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THE ANATOMY OF A PRODUCTION: THE ANALYSIS OF THE DIRECTORIAL
JOURNEY MOUNTING “STEEL MAGNOLIAS” FOR THE STAGE

by

ARADHANA TIWARI
B.A. University of Central Florida 2005

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

Spring Term
2009

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ABSTRACT

This study is based on the Vine Theater Company's production of "Steel Magnolias" performed in March of 2007 at the Garden Theater in Winter Park Florida, directed by Aradhana Tiwari. This document examines the directorial journey from vision to the stage. Specifically it will explore a.) The dynamics of the production process from a directorial lens. b.) Interpreting Harling's text for design and performance c.) The development of an artistic aesthetic through collaboration.

In May of 2007, I mounted a production of "Steel Magnolias" for the Orlando International Fringe Festival. The show was performed in the Universal, a thrust space at the Orlando Repertory Theater. Soon after, Producers Stephanie Williams invited me to direct the same production again for her theater company, The Vine. This time the show will be mounted in a proscenium space called the Garden Theater, located in Winter Garden's Historical Preservation District. We will have three to four weeks of rehearsal. Two of those weeks will be in an alternate rehearsal space with one week on set prior to open. The show will run from March 7th through the 22nd with a few days in the dark. We will soon re-audition the show and open it up to professional actors. I am being paid a set sum for directorial responsibilities and an additional sum for sound design of the show. I'll be collaborating with Lighting Designer Erin Minor and Set Designer Tommy Mangieri, and costume designer Kelly VanDyke. We are all advised to stay within the

parameters of a set budget. A tech crew will be provided by the Vine Theater Company. Everyone involved with the production is being compensated for their work, specific sums are at the producers' discretion.

My early vision for this production is romanticized realism. From the set, to lighting, costumes, sound and even blocking. My goal is to execute a "slice of life" in this salon located in a tiny Louisiana parish during the mid 1980's within a slightly romanticized portrait. One of the ways I'll go about doing this is to create a series of character building exercises tailored to the specific story. I aim to craft real characters with honest moments, but frame them inside a slightly romanticized set and proscenium blocking. Some of the challenges I'll be exploring in this study are how to adapt a thrust show to a proscenium, how to integrate old and new cast members into a unified process and progression, how to facilitate a collaborative process and lastly, how to achieve an artistic vision while sustaining the integrity of a small budget.

The materials I'll be submitting is a collection of research, a log of technical needs and other printed information, reflections on every aspect of production such as set, sound, lighting, costumes, and a detailed rehearsal journal logging the production progression. These documents will track design ideas and archive any required changes that ensue. Finally, upon completion of the show I'll write a post-production summary. This will examine how close I got to my original goals, evaluate the process I implemented, highlight necessary modifications that were made along the way, and discuss what I learned from the experience.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This author would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of the Faculty and staff of the UCF Theater Department especially those who participated in this Thesis Committee: Chair, Professor Lani Harris, Dr. Donald Seay, and Assistant Professor James Brown. Without their incredible well of their wisdom and support, this project would have never been brought into fruition . In addition the continual assistance and dedication of program director, Dr. Julia Listengarten has been a steady source of guidance and inspiration throughout this author's journey of academic exploration and analysis. Without the thoughtfulness, passion and encouragement of these key University faculty members this author would not have the opportunity to even suggest such an experiment, let alone realize a production thesis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH & ANALYSIS | 3 |
| Past Productions..... | 3 |
| The Playwright..... | 5 |
| The Setting..... | 7 |
| The Plot..... | 10 |
| The Characters | 15 |
| Dramatic Structure..... | 19 |
| CHAPTER THREE: WORLD OF THE PLAY | 20 |
| Louisiana..... | 20 |
| Magnolia House..... | 21 |
| Southern Women | 22 |
| Festival Of Lights | 23 |
| Diabetes..... | 24 |
| CHAPTER FOUR: AUDITION REFLECTIONS | 26 |
| CHAPTER FIVE: PRODUCTION LOG | 30 |
| CHAPTER SIX: REHEARSAL PLAN..... | 36 |
| CHAPTER SEVEN: REHEARSAL JOURNAL..... | 45 |
| CHAPTER EIGHT: PRE-PRODUCTION NOTES..... | 55 |
| CHAPTER NINE: POST-EVALUATIVE SUMMARY | 71 |
| Introduction..... | 71 |
| Rehearsal..... | 73 |
| The First Meet..... | 73 |
| Process | 77 |
| Character Choices | 80 |
| Exercises | 83 |
| Lighting..... | 88 |
| Costuming..... | 95 |
| Hair & Make Up | 100 |
| Set Design..... | 103 |
| Sound Design..... | 108 |
| Music..... | 108 |
| Radio..... | 111 |
| Effects | 111 |
| Conclusion | 114 |
| LIST OF REFERENCES | 116 |

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In January of 2007 I was asked to direct a Production of “Steel Magnolias” by the Vine Theater Company in Orlando Florida. At the same time I was in the midst of seeking a topic of exploration for my final Thesis Project. I knew that I wanted to build a Thesis on my passion , which is Directing. I decided to use this directorial process as an opportunity to explore and apply what I had been researching during my graduate experience by analyzing and experimenting with a variety of directorial approaches and styles.

Weighing these theories in real time, in real space with real actors seemed like a far more practical approach for analysis then simply resigning to words on a page. I seized the production as an object of research, analysis and exploration, in every stage of production, and all of the tasks that it encompasses.

First, it is wise to note that the anatomy of a directorial journey is not limited to the physical production. That would be likened to weighing the way someone walks without understanding how their legs were formed and why they are able to move them. Directing is a series of decisions, which include a variety of responsibilities: fiscally, dramaturgically, timely, communicatively, organizationally, physiologically, and of course creatively and artistically. This examination of process would not be complete without touching on all of these components, however the majority of my analysis will be linked to the rehearsal aspect of the production. By comparing different directing techniques, approaches and styles as they might be applied to post 20th Century American Drama.

You will find a collection of notes on various topics which include dramaturgical research of the play, it's dramatic structure and plot, it's author, the setting and the characters. In addition, I have included a production log to serve as sample of pre-production communication and process, along with a rehearsal journal, which tracks my mental and emotional journey throughout the endeavor. This thesis also includes a chronicle of notes and observations made by my Thesis committee throughout process in relation to my research, and approach in rehearsal and in the execution of the production. Lastly, this study will host a post evaluative summary of the entire process, evaluating what approaches were and weren't successful, taking into account the set of unique circumstances surrounding this specific production of "Steel Magnolias" and the containers engulfing it.

CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH & ANALYSIS

Past Productions

When preparing for any production it is often helpful to look at past mountings of the same show. I personally do not like to look at too much before I set out on an artistic endeavor, because I feel that it greatly influences the work, consciously and subconsciously. With this particular play already being such a well-known movie, I knew that I was already going to be hard to approach this from every artistic corner without pre-disposition and bias. However I also felt that it was necessary to retain some of what the audience expectations of a particular character might be, because of the unique sentimentality people have with this particular story.

This being said, I felt that I had enough in my memory banks to recall the essence of the film, and opted not to re-watch once knowing I would be directing this piece. Instead, I looked at several other films that I felt had a particular quality that might be interesting to pull from such as “Fried Green Tomatoes” , “Midnight In The Garden Of Good And Evil” and ‘The Divine Secrets of The YaYa Sisterhood”. I did however want to know a bit about the history of the stage play, I think it’s good to look at who has been cast for particular hallmark roles ---especially when you are in the casting process. So I did conduct a remedial search of past productions and looked at several images that crossed my path along the way

The following information is from Wikipedia:

“The stage play, written by Robert Harling, is still popular today and has frequent productions mounted throughout the United States. It was originally staged Off-Broadway. The original stage production opened at the WPA Theatre, in New York City, on 28 March 1987. It was directed by Pamela Berlin, and featured Margo Martindale as Truvy, Constance Shulman as Annelle, Kate Wilkinson as Clairee, Mary Fogarty as Ouiser, Blanche Baker as Shelby, and Rosemary Prinz as M'Lynn. The production moved to the Lucille Lortel Theatre on 19 June 1987, with Betsy Aidem taking over the role of Shelby.”

In the spring of 2005, the play made its Broadway debut at the Lyceum Theatre. Previews of the production began March 15, 2005 and officially opened on April 4. The cast included Delta Burke as Truvy, Christine Ebersole as M'Lynn, Rebecca Gayheart as Shelby, Marsha Mason as Ouiser, Lily Rabe as Annelle and Frances Sternhagen as Clairee. At the close of its run, the staging had played 23 previews and 136 regular performances. A touring production of *Steel Magnolias* was expected for the 2007-08 season. Many regional theaters also perform the play each year.”

Another unique perspective that I had with this particular project was that I had previously directed less than a year prior. I didn't want to be trapped in approaching it the same way, so I continually set goals for myself to keep the process fresh and in the moment with the specific cast and crew I was working with this time around. I was tempted to glance back at my old script, which was riddled with notes and ideas about character, blocking, and story. But I started with a fresh book, and never looked back. One of the circumstances brought my way not by design, but sheer default was that this second approach took place in a proscenium space while my first production of “*Steel Magnolias*” took place on a thrust. If I *could* have dictated the space, I would have chosen a thrust, as I am partial to the dimensional pictures that a thrust allows directors to toy with. However in hindsight, I do believe that very different space, forced me to look at things from a fresh angle and ultimately led to some very interesting discoveries.

Character approach also led me to some new places. I cast a much earthier set of actresses the second time, all with a similar acting methodology and approach, which led to some great chemistry. Casting is often the result of who shows up, and coordinating contracts and availability. This being said I can not say that all of the casting choices on either go around where optimal or what I was seeking exactly, however I was ultimately pleased with the ensembles that where created from the pallet of my immediate possibility.

Overall, looking at past productions, my own and others has definitely influenced my approach to this piece on a myriad of levels. There is no way to measure the impression that this ultimately may have had on the presentation, however it is worthy to note during the examination of this process.

The Playwright

Robert Harling was born in 1951 and raised in Narchitoches, Lousianna. The fictional community where the action of “Steel Magnolias” takes place, Chinquapin Parish, strongly resembles the colloquial town of Narchitoches, population 17,000. This is only one of many autobiographical features that Harling used to mold his play. The story is based on the tragic experience of Harling’s sister, Susan. Like the character Shelby, she dies at an early age as a result of complications caused by diabetes following the birth of her son. Harling dedicated the play to her in the hope to provide his nephew, who was two at the time of his Mother’s death, with a living image of his lost parent. The play is

also an 'omage to Harling's mother who, like the character M'lynn, donated a kidney to her daughter in a transplant operation that ultimately failed.

In explaining the genesis of the play, Harling said, "I was seized with such a fury, I never looked at it as anything more than telling a story. I was just so upset and somehow I thought it would make things better..." Harling felt a sense of urgency to keep the legacy of his sister alive for her son. He said, "the thought that my nephew would grow up and never know his mother, the sacrifice she made so that he could live. So this is basically the story of her life"

An important part of that legacy was the incredible support system surrounding Harling's Mother and sister, which he molded into the endearing and timeless characters we know as Miss Clairee, Ousier, Truvy and Annelle. He describes them as a portrait of "the community of women that surrounded" his mother and sister during their ordeal.

Harling states, "my family and my community have always been characterized by a tremendous sense of humor, even in the darkest moments."

Having never previously written anything before, this was Harling's first venture as playwright, let alone a writer. After his sister's death he found himself engulfed in a "fury", a surge of creativity that resulted in the completion of "Steel Magnolias" in ten days. Only months after Susan's death, the script was being performed at the WPA theater in New York, during the summer of 1986. Almost immediately it was moved to a larger Off-Broadway stage at the Lortel Theater. Sixteen months following its premiere, it was produced as major Hollywood film starring Sally Field, Dolly Parton, Shirley Maclaine, Darryl Hannah, and Julia Roberts.

Before writing “Steel Magnolias”, Harling had spent eight years in New York pursuing an acting career with limited success, playing small roles in minor productions, and working from time to time in television commercials. Beginning his path to the stage at Louisiana's Northwestern State University, his dream was to become a professional actor. Resigning himself to practicality however, he attended Tulane University Law School. He completed his studies there, however he found the law unappealing, noting there were "not many laughs in Brown v. The Board of Education." And so Harling bypassed his bar exam, deciding instead to join a summer stock theater company. It was this step which would eventually led him to New York. Following the success of Steel Magnolias on stage, Harling began working in movies. He wrote the screenplay for the film version of Steel Magnolias (1989), and for the comedies, Soapdish (1991), and The First Wives Club (1996). He also wrote and directed The Evening Star (1996), a sequel to Terms of Endearment.

The Setting

All of the action in “Steel Magnolias” unfolds in a salon belonging to the character Truvy Jones. Later in the play we discover that this is not truly a self-standing place of business, but rather an enclosed carport that her husband has constructed for her. The salon becomes a wonderful container for this story as it quite literally allows us to experience these women with their hair down as they navigate a beautification process with ritual ease. We become voyeurs as they prepare for the main social events of their lives: weddings, funeral, parties. Ironically, while they are applying their public faces they reveal their private selves. Here in this sanctuary of beauty they confess their deepest

fears, greatest hopes and heaviest burdens. The director of the Jerusalem production of “Steel...” remarked, "Just as men have their bar-room and children their clubhouse, the southern woman's preserve is the beauty salon. It breeds . . . intimacy."

The setting is also an important reflection of social and cultural values that are a specific expression of the time and place these characters exist within. Truvy shares her beauty mantra early in the play, “I have a strict philosophy that I have stuck to for fifteen years . . . 'There is no such thing as natural beauty’” (Harling 8). Truvy is a lover of artifice, and revels in extremes, which is evident in her beauty aesthetic famous for the baroque excesses of hairdos. This love of largeness is passed on to her faithful customers and trickles out of the salon, in their hair and make up as does her infectious and colorful approach to life. Martin Andrucki a professor at Bates College says:

“What Harling is showing us through the hilarious bad taste embodied in the setting is that his characters, though lacking sophistication or aesthetic restraint, are nevertheless noisily and colorfully alive. Their exuberant vulgarity expresses a kind of joy in living that provides a striking context for the sad trajectory of Shelby's declining health.” (1)

The events of the story take place in four scenes, which unfold over the course of many months. The action begins on the spring day of Shelby's wedding, then moves to the following Christmas season when Shelby announces she is pregnant. The following scene dashes ahead eighteen months to the summer day preceding her transplant operation, and then ends in winter, following Shelby's death. The seasonal cycle encompassing the four scenes is another important layer of support to the setting. The play opens with the promise of spring, then moves through to Christmas and Shelby announces that she is pregnant at the time of the Nativity. Then we jump ahead to summer, passing the spring

which brought new the new life as Shelby brings to the world. Finally Harling takes us to winter ending the story in November, the month in which the dead are remembered on “All Souls Day”. The characters respond emotionally and physically to the seasonal shifts that Harling has strung together. Executing this progression on stage involved acting choices, costume choices and lighting choices that served the story.

This progress of time is marked by alterations in the salon’s décor, reminding us of how life outside the shop moves relentlessly forward, bringing both birth and death, joy and sadness. Truvy embraces this dichotomy, “Laughter through tears is my favorite emotion” (Harling 69). While the exterior world throws them circumstances beyond their control, the characters attempt to keep constancy in the atmosphere inside the shop, a faithful support system built on love and friendship.

Directorially, I wanted to embrace the setting as a symbol of constancy within the whirlwind of change spinning outside its doors in the live of these six women. During transitions I crafted a series of tiny vignettes, which also served in buying time for the necessary costume changes of particular characters. In many ways the shop itself is the seventh lady of this story. I wondered how we might see her with *her* hair down. There is something beautiful that happens whenever a place of business does not have to be “on”. The stillness can be poetic, as the quiet breath within it’s very wall finds a voice. In many ways, Truvy is a part of the setting as she essentially is this place of business. It is *her* style, *her* colors *her* point of view sitting on the shelves and hanging on the windows. In the play she is constant pillar of strength and encouragement for the ladies she services, and her hair always seems to be in place while she is fixing the others, thanks to an abundance of hairspray. I thought it would be interesting to see Truvy’s hair get a little

sloppy from the work of the day. I wanted the audience to see this would-be fashion plate take off her heels, snatch some cutlets from her brazier, truly look at herself when no one was looking. The idea being that the well of bubbly joy this character gushes through most of the play, means more if it doesn't come quite so easily, and without some price.

The Plot

While the plotline of "Steel Magnolias" is based on Harling's experience with his sister Susan, the play in no means is a convention narrative or autobiography. There is design in Harling's unfolding of the story, and the action that ensues. However all of the main action in this story takes place entirely off stage. For example, the conflicts of Shelby Eatenton-Latcherie, her pursuit of motherhood, the obstacle of her illness, her decision to become pregnant in spite of it, the resulting breakdown in her health---all occurs entirely offstage. Onstage we track secondary effects to the primary conflict and how they relate to her Mother and the other characters.

The sub-plot of Annelle, follows a similar approach, her troubles with a criminal husband, her re-birth as a Christian zealot, and her second marriage and pregnancy. As with the events in Shelby's life, the critical action is happening elsewhere, outside of the salon. What unfolds in the incidents that make up the real time of play are reactions of the other characters to all of these primary situations.

"The action is thus prismatic, the characters filtering and refracting the significant moments in the lives of Shelby and--to a lesser extent--Annelle. What organizes the play,

then, is not narrative momentum, but emotional complexity, the unfolding of a pattern of feeling and friendship that defines this small community of women” (Andrucki, 1)

At the beginning of the play’s four scenes we are introduced to Truvy and Annelle, her new assistant, along with the four customers who come to the beauty shop in preparation for the upcoming wedding of Shelby. In this thematically long scene we learn that each of these characters has a personal burden to bear, something that they are struggling with.

