, I found an article about clothing metaphors and references in Dickinson's poetry. If Emily was so picky about what she wore, she obviously cared a great deal about clothing and what it symbolized. Otherwise, she would wear any old thing.

December 20, 2006

Back at the Museum site, I copied off Emily's writing table, bureau where she stored her poems, and bed. Her furniture was really small. She was a small person. As soon as school reopens, I can go set piece hunting.

December 26, 2006

I returned to the script today and timed it again. Now it seems too short. It seems to time out at thirty minutes. I noted where the transitions are jolting. Sometimes this is due to a cut in the play, but other times that is Luce's handling of the script. Emily's mind does wander and the transitions don't always make sense. I'm depending on the music to help me make the transitions work. Now it is time to get the sound design underway. I want to know what music Emily played, what she listened to as particular favorites, and what was typical of music in her environment, either classical or popular, 1830s-1880s. Fortunately, someone has already written on this topic. UCF has the book and it is mine to read. Even if I add music for the transitions, I need to add back some material I cut. I do love the train accident newspaper story. It is wicked funny.

December 29 to January 1, 2007

I read Carolyn Lindley Cooley's book, *The Music of Emily Dickinson's Poems and Letters: A Study of Imagery and Form*. I selected the book thinking I would find music Dickinson might have listened to during her life, and this might help me make selections for music in my performance. There is some information about a few composers and performers Dickinson listened to. She was a gifted pianist, and some of her sheet music for marches and popular music is reprinted in the book. The book mainly talks about the influence of Protestant hymns as a source for themes and meter in Dickinson's poetry. Of particular interest to me is the book of hymns that Dickinson would have listened to – a collection by Isaac Watts. Some of the hymns are reprinted in the book and I will definitely consider using these hymns. A preliminary search on the Internet showed that the hymns have been recorded.

Cooley's research also led me to contemporary musical settings of Dickinson's poems. Some of these may be appropriate to use for pre-show or after-show music. I already knew of Aaron Copland's *Twelve Songs of Emily Dickinson*. The last of the twelve is a setting of "Because I would not stop for Death" entitled *The Chariot*. This might be good for after-show music.

Nestled among all the analysis of music imagery in the poems and the comparison of hymns to poems, I found lovely anecdotes about Emily and music. These provide more clues about her personality and her behavior. My favorite was:

Todd, a gifted musician, frequently came to the Homestead to play and sing for Emily, who heard every note, though she never entered the drawing room but remained, instead, in the dark

hall or on the stairs. Todd recorded that she "usually sang to Emily for an hour or more, playing afterwards selections from Beethoven and Bach or Scarlatti, which she admitted almost extravagantly." After Todd finished each recital, Dickinson always sent her "a glass of wine on a silver salver, and with it either a piece of cake or a rose – and a poem, the latter usually impromptu, evidently written on the spot" (Colley 9-10).

January 3, 2007

Back to the library today for more search and research. I ordered several recordings of hymns by the Baroque composer Isaac Watts. I hope that Interlibrary Loan will be able to obtain them. I also ordered Noel Tipton's play, *Amherst Sabbath*, out of extreme curiosity. According to Cooley, Tipton wrote this play about Emily Dickinson with the blessing of William Luce. I want to see if Tipton included specific music in the play. I've also ordered Aaron Copland's *Twelve Songs of Emily Dickinson*.

Another area of research today was nineteenth century dance. I envision Emily not just telling the audience about her past, but reliving it. In the scene where she transitions from talking about valentines to the scene where she is talking to a potential suitor, I imagine dance music starting and I can see Emily doing a little dance with Mr. Billings as she tries to engage his attention at the party. According to Kirk's biography, Dickinson had a normal young life, attending parties and socializing with the men. I certainly want to convey this. I found two videos in the library on nineteenth century dance. One in particular is very good. It is called *How to Dance Through Time: The Romance of Mid-19th Century Couple Dance*. The video shows how couple dancing was done down to the smallest detail, such as the way hands were held. I'm sure I can use this

video to learn a dance. In the same series of dance videos was another called *A 19th Century Ball: The Charm of Group Dances*. In a way, this video was more informative about the social customs of the times. The etiquette of the quadrilles, marches, and cotillion was quite formal, but very beautiful. Watching the dance patterns and interaction of the men and women gave me information about group behavior in social settings that I could not have learned from a biography. I plan to meet with dancers who can inform me about ballroom dance or teach me some steps.

Before I left campus, I swung by the Costume Shop and arranged a time to look through any period costumes at UCF with Dan Jones. That will happen next week. If I don't find anything suitable, I will look into making a dress.

January 8, 2007

I met with John Davis, president of the Central Florida chapter of the US Ballroom Dance Association. We watched the videotapes of the 19th century dances. John is of the opinion that the waltzes are too modern for the Dickinson social. Waltzing became popular in the late nineteenth century with the Victorians. People would still have been doing eighteenth century dance styles. Therefore, I would be better off to incorporate some of the moves from the quadrille and cotillion from *The Charm of Group Dances*. We discussed some of the moves and John made suggestions as to how I might do turns with an imaginary partner, move to curtsy to an imaginary corner partner, and return to my partner all the while keeping open to the audience. The videotape teaches specifics of the curtsy, how to hold a partner (not too close!), and how to move with a partner.

We met at the Maitland Senior Center. John suggested I use the Center as a testing ground for the thesis performance. The program director would welcome a morning performance in their spacious activity room. The window of the room faces out onto the garden and looks somewhat like Dickinson's view. I can see setting up the performance area there. No need for the little proscenium stage already in the room.

January 10, 2007

The costume shop at UCF yielded nothing in the way of period costumes. I moved on to contact the Orlando Rep, OSF, and Valencia. In a meeting with Mark Brotherton today, I outlined the written part of the thesis and he advised me not to get bogged down in a lot of writing, but to keep the writing specific to the needs of an actor building a character and resolving production problems. I also posted notices for a stage manager at the tech center.

January 11, 2007

Stage management sophomore Kira Ackbarali responded to my notice for a stage manager. I am delighted. Kira was in my Acting II class last year and I thoroughly enjoyed working with her. I'll be in good hands if she accepts the project.

January 16, 2007

I met with Kira today to explain my thesis project and outline some of the production challenges. Kira has already worked in Valencia's Black Box and is familiar with the space. I explained that I wanted quite a bit of sound, but had no real idea of how to put the sound together. Kira said

she would enlist Kyle's help to teach her about sound. Kira has also done props for two shows and is knowledgeable about getting set pieces from UCF's inventory.

January 24, 2007

The use of Valencia Community College's Black Box is confirmed for three days from April 12-15. Julie Gagne will sponsor me and will help me work out the details. She prefers I tech on Thursday, April 12 and do shows on Friday, April 13 and Saturday, April 14. I think I might get a better response on a Friday/Saturday than a Saturday/Sunday, so I will go with April 13-14.

The seats will be set up for the Director's Showcase on April 10-11. This means that there will be about fifty seats in the center section and the left and right side seats will be removed. This will make the stage seem rather big. Last year, I directed a one-act play in the Director's Showcase so I am familiar with the set up. This is the same space where I am currently doing *Romeo and Juliet* so I should feel very comfortable by the time April rolls around. There will be general lighting as set for the Director's Showcase, which will work fine for my small set. I am very, very lucky to be able to perform my thesis in this terrific space.

Today I set up an appointment with Denise Warner at OSF on Wednesday, January 31 at 2 pm to look at costumes to rent. She said she has a lot of white dresses from "A Little Night Music" that I might be able to work with. Valencia's technical director, Kristen Able, may also be able to show me pieces from VCC's stock if I am not successful at OSF. Valencia won't charge me for rentals either.

I have memorized up to page 9 but now see where I get lost going from one train of thought to a completely different one. Some of the jumps seem disjointed. Transitional music or ambient sound may help to move me from one period of life to a different period altogether. The CD of Isaac Watts' hymns came in at the library along with Julie Harris' *A Certain Slant of Light*. I am eager to get my hands on both.

January 25, 2007

Thanks to generous libraries in Nebraska and Missouri, I have two wonderful pieces of multimedia to help me. *A Certain Slant of Light*, narrated by Julie Harris, was shot at The Homestead. Harris gives a wonderful biography of Dickinson's life as she walks through Emily's garden, sits in her living room, reposes in her bedroom, muses at her writing table, and looks out her window. She walks the path between The Homestead and The Evergreens that Emily used to walk to visit Sue and Austin. I watched the video twice. First, I took biographical notes. The second time through, I looked at all the little details of the rooms. I saw the old clock on the night stand, the Franklin stove to heat the rooms, and the long pens in the inkwells as Harris reenacted some of Dickinson's life. I noted the bureau. I scribbled notes about props I might look for to dress the set. I also saw Emily's white dress that Harris picked up. It seems light and thin. Not at all heavy as I imagined dresses of that day might be. I also noted the pictures on the walls. In particular, I noticed the silhouette that was made of Emily as a young girl. The silhouette, in a way, is a metaphor for Emily's presence in the house as perceived by "outsiders." Since she would not meet people face-to-face, but rather stayed on the stairs and listened to people in the living room, she was like a silhouette. She was definitely there, but other people

could perceive her only indirectly. Mabel Loomis Todd and other visitors were sent flowers, sherry, and a poem from Emily sitting on the stairs, but they didn't actually see her.

After watching the video, I slipped the Isaac Watts CD into the player and was not disappointed. The hymns are very beautiful. I am looking for music that might be appropriate to play in the scene at Mount Holyoke while talking to Mary Lyon. A hymn seems like a logical choice here. I think a hymn might also be appropriate to play for Gilbert's death. This might help to make the transition from such a heavy moment to the last years of Emily's life. Two selections might make good pre- or post- show music. This recording features a chorus with organ accompaniment. I would prefer to have a cappella voices, as if singing in church. I want the sounds to seem like they are auditory memories coming from Emily's mind.

January 31, 2007

Today's appointment at the Orlando-Shakespeare Festival yielded almost nothing in the way of a costume. I found two white cotton long-sleeved blouses in somewhat the right style, but no skirts. I have another costume shop to check at Valencia Community College tomorrow. Finding a costume might be more difficult than I imagined.

My research on costumes today helped me understand a little better what Emily wore. I called Sewing Central, an internet store that sells patterns for period clothing. The friendly owner informed me that what I wanted for an apron is an Edwardian apron. It dates from the early 1900s but it would have been worn in the late 1800s too.

I also found undergarments dating from 1863 from another website. I have a sketch of an 1863 Bust Supporting Corset. It is a beautiful corset that buttons in the front and laces down the back. There is no way I can make this. For curiosity's sake, I printed out Emily's underwear.

More surfing on the Internet gave me nothing in the way of shawls of the Civil War period. I found out paisley shawls were all the rage in Europe, but could find nothing that might show me what a "blue net worsted shawl" looked like. I also looked for dresses that were similar to the one Emily is wearing in her daguerreotype. One of the Victorian websites had a casual day dress from about 1850 that looked similar. Finally, I went back to the Godey's Lady's Book Pattern site I found last month to see what Emily is wearing when she talks to James Francis Billings. If she was twenty years old and wearing one of those ball gowns, she was very fancy indeed.

February 1, 2007

I scooted over to Valencia Community College today, which is around the corner from where I work. There are many beautiful costumes in their shop, and there was one for me! I found an off-white, cotton, long-sleeved, floor-length dress with a pleated bodice, dropped waistband, and full skirt. It buttons in the back and has lace across the upper chest and most of the upper to mid back. It has many of the features I am looking for. The dress fits, although it has been sewn rather oddly. The gathers at the side are uneven so that they don't align evenly at the hips. The dress has purple trim, bows, and buttons which would have to be removed. The lace front and back would need a facing so that the dress is not see-through. These adjustments are not major and could be made fairly easily. I have emailed Rob O'Brien, the head of the costume

department, to ask permission to make adjustments to the dress. At least I can fix the gathers at the side and return the dress better than it is now.

