An Examination Of The Actor's Approach To Playwriting: Are Playwrights Able To Write About What Is Unfamiliar To Them?

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AN EXAMINATION OF THE ACTOR’S APPROACH TO PLAYWRITING: ARE PLAYWRIGHTS ABLE TO WRITE ABOUT WHAT IS UNFAMILIAR TO THEM?

by

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

Spring Term
2013

Major Professor: Charles Perry
ABSTRACT

Playwrights write about what is familiar to them. Their inspiration comes from their childhood, past relationships, and their personal view of the world. But could a playwright write about something to which they have no personal connection?

Using the book Triggered: A Memoir of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, I will write a one act play about mental illness. I have no personal experience or personal connection to mental illness, but I will approach the process the same way as an actor does a character. I will go into the writing process as an actor, completing character analyses for the characters and using the information found within the book.

I will direct a reading of my play with the goals of educating the audience about mental illness, evoking empathy for the characters within the piece, and proving that a playwright can write about something that is foreign to them, much like an actor can portray a character that is remarkably different from themselves.
For Nana Pat, who never gave up on me.

“If ever there is tomorrow when we’re not together... there is something you must always remember. you are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think. But the most important thing is, even if we're apart... I'll always be with you.”

-A.A. Milne
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis chair Chip Perry for always believing in and constantly telling me that “I am a writer”. Thank you to the other members of my committee, Holly McDonald and Kate Ingram for their positive support and feedback. Thank you to my classmate, Trevin Cooper for all of his help in the past three years and throughout this entire process. I want to thank the actors that were in the reading of my play Drowning, Sandia Ahlers, Michael Dritto, Deidre Manning and Robert Svetlik. Finally I thank my family who have never stopped believing and supporting me: Nick, thank you for always making me laugh, Dad thank you for making me crazy and helping me realize that I shouldn’t take life too seriously and finally, Mom thank you for being my rock and my inspiration throughout my life.
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INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores the idea of writing a play about a topic that the playwright knows nothing about. The specific topic is mental illness. When I use the term mental illness, I am using it in a broad sense, as a member of society, not as a doctor of psychology. I realize that the term “mental illness” covers many types of mental disorders, and it is my hope to not offend anyone by using this term. This thesis will go into detail about the benefits of character analyses and how it can aid a playwright during the writing process. I will discuss the histories of Tennessee Williams and Eugene O’Neill, and how their histories impacted their careers as playwrights. A journal was kept throughout the rehearsal process and after the final reading of the play.

Chapter one will give a broad overview on mental illness and how prevalent it is in society today. I will discuss how children who are mentally ill seem to go to theatre as an outlet. My thesis will also touch on the characters that I have played in my career that have been mentally ill, and how I had to prepare for them as an actor.

Chapter two will focus on the writing process and how it changed over time. There are examples of the different types of character analyses that were used. I will also explore how the analyses will be used within the written play.

Chapter three will go into detail about the histories of Tennessee Williams and Eugene O’Neill. The thesis will discuss how their experiences with mental illness affected them as writers.

Chapter five is a journal that was kept during the rehearsal process of my piece. I will discuss the challenges that were faced during the process. I will reflect upon the re-writes that were made to the piece with the collaboration of the playwright and the actors. My thesis also contains excerpts of the script.
Chapter six is a reflection journal detailing the final reading of the piece. I will discuss what was learned throughout this entire process, I feel work like this is essential for social change.
CHAPTER ONE: THE INSPIRATION

As a society in the 21st century we are extremely tolerant towards those with physical handicaps. There are also people who have mental handicaps; if their mental handicap is shown physically, we again believe that we are tolerant to them. But what about those who physically look healthy but internally are suffering? Are we tolerant towards them? Often society is not aware of their illness because it cannot be seen. Societies may see these mentally ill people as, “dramatic” or “pessimistic” when sometimes they cannot help the way that they feel or think. Society has to open their eyes to the mentally ill and gain a sense of empathy towards them. The play that I have written is derived from the memoir Triggered by Fletcher Wortmann, and I hope it will help do exactly that. Using an actor’s approach to the writing, I wrote the play to prove that a person who is not mentally ill could write about this sensitive topic. Could a playwright possibly write about something that they do not know? Actors play characters that are different from themselves all the time. Could a playwright not do the same?

During the summer of 2012, I worked at the Orpheum Theatre in Foxboro, Massachusetts as a part of my graduate internship for the University of Central Florida. As an instructor for the children’s camp, I received a list of the children’s allergies and medications. It was astounding to see how many of the children were on some type of medication for mental illness, mostly for anxiety and depression. The camp was not geared towards children with mental or social disorders; however a majority of the children were suffering from them. It was astounding to see which children were the ones that were struggling because usually they never showed any signs of suffering or struggle. There was one particular 13 year old girl named Amber, who I saw as outgoing, talented and a driven young woman. All of the older kids wanted to be her friend and all of the younger ones looked up to her. However, according to her paper work, she suffered from both depression and anxiety. Amber had been coming
to this particular camp for approximately five years; she was well known throughout the theatre. When I asked the other teachers about her and her conditions, I was told that she recently had to transfer schools due to bullying. Anyone with empathy would be heartbroken by this information, and I almost could not believe it. I recognized how valuable the camp and theatre must be for her. When speaking with the executive director of the theatre about it, he told me that theatre is an outlet for Amber. He said that other children like her use theatre in that way, for them to express themselves through acting as the character. They do not have to be in their own head with their own tormenting thoughts, but they can be in a character’s head where they can escape themselves.

While this may not apply to all actors, hiding” in another person in order to escape self, some performers do use theatre as an outlet. When actors are on stage as another person they do not have to be themselves. Actors can escape their own troubles and live in the life of that character. The idea of being another person might help a trained actor release many of their own demons.

Mental illness is something that is often portrayed on the stage, and something that I have researched a lot due to the roles that I have played. My most recent role was April White in John Patrick Shanley’s *Savage in Limbo*. April is a depressed ex-nun who turns to alcohol in order to escape her own life and depression. Another dark role I have played was Kaye Hamilton in Edna Ferber’s and George S. Kaufman’s *Stage Door*; Kaye was an aspiring actress who had run away from her abusive husband in order to achieve her dream. New York gets the better of her, and she ultimately commits suicide, due to her lack of success. In doing research for these roles I have informed myself on the subject of mental illness. Through my play I wish to do the same for others.

When developing my thesis project I wanted to write about something that I also would enjoy reading. I wanted to write monologues that would be similar to Shakespearean soliloquies, breaking the fourth wall and letting the audience in on the inner conflict that the character is going through. The
audience would be able to hear the inner monologue. Using this style the audience could view how the characters act when they are speaking directly to them, and how they act when they are speaking to the characters on stage. John Patrick Shanley uses this style of direct address in *Italian American Reconciliation*, through the main character Aldo. The opening of the play is a monologue where Aldo is speaking to the audience and letting them know about everyone in the town. This automatically hooks the audience, and they feel involved in what is happening within the life of the play. It is this type of style that evokes a visceral reaction in me. This was the type of play that I needed to write.

I wanted to write about something that was about a true story, a story other than my own. Drama can be used as a platform for society, to hold up a mirror to itself in order to promote change. For example, the play *The Laramie Project* is a piece based on a true story of the young gay university student, Mathew Shepard who was murdered. I first saw this show when I was in high school and was immediately drawn into it; not only was it a fantastic show, but it also made me want to learn more about Mathew Shepard. My goal is that my play is captivating and urges people to research more about mental illness, to get themselves informed.

While searching for a play topic, I had created requirements for myself: the play had to be based on a real story, and I wanted to write something that has not been prevalent in mainstream theatre. It seemed like fate when I came across a book entitled *Triggered* by Fletcher Wortmann, a memoir that he has written about living and dealing with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

Wortmann is a young man from Winchester, Massachusetts who has suffered from OCD and depression for the majority of his life. The memoir consists of his journey through life with his conditions. Fate was also on my side when I found out that I had a connection with Wortmann; a family member of mine works with Wortmann’s father. Once I contacted Wortmann, he told me that I had
permission to loosely base my play on his book. However, I was not given permission to publish the full play within this thesis due to the request of the publisher.

Once I knew what my topic was, and the direct address style I would be using, I had to answer more specific questions for myself, one of them being how many characters would I have? Knowing that I did not want to have many characters, I only created four. I wanted the message to be clear and I felt that only four characters it would be. One of the most fundamental questions that kept reoccurring was, am I “allowed” to write a play about mental disorders, if I do not suffer from one? This question was also posed to me by peers when I first approached them with the topic. Playwrights tend to write about what they know. But what if all I know is being a perfectly healthy girl, living in a small town, with a loving family who supports me in every way? This isn’t exactly the best plot for a particularly good drama. In the theatre history classes that I have taken, the professors usually focus on the life of the playwright. What I always found intriguing was seeing how their life was reflected their work.

Tennessee Williams and Eugene O’Neill are two playwrights that put their life on the stage. Both these men had a tremendously difficult upbringing and dealt with mental illness or addiction in their life. They were in pain, and they used playwriting as their creative outlet. Both playwrights created complex and intricate characters that seem to have some type of mental disorder. Williams suffered from depression, but it was his sister Rose who was the main inspiration for Williams’, The Glass Menagerie.

It was precisely the short series of letters from his sister that made him plunge into the first draft of a new play. He was fully aware of its autobiographical nature from the start for he wrote to Windham that it was taking shape as a personal history of his family. The play would be a tribute to Rose, and a cry from his heart about the serenity they had
all gradually lost over the years and were never able to regain. (Spoto 94)

Throughout this thesis, I will expand on Williams and his own mental disorder along with his sister Rose’s. I will link his experience with these disorders to his plays, specifically *The Glass Menagerie*.

Eugene O’Neill also suffered from depression along with alcoholism. One of his most famous plays, *A Long Day’s Journey into Night* dealt with issues such as addiction and depression. O’Neill depicted a dysfunctional family that held up a mirror to his own family in many ways. “*Long Day’s Journey Into Night*, is one of the more famous autobiographical works on O’Neill” (Miliora 47).

O’Neill and Williams are two great American playwrights that changed the world of drama with their realistic styles. Two of their most famous pieces were both autobiographical pieces. If their childhood was not traumatic would their careers have been as successful as they were?

Reading Wortmann’s *Triggered* may cause readers to begin to question their own sanity. Wortmann would describe things about his OCD, fears he would have, absurd thoughts that would come into his head. At one point he confesses that he would be so distracted from the disturbing thoughts that were coming into his head that he would not be able to complete the task at hand because they were so powerful. To try to quiet these thoughts he would go out and drink, but the next morning they would come back even stronger than before.