Annelle's divulges that her husband has deserted her and she is all alone in a strange town. Clairee's husband has died and she is wrestling with defining a new meaning of life. Ouiser lives alone with only her dog to keep her company having survived marriages to "the two worthless men in the universe " (Harling, 41). Shelby is suffering from diabetes, a fact brought home to everyone on stage when she experiences a sudden fainting spell. And M'Lynn, Shelby's mother, not only consumed by worry about her daughter, but also saddled with an eccentric husband who is trying to drive the birds out of the trees with shotgun blasts. Even graciously tempered Truvy confesses that her husband "hasn't moved from in front of the TV set in fifteen years;" (Harling, 16).

We soon discover that each of these women are seeking more from this beauty shop than a new hairdo. As the scene concludes, an exchange involving Shelby, Truvy, and Annelle, reveals the fundamental nature of life in the salon as Shelby invites Annelle, to her wedding:

“SHELBY. I can't stand the thought of someone being unhappy or alone tonight. . . .

ANNELLE. You're all so nice.

TRUVY. We enjoy being nice to each other. There's not much else to do in this town”
(Harling, 31)

□ Significantly, Truvy undercuts the incipient sentimentality of her remark with a self-deprecating joke. This puncture a great example of what Harling threads in the language of these ladies throughout the play, they are “nice” but not mawkish; tender, but tough as well. They truly are the “Steel Magnolias” of the title.

The second scene of the play occurs later in the same year. It is the Saturday before Christmas and open with the homecoming of Shelby, who conveniently finds M’lynn alone in the shop waiting for a hairdo.

Shelby tells her mother that she is pregnant, and it here that we witness a moment that is typical of the overall structure of the play. The important actions have happened elsewhere. What occurs onstage is the process of discovery and adjustment: □

“SHELBY. Mama. Don't be mad. I couldn't bear it if you were. It's Christmas.

M'LYNN. I'm not mad, Shelby. This is just . . . hard” (Harling, 33)

Shelby is aware that she is risking her life by bearing a child, but has decided to take the chance. The scene between her and M’lynn becomes a plea for acceptance by Shelby, and a struggle to assimilate the unsettling news by M’lynn. What changes is not the circumstantial facts of the situation, but rather simply their feelings towards them.

In this scene we also learn that the character Annelle “is settling down and finding her way” (Harling, 37) After a shaky start in the first scene, she has now mastered the challenges of the workplace and gained confidence in her exterior situation with the addition of a boyfriend that she met at Shelby’s wedding. This newly motivated character has taken on the job of decorating the beauty shop for Christmas. She comically describe her artistic recipe for success as being "tiny white lights, Baby Jesuses, and spoolies" (Harling, 35).

Following the formula of the first scene the second also ends on a note of group solidarity, the recipient of the collective comfort this time being M’lynn:

“TRUVY. This baby. That's not exactly great news, is it?

M'LYNN. She wants this so badly. I just don't know . . .

TRUVY. Oh, honey. I wish I had some words of wisdom . . . but I don't. So I will focus on the joy of the situation. Congratulations.

OUISER. Absolutely.

M'LYNN. Diabetics have healthy babies all the time.

ANNELLE. It will all be fine.

CLAIREE. Of course it will.

M'LYNN. Thank you, ladies. You're right. We'll make it through this just fine. You know what they say. That which does not kill us makes us stronger.” (Harling, 43)

But the determined optimism of the women does not go without testing. In the third scene, about a year and a half later, Shelby is having her long hair cut short, a process that Truvy has tagged as , "rite du passage." Ironically, without realizing it, she is entirely

correct. This transformation in Shelby's external appearance is a ritual moment which reflects an internal, spiritual change as well having become mother, and foreshadowing the critical passage in her life that is about to occur: a kidney transplant operation.

The third scene uncovers the dire warnings of the doctors about the danger of pregnancy for Shelby have come to fruition. Her kidneys have failed, and she needs to take radical measures to save her life. It is then that her and M'lynn reveal to the other characters that the next day she and her Mother, the kidney donor, will enter the hospital to prepare for a transplant operation. This is devastating and disconcerting news to all of the women in the shop. However even in this unsettling sea of circumstances we watch as they attempt to adjust and conquer the events over which they have no control. Again, they offer consolation and support:

“ANNELLE: God bless you, Shelby.

TRUVY: You're going to be the sassiest girl in that hospital.

M'LYNN. Well, what about me?

SHELBY. You ladies better come visit us!

CLAIREE. I'll be sitting right by your side when you wake up. Yours, too,

M'Lynn. I'll manage it somehow.” (Harling, 60)

The final scene fast forwards through time and takes place after Shelby's death. Again, we do not see the main action, but learn of it as the characters process and adjust to this devastating news. M'lynn movingly describes the scene of her daughter's death and then marvels, “This morning I wanted to come here more than anything, isn't that silly?”

(Harling, 67) Truvy, tells her it is not, understanding that what the grieving mother needs is exactly what is available among her friends. And what M'lynn finally experiences at the shop is a type of catharsis she had been unable to achieve outside this intimate sanctuary: "Maybe it was about time I had an emotional outburst. Maybe I'll start having them at home more often. . . . I'm so glad I came by. Shelby would've had a good time here this morning." (Harling, 70) It is in this moment that we realize the plot of the play has been a sequence of similar moments of healing release. The play is simply four scenes in which the traumas of the offstage stories are treated with the medicinal healing of friendship, humor, and empathy.

The Characters

The characters of "Steel Magnolias" are known to be some of the most colorful and vivacious roles for women to grace the stage. However they are not necessarily the most dimensional or developed roles for women to tackle. What they gain in humor and strength they are often lacking in arch and complication. There is indeed some transformation to be found in all of these characters throughout the course of the play, however some far more than others. Harling himself foresaw some of the possible traps that could ensnare actors taking on this precarious group of women as he advises in an author's note, "The women in this play are witty, intelligent and above all, real characters. They in no way, shape or form are meant to be portrayed as cartoons or caricatures" (Harling, 5).

Shelby is profoundly affected by her choices, and even though they are made offstage, we encounter a different, arching person in each scene because of them. Her decisions to

marry, to become pregnant, and to have an operation propel the plot, which is essentially a sequence of reactions to her life. They also bring about major changes in her character, internally and externally. She is transformed from an immature, somewhat shallow young woman principally concerned with achieving a "total romantic look" for her wedding to a brave mother who declares, "I look at having this baby as the opportunity of a lifetime... I would rather have thirty minutes of wonderful than a lifetime of nothing special." (Harling, 35)

Upon her final exit, Shelby's last words are about the group about a couple that has just discovered that their son is gay: "tell them I said that if that's the most disturbing that's ever happened to them . . . they should just get over it." (Harling, 61) Having matured because of her circumstances, choices and experiences, her thoughts are now for others rather than herself.

Annelle also makes offstage choices that arch her character. When she first appears on stage, she is a bumbling ball of insecurity. Her self-confidence has been completely undermined by a bad marriage to criminal husband. Then her doubts and hesitations are replaced by an aggressive commitment to her newly found Christian faith.

While her born-again assertiveness often seems comically obnoxious at best, she achieves a level of emotional maturity that enables her to offer real comfort to the grieving M'Lynn. Harling revolves this character one hundred and eighty degrees, having begun as herself an object of consolation, she becomes the consoler: "[Shelby] wanted to take care of that baby, of you, of everybody she knew," she tells M'Lynn, "and her poor body was just worn out . . . So she went on to a place where she could be a guardian angel. She will always be young. She will always be beautiful." (Harling, 66)

However not all of Harling's characters are set up for such significant transformation. By contrast, the characters Truvy, Ouiser, and Clairee undergo far more subtle changes. Their main action is not defined by sharply differing choices and actions, but rather all choose to perform variations of the same action: supporting Shelby, Annelle, M'Lynn, and each other. Subsequently the majority of their action is simply reaction. The change that ensues for their characters happen off-stage. Clairee buys a radio station, Ouiser takes a boyfriend, and Truvy rekindles things with her husband. They remain a solid support system from beginning to end. Their individual identities are established through how they choose to be a support, which is a reflection of personal idiosyncrasies in attitude, appearance, and behavior.

For example, Truvy's commitment to un-natural beauty is comically extravagant. She longs to visit Baltimore, which she regards as "the hairdo capital of the world" (Harling, 11) becoming a kind of personal Mecca. The beauty shop, with its gushing bad taste, and tackiness is embracing warmth, and its atmosphere is essentially an extension of her personality. Ouiser, is described as a "Wealthy curmudgeon Acerbic but loveable." (Harling, 5) These qualities manifest themselves in her ongoing feuds with her neighbor, her affection for her vicious dog, and her fervent pose of disagreeableness she warns Truvy in scene one: "Don't try to get on my good side, I no longer have one." (Harling, 27) Clairee, widow of the longtime mayor of the town, is a "grande dame" who spends most of her time at football games, declaring that, "The only thing that separates us from the animals is our ability to accessorize"(Harling, 63).

The character M'lynn is set apart from these other characters in that she is not simply a function of reaction. In many ways this is M'lynn's story, not Shelby's. Her direct involvement with the main action, her role as kidney donor, and as witness to her daughter's death, force her into perhaps the most transformative arch of the show. She is continually struggling to let her daughter go on some level and constantly forced to accept the circumstances that are thrown into their relationship. Her love for Shelby and her grandson deepens, as her devotion to the emotionally more brittle men in her family, her eccentric husband Drum, and her son-in-law, Jackson. In the final scene she voices feelings and concerns that inspired Harling to write the play: "I am so mad I don't know what to do. . . . How is that baby ever going to understand how wonderful his mother was? Will he ever understand what she went through for him?" (Harling, 68)

In approaching these characters I encouraged the cast to go against the sugary frame of the language and dig deep into the darker underbelly of the script. From day one, I sought to extrapolate as much layering and dimension from this set of women as the script could reasonably imagine. We did a series of character exercises, which I discuss more extensively in a following chapter. We discussed tension, embraced flaws and sucked as much of the conflict from the text as the walls of Truivy's Salon could withstand. Time and again I would say, "Sweet is tastier when it's pushing against some salt".

Dramatic Structure

Steel Magnolias has a linear dramatic structure although there are gaps of time in the progression. The action unfolds over the series of four scenes, each with a specific season attached to it. In each scene the main action progresses to some new place or point of discovery. However within each scene there are a collection of French scenes which allow for more opportunities to mix up the dynamic between different characters.

Scene one has a great stacking of character introductions. Beginning with Truvy and Annelle he really sets up the day, the place, and immediately lets us know who these women are. Then one by one Harling brings in another character adding them to the stack, the order in which he does this is brilliant. First Clairee comes in fresh from the football field, then Shelby with wet nails, soon M'lynn enters arms full of wedding tasks and just when the scene begins to feel as though it is settling, Ouiser comes stomping in like a whirlwind stirring everything up.

Each unlikely scene finds specific pairings amongst the different women. At the top of scene two, Shelby and M'lynn manage to steal some time alone together, as Shelby is fresh home for the Holidays. This private moment allows the audience to be let in on a secret, which carries underneath the following scene as Truvy & Annelle march in with an army of Christmas decorations. This seems to be the overall pattern of Harling's structure: a vulnerable moment, followed by some sort of noise, and there is always a comic undercut quickly afoot. This didactic pairing is how Harling cunningly manages to make us laugh and cry all in the same breath.

CHAPTER THREE: WORLD OF THE PLAY

The following is a sample series of topics that I thought would be worthy research for this particular play. They should be viewed as simply as dramaturgical material that was perused while constructing ideas and possible choice during pre-production.

Louisiana

The following is from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia:

MAP OF LOUISIANA'S PARISHES

The U.S. state of Louisiana is divided into 64 parishes in the same way that 48 of the other states of the United States are divided into counties (Alaska is divided into boroughs and census areas).

Louisiana was formed from French and Spanish colonies, which were both officially Roman Catholic. Consequently, local government was based upon parishes, as the local ecclesiastical division. Following the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the Territorial Legislative Council divided Orleans Territory (the predecessor of Louisiana state) into twelve counties. The borders of these counties were poorly defined, but they roughly coincided with the colonial parishes, and hence used the same names.[1]

On 31 March 1807, the territorial legislature divided the state into 19 parishes, without getting rid of the old counties (which continued to exist until 1845).[2]

In 1811, a constitutional convention was held to prepare for Louisiana's admission into the Union.[3] This organized the state into seven judicial districts, each consisting of groups of parishes. In 1816, the first official map of the state used the term, as did the 1845 constitution. Since then, the official term for Louisiana's primary civil divisions has been parishes.

The following is from an acesry.com community hosted by rootsweb:

ABOUT NATCHITOCHE PARISH

“Natchitoches Parish's oldest permanent settlement was founded in 1714 on the Red River by the French to promote trade with the local Indians and the Spanish in Mexico. The trading post of Natchitoches (Nack-a-tish, an Indian word meaning Place of the Paw-Paw (or Chinquapin), played a major role in the history of both Texas and Louisiana. Several overland highways, including the Natchez Trace from the east and the El Camino Real from Mexico, and the boats on the Red River going to New Orleans made Natchitoches a primary transfer point for trade and a gateway for settlers going to Texas.

After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Americans rushed into the area. From a population of only 457 in 1766, the parish grew to over 2,870 by the census of 1810.

When Louisiana was divided into its 12 original counties in 1805, smaller civil divisions called parishes took over the functions of the counties. When organized in 1807, Natchitoches Parish was 120 miles long and 70 miles wide. It included what is now Caddo, Bossier, Webster, DeSoto, Bienville, Claiborne, Sabine, and Red River parishes, plus parts of Lincoln, Winn, Vernon, Jackson and Grant.”

The following is from www.neworleanschurches.com :

CHURCHES IN NATCHITOCHES, LOUISIANA

“Natchitoches, located just off the Interstate 49 corridor between Shreveport and Alexandria, is Louisiana's original French colony. The historic district of Natchitoches includes over fifty buildings dating back more than one-hundred years. It has been designated a National Historic Landmark by the U.S. Department of the Interior. The shop buildings and houses are laden with cast iron grill work, and balconies or galleries which overlook the Cane River Lake. Visitors to Natchitoches will see a town which is very reminiscent of the days when the grand south and cotton production were of prominence in the economy. Like most southern cities, Natchitoches residents were religious. A number of church congregations in the area date back before the Civil War. “

Magnolia House

The following is an excerpt from IMDB:

“*Steel Magnolias* the film was shot in the small Louisiana town of Natchitoches. M'Lynn's home is actually two different houses. A Bed and Breakfast in Natchitoches was used for the outside front of the house. It is on Front Street by the river and can be easily located, as it is now known as "The Steel Magnolias Bed and Breakfast." The inside and back yard scenes were done at the home of Henry Taylor. During filming, the Taylors moved out and rented an apartment. □

There is no parish or town in Louisiana known as Chinquapin. "Chinquapin" is the name for a type of fish and a particular breed of oak tree. The town of Natchitoches in the parish of the same name served as the backdrop for the film. The town was named after the "NAKTOSH" Indians whose names means "chinquapin eaters". Natchitoches actually does have a large Christmas Light Festival annually. Natchitoches was also the first settlement in the Louisiana Territory. “

The following is from Magnolia House:

“Welcome to the Steel Magnolia House Bed & Breakfast!

Step back in time to a more elegant and leisurely atmosphere, where you can relax and enjoy rare antiques, peaceful gardens, large guest rooms, a grand staircase, private bathrooms, and a wonderful gourmet breakfast.

Written history of this home states that it was originally built in the 1840's by Italian architects, Trizini and Soldini, and was built for Louis Dupleix as a store. An earlier writer of Natchitoches history, J. H. Cosgrove, referred to it as a "great business spot" and during the Civil War, it has been said it was used as a hospital. In the early 1900's Mr. Jackson L. Bryan moved the home from its original location next to the sidewalk to where it now stands. The more recent claim to fame of this historic home is the on-site filming of much of the movie, "Steel Magnolias". Many of the scenes from the movie were filmed in the home and in the grand gardens, adding popularity to this already significantly historic home and quickly making it the "most photographed" home in town!

This majestic home is conveniently located in the historic district, just blocks from restaurants, wonderful shopping and across the street from Cane River Lake.”

Southern Women

The following is an from www.sniksnak.com:

A SOUTHERN LEGACY

"It's interesting to look back and realize how fortunate I've been. You can't realize these things as you're living through them; it is only as you get older that you're able to reflect on all that you have witnessed." ~ Ruth Dreyfous, Louisiana author.

“Born and "raised" in the Deep South in the state of Louisiana is a rich, fulfilling and rewarding experience. There have been many female role models in the colorful history of my native state that I personally feel all Southern women can apply the ideals and goals of those women's lives to their own: women who weren't and aren't fearful to take bold steps to pave a positive road for the South, the nation, the nation's children, and womanhood in general - both young and old of any culture or race from all walks of life. Each has left a loving legacy for other women, in this country and abroad, as inspiring examples of womanhood.”

The following is from Southern Women Webring:

SOUTHERN WOMEN WEBRING

"The biggest myth about Southern women is that we are frail types... fainting on our sofas. Nobody where I grew up ever acted like that. We were about as fragile as coal trucks."

--Lee Smith

We are the women of the Southland! We were born here, some of us moved here, but all of us have Dixie in our blood. We come from all walks of life. Our common bond is our love and heritage of the South. We would like to share our beloved land with you, please tour our webpages, and we will welcome you with our hospitality."

The following is from "Women and Dixie: The Feminization of Southern Women's History and Culture" by, Helen Taylor Professor of English at the University of Exeter and a specialist in southern literature and culture.

"McPherson moves on to discuss southern femininity through the theoretical frame of performativity. First, the very bleached-white *Steel Magnolias* (1989) which, as she well demonstrates, expresses white desire for a safe, segregated space in the Sun Belt South, albeit offering a critical perspective on women's lives, the always-constructed/performed elements of femininity, and the problematic nature of marriage as a white woman's central goal and role."