February 2-28, 2007

These past three weeks have been dedicated to writing the first draft of the thesis. I worked on individual sections – costumes, music, relationships, biography, education, introduction, abstract – then put them together in order. Writing is a painstaking process, but it helps me solidify my research and focus on Emily Dickinson as a real person with observable behaviors.

February 17, 2006

My mother brought me her 1952 Singer Featherweight sewing machine so that I could sew the dress and the Edwardian apron. (She came to see me in *Romeo and Juliet*). She and my sister suggested I get a dressmaker to do the alterations because the gussets need to be taken in.

February 20, 2007

I have ordered the Edwardian apron pattern from a store in Alabama. I also ordered the Isaac Watts CD from England. The CD should arrive within twenty-eight days.

February 21, 2007

Kira and I went foraging at the UCF storage room and found a good parlor chair, assorted dishes, and possible bureau or trunk. We put pink post-its on our items and will figure out how to retrieve when we have space. I have an appointment for March 7 to look for set pieces at Valencia Community College.

February 22, 2007

A friend who lives over an antiques store in Orlando has located a tea cart. There are two in the store below him. I will pass by to check them out and inquire about rentals. I don't have to hurry because they are slow sellers.

February 27, 2007

Kira and I went foraging in Fine Props at UCF. There is a possible settee there, but it needs repair and a new cover. It may not be worth the effort. I took away an old doll, a picture frame, and a beautiful box that I don't know what to do with yet.

February 28, 2007

I delivered the first draft of the written thesis. I am eager to rehearse now that the "left brain" part of the thesis is in place. Let's see what the right brain does with all that research.

March 4, 2007

I attended a one-woman show based on the life of Dorothy Parker at Playfest. *You Might as Well Live* had some good ideas. Three distinct playing areas were created by a parlor chair down left, a bar down right, and a writing desk with typewriter slightly upstage and center. Most of the action happened at the writing desk (typing, telephone calls to various people). The parlor chair was used for the moments where Dorothy Parker sits and talks to the audience, smoking a cigarette and drinking brandy. These were some of the best moments of the play because the rapport with the audience was the most intimate. This is what I needed to see for my own show. If Emily creates a real intimacy with the audience, they'll become part of her world. I also noticed that the audience comes in with expectations about the historical figure. When the actress appeared on stage dressed in 1950s attire and behaving like Dorothy Parker, the audience immediately laughed with recognition. It is important to find the humor and the eccentricity of an historical figure. During the talkback, the audience asked about the actress' vocal choices. Although she had listened to audio recordings of Parker, she chose not to imitate Parker's style of

speech exactly. She added a flavor of the New York upper class 1930s speech style, but did not go to Parker's extreme.

What I learned from this performance: 1) Costuming is very important, especially when it meets the audience's expectations. 2) If I create distinct areas, I should use them all specifically and not wander into them for the sake of movement. 3) Creating a rapport with the audience is by far the most important action of the play. 4) Don't be afraid to create a strong character with idiosyncrasies. I must find Emily's humor.

Meanwhile in Miami... My sister Carol and my niece Natalie were making a trial batch of Dickinson's Black Cake. The cake took two people two days to put together. I am being mailed the results and should have a slice by tomorrow.

March 6, 2007

The Black Cake arrived at my doorstep and promptly became dessert. It is very good. It's a spice cake with fruit. There's no taste of the alcohol (brandy) used to soak the cake (thank goodness). The remaining loaves are residing in my sister's freezer until show time.

March 7, 2006

In my first vocal coaching with Kate Ingram today we discussed ways to bring out the childlike qualities of Emily Dickinson's voice. The focus of the resonance is in the sinuses rather than the nasal passage. This gives the voice an open, vulnerable quality. Kate suggested dropping the head forward and letting the tongue and cheeks relax to heighten awareness of the sinuses. Then

we did a little sinus massage with the fingertips in the fleshy part under the eyes to feel the resonance in the sinuses. By humming and vocalizing on "he" and other syllables, I could feel the sinuses vibrate. Kate suggested vocalizing at the breaking point in the voice (an F for me) to get that vulnerable sound. She likened the sound to a finger making a sound around the rim of a wineglass. Then Kate suggested thinking of the upper cheeks and eyes as the window the child looks out of. I called out "Where's my Mom?" and got a nice, vulnerable sound. We tried several phrases with the placement of the resonance.

Next I tried a few of the poems with sinus resonance. I discovered the "w" sounds are especially good with sinus resonance. The word "one" occurs often in the poems and is a good word to give sinus resonance to. Some pitfalls to be careful of: Don't overuse this sinus resonance or the emotional range of the voice will flatten. Apply the sinus resonance judiciously. My homework is to find the best times to use the vulnerability in the voice.

I returned to UCF in the evening for my first blocking rehearsal. I have memorized the first half of the play and can now walk through it and experiment with actions. The areas I created are a parlor (chair, table) down right, a bedroom (bureau or chest, writing table, chair) up center, and garden (iron bench or chair) down left. I walked through the play, placing each scene in a distinct area. My Playfest experience is still fresh in my mind. One thing that bothered me about the Dorothy Parker staging was that she wandered from area to area so quickly that it became difficult to follow her thoughts. I just wanted her to stay in one place and talk to me. Instead I got lost in her movement. And then my eyes started to close... I have vowed not to make the

same mistake with *Belle*. Pick an area and do the scene there. Move between scenes on transitions.

After I got the overall feel of where I wanted to go, I went back to the beginning and started walking through the play, saying the lines, addressing the audience, and noting what business I needed to do. I worked on the first third of the play, from the Introduction through School Days. Colleague Rob O'Brien was present at the rehearsal to be on book and provide much needed feedback. Rob and I worked together on *Romeo and Juliet* last month. He has an MFA in Directing and was a good resource for this first rehearsal. As I walked through the play, many questions came up. In what ways is Emily frightened of the audience? How do I, as the actor, justify my choice to stay and talk to the audience and not bolt for the staircase? I liken the audience's "surprise" appearance as similar to Higginson's first visit. Although it may be uncomfortable at first, it is ultimately a comfort to talk to those who are interested in the poet. The audience may be "an admiring bog" as Dickinson said in her poetry. Still, they are admiring her and that is an attractive offer from the audience to me.

Throughout the introduction, Emily is holding the Black Cake. This felt awkward for me because I was conscious of holding the plate. Emily, however, is not conscious of holding onto the plate. She rediscovers the cake when she happens to look at her hand as she sends the busybody to the cemetery. How do I get over the awkward feeling? Is there something awkward about Emily?

Another problem cropped up with the poem "Tell all the Truth". Where is Emily when she says it? What is she doing? She is being ironic. In what way is she conveying this to the audience? I

tried making this poem a celebration or liberation from conventionality, per Rob's suggestion.

I'm not convinced I've found quite the right path for this poem. On the other hand, I discovered that the garden is the spot where some of the most intimate poems work the best.

The childhood scene with the valentines works very well from Emily's bedroom. The valentines can be kept in the bureau or chest. The fan can be kept on the bureau or writing table to transition to the next scene of Young Adulthood. The Lancer's Quadrille music I purchased will work well but I'll have to try and time it with one of several tracks. The center downstage area is a neutral area where Emily dances with Mr. Billings. When he leaves, the next scene moves to the garden for Emily's Private World. I realized that I need to add back the entire poem. The abbreviated poem is too short.

For the School Days scene, I created an area for the school by taking the bedroom chair and moving it center into the neutral area. Placing it slightly off center and facing stage right, I can refer to my girlfriends on either side of me and Mr. Crowell out front. If my chair is sturdy enough, I will stand on it for the last quote from *King Lear*.

March 8, 2007

I have scheduled myself for two hours of rehearsal every day. That's the only way I can figure to make myself keep working alone. Today I set up my living room as my stage and went through everything I did yesterday from the Introduction to School Days. I returned to the moment of holding the Black Cake and the question of Emily's physical awareness. If Higginson perceived Dickinson as unaware of her listener, then perhaps she had an imperfect awareness of her body

and might hold onto a cake plate. How aware is Emily of her body? In what situations would she be aware or unaware? She did a lot of physical labor with baking, gardening, and house cleaning – as all nineteenth century women did. She would have been aware of her body on her walks with her dog Carlo. She would have been aware of her body as a singer too. How do I know when I have caught the right physicality for Emily? How does the presence of other people change her physicality? Does she move freely in private and less freely in the presence of others? I must return to these questions throughout my rehearsals.

I did add a bit with the fork. Since I am holding the cake plate with a fork, I used the fork to point the busybody to the cemetery. Then it is in my hand for the line "Hmm. Lovely." I can go right into eating the cake.

March 9, 2007

In rehearsal today in my living room, I started with "Private World" and the poem I added in based on Wednesday night's rehearsal. "I dwell in Possibility" now has its ending verses. The poem is said in the garden. Since it is the first time I've worked with the entire poem, I discovered the joy in the poem as an ode to Nature. Nature, Paradise, and Inner Joy are one to Emily. One of my favorite lines is in this scene. Paradise is within. "I travel the road into my soul all the time." How can I say this so that my audience will understand how deeply preoccupied I am with understanding my emotions?

I carried on into the next scene with School Days. It is very tempting to play Miss Woodbridge as a stereotypical etiquette teacher (how much is too much?) and very, very tempting to ham up all the Shakespeare "wicked" words. I think Emily should have as much fun here as possible.

I moved on to "Father Relents". After a defiant "How do you like that, Mr. Crowell?" I reset the chair in the bedroom and take up Father's picture. I think that "You see. He looks like a bear." calls for an imitation of the stoic Edward Dickinson in all his photos. I will try to capture that no-nonsense look on his face and then have Emily make fun of it as she did in real life. This is a good contrast to the serious side of getting caught awake late at night. As I "talk" to Father, I have to plant those obstacles in my imagination that give Father is authoritarian power. He is not to be joked with. He means what he says. Yet, Emily makes light of her situation by making a joke of Vinnie's snoring. There is movement from dutiful daughter to disobedient rule bender. Emily is jockeying for her best position with Father. Reading the poems and checking Father's reaction to them from time to time will keep Father's emotional presence felt.

I moved on to College Days. I have inserted an aside to the audience in the middle of the conversation with Miss Lyon. I think it works well. The conversation with Miss Lyon takes place in the neutral center. I found myself standing up very straight in Miss Lyon's presence – at attention really. But when I addressed the audience, I was physically much freer. I could stride into the garden in indignation at the sermons given in church and speak the poem, "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church" in *my* church (Nature). When I take up the conversation with Miss Lyon, I am back to center and at attention again. The end of the scene, the coy spelling of "merry" tweaks Miss Lyon's nose. I really enjoyed tweaking her nose.

Finally, I worked on "Sue". I added back all of the narrative about Sue. It is impossible to understand what Emily is talking about if you haven't read her biography about the strange relationship. I know the audience won't follow this. Nor will they understand what I mean about "intense friendships". I think I must speak as if they could see inside my head and it would all make sense. Perhaps all the audience needs to understand is the loss and the disappointment of being misunderstood (at best) or treated cruelly (at worst) by a friend.

March 10 and 11, 2007

Two hours on my living room stage both these days were spent working just the sections "Sue" and "Publishing Attempt". I set my mind to memorize the added text in "Sue" and to think what to do on stage. From the parlor chair, I can look off slightly right of audience to look over to the Evergreens. Other than that, I have no ideas...yet. The Publishing Attempt went better. I need an Atlantic Monthly magazine prop on the parlor table and lots of poems in the bureau/chest. I discovered that I need to establish Sue in the poem selection scene. Her opinion must matter to me. Sue disappears from the scene once I start to write to Higginson. Will this be clear to the audience?