I feel it is necessary to share Wortmann’s story because of the effect that it could have on society. Even if certain members of society do not personally suffer from a mental disorder they may know someone who does, and will be able to have a better understanding of the disorder and what it can do to a person.
An irrational thought that I developed in middle school was that I was afraid that my mother was going to die. She wasn’t sick nor did she get into a horrific accident that could’ve taken her life; this was just a fear that had come up on its own. In the beginning stages of it, I would cry before I had to leave her for long periods of time and before I went to bed. I did not know what to do about this; I knew that I couldn’t live in this fear forever. I came up with the idea that I would make my mom promise that she wouldn’t die. The exchange would go something like this:

Mom: Good-bye Kayla.

Me: Promise you won’t die.

Mom: Yes, Kayla.

Then I would go on my way. It got to the point where I couldn’t leave the house for a five minute trip or end a phone call or text without going through this routine. I am almost ashamed to admit that I still do this to this day. As a 24 year old Graduate student earning her masters, I am still asking my mom to promise me that she is not going to die. Yes, I know that her saying “promise” does not actually mean anything; she cannot control something like that. Now you may ask yourself why I do not just stop saying it if I know that it doesn’t mean anything. But, what if I do not say it one day and God forbid something actually happened to her. Would it be my fault, how would I be able to live with myself after I “killed” my mother? During the process of reading the book and writing the play, I discovered that maybe I do have some slight form of OCD. If I have a little form of it, then maybe everyone does as well. But, we may also label some behavior as OCD to give our quirks and habits justification.

There are superstitions that everyone has whether it is knocking on wood or holding your breath when you go past a graveyard. These are the little things that everyone does to some extent, but knocking on wood will not stop anything bad from happening and holding your breath will not keep you
from dying, all of these things are inevitable. Bad things will happen to you in life, and eventually you too will die. Thinking these superstitions work, is a form of OCD; it is trying to control something over which you have no power.

It is my hope that my play will open the eyes of society to mental disorders, specifically OCD. I hope to discover whether or not someone without a mental disorder can write and direct a play successfully about the subject.

I am eager to direct this; though I know it will present its own challenges, am excited to meet them. I expect some of the text to change once the play is heard aloud. The process will be a collaboration between the actors and myself. The actors will be a crucial part of my editing process.

I hope the audience will leave the reading better informed about mental illness and inspired by Wortmann’s story. I want them to leave with a sense of catharsis. This thesis will hopefully prove that a person without a mental disorder can create characters that are believable and relatable to all.
CHAPTER TWO: THE WRITING PROCESS

The idea of writing a play is daunting. With the basis of a new work rooted in an existing document written by another, it would seem to save one a considerable amount of imaginative work. However, it is never easy at all, and I found struggles with the work almost immediately. It was difficult to create something new out of a story that someone had already created. It was actually harder to begin writing the story of Wortmann in a different way, without changing the basic construct of the memoir; this became the primary goal.

One of the earliest drafts began in the summer of 2012. All that could be completed was the first couple of monologues before I knew that it was wrong. The voice was his, the play needed to tell his story, but in my voice. The next draft began in the fall of 2012, when returning back to school at the University of Central Florida. I began writing in my voice but at the same time began losing passion for the project. If I could not relate to the story, was I already answering my thesis question?

Recalling research projects and papers written throughout my collegiate career, I realized that a number of them were focused on character analysis. I had always enjoyed writing character analyses because there were many different types of analysis, created by the pioneers of the “acting training world. Uta Hagen’s “Nine Questions” was one form of analysis that was always useful because her basic questions required specific detailed answers. This opened thoughts about other analyses that were helpful when creating a character. Michael Shurtleff and his book Audition is always of use for a trained actor, but mostly to prepare them for auditions. I wanted to see if it could be used as an analysis. The final analysis that came to mind was a list of question made up by acting professor Nick Petron from Adelphi University. The analysis consists of questions that require an actor think about the specificities
of the character that they are playing. If an actor could use these analyses to create a character; could they not be used to create a play?

An actor’s analysis can open up a whole new world to an actor. A huge part of a trained actor’s process is analysis; most could not imagine their career now without it. When I first began acting I never thought that there would be paper work involved; acting entailed memorizing lines and moving where and when I was told.

First semester students at Adelphi are trained in Stanislavski, a method that concentrates on objectives, the use of the “magic if”, obstacles and internal monologue. Sophomore year, students are opened up to script analysis; it was in this class that professor Nick Petron would constantly instill the importance of character analysis. Petron created his own analysis filled with over 50 questions about the character that you are playing which we were all required to complete.

Participating in this type of work can affect an actor’s career immensely. It can open a new love of the process of acting and character development; if done correctly this work can change an actor’s whole perspective on the craft. An actor’s eyes can be opened to an unlimited number of options that can be taken in any direction.

Sophomore year I was cast in Lanford Wilson’s The Rimers of Eldritch as Mavis. Mavis was a remarkably complex character especially for an 18 year old to play. Mavis was a mother and a wife; however, her life was not as easy. Mavis’s daughter Patty had been molested, and her husband Peck was cheating on her. As a young actor, it is difficult to live in this particular character because of the circumstances of Mavis’s life. “Given circumstances” is a term coined by Stanislavski, a Russian theatre practitioner. They are the circumstances of the character set up by the director or the playwright; these circumstances can be either environmental or situational, but they must influence the character. I began my analysis of Mavis, and within the first couple days of rehearsals I found myself altering, and adding
the discoveries that I made throughout. I ended the process with a notebook filled with analysis, diary entries, letters, and pictures. All of these elements helped me shape Mavis into a fully developed person on the stage; not just a character. I suddenly found this character relatable, and therefore, playable. Before every show, I would reread my notebook. This helped me get into the mindset of Mavis. I felt very confident in my performance, and I know that if I had not done the character analysis and spoken with the director about my choices, I would not have felt that. I am certain that because of this process, I was nominated for an Irene Ryan Award from the Kennedy Center.

Playing Mavis was a turning point in my acting career. I found that with the analysis, I could make my characters into three-dimensional people. Throughout my training, it became apparent to me that an actor’s job is to be the vessel for the character. Actors must surrender who they are in order to share a story. Actors have to know every single thing about their character from their first words to what color their toothbrush is.

There had to be a way that my play could be written just as passionately as I would write a character analysis. While rereading Triggered, a different sense of empathy came over me for all of the characters involved, not just for Wortmann himself. Suddenly his family became much more essential. I began writing as if I were Wortmann, expressing his feelings about his disorder and how it affected his family. After writing about a page, I saw that this was the new beginning for my play. After drafting the first monologue other characters voice appear, and the voices of his mother and father flowed from the development of Wortmann’s voice.

Once I began to approach the piece in this matter, completing an analysis for each character, I became more passionate about everything that was written. When stuck, going back to the character analysis allowed my writing process to continue. This also aided in creating specific qualities for each character. The easiest character to write was that of Jacob (Wortmann) because the memoir is clear in
communicating what he is feeling and thinking. On the contrary, the other characters, his mother, father, and girlfriend were a little more challenging to write because we only see them through Jacob’s eyes. They needed to be written in as unbiased a way as possible; I did not want Wortmann’s opinion showing through because I did not want the audience to be biased towards anyone character. I had to find the balance between his parent’s depiction in the memoir and how my script was going to depict them in a way that would serve the story best.

Another obstacle I encountered was the character’s arc; I was unsure about whether or not I had to create an arc or if one would naturally form. I did not know what was going to happen within the story, I knew how it would begin and how it would end, as for the middle, I was unclear. The analyses helped find a clear arc in all the characters as well as within the play itself. I now strongly believe that no matter which character analysis is used, both actors and playwrights alike can use character analysis for the characters that they are developing or portraying.

I found it most easy to relate to Jennifer because she is the main female in the play. It was easy for me to get inside her head, to know what she wanted as a mother, as a wife and a woman in general. Using Uta Hagen’s 9 Questions I was hoping to find her character through specifics. The relationship between Jennifer and Kyle needed to be more clearly defined and the analysis was surely going to help with that. After completing it, I found the arc between Jennifer and Kyle. I also found the arc in her: what she wanted out of life, how that had changed since Kyle, and since Jacob. Jennifer’s history was found within the analysis. Once her history was defined it would become a lot easier to write about her present.
Uta Hagen was a German born actress who eventually made her American debut. After her theatre career in America, she began teaching acting. After getting positive feedback on her classes, Hagen wrote two books based on her technique, the first of which was *Respect for Acting*, and second *A Challenge for the Actor*. Hagen created her own analysis consisting of nine questions, which help the actor get a deeper understanding of their character.

**Uta Hagens 9 questions: Jennifer**

**Who am I?**

My name is Jennifer Whitman; I am a 54 year old woman who is from Foxboro Massachusetts. I had a good life growing up; I was the youngest after three brothers. They were good brothers too; they weren’t the kind that would tease their younger sister, but the kind that would always look out for her. They loved me so much, they would play dolls and have tea parties with me, I was very lucky. I like to consider myself an average student; I am not particularly smart but not particularly dumb either. I got good marks and my parents seemed happy so that’s all that I really cared about. I was however extremely involved in school, I was a part of student government, student activities board, and I was head cheerleader, even though I was just a sophomore at the time. I guess you can say that I was popular. At the end of sophomore year I met a guy named Kyle who was on the football team. We met because I was at all of his games cheering. I remember when he first asked me out, we were walking off the field after they had just lost a really important game, and he came over to me and said, “You know what would make this day better, if you came and got ice cream with me”. I was blown away, I mean here is this guy that just lost a really big game and he would rather take me out than go and get drunk with the rest of the team. I said “yes” of course, and that was technically the last first date of my life. Eventually we both graduated from high school and both attended John Hopkins. I went for elementary
education and Kyle went for Law, he wanted to become a lawyer. Once we graduated from school we moved into an apartment together, Kyle got into law school at Boston College and I was working at a local preschool. Everything was perfect. When Kyle graduated he was placed with a firm with a high starting salary. Some time went on and Kyle proposed in December and we were married in June and before I knew it I was pregnant with Jacob. We had Jacob in May and our family was complete. Everything was perfect, or at least seemed it, for a short time. Jacob had a very difficult time growing up. He had trouble socializing with other children and seemed to always be alone, and in his own little world. At first Kyle and I ignored this, thinking it was just a phase, something that all kids go through. However, the older he became, the more odd his behavior had become. I remember there was one time where he was picking a scab on his face and I had told him to stop because it was going to leave a scar and he told me that he liked the way that it felt, it gave him a sense of power over his own body. Kyle and I took him to a psychologist and they told us that he had suffered from depression. I couldn’t believe it, I felt like it was because of something that I had done wrong as a mother, that I didn’t show him enough love, that he didn’t feel loved.