Festival Of Lights

Natchitoches has an annual Christmas Festival of Lights. The following is from www.Christmasfestival.com:

"The Festival of Lights begins November 21 and lasts into the New Year. The Natchitoches (Nack-a-tish) Christmas Festival has been held on the first weekend in December since 1927. This annual event draws in excess of 100,000 visitors each year for the parade, live entertainment, food fair, arts and crafts show and a spectacular fireworks show over the scenic Cane River Lake.

Mini-festivals are held every weekend in December with a Holiday Tour of Homes, entertainment and fireworks every Saturday and at midnight on New Year's Eve. More than 500,000 visitors annually trek to Natchitoches during the holiday season to enjoy the

light displays, riverbank vendors, shops, restaurants, and nightly tours by streetcar or carriages.

2009 Festival of Lights Season Announced

Posted Monday, February 2nd, 2009

[View All Posts in Christmas Festival News](#)

The Natchitoches Christmas Festival committee announces the dates for the 2009 Festival of Lights season. The dates for this year's festival are November 21, 2009 to January 6, 2010. The 8rd annual Christmas Festival will be held on Saturday, December 5. More detailed information will be posted as it becomes available."

Diabetes

The following is from the American Diabetes Association:

ALL ABOUT DIABETES

"Diabetes is a disease in which the body does not produce or properly use insulin. Insulin is a hormone that is needed to convert sugar, starches and other food into energy needed for daily life. The cause of diabetes continues to be a mystery, although both genetics and environmental factors such as obesity and lack of exercise appear to play roles.

There are 23.6 million children and adults in the United States, or 7.8% of the population, who have diabetes. In order to determine whether or not a patient has pre-diabetes or diabetes, health care providers conduct a Fasting Plasma Glucose Test (FPG) or an Oral Glucose Tolerance Test (OGTT). Either test can be used to diagnose pre-diabetes or diabetes. The American Diabetes Association recommends the FPG because it is easier, faster, and less expensive to perform.

In the OGTT test, a person's blood glucose level is measured after a fast and two hours after drinking a glucose-rich beverage. If the two-hour blood glucose level is between 140 and 199 mg/dl, the person tested has pre-diabetes. If the two-hour blood glucose level is at 200 mg/dl or higher, the person tested has diabetes."

The following is from Web MD:

DIABETES OVERVIEW

"Diabetes affects the body's ability to use blood sugar for energy. The main types include type 1 diabetes, type 2 diabetes, and gestational diabetes. Diabetes insipidus, a rare disorder, is not related to diabetes mellitus (sugar diabetes). Diabetes symptoms may include increased thirst and urination, blurred vision, and fatigue."

The following is from the New York State Department of Health:

IMPORTANCE OF CONTROLLING BLOOD SUGAR

“Sometimes blood sugar levels fall too low. This is called hypoglycemia. Hypoglycemia can happen when a person eats too little food, takes too much insulin or diabetes medicine, or is more physically active than usual. Often hypoglycemia happens suddenly and sometimes there is no explanation for why it occurs. When this happens, a person may have some, or all of these symptoms:

- * Shaking
- * Fast heartbeat
- * Sweating
- * Dizziness
- * Feeling anxious
- * Hunger
- * Vision problems
- * Weakness or feeling very tired
- * Headache
- * Feeling irritable

Since hypoglycemia can be life-threatening, it must be treated immediately! People with diabetes should work with their doctor or health care provider to develop a plan to treat hypoglycemia.”

CHAPTER FOUR: AUDITION REFLECTIONS

On November 27th, 2007 Auditions and Callbacks were held for “Steel Magnolias” produced by the Vine Theater Company. The following is a collection of reflections that ultimately led to the casting of this production.

Sometimes the wondrous thing happens...something that you never expected sneaks up and tugs at your heart in a way that makes your toes curl in excitement and sends goose bumps up and down your back...it’s a moment that takes you out of the audition and gives a tiny glimpse into the future...you are suddenly watching a fragment of something that will happen in performance...almost like a premonition...it is a stolen second that you brain turns off allowing you to suddenly feel into the world of the play--- experiencing it rather than analyzing it...I was blessed to have one of these moments at my recent auditions for “Steel Magnolias”...surprisingly it was not born from a conventional reading of the script...

I got strange looks from producers Whitney Goin and Stephanie Williams when I announced that I would like Robin Olsen to read for M’Lynn with Whitney reading opposite her for Shelby...”I know, just humor me, I said...I’d like to try something”...They shrugged in compliance, but it was clear they thought I was on crack...

I had the two ladies read a side that featured the very famous Mother/Daughter scene from the play. In the scene Shelby announces her pregnancy--- seeking out her Mother’s blessing, which is hard for M’lynn to give knowing her daughter’s delicate health

situation and the extreme risk she will undergo during the pregnancy. Robin and Whitney began the scene with a heart filled attempt...you could feel them easing into the roles which so obviously fought everything else they had read earlier in the night...but I still felt unrest...I didn't see the magical chemistry I had been hoping for...

I stopped them before they got to the emotionally charged end of the scene...and asked them to throw down their scripts... "Have you ever done a repeat exercise?", I asked. Whitney nodded "yes" and Robin asked to be reminded...when the exercise was explained I gave them their new dialogue. Whitney was to say: "I can have everything" and Robin was to say: "You can't have everything"...they both threw themselves into the objective of winning the other one over which led to a riveting exploration of tactics, and emotion...by the end, they were both in tears and they perfectly captured the didactic resolve for both characters in the script... M'lynn is technically right---but concedes the point out of love...Shelby is wrong, but pursues the point out of hope...they both fail...they both triumph.

As soon as the scripts were out of the way---they truly LOOKED at eachother...and that's when the magic happened...Suddenly I felt that they were Mother and Daughter...and both of them fell into the vocal tones I was hoping to excavate...Whitney dropped the gibberly "Annelle" stutter she had practiced for the audition and Robin let her grainy southern bass for "Clairee" melt away and gave into a more youthful tone which better suited M'lynn...

This became my core casting for the remainder of the audition. I started filling in the rest of the cast to frame these two. But I also wanted to examine the chemistry within the sets that Harling has crafted. For example, Ouiser and Clairee, share a history amongst

themselves which is somewhat exterior from the group. Accordingly, Truvy and Annelle have a more intimate relationship apart from the collective whole.

I felt somewhat at a disadvantage, with Ouiser being Pre-cast without having ever seen her or hear her read...all I had was a photograph that I had been given prior to the audition. I asked some questions about her vocal quality and age range, and Whitney attempted to give me the best description she could... so I put this aside and started to focus more on my Truvy/Annelle Duo.

Right off the bat, Marty Stonerock had my attention...she is a good actress, who could have played more than one of these women. She seemed to have her eye on Clairee, yet Marilyn Fallen was steeling this role from everyone---every time she read, she brought a depth, and base to her that I could not find in anyone else...Marty was living in a lower vocal quality as well---even when I had her reading for other characters...Meanwhile, Stephanie Williams had my eye for Annelle, she is beautiful---but has the ability to be incredibly awkward in the most endearing way. Also, she had a fluttery energy to her, a constant nervousness---that I think Annelle shares...it stems from her lack of self esteem. This is one of the things that we see change throughout the play, as this character becomes empowered and stands in more confidence.

So, I paired Marty and Stephanie together as Truvy and Annelle...the contrast was nice, but Truvy still felt a bit darker than she should be. I kept Marty in the room a moment more and spoke with her before sending her out with another side. "They can't all play the obo" I said, "find a brighter instrument"...I told her that while Truvy had a rough life, she was an eternal optimist---and puts sugar on everything. I need to see the actions: to encourage, to uplift, to enharten...don't sit in the gloom---conversely, don't paste on a

big smile... seeing you choose to put it on---is more interesting... The next time Marty came back in the room... she had made several steps in the right direction... I had full confidence that she would be able to take this role. Also, I liked the little bit of edge she brought to Truvy... it balanced out all of Annelle's sweetness that Stephanie was bringing to that role...

In the end, I felt that I had six female archetypes... the five I had seen all had the same texture and acting style---with differences that created complimentary contrast. Visually, I had a nice bouquet of body types and coloring... Vocally, I had six different instruments to play the scale... I feel very pleased, and confident that this cast is going to work well together... I'm looking forward to our first read through!

CHAPTER FIVE: PRODUCTION LOG

The following is a sample of the production correspondence that took place prior to rehearsal. Please note that this is not extensive, and in no way represents the entirety of production communication or tasks. This log represents simply a portion of what sort of interactivity took place within the dynamics of this particular production team.

10/06>

DESCRIPTION: Email correspondence with Alauna McMillen, General Manager Garden Theatre

NOTES: Received Architectural Plan for Space renovations and rendering. Confirmed Walk-Through for January.

10/16>

DESCRIPTION: Email from producer Stephanie Williams.

NOTES: Set designer still not secured. Budget for Set is \$1,000.

10/30>

DESCRIPTION: Voicemail from producer Stephanie Williams.

NOTES: Audition space is still TBD. Audition dates have been pushed back to Nov. 26th and 28th. Tom Mangieri has been secured for set Design. I will call him soon to set up a meeting. Tommy's number #407-506-6444

11/03>

DESCRIPTION: Email from Helen Stowel.

NOTES: No longer able to Stage Manage the show. Notified Producers of stage management need.

11/04>

DESCRIPTION: Email from producer Stephanie Williams.

NOTES: Space secured for auditions. Callback date moved from Wednesday the 28th to Tuesday the 27th.

11/12

DESCRIPTION: Conversation with producer Stephanie Williams

NOTES: Combined audition confirmed. Discussed Robin Olsen, and various casting options. Talked through stage management possibilities. Planned a production meeting for next Monday, 8:30am.

11/13

DESCRIPTION: Email from producer Stephanie Williams.

NOTES: Elizabeth Maupin, theater critic of the Orlando Sentinel, posted audition information on her Blog. Consequently a larger turnout is expected. A 2nd call back date is secured as back up.

11/15>

DESCRIPTION: Phone Conversation with Set Designer Tom Mangieri.

NOTES: Introduction, exchanged contact info. Briefly discussed the script. Set up a meeting for December 2nd. At Panera Bread at ?ajsafj;

11/17>

DESCRIPTION: Correspondence with Set Designer Tom Mangieri.

NOTES: Sent information about the Garden Theater along with the general manager's contact information. Included website along with a rendering of the space. Will set up a venue walk through in January. First meeting confirmed.

10/17>

DESCRIPTION: Email from producer Stephanie Williams.

NOTES: Audition space is still pending. Contact at the Rep has not gotten back, and they are seeking alternate spaces.

11/19>

DESCRIPTION: Production meeting with producers Stephanie Williams and Whitney Goin

NOTES: **Stage Manager**

Leads...
Lucinda Nickles
Whitney and Stephanie are going to ask around.

Auditions

Turnout
Because of Maupin's post---higher volume expected!
Marty, Robin, Amanda arriving at 7:30 (to stagger slots)

Callbacks

Time set for 8:30 pm
Back up Callback Day: Dec. 4th

Casting

Gretchen was informed that Annelle is cast, to audition for Truvy.

Aradhana will call Tabitha again.
Laurie is auditioning for Truvy

Running Auditions
Stephanie & Whitney, sign up, etc.

Stage Manager TBD.
Forms & Sides
Aradhana will email forms and sides for printing.

Scheduling

18 rehearsals dates set (may be whittled down)

Standing Days off: Thursdays and Sundays (minus
Thursday before open)
Hourly blocks 4-5 hours...Fridays will be our long days---
will break for meal, which the Vine will provide.

Aradhana will do the next draft of the production Calendar
and email.

Loading in the set on Monday Morning, March 3rd.

Hang/Focus on afternoon/evening of Monday March 3rd.

Dry Tech & Tech...Aradhana will talk to Erin

Costume Fittings...Aradhana will talk to Kelly
Costume designer : Kelly Van Dyke

Hair Session with cast.
Hair Designer: Laurie
Borrow old Shelby wig? Aradhana will call Dawn Harris.

Set Design

Tommy, meeting set up
Need pic's of old pieces for him to see, or
Stephanie/Whitney will go look at pieces with him.
Stephanie will call Brenda and Derrick for permission/help.

Aradhana will schedule a venue walk through with him at
the next meeting. (Whitney/Stephanie are welcome to join)

Lighting

Haven't heard from Erin...Aradhana will email update.
Is Erin doing sound as well? If so, I need to put that into the
schedule

Props

Rehearsal Props – Stephanie will see what we can borrow from before.

Sound Design

Louisiana vs. known --- Whitney gave GREEN LIGHT Louisiana choices. Craig Slayzack for radio announcer? Radio Whitney gave GREEN LIGHT for Aradhana to ask Craig. Will give him a set of comp. tickets. to the show and Aradhana will get him movie tickets.

11/19>

DESCRIPTION: Email forward from producer Whitney Goin to Kelly blahodsfo .

NOTES: Introduction to Costume designer. Set up communication and contact info.

11/20>

DESCRIPTION: Forward from producer Whitney Goin to Lighting Desgner, Erin Minor.

NOTES: Received word from the Garden Theater that they have hired a TD. Our light plot is due Feb. 8th. TD will be responsible for setting the lights and having them ready to go on our load in date, March 3rd. Requested for Erin and techs to be ready on March 3rd for adjustments and so on. Also requested for Erin to speak with Alauna to coordinate scheduling.

11/20>

DESCRIPTION: Correspondence with producer Whitney Goin.

NOTES: Choosing publicity photos for theater's website and calendar. In lieu of cast pics not having been taken yet, exploring alternative possibilities. Mainly looking at photos of magnolia blossoms and trees

11/21>

DESCRIPTION: Correspondence with producer Whitney Goin.

NOTES: Whitney requested information about the audition sides. Emailed specific page numbers with start and stop points.

CHAPTER SIX: REHEARSAL PLAN

The following is a sample of a collection of drafts of the rehearsal plan at various stages in production. This plan was simply a set of goals with the intention of remaining fluid for adaptation and adjustment. Please note that this does not reflect what was or wasn't accomplished, explored or discussed in any particular rehearsal.

STEEL MAGNOLIAS REHEARSAL PLAN Draft as of 02/17/08

| | | |
|----------------|---------|---|
| JAN 22/ TUE > | 11:00 | FULL COMPANY |
| | | First Read Through Housekeeping Costume Fittings Contracts |
| FEB 04 / FRI > | | |
| | 12:00 | Full Company Call |
| | | Character Exercise |
| | 12:30 | Dialect Session with Ginny Kopf |
| | 2:30 | End |
| FEB 12 / TUE > | | |
| | 8:00 am | Aradhana / Erin / Stephanie / Whitney |

Tape and load in...

9:00 am Truvy / Annelle
Block Beat 1

9:20 am Add Clairee
Block Beat 2

9:40 am Add Shelby
Block Beat 3

10:15 am Add M'Lynn
Block Beat 4-5

11:00 am Break

11:15 am Back
Add Ouiser
Block Beat 6

12:15 pm Stumble Through 1-6
Notes

1:30 pm Release

1:30 pm HAIR SESSION
Laurie, Marty, Stephanie

FEB 13 / WED >

11:00 am M'Lynn / Shelby
Block Beat 7

1:45 am Add Truvy / Annelle
Block Beat 8

12:00 am Add Clairee
Block Beat 9
12:30 am Add Ouiser
Block Beat 10
1:30 am Break
1:45 am Back
1:40 am Stumble Through 1-10
Notes
3:30 pm Release

FEB 18 / MON>

9:00 am M'Lynn / Shelby
Block Beat 7
9:30 am Add Truvy / Annelle
Block Beat 8
10:00 am Add Clairee
Block Beat 9
10:30 am Add Ouiser
Block Beat 10
11:20 am Break
11:30am Back
11:30 am Stop & Go 8-10
Stumble Through 6-10
Notes
1:30 pm Release

| | | |
|---------------|----------|---|
| FEB 19 / TUE> | 9:00 am | Truvy / Shelby / Clairee / Annelle Block Beat 11 |
| | 9:30 am | Add Ouiser Block Beat 12 |
| | 10:30 am | Break |
| | 10:45 am | Back Add M'Lynn Block Beat 13 |
| | 12:15pm | Stumble Through 8-13 |
| | 1:30 pm | COSTUME FITTINGS: ? Whomever can stay... we've pulled some stuff for you. KELLY Release |
| FEB 20 / WED> | 8:00 am | Shelby / M'Lynn Revisit 7 |
| | 8:30 am | Company Call Polish 1- 6 |
| | 10:30 am | Break |
| | 10:45 am | Back Run 1 – 13 Notes Work TBD |
| | 12:30 pm | Release |

FEB 21 / THR>

8:00 am

LEAH CT

9:00 am

Company Call

*OFF BOOK 1-13

Work TBD

11:00 am

Break
Shelby Released

11:15 am

Back

Block Beat 14-15
Character Work

1:30 pm

Release

COSTUME FITTINGS
? Whomever can stay...
we've pulled some stuff for you.