"Publishing Attempt" seemed disjointed in rehearsal. The conversation with Higginson seems too short or too abrupt. I went back to the original script and looked it over. I decided to add back part of Emily's letter to Higginson asking for his opinion of the poems. The letter is in Dickinson's own words, not Luce's, which gives them more authenticity and more of that air of posing I want to impart. I added back one sentence referring to Higginson's participation in the

Civil War and Dickinson's lack of participation. The additions were small, but important. I went back through the scene again. It flows: 1) Introduce the audience to the magazine. 2) Select the poems with Sue. 3) Write a "posed" letter to Higginson and express the wish to be famous. 4) Wait for Higginson's reply in the garden while I recite my poem, "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers". 5) Scurry to get Higginson's reply with enthusiasm and great expectations. 6) Sit in the parlor chair to open the letter and read it. 7) Tell the audience the disappointing news. 8) Receive another letter about Higginson's visit. 9) Cross to the bedroom to fix myself up; Cross to parlor while fantasizing about meeting my Preceptor. 10) Meet the real Higginson with shyness. 11) Plunge into the publishing plans with non-stop talking. 12) Hear Higginson's criticism and try to defend myself. 13) Express my disappointment to the audience again. 14) Put on apron. Cross to the garden to seek solace in my flowers and erase my hopes of fame. Recite "I'm Nobody" to my flowers. I enjoy this scene for the emotional roller coaster.

Dickinson knew she was gifted and her poems were better than many others. She was frustrated by the conventionality of less gifted people in positions of power. That must have hurt. I ended Sunday's rehearsal with a run-through from the beginning of the play to the publishing attempt.

By good luck, I had a chance to talk to an actor friend of mine, Alan Sincinc, after seeing him in *The Caretaker* last night. He is preparing to perform his own material as a one-man show at The Fringe. We talked about the need for a director as the person who can give the actor more insight than he/she has. As actors, we can go far, but with a director we can often go further. I agree wholeheartedly with him. The best directors I have worked with have been able to pinpoint a new action or a mention a new image that has spurred me to a discovery I wouldn't have stumbled on myself. It's not for lack of research or some kind of dependency on a director

to do an actor's work. Other people can provide new associations, thoughts, and feelings that one person alone would miss. Discoveries work the opposite way too. Actors bring clarity to what a director may not have understood. Even a "self-directed" one-person show is a collaboration with anyone who gives feedback.

March 12, 2007

Two hours flew by as I tackled the next section of the play – "Love." I hadn't worked on this section in January so I spent the time memorizing the lines, checking it against the original play to see what I might adjust in the script, and putting in preliminary blocking. I added back in a few sentences to explain how Emily happened to be in Philadelphia. I inserted two sentences describing Emily's perception of Wadsworth. I added one verse of a poem that I can use as a transition from the bedroom to the parlor as Emily prepares to meet Wadsworth, just as I had a poem transition to meet Higginson in the previous scene. Finally, I added in the entire poem "I cannot live without You" instead of using only the last verse.

Miscellaneous happenings: 1) Marilyn McGinnis and her husband David McElroy would like to see a rehearsal since they will be out of town during the show dates. Their feedback would be very valuable since they have done one-person shows many times. 2) I found a font I want to use for the notecards (Rage Italic). 3) I took the dress to a dressmaker for alteration. She loved the photo of Emily Dickinson's actual dress and suggested creating pleats rather than gathers for fullness in the costume. She will line the lace with the fabric I bought, put on the cream lace I found, sew down the pleats in the bodice, and take in the sleeves at the shoulders. I'll go for a

fitting next Monday. 4) A friend has a table for the parlor and a bureau for the bedroom. I'll be able to pick them up about a week before showtime.

March 13, 2007

Kira and I met in the Tech Center for rehearsal this afternoon. I went through all I have memorized of the show from Introduction to Love. It took just under an hour. I did some starting and stopping for lines, but not too much until the last two sections. I need another hour this evening for line work.

March 14, 2007

I rehearsed the same sections as yesterday at the Tech Center with Kira on book. This is fine for line memorization but I am completely at sea with what to do with character choices. I have no one to talk to about how I feel Emily as I speak her words. How do I know if I am making any good decisions about actions or objectives? The collaborative aspect of actor-director is irreplaceable.

After the rehearsal, Kira and I put the set design on the computer with VectorWorks. That was neat! We also went through our list of props and ticked off what we had and what we needed. Tomorrow I will bring in photos of Emily and her father for scanning. I need to put their pictures in frames and use the props in rehearsal. Kira will call the Rep and Opera for set pieces. I will work on the fascicles. Fascicles. Now there's a word you can lift your hat to.

I found fabric for the Edwardian apron at Wal-Mart for a dollar a yard. It is a yellow print with dark green accents. Old fashioned but not so loud or busy that it will distract. Now I'm obligated to sew the apron.

March 15, 2007

Back at the Tech Center today, I ran through the play one more time from the Introduction to Love. I gave Kira the book with photos of Emily and her father to scan and frame. I went to see *Crime and Punishment* at OSF this evening. I paid special attention to the rapport Raskolnikov established with the audience. It is difficult to describe. The audience is ready to identify with the character. What the actor did was use the predisposition to trust and believe the character to further engage the audience's sympathy by making his case for redefining "criminal" acts. He uses reason, logic, and situational examples to convince the audience he is sane and innocent. Am I not doing the same thing with Emily? I want to convince my guests that I am sane, sensitive, and intelligent – a true poet.

March 16, 2007

I commandeered the dance studio this afternoon for rehearsal. I went through the play again, without Kira. I only had to stop a few times to check lines. The lines concern me much less than finding interesting character choices and actions. My watch word for the day was “find the humor.”

I noted transitions where I felt uncomfortable as an actor. The most difficult transition is from Childhood into Father Relents. I end with a triumphant retort, “How do you like that, Mr.

Crowell?" standing on the bedroom chair center stage. I have to step down from the chair, which may not be easy in a long dress, and cross upstage to the bedroom to replace the chair. The next line, "Father never kissed us goodnight" seems to come from nowhere. What triggers that jump to the need for Father's approval? Mr. Crowell is someone I can outwardly rebel against; Father is someone I can only indirectly rebel against. That's the emotional connection, but I don't know how that reads on stage.

March 17, 2007

I took the day off from rehearsal to make the apron. After work, I cut out the pattern and sewed the apron on the Featherweight, the same sewing machine I learned to sew on when I was around eleven or twelve. Sitting and working in the quiet of my home brought back memories of summers spent making clothes for junior high school. I still have a blouse I made when I was fourteen. Busy hands free the mind to contemplate life. I thought of Emily baking and gardening. Busy hands freed her mind to search her soul until it was time to write. Sewing the apron was therapeutic. What a joy to have a creation in just two days! Not like a performance which takes months to prepare and then is gone like a piece of Black Cake!

March 18, 2007

Three hours of line memorization got me through Father's Death, Mother's Death, and Nephew's Death. Oh dear. It's all so sad I could hardly get the words out. No matter how many times I relate the deaths of these important people in Emily's life, I still want to cry. It isn't the actual deaths, but Emily's keen insight about the universal issues surrounding death, that undo me. Of putting flowers on Father's grave: "If we only knew *he* knew, perhaps we could stop crying."

How often have I had exactly the same thought. Of Mother's death: "Hold your parents tenderly, for the world will seem a strange and lonely place when they are gone." How seldom have I contemplated that, and yet the strange and lonely place will someday be my life. Of Gilbert's death: "All we possess we would give to know [who meets us when we die]." How many years have I spent wondering this very thing? It's not my job to cry but to allow the audience to cry if they are so moved. So how does Emily feel about describing these deaths? How easily does she talk about such things? Will talking to the audience be a relief for her or a burden? What will the audience connect with as Emily speaks? Is there something more I need to do to bring the audience to my understanding, or do I just let the words speak for themselves?

I made some additions to the text. I added a poem to Father's Death. It is one of my favorites, "After great pain a formal feeling comes." More than any other poem, this one describes the devastating numb feeling of a death. I added a few sentences to make the transition to Mother's Death a bit clearer.

March 19, 2007

Another hour and a half on lines to learn the last section, Emily's Death. With all the lines in place, I should be able to spend the next three weeks working with props and costumes and problem-solving character choices. I made a quick stop at the dressmaker's on my way to Film Acting class, but the dress was still in pieces. I can pick up the dress on Friday afternoon.

March 20, 2007

The apron is finished. I hemmed my gem this evening. Kira and I hauled the parlor chair, a garden chair, and a bureau into my car. I will use the chairs for rehearsal tomorrow night with Mark and stash the bureau in my living room to rehearse with at home. One hour of running lines. I know I know them enough to move through the play, but the lines have to be really "in my bones". That only comes with time and practice.

March 21, 2007

I gathered as much as I could for this afternoon's rehearsal - a first showing with Mark. Costumes, props, music, and set pieces went into Dance Studio 2. The bureau is a little too heavy to move so I must make do with a cube. This is the first time I have worked with the apron and shawl. I didn't know exactly where to put them on or take them off or leave them on the set. This is also the first time I have tried to work with any props so I wasn't always sure where to put them or where they might end up in various scenes. I also hadn't done the last four sections at all so I improvised the blocking.

My main focus is the feedback from Mark. The general notes included following. 1) Think of the play as its own poem, complete with the idiosyncratic rhythm of Dickinson's poetry. 2) Separate the poems from the rest of the addresses to the audience. I had made a conscious choice to make the poems a natural part of Emily's thoughts. I had been trying to incorporate them into the conversation with the audience. I can change the way I say the poems so that they are distinct from her "normal" speech. 3) Get very comfortable with my home, my space, my world and don't rush through the stories. I think I can develop that ease with three more weeks of rehearsal. I can take time to drink tea and enjoy the cake and feel the shawl on my shoulders.

4) Play the various ages of Emily as a fifty-three year old remembering what it was like to be fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, thirty-two, forty, and fifty. 5) The transitions from scene to scene need to be filled in with activity or sound or something that makes them flow smoothly. (But I already knew that.)

Mark gave me specific notes for certain choices I had made. Don't really lift my imaginary hat when I talk about words. Don't pet my imaginary dog. Don't really dance with my imaginary James Billings, but leave the dance music in. Do the Shakespeare readings as a really good actress. Have more of a point of view on Father when he discovers me up late writing. Talking to Miss Lyon needs to be clearer. Take more time to talk about Sue. Make my movements clearer when I imagine talking to Professor Higginson. Invest more in Mr. Wadsworth. In the last scene, put the quilt over my knees. Take more time after the long poem and put in clock chimes for six o'clock. Get a really big box to hold 1800 poems and leave it center on the floor as per the stage instructions.

Mark gave me one other general note on my approach to the character of Emily Dickinson. I have been trying to think how I can best create Emily from the historical information left about her. Instead, Mark suggested that I simply be who I am and build upon the similarities I already have with Emily Dickinson. The world will never know how the poet moved or talked. I have the artistic freedom to do what I like within the bounds of nineteenth century norms and the given circumstances of Emily Dickinson's life. I certainly identify with her intelligence, her reclusiveness, and her love of nature, words and writing. I just need to live in her particular personal history.

March 22, 2007

I had my second vocal coaching session with Kate. Today we worked on some of the suggestions Mark made yesterday. In particular, we worked on how to make a separation between poems and stories or comments addressed to the audience. Kate said that she would like to know which words were the poems. To separate the poems from the surrounding text, I can try making a physical or vocal change in focus, direction, level, energy, or pace. The change may be as simple as standing up or moving behind a chair or speaking either more slowly or quickly. With every beat change, there is a shift of some kind. The same is true with scene transitions. After the Introduction, where Emily recites "Tell all the Truth", there is a physical change to her love of words. I can see an energy shift there as her excitement about words grows. After the poem "If I can stop one heart from breaking", there is a shift into Childhood. The physical change might be an action such as picking up the doll. My major homework in this next week is to look for all the changes and try different shifts of focus, direction, level, energy, and pace. To find the changes, I should stand, sit, move, and do different blocking than what I have tried so far.