2. What time is it?

Currently it is 4:00 pm Wednesday. It’s that time of day where you are kind of hungry because you had lunch at noon and it’s not dinner time quite yet, so you might have a snack. I am waiting for Kyle to get home from work, he should be home around six, but you never know with him. He works late on some days and forgets to call to let me know. I don’t mind that he is going to be late, but I do mind having dinner ready and then sitting alone and eating.

It is about 57 degrees outside, a perfect October day, in my opinion. It is a great day for a nice big comfy sweatshirt.

3. Where am I?
I am in Foxboro, Massachusetts in the United States of America. I am sitting in my kitchen at the breakfast bar on my laptop.

4. What surrounds me?

My dog, Lilly, is standing looking up at me right now, because she thinks that I am going to give her some food. I am in my kitchen sitting on a stool at my breakfast bar, with my laptop in front of me. To my right is my stove and counter tops. I like to think that my kitchen is pretty big. Having a big kitchen was always important to me. The kitchen is the place where everyone gathers. I have some of my fondest memories in the kitchen, cooking with my mom or playing Uno with my brothers.

5. What are the given circumstances?

Right now my son Jacob is in a mental institution because I caught him cutting himself in the bathroom. Jacob was diagnosed with depression from a very young age and was later diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsion Disorder. I hate the fact that he is there and not finishing up his junior year in college. Kyle and I have been visiting him daily to try to keep his spirits up as well as ours. Right now he doesn’t seem to want to get treatment; he doesn’t want to go through the steps that are necessary for his recovery. Right now Jacob has been the main focus in my life, it’s difficult to live your life when you know that at some point your child didn’t want to live theirs.

6. What is my relationship?

Kyle is my husband. I like to think that we have a healthy relationship, but I know that there are some things that we could work on. I mean, we have our ups and downs, just like any other couple. I think that the stress that Jacob has caused us over the years has distanced us a bit, but how could it not. I think that Kyle doesn’t take time to understand Jacob and what he is going through. I remember he
would constantly tell me that Jacob was being dramatic, that he isn’t really that sad, and when it comes
down with siding with my husband or my son, I am always going to pick my son.

Jacob is my only child and I love him more than anything in this world. He is my everything. Jacob suffers from depression and OCD. This has been a struggle for him and for the family. He has been dealing with these demons for about 20 years. It pains me as a mother to see my child go through something that he himself cannot help. I wish that there was some way that I could “fix” him. I don’t think that he is aware of how much he means to me, and how much I love him. I think he thinks that I am constantly out to get him, which couldn’t be farther from the truth. It difficult for me to relate to him because I have no idea what is going on in his head and he doesn’t tell me.

As far as the relationship that I have with myself, I am pretty sure it is nonexistent, which I know isn’t good. As a mother and wife I make everyone else’s need a priority before my own, and I have been doing this since before I was even married. I love Kyle so much that I wanted to do everything for him, I wanted to cook him dinner, I wanted to clean his room, do his laundry; I was afraid that if I didn’t do these things that he would break up with me, that he wouldn’t want to be with me, that he could find someone who would be prettier, skinnier and do everything for him. I felt like I was also competing for his love, even if there was no one around to compete against.

7. What do you want?

What I want more than anything is for Jacob to get out of the hospital and to go back to his own
life. I want him to go back to school and live a normal life. I want Kyle and me to fall back in love. I want to find time for myself. I want to be happy. I want to stop worrying about everything. I want Jacob to stay safe. I want my family back; my life back.

8. What is in my way?
Jacob is in my way, not so much physically, but mentally. Jacob is also in his own way, for whatever reason, he is resisting his own therapy. In some ways, I know that I am in my own way as well. Maybe I don’t want to be completely happy, maybe that there is a part of me that enjoys being everyone’s caregiver, if I have to take care of everyone else then I don’t have to take a look in the mirror and care about myself. I know that if I felt better with myself, mentally, physically and emotionally, I would be able to be closer to Kyle. The thing with Kyle is that we both have to meet half way in order to work on our marriage; things like that don’t work unless both parties are willing to try to be better.

9. What do I do to get what I want?

To get what I want I have to let go. I have to not feel like I have to control everything that happens in life. I need to realize that Jacob’s sickness has nothing to do with how I raised him; it has everything to do with the chemical make up in his brain, which is no one’s fault. I need to show Jacob more respect when it comes to his disorder. Sometimes I think that I know best because I am his mother, but when it comes to his mental illness sometimes I don’t know best at all, he knows best because it is happening inside of him.
Kyle was a difficult character to write. It was hard because he had to be written from a male perspective, as a father, as a husband and a man in general; this is something that I have no experience with. I wrote him based on how I saw men, how I looked at the men close to me, my father, my brother, uncles, grandfathers. It was a collection of all of them that became Kyle. The analysis helped me find who Kyle was as a person; one had to forget about his sex and just look at him as a human being. Once I began to look at him in this way it was easier for me to find him.

Shurtleff was a casting director that wrote the book Auditioning, hoping to help actors audition, more successfully. The book is known to be a “bible” for actors. Within the book he has twelve guideposts; each guidepost asks questions to the actor about their character. I decided to use Shurtleff’s guideposts in this way because I was curious to see if they could be used as an analysis.

12 Guideposts by Michael Shurtleff- Kyle

1. Relationships

What is my relationship with the other characters in the scene?

Where is the love?

The relationship that I have with Jennifer is that she is my wife. Not only is she my wife but she is my best friend; I cannot imagine my life without her, she does everything for me. I know that there are times when I could pay a little more attention to her, take her out more or even just say thank you; but I am very busy with work and with everything that is going on with Jacob, it is hard to find the time. I obviously love my wife more than anything but I know that I could show her my love for her more, even if I don’t say it, I know that there are things that I could do.

Jacob is my son. When Jacob was first born I was so happy that he was a boy, I had this picture in my head of what our life would be together. However when you make a plan, God laughs. Jacob isn’t the
son that I would have hoped for at all. He doesn’t like sports; he doesn’t want to be a lawyer like me, and we have nothing in common. I think that he is weak, that he isn’t strong; if he was strong he would be able to fight his depression and his Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. I mean I love him, of course I do, he is my son. But just because you love someone doesn’t mean that you have to like them. I used to pick on kids like Jacob when I was in high school, he must get bullied all the time. I just wish that he could be more like me.

2. **Conflict**

**What are you fighting for?**

**What tactics can you use to reach these goals?**

What I am fighting for is my son to become mentally stable. I am fighting to get him out of the hospital. I am fighting for my own family. I know that if Jacob was healthy then everything would be better, my home life, my marriage. I know that Jacob being healthy is out of my control, but I try to think of the things that are in my control. I know that I can be more tolerant towards Jacob and try to be more understanding towards his disorder. The tactics that I can take to get what I want is to console, to complement, to comfort, to strengthen, to validate. All of the actions that I have chosen are uplifting, I think that if I bring him up, it will help his confidence and consequently help his depression.

3. **The moment before**

Jennifer and I met when we were in high school and it was love at first sight. I was on the football team and she was the head cheerleader, I mean it cannot get any more perfect than that. Jenny and I had our whole lives ahead of us. We both applied to John Hopkins and both were accepted, after we graduated I went off to Law school at Boston College and Jenny worked at a preschool. We lived in a little apartment right near the college and everything seemed to be going perfectly. In December I
proposed to Jenny and we were married shortly after, and it seems like before I knew it, I was married and Jennifer was pregnant, I couldn’t believe it, everything happened so fast. All of a sudden we were living in a house and expecting a baby. To be honest, I don’t know if I was ready for having a family, for being a father. My dad himself wasn’t all that great; he was always busy with work and seemed to believe the notion that providing for his family was his only job as a father. He was never there for me, but we never starved either. I think it was a different time then in general. All I knew is that I had to be a better father than mine was to me. I was so happy when I found that we were going to have a boy, a girl would have been great, but a boy, what more could I have asked for. When Jacob was first born he was everything to me. He was always by my side, following me around while I worked in the yard, he was my partner in crime. As he got older things seemed like they were changing, I didn’t know if it was something that I had done wrong. He just seemed very distant, not only from me but from Jenny as well. We thought nothing of it, thinking that it was a phase, something that would pass. Jacob would also kind of stay inside of himself and away from us. He was first diagnosed with depression and then later on with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. I know that I wasn’t the most supportive when it came to Jacobs condition. In the beginning when this was all first starting to happen I thought that he was just being dramatic, over reacting towards everything. Therefore I didn’t give him the proper attention that he needed. Maybe it was partially my fault that he tried to take his life, I am not sure. I wish that Jacob felt he could come to me and talk to me about what was going on.

4. Humor

I guess that there is humor in everything that happens in life. You know I didn’t even plan on getting married and to have a family. I thought it was something that I didn’t need, the funny thing about this is that now I realize that it was the thing I needed the most. Jenny is the best thing that has ever happened to me. And Jacob, I mean for everything that he has gone through he has always been a
well behaved kid, he never did me wrong. Jacob has taught me so many things about life, love, and humor. Jacob always found the humor in his disorder, making jokes when appropriate. I think it was because there were so many days when he was sad and off to himself, that when he wasn’t he wanted to make us smile. There are times in life where you just have to laugh even if you want to cry.

5. **Opposites**

This would be a question for the actor that would be playing Kyle and the choices that he would make. Whatever the actor’s motivation is for a particular scene there is also an opposite action that could take place that could very well help their character reach their objective. The actor just has to be willing to find and then play the opposites of the scene.

6. **Discoveries**

I have made a lot of discoveries about myself as a person, a husband and as a father. I think with everything that is currently happening to Jacob it makes you realize what is really important in life. That maybe it isn’t really important that I do extra work and I go home on time to be with my family. If this has taught me anything it would be to never take people for granted. As a person I have discovered that it is never too late to change, that I can be a good father, thank God that my son is still here so I can be. I know that I can be a better husband; I can thank Jenny and show her my appreciation for her more.

The following guideposts are questions for the actor that is playing Kyle.

7. **Communication and competition - reaching the other actor.**
Acting is about what your character is doing to affect the other character. When an actor is doing a scene they need to place all of their attention and focus on the other character in the scene. This section is about give and take; it is about communicating with your partner and focusing all of your actions on them. Acting is a very selfless thing; an actor can never go on stage thinking about themselves and have a good performance. Shurtleff says to count the wins and losses within a scene; this will help raise the stakes for your character. Your character must always want to win.