KELLY
Release

1:45pm

LEAH OUT

FEB 22 / FRI >

8:00 am

Shelby & Truvy

Polish Beat 1/ Character Time

8:30 am

Add Clairee

Polish Beat 2

9:00 am

Add Shelby

Polish Beat 3

| | |
|----------|---|
| 9:30 am | Beat 11 |
| 9:30 am | Stephanie Out (return at 11:30) |
| 10:00am | Add Ouiser Block Beat 12 |
| 10:30am | Add M'lynn Revisit 13 |
| 11:30 am | Lunch / Brunch |
| 12:00 pm | Back Polish 8-10 |
| 12:30 | LEAH CT |
| 1: 00 pm | Run 8-13 |
| 2:00 pm | NOTES MAKE UP CASE / SECRETS |
| 2:30 pm | Shelby / M'Lynn Only rest of cast released Revisit Beat 7 |
| 3:30 pm | Release |
| 4: 30 pm | LEAH OUT |

FEB 23 / SAT>

| | |
|----------|---|
| 12:00 pm | LEAH CT |
| 1:00 pm | Company Call Work TBD Hair Rehearsal... Integration... |

| | | |
|---------------|----------|------------------------------------|
| | | Transitions... |
| | | Quick Changes... |
| | | Curtain Call... |
| | 5:00 pm | Release |
| | 6:00 pm | LEAH OUT |
| FEB 24 / SUN> | OUT | |
| FEB 25 / MON> | 9:00 am | Company Call |
| | | Final Brush 1-6 |
| | 1:30 pm | Release |
| FEB 26 / TUE> | | |
| | 10:00 am | LEAH CT |
| | 11:00 am | Company Call |
| | | Final Brush 7-13 |
| | 1:45 pm | LEAH OUT |
| | 3:30 pm | Release |
| FEB 27 / WED> | OUT | |
| FEB 28 / THR> | | |
| | 7:00 am | LEAH CT |
| | 8:00 am | Truvy / Ouiser / Clairee / Annelle |
| | | Final Brush 14 |
| | 8:30 am | Add M'Lynn |

Final Brush 15

10:00 am Break
10:15 am Back
Add Shelby
Work TBD
12:30 pm Release
2:30 Lani?
1:45 pm LEAH OUT
(Kelly ? 1:00-->)

FEB 29 / FRI>

9:00 am Company Call
Transition Review
10:15 Run 1-15
Ginny K. Joins us for Run?
Notes
12:30 pm Lunch
LEAH CT
(she can stay till we're done)
1:15 pm Character Exercise
1:30 First Dress Rehearsal
Notes
3:30 Break
3:45 Back
Work TBD
5:30 pm Release

*Last Rehearsal all together before in the space
(Kelly Costumes?)

MAR 01 / SAT>

9:00 am LEAH CT
10:00 am Call
S OUT / R OUT PM
3:00 pm Release
4:00 pm LEAH OUT

*If we are in a good place by Friday...this Saturday call will be significantly shorter and perhaps cancelled for most of the cast...this is mostly back up only.

MAR 02 / SUN> OUT

MAR 03 / MON> TBD

Load In
Hang Focus

MAR 04 / TUE> TBD

MAR 05 / WED> TBD

MAR 06 / THR> TBD

MAR 07 / FRI> OPENING NIGHT!

*It's important for everyone to have March 3rd-6thth entirely cleared and available for SM...

CHAPTER SEVEN: REHEARSAL JOURNAL

The following is a personal diary of thoughts and reflections based on collection of rehearsals during the process.

1/22

We had a lovely first read...it was my first opportunity to hear the entire cast read together, as Cira had been pre cast and was not able to make it to the audition...I was relieved to see that she fit with everyone else nicely. However since it was a read through, there were times when I wasn't sure if she was fully committing to her delivery or if her very relaxed nature was a choice for "Ouiser". Which I believe works at times, but also desire the stakes to be raised at other moments.

The orchestration of voices has already developed since the audition, but we still have a distance to go. Marty, whom at the audition I had asked to find some higher notes in the scale for "Truvy", had made some vast adjustments in the right direction...even during the course of the read she seemed to elevate as she was warming into a brighter instrument. Stephanie, has the empowered "Annelle" at the end of the show down pat, but we need to craft a less confident "Annelle" for the top of the show. The vocal task in this I believe may be in crafting a slight stutter...I'm looking for a fluttery sound and a delivery that signals insecurity and uncertainty.

I was pleased to see the steps forward Whitney had made with "Shelby" since the audition. She has embraced her youthfulness, and fallen into a brilliant spirit who warms everyone up whenever she speaks. In scene four, when she is absent, the lack of her presence was palpable. Robin, playing mother "M'lynn", has the heart and feeling of her character. However I still felt that overall she was far too relaxed. Again, this may have simply been the result of this being a first read and not being on our feet. Sometimes the simple act of sitting in a chair can greatly affect how we dialogue. Even so, I feel it's crucial for "M'lynn" to be someone who is constantly ticking...I imagine the world she endures outside the walls of what we see on stage,...two rambunctious boys, and a husband who's like a big kid...scores of mental patients, power women, power mom, running around trying to accomplish everything and still look like a woman at the same time....Also, because she must deal with "Shelby's" disease constantly, she lives with the impending threat of the bottom dropping out at any moment...no, this is not someone who can have a laid back energy.

Marilynn as “Clairee” was right on the money...I almost hate to say this, but she could have opened at our first read. I am not thrilled with being there soo soon---as I’m aware that’s not necessarily a good thing, however I’m glad to see her in such a good place. My growth goals for her is in the delivery of her “hard life” moments...she tends to want to sink into the gloom of her circumstances momentarily and then recover and be funny...I would prefer to see her striving to overcome the gloom---struggling to press against the gloom that is her reality, and then persevere with her sense of humor. So, this is something we’ll work on.

After the read we had a nice little table discussion about the show. The cast was anxious to talk---and I was glad at how seamless the discussion flowed and moved to touch on many things. Some of the things we mitigated was, status, regional colloquialism, affluence, relational history, language, environment....etc.

At the end, I gave each of them a make up case, each one suited to their characters personality, and taste. Then I gave them a make-up case character study sheet that has ten questions on it. I instructed them to use this sheet and their imaginations to gradually fill contents into their make up case. By the end of the show, I’d like to be able to dump out the contents of every one, and instantly know just by looking at a tiny pile of items, who’s make up case it is. My goal in doing this is to facilitate specificity in their character work, and marry it to the world of the play---which is a beauty salon. Since all of the action takes place in this shop, most of the action will revolve around exterior beautification. I don’t want the play to feel like the action is just an action---a tool for the director to move the actors in and out of different pictures. My goal is for every activity to be purposeful and very detail driven, so that the audience feels it is truly a salon, and very much these ladies ritual. But filling their make up cases is jus the first step in this character work...throughout the process I’ll be instigating a series of exercises that will use the research they have gathered. I think it will be a helpful tool and delightful addition to our rehearsals, if kept in balance and if rooted in purpose and application.

In addition to the read, we accomplished a lot of logistical things for the show. We had their measurements taken for costuming. Everyone signed their contracts. Producer Whitney Goin, gave everyone these tiny necklaces that reflected their characters. We also shared a bountiful brunch that mirrored the southern charm of the show. While eating a meal may seem inconsequential to our process... as the director, I felt very pleased, as this was an excellent opportunity for the cast to get to know each other a bit before beginning rehearsals. By the end of the meal, everyone was laughing and joking with ease, and you could feel that they where all enjoying discovering each other. All in all, our first step has

been accomplished for this process, and has set the tone for where we are headed.

2/12

Its funny how optimistic I am every time I sketch out a rehearsal plan. Minutes are delegated like priceless jewels---every moment seems to have an objective, some great purpose that serves the master plan...then the rehearsal actually happens...

At 9:00 we were supposed to start...at 9:00 I received a phone call from actress/producer Stephanie Williams, she was running late, she was on her way, she was "sorry"...it's "ok" I heard myself saying over the phone...I looked down at my perfectly mapped out breakdown for the rehearsal and realized that NONE of it was going to run on time...I think it hurt more that this was the first rehearsal...I feel a great deal of trust and respect can be earned from an actor to a director if there is a successful follow through in the game plan---no wasted time...but what to do? You roll up your sleeves and roll with the punches...

We hit the ground running as soon as she arrived but soon, it was clear that my stage manager was going to have to push back some of our call times...

I always feel like a first rehearsal in the space is like a first kiss. It's something you've been anticipating for some time and are incredibly excited about---but it never quite goes how you imagined and it takes some time to learn the magic of it...but once you fall into the right rhythm---your blood starts to rush and euphoria kicks in...

After stumbling through those first moments, we started to pick up our pace and successfully blocked all the way to Ouiser's entrance...who's call time got pushed into the next day...

I left feeling BEHIND...

2/13

I came in with a fresh game plan---my objective being to get back on schedule. Not only did I desire this for us to be on course scheduling wise--but also to ensure my actors that everything was going to be ok, and that they could trust me to guide them through the process...I came in with more pre-blocked to save time, but left flex room for discovery...we moved faster and quickly blocked the end of scene one, beats 1-6. Then we spent the remainder of the rehearsal polishing and cementing choices.

Because of the odd scheduling layout, I did not think it would be valuable to pluck ahead to the next scene. I would rather solidify what we've accomplished thus far, and then after the four day break, take on the next set of beats. We ended with a stumble through of beats 1-6 after which I gave notes. In addition to blocking and technique I started to give some character and objective notes as well. Here is a sampling of a few that I feel are most important:

M'lynn and Shelby>

We need to carve out a progression to the underlying tension you guys have about the wedding etc...each of these little battle's need to escalate and have an arch...M'lynn, you have a very strong sense of decorum, manners---what are the moments that you must fight the hardest to maintain them, where are you not succeeding?

The "groomsake" moment is soooooo incredibly important because it is the first time we really get to see that there is a friendship here. It's one of the few moments that these two are truly having FUN with each other---it must be extremely playful...this way we have somewhere to fall from...in the midst of tremendous tension and bickering---they are still able to laugh with each other...we must seize this moment now, and set up their relationship...this way we have somewhere to progress from in scene two...

Annelle>

I love that you are exploring her insecurity...take it further. We must start her broken so that we can build her up and empower her. Raise the stakes and her nervousness will be rooted in an honest fear.

Truvy>

I can definitely see you progressing her vocally in the right direction. Please continue to find the higher notes. She is a much brighter instrument.

We don't get a lot of back story on this character...but several times in this scene she is a champion of love. Where is that rooted in terms of her own life? Don't just deliver the sweet line...I don't think it's what's she saying so much as what she is wishing and missing in her own life.

Clairee>

Loyd...who is he? If you don't see him, we won't...how have you changed since he has passed...it's easy for this character to be brave...but I want to see her BRAVING something---not just putting on armor...

Ouiser>

I think it's easy to play "pissed"...but I prefer wounded...she plays offense more often than not to prevent having to play defense...I think she truly loves that dam dog of hers---it's not just her bitching and moaning...

2/18

Today was on crack!!!! I came in with the such a solid idea about what the blocking was going to look like, but it felt like we were all moving through quicksilver today...maybe there was something in the water...whatever it was, it made the rehearsal feel incredibly TEDIOUS...in the end, MUCH was accomplished...we scaled through beats 7-11, then polished 1-6...We've "caught back up"...but I FEEL like we're still behind...

Driving home I thought a lot about my actors humors and quirks...I feel like a parent who's learning how to deal with their different children...

Robin (M'lynn) is like the strong, dependable, and wise "oldest" child---who gives more than she takes...she's a rock to lean on when the other "children" get testy...

Marty (Truvy) is the child who's vivacious energy is sooo infectious you just want to PLAY---and never want to say "no" to...but sometimes it's hard to keep up with that...nevertheless---you wouldn't trade her magic for all the world!

Whitney (Shelby) is a "middle" child...sweet, self sufficient, diplomatic, and often can get lost in the shuffle...but don't underestimate her---she is strong and full of surprises.

Cira (Ouiser) is a gentle heart...so gentle you have to look out for her and make sure the other "children" are not abusing her meek nature...she's the awkwardly insecure "child" who secretly craves positive reinforcement and daily doses of self re-assurance.

Stephanie (Annelle) is my "baby"...it's hard for her to do "wrong"---and even when she does, my mother's heart finds it adorable...she is coddled, but luckily can be without spoiling...She is the most protected and rightly so, as she is the most delicate---in the best sense of the word...

Marilynn (Clairee)...is my most confident “child”...she knows who she is---and what she should be doing (even when she really doesn’t)---but that’s the charm. She’s the “child” who best understands how she fits in the family dynamic---on and off stage. She struts... without pretense.

They are all charming...they are all “magnolias”...but today, they played more of the “Steel”...yes, today was on CRACK...but tomorrow is another go...

2 /19

Today things seemed to come easier...we’re almost done blocking the entire show...Scheduling –wise, today was the most successful, and I was glad to find out that we had a whole hour left, when we did---felt like bonus time...I am happy to say that yucky feeling of “catching up” has finally left us, and we are no longer haunted by the fear of being “behind”...We explored and played...

I’ve broken the show up into 15 beats, but it’s easier to think of it in terms of four scenes...two in the first act and two in the second...

Today we primarily worked on scene three, the “Dialyses” scene. It’s the last time we see Shelby in the show, and sets up the climax of the story.

It was mainly a blocking rehearsal but I did give some general notes.

Mainly I am concerned about mapping out the overall dynamics...they really need to have FUN at the top, this way when the bottom drops out, they have somewhere to fall...also, they are hit with TWO bombs...Shelby’s on dialysis---BANG...M’Lynn’s giving her a kidney---BANG...so even their reactions from one discovery to the next has to build...I think the trick to this scene is urgency and with that the pacing...all of the transplant talking has to FLY...cues have to pick up on every turn...right now, I am not picking on them about these things...they’re blocking---they’re on book...this is just the next step---where we’re headed...

I think tomorrow will be a pivotal point in the process...we’re moving past the technical/blocking phase, into that explore/work/polish zone...I’m looking forward to that...

2/20

Started off a beautiful morning with M’lynn and Shelby...I wanted to carve out some “Mother/Daughter” time---even if it was just a little, for the actors to start building that relationship, and sketching out their joint circumstances...I was very pleased to discover how much they had

already worked out and thought about. Robin and Whiteny are both very intuitive, and I feel truly understand their characters.. As the other actors began to shuffle in, I felt confident in sending them off to continue their dialogue while I worked some of the other beats. The rest of the rehearsal did not go as smoothly...I was a little disappointed to learn that the cast was not as off book as I felt they could have been, given how long they've had their scripts and all the emphasis we've put on being off book...I also felt that much of the rehearsal was about re-hashing, re-tracing---remembering...but, we moved forward, and there were moments where you could feel them start to live inside of it...when those moments happened it was exciting and you could feel them want to just run off the cliff and fly, but then some piece of blocking, an uncertain cue, or flubbed line would trip them up...I just kept reinforcing them, encouraging them...we have time, I'd rather them feel comfortable and safe, then put unnecessary pressure on them that might just multiply the mishaps...I've redesigned the rehearsal plan for tomorrow...after seeing where they are at, some adjustments must be made. It's odd to work with two such different style casts at the same time...my cast for "Erratica" is so quick on their feet, and independent. This cast seems to want more direction, specifically Stephanie, and Marty---they would like many of the details dictated rather than discover them...I need to adjust to this, give them more, but also empower them to PLAY...

2/21

We cleaned up beats 1-6 significantly...the orchestration of that first scene is starting to have more specific dynamics...I told the cast that it's energy/drive-energy/drive-energy/drive---all the way until Shelby tells them "...I told him I couldn't Marry him"...that's the first "bomb" in the play...then the recovery starts to happen, but the tension of that stays underneath...shortly after, we go into the "diabetes" section which all about URGENCY...then we slowly ebb our way out of that...then Ouiser enters like a tornado---and we have a whole new dynamic---this is followed by Annelle's confession---which brings them all to a place of temporary resolve---but that's quickly interrupted by an explosion---and then we are at chaos full blast...

I enjoyed today's rehearsal, because the actors were doing much better about being off book, and it allowed us the opportunity to start living in it a bit more...We still need to clean up the Diabetes section (beat 5)...but the rest of scene one is looking pretty good...

Some big steps forward where cleaning up from the explosion to the end, and almost all of the entrances got tweaked...I had them do some line work with my stage manager---because soo much of that is in them picking up their cues and even overlapping dialogue...

Truvy (Marty) , is really starting to lighten up...I'm very pleased...I thinks she's finally tapping into a brighter vocal quality that softens her character. She's aware of it too---which is another plus, so I'm feeling much more confident about where that's going...

Another step in the right direction is happening between Shelby and M'lynn, they are starting to carve out more specific dynamics in all of their bickering...as I said before---it's all got to build and build an build all the way to Shelby's "forget the dang juice"...then M'lynn has the recovery...

Little Annelle is exploring he monologue...it's still very rough...but I'm holding back on giving her too much direction, I feel her thinking and trying things---and there is still time left to allow her to discover things on her own---which I think is almost always better anyway...

All in all, there is still much ahead---but we're progressing at a nice pace...

2/21

We stayed on task for the most part...I feel very bogged down with the actors not being confidently off book...I am disappointed with how much they are stumbling...I gave them a little lecture---nothing too harsh, but just wanted to hold them accountable to do their homework so that our time together could be more fruitful...

Now that the ground plan is taped down more accurately, we've been making minor adjustments here and there...it's very tight, but we're working it the best we can...it is, after all an "enclosed carport".

At the end of the rehearsal I kept M'lynn and Shelby to work on the mother daughter scene. We've almost completely re-blocked it...I'm happy we made the change that we did---I think they were for the better...the ladies have done some nice emotional work---but right now the pace is off because they're reaching for lines...that's the next step.

I think tomorrows gonna be a very logistical day...There will be lots of different things going on...I'm really hoping that they spend some time with their scripts tonight and tomorrow morning so that we can take beats 1-13 to the next level.

2/22

Today was very productive... We spent the first hour of rehearsal cleaning certain moments of the play. Then I had them run lines a bit...I felt that it might sharpen them a bit and make a run more valuable. We ran beats 1-

13... the last three beats were really rough. . but I felt that it was critical for them to start experiencing the journey of the story. In the end many discoveries were made, and even when things were rough---I feel that pushing through it helped them with memorization.