As a general note, I should consider all the distinctive verbs Emily uses and relish them as I say them. For example, in the story where the old lady comes to the door to spy, there is *peek*, *stammered*, *spare*, and *directed*. All of these can be said with varying intention. That is a note I can apply throughout the text, especially when I say that truth can be "slanted".

Another general note to apply to the entire text is to address the audience and seek a real response rather than ask rhetorical questions. Mark also mentioned this. When I heard this, I

flashed back to Playfest a few weeks ago. I remember Peg O'Keefe's performance in "Funnel of Love" and what a terrific rapport she had with the audience in what is essentially a one-woman conversation, as *Belle* is. It was mesmerizing. How did she do it? She had a specific way of asking the audience questions with a twinkle in her eye and waiting for the answer to form in our heads.

March 23, 2007

Kira and I met with Valencia Community College technical director Kristen Abel this afternoon to go over specific needs for the show. She will try to accommodate our lighting requests as much as possible when she sets lights for the One Act Festival at VCC during the first week of April. I am asking for a garden gobo for Emily's garden light. UCF must supply this and Kira will procure it. Kira will also find a UCF sound/light board operator to work in the booth while she calls the show from the house, due to the odd arrangement of the VCC Black Box.

I also asked about using fabric panels to create some kind of abstract background of trees. I have no knowledge at all about doing scenery, but if we go with the fabric hangings (as I saw so effectively done in *Pillowman*) the decision must be made by March 30. Anything we hang will have to be lit. If there is time during the tech to set more lights, they'll be set.

Tech will start on Thursday, April 12, at 1:30 when Kira arrives. Valencia is supplying students to do the tech work because UCF students are not covered by VCC insurance if anything bad should happen. We ended the meeting with a few notes to ourselves about miscellaneous props.

I will forage for flowers for the garden, Victorian valentines, and sound effects CDs. Kira will get the pen and inkwell.

March 24, 2007

My home rehearsals now have the look of my set. The parlor chair, garden chair, and bureau are set up in my furniture-less living room. I have the apron, the props, the music, and my script staring at me. Daring me to skip a day of rehearsal! For an hour I tried to work on just the Introduction. I am going through the script sentence by sentence, beat change by beat change, and marking every shift I want to make to get the poems separated from the conversation and move Emily from shy to relaxed to excited to exuberant to whatever. The Introduction is the hardest part of the play. I counted twelve shifts just in these pages. After an hour of trying different movements and scribbling notes on different energies, I had to take a break. If I may borrow Emily's words: "The Mind is so near itself, it cannot see distinctly...and I have none to ask." It is very difficult to know if what I am doing is working because I can't see outside myself. I can't act and direct myself. And it is lonely to keep working alone. No good actor in his/her right mind would ever work without a director.

Before going to bed, I did a search for Victorian valentines on the Internet. Gorgeous! I can see why a young lady would love to have those valentines. I can find lace paper and make one with a heart and one with a Cupid. Victorian fans also popped up with the valentines. I have one that will do if I can find it.

March 25, 2007

Back to Amherst today, as near as my living room and ever so much warmer. I dug in for four hours and worked beat by beat through the first half of the play. I tried different shifts and scribbled down what I thought worked best. I made little discoveries along the way. I think I need to let the ink dry on the paper and I can even help by blowing on it. I put Austin in another room and really had to yell over to him, as Mark said. I found a time to pick up my doll. I ransacked my "Fibber McGee" closet to find a fan I wanted to use in the Young Adulthood scene. Working with the fan gave me fun ideas about being more of a coquette, as Mark suggested. I also realized that James has gone off to find a "pretty" girl, not another plain girl. I can let "pretty" resonate in my mind. I no longer pet Carlo in the next scene, but I decided I could pick a flower and wrap the stem in paper to give to someone in the audience during Private World. Perhaps I should get the garden table to go with the chair.

Of course, there are times when I just don't know what to do. The transition from Mr. Crowell to Father is still random. After I sniff at Mr. Crowell, I thought I should sit and have a sip of tea. If I put Father's photo on the parlor table, he's right where I will see him for the next scene. I scribbled that in. I've scheduled myself for another four hours in the living room tomorrow morning to do the rest of the play. I'll have flowers to work with since I went shopping and purchased things for my garden. Tomorrow I'll get my dress and pick up lace paper for the valentines.

March 26, 2007

I rehearsed the second half of the play for my four hours today. The flowers made a big difference. Suddenly, there were real flowers to tend and pick. I found I could use them to help me make transitions. When I go to the garden in *Private World*, the flowers are there for me to gather. I thought I could pick one, wrap it in paper, and give it to someone in the audience when I say, "Nature is the highest form of art, don't you think?" I'll see if that is too much or too distracting when I give the flower to Kate on Wednesday. I also found that I could pick flowers during *Father's Death* ("And so we take him the best flowers") and then lay the flowers beside his picture on the parlor table. This helps make the transition to the parlor. At the end, after I place the box of poems on the floor, I can strew flowers over it. I'll have to see how that times out.

I still have to see how I can make shifts with scene transitions. I marked all the beat shifts and scene transitions, but until I get feedback I won't know if what I am doing is enough. I don't think it is clear when Prof. Higginson actually arrives. I don't know if my transition into "Will there really be a Morning" is big enough to make it seem like poetry rather than the Luce's words. I don't think there is a big enough shift from *Father's Death* to *Mother's Death*, even with the poem fragment I have added. On the other hand, getting the quilt for *Emily's Death* does make a clear transition.

This afternoon, I had a final fitting for the dress. It is beautiful. It looks like the dress that is on my prop doll. The dressmaker will take in the snaps at the waist and then it will be done. I

should be able to pick up the dress next Monday. I passed by Michael's and bought papers for the valentines. I think I can fashion something that looks Victorian.

March 27, 2007

Kira and I had Dance Studio 2 for two hours! I had gone to the library to get sound effects for the show. I found a school bell (hand rung), and church bells for the funeral. I have a church clock tolling for the 6 o'clock toll at the end. I found wonderful birds to make the garden more real. We went through the show from start to end and added in the sound and music. I don't think Copland's *The Chariot* is the right piece for the end. I'd rather have *We Give to God Immortal Praise* because it is upbeat and talks of nature. Perhaps there is a different track on the hymn CD I can use. I can't really say how the show looks because I can't see myself, but I think I feel more comfortable, more interested in the audience as my confidants, a little more biting in my response to people like Mr. Crowell and Miss Lyon, a little more scared of Father.

March 28, 2007

Just under three hours for rehearsal this morning. I went from start to finish, trying to follow the shifts I had worked on since Sunday. Did they still feel right? Some yes, some no. I also worked with Kate and Mark at the Tech Center this evening. Their main notes to me were absolutely right on. They encouraged me to make the whole show much more conversational and to pick up the pace of everything. The conversation is weighted evenly and I really need to lighten it up and throw some things away. People listen fast so I need to talk fast. The way to accomplish this is to characterize my audience as if they were the old lady who has come to get a

peek inside my life. I must play with them, tease them, disarm them, love them, and reach out to them with everything I say. This simple suggestion has been the best guidance yet!

March 29, 2007

My rehearsal tonight was all about pace and conversation. I went through every line of the show and decided how I might affect/engage the audience in the most active way possible. I wrote all my verbs down and went through the show experimenting with them.

March 30, 2007

Today I did a lot of line work, as Mark suggested. My goal was to make Emily as conversational as I could and say the lines without "thinking" them - that is, weighting all the words evenly, as Kate pointed out. I recall times when I have seen actors weight words evenly and it makes for a very boring evening. It's so hard to follow someone who talks like that. When I think of my two recent examples, Becky Fisher and Peg O'Keefe, I am convinced that the conversational rapport with the audience is the most important way to go.

I settled in for a long drive to Miami and snapped off the radio when I hit I-95. I was able to go through the play two times all the way through as I drove. There were only two words in the play I couldn't remember and I had to pull over at a rest stop to look them up because it was driving me nuts. With some distractions like rain and accidents, each line through was about 45-50 minutes long. I could write a book entitled, "Lines I Have Said in Cars". As I passed Ft. Lauderdale, I flashed back to doing lines for Katherine in "Suddenly Last Summer" in 1993 as I

drove to the Public Theatre. I do lines until they are "in my bones." Even then, I go over my lines every day I have a show, or I don't feel like I know them.

When I got to Miami, I set up my parents' living room with chairs and my props from Orlando. I wouldn't dare miss rehearsal! I went through the show again with apron, shawl, and props. I focused on the conversational aspects talked about on Wednesday night. I focused on playing with the audience (although I was alone). My imaginary audience is still a good audience because I need to think of many more ways to get a response from them. They are so quiet! The show ran about 50 minutes.

My questions from this rehearsal were:

1) How am I doing with making Emily the distinct ages, as Mark said in the first rehearsal together? I am 53 playing the ages of 15, 16, 17, 30, 48, and 56. How is this going? I am trying to walk the line of not too loose as a teenager and not too circumspect in movement (except as the 19th century dress constricted movement) for a 53 year old. Since I can't see myself, I don't know how much is too much and how much is not enough.

2) How contemporary should Emily be? I wonder if I am losing the nineteenth century feel of Emily as I trade off for a little more verve and less reserve. I feel that my existence in the nineteenth century informs so much of my perspective on the world. I want to be sure I can layer that into Emily. Should I worry about this at all?

3) Still more questions about the poetry. "I cannot live with you" in the Love section is particularly tricky. The poem is quite embedded in Emily's dialogue with Wadsworth. The poem pours out of her as if she were saying it right to Master. How then is this poem supposed to be separated/distinct/heightened from the surrounding dialogue? My own idea was to make the poems a natural part of Emily's world, as if she thinks in poetry. Mark and Kate see a need for the poetry to be distinct. How can I balance the two?

4) The transition from School Days to Father Relents is still awkward, even with the addition of the line "If I had only one book to read, Shakespeare would be enough." I don't want to add anything else, but the jump seems random.

5) Still more questions about character and making Emily as full of depth and complexity.

March 31, 2007

Today's rehearsal was pivotal, I feel. I went through the show once and tried to notice everything I could about what was working or not working for me emotionally. Then I practiced some of the individual moments to rework them. Then I did the show again all the way through.

The hardest moment of the show is the first moment. I can get very frustrated because it is so difficult to know what I am doing wrong when I can't see myself. I need to keep this opening very simple and very much full of energy or else the show starts on a very weak level. I have been thinking about the first moment on stage in the wrong way. Emily isn't trying to hide from the audience so much as she is trying to cover her innate shyness with the hospitality required

when guests arrive unexpectedly. She has to put on the dog. She has to muster some bravura. She has to reach out to them with the energy of a hostess. I have been missing that. Yes, there is a bit of a shock that so many guests have arrived at once, but that's all the more reason to regroup quickly and get the conversation underway.

To play all the beats here, I have to think: 1) Call out to Vinnie that I have the tea. 2) Turn and see the audience without anticipating the next beat of shock (which I have been doing). 3) Their presence frightens me. How will I manage? 4) Look down at the cake in my hand. 5) Think that the cake is better than I am. 6) Look at the audience. 7) Extend the cake to them as a greeting. 8) Love the audience. Welcome them. Pray that they will excuse my lack of social grace and my lack of coherence by admitting them right away. If I come to the audience with the energy I have in the rest of the play, the whole play will be fine. If it starts low energy, I am sunk. That's what I think now.