8. Importance - locating the dramatic score.

This section is about raising the stakes, how important is it to you/your character to reach their objective. The higher the stakes the better the scene will be because there will be an undying sense of urgency that the scene will need. As an acting teacher at UCF I see this all the time: When young actors do not raise the stakes, the scene will go nowhere without stakes, it will be boring to watch. When an actor is creating an analysis it is important that when they talk about the given circumstances that they use “I”. This will make the circumstances more important and therefore the stakes will rise automatically.

9. Find the events- what is really happening in the play?

It is a series of events that create a play and also create change. The actor has to be aware of the events that are occurring and they have to find them in their partner, to see if they are aware of what is happening between the two of you. If the actor can map out the events they will be able to find their characters are easier and therefore will be able to play it.

10. Place - create it on a bare stage.

This is far more complex than just where you are physically. This is about where you are emotionally, do you have any emotional connection to the place where you are physically, what type of
memories does it bring back for your character?

11. Game playing and role playing - play them for reality.

   This is about the role that your character plays in society and what role do they play in their personal life. For example if you are playing a doctor, you would behave a certain way with your patients and a totally different way if you were at dinner with your wife/husband.

12. Mystery and secret - adding wonderment to the scene.

   As a director I always make my actors have a secret about themselves or another character in the play. Having a secret helps drive a scene for the character. For example if April White from John Patrick Shanley’s *Savage in Limbo* had a secret that she had sex with a priest while she was in seminary school, the entire monologue where she is talking about that priest will have an underlining pain beneath it, that no one will truly understand but April. Having a secret helps bring the actor closer to the character. I can also help bring out the intensity of the text.

   After exploring Jennifer and Kyle it suddenly became clear to me that writing Jacob would be the hardest for me. After all he was the character with the mental disorders, which I personally knew nothing about. It was challenging to put myself in his mindset, not knowing what that was exactly. Wortmann’s memoir helped me the most being that it was written from his point of view, but that was the only thing I could use as a reference. I used what I could from the book and expanded from there. I was glad that I chose this particular analysis for Jacob because it is extremely detailed and involved many questions, this gave me a better chance to write in his voice. It allowed Jacob to shine through and show how he was mentally different than everyone else in the play.
This analysis comes from Adelphi professor Nick Petron. Students would have to complete these questions for class and were encouraged to use them for roles they were cast in.

Character Questionnaire- Jacob

What are the characters opposition forces? (What’s in the way of what you want to achieve? Who is against you?)

My main problem is myself, and it is kind of hard to get away from yourself. I wish that there was a way for me to get out of my own head and not have to listen to my own thoughts but it is impossible, it is the way that my brain is wired. There were times in my life where I felt like everyone was against me at that time. I feel at times that no one understands what I am going through, and I get that, because unless you are me, you are not going to be able to understand; but I wish everyone, including my parents tried at least. My mom tries more than my dad does. I know that he is against me; I feel that he is not proud of me in the least. I was never the son that he wanted me to be, and I know that I wouldn’t have been even if I wasn’t mentally ill. He wants a son that would be just like him, and that is not me. I wasn’t popular in high school, I didn’t play football, I didn’t have a lot of girlfriends, I wasn’t him, that was what he wanted, he wanted a son that was just like him.

Indicate all the characters relationships? (With whom or what are you most heavily involved)

Out of my family, the relationship I have with my mom is the strongest. I know that she tries to understand me and is always looking out for my best interest at heart. It makes me sad that it was my mom who caught me cutting myself in the bathroom; I didn’t want to hurt her in that way. The worst thing that could happen to me is if I did take my own life that my mother would blame herself for it. My mom was the one person who constantly took care of me and made sure that I was taking the right amount of medication, or would talk to the doctors when she believed that I was taking too much or too
little of a specific drug. She was always so supportive in anything that I wanted to be involved with in school or any of my career goals. She visited me every day while I was in the hospital and urged me to keep a positive attitude towards my treatment.

My relationship with my father needs to be stronger. I know that he means well, and he cares about me, but he has trouble showing it. I wish that we could be stronger, a part of me wishes that I was the son he wants so that we could both be happy. We are just two very different people.

The only other relationship that I think is worth noting is the one that I had with my first serious girl friend. She was “The Girl” the one that would change the way that I look at everything in life. The only problem with our relationship was she was also mentally ill, and two mentally ill people do not make one “normal” person. We brought each other down, I wanted her to get better and she wanted the same for me, but the stress of all that made ourselves more unbalanced. I knew that I had to end the relationship because we weren’t lifting each other up, but bringing each other down.

**How is your character physically and psychologically different from the others characters in the play?**

Physically I don’t see myself as that much different than my mom and dad. I mean of course I look different than them, but we all have two arms, two legs, two eyes, two ears, one mouth, we are not that different at all, we look like regular people. Psychologically however it is almost a different species. I have been diagnosed with major depression and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. My brain just isn’t wired like theirs. I cannot really explain it because this is the only brain that I know. I know that the obtrusive thoughts that I have are not normal and that other people don’t have them, but I don’t know what kind of thoughts they do have. I know that I am mentally ill and they are not.

**How do your character’s changes affect others in the play?**
I feel like everything that I do affects everyone in my life. I hate that feeling, the feeling that everyone’s happiness is depending on me, I don’t like that kind of pressure. I know that if I was healthy then my family would be closer, my parents wouldn’t fight as much and my relationship that I have with my father would be better. When my mother found me cutting myself in the bathroom I knew that my life and my family’s life would no longer be the same. My mother grabbed my arm and dragged me out of the bathroom and brought me over to the phone, never letting go of my arm, she picked it up and called the hospital. Before I knew it we were in the car and I was in the mental ward of the hospital. Because of these actions I know that my mother’s life will never be the same.

**Who likes or dislikes you? Who do you like or dislike?**

I know that I am loved by both of my parents but I don’t know if I am always liked by them. I know this could be true because there are times where I don’t like my parents even though I love them all the time.

**Physical description**

Sex: Male

Age: 24 and 3 months

Height: 5’9.5”

Weight: 193.8

Color of hair: Dirty blonde

Color of eyes: 70% brown 30% green

Skin: White, and usually pimply from eating too much junk food.
Posture: I tend to slouch. I don’t care. My mom has told me to stand up straight 562 times, but I won’t listen.

Appearance: There was a point in my life where I didn’t think I was that bad looking, but then I got to high school and my opinion changed. It was also around this time that I was dealing with a lot of untreated issues like my depression and my OCD. I began to eat very badly due to my lack of caring. I know that I am not very good looking so what does it matter if my body isn’t great. I don’t know much about fashion; at least I don’t think I do; I don’t dress like everyone else. I don’t enjoy brand name clothes, they are usually too expensive and I don’t see what the big deal is with them. I pretty much wear whatever my mom buys me.

Defects of unusual physical features: When I was little I used to think that one of my arms was shorter than the other, so in hopes that I would be able to stretch one out I walked around holding my dad’s bowling bag. When my parents caught on to my usual behavior they assured me that my arms were the same length. I did not believe them until I measured them myself; they were of equal length.

Sociological Profile

Class: I grew up in an upper middle class family. My dad is a lawyer he was the main provider for the family.

Occupation: I worked at the Harvard book store for a summer once. That was a good job because I didn’t have to do much. What was bad about that though was the job didn’t keep my brain thinking that often, so my OCD acted up very badly. I then went to work at a comic book store called “Newbury Comics”. This job was great for me because I love comic books and even if I was bored I could always reorganize CD’s or look through some of the comic books.
Attitude: My attitude changes from day to day. I like to think that I usually have a good attitude towards things, until those bad thoughts sneak into my head and then I hear those voices that can cause my whole day to change.

Education: I am currently in college in the middle of my junior year. I don’t know right now if I will go for my masters, but it is definitely something that I am interested in. I like school, it is all about order, I like order, I like having a schedule, schedule makes sense to me. I like the idea of learning as much as I can and not having to get a job in the “real” world.

Home life: my home life was pretty normal, my parents are still together, and we had a dog and a cat. I grew up in a suburb of Boston in a medium to large sized house.

Religion: I grew up catholic. I don’t practice it that much any longer. I had a lot of catholic guilt, it was actually a part of my OCD. I can feel overly guilty about something that isn’t even that bad. For example if I have an unclean thought, I will think that I am going to burn in Hell just for thinking about sinning. This is something that I have been trying to work on throughout my recovery.

Race: I am white.

Nationality: I am 70 % Irish, 25 % German and 5 % Polish.

Position in society: I currently feel that I really don’t have any positions in society, I am a student; not that this is any excuse but I am focused on myself right now and not on society.

Political affiliations: I am a democrat.

Hobbies: I am really into comic books. I also like reading in general; David Foster Wallace is one of my favorite authors.

Psychological profile
Moral Standards: I like to think that I have high morals, but I know that there are times where I stray from the Path. Because of my OCD I usually feel terrible about myself after I do something that doesn’t exactly follow “good morals”. I didn’t masturbate until I was in college because I knew that God was watching me. I didn’t want to drink because I knew that drinking lowers ones inhibitions and I didn’t want that to happen.

Sexual Behavior: The first time that I had sex I was a freshman in college. It was pretty terrible, I mean it felt good, but I had no clue what I was doing. After that I had sex with my girlfriend at the time, and that was much better, I don’t know if it was because it was with someone that I love and loves me or if it was because I knew what I was doing. I haven’t had sex with anyone since we broke up.

Ambitious: I go through periods where I am ambitious and times where I am not. It depends about how I am feeling about myself at the time; the more confidence I have the more things I think I can accomplish in life.

Personal Habits: I pick my scabs and I bite my nails, but only when the time is at an even number. So I can pick my scabs at 2:42 but not 2:43.

Frustrations: The frustrations that I have are due to my disorder mostly. I get frustrated with myself and I get frustrated with people who don’t understand me. It isn’t their fault but it isn’t really my fault either, that’s the most frustrating part of all of it.

Temperament: I know that there are times I can have a bad temper, which comes out of my frustrations. For the most part however I am pretty calm, mostly because of the medications that I am on.

Life Attitude: I try to have a positive attitude toward everything in life. Especially after the work that I have done in therapy trying to change my perspective on things.
Complexes, emotional disturbances, abnormal behavior: I am mentally ill; I have been diagnosed with depression and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. My mind is so complex that I don’t even understand it.

Abilities: I think I have the ability to do a lot of things but I need to get out of my own way.