I wrestled with whether or not I should block the last scene. It's odd to me that we haven't touched that yet. Our rehearsal scheduling is so fragmented, that it's affected the unfolding of the process. In addition, my cast is fumbling with being off-book. I'm not making excuses---I just think that it would be unwise to not make adjustments to the rehearsal plan accordingly. My thought was that in pushing ahead we would actually be taking a few steps back...and I don't have the time for them to have to "remember" what we've done thus far. Tomorrow they have a day off---and the following rehearsal is painfully short...Another reason for postponing the work of that last scene is that I don't want to spend too much time on it...I want to keep it fresh and have no desire to spend any unnecessary time working it prior to open. Ultimately the person who is most affected by this decision is Robin. I spoke with her briefly, wanted to check in and see how she felt about it...I feel confident that I made the right decision....time will tell.

Marty really made some big steps forward today. I feel she's finally tapped into Truvy's voice. She has started playing some of those higher notes---and is MUCH brighter. I feel very happy with how she's progressing.

Stephanie also has a gold star from me. Every rehearsal Annelle grows a little bit more. Her monologue at the end of scene one is really rooted in truth --- she's done beautiful work on it. I worry for her vocally though--- She needs to keep that raw emotion and marry it to form.

Ouiser is frustrating me beyond expression. I feel that she is actually taking steps back. She keeps fudging her blocking more and more---in little increments until finally it's almost a completely different move. She has moments that she soars but then the bottom drops out and she is far too relaxed. I'm tired of giving her the same notes over and over---without feeling as if she's even tried a fraction of an inch---not the least bit of an attempt! In fact, it's almost as if she doesn't even remember the note at all.

Shelby is another one of my "bad children" today. She is not anywhere near off book and when she DOES remember her lines it is PAINFULLY slow, her cues are a century behind and no matter how many times I remind her not to break character and say sorry etc---she continually dramatizes every mistake. This is GREATLY bogging everyone down---it's holding back progress. I didn't give her a scary lecture---but I did make it clear that I was not pleased with where she was at memorization

wise , and stressed the urgency of taking tomorrow to spend time getting off book.

Marilynn is growing...but in many ways, is already there...she is much older, and her largest struggle is just remembering what she's supposed to do...but when she does it...it's magical.

Robin is the most professional of the bunch. She is someone who intuits almost everything she needs to adjust. Sometimes I feel dumb for even saying out loud what I KNOW she already knows. And she solves things on her own without needing any handholding---it's very refreshing!

□

CHAPTER EIGHT: PRE-PRODUCTION NOTES

The following document is a set of notes assembled in pre-production. It archives some of my initial directorial thoughts and goals for this process. It should not be viewed as a comprehensive list, and would be better served within the context of the overall directorial journey.

Designing The Garden: A Detailed Vision of The Design of “Steel Magnolias”

By, Aradhana Tiwari

General Notes On Lighting

I'd really like to capture the sense that there is natural light and light from salon being used in this space. There should be shadows of trees in the windows and gobos used to create these shadows in the space. It is not a formal Salon, but rather a makeshift enclosed carport. This should be reflected in the lighting.

CUE BREAKDOWN

PRE-SHOW

| | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------|
| 0. FADE TO BLACK> | Transition | 3 SECONDS |
| 1. LIGHTS IN > | Scene One | 5 SECONDS |
| 2. FADE TO BLACK | <i>(Stage Only, Windows stay)</i> | 3 SECONDS |
| 3. LIGHTS IN> | Scene Two | 5 SECONDS |
| 4. LIGHT SHIFT> | Scene Two | 1 SECOND |
| 5. CHRISTMAS TREE> | Scene Two | 1 SECOND |
| 6. FADE TO BLACK | <i>(Stage Only, Windows stay)</i> | 5 SECONDS |
| 7. LIGHTS IN> | Transition | 3 SECONDS |
| 8. FADE TO BLACK | <i>(Stage Only, Windows stay)</i> | 3 SECONDS |
| 9. LIGHTS IN> | Scene Three | 5 SECONDS |
| 10. FADE TO BLACK | <i>(Stage Only, Windows stay)</i> | 5 SECONDS |
| 11. LIGHTS IN> | Transition | 3 SECONDS |
| 12. SPECIAL IN> | Transition | 3 SECONDS |
| 13. LIGHTS OUT> | <i>(Special Stays)</i> | 3 SECONDS |
| 14. SPECIAL OUT> | Transition | 3 SECONDS |
| 15. LIGHTS IN> | Scene Four | 5 SECONDS |
| 16. FADE TO BLACK> | <i>(Full Black)</i> | 5 SECONDS |
| 17. LIGHTS IN> | Curtain Call | 2 SECONDS |
| 18. HOUSELIGHTS | Exit | 1 SECOND |

DESIGN DESCRIPTION

PRE-SHOW

- | | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|-----------|
| 0. FADE TO BLACK> | Transition | 3 SECONDS |
| 1. LIGHTS IN > | Scene One | 5 SECONDS |
| Afternoon. Light from windows. Light from Lamps in the Shop. General Wash. Warm. Amber and white. | | |
| 2. FADE TO BLACK | <i>(Stage Only, Windows stay)</i> | 3 SECONDS |
| 3. LIGHTS IN> | Scene Two | 5 SECONDS |
| Early Evening. Light from windows only. The story says that the electricity is out. Pools of light on designated acting areas. | | |
| 4. LIGHT SHIFT> | Scene Two | 1 SECOND |
| Lights for the shop jolt on as the electricity comes back. General Wash. Warm Ambers. | | |
| 5. CHRISTMAS TREE> | Scene Two | 1 SECOND |
| Multi-colored Christmas bulbs. No Blinking. | | |
| 6. FADE TO BLACK | <i>(Stage Only, Windows stay)</i> | 5 SECONDS |
| 7. LIGHTS IN> | Transition | 3 SECONDS |
| Pool of light on designated area. Gobo texture of leaves. | | |
| 8. FADE TO BLACK | <i>(Stage Only, Windows stay)</i> | 3 SECONDS |
| 9. LIGHTS IN> | Scene Three | 5 SECONDS |
| Afternoon. Light from windows. Light from Lamps in the Shop. General Wash. Warm. Amber and white. | | |
| 10. FADE TO BLACK | <i>(Stage Only, Windows stay)</i> | 5 SECONDS |
| 11. LIGHTS IN> | Transition | 3 SECONDS |

Pool of light on designated area. Gobo texture of leaves.

12. SPECIAL IN> Transition 3 SECONDS

Special. Soft spot isolation of Shelby's Radio.

13. LIGHTS OUT> (*Special Stays*) 3 SECONDS

14. SPECIAL OUT> Transition 3 SECONDS

15. LIGHTS IN> Scene Four 5 SECONDS

Afternoon. Light from windows. Light from Lamps in the Shop. General Wash. Warm. Amber and white.

16. FADE TO BLACK> (*Full Black*) 5 SECONDS

17. LIGHTS IN> Curtain Call 2 SECONDS

18. HOUSELIGHTS Exit 1 SECOND

General Notes On Costuming

In approaching the costume design of “Steel Magnolias” I’ve taken to the idea of designing each of them through the lens of different flowers. I think this will lend itself to inspiration in not only a color pallet, but line and texture as well.

CHARACTER FLOWERS

TRUVY

LILAC

ANELLE

DAISEY

CLAIREE

ORCHID

SHELBY

PINK ROSE

M’LYNN

PEACH ROSE

OUISER

GERBER DAISEY

SEASONAL JOURNEY OF THE STORY

SCENE ONE SUMMER

VIOLET / BROWN / RED GREY / PINK / GREEN / BLUE

SCENE TWO WINTER

GREEN / NAVY / VIOLET / RED GREEN / WHITE / BURGENDY

SCENE THREE SPRING

PINK / LEOPARD / TURQUOISE / WHITE / GREEN / BLUE

SCENE FOUR FALL

BLACK / TEEL / BROWN / OLIVE / BLACK

TRUVY

- FORM:** If she were a flower she would be a Lilac. She loves colors that have violet in them. She believes herself to be very fashion forward--and that translates almost successfully. She craves glamour, and when that gets out of balance she is tacky. She is proud of her curves and wears clothing that showcases them. She believes a women should always be in a heal and honors this philosophy. She is a lover of large jewelry and shiny things.
- FUNCTION:** Truvy is on stage for most of the show. She has very little time for quick changes. I would like her to have a base that can easily have things added and subtracted to create very different looks. Truvy wears smocks and aprons. I imagine that hers are very personally accented: in color choices, print embellishments, and an aplicae of her logo. These need to have pockets for things like her compact, combs, bobby pins etc. Quick changes from 2-3, and 3-4.
- SCENE 1:** Denim pants with a Polka Dot print shirt---Some shade of Lavender, over this she wears a violet smock that has an aplicae, which says “ Truvy’s Salon”. She has the epitome of 80’s pageant hair...it doesn’t move. During the scene she ties a matching scarf on her head.
- SCENE 2:** Black leggings with a flashy Purple Shirt trimmed with Dyed foe fur. She wears an apron over this. Over this she is wearing a Christmas themed apron, and poinsettia earrings.
- SCENE 3:** Same black leggings with a leopard print top. She has a Violet apron over it that has an aplicae that says “Truvy’s Salon” on it. Her hair is pulled up in pageant fashion and she has on a large pair of black plastic hoops.
- SCENE 4:** Same black leggings with an with a large over-sized Men’s cuff shirt, cinched with a large Red belt and accompanied with matching Red pumps. She wears her smock from Scene one over this. Her hair is down and pulled back with a headband.

ANELLE

- FORM:** If she were a flower she would be a daisy. Small, light, delicate, bright and cheery... but not a large presence. She undergoes a transformation style-wise during the course of the show. In Scene One she looks dingy and dowdy. Then Truvy teaches her the “ins and outs” of being a “Cosmo” girl, yet she doesn’t quite achieve this successfully. There is always something slightly “off” about her appearance. She is very feminine and conservative because of her faith. Her texture is very soft, and delicate.
- FUNCTION:** Anelle also needs some aprons that have pockets. She needs a maternity/pregnant form for the end of the show. Quick changes from 2-3, and 3-4.
- SCENE 1:** A very shabby “Hand-me-down” salvation army, ex-“church lady” dress with a very tiny floral print. Color tones in the brown and green family with tiny bits of turquoise. She wears the most ugly, clunky and broken down brown boots that have laces worn out like at the bowling alley. She has the most ridiculously ugly cat-eye glasses. Her hair hangs about wildly resting along the edges of her glasses.
- SCENE 2:** She is the quintessence of an over decorated Christmas tree! Green leggings with an over-sized “Merry Christmas” sweater full of festive embellishments. She has on matching trendy slouch boots. And a “Santa” hat along with her homemade plastic poinsettia earrings. During the scene she puts on a matching apron.
- SCENE 3:** She wears a denim skirt with a tiny floral print blouse. The print on the blouse is very tiny and in the Turquoise and blue color pallet with hints of green. She wears a matching cardigan with it. Not a polished cardigan---something that looks like “granny used to wear it”. She has on tennis shoes with this ensemble---along with a shop apron. Her hair is gently pulled off of her face with combs.
- SCENE 4:** She has on leggings with a solid turquoise maternity shirt that has a “hoody” on it. She has the same tennis shoes from the previous scene. Her hair is pulled off her face with a printed scarf.

CLAIREE

- FORM:** If she were a flower she would be an Orchid. Smart, clean lines, crisp textures... no-nonsense. Feminine but not frilly. She is the “Jackie-O” of the bunch. Everything about her is impeccable. She is also the most affluent magnolia, and it shows in her taste. She is classy, but not showy.
- FUNCTION:** She needs a bag for her knitting. Also needs reading glasses. One basic, one trendy for Scene Two. Quick changes from 2-3, and 3-4.
- SCENE 1:** Grey pants with a white blouse and red blazer. She has on a scarf tied like a bow-tie. She wears pearl and gold earrings. She enters with a pair of “Jackie-O” sunglasses, a black envelope purse, and her “knitting” bag. Her wedding band has a very pronounced diamond.
- SCENE 2:** She wears white trouser slacks with a grey turtleneck and sweater vest. She has on gold earrings that she can wear for the rest of the show. She carries a red pat&leather envelope purse, and a Christmas tin of pecans.
- SCENE 3:** Same white trouser slacks with a blouse. Paired with a lemon designer blouse. She opens the scene with one of Truvy’s cover wraps on. And wears for the entire scene. During the scene she uses a pearl envelope purse.
- SCENE 4:** A black dress with large white-cuffed sleeves and a very large white collar.

SHELBY

- FORM: If she were a flower she would be a pink rose with magenta lipstick. She is contemporary with a classic undercurrent. She undergoes a transformation style-wise during the course of the show. She transforms by maturing from girlish women to young Mother. She is bright and trendy---but relaxed and comfortable. She always looks lovely, but with an air of not trying too hard. Her style is nonchalant, but not unnoticeable. She IS the color pink.
- FUNCTION: She needs a wig to transform from long to short hair. Her short haircut is very “pan”. Quick change from 1-2, and 2-3.
- SCENE 1: Shorts and a pink blouse. She enters with her hair in rollers and carries a pink purse. She has on tennis shoes.
- SCENE 2: She has on Navy Blue leggings with a large sweater that is cream, hunter green, burgundy and navy (in sections). She enters with a red coat and hat on with scarf. She carries a navy, over the shoulder, long strap purse. She has on short beige slouch boots. Her hair is down, very natural---but neat, wavy and flowing.
- SCENE 3: She wears a soft pink sundress with little banana flowers on it that have very pale green leaves. She wears a very delicate and light matching cardigan. Her short wig is on. It is very “boyish” which helps even out this “girly” ensemble. She has a different pink purse with a matching pink wallet.
- SCENE 4: Not on stage.

M'LYNN

- FORM:** If she were a flower she would be a very soft peach rose. She is elegant and graceful. Her look is charming without trying to be. She is comfortable and relaxed but not plain. She has polished details and trimmings, but they are so quiet that one can only notice them if they are looking. There are no sharp lines on her---like rose pedals everything has a gentle curve. She is practical with her apparel, everything thought out carefully crafted to suit the day---without drawing attention to the thought.
- FUNCTION:** Need solutions to shampoo, and style her hair on stage. Must have a “helmet” like hairdo. Quick change from 1-2.
- SCENE 1:** Wears a very smart scort and blouse set. A gentle spring floral fashion with sandals. She wears a watch and gold earrings and wedding band that she keeps on for the entire show. She carries a large “mom” purse that coordinates with her ensemble.
- SCENE 2:** She wears kaki color trouser pants along with an earthy green sweater (not a Christmas green---more yellow/brown in it). The sweater has texture and design---but is one solid color. She also has a pair of Anelle’s homemade plastic poinsettia earrings ---clipped on.
- SCENE 3:** She wears a soft blue toned dress. Very much in the same dialog as Shelby’s but not as youthful. She has on a gentle white cardigan with it. She carries a navy, long strapped medium purse, and has matching flats. She also wears a very gentle string of pearls.
- SCENE 4:** She wears a black conservative dress---that’s comfortable and relaxed--- not stiff, along with a cream colored cardigan. She looks Neat, “appropriate”---but with no added thought. Black flats, and black long strap purse.

OUSIER

- FORM: If she were a flower she would be a Gerber Daisy. Bright, Loud, Wild Colors and shapes---but in a traditional form. She is a walking oxy-moron with the most unexpected pairings. Parts of her are expensive while other parts look like she doesn't care about anything. She likes what she likes, and she wears it---to hell with what anyone thinks. She embraces her "sourthernness" by wearing extravagant and ornamental peaces irregardless of their practicality. Her style is loud and demanding to be heard---not necessarily for beauty or adoration (like Truvy), but rather for focus.
- FUNCTION: Needs a very audacious fur coat. Quick change from 3-4.
- SCENE 1: She enters wearing a pair of overalls, a visor and her fur. She has on garden boots. She carries a very bohemian earth-toned bag.
- SCENE 2: Fur coat. Dark grey slacks and a silk burgundy red shirt with enormous shoulder pads. She also has a basic dark grey long strapped purse. She has on a very ritzy broach.
- SCENE 3: She wears a very southern gardening dress with a large gardening hat. Her color pallet here is green and earthy colors---but not very saturated tones.
- SCENE 4: Very deep olive (with a lot of grey in it) colored pants with a very simple beige blouse. Over the blouse she wears a shoulder-padded shirt that matches her pant---she wears this open over it.

General Notes On The Set

SPACE

The ideal space to do this show would be in a thrust. This space would invite the audience to really feel as if they are in the Salon with the ladies. Also, it encourages the movement to be more realistic and detailed.

ARCHITECTURE

The Set design of this show should be realistic. We are in a signal location for the duration of the story: Truvy's Salon. The more detail ---the better. One very key thing to keep in mind when designing the set is that Truvy doesn't have a self standing Salon, but rather an "enclosed carport" that she turned into one. The architecture should reflect this. Wood paneling, crown molding, the form of the windows, etc.

COLOR

The first color that many productions seem to bend to is pink. I think this is a mistake, as pink as Shelby's "signature color". Having Truvy's Salon in the pink family weakens this. I would like Shelby's pink attire to pop on stage so that the memory of her love for this color is very pronounced. The color of my set will be in soft violet tones with green as the main contrast color along with white and bits of yellow.

ENTRANCE / EXIT

Must have one entrance/exit that leads outdoors along with one entrance exit that leads to Truvy's kitchen and other parts of her house.

TEXTURE

Because this space is an extension of Truvy's home the texture would be softer than a traditional salon. More fabrics and domestic embellishments, etc. One way to accomplish this feel is through the way the windows are dressed---they should look like windows that could be in someone's living room. The furniture selection for the sofa, coffee table, and hat/coat rack should also have the lines that would be in someone's home. There is must be a balance between the Salon Steel and leather and the Home wood and cotton.