The second biggest problem to solve is the unheard dialogue. I can't recall ever doing this type of "acting to the air" dialogue except in telephone conversations in plays, and even they don't require physical interaction as these dialogues do. I think I need to react more to these unheard dialogues in terms of what is being said and how it makes me feel. Mark gave me this note two Wednesdays ago and now I see where to go. When I talk to Austin about the valentines, I need to react more to his waving me off and not interceding on my behalf. I am disappointed, but I need to be more so. When James Billings says he doesn't like rhubarb, I can react with rude disbelief and then try to cover my *faux pas* by reassuring him on the next line that he's not alone in his distaste for rhubarb. When he inquires about Lavinia, I definitely need to react with

jealousy or frustration. He's supposed to be paying attention to me, not her. When I talk to Mr. Higginson and Mr. Wadsworth, I have to gesture for them to sit in imaginary chairs or else it isn't going to be clear to the audience where they are. It isn't clear to me right now, so I know it can't be clear to others. I decided to cut that bit about getting ready for Higginson with "practice greetings". It just doesn't work and it slows down the pace. The audience just wants to see Higginson arrive, I'm sure.

There's still more to work on with vocal variety. With more energy, more conversational speech, more fun, more relaxation with the character, and more playfulness with the audience, I think I can add more vocal variety. I still need to separate out the poems from the rest of the play. People want to know when the words are poetry. I get that. I thought of old recordings of Robert Frost reading his poetry and how different they sound from ordinary speech. There's a beautiful, abstract quality that really needs no other interpretation. The words are the art, complete in themselves. What is the right balance of that abstract quality and openness to the audience?

Things I'm going to remember for all future rehearsals: 1) Find the humor at every opportunity (thanks for the surgery, lift my hat, Mrs. Hills). 2) Keep the energy reaching out to the audience. 3) Light up like a lamp whenever poetry or writing is mentioned. 4) There is a lot of sadness, but I need to play against it. 5) Layer in the distinct ages of Emily. 6) Find more complexity and compassion. When Emily says Higginson is deaf, replace the bitterness with acceptance of her situation.

April 1, 2007

I performed part of the show for my parents at their home. My mother is often my best audience. I really need to know when people might laugh. It will help me tremendously to know what an audience will find funny. Now I am really looking forward to performing at the Maitland Senior Center on April 10th. That will give some great feedback. Didn't I say early on that the rapport with the audience will make or break the show?

On the drive home, I did lines again in the car. The show keeps running at 50 minutes. As I keep running the lines, I keep imagining and improvising the entirety of the unheard dialogue and reacting to the imaginary characters in different ways. I am considering what to cut if I am asked to make the show meet the time limit. I can cut the part about Sue. That gets long, I think. The valentines are sweet but are not as important as other scenes. Would I cut Mother's Death? I could I guess. Maybe I won't be asked to cut the show.

I have acquired a teapot, an old book, a chair for the writing table, and the cake. My mother is making another quilt because the one she gave me is too colorful. She's making a *faux quilt* with pastel squares and a floral backing not unlike the apron.

April 2, 2007

I rehearsed from 11:00 am to 1:30 pm. I ran through the show two times. Between runs, I worked the last scenes for some minor changes in blocking. I started today's rehearsal by changing the position of the chair and writing table. I reversed them so that the chair is on the right and the table is on the left. That way I can easily enter the parlor or cross to the bureau

without having to walk around the writing table. I feel like an idiot for not thinking of this before now. I'm right-handed, so when I write the poems my writing arm will be downstage. I wonder if this is a problem. I could put the bureau to the left of the chair and table but then it's hard to get to the parlor. What do I look like on my set anyway?

My focus today was on finding the humor in Emily's playfulness with the audience and on the unheard portion of the dialogues. First, humor. It's hard to know what an audience will find funny, but I'm guessing the following: Mrs. Hills, the Shakespeare quotes, Santa Claus and the prowling gentlemen, M-E-R-R-Y (I've added a wink), the bird poem, and the kangaroo among the beauties. It isn't so much the lines as the way Emily says them that makes people chuckle. In what way is Emily humorous? Her irony is a large part of the humor in her poetry. I think that probably holds true for the play. The Merriam-Webster dictionary says irony is "the use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning." For example, "truth" and "slant" seem to convey opposite ideas. The poem "Tell all the truth" works entirely by irony. Where else is Emily ironic in her conversation with the audience? The directions to the cemetery, wearing out her welcome with Miss Lyon, even stating the obvious sadness of seeing a pain from behind. How can I best convey this sense of irony? This is difficult to describe. Perhaps, I can be truthful and practical and maintain a sense of objectivity about myself and feelings.

In the evening, I went to my last acting for film class of the semester. In this scene study class, we talked a lot about the essence of who we are. "Essence" sounds very vague and mysterious, but it is as real and tangible as an apple. What gives each person their unique presence in the

world? What fires up our first response to anyone? Why do we love certain people whom we call characters? It is the essence or dominant characteristics a person has. My teacher and my classmates always say the say thing about my essence. Janet, you have a lot of heart chakra. You are warm, nurturing, compassionate, heartfelt, and gentle. For twenty-four weeks, I have heard them say the say thing. Every time I bring my heart chakra essence to my acting work, my scenes are come alive. The same thing happened tonight. I have to infuse my essence of humor and warmth into Emily to make my particular Emily work. The more I tap into it, the stronger my Emily will be.

I picked up my dress from the dressmaker this afternoon. It is beautiful. The lace trim I bought is lovely and the pleats in the front and the side are a good match for the simple tailored look of Dickinson's existing dress. The ruffle down the back of the dress is the only thing that tells me the dress dates from about 1900 rather than 1880. I can live with that.

April 3, 2007

After work today, I drove to Tampa for a commercial audition. I had rehearsal time in the car again and lined through once on I-4 West and again on I-4 East. I tried cutting the section on Sue. The cut will work because I can go from, "Sue is the only one who understood my need to write," to "Do you read the *Atlantic Monthly*?" and it will lead me directly into the poem selection with Sue.

I passed right by the Goodwill in Tampa and ran in to look for a writing table. Nothing. But I did find Emily's table lamp.

April 4, 2007

Rehearsal was early today, 8:30-10:00 a.m. My goals were: 1) Work with the dress. 2) Keep up the pace. 3) React more to the unheard part of the dialogue. 4) Find the humor. Run through completely, then work bits. I did one run-through in preparation for my rehearsal this evening with Mark and Kate.

In the late morning, I went to Oldies but Goodies antique store to rent the furniture I could not find anywhere – namely, the writing table and the parlor table. The writing table has a beautiful chair that goes with it. I wish I didn't have to rent anything, but I can't spend any more time looking. If I could find anything that would even just be passable, I'd use it. There is one more place to look, at the JCC in Maitland, but I don't know if I'll have time to go over there. Just as futile is my search for shoes to wear with my gorgeous dress. Little ballet-looking shoes are everywhere, but none will fit my feet since I take an AA width. Narrow sizes are impossible to find. My sister said I should try Isotoners at Penney's.

At rehearsal from 6:00 to 7:00, Kate watched a run-through (Mark could not attend) and gave me important notes about vocal problems and slow transitions. I need to be careful about the ends of sentences dropping. To make the audience listen more, I can lift the end of the sentence and give the final words more energy. Rising intonation will help carry me from thought to thought and help the audience stay with me.

There is still dead air between some transitions. I need to start some transitions earlier with actions that will lead me more fluidly from one scene to the next. For example, I need to start

taking the apron off earlier to make the transition to the poem for Mrs. Hills. I need to tighten up the transition from the Shakespeare poems to Father's picture, and from Father's picture to hiding my late night writing by starting my crosses earlier.

I am a little concerned about the length of the show. Tomorrow I will time the play with cuts. Kate suggested cutting Mother's Death. It does seem to come out of the blue since Mother is not mentioned in the script as I have cut it. The scene does have my favorite line. Perhaps I will give it to Father. I also think that the relationship with Sue is very odd, which is why I left it out originally. I don't think an audience new to Dickinson will be able to appreciate this complex relationship in such a short passage. I will cut it tomorrow when I run through.

As for the technical side, I decided to work with the bureau rather than take the chairs because I have so much business with the drawers. The dress works out beautifully, though it is surprisingly hot.

April 5, 2007

I ran through the show once at the Tech Center, cutting Sue and Mother's Death. Although there were some starts and stops for music cues and minor questions, the show was 53 minutes. I'm guessing the show will run 45 minutes with the cuts. I will time the show more accurately tomorrow at home with no interruptions. I made a conscious effort to lift ends of sentences and cross into transitions quicker. But of course, I don't know if my adjustments really work because I have no one to tell me since I have no director. I truly don't know if my idea for saying the poem "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church" away from the parlor chair and then returning to

the parlor chair works or not. I wonder if it is clear that I am captive in Miss Lyon's religious fervor and all I want to do is to break free. That's what I hope the blocking underscores.

April 6, 2007

After work today, I went on the hunt for shoes one more time. Miracles of miracles, I found a pair of soft white leather ballet-looking shoes on clearance at Rack Room Shoes. They almost fit too. By monkeying with arch supports, I can make these shoes stay on my feet (of course they are too wide). I may even add another elastic strap. Somehow, they will fit. I am overjoyed! I am still stalking an old looking box. Nothing at Walmart but baskets.

Rehearsal tonight was a line through with all the changes for vocal intonation. I need to think of every place I can lift the end of lines, keep the audience guessing what I will say next, or ask a question and expect them to answer. Mark said to do the lines in all different ways. Keep changing everything up and keep exploring. I am trying to mine the lines for every nuance I can. The cuts brought the time to 45 minutes, but with the music and sound I think it will be a little longer. I am definitely cutting the section on Sue and Mother's Death, although I am leaving in the transition to Gilbert's Death, "Oh, how I wish I were just a blade of grass." I feel good about the cuts.

April 7, 2007

After work today, I hit the Goodwill for an old box, but found a shawl instead. Kind of. The shawl is orange but I think I can dye it blue. I scooted over to Jo-Ann Fabrics for dye, but found an old box instead. It was that kind of a day. The boxes were large antique-looking things that

could not have been more perfect for the job. I tried to talk down the price of the largest box, but management wasn't budging. I ended up with the medium size box which will still hold plenty of poems. I waltzed home.

For rehearsal tonight, I ran lines for the whole show, paying attention to the vocal choices. Then I reconfigured the living room so that the stage was set up narrow but deep. I had been rehearsing so the stage was wide but shallow. I just don't have enough space no matter which way I turn, but at least a stage with depth allows me to imagine an audience better. I had specific spots so I could place "people" to focus on. One of Kate's notes was to focus on specific people for a longer length of time, rather than survey the audience generally. As I did my run-through, I consciously tried to 1) focus on my people-spots, 2) lift the intonation, 3) transition quicker from scene to scene by crossing into other areas earlier. The apron came off as soon as I talked about enclosing obscure notes. I snuck into my room as soon as I talked about Father finding me up late. I crossed to the parlor chair and was sitting by the time I told Miss Lyon I couldn't rise. I stayed by the bureau to pull out my daguerreotype and didn't cross down with the photo. I was ready to return it to the drawer on the line, "Is it any wonder I keep it in a drawer?" I didn't go to the window to watch Master leave, but watched him go out the door, then sat in the parlor chair for the poem about his death. I felt that I needed to take a brief, quiet moment before Father's Death, so I picked up the shawl in the bedroom and walked into the garden as I started Father's Death. I put the flowers in the vase and put the vase by Father's photo so that I ended in the parlor. I took Gilbert's Death standing center, then crossed to the parlor chair for Emily's Death. The quilt will be placed under the parlor table for easy access on my cross. My mother emailed today to say I should have the *faux* quilt by Wednesday.

As of today, I feel I have made all the text changes and blocking adjustments to make the show flow smoothly. The old box is too large to fit under the bureau. I will leave it at the left foot of the table. It will overflow with poems. I will definitely add a hall tree. Otherwise, there is nowhere to put the apron and shawl. They are always in the way. I know there is a hall tree at Valencia. There's also one at the Maitland Senior Center. From now on, I need to run through the show and remember all of the emotional triggers, vocal lifts, and playfulness with the audience so that everything solidifies. The last week of rehearsals is usually about pace and energy, and it seems rehearsing solo is no different.