Talents: I think that I have a lot of little talents but not one main one. When I was in high school I was a part of the school musical, which was a good experience but something that I don’t think I was as talented in that craft as I would need to be to pursue a career in it.

Intelligence: I like to think of myself as intelligent. I have always done well in school.

Who are you? First, middle and last name.

Jacob Patrick Millers

In what country, state and city do you live?

I live in the United States of American in Massachusetts in a town called Worchester.

Single, Married, Divorced? Any children?

I am single and I don’t have any children.

How do you dress, walk, sit?

I walk with a slight hunch on my back, on account of the way that I hold myself. I like to sit with one of my legs crossed over the other. I dress the same every day; I usually wear some type of collared shirt, usually cotton, and a pair of jeans.

Characteristic voice tones? Justify them in terms of character’s/background
I think that I have a really nice voice actually, that is until I actually hear it, when I play back a recording of it. I like the way that it sounds when it comes out of my mouth, I feel like it is deep and resonate. But when I hear it, it sounds high and girly.

**Are you in good health? If not, why? Does your health change during the play?**

I am in poor health both mentally and physically, they go hand in hand. I believe that I over eat, and don’t watch what I eat because of my depression and my OCD. I like to think that my health changes during the time span of the play. As my mental health improves I think my physical health will do the same, the better I feel mentally the more motivation I will have to eat better and exercise.

**What are your strengths? How are they affected in the play?**

I am a very caring person. It might take a long time for someone to break through my wall, but when they do I can really invest in a person. When I was dating “the girl” I found that I cared about her more than I thought I could care about anyone, it was then that I realized that this was a strength of my. I have tried to incorporate this in the relationship that I have with my parents.

**Financial status?**

I am a student, so I am poor. I pretty much live off my meal plan; I don’t have a lot of other spending money.

**Do you use good English? Speak illiterately, with a dialect?**

I use proper English. I don’t have an accent really, which I am very happy about, I would hate to have a Boston accent, it sounds so uneducated.

**What kind of life have you led?**
My life has been a rollercoaster. I haven’t led a bad life; I have never been in serious trouble or have caused anyone serious harm, but I think that my disorder, at times, makes me feel like I have. There was a point in my life where I didn’t want to continue my life; I thought that it would be easier to die than it would be to go on in the way that my life was headed. I was a prisoner of my own brain and I felt that there was no other way to escape it. Now that I am in treatment I feel like my life is about to go uphill, I am beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

**In what kind of home do you live?**

The home that I grew up in was nice. It was always clean because my mom is a super neat person. We had a nice big backyard, a lot of room to run around a play. When I went to college I lived in a dorm on campus, which wasn’t as bad as I expected it to be. It was really small but I got along with my roommate.

**At the beginning of the play, how do you feel towards any of the other characters? Why do you feel this way?**

The relationship that changes the most within the course of the play is the one with my dad. I think that the problem in our relationship was a lack of understanding with each other. He wanted me to be a certain way and I wanted him to be a certain way. I think that there was a point where he thought that I was faking my disorder or playing it up, milking it for all it was worth. I believe that this frustrated him. After the whole “cutting” incident I think he began to rethink our relationship. Once I saw that he was making an effort I felt that it was only fair if I did the same.

**How do they feel towards you? Why?**

My dad is beginning to accept me the way that I am, which makes me want to accept him the way that he is. He cannot change me, so why should I try to change him.
During the course of the play, do your feelings towards any of the characters change? If so, why and in what way?

My feelings change towards everyone in the play. I think that because I change my mental outlook it affects my whole life and the people that are in it. Before therapy I felt like everyone that cared about me was against me, when really they just wanted to do what was best for me. When I first was put into the mental institution I was so rebellious towards any of the treatment because I was upset that my parents had sent me there. I felt that I could cope with my own disorder and that I didn’t need any outside help. My parents told me that I was not going to be released unless I submit myself to the process of getting healthy. Once I felt like there was no other way and fully dove into the treatment I realized that my parents did have my best interest in mind.

What are your characters need and wants?

I need to feel that I belong, that I am normal, that I am loved, that there can be a life dealing with depression and OCD. I want to be healthy.

Do you get what you want? If so, where? If not, why?

I think I do get what I want, or am in the process to get what I want. The real turning point in my life was when I went to the mental institution. It wasn’t until I got help that I realized that I can live with this disorder it is just a matter of knowing how to deal with it.

Who helps your character? How?

My parents help me by giving me an ultimatum. And I help myself by fully committing to the therapy.

What is your emotional climate, including the intensity of the emotions?
My emotions fluctuate throughout the entire play. When my mind is in a good place my emotions are in control. However when I am in a bad place I feel my emotions are all over the place, it is like I have no control over them.

**How do you appear in general?**

I appear as an average looking guy, someone that you wouldn’t give a second glance to.

**How do you not want to appear?**

I don’t want to appear as someone who is crazy.

**How do you want to appear to yourself?**

I want to appear as someone who is confident, attractive and someone who has their shit together.

**What appearances must you avoid at all times and at cost?**

I must avoid looking like a sufferer of OCD and depression. I never want anyone to know about my illness just by my appearance, I know that I will never get anywhere in life if that is the case. No one can ever truly trust someone who comes off as mentally unbalanced.

**Who is your God? This is not a question about religion. It means who or what are the guiding forces in your life?**

My God is my sanity. In my mind, if I can get my illness under my control I will be happier and will be able to live a fuller and better life.

**What animal represents your character best?**

I think that I am a rhino. For the most part I am peaceful but if you bother me I will charge.
Is your character head, heart, gut or groin centered?

I am head centered. I am constantly in my own head surround my unwanted thoughts.

How do you differ from all of the other characters in the play?

The main difference between me and the other characters in the play is that I am the only one with a mental disorder, well aside from “the girl”. My mind works differently than everyone else in the play.

Who is your private audience? If you knew that someone was watching all of your actions, who would you be living or playing for?

I wish that I could be watching myself, the healthy version of myself, my future self. I want him to be watching me so then I can know that I am going to be ok, that I will be able to overcome this huge hurdle that has blocked me from living my life fully for all of this time.
The idea behind doing the analyses was to link the creative mind as an actor and the creative mind as a playwright. These analyses helped create the characters and understand who they are.

Choosing to use three different types of analysis allowed for experimentation, to see which one worked the best for a new playwright. Uta Hagen’s 9 questions worked for the characters back story best. I was able to create a specific history for Jennifer, which helped with the arc of her character within the play. On the other hand, the analysis for Jacob helped with specific details about the character physically and mentally. Michael Shurtleff’s questions were the least helpful, probably because most of them were questions for the actor that is auditioning for a character. It didn’t really serve the initial development. It did lead to the discovery and creation of the relationship between Kyle and Jacob.

Using these methods of character analysis before writing the play really provided the basis for me as the playwright. I plan on using these analyses for monologues within the play itself and during re-writes.
CHAPTER THREE: TWO INFLUENTIAL PLAYWRIGHTS WHO DELT WITH MENTAL ILLNESS.

Mark Twain says: “Write what you know”. When a writer writes what they know they will undoubtedly create a piece that has not been shared before. A story is a part of the writer because every person is unique; so is the story that they create. Authors and playwrights alike write pieces about themselves and/or their family. Could they write about something that they do not know about? Would this make them more talented, more creditable? To write about a character who is suffering from a type of mental illness, does the writer have to be ill?

Some of the greatest people in this world have suffered from mental illness. Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president that ended the Civil War, suffered from depression and had suicidal thoughts as documented in many biographies by Carl Sandburg. Ernest Hemingway won the Nobel Prize for Literature, for his classic The Old Man in the Sea. He tragically took his own life after dealing with lifelong depression (National Alliance on Mental Illness). People that have changed this country forever dealt with their own sanity and it makes one wonder, how fine is the line between “madness” and “genius”?

Tennessee Williams and Eugene O’Neill have similarities between them that are extremely exceptional. Williams knew he wanted to write for theatre when he saw Russian actress Alla Naziamova play Mrs. Alving in Henry Ibsen’s Ghost. Williams recalls,

Nazimova’s playing was “so fabulous, so terrifyingly exciting” that he was unable to stay in his seat: “it was so moving that I had to go and walk in the lobby during the last act. I’d stand in the door and look in, then I’d rush back to the lobby again. (Leverich 160)
It was Nazimova’s performance in *Hedda Gabler*, also written by Ibsen, which inspired O’Neill to write.

A coincidence that happens only in life was cited in Louis Sheaffer’s definitive two-volume biography of Eugene O’Neill: “In the spring of 1907 O’Neill saw his first Ibsen performance, *Hedda Gabler*, with Nazimova...he saw the play ten times.” The performance, he said, opened a new world of the drama for O’Neill. “It gave me my first conception of a modern theatre where truth might live. (Leverich 160-161).

Although the playwrights have their similarities, to compare their work is difficult. Even with their commonalities, Williams saw O’Neill as an enemy of sorts.

Williams’ only real rival as the greatest American dramatist of this century is Eugene O’Neill. The two of them changed the whole shape of American drama... Before O’Neill, there was almost no serious American drama... (Williams 333)

Although both playwrights were writing at the same time, O’Neill influenced Williams after Williams saw a performance of *Diff’rent* at the Provincetown Playhouse: perhaps in the character of Emma Crosby he glimpsed an hysterical precursor of Alma Winemiller and Blanche DuBois in *Summer and Smoke* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*” (Leverich 361).

Both playwrights suffered from depression along with alcohol and drug abuse. Williams and O’Neill wrote dark plays dealing with their struggles from their child and adulthood. It is possible that as they were writing these plays they were forcing themselves into a deeper depression. However, it is also possible that the playwrights were releasing their own demons through their writing.
Elizabeth Moon, a science fiction writer who suffers from depression discusses openly on her website why writers often suffer from depression:

Writers suffer from depression for all the usual reasons (innate biochemical susceptibility, early life experiences, etc.) but they also live lives full of contributing factors. Isolation, introspection, lack of physical exercise, irregular hours, less than perfect diet, and lack of exposure to sunlight--all may cause a depression, or worsen one. So also do financial and professional uncertainty--the lack of control of events which writers experience in every aspect of their work. To these, some writers add alcohol or drug addiction. (Moon)

Personally I have not suffered from depression. As explained in previous chapters, I have portrayed characters that have dealt with depression, alcohol and drug abuse. The characters that I have played found themselves in the downward spiral that Moon discuses above. This maybe one of the main problems with depression; there is no end.