CORE PIECES

Certain pieces in this set are none-negotiable as they are explicitly called for in the story:

Two stylist chairs & two station carts
Shampoo chair & sink
Nail station
Dryer Chairs

Additional pieces are:

Small sofa or setae
Counter with a sink (hotplate)
Desk area with a telephone
Places for storage
Hat/coat rack

WINDOWS

There should be two windows. Their architecture is that of a Louisiana home. They are fully dressed with curtains and a shams and sheers. The shadow of trees are scene on the curtains.

SEASONAL / SCENE SHIFTS

While the story remains in a single location for the entire show, there are opportunity to dress the set slightly differently from scene to scene to show seasonal shifts and the passage of time:

SCENE ONE → SCENE TWO

The flower vase on Truvy's counter is struck. A poinsettias vase replaces it. A Christmas tree is brought on. A Christmas blanket and pillows are thrown over the sofa. Additional Christmas embellishments are scattered about.

SCENE TWO → SCENE THREE

All the Christmas décor is struck. A vase of magnolias replaces the poinsettias.

SCENE THREE → SCENE FOUR

The magnolia vase is replaced with a vase of pink roses.

General Notes On Sound

MUSIC Music selection is an opportunity to paint the period that this story lives in: The 80's

RADIO The Radio allows us the opportunity to sketch in the surrounding town that these characters reside in: Chinquapin Parish. It threads into the story line of Claire buying WKKD---per Shelby's instruction---which becomes an arch for Claire as well. The physical appearance of the radio in Truvy's Salon is attributed to Shelby giving away one of her duplicated wedding presents---so it also serves as a source of nostalgia when Shelby is gone.

EFFECTS There are a few sound effects needed to propel the action. A telephone ring. The sound of a dog barking. And the sound of an explosion. An additional sound I'd like to add is the sound of a car pulling up,, and away for certain character's exits and entrances.

PRE-SHOW

OPEN

TRANSITION A Scene 1 → Scene 2

TRANSITION B Scene 2 → Scene 3

TRANSITION C Scene 3 → Scene 4

TRANSITION D Scene 4 → Scene 5

CURTAIN CALL

CHAPTER NINE: POST-EVALUATIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

There is no rehearsal for the director. Each interaction is the final performance. Each day, each facet of communication whether phone, email, meeting, rehearsal---is all orchestration in the opus. The director that throws any part of the process away is like a bad actor throwing away some of their lines. Also, once an approach is selected, it should remain fluid, open to adjustments as the process unfolds. Trying to force a process into a specific approach is like squeezing on really gorgeous shoes that are too small: it pinches, causes pain, and there's something hanging out. No matter how good looking the shoe---it won't look quite right. I want to examine this idea of approach and adjustment through the various channels of production and design under the director's umbrella, specifically the rehearsal process. Anne Bogart says:

“ I am interested in the artistic process. In order to approach the theater as artists, we should have a good look at our tools and how we make decisions. How do we approach one another in the arena of rehearsal or on stage? How do we begin, how do we proceed, and what are our allies?” (Bogart, 1)

Over the years I have studied countless directorial approaches. I've read countless books, sat in myriads of rehearsals of with different types of directors, and have experimented with many different techniques. However each show has a plethora of variables: script,

cast, crew, budget...the list is endless. So, is there a formula to plug in all these intangibles? Of course not! That is why it is important for directors to tailor their approach to each specific production. My journey with the Vine Theater's production of "Steel Magnolias" was to investigate this process of custom tailoring. There are countless approaches and techniques to pull from, alter, steal, embellish and re-arrange. This organic pastiche of ideas and theories weave into an approach unto itself. A director's approach is like the unseen fingerprint of the production, it can be traced throughout the process. It is multi-dimensional and multi-faceted. The journey from vision to performance is all propelled through the fabric of this approach and how the director allows that material to breath, adapt, shift, metamorphose and grow moment to moment. In this post evaluative summary, I would like to explore some different approaches and styles, examine how they were implemented, analyze what was successful and hypothesize about what might have been more effective.

This evaluative summary should also serve as a post-mortem of sorts. It is as an opportunity to dissect the body of this particular production process. This examination will focus on complications, mal-functions, shortcomings, mis-adventures and short-sightings. After all, doctors do not scan a patient to find out what is going right. Rather they seek out symptoms of distress and dysfunction, question the cause, review the history, and then make a diagnosis. It is the same for directors. The diagnosis made in the post-mortem of a production, may help prescribe a different "medicine" to some portion of the next. That being said, my hope is that this review becomes a testament of the complex anatomy of a production.

Rehearsal

The First Meet

At first glance, one might say that all rehearsals have a basic formula that seems to be universally adopted. But in truth, rehearsals are like fingerprints. No two are alike. A Director's job is to arrange a string of these unique events into some sort of natural progression, a process that allows for a series of arcs within the frame of a master arc. It all begins with the first meet. There are many different schools of thought on what should happen at a first meet. Almost all seem to have many of the same components: introductions, housekeeping, design presentations for the set, lighting, costumes, and of course the obligatory first read. Many directors like to incite discussion during the first meet and kick-off with a great deal of table work. Others believe in getting the actors on their feet immediately. Some directors like to spend the first meet with a series of exercises that break the ice and start creative bonding. For example:

“... Akalaitis has devoted an increasing amount of time to ‘tablework’ during the early days of rehearsals. Even so, she gets her actors on their feet by the first or second day, engaging in a complex series of physical exercises which lasts anywhere from twenty minutes to several hours, and supports the work on the text itself.” (Mitter, 155).

I do like to have “table-work” at the top of my process, as most directors do. However I usually tend to lean more towards Anne Bogart's style and approach to this valuable production “homework” which she refers to as “sourcework”:

“...when a director walks into a rehearsal on the first day, she is often weeks or months ahead of the rest of the company in her obsession with the material. Source-work is used to provide similar time and space for the collaborators to fill up with their own knowledge, interest, dreams and reactions to the material. The Director has caught a disease, and somehow in those critical and early moments in the process she has to make the disease contagious. Source-work is an invitation to obsession.” (Bogart, 18)

While I agree with this thought, and love to indulge in Bogart’s viewpoints technique whenever possible, I felt that for this particular process this modern of discovery would not be feasible. We didn’t have many rehearsal hours, and the actors whom were cast were not necessarily of the “viewpoints” variety. Not to say that the prospect of bringing this new approach to their artistry wasn’t exciting. Rather, I felt that the investment of time it would take to teach, facilitate and utilize this method was not conducive to our production timeline.

But what’s great about Bogart’s Viewpoints is that invites artists to explore and adapt it’s concepts in ways that make them their own. This rests well with me as

I am from the school of thought that there is no set equation, but rather the first meet should be tailored to the specific production and the unique group of people working on it. My approach with “Steel Magnolias” was to achieve some version of the following goals. Create a warm environment for the cast to meet one another and get to know each other as women. Incite discussion about the script, and encourage analysis. Accomplish a dynamic first read full of bold choices and exploration. Carve out a manifesto of sorts for the journey ahead. Set goals for the group individually and for each character specifically. Establish a rapport with the actors that will allow them to feel comfortable

and open in the collaboration ahead. Initiate the building blocks of Actor/Director trust. Inspire the group to seek more specificity in every aspect of the story---encouraging them to dig deeper. And lastly, to assure the group that there is a very deliberate vision that all components are working towards confidently.

Our first meet was very charming and fitting for the journey we were about to begin. Our assembly of women met for a traditional southern brunch at the home of producer Whitney Goin. Her home felt as though it might have been in the play! We spent the meal gathered around a warm mahogany table, set with all the trimmings one might find at the home of a southern lady. We spent about an hour discussing the script and getting to know one another.

Then we all retreated into the living room for a comfortable and cozy first read. I remember noticing that they all chose seating appropriate for their characters. Whether this was by design or default I do not know, but M'lynn chose a settee with Shelby near her feet sprawled out on the floor. Ouiser nestled herself into the cushions of the sofa, while Miss Clairee took an exquisite upholstered chair. Truvy sat on another sofa---but with her feet curled tucked beneath her while Annelle sat on the floor beside her Indian style.

During the read, I mainly listened. I took some notes here and there. It's always wonderful to hear it read aloud with your instruments after spending so much preparation in your head, imagining what it will/should sound like.

Afterwards, I incited some further discussion by asking some questions. I was very pleased with how much thought and homework the cast had put into this prior to our first meet. They were already thinking sooo specifically and looking for layers and subtext. I shared some of my ideas and goals for them. Perhaps one of my most prominent notes

was, “the trap of doing a piece like this is playing the sweetness of it---it can’t be too precious, or it will become obnoxious.” Yes, this group of women love each other, yes, they would give their right arm away to help a friend, but they are all very different and there are things that they can’t stand about each other. Intimacy means knowing the bad with the good---look for the bad---the good is overpowering. I also said that it was important to carve out the specificity of the different relationships, and truly create an arch in the passage of time. Who is “familiar” at the top, how familiar? How does this change during the course of the story? Who has alliances with whom and for what? How do these change moment to moment? Also, what is your individual arch? Some peoples like Shelby and M’lynn’s are easy to spot and play to...but they ALL need to have an arch...what is Truvy’s and Miss Clairee’s?

One of my favorite things about the first meet is the sense of excitement, and expectation that wells up in the cumulative gathering of artists. There is something cathartic for the everyone to bring their research and thoughts outside of themselves to share, inspire, challenge, question and discover.

I think how a director leads this exploratory sharing of ideas can often be the template of communicative exchange for the remainder of the process. The artistic tone and working style is introduced, in how the first meet is set up. My approach was to create a collaborative atmosphere, open, non-judge mental, non-threatening, but without being lost, and sloppy. I believe in structure and having a clear vision, however I don’t think it’s the Director’s job to dictate, but rather steer, prompt, promote, push, real in, specify, and maintain the integrity of story .

It is even easier to achieve this directorial style when the group of actors you are working with are talented enough to navigate this sort of process with ease and grace. I must say that this particular group of eight women were wonderfully adept at participating in this form of progression and I was pleased to say that for the most part, our working environment from the first meet---all the way to opening night was an absolute delight.

Process

No two productions I've ever worked on had the same process. There are however components that always seem to be somewhere in the recipe of any production, and there is definitely a general aesthetic to how those ingredients are mixed. Style, approach, attitude, philosophy, mantra---whatever you want to call it, is what makes each director uniquely different from the next. One of my core beliefs about directing is summed up in Bogart's statement:

“Rehearsal is not about forcing things to happen; rather, rehearsal is about listening. The director listens to the actors. The actors listen to one another. You listen collectively to the text. You listen for clues. You keep things moving. You probe. You do not gloss over moments as if they were understood. Nothing is understood. You bring yourself to the situation as it evolves” (125).

This was not always my belief, but rather one of the greatest lessons that time and experience induced. I remember when I first began Directing, I operated in a mindset which very much opposed this thought. I made the mistake that many green directors do in thinking that I was responsible for FORCING things to happen and understanding EVERYTHING. As of course this is impossible, nonetheless I looked at my any lack of

understanding as utter failure and incompetence, and would become very defensive about anything that an actor, or designer may have shed light on. It was as if I was in a perpetual state of fear in feeling inadequate for the task, and that I would be “found out”. How liberating it is to walk confidently into not knowing, not understanding, not forcing...but rather as Bogart says, “ride what is happening”.

My process for “Steel...” however was not entirely organic. I would steer things inside of a frame, and then allow the actors to explore and discover inside of that, and occasionally their exploration led me to changing the frame entirely. For example, I’d say “during that monologue on pg. 96 I’d love for her to get up and cross upstage to the kitchen and start cutting herself a piece of pie---let’s try it.” Most of the time, with MOST of the cast, the actor’s instincts would find the when and how of navigating these vague and open “directions”. But there were many times that things “didn’t work” and felt “off”. But I would rarely say that to the actor. Rather at that point, I would say, “ok, thanks, how about we try it again, this time, let’s try you rising on word “x” and crossing up on line “x”---then make the pie.” Then after it’s attempted, I will generally ask---“what do you think?” Most of the time, the actor would say “Oh, that felt much better” and then I will follow up with an “Ok, great---then let’s get that”. On the few occasions that they tell me it still feels “odd”, I will not force them to stick with it but instead invite them to keep trying new things. There were probably a couple of instances where I might have asked them to try it again before writing it off---but I always say this with the promise that if they still do not feel good, we’ll change it. Which is not always necessarily the case, but I am always open to considering it.

I am of the belief that if you are working with good talent, then most of the time, if they feel “off” then it very well might be an indication to something actually being “off” about the choice. I don’t think that this should become a standard assumption, but rather a miniature “red flag” worthy of further investigation. I am also not of the philosophy that everything an actor does ALL of the time should feel “natural”. This is art, which is a lie by nature; sometimes we need to “cheat” so that the audience may experience the truth of moment. It’s the Directors job to weigh when that is absolutely necessary, and how these little lies are most effective. With “Steel...” this was a constant struggle as we where working in a proscenium space with a very tight cone-like set. I would often as the ladies to “cheat out” and “open up”. Having previously directed the same show in a thrust space, I found many of the adjustments to proscenium disappointing, as my personal preference is to work in the more dimensional diagonals of a thrust.

One of the traps I’ve noticed when a director asks an actor to “cheat” is that it essentially signing off to the actor that there is something disingenuous of false about their movement, which is very negative physiologically to good actors. So, while I may have often thought in my head “I need M’lynn to cheat out to her right while she x’s” , I would say “M’lynn while you are crossing why don’t you enlist Annelle in what you’re saying-- -Annelle, I know you’re busy dying Ouiser’s hair, but why don’t make sure you’re an available scene partner for Annelle on this line”. Annelle being to M’lynn’s right, would have accomplished my “cheat” while giving intention and purpose to the actors, taking away it’s “falseness”.

Character Choices

Another example of “riding things” rather than forcing things could be found in the individual approach of their characters. Actors are wonderful thinkers, and imaginative dreamers, given the chance; they can create a world of specific circumstances built on reasoning and feeling. They don’t however always make those choices with a lens that can zoom out beyond their own character. This is when I feel it’s necessary for a Director to steer them to an instrument that better fits the orchestration of the whole.

A great example of this during “Steel...” was Whitney Goin’s journey with the character Shelby. Whitney is a very thoughtful woman of reason, grace, logic, understanding.

These traits are not necessarily shared by the character Shelby, especially at the beginning of the journey. Whitney’s approach to Shelby began to become incredibly gracious, poised, elegant, and lovely. This was not serving the story, as Shelby needed to be more headstrong, stubborn, willful---child-like in order to facilitate the conflict and contrast between her and the M’lynn. Part of the issue here was also that Whitney was older than the character, and she needed to play down her age. I began to ask questions to incite thought to her chosen approach. This did not elicit the response I had hoped for, being the thoughtful actor that she is, Whitney always had very neat and logical answers backing up her choices which bent towards harmony and resolve. I reminded the cast that we want to look for the tension, especially in script as sweet and precious as “Steel”. I asked Whitney, what is stronger for the story? That Shelby is an immature, slightly spoiled daughter challenging her mother, or that she is a mature, responsible woman who is decidedly choosing the best thing for herself. She had hard time resolving that someone

she perceived to be “good” would in fact do things that were “not nice”. It was a hard realization for her to come to, but the character Shelby needed to be far shallower than she was quantifying her to be.

When discussion didn't seem to elicit the actions I needed, I attempted “steering” her another way. Rather than dictate, Shelby needs to be more immature, I asked her what her actions and intentions were for specific lines and moments. For example, I would ask, when you say that to M'lynn what are you trying to DO to her there? How do you want to make her FEEL? Not wanting to give the weak and generic response of “I'm trying to explain to her to make her feel enlightened”, she would be cornered into choosing something stronger: “I'm trying to scold her to make her feel belittled”...then I would say, how are you going to go about doing that? I always encouraged the cast to choose tactics that had tension with the action. In other words, “judgingly scold her to make her feel stupid” was not as strong as “jokingly scold her to make her feel belittled”.

This began to turn her away from some of the sugary delivery that her Shelby was attracted to.

I would love to say that the situation was resolved here. But it was not. In a perfect scenario, all of these gentle approaches that Directors have to steer and ride what is going on would work. Most of the time they do, however, once in a while they don't. While things did shift and grow, as we grew closer to open, I noticed that she began to revert to some of the “old” habits. Still I attempted to keep the integrity of not demanding. I would say things like, “Remember your choices, what are you trying to DO there? It's not as clear as it was. If you are trying to scold her---really do.” This also seemed to work, however its success seemed erratic.

Many times towards the end of a process, Directors will be forced to come to the realization that much of what they had hoped or strived for, may not happen, and the tactics they used to go about it were not successful. It is at this point in time that they must decide what is worth still pushing for and what might be lost. Some directors make the mistake of pushing for everything, and only end up overwhelming and frustrating their actors to the point of failure on all fronts. I try to be wary of this while also contending that I would rather over-shoot than underestimate their capabilities. It is during this time frame, where I will sometimes adjust my process of communication. We are beyond me asking an actor to “try” to cross-further left before planting themselves for a section. I simply ask it happen. When this fails I will sometimes say that I NEED it to happen. Similarly with character choices and intentions. In the case of Shelby, I found my last resolve becoming, “she needs to be more immature, childish, silly, playful, un- assured, stubborn, resentful, challenging...” etc. At this point in the time line, I am beyond taking the time for the actor to find it on their own, I am beyond explaining “why”, it is time for action and to do. Otherwise when it does NOT happen, it is ultimately on my head. Sometime this shift of dialogue will frustrate an actor, but often they will operate with a renewed sense of urgency. Most of the time the desire to be pleasing to the Director and accomplish whatever it is they are striving for successfully. One of the ways I find using this tactic effectively is in preserving it’s scarcity. Also, the trust you build up to this moment goes a long way in the actor’s acceptance of the request. If they feel they can trust you, if they believe you’ve been “fair” with their

process. They won't need all of the other things, they will simply seek to do. Ultimately, they desire to be pleasing.