April 8, 2007

This morning's rehearsal was from 9:30 to 12:30. I ran through the show three times using all of the props and costumes. Although my living room stage is cramped and I have made do with a music stand instead of a writing table, I think that all of the movement will work just fine. As I decided last night, the run-throughs now are all about pacing and energy. I can hardly wait for Tuesday when I will have my first audience. I need people to create the reality of Emily. If I have no one with whom to have a rapport, how can I know if my most important goal has been achieved? Today on NPR, I heard an interview with a Chinese pianist – just eighteen years old. He talked about playing a Liszt piano concerto in concert and how the experience of playing for a live audience changed with every performance. He remarked how different the experience was in a recording session where there were a handful of engineers. I strongly identified with his sense of the audience's contribution and energy. I feel frustrated that I can't know this feeling until performance time. I am very glad to do the performance Tuesday, twice at Valencia, and a

final time at the Osceola campus. It would be a shame to work this hard on a show and perform it only once.

As for the run-throughs today, I think that I am not concentrating as well as I could or should when I am working alone. In a way, I am doing the acting but I am also trying to monitor myself as a director might and note where I have problems. Did I start the cross too late? Have I varied my usage of the fan? Do I come across too young? Have I remembered to lift the intonation? As an actor, I am still making discoveries about words and emotions. Today the word "arduous" struck me. Understanding one's own emotions is an arduous journey. It takes time and energy to say "arduous". The fear of being found awake late at night by Father also jumped out at me. How scary to face Father with nowhere to hide and no other people to intervene. It makes my heart thump.

Sometimes, when I am alone in rehearsal, I think of Emily's line, "Why sing, since nobody hears?" Why am I trying so hard when I am alone? My answer is the same as Emily's, of course. "It's my business to sing." Acting is my artistic expression of choice and I will act whether or not anyone comes. How many times did Emily Dickinson ask herself why she bothered to write poetry when no one paid attention to her? Last night I dreamed that all my Orlando friends showed up for my thesis shows. I was overwhelmed by their support. I'll be happy if I have twenty people come. Even three will do – my mother, my sister, and my niece. It's my business to act.

I have to keep the energy and pace up, but at the same time I have to go slow enough to get the words of the poems exactly right. There is no wiggle room. What will I do if I invert words in a poem or skip a line or can't think of a word even though I know everything I want to say? I don't think I can lose my way in the piece but there may be words that disappear from my mind and I won't have time to chase them down. What will I do? There won't be another actor on stage to jog my memory. Only once have I seen an actor go completely blank on stage in a one-woman show. She turned to the audience and apologized, walked off stage, got her line, came back on stage, and carried on as normal. As an audience member, I was fine with that. As an actor, I felt her pain and shared her fear. I think that if I concentrate on the tasks at hand, I won't have time to start second guessing myself. I really won't know until I try to perform for an audience.

April 9, 2007

Rehearsal was early again today. I ran through the show two times from 8:30 to 10:30 a.m. I made some wonderful discoveries by accident. I used a side table as the writing table. It is a piece of furniture I got from a friend, but had put aside because it is too modern. However, I will use it tomorrow when I perform at the Maitland Senior Center. Although I can't get my knees under the table, I can sit sideways and lean over to write poems. The table has two drawers where I stashed poems and the daguerreotype. As it turns out, this is marvelous. I no longer have to turn my back to the audience every time I fetch a poem. I can place the old box on top of the bureau where it is much easier to reach. I don't even have to open the bureau drawers. The bureau isn't very steady and the top drawer doesn't open at all. I can sit at the writing table and take out the daguerreotype, talk about it, and put it right back in the drawer. That also gives me some time to play with the audience on the following transition. "Plain or not..." now is a

seamless transition to enticing the audience to hear about my love affairs. In the two run-throughs today, I felt that I had tightened up all the transitions. I felt good about the time - forty-five minutes today for both runs. Good concentration and energy. I'm taking the week off from work so I can rest. I am useless when I am exhausted.

This afternoon, I made final decisions about the music. Copland is out. I replaced the closing music with another selection from the Isaac Watts hymn CD. I recorded all the music and sound with Josh Myers. It took us less than an hour to transfer the various tracks onto a CD-R. I've made a backup CD-R just in case something happens to one. At the UCF costume shop, I pulled a shawl from the shop. It's not blue, but I have given up hope on blue. It is cream, like the dress. Kira repaired a chair I got in Miami that I will use for tomorrow's show. Finally, I made two valentines. One has a cupid and one has a heart. They are simply done, but I think they will be effective.

After dinner, I decided to do one more run-through. Why not? I can't sit still or think about anything else. I might as well do the show one more time. I'm excited about tomorrow, but nervous because sometimes seniors can be a quiet audience. Not always. When I did *All in the Timing*, our seniors were our absolute best audiences. I am nervous about remembering all the poetry precisely. What will I do if I can't remember a word? Will the audience make me even more nervous? Isn't this precisely why I am doing the show tomorrow – to get the nerves dealt with and get on with the thesis shows? John Davis is going to run the sound for me. This may be tricky doing the sound without actually rehearsing it. We'll have only about thirty minutes to set up the room. I'm taking three chairs and one table, props, costume, and boom box.

April 10, 2007

I am so glad I did the show at the Maitland Senior Center. Seventeen people attended. Although they were quiet for the most part, they laughed at the Shakespeare quotes, Father's picture, and a few other places. Just because they were quiet, doesn't mean they weren't paying attention.

When I addressed them directly with questions, they nodded their heads. "Nature is the highest form of art, don't you think?" They nodded yes. When I told them about Gilbert's death, they nodded their heads in understanding. Life is full of death. They knew. I really tried to check them out as I was talking. I focused on individual people with questions, rather than surveying the audience. The more conversational I was, the more they reacted. I consciously tried to keep the pace moving because I wanted them to stay awake. At the same time, I wanted to speak as clearly as I could and as loudly as appropriate. The room was pretty quiet so I didn't have to speak over other noise. I hoped they were still with me all the way through, even going into Gilbert's death where the play gets very heavy.

After the show, they had so many questions. Who made the dress? That was the number one question! They loved the dress. How did I learn all those lines? I started in January. How old am I? "Fifty! Good for you!" they said. One woman asked the most insightful question. She said, "Wasn't Emily Dickinson really more of an ascetic?" Of course she was, but to perform a play about Emily Dickinson as a really shy and self-effacing person wouldn't do for a stage play. In a way, I agree that there is something rather false in Emily bubbling about in her home and wandering through her memories. We'll never know the real Emily; she may well have bored us. But I do know that the pace had to be that fast to hold the audience's interest. This same woman, Lydia Voorhies, told me she had once owned two original poems by Dickinson. She had sold

them, but she wanted me to have photocopies! She told me they were authenticated by Thomas Johnson, the editor who created the first complete edition of Dickinson's original poems in the 1920s. I am only six degrees away from Emily Dickinson! Finally, I was asked if I could perform for a club in Winter Park. Yes, of course! All the things I worried about – lines, timing, energy – were not an issue at all. John Davis and I set everything up easily. He is so funny and entertaining that he took away any nervousness I had.

After this show, I would like to work on my rapport with the audience. A little younger audience might give me more feedback and help me understand my relationship to the guests better.

Tomorrow will be my last rehearsal at the Tech Center. I want to be sure I ask about the separation of the poems from the prose, the pace, the focus when I talk to Charles Wadsworth, and sound cues. John inserted the sound cues as best he could. The funeral bells seem long to me when I am on stage. The six clock strikes also seem long. I want to start to realize the time before the end of the sixth strike and talk over them as I excuse myself. Since I can't see this, I have to depend of Mark's judgment about the sound. On my way to Daytona, I went through my lines again in the car.

April 11, 2007

Last night I dreamt that I was defending the survival of live theatre to Earl Weaver. "Theatre is primal, Earl," I said, "starting with the first moment you say 'Mommy, look at me.' From the Greeks until now, there's no substitute for that direct relationship with a live audience. Film can't do that." I assume I was thinking of the cabaret performances I saw last night in Daytona. Each

performer had a distinctive way of interacting with the audience. I sat there watching them and thinking of my own choices with Emily Dickinson.

One performer carried on an impromptu-sounding conversation with the audience. It was very informal and personal in style. I was drawn in because the conversation was so close to a one-on-one conversation. Another performer chose to split focus between talking directly to the audience at times and talking to imaginary characters placed on the stage. Another performer chose to talk to the audience directly, but the conversation did not have an impromptu feeling to it. The performer definitely had a specific script and a specific aspect of the performer's character to portray. The strongest moments in all of these performances occurred when the performers addressed the audience directly and were open and vulnerable emotionally. Let that be a lesson to me as Emily. Include the audience at every chance.

The morning was devoted to rewrites on the research paper and publicity emails. At one o'clock I got up from the computer to run through the show once with props but no costume. I need to run through at least once at home. I loaded up the car and headed for one last rehearsal with Mark.

The notes were mainly about going further with everything I had written as objectives in my script. Chastise Austin more for not talking to Thomas. Feel more wounded when Billings mentions Lavinia. Search for more ways to maintain Billings' interest in me. Challenge Mr. Crowell more about the indecent Shakespeare. Plead harder for leniency when Father finds me up late at night. Along the same lines, I need to remember to make discoveries such as my

frustration with Mr. Higginson, more surprise that Billings doesn't like rhubarb, more discovery about Father hardly ever smiling, discovering my acceptance of aloneness, and more soul searching about the relationship with Sue.

Along the same lines again, I need to react more to the unheard portion of conversations. For example, reactions to Austin and the valentines, Higginson's criticism about spasmodic, bad rhyming poetry, Father's commandment to go to bed.

In addition, I need to keep the poetry separated by using the language more (assonance, alliteration) in "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" and being more in awe in "I dwell in possibility". I should say the whole poem "I cannot live with you" to Charles Wadsworth. "A great hope fell" must express more disappointment. The final poem, "Because I could not stop for death" must consume me with awe. I am lost in it by the end.

A few miscellaneous notes: Set up the joke for "cemetery". Play with father more as I lie to him about staying up late to write. Put the apron on at the end. I may not have time to rehearse any of these changes until Friday morning, but I will try to incorporate them into the dress rehearsal tomorrow.

April 12, 2007

I woke up at 6:30 this morning too nervous to sleep. I worked on the program for an hour, then went over the entire script looking for all the changes I wanted to make based on Mark's notes from last night. I read every word again to find all the places where I might have deviated from

the script. Without someone constantly on book, I have changed *a* for *the* or done similar word inversions. Mark likes the section on Sue, so I have added that back in. After an hour of script work, it was time to go to the antique store and pick up the parlor table I had rented. I wish I could have found a parlor table somewhere free. By 1:15, I had loaded the first pieces into the car. I drove to Valencia Community College where Kristen Able and the tech crew of Valencia students were on hand to set pieces and put the garden gobo in the light. Kira set herself up to stage manage while I drove back to my house for the second load of furniture and costumes.

The stage is so big I hardly knew where to put things. I made my best guess about placement using suggestions from the VCC lighting crew about the six areas already lit. I didn't expect anything more than lights up and down, but Mark had asked for dips in the lights at several points. Although we tried the dips, it wasn't clear how to do the settings. It became clear to me and to Nathan Nicholson, the lighting student, that it would be easier to set cues for the whole show based on the scene shifts. In an hour and a half, we wrote twenty-one cues for the show. The lights looked fabulous. I was speechless with joy. It was really fun to set lights. Even though I couldn't see myself on stage, I took my best guess and relied on Nathan and Kira to say if I was lit enough. I loved every moment of tech!