As an artist, I have a heightened level of empathy. When reading Trigged, I felt an extreme about of empathy towards author Fletcher Wortmann. Wortmann struggles with depression along with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. He is his own worst enemy. He is always stuck in his head with his own tormenting thoughts, very similar to the two prominent playwrights. Like Williams and O’Neill, Wortmann had to get his thoughts out on paper. My goal is to share his thoughts through the realm of theatre. Through my play, I want to offer audiences the chance to experience a deeper level of empathy. The audience hopefully will have an even better understanding of Wortmann’s struggle than they would have if they had read Triggered.
The subject of mental illness cannot be taken lightly. According to the National Alliance of Mental Illness, it is an epidemic that is affecting one in four adult Americans. As someone who does not have a mental illness, I know that it would be difficult for me to relate personally to Wortmann. As an actor, I am training to be able to tap into characters, using techniques such as character analysis and Meisner’s repeat work. Repeat work helps when trying to replicate the emotions the character has been through, in order to share their story. Actors are able to do this through a rehearsal process using different acting exercises. For example, when playing a character it is helpful to walk around as that character; spending the entire day as them, eat like them, try to surrender and let the character fill in every thought.

Williams and O’Neill both had a history of mental illness. Williams has written classics such as A Streetcar Named Desire, The Glass Menagerie, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, and many others. Williams led the opening of American drama history by opening up the theatre world to taboo subjects like sex, homosexuality, and violence.

Tennessee Williams was born Thomas Lanier Williams to Edwina Dakin and Cornelius Coffin Williams. Williams father was a traveling salesman who was gone weeks at a time; Edwina was a stay-at-home mom. Williams had an older sister named Rose and “though Rose was to become the prototype for Laura, the lame and painfully shy young woman of The Glass Menagerie, she was not lame; her mother claimed in her memoirs that Rose was certainly not shy in her early years. In fact, “She was the ringleader in games and very spirited” (Williams 15).

Note that not every aspect of a person has to be in a character for it to be based on them. A playwright gets inspiration from the people in their life and usually takes artistic liberties.

He and Rose were uncommonly close; both were considered outsiders in school and had to seek each other out for friendship. They were inseparable until something came between them: “What
happened was that Rose became a woman. She came down to breakfast one morning after her first menstruation, his mother and grandmother helped her gently to the table, and handed everything to her that she could not reach” (Williams 22). Their relationship was different from that point on, Williams himself was growing into a man, “he was having feelings that he could not understand...and at the time he did not know that the word homosexual meant” (Williams 22).

Williams touched on this confusing period of his life when he wrote A Streetcar Named Desire. Although Allen Gray is not a character in the piece he is talked about as Blanche Dubois’ late husband. Blanche never admits that she was married, perhaps because their marriage was never consummated. When her sister Stella confronts her about her marriage she replies, “The boy—the boy died”. It is amusing that Williams chooses the word “boy” as appose to the word “man”. Perhaps Williams is commenting on Gray’s sexuality that he is less of a man because he is gay, a feeling that Williams may have once had about himself. Cleary Gray, confused about his sexuality, wanted to find a woman to marry. Williams himself had a girlfriend for years by the name of Hazel who he did nothing more than kiss. He loved her. During a period where the two had lost touch Hazel became engaged. Perhaps otherwise Williams would have married a woman similar to the character Gray.

Williams’ first sign of mental illness happened during the time that his mother and father’s marriage was falling apart. “The effects of this destructive home life on the children must have been traumatic. Tom, already a neurotic and introverted child, was having all kinds of psychological problems. He was even terrified to go to sleep at night, because he thought sleep was similar to death” (Williams 24). As Williams grew up he became, “almost pathologically shy. He said he blushed when anyone looked at him. It was particularly bad when women looked at him, even his own girlfriend who was his companion for 11 years” (Williams 25).
According to Williams’ brother Dakin, Williams went on a trip to Europe with his grandfather during the summer of 1928. It was here where he began having some temptation problems due to his sexuality. Williams became very confused about who he was. As a result of his confusion, he pushed all of his “strange” feelings toward men away, affecting him tremendously psychologically.

A few years after Williams wrote *A Streetcar Named Desire*, he wrote another play that dealt with homosexuality. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* touched on the subject through the character Skipper, Brick’s dead friend, with whom he shared an “uncommon” relationship. After Skipper professes his love for Brick and Brick rejects him, Skipper drinks himself to death. Brick is pushing away his homosexual feelings; similar to what Williams had done during the early part of his life.

Tom had an odd psychological crisis apparently having little to do with the trip or his companions. It was a kind of wide-awake nightmare so intense that it left him shaking and drenched with sweat. He was terrified by the thought of thought, by the concept of the process of human thinking, as mystery in human life, and it made him think he was going mad…the phobia returned again, briefly, and this time he cured it himself: he wrote a poem, a lovely one about strangers passing in the street. It made him recognize he was not alone but a part of humanity. The phobia left him for good. (Williams 25-26)

This was the first of many times that Williams would use writing as a form of therapy. It was way for him to get his thoughts out of his head and on to paper. This is similar to what Wortmann does with *Triggered*.

Williams’ strong relationship with Rose continued to grow, “Tom admitted in his *Memoirs* that their feelings for each other were stronger than for anyone else...It went beyond normal love of a
brother and sister” (Williams 41). When Rose had her own struggles with mental illness it affected Williams as well, especially because there were times where he felt that he was to blame for her psychological problems.

In 1935, Williams and Rose went out to see *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. On the way to the movie Williams told Rose he was losing feeling in his arms and legs. Rose told the driver to rush to the hospital. After about a week of tests, doctors decided that Williams had just been suffering from exhaustion. Although not a serious medical event, Rose was very shaken up by the incident.

Throughout the next five years, Rose went through a lot of disturbing experiences, the last of which was “The final straw that separated Rose from her sanity” (Williams, Mead 63). When Williams’ parents went on vacation one weekend, Tom had some friends over. They got drunk, and began making obscene phone calls. Rose was aware of all of this and told her parents when they returned. Upset that he was now punished, Williams ran upstairs and told Rose that he hated her and never wanted to see her face again. “After this she began to suffer delusions, believing people were trying to poison her” (Williams, Mead 63).

At the age of 18 Rose was sent to St. Vincent’s Sanitarium where she was diagnosed with schizophrenia and acute paranoia. “Between screams and the most vile cursing, she would be chain-smoking and pacing up and down the corridor or visiting room. Finally the mother superior advised them there was no future for Rose at St. Vincent’s” (Williams, Mead 63). The doctors at St. Vincent’s suggested that the family talk to Dr. Emmett Hector who was one of the pioneers in the growing field of brain surgery. Dr. Hector had been experimenting with a prefrontal lobotomy procedure, in which a hole is drilled into the skull and an instrument is inserted to sever a connecting nerve. Doctors felt Rose would benefit from this type of operation but, permission would have to be given. Williams’ father had
been extremely depressed and was becoming more and more of an alcoholic, a foreshadowing of Williams’ own future.

Under the consent of her mother, doctors gave Rose the procedure. As a consequence, she ceased her violent ways and became a “mental vegetable”. Edwina later admitted that the operation was a grave mistake; Edwina was the one who suffered the most from the tragedy blaming herself for allowing the procedure to be performed. Many of Williams’ characters also dealt with indecisiveness. The best characters for an actor to play are those with an inner struggle. Tom in The Glass Menagerie struggles between the life he lives with his family, and the life that he wants, that of a movie star and a writer. This is a struggle that Williams himself dealt with in his life: the life he wanted as an artist and the life his father wanted for him as a salesman.

The relationship of Edwina and Rose happened to be another inspiration for The Glass Menagerie. Amanda wants Laura to be taken care of and believes that finding a husband for her will do that. She only wants what was best for Laura. Similar to Laura and Rose, Edwina wanted to do what was best for Rose in having the lobotomy.

Williams had Rose moved out of St. Vincent’s after the procedure and brought her to a number of different sanatoriums until he found the “right” one for Rose.

We drove for hours and hours to Stony Lodge in Ossining, where she now stays, a lovely retreat where she has a pleasant room to herself, with flowered wallpaper. The Lodge is on a bluff looking over the upper Hudson, and the grounds are beautifully landscaped. This is probably the best thing I’ve done with my life, besides a few bits of work.

(Williams 127)
Here, Rose seemed happier although Williams still felt like she was not complete: “I gave Rose a parakeet, remembering her devotion to the canary at the farmhouse. It became a dear pet”. (Williams 127) Rose enjoyed the bird so much that she wanted Williams to come up and see it every time he came to visit. There came a day where Rose did not ask, when Williams questioned her about this she said it was not doing well.

I insisted on going up to her room and the parakeet was lying dead in the bottom of the cage: the nurse in attendance at Rose’s Lodge said it had been dead for days but Miss Rose would not allow it to be removed.

On several occasions after this tragic demise, I tried to persuade her to accept another parakeet and she has always refused. (Williams 127)

Similar to Laura in The Glass Menagerie Rose had an exceedingly difficult time accepting reality. Rose did not believe that her bird was dead, and Laura lived in a world where her glass animals were everything to her. Both real and pretend, those animals were a large part of these women’s lives. They provided comfort for them. Wortmann also had a difficult time with his own reality. Due to the intrusive thoughts that he was constantly battling; he had a difficult time perceiving reality. It was not only Rose who suffered from physiological issues. Williams’ mother, Edwina, was said to be more psychotic than his sister Rose.

Mother was put away once...she was put away long before she was old, in the early part of the decade of the fifties...she was living alone and I guess her fantasies got the best of her. She thought the blacks were planning an uprising in St. Louis, and they were exchanging signals by rattling the garbage pails. (Devlin, Williams 326)
At the end of her life, Edwina was seeing images that were not there. For example, she was under the impression that she was living with a horse. Williams joked saying that she had always wanted a horse when she was younger and now that she had one, she did not like it one bit.

It was Rose who became William’s inspiration for The Glass Menagerie which had the original title of The Gentlemen Caller. She had written him letters while she was in the hospital telling him that he was lucky to be in prison, like herself because screaming crowds of hungry people were clamoring at the city gates.

It was precisely the short series of letters from his sister that made him plunge into the first draft of a new play. He was fully aware of its autobiographical nature from the start for he wrote to Windham that it was taking shape as a personal history of his family. The play would be a tribute to Rose, and a cry from his heart about the serenity they had all gradually lost over the years and were never able to regain. (Spoto 94)

Williams in his Memoirs states, “But you do not know Miss Rose and you never will unless you come to knew her through this “thing,” for Laura of Menagerie was like Miss Rose only in her inescapable “difference,” which that old female bobcat Amanda would not believe existed” (Williams 125).