Exercises

Exercises are to a director what vitamins are to the body. They are always good for you, but taking extra vitamins your body isn't lacking does not produce an evident result. Perhaps somewhere, on some internal level, it's doing something, but externally the effects are unnoticeable. In order for these supplements to be effective, the right ones need to be prescribed to the right person, while others seem to be valuable across the board.

It is the same with exercises. Some seem to work across the board, but the specific regiment should be tailored to each production uniquely. A director must determine what will be fruitful and what is timely in terms of production hours. Also, when an exercise is explored can greatly shift how it is approached. For example, a particular exercise done in the first week, will elicit a very different outcome than doing it during the third week. For "Steel Magnolias" I decided to do a very unique series of character exercises based on the products found in a make-up case. Personal beauty and style are such a huge part of the show; I wanted all of the beatification processes to be specific as possible for every character. Also, I wanted the actors to attach meaning to all of their cosmetic rituals, exploring their history and origin. Lastly, I wanted to overlap and interconnect their physical rituals to parts of each other. For example, Annelle might wear red lipstick because Truvy told her it was the color of passion, and gave her a tube of it which Annelle wore the night she met her husband. This would serve in adding detail and

shared history for the two actors at the top of the second scene when Truvy is bragging about Annelle's makeover to Shelby. All of these details put together would assist in making the salon seem more real and less strategy.

I began this by giving each of the ladies a make-up case at the first meet, designed to suit the personality of their individual characters. I then gave them an assignment to put ten things inside that they felt their character would have inside there.

The following is a worksheet that I asked them to fill out at the same time:

STEEL MAGNOLIAS

Make – Up Case Character Study

1. What are your colors? When did you fall in love with these colors? Why?

2. What is the most important thing in your make-up case?

3. When is your make-up case with you?

4. When did you get your very first make up case? How old were you? Who gave it to you? What did it look like?

5. What perfume would we find (if any) in your make-up case?

6. What is the oddest thing I would find in your make-up case?

7. If there was at least one thing in your make up case that another character (in the play) gave you, what would it be? Who would it be from?

8. What is something in your make up case that you wouldn't want another character to see? Who would you want to hide it from?

9. Describe the make up case your character has at the top of the show.

10. What is your character's philosophy on physical beauty?

After this base assignment, intermittently, we would do exercises during rehearsal using this information and the cases they had filled. For example, one day I had each of them

take someone else's and had them put two things inside that their character thought that the other character should have in there. The purpose of this was to create some sort of judgment. I wanted there to be an "odd" between them. The script already hands us the sugar, it's our job to find the salt. One example of this was Miss Clairee putting pantyhose in Shelby's explaining that she is of the belief a southern woman should always wear a stocking when she has a dress on, not go gallivanting around with her bare legs flailing about. This little "judgment" created an interesting layer to the bond between Miss Clairee and Shelby. She isn't just this "nice" woman who is friends with her Mother, she is this woman in Shelby's life, who gives advice and support but also lovingly chastises from time to time as a grandmother might.

Another exercise involving the make up cases was me and I asked each of them to put two things inside of it that they wouldn't want anyone else to find. One of the things Ouiser put in her's was a pack of cigarettes. She had created a sub-story that her character used to smoke, but then had a cancer scare and stopped. But then she began smoking again, which raises the stakes to her guilt when she finds out about Shelby and M'lynn liver transplant.

One exercise we did with them was when we were on set, I had them divide into groups of two for an improv. In each improv they would find another character's case who wasn't there that had left it in the salon. During the course of the improv they would have to snoop through it to figure out who's it was, and by the end of the scene, steal one item and throw one item away. These revealed many details, created interesting alliances and gossip, much of which raised the stakes during our actual scenes.

In all of these little exercises we specified, where in the timeline of the story these little “scenes” happened, creating a shared history for the characters before the next seasonal sequence. Also, I strategically assigned exploration between individual characters to heighten their shared vocabulary and create opportunity for stronger tactics in their individual scenes or moments together. All of these “make-up” exercises were short, and did not take over our production process. When we fell “behind” in certain tasks, I would scrap an exercise I might have planned. When we did do them, they became a special time for the actors, almost a reward in many ways, as they greatly enjoyed doing them. Over time they accomplished a special and specific bond that did translate to the stage.

Lighting

Going into lighting I had some initial concern. The acting area of the stage was shaped somewhat like a cone and was not placed conveniently for where the lighting instruments were hung. I was reminded of Linda Essig's idea of reflected light:

“Reflected light, for example, may enter the stage space at an angle directly opposite the main source or at some angle diagonal to it. The former implies a rigidity to the environment that may or may not be present in the design of the set” (111).

Ideally the developmental process of design starts with discussion of conceptual ideas. These are turned into pictorial representations and then finally schematic diagrams. Unfortunately sometimes in the “business” of theater this process is lost and replaced with a soul focus on product within a range of deadlines. Lighting designer Erin Minor made it very clear from the beginning that she did not deem the process necessary, as this was an “easy show” for light. As the Director, I felt it was my duty to attempt the process in any way that might fit within our monetary budget and time. I initiated as much contact as possible, continually trying to arrange a meeting. One week prior to open we finally managed to sit down and have a fruitful discussion. I brought an entire breakdown of every lighting moment with possibilities and ideas to incite discussion and collaboration. I left feeling that we were on the same page. Nothing could be farther from the truth. During our tech I would discover that nothing we discussed was retained by the Lighting Designer, and I found myself starting from ground zero yet again. It

became clear that this person on this particular production was simply trying to complete a job and cared very little about creating art. Essig states, “The lighting designer must come back to that all-important question of ‘how will the light function for this production and what will it look like?’” (112)

If the designer is not asking this question, it becomes the Director’s job to ask it and propel a discussion. Now the lighting for “Steel Magnolias” is very practical and not overly complicated in terms of the script. However with our abstract set design we had some panels that could very much change based on how they were lit. Which brought up yet another great question of Linda Essig’s: “...If the set is based on ideas of translucency and transparency, how will the lighting help to support those visual ideas” (112).

This is a question that the Set Designer and I were very conscious of from day one and brought to the eye of the lighting designer at our very first production meeting. The central design idea of the set was appropriate for this approach to lighting, creating a feeling of the exterior of this local, and making the looming magnolia trees a standing presence on stage throughout the show. Unfortunately, sometimes goals are not always realized as we plan and vision is replaced with the practicality of facing deadlines and producing a means to an end.

It’s no secret that the week before open is often called “hell week”, and rightly so, as everyone is scrambling to make deadlines on little to no sleep, tensions run high. There

are moments as a director that you are tempted to throw your hands in the air and give up resigning yourself into the mediocrity or laziness of a particular cast or crew member. I had a moment like this with the lighting Designer. It was at the end of a 12 hour rehearsal for me, she had arrived much later in the day and was finally available to do a cue to cue. But all she was concerned about was having some light. She did not care about mood, tone, evenness---she just wanted to set a cue. It would have been soo easy to just nod and say “ok”, that’s fine. But it wasn’t “fine”, and anyway I don’t want “fine”, I want “great” and “excellent”. So I pushed for more, asking questions like “can we warm that up just a bit?” “Is there anyway we can have some texture on this one?” “What do you think about trying a different pattern here?”. However, the more I asked, the more angry the designer became. Eventually she exploded into a verbal fit. I was completely tempted to have one as well, but I knew that this was the only time we had left to get this done, and the producers where going to have a hard time hiring someone else within the next 24 hours. So I calmly answered her by saying, “I understand that you are frustrated, I am frustrated too, why don’t we just start over and get through this, because the sooner it is finished the sooner we can go home”. I immediately said something positive about what we where looking at and tried to move forward. She then traded in her verbal bickering to passive aggressively playing “dumb”. For example, if I asked if we could get a little more light stage right, she’d take it to the extreme and make me hand walk her through how much, instead of just giving it an honest shot.

In the end, I was not completely satisfied, but felt I pulled as much out of her as I possibly could. The business part of me wanted to fire her because I felt her behavior and execution was beyond unprofessional and entirely unacceptable. But the logistical part of

me was thinking about how many hours away we were to open, and there was no fruit to bear towards the production in pursuing that thought. I did tell the producers the next day that I would not be left alone with her anymore as she was clearly taking advantage of an isolated working environment to unload unhealthy aggression. In truth, I did not really care as much about the attitude she threw at me, but I felt certain that having some accountability might produce a better product. It's amazing how different people will act out in the open of their employers. This accountability went a long way in making the remainder of the process far more successful. I was pleased to see her behavior and attitude towards me completely change in the presence of the producers.

I may not be a lighting designer, but I understand enough basics to say with certainty that the lighting for this production was poor. There were shadows on the actors' faces when they were sitting on the salon chairs---which was a large part of the show. This is inexcusable. Tommy, the Set Designer had given everyone renderings of the floor plan from the very beginning of the process. The specs of the space were given out to everyone far in advance. If the Lighting Designer foresaw any problems in lighting the salon chairs she should have alerted us. If there was no practical obstacle in making the appropriate adjustments after load in, then it should have been done upon my many requests.

As Director, I take full responsibility in this issue not getting resolved. Part of Directing is understanding that wearing this hat means more than just citing complications.

Directing is about understanding them, looking at them for what they are, who they will inevitably affect, predicting the consequences of them and then, arranging them in order of priority. In order to direct you must resign yourself to the idea, that not everything will

go as you like, not everything will be executed as you desire. So you must know which battles are worth fighting. In weighing this, it's necessary to consider what you are actually gaining, and how much the battle will cost you. Then you run this through that faithful filter which is time---how far away you are from open? This is what put my lighting complications in perspective. Hours away from open I decided that this battle had run it's course. The actors would be sufficiently lit, and more then 95% of my audience would probably never consider, let alone pin point, the shortcomings which I considered "problems". In the end the actors where lit, transitions where more involved then simply lights up an down, and we where able to thematically light moments which I believe helped tell our story.

SM LIGHTING
 CUE BREAKDOWN : Rough Draft

| CUE | DESCRIPTION | APX TIME |
|---|--|-----------|
| PRE-SHOW | Houselights Gel on Stage? | 20 Mins |
| 0. FADE TO BLACK> | Transition | 3 SECONDS |
| 1. LIGHTS IN > | Scene One pg. 31. O: “ Kill Rhett...Kill!” a beat X | 5 SECONDS |
| 2. FADE TO BLACK (Stage Only, Trees stay?) | Transition | 1 SECOND |
| a.) | Lights up on Truvy in shop (apx. 50 seconds into track...as Vocals start) | |
| b.) | Lights fade out (At the end of vocals on the track) | |
| c.) | Window Christmas lights in? (M’lynn gets to mark) | |
| 3. LIGHTS IN> | Scene Two Lights up in specific acting areas only pg. 31-32 | 5 SECONDS |
| 4. LIGHT SHIFT> | Scene Two pg. Lights in the shop pop on To full | 1 SECOND |
| 5. CHRISTMAS TREE> | Scene Two | 1 SECOND |

| | | |
|--------------------|---|------------|
| 6. FADE TO BLACK | INTERMISSION | 5 SECONDS |
| 7. LIGHTS IN> | House Lights Down | |
| 8. FADE TO BLACK> | House Lights Down | |
| 9. LIGHTS IN> | Transition Radio Special? | |
| 10. FADE TO BLACK | (Stage Only, Trees stay) | 5 SECONDS |
| 11. LIGHTS IN> | Scene Three | 3 SECONDS |
| 12. FADE TO BLACK> | Transition | 6 SECONDS |
| a.) | Tree Special? | |
| b.) | Fade to Black | |
| c.) | Lights Up on Truvy In shop | |
| d.) | Fade to Black | |
| e.) | Lights up so that I can see through the Walls and see silhouette Of C. and O. walking from SL. To SR. | |
| f.) | Fade to black | |
| 13. LIGHTS IN> | Special on Radio | ? SECONDS |
| 14. FADE TO BLACK | Actors hit marks | 3 SECONDS |
| 15. LIGHTS IN> | Scene Four | 5 SECONDS? |
| 16. FADE TO BLACK> | End of Show | 3 SECONDS |
| 17. LIGHTS IN> | Curtain Call | 2 SECONDS |
| 18. HOUSELIGHTS | Exit | |

Costuming

Costuming of this production was unconventional at best. Due to budgetary restrictions there was not a costumer designer per say, but rather a costume assistant, Kelly Van Dyke to help gather and allocate articles of clothing from various resources that could be pulled into some sort of unified pallet. VanDyke and I had a preliminary meeting to discuss the characters and what we envisioned would and wouldn't be in the closets of our six "...Magnolia" women.

First we asked the actors to participate in their constructing their looks by bringing in anything they may already have in their wardrobe that might work. Given the ages of our cast, we where pleasantly surprised to see a nice variety of pieces that were actually specific and appropriate to 1980's apparel. We ended up pulling several pieces that we knew we definitely wanted to use, and then began the process of "filling in the gaps". For this particular production, this approach did not prove to be detrimental, but it was in no means optimal. The overall look was a potpourri of accurately period pieces, haphazardly arranged into a seasonal scheme that did not fully temper color, and texture. But to coin clothing Designer "Tim Gun", we "made it work". In the end, I feel we definitely achieved a sense of character to each individual wardrobe that rang true to the characters on the page and the actors which inhabited them.

The following is a log sampling some of the costuming process of the production. Please note that it is not extensive and only represents a portion of the overall costuming journey.

COSTUME REFLECTIONS

- 2/4 I met the Costume Designer Kelly VanDyke. She is absolutely lovely! We walked the show with each character and discussed the script. I was very happy to find out that we were very much on the same page and I immediately felt a great amount of trust in her. At the end of the meeting we set up scheduling with a plan to visit the FBCO costume closet sometime in the upcoming week.
- 2/15 We went to the FBCO costume closet today. It was a very successful visit, I think we pulled at least 80 percent of our wardrobe from here. We spent three and a half hours pouring over each character, exploring possibilities and sifting through costumes. By the end, we had a very clear vision of where we were headed. The next step is to have the cast try what we pulled and take a look at the overall palette of each scene.
- 2/21 Today was a pivotal moment for costuming...by the end of our meeting we had gelled everything except what Coat Shelby's wearing in Scene two, What sweater Annelle's wearing in scene one, and what Annelle's wearing in scene 4 as well as what Ouiser's wearing at the top of the show...Aside from this, all that remains is the final touches of accessories and fittings...
- 2/24 We Found a Dress for Annelle for scene 4. It's a brown tweed/knit dress that I'd love for her to wear with leggings and a sweater.

The following is a list of working notes, towards the end of the costume allocation:

SCENE ONE

TRUVY Zebra shirt with purple leather skirt. Black side of apron.
Purple Earrings. Black belt.

Scarf? Any other accessories you want?

ANNELLE Brown floral Dress

? Sweater / Belt / Glasses

CLAIREE Black Pants, White Shirt, Red Blazer & Bow Tie.
Sunglasses, Black Envelope Purse. Knitting Bag. Jewelry--
-pearl & gold.

SHELBY Pink Shorts

***Denim color shirt/ white under tank

M'LYNN Coral pants with a plaid blue shirt. coral tied sweater . Big
purse.

OUISER Jeans with a turquoise hoody. Brown Fur. Sunglasses .Big
bag Purse

? Needs Jewelry

SCENE TWO

TRUVY With leopard apron. Poinsettia earrings.

*** Red & Purple Christmas dress---needs to be altered
and have fur cuffs.

ANNELLE ? Christmas leggings and sweater (think she found a better
one that she's borrowing) Beige/tan/camel boots/ Christmas
hat . Needs festive earrings. Would LOVE for them to be
Christmas lights.

CLAIREE White trousers with red turtleneck and Christmas sweater vest. Sassy glasses. Expensive jewelry. White Fur. Envelope Purse

SHELBY Sweater with leggings.

*** Coat from FBCO? Maroon Mary coat? Scarf, gloves hat.

M'LYNN Denim skirt. Mom turtle neck with green sweater. Poinsettia earrings.

? Brown tweed belt? Robin might have it...

OUISER Burgundy jersey knit set. Brown fur.

? Expensive accessories. Loved that stuff you pulled ---if you'd like to use that.

SCENE THREE

TRUVY Leopard Print shirt. With black Capri with beads. Leopard apron

?Accessories same as scene four or clip ons...

ANNELLE Red floral and white & denim vest dress.

?Accessories same as scene four

CLAIREE White trouser slack and purple blouse.

?need bug pin or some other pin---I can change the line if we need to...

SHELBY Pink tube dress with pink sweater

M'LYNN Crème dress with pink and green floral.

OUISER Yellow floral sundress with red hoody. Hat. Glasses

? Jewelry same as scene four. Hat needs red flower embellishment.

SCENE FOUR

TRUVY Navy blue and white polka dot dress with smock

? Jewelry

ANNELLE NO IDEA! I had her try on a black dress with rusty coral flowers and green leaves. It's a large print. It would need a sweater...not sold though...also, we must keep in mind the quick change and the pregnancy belly. If she wears leggings under her scene three dress she could wear them with a new look in scene four.

Pregnancy belly---ask Stephanie.

CLAIREE Black Dress with white color.

M'LYNN Let's try the black suit she brought in... we also have that navy dress...but if you find something interesting---I'm open...

? Jewelry

OUISER Black dress with turquoise paisleys

? Jewelry

Hair & Make Up

The colorful and boisterous hairdos of “Steel Magnolias” have become iconic symbols of the 80’s and southern women. It’s also one of the most unnoticeably complex challenges of the production as most of the time, the actors cast in the rolls of Truvy and Anelle are not professional hair stylists and must learn to achieve all of these “doos” in real time on stage. An additional component to this particular challenge is working with the hair that the actors may or may not have. And so the decision of wiggging is discussed and explored.