After a half hour dinner break, Kira and I were back to tech. Nathan left and sound board operator Mike Rusnak arrived. Kira went through cues with Mike while I got into costume. At 6:30 my audience arrived – David McElroy and Marilyn McGinnis! We started the show and ran the lights and sound as best we could. Mark came in around 7:00 and gave me a few notes after the run. He liked the lights and thought everything was ready for tomorrow. Kira, Mike,

and I stayed on to do a cue-to-cue for lights and sound. Fortunately, Julie Gagne, VCC's artistic director, was in the house to help us. She was able to be our audience's eyes and say whether the light cues were working well and the sound was the proper level. We were finished by 8:30.

When I picked up my mail, I had an envelope from Lydia Voorhies, the former owner of two Dickinson poems. She sent me photocopies of the two pieces. One is an unpublished poem; the other is probably one of Dickinson's notecards. Lydia also included some newspaper articles about Dickinson. I am quite overwhelmed by the incredible coincidence of performing for someone who possessed Dickinson's actual papers. Somehow the Universe knows what I'm up to.

I am tired from the schlepping of the set pieces and the excitement, but also very energized and encouraged that things will go well for the performances. I am very happy when I look at all I have accomplished to put my own show together.

April 13, 2007

A very lucky Friday the 13th for me. I started the day by finishing the program and printing fifteen copies. That should be plenty for tonight. By 9:00, I was on the phone calling around town for a hat and coat tree. Valencia didn't have any in their prop room, but I thought I could borrow the one I used at the Maitland Senior Center. I finally got a call from Ellen Pitter at the Center to come and get the tree. When I got there, Ellen gave me a copy of a beautiful letter from Lydia Voorhies thanking her for having me come and perform. Lydia wrote, "No one could have more admirably portrayed what Emily Dickinson might have been like, even with her

eccentricities, than Janet Raskin." It was such a touching letter, I wanted to cry. Perhaps I was put on my Emily Dickinson path for Lydia's sake.

After a quick stop to pick up paper plates, forks, and flowers, I was home to make the brandy syrup to drizzle over the defrosting Black Cake and craft a parchment envelope addressed to Mr. Higginson. I went over my lines one last time from 3:00 to 4:00. How can anyone possibly remember all of this? To calm down, I took a short nap and watched some Oprah.

Kira, Julie Gagne, and I arrived at 6:00 and set up everything. Mark arrived to marshal the cake. Kira went through her cues with Mike. I had nothing to do but be an actor, alone in my dressing room, just me and my costume. I took one last, last look at the script as I dressed. Now go out there and have some fun.

The show went very well. It really didn't stray from all of the work I had done. My first moment on stage was a huge surprise because I immediately saw a friend of mine who came from Sarasota. I was so stunned, I could hardly remember what I was supposed to be doing. At least that's in character for the beginning of the show. I settled down and started concentrating after the introduction. I tried to lift the end of lines, really relish the poetry, listen to my imaginary companions and react, and develop a rapport with the audience. The audience was quiet. They didn't laugh at things I thought were really funny. The cemetery. The Shakespeare. As the show progressed, I felt myself more involved in a conversation with the audience, not talking at them. I relaxed more.

I was very happy to greet my audience after the show – MFA graduate students, a co-worker from the social service agency, and my friend/acting partner from Sarasota. Tomorrow night, the crowd will be bigger. That should be a lot of fun.

April 14, 2007

The last three and a half months have come to this day, the final day of my thesis. I was so exhausted, I did little but sleep, print more programs and notecards, and pour brandy syrup over the cake. I emailed a few more people to remind them about the show. I went over my lines for an hour and left for the theatre.

The show tonight was far better than any rehearsal or even the show last night. The difference was the audience. There were fourteen people who were with me from the first moment. They laughed at the humorous moments, like the cemetery joke. They nodded their heads about the cake. They stayed with me for the poetry. They giggled at the Shakespeare. They were crestfallen when Higginson left without publishing my poems. They cried when Father, Gilbert, and I died. I heard them cry. I wanted to cry too but I played against that urge. I gathered up my courage to keep telling them my story of awe as I traveled with Death. At the very last poem, "This is my letter to the world", I really felt that I would cry too because I felt the audience so strongly. I tried to transform that sadness into my deep love for nature and the importance of handing down that reverence to the generations that would follow. I was glad to cheer them up with the thought of gingerbread at the end and to tell them one last time how much I loved them, whether they realized it or not.

This particular performance was one where I was so deeply connected to the character that the experience was effortless. Though I know I told Emily's story, said her poetry, and carried on imaginary conversations, I never felt separated from her. My focus was really on my audience, my guests, who had come to talk to me or spy on me. Although I wandered back and forth in time, I always returned to my audience for their love and their response to me and the events of my life. Beyond these thoughts, I don't have words to express the emotional depth of the performance. I think you just had to be there.

After the show, I was happy to receive my guests in their true identity as my friends and classmates. I was truly overwhelmed by their congratulations and so happy that they enjoyed the show. It was a gift in both directions as audience and actor. My family especially loved this show. Of all the performances I've done in the last twenty years, I think they found this the most profoundly moving. As my sister said the next morning, "Thank you for giving us a performance to remember all our lives." My film acting teacher, herself quite a famous actor, emailed to say, "Thank you for a flawlessly masterful performance last night. You were really stunning on so many levels." A graduate student said, "Wow, you set the bar high for master thesis shows." This is exactly what I demanded of myself for my master's thesis.

Kira, friends, and I struck the set and loaded everything in our cars to return next week.

Valencia Community College gave me the dress to keep since I had paid to have it altered. I headed home with my family to eat Black Cake. I didn't sleep at all. I was far too happy.

April 15, 2007

I'm sure I will reflect on the thesis for many years to come, but I see already what went well and what I can still work on. I call myself "The Company of Selves" for all the many hats I wore. The Artistic Director did well to listen to the advice of others and chose a play that spoke to the heart of the Actor playing the role. The Playwright did an excellent job cutting the script. Last night, a playwriting friend in the audience remarked that he thought the full-length script had been cut very well. Without a well-cut script, the show would not have worked. The Costumer did an excellent job too. She researched the dress well and argued correctly that costuming should be a priority. Her decision to go with a dressmaker turned out to be for the best. Her apron was terrific. And of course, she had incredible luck finding shoes! The Set Designer tried hard but was hampered by a lack of budget. In the end, she made do with what she had and the set was serviceable. Props pulled through despite her lack of artsy-craftsiness. The valentines were ingenious. The Sound Designer chose well with the Isaac Watts hymns and the sound effects. With more time, she could have done more sound effects. The Lighting Designer surprised us all by having twenty-one cues and a stellar group of technicians from Valencia. She really made the show flow smoothly by setting the mood and creating areas with lights. Publicity did a great job on the program but really ran out of time to devote to the hard core hounding it takes to get people to come and see a play. She emailed to her lists and handed out flyers but it was very hard to convince others to come and see the show. Concessions went beyond the call of duty finding the Black Cake recipe and twisting the arms of the bakers to make it. The Dramaturg did a lot of research and wrote her thesis paper diligently for a month. It was her decision to create the ambience for the audience by serving Black Cake and notecards. If she had had more time, she would have liked to make a display board with information and

photographs of Dickinson or have put a Dickinson trivia quiz in the program. The Stage Manager relaxed while the real stage manager, Kira Ackbarali, handled everything with accomplished professionalism.

The Actor, stalwart and steady, showed up for rehearsal every day, lonely, doubtful, scared, but determined to live as Emily Dickinson day and night, sleeping or awake, until April 14th. She took notes, asked for others' opinions, and sought help when needed. She traveled the road into her soul all the time and discovered the beauty of Emily Dickinson.

The Vocal Coach was quite the taskmaster. She was on guard to lift the end of sentences and make question inflection go up. She insisted on a lively conversational style that was genuine and from the heart. She required the poetry be elevated and separated from the prose and given the status it was due.

The Director had the hardest job. She often felt helpless and unable to see clearly how to help her actor. She blocked and reblocked. She experimented with furniture arrangements. She asked for different characterizations and wrote in all the objectives for the actor. She scored the script for shifts in energy, level, direction, and focus. In the end, when discoveries happened that worked, she wrote them down and made sure to repeat them. Over the course of six weeks, decisions about blocking, character, and objective were set. The overall pace was picked up. Finally, with all the homework done, the director said, "Play every beat and enjoy every minute." And that is what the Company of Selves did.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

The Belle of Amherst turned out to be exactly the right the challenge for me for a thesis production. It was the greatest learning experience I could have given myself. I had never before attempted a one-woman show. Though I admired other actors for their solo work, I often wondered if I could do one myself. It seemed a daunting task. Now I know how to research, rehearse, and stage a one-person show, and I am looking forward to my next solo opportunity.

There are many reasons why this play was a good fit for me. The character of Emily Dickinson was an excellent casting choice for me, and I have to thank committee chair Mark Brotherton for his keen insight in suggesting the role. I share the poet's sensitivity, intelligence, eccentricity, and passion for words. Making her words my own was a very short hop. Her commitment to express the emotions that make up every life – love, hope, sorrow, loss – parallels my personal search in acting truthfully to express the widest range of emotion. The play also appealed to my love of dramatizing great literature. In many ways, I haven't strayed far from my undergraduate degree in Interpretation of Literature.

There are also many reasons why this project was a good fit for me. Building a one-woman show also meant wearing many different hats – literary editor, actor, director, costumer, set designer, sound designer, producer, dramaturg, and technical director. I enjoyed filling all the positions, though I was happily surprised by how much I enjoyed editing the script and designing the costume. As I rehearsed the play, I saw how the elements of the production influenced each

other and added to the total experience of the play. The costume influenced the movement which influenced the acting. The lighting smoothed out the transitions which made the acting easier. My research on Emily Dickinson influenced how I approached the audience, and that, in turn, guided some of my choices as an actor. I believe that performing a one-woman show gave me the chance to see how all of these elements interconnect. Experiencing the process of putting all the elements together was a valuable education in itself.

As an actor/director, I know that developing this one-woman show gave me the opportunity to apply much of what I learned in the first two years of coursework. The Research Methods class was extremely helpful in preparing me to research and write this thesis. I felt I was especially able to apply the vocal techniques I learned in class to the performance. The Shakespeare training helped me adjust vocally to the heightened language of Dickinson's poetry. The many self-directed scenes I worked on in the acting classes helped me work out the blocking and clarify objectives. I also drew on training I received in my undergraduate degree and sixteen years of acting in semi-professional and college theatre.

The performance was a culmination of all my life's work as a theatre professional and as a person who "travels the road into her soul all the time," to borrow Emily Dickinson's line. I felt at one with Emily and at one with the audience I had welcomed into my life. Their response of laughter and tears assured me they were as moved as I was. I know I was able to give them a gift with my performance. They, in turn, gave me a gift by their presence and support. Now I know that I can perform this play again and touch other audiences. As Emily Dickinson says of the souls of people, "The light goes on and on."

APPENDIX A: SYNOPSIS OF *THE BELLE OF AMHERST*

The play begins with music of Isaac Watts. As the lights come up, Emily Dickinson walks into the parlor to have tea with Vinnie. Instead she sees the audience. She invites them to have a piece of her Black Cake as an introduction. She introduces herself and tells the audience she is a poet. She warns the audience she is a bit eccentric and hasn't left the house in years. The neighbors think she is odd. Emily admits she deliberately poses as an oddity and sends out strange notes to people with the cake she bakes. She tells the truth, but tells it "slant" so that people will not be directly offended. She recites the poem, "Tell all the truth."

Emily tells the audience she loves words. They have a life of their own. She writes the word "phosphorescence" and reflects on how the life within each person is a poem. She recites "If I can stop one Heart from breaking" to reveal the importance of each life as it touches another.

Emily then recalls her childhood. She was a typical Amherst girl who sent valentines. She imagines she is once again talking to her brother Austin about receiving valentines. She asks him to get other boys to send her valentines but her brother won't do it. Emily picks up a fan and dreams of becoming the belle of Amherst one day and having her pick of young men.