There are three main characters in The Glass Menagerie, Amanda, Laura and Tom. Tom is the character that William’s based on himself, even naming the character his actual name. Amanda is the mother of the two who are based on Williams’ mother Edwina. Like Amanda, Edwina had many gentleman callers when she was younger and often talked about them as the children were growing up. Williams gives the audience hints about Roses inspiration on Laura. For example, Laura’s nickname in
the play is “Blue Roses”. Although Rose did not have a physical handicap, Williams chose to give Laura one; it made the character shy and gave her a fragile emotional state, similar to Rose’s real life personally.

Williams’ brother Dakin wrote this postscript, in reference to The Glass Menagerie: “It may appear our mother was a comical character with many of the attributes of Amanda in The Glass Menagerie but in this ordeal of my sisters mental demise she showed an abundance of courage and determination to do all that could be done to salvage the wreck that life had inflicted upon Rose” (Williams, Mead 65).

Williams writes about his own struggle with depression in his Memoir:

I arrived at the nadir of this long period of depression when I began living totally alone. I forget the year and the season of the year but instinct drew me back to New Orleans and I made a last solitary effort to pull myself together...I believe that depression is classified as “clinical” when the victim stops moving, stops eating and bathing. I think I was aware of death’s attraction. (Williams 204)

This is similar to how Wortmann felt during his lowest point of clinical depression. He felt that he had no way out; that the only way he would be able to stop the pain by taking his own life. During this point in Wortmann’s life, he began to drink in order to suppress those thoughts and “voices” that would come into his head. Williams also drank and had a problem with alcohol during his lowest period. Williams’ characters also abused alcohol especially when they wanted to escape. After Stella confronts
Blanche about her marriage to Allen Gray she begins to drink heavily and Skipper drinks himself to death after hearing of Brick’s rejection of him.

Williams sought out help from multiple psychologists in order for him deal with his depression but, the only way that he could be medically treated was through drugs; he never wanted to talk about any of his emotions. He recalls how Doctor Max Jacobson treated him in Conversations with Tennessee Williams:

I did find Max Jacobson’s shots marvelously stimulating to me as a writer. And during those last three years of the Sixties, before my collapse, I did some of my best writing...My collapse was related to the fact that I continued to drink while taking the shots. I was not supposed to. I had a bad heart. Dr. Max Jacobson never listened to my heart. Never took my pulse...He would look at me for a long time. He had all these little vials in front of him...Of course, the primary element was speed. And after I had a shot, I’d get into the taxi and my heart would begin to pound, and I’d immediately have to have a drink or I wouldn’t be able to get home. I’d have died in the cab otherwise. (Prenshaw 343-344)

It is true that The Glass Menagerie is the most autobiographical piece that Williams has written but, he seems to think that all work is autobiographical if it is serious.”Everything a writer produces is his inner history, transposed into another time. I am more personal in my writing than other people and it may have gone against me” (Spoto 114). Williams took a risk writing something that was personal and close to him, but then again there is no art without risk, and it was clearly a risk worth taking. Wortmann
took a risk as well opening up to the world about his disease. As a reader, it is so refreshing to read something that is honest and true.


Death is the unavoidable eventuality which in most cases we avoid as long as we can, but which finally, when all the possible options have expired, we must attempt to accept with as much grace as there remains in our command...I hope to die in my sleep, when the time comes, and I hope it will be in the beautiful big brass bed in my New Orleans apartment...Someone interviewing me asked me why writers are so preoccupied with disease and death. “Any artist dies two deaths,” I told him, “not only his own physical being but that of his creative power, it dies with him. (Williams 242, 247-248)

Williams tragically died from suffocating, a fear that he had since a child from when he suffered from Bright’s disease. One of the symptoms of Bright’s disease is restricted breathing. Although it was first thought that Williams had died from natural causes, it later was revealed after an autopsy that he had died by chocking on a bottle cap. A bottle cap used for nasal spray or eye solution.

In the days preceding his death, Williams had hoped to return to his home in the French quarter of New Orleans...like Eugene O’Neill at the last, the torment he felt was not just the disabling effect of his illness but also the fact that he was no longer able to sustain any effort at writing. (Leverich 1)
Williams’ life was truly a rollercoaster; it had its highs and its lows. His past clearly made him whom he was and what he wrote. He suffered from a mental disorder due to a history of it in his family and due to the environment that he was a part of and created for himself. It was Williams past that made his career, everything that had happened to him influenced him some way consciously or subconsciously. Actors use this in their art as well; they use their experience in order to create a similar experience on stage. Actors recall a memory from their real life in order to recreate emotion on the stage. Susan Giosa, an acting teacher in Los Angles says, “Our imaginations are fueled by life experience.” Artist of all forms can agree on this.

During the same time that Williams began writing his plays, another playwright was already well into his career. Like Williams, Eugene O’Neill suffered from mental illness. Wortmann, Williams, and O’Neill all wrote about what was familiar, using their past to influence their work. All three men suffered from depression due to their own personal tragedies in their life. All of these men created pieces of literature that would make audiences take a good hard look at their own life and mental state.

O’Neill’s father, James was a successful actor who was constantly on tour. His mother Ella accompanied her husband for 40 years, a task that was not a pleasant at times:

Being married to a touring star in the 1870’s and 1880’s required being resilient, an approachable personality, unaffected interest in and warmth for fellow trouper, and an ability to ignore the hardships of unventilated trains, shabby hotel rooms, and the prevalence of whiskey.

(Gelb 39)

Ella did not seem to mind being in the spotlight on the arm of her husband. Their relationship had been remarkably stable. During one point in their marriage a woman, Nettie Walsh, came out saying that she was James’ wife, and they had a child together. Walsh hearing of James’ success wanted to get a sum of
money for what he had done, marrying her and then leaving, Walsh as a result, sued. James counter-
sued the allegation and considered the relationship over in 1875. James felt that everything was under
control, that things would go back to the way they were.

Although upset about the scandal, Ella tried to stay positive for she was anticipating her first
child, according to Gelb. James O’Neill Junior was born on September 10, 1887. The couple seemed to
be happy according to some acquaintances. Ella was now happy that she had her baby to keep her
company while James was in rehearsals or performing. James, Ella, and the child continued touring the
United States often settling in one place for a long period. Ella and James had their second child
Edmund Burke O’Neill in St. Louis. After the birth of Edmund, the parents decided they must have a
home base that they could bring the children repeatedly. The two found a place in New London,
Connecticut, close to Ella’s mother. Both James and Ella hoped that New London would offer the roots
they wanted for their children.

During the time where James would continue to tour the couple would leave the children with
Ella’s mother. “She felt guilty about leaving her children, but she was incapable of parting from her
husband” (Gelb 53). There was one instance in particular that ended in tragedy when she had left them.

Soon after, she heard word that James Jr. was sick with measles. On
February 27, the baby, Edmund, not yet a year and a half caught the
disease. He was ill for five days and died in the early morning of March
4... young Jim was the first to suffer, for Ella was convinced that he had
tried to kill his brother. Eugene O’Neill was aware of how Ella felt as he
demonstrated in Long Day’s Journey Into Night when he caused Mary
Tyrone to say to her husband that she had always believed her son went
into the baby’s room deliberately, to give him measles. Jim was jealous
of the baby—hated him, says Mary Tyrone, adding that he had been
warned that measles could kill the infant. The real him could not have
been insensitive to Ella’s feelings. (Gelb 53)

Three years after the death of Edmund, Eugene O’Neill was born.

Eugene was as far as can be determined from medical records, a normal
healthy, breast-fed baby, despite the debilitating effect that his birth
apparently had upon his mother...Ella according to relatives, was
attended at her delivery by a doctor with whom James O’Neill had
struck up a barroom acquaintance. Eugene came to believe that it was
James’s eagerness to save on medical cost that caused him to choose a
doctor so casually. It seems certain that the doctor ordered morphine
to ease Ella’s pains. (Gelb 58)

This would be the start of Ella’s addiction to morphine.

After spending seven years on tour with his family, Eugene was sent to a Catholic boarding
school; being away from home made O’Neill feel terribly alone at such a young age. According to Gelb,
since both of her sons were away, Ella would no longer have to conceal her use of narcotics

Throughout the following years, Eugene continued schooling away from home and spent his
summer at the family’s home in New London. He did well in school, aside from algebra which he had failed. His parents would visit him as much as they could and Eugene went to see them when he was nearby.

Eugene started drinking alcohol, shortly after he discovered his mother’s addiction, when he was fifteen.
Eugene returned to the hotel one day unexpectedly and stumbled upon his mother in the act of giving herself a morphine injection. She was far more upset that Eugene saw her, and accused him of spying on her...Eugene had already begun to dramatize himself, much as his mother had as a girl. His misery was genuine but he heightened it to torment himself. (Gelb 72)

This is seen in *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* in the character of Edmund, the character which based on himself. Edmund could be seen as the “victim”, it was his painful birth that caused his mother to become addicted to morphine. He talks about his love for poetry, which is heightened text.

The topic of religion was prevalent in O’Neill’s work, and it was at this point in his life where he felt that God in fact, did not exist.

Ella’s addiction now provided the reason for his faltering faith. He prayed for her cure, challenging God to prove himself by restoring his mother to health, and demonstrating thereby that he had already lost faith. (Gelb 72)

O’Neill uses this experience with his mother in *Days Without End*. This is one of the first times that used his personal life in order to feed his muse.

After graduating high school in 1906 O’Neill attended college. Following the advice of his father, O’Neill attended Princeton University, but only for one year.

He spent more time drinking than he did studying. He also experimented with drinking absinthe, a wormwood-alcohol intoxicant...
that is particularly potent neurotoxic. He was expelled from Princeton for pranks and cutting classes. (Miliora 32)

Eugene wanted Ivy-stamped niche in life. He was convinced he could learn more out of college than in. Like Shaw and O’Casey, he ultimately demonstrated that a college education was not essential to the writing of great plays. (Gelb 118)

After leaving Princeton, he worked odd jobs (including his father’s theatrical troupe) and as a seaman, traveling to South America and Europe. In 1912, following his return from sea, O’Neill fell into an alcoholic period, living in or near wharf-side saloons and frequenting brothels. At extremely low ebb in his fortunes and heath, O’Neill attempted suicide. (Fisher 10)

O’Neill had been dealing with alcohol and depression from a young age. His addiction started unusually early in his life.

In 1912, Eugene, became diagnosed with tuberculosis. He spent much of that year in a sanitarium. It was here where he began reading classics on American literature and drama, which is when he thought about pursuing a career as a playwright. 1912 is also the year in which he would set *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*.

Like Tennessee Williams, O’Neill became involved with the Provincetown Players in Provincetown, Massachusetts on Cape Cod during the summer of 1916. It was here where he came into his own as a playwright. In the fall, the theatre group moved their operations to New York City. “There they successfully performed O’Neill’s *Bound East for Cardiff* and *Before Breakfast*” (Fisher 11).
Although he would marry writer Agnes Boulton in 1918 and have two children with her, O’Neill still was not happy. He was beginning to realize that he was a product of his environment.

As recounted in *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*, as children, both Jamie and Eugene were given whiskey by James if they were sick or woke from nightmares. James was a heavy but seemingly controlled drinker. O’Neill’s maternal grandfather was an alcoholic, and his mother was a drug-addicted. Alcoholism was transmitted intergenerationally to O’Neill, perhaps both biologically and culturally. (Miliora 35)

In 1920, O’Neill’s father died after he had suffered a stroke. After the death of his father, Jamie, at the time 44, made the choice to stop drinking and quickly became his mother’s companion. The two were on a trip together to California when Ella suffered a stroke and a brain tumor had been discovered. Jamie distraught by the whole ordeal wired Eugene to come to the west coast, but Eugene replied he was unwell and could not. Jamie fell back into drinking heavily. Ella died in 1922; her body was shipped back to New York on the train. Eugene attended her funeral, but according to Miliora, Jamie was too drunk to attend. Jamie’s drinking problem became too much to deal with, he drank himself to death in 1923.

Within 1920-1923, Neill had lost his father, mother, and his brother. It was a lot for him to handle and he reacted to his pain by going on a self-destructive path.

O’Neill went on a particularly long and destructive drinking binge on the one-year anniversary of his brother’s death. In the mid-twenties, O’Neill had six weeks of treatment by Gilbert Hamilton, a psychoanalyst in New York City...After his experience with Hamilton early in 1926,
O’Neill stopped drinking. He was 37. He remained essentially sober, except for brief lapses, for the rest of his life. (Miliora 36)

Over the years, O’Neill would abandon his own family. His daughter Oona was disowned by him because of her marriage to Charles Chaplin in 1943. The youngest boy, Eugene O’Neill III, became a classical scholar and had received a job as an assistant professor at Yale. However due to the lack of stability in his childhood, he had trouble with relationships. Eugene O’Neill III, married three times and fell into a depression that he medicated with drinking and finally committed suicide at the age of 40. Shane, Eugene’s final child, was similar to himself; he was sensitive and lonely, and he never found a stable career. He too abused alcohol and marijuana and would eventually become addicted to heroin. Shane was arrested for heroin possession; O’Neill disowned him as he had his daughter. Shane eventually committed suicide in 1977.

O’Neill fell deeper and deeper into a depression due to “the tragedies surrounding his children, his inability to write, and his illness that rendered him...” (Miliora 38). O’Neill died at the age of 65 in a Boston Hotel on November 27, 1953.

It is clear to see that O’Neill’s childhood had affected him as well as his own children. It had become a vicious cycle that they had no way of escaping. Although O’Neill was plagued with mental illness and drug/alcohol abuse, he won four Pulitzer Prizes for Beyond the Horizon, Anna Christie, Strange Interlude and Long Day’s Journey Into Night. He was also awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. One of the most captivating and moving piece in American Drama, Long Day’s Journey Into Night is an autobiographical piece. If O’Neill’s life had been different the play may not have existed. Long Day’s Journey Into Night was written over the course of two years; it was completed in 1941.

It depicted the O’Neill family (named Tyrone in the play), consisting of his parents, Mary (54 years old) and James (65), his brother, Jamie (33),
and himself (23). Interestingly O’Neill called himself “Edmund” in the play. This was the name of the bother that died in childhood about three years before Eugene was born. In the play, this dead brother is named “Eugene”. (Miliora 39)

Mirroring O’Neill’s real life, Mary is addicted to morphine and all three men show alcohol abuse. Long Day’s Journey Into Night is one of the most famous autobiographical works on O’Neill but A Moon for the Misbegotten is another of a similar nature.

This play portrays the tragic story of his older brother, set a few months before Jamie’s death...The story line centers on the relationship between Jamie and his mother, the circumstances of her death and Jamie’s behavior after her death. (Miliora 47)

Like Wortmann, O’Neill’s problems stemmed from the feeling of not belonging. He had a feeling that there was no one who could understand him, along with having an emotional disconnect to his family.

O’Neill felt a painful sense of not belonging within this milieu, much like the experience of Yank in The Hairy Ape. He felt betrayed by this abandonment and he was extremely lonely. The preoedipal failures left O’Neill with a lack of cohesiveness, a propensity for depletion, depression, anxiousness, and intense loneliness. (Miliora 145)

Wortmann and O’Neill had a similar relationship to women. Both men used women to validate their own sense of self. They both struggled with narcissism.
The immature form of narcissism can be conceptualized as a condition
that has been described aptly by Christopher Lasch (1991 [1979]): “Not-
withstanding his occasional illusions of omnipotence, the narcissist
depends on others to validate his self-esteem. He cannot live without
an admiring audience. (Miliora 11)

There seem to be many similarities between Wortmann and O’Neill. Both have felt as if they
were outcast in society and within their own families. Wortmann’s home life was not nearly as
dysfunctional as O’Neill’s, although due to his anxiety and obtrusive thoughts Wortmann believed that it
was. Wortmann has shared his journey in life dealing with the development of his OCD and depression
through his memoir, and O’Neill has shared his journey in life dealing the formation of his depression,
along with his substance abuse problems. Wortmann, Williams, and O’Neill all wrote as an escape. This
is ironic because they wrote about the exact things in which they were trying to escape.
CHAPTER FOUR: REHEARSAL JOURNAL

When I first began writing my play, I knew that the most vital step in this whole process would be the public reading of the script. What I did not know was how much the rehearsal process for the production would influence the play itself. Prior to having my first read-through I was confident that everything within the script would stay the same. After making many edits of the work myself and reading it aloud, I felt that there was nothing more that I needed to bring to the script. Unfortunately, I am unable to publish the entire play within this thesis, following the request of author Fletcher Wortmann. There are excerpts within this chapter to illustrate progress made throughout the process.

I had my first reading of the script about a month before the scheduled production. The first rehearsal was primarily a read-through. Hearing the words aloud for the first time, in someone else’s voice other than my own, was exciting and inspiring. Suddenly, I was hearing the words in a totally different way. There was a lot of text that seemed very cluttered once read aloud, and because of the complex wording it seemed very confusing to both myself and the actors. There were also a lot of parts within the script that did not seem sincere, even though while writing it, I thought they were. Read aloud however, some parts sounded very cliché and unrealistic. Even before I got feedback from the actors I knew some of the changes that I needed to make.

Jacobs’s father Kyle was not playing as well as I thought it would. Robert Svetlik, a senior acting major at University of Central Florida will be playing the part of Kyle. Svetlik told me he felt that the end of Kyle’s arc felt forced and unreal. He felt that Kyle would not change his attitude so drastically. In the beginning of the piece, he is shown as the perfect man; and by the end he is a jerk. Near the end of the script there is a scene between Kyle and Jacob where Kyle is apologizing to him about their past relationship.
Kyle: You know Jake; the scariest day of my life was when you went into that hospital. But looking back on it, that was also the best day of my life because I got to know you. It was my fault for not trying to before. I missed out on knowing a great man, a man I am proud to say that I brought into this world, but a man that I am sad to say I didn’t help bring up all that much.

It needed to be simpler. I ended up cutting the entire monologue, and made it a very short and simple scene.

Kyle: You know I love you, right?

Jacob: I know Dad.

Kyle: And... I’m sorry.

Jacob: I know Dad

Even though there is not as much text as before, it was still meaningful. It was straight forward and got to the point of the scene without using a lot of words. Also, I have trust in my actors and know that they will not rush through the moment.

After changing the end of Kyle’s arc, I had to change the beginning.

For example, Kyle’s first monologue read as:

We had a boy! I couldn’t have been happier; I was a father, a Dad! I was going to teach him everything I knew. I was going to be there for all the important things in his life; I would be there at his first Tee-Ball game, the night before his first date, the day of his wedding, when his first
child was born. I wasn’t going to tell my wife Jennifer this but I really wanted to have a boy. I guess I would have been fine with whatever God chose to give us as long as the baby was healthy, but this way I got a healthy baby and a son. I felt like the luckiest guy in the world.

Jennifer and I were finally starting the family that we always talked about.

I myself was not very close to my father. He worked a lot and wasn’t always around for me and my mother. He felt that as long as he provided for us then he was doing his job requirements. I remember one night I was waiting for him to come home from work, I had so much to tell him about my day. I remember standing at the door when he came in. He walked in the door, and walked past me. When I called for him he kept walking and said “Not now”, and closed the door to his office.

When I first looked at my own son, I thought of this exact moment and I promised myself that I would be a better father than my own.

After the first rehearsal and the re-writes it read:

I was a father, a Dad! Wow, this kid is going to be lucky, I know I am going to be a great dad. You know I would have been fine with having a girl but I am glad about having a boy, I wouldn’t know what to do with a girl, except lock her up in her room when she turned 14. God having a
girl would have been terrible; I wouldn’t have been able to deal with that shit.

I was not very close to my father. He worked a lot and wasn’t always around for me and my mother. He felt that as long as he provided for us then he was doing his job requirements. It’s pretty much your typical *Cats in the Cradle* kind of story. Dad always worked, didn’t have much time for his family. You know the song.

Svetlik had expressed that he was glad that the section listing the activities was cut. He felt it was too literal; he would be able to show his excitement for having a son, without having to list all of the events that would take place in his life. This also made the most sense because of the re-writes made to the last scene between the two characters.

When I began writing Kyle’s character, I found myself writing him as a stereotypical man. He played sports in high school, was the perfect husband and father. He seemed boring and two dimensional; he needed to seem more real. In order to produce him as a realistic character, I thought about the men that I knew closely in my own life. I thought of my own father a lot while re-writing Kyle; this helped me find his voice. This experience as a whole made me gain a whole new respect for male playwrights that write such fabulous parts for women, such as Tennessee Williams, John Patrick Shanley, and Neil Labute.

Sandia Ahlers a junior BFA acting major at UCF will be playing the role of Jennifer, the role that I felt the closest to because it was major female voice. While writing, I was amazed when I noticed how easy it was for me to write as a woman and how difficult it was to write as a man. I felt that because I was a woman, it was hard for me to tap into the mindset of a man. This was a discovery that I had
made during the rehearsal