I felt very strongly about not wiggging the cast for a series of reasons. Firstly, they all had hair that was manageable enough to consider using for the characters they were playing, given their willingness to engage in some more specific hair-cuts. Budget wise, the wigs they were looking to invest in were very cheap and looked chintzy to me. I felt that it needed to feel like their real hair---as so much of their feeling and emotion and interaction with one another is channeled through their tresses. My main reason, for not wanting to wig them, was my greatest fear: wigs that come off in the middle of scenes. And these are LONG scenes. The converse of that also scared me---a group of actors being “careful” with their hair in an attempt to keep their wigs from falling off. I also know that I had cast at least three “method” actors who were going to want to pull and shove hair into rollers, scrub and rinse hair in the sink, brush, curl, tease and bobby pin to their hearts desire, and no amount of “carefulness” was going to keep that from happening. I also weighed that when this dilemma DID ensue it would become such an

incredible distraction to the audience and pull them out of the story unnecessarily. All this to say: I decided not to wig them. I found this decision to be a blessing and a curse. We did not have a hair or make up designer as productions typically do. So we approached these elements much the same as we did costuming: collaboratively and collectfully. We discussed each individual character and tracked their beauty processes throughout the four seasons taking into account the changing seasons, and life stages that encapsulated them. The producers then brought in a professional hair dresser to teach certain styles and techniques to Truvy and Annelle to practice on their fellow actors. Just like any other blocking, this took time for the actresses to gain comfort and confidence to live and breath inside of.

I told them that we needed to approach styling like it was choreography. That it was alright to be organic in delivery and that indeed, they should not be mechanical. But the basic attack of how they orchestrated their hair business should be gelled like steps in a dance and marked in their scripts like blocking. They seemed to be successful for the most part, however in performance, I found a lack of consistency and strength in their commitment to these processes. Especially in the character of Truvy, who unfortunately does a majority of the “hair-business” in the show. Annelle was far more steadfast in her execution of salon business, and navigated having a live shampoo very well. Another complication was that our working sink and faucet wasn’t always working and made for a hard challenge to hide and cheat from the audience.

Another hair crisis I had involved one of the cuts I asked for regarding the character Ouiser. Cira Bledsoe had long curly trusses that I could not envision Ouiser ever having. It was agreed that she would get it cut short, to the shoulder. When I saw her after her big

cut I was disappointed to find that it was still well beyond shoulder length and looked long. I voiced my concern and asked for another cut. After much back and forth between her and the producers, I was left to accept that this was her final look, and began to channel attention into instructing how to “make it work”. In the end, it was far too much for the character. It looked sloppy at best and took Ouiser’s eccentric nature to the dowdy end of the hair pond. This was in no way a minor detail. What is central to all of these women is that they are groomed. The configuration and dismantling of their hair is visual subtext for the plays main themes. If there is little contrast between the too extremes then there is nothing “at stake” for the characters to “let their hairdown” and nothing for them to assemble before heading back into their exterior worlds.

Set Design

Nothing is more delightful than collaboration at its best. This is how I felt from the first instant of my meeting with Set Designer Tommy Mangieri. Every moment of working with him felt so fluid that looking back it is hard to remember what ideas were who's there was so much give and take that it simply became "ours". It's not so much that we agreed about everything, but rather that we embraced tension with openness and celebrated exploring ideas outside of our individual sightline. Anne Bogart has a wonderful statement about the idea of agreement:

"Americans are plagued with the disease of disagreement. In the theater we often presume that collaboration means agreement. I believe that too much agreement creates production with no vitality, no dialectic, no truth. Unreflected agreement deadens the energy in the rehearsal. I do not believe that collaboration means mechanically doing what the director dictates. Without resistance there is no fire" (Bogart,11)

First Mangieri and I met for a preliminary discussion and he brought a collection of sketches and photographs. He had extensively researched southern architecture, specifically carports. I was very pleased to find that he was keeping integrity to the script by focusing on the fact that the acting space was an enclosed carport, rather than a typical hair salon. We scrolled through books he brought of old Southern homes, and pointed out bits of texture and structure that we liked. Soon he had preliminary sketches of what he had envisioned. I was pleasantly surprised that he had surprised me. Rather than

executing a traditional realistic set, usually associated with the play, he had explored an abstract version of Truvy's salon car-port. The structure consisted of wood framing and based on the skeletal frame of a southern carport, with sheer panels which could be lit to be opaque or translucent based on the moment we were trying to achieve. Upstage, curving around the structure Mangieri had scattered six magnolia trees, which would become visible when the panels were lit to be translucent.

I thought the concept was breathtaking, to have such a strong visual metaphor that supported the story felt like a gift. The magnolia's were rooted, strong, and elegant like the women...they were a constant on the stage---withstanding all seasons...in life and in death they stood in celebration and reverence. Once we committed to the overall concept of the design we started to "re-arrange the furniture"...So much of "Steel Magnolias" is built upon the action of what takes place in a hair salon that each piece had to be carefully considered and placed.

Another challenge to this set was the space which housed it. The stage was very deep---but not that wide, and the house stretched far from the lip---without significant raking creating sight-line issues. Mangieri felt confident about building a cone like floor plan that had platforms leading upstage. We placed the main hair stations far floor right and left placing the kitchen up right on a diagonal and the dryer area up left. In an effort to save floor space, we decided to dual on of the hair station as a shampoo area, and made this station with an adjustable chair and sink. We both embraced the idea that this Salon would not have symmetry or uniform as it was very much a "make-shift" business Truvy had developed over time. Another way that we saved space was to have a rolling nail station and chairs that stayed upstage against the wall on a diagonal to be rolled on and

off as needed. Not only did this serve to save space, but added action to scenes and allowed for a “change of space” and movement patterns within the container that capsulated all of the action.

I am not the sort of director to have all of the blocking pre-set, but given the intricate collection of activities that where necessary to serve the script, I did a basic run down of acting areas, prior to setting on a final floor plan. It was important for me that we utilized every area of our carport set, and that we weren't living in one area for too long of a time. This led to some moving of pieces within Tommy's original plan, but for the most part, his full design was set out to be accomplished.

As with many productions, there are often “surprises” and adjustments that have to be made as design moves to construction. Some of those adjustments are budgetary, some are based on time. Some of them are spurn from circumstances entirely unpredictable--- fire codes that where neglected to be taken into consideration. Unfortunately, for this particular project, there was little to no communication with me and the builders until load in. This was by design of the producers and the Set Designer who was overseeing his plans. When we had our first rehearsal on set, I was discouraged to discover that I had lost two feet on either side of the floor. In addition the sofa was almost twenty inches longer then what we had previously been rehearsing inside. Originally a sofa was being custom built to buy us space and movement patterns that facilitated the odd cone-like floor, however time and budgetary constraints brought the team to buying a large bulky sofa, much like something you'd find in the Florida home of “The Golden Girls”. I was very disappointed with what this did to almost all of the blocking on the downstage portion of the floor plan. Soo much had to be “adjusted”, that I literally ran a “marker”

rehearsal, simply to score and map out all of the things that needed to be shifted. For the most part, these issues were resolved. I hammered out the importance of setting marks and not getting “stuck” all the way through to open, however my final note on the topic was, “ok, you know the space now LIVE in it...it’s a nail salon...at the end of the day, if you forget a mark it’s ok---because you are IN a nail salon---so just BE in a nail salon and you will find resolve”.

These were not the only things that needed changing. Apparently there were panels that were measured the wrong way and the upstage counter was built far larger than what we had planned for. Not only was it significantly bulkier, but it dove deeper into the little bit of floor space that we had upstage for moment and crossing. I decided of all the adjustments that were being made this one was worth pressing for a bit more. I suggested that we saw off two feet of the counter space. It was argued that it would make navigating the activity on it a bit trickier for the actors, but I felt it far more valuable to have the floor space for their action. Thankfully, the carpenter found it to be an easy cut and within an hour the piece was re-assembled and some of the actor’s business had already been resolved to suit the new dimensions.

Unfortunately, other complications did not disappear with the same ease. The Production Manager and Technical Director had neglected to take fire codes into account. According to code the theater’s curtain needed to be able to come fully down on set with no obstruction on the floor. In a desire to bring the action closer to the audience, our entire set was designed to spill past the standard curtain line and onto the lip. The obstruction to the curtain fall was monumental. Days before open Mangieri was re-designing the panels and “walls” of the salon. Our solution was to embrace the abstract quality of the set to

pull the panels attached to the salon stations downstage of the curtain line and leave a clear path for the curtain fall, keeping the structure upstage as planned with some minor panel adjustments for support. In the end, this adjustment did very little to sacrifice utility, however it greatly disrupted the integrity of Mangieri's translucent design. It also took away from the space we had upstage forcing him to scale back from six large magnolia trees to just a few scattered magnolia bushes. We still had some small portions of panel to facilitate the "see-through" aspect of the design, however not enough to be truly affective and serve it's original intent of letting us "see through to the out-side world of the magnolias and let the wind blow through their carefully crafted hair".

Overall, the set was a success in that it facilitated all of the acting stations needed to carry out the complex activities of a Nail salon. It definitely felt like a transformed carport of a Southern Louisiana home in the 1980's. It had the vibrancy and color of a character like Truvy and the warmth necessary to host this collection of Magnolia women. Where it fell short, I am confidently concede to the circumstances that inevitably shaped it's final drafts and can contentedly suffice that it was indeed "good".

Sound Design

I decided to take on the role of Sound Designer in addition to my Directorial duties. I had a very specific goal and vision of what I wanted to accomplish, and I didn't feel the need to splinter the work. Having previously designed sound for numerous productions, I felt confident about taking on this design task. I was compensated for this additional work with a separate fixed sum.

Music

Music selection was great opportunity to help paint the world surrounding Truvy's Salon that the audience never gets to see. I started by researching the general music of the 1980's. But this was not specific enough. I wanted to capture the true sounds of the "bayou" and what you might hear on a radio in a small Louisiana Parish. I began scanning through the top charts of specific locations in and around Harling's home town. Then I would dig deeper by looking at the entire work of specific artists, hoping to stumble upon things that might better suit a specific mood, or theme of a moment. Also, I thought the music should reflect the intergenerational collection of women that served as the main characters. I approached this with the question: what sound of music would have been from Clairee and Ouiser's time while M'lynn was growing up? These songs should be on the radio, along with Shelby's more current sound . Another wonderful source for sound designers is soundtracks. A lot of times, the research of a time and place that is done for a movie is reflected in a soundtrack. Looking up films that have a similar time period or feel of a particular play, can often inspire great choices. I did not however

wish to use the soundtrack of the film “Steel Magnolia’s”. There is only one moment where I used a piece from the original soundtrack and it was for less than 10 seconds. In scene two, when Shelby is speaking to M’lynn about having a baby the radio and electricity pop on, and then M’lynn immediately turns the radio off. Knowing that hardly more than a phrase might be heard, and wanting the sound to be loud, celebratory, and slightly obnoxious, an abrupt interruption to their serious discussion, “Cajun Christmas” was a perfect selection.

Programs such as Pro-Tools and Digital Performer have opened up so many opportunities to design sound more effectively. One aspect of sound design that I tackled on pro-tools was the slicing and layering of songs. For example I was able to seamlessly cut a four minute song down to a little bit over a minute which allowed me to tailor exactly what portion of the song I felt suited a particular moment. The above instance of “Cajun Christmas” is a great example. I did not want just any part of this song to be heard, I wanted the audience to catch the song in the middle of broadcast right before the line “Cajun Christmas”. After slicing the patch I wanted I layered it with static and radio tuning waves to make it sound more authentic.

The following is the final sound list of Music that was used in production, as well as pre and post show. It should be noted that it does not reflect, order or context.

| TITLE | TIME | ARTIST |
|------------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|
| Dimming Of The Day | 4:00 | Richard & Linda Thompson |
| Ada Plays | 3:18 | Gabriel Yared |
| It Ain't Me, Babe | 3:34 | Bob Dylan |
| Little Rain | 2:46 | Jimmy Reed |
| Going Back Home | 3:32 | Clifton Chenier |
| Ain't Misbehavin' | 4:32 | Hank Williams, Jr. |
| Jambalaya (On the Bayou) | 2:55 | Hank Williams |
| Jambalaya | 3:03 | Jambalaya |
| Cajun Christmas | 2:20 | Monty Brown |
| Rocking Around the Christmas Tree | 2:06 | Brenda Lee |
| Ma Louisianne | 2:24 | Zachary Richard |
| Assi Dans La Fenetre De Ma Chambre | 2:57 | Blind Uncle Gaspard |
| Found Love | 2:21 | Jimmy Reed |
| C'est Si Triste | 3:00 | Ann Savoy |
| Lulu Revenue Dans La Village | 3:15 | Ann Savoy |
| C'est Une Peche De Dire Un Mentire | 4:15 | Ann Savoy |
| Ain't That Lovin' You Baby? | 2:21 | Jimmy Reed |
| I Got Love If You Want It | 2:49 | Slim Harpo |
| Waitin' For You | 3:37 | Bob Dylan |

Radio

The Radio allows us the opportunity to sketch in the surrounding town that these characters reside in: Chinquapin Parish. It threads into the story line of Claire buying WKKD---per Shelby's instruction---which becomes an arch for Claire as well. The physical appearance of the radio in Truvy's Salon is attributed to Shelby giving away one of her duplicated wedding presents---so it also serves as a source of nostalgia when Shelby is gone. I cast Joshua Weidenhammer for the voice of the Radio announcer. It was important for him to sound like a real person full of southern charm, but also have the craft and form of a radio host. We ended up dubbing a few extra radio segments to slice in-between pre-show, intermission, and post show music. I thought this helped set the tone and atmosphere for the world of the play. This seemed to be affective as I noticed people at intermission, swaying in their seats and dancing in the aisles.

Effects

There are a few sound effects needed to propel the action of this piece: A telephone ring, the sound of a dog barking, and the sound of an explosion. It was important to choose the right type of dog bark, as this was the only way the audience could experience Ouiser's dog Rhett. I wanted him to sound like a big scraggily dog. The explosion needed to sound large but also feel as if it was down the street.

Sourcing the sound from specific placements helped capture the true allusions of the effects. The telephone ring was sourced from under the counter that the telephone sat

upon, making it seem real. The dog barking was sourced from upstage of the outside door, to make it sound as if Rhett was sitting on Truvy's porch. Also, I varied his barking varied to create motion so that it sounded as if he got closer and farther away as he was running. Another important sound source was the radio. I wanted the sound to seem as if it was coming from the radio, but then be able to transition to the house speakers, and vice versa for transitions from scene to intermission and intermission to scene. In the end, all of this was accomplished to it's best possibility given the sources and instruments we had available to us at "The Garden Theater".

Most of the craft and design in these affects was in setting the levels and getting the EQ just right. I accomplished this by using a sound editing software called Pro Tools. I also used Pro Tools to automate all the sound cues for the entire production, having levels pre-set just right for specific moments. Unfortunately, the execution of these automated cues did not go as smoothly as I had planned. On several nights there was ambient noise which interfered with the pre-sets and the levels needed to be manually modified. These modifications where not nearly as smooth as the automated shifts, and I was disappointed with the abrupt sound shifts that resulted. But overall, for most of the performances, sound and music was quite successful in capturing a time, enhancing a mood, and creating an environment for the story to soar.

The following is the basic schematic of the music transitions for this production:

MAJOR MUSIC TRANSITIONS

| | | | |
|--------------|--------------|---|--------------|
| TRANSITION A | PRE-SHOW | → | SCENE 1 |
| TRANSITION B | SCENE 1 | → | SCENE 2 |
| TRANSITION C | SCENE 2 | → | INTERMISSION |
| TRANSITION D | INTERMISSION | → | SCENE 3 |
| TRANSITION E | SCENCE 3 | → | SCENE 4 |
| TRANSITION F | SCENE 4 | → | CURTAIN CALL |
| TRANSITION G | CURTAIN CALL | → | POST-SHOW |

Conclusion

The anatomy of a production is complex in its workings. Each piece of the body has its own need for an arc yet must exist and operate within a master arc. A director's job is to orchestrate this symphony of sinews. From set, to lighting, sound, costuming, hair, make up, blocking, acting to even simpler things, like the dynamics of a production meeting, or design exploration. Every moment is the act in progress, even when there is silence, or stillness, it is not void but merely a purposed fermata in the midst of a production phrase. Looking back over my journey with the Vine's Production of "Steel Magnolias", I see a myriad of complications and shortcomings swimming beneath a sea of triumphs and success. In the end, you must except the good with the bad. There are always things we wish we could go back and do over. Things we felt didn't succeed, weren't effective. In hindsight we often wonder what we might have changed "if we had only", and remain haunted by the notion of "might have been". How do we truly measure theatrical success? By seats sold? By reviews? By Applause? By the feedback of friends, and family and colleagues? Who is to say what worked, what didn't work and what was just a complete mess?

The truth is we KNOW it. In our bones, at the end of the day, we know what worked, what didn't work. What was our "fault" and what wasn't.. Deep down we know. A director knows the true anatomy of a production. When examining its x-ray we know exactly what to look for all the dark shadows and those brilliant patches of light. We know what prescriptions were filled and what scripts were left for wanting. We understand this living machine: how we built it, how we grew it, how it lives and breaths, cramps, hiccups, limps, races, skips and soars. A director knows all these things...and

just like any good doctor, understands the value and mechanics of every part of that body. Every bone, every cell, every pore of it's make-up working in tandem to perform the task at hand: telling a story. Understanding the formula of directing is understanding the medicine of a moment can only be prescribed in that moment. A history must have already been done. In an instant the vitals must be scanned, stats calculated, temperature taken before any sort of diagnosis can be sought out or reviewed. However, the more theories, approaches, and styles that you inform yourself of and experiment with, the more cures you will have in your director-bag making for a far healthier production.

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