Eighteenth century dance music begins to play and Emily relives a party she attended in her young adulthood. She is talking once again to James Billings, rather unsuccessfully. After a few pleasantries about the party and the refreshments, he leaves to pursue a pretty girl.

Emily retreats to her garden as robins begin to sing. She recognizes her world as a paradise for its beauty. She tells the audience her paradise is the road she travels into her soul and recites, "I dwell in possibility." She praises nature as the highest form of art.

A school bell rings and Emily recalls her school days. She tells the audience about her Shakespeare Society. The teacher asked the students to cross out passages that that were considered risqué. Emily rebels against the censorship and reads four uncensored excerpts from various Shakespeare plays. She states that Shakespeare is the only book she really needs.

As she places the Shakespeare book on the parlor table, she sees her father's photograph. She recalls how strict he was. He didn't smile or kiss his children goodnight. He had a temper and used to say, "Damn!" when he was angry. Emily relives the night her father discovered her up late at night writing poetry. Emily reads Father two poems: "To make a prairie" and "I'll tell you how the Sun rose." By the end, Father relents and allows Emily to stay up at night and sleep late in the morning.

Emily recalls the time she left home to go to college. The head of the college, Miss Lyon, wanted her students to declare themselves Christians. Emily refuses and sits with the "without hope" group of girls. She tells the audience that religion is too grim and dull. She recites "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church" to show how nature is a greater inspiration than religion to become closer to God. She teases Miss Lyon and tells her that the Bible is a "merry" book.

Emily does not return to college the next year. Instead, she stays in Amherst with her family. She becomes friends with Sue, Austin's fiancée. She and Sue were close, but their friendship could not stand up to Emily's emotional intensity.

Sue did share Emily's love of writing, however. Emily tells the audience how she and Sue chose poems when an opportunity to publish new work appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Emily reads "The Pedigree of honey" and "A Bird came down the walk", but finally selects "Safe in their alabaster chambers" to send to the literary critic, Higginson. Emily writes him a letter asking him to critique her poems and signs her name "E. Dickinson." She goes into the garden and recites, "Safe in their alabaster chambers."

Professor Higginson answers her letter, but his words are not encouraging. Emily continues to send him poems and letters for eight years. When she is forty, Higginson visits Amherst. Emily relives the visit with excitement at the thought of being published. Higginson still has no encouragement for Emily. She reacts to his assessment of her poetry – "spasmodic", "bad rhymes", "uncontrolled" – with disappointment. Emily recites a portion of "A great Hope fell". Emily puts the poems away and thinks no one will ever read her poems. That, however, will not deter her. She recites, "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" as she picks flowers in the garden.

Emily reflects on how she withdrew into seclusion. She tells the audience she is not lonely and that she accepts her life. She admits she knows she is plain and shows the audience a daguerreotype made of herself when she was seventeen. She then tells the audience that her life is not loveless. She has had several love interests, all married! She then confides that her one

true love was Charles Wadsworth, a minister she met in Philadelphia in 1854. She carried out a love affair in her correspondence with him through the years. Emily recites, "Wild Nights". She tells the audience that Wadsworth visited her in Amherst in 1860 and again in 1880. Emily relives her last meeting with Wadsworth. She recites, "I cannot live with you" to Wadsworth and says good-bye to him. Emily then tells the audience that her true love died and recites, "Will there really be a 'Morning'?"

Emily goes into the garden, still pondering death, and recalls the day she last saw her father alive. She tells the audience of her last afternoon and the intimate conversation with him. The next day, her father died while on a trip to Boston. Emily describes picking flowers for his grave and Austin kissing Father's forehead. Church bells play a funeral song as Emily places flowers in a vase and places the vase next to Father's photograph. She recites a portion of "After great pain, a formal feeling comes". She wonders where her father is "without any body". Emily wonders why we are so afraid to die. She tells the audience that she is not afraid.

Emily's mind turns to another death, that of her eight-year-old nephew. She crosses into the garden and recalls the dear things he used to say. She tells the audience that memories of him are still full of joy. There was a mystical quality about his death. Before he died, he told his aunt there were people waiting for him. Emily wonders who they could have been and muses that we all wonder who waits for us at our death.

Emily now approaches her own death. She crosses to the parlor and picks up a quilt. She sits in the parlor chair and tells the audience she hasn't been feeling well. She recalls a fainting spell

that signals the approach of death. She gives instructions to Austin and Vinnie about her funeral. She wants to be carried out in a small white coffin to the Amherst burial ground. She muses one last time on whether she will see her neighbors again. Emily recites "Because I could not stop for Death." Lost in the awe of her ride with Death, she is brought back to the present moment by the striking of the clock. Emily tells the audience that she must go and peel the apples. She turns to her box of poems and carries them center stage. She presents them as a gift to the audience and recites her poem, "This is my Letter to the World." In farewell, she promises to give the audience her recipe for gingerbread the next time they meet. She exits to the music of Isaac Watts' hymn, "From all that dwell below the sky."

APPENDIX B: COMMITTEE REPORTS

Mark Brotherton, Committee Chair

I have had the pleasure of working with Janet Raskin numerous times during her stay in the Department of Theatre at the University of Central Florida. I taught Ms. Raskin in numerous acting and voice classes. In addition, I was her director in the production, *The Visit*. In all these efforts, I have been impressed with Ms. Raskin's intelligence, talent, creativity, and commitment. So, I was not surprised by her successful work in adapting and performing *The Belle of Amherst*. The piece was very touching and extremely moving.

Ms. Raskin was constantly updating me on her preparation and rehearsals. It was clear from the start that this project was in the hands of a well-prepared, well-organized, and creative artist. Her research on Emily Dickinson was in-depth and thoroughly studied. Ms. Raskin worked around limited resources, tight deadlines, and very little time in the theatre. Instead of seeing these problems as roadblocks, Ms. Raskin saw them as a challenge.

During the rehearsals I attended, Ms. Raskin was an active listener in all notes that were given, always probing for information to make every moment clear, constantly processing all ideas. Rather than play a general wash of an eccentric character, Ms. Raskin searched and found many different colors for the numerous scenes and moments in Emily Dickinson's life. Instead of playing just the moods of Emily Dickinson's writings, Ms. Raskin found the poetry's many levels.

In performance, Ms. Raskin showed herself as a mature and intelligent actor through her analytical skills in the understanding of this character. She constantly made strong specific active choices were insightful and always interesting. Her acting was invested with a search for simple truth and honesty in a very complex woman. Technically, as an actor, all her choices, whether vocally, physically, or emotionally, were clear, precise, and living in the moment. Above all, Ms. Raskin was successful in showing the many sides and layers of this character. She found Emily Dickinson's artistry and humanity.

It was a very strong performance.

Kate Ingram, Committee Member

After working rather closely with MFA Acting student Janet Raskin during her rehearsal process, it was a very special pleasure to see the culmination of her thesis role as Emily Dickinson in “The Belle of Amherst.” On Saturday, April 14, 2007, in the Black Box Theatre at Valencia Community College. I witnessed Janet truly accomplishing all she had set out to do. Her one-woman show had been performed previously (at a Maitland Senior Center) and on Friday, April 13, also at Valencia Community College.

Her performance was a confident embodiment of Emily Dickinson, clearly based on extensive research and rehearsal. She brought subtle attention to detail in her costuming and set design decisions, and her choices of set/prop items.

I was especially impressed by her attention to the music of the period. Sound design is a huge factor in creating the ambiance of a production, and Janet’s choices not only embodied Emily’s world, but also helped transport a modern audience to be there with her.

In this report, I’d like to also go back to the earlier rehearsal periods, in which Janet was attentive and open to suggestions and ideas from her mentors: always eager, always hungry for more feedback, but frankly, always careful. What I remain most impressed by is the fact that Janet threw away her ‘carefulness’ in performance.

She learned to trust that her meticulous study of Emily Dickinson would enable her to bring Emily to life as a living, breathing human being. Emily may have been a recluse, but as Janet's thesis concludes, that does not necessarily make for an interesting or theatrical character. Janet discovered that active verbs are the key to connecting with a live an audience. She successfully confided, shared, teased, and gently reminded her audience of their mortality, with humor, too! Not an easy task.

She engaged the audience with a poise that bordered on the awkwardness of the real Emily, and she successfully made the audience feel as if they knew a shy poetess that much better.

As Janet progressed through her rehearsal process, she more and more allowed herself to be immersed in, not only the actor's lines, but in the personal internal monologue that is so important in the grasp of a character. This is clearly documented in her thesis journal.

I visited her rehearsal work quite often. She always gave evidence of "doing her homework" and it was always clear how much this thesis project meant to her. But it was not until she came to recognize that the audience was her partner that Janet really blossomed, and thus Emily blossomed. Janet's resulting work demonstrated a wonderful combination of research, acting, voice, speech, and movement technique.

The evening I saw Janet's performance as Emily, I was, simply put, so proud of her. She conducted herself flawlessly through the entire evening, which, as her thesis describes, entailed production responsibilities beyond acting responsibilities – all well done. She invisibly introduced herself, as Emily, pre-show, to each audience member as they arrived, with a slice of cake and a bit of poetry. She also added a lovely impromptu Q & A period after the

performance, during which, in character, Janet as Emily gently, kindly, and appropriately enigmatically, answered the curious questions of the audience members.

Interestingly, it was witnessing this last Q & A session when I realized that Janet truly and totally trusted her research and intuitive study of Emily: without a script she was ready to answer unknown questions from her audience – very brave, indeed. (And quite delightful!)

Janet has thoroughly accomplished her research and performance work on this project.

I strongly believe that she personally achieved the goals of her thesis project, and hopefully, she has created a foundation for the way in which to approach future roles and bring them to as full a life as she brought to Emily.

Earl D. Weaver, Committee Member

On Saturday, April 14, 2007, I had the extreme privilege of witnessing Janet Raskin as Emily Dickinson in “The Belle of Amherst” in her one-woman, MFA acting thesis project. The show was performed in the Black Box Theatre at Valencia Community College.

The evening was a tour-de-force performance by Janet! I am not usually a fan of one-person shows, but I was impressed, entertained, mesmerized, and overwhelmed with Janet’s performance work. From the moment she stepped on stage, she was the complete embodiment of Emily Dickinson. She engaged the audience immediately and drew us into her world with poise, grace, humility, and poetic language. I was able to completely immerse myself in “Emily’s” world and forget it was Janet performing a role...which is something very difficult for me to do as a theatre director!

Janet clearly demonstrated a cohesive marriage of research, acting, voice, speech, and movement technique, which is what is expected of a graduate performance major in a thesis role. She maneuvered flawlessly through Dickinson’s poetry, Shakespeare, and William Luce’s script. The story was articulated clearly and the various stages of Emily’s life covered throughout the piece were developed well with changes in voice and movement quality. Janet, as Emily did, used the language to its fullest effect, cherishing each little relic written in the original poetry and the play’s text.

The production values were simple and used effectively by Janet as she moved through Emily's world. Costume, sets, lighting, and props were used to enhance the performance instead of overwhelming it. Janet was also quite successful in setting the mood for the play by offering Black Cake and Dickinson poetry to each audience member as they arrived. In fact, the evening I attended, her twin sister was serving the dessert and confused many patrons. "Why aren't you backstage getting ready?" one patron asked. She politely replied, "I'm the twin sister. Janet IS backstage getting ready." It was an amusing moment for all of us waiting for the performance. But it set a tone of expectation for all us waiting to enter Emily's world.

I commend Janet in her thorough research and performance work on this project. It is not easy "going it alone," but Janet led us on a journey I will not forget. It was rich with emotion, lively with humor and candor, and passionately and beautifully heartfelt. This performance is exactly the level of quality I expect from an MFA performance candidate. I encourage Janet to continue pursuing these types of projects...and possibly exploring the idea of writing one of her own plays. Her aplomb with writing and language is a natural fit with her performance skills. When her first play is ready for performance, I'll be there ready to buy my ticket.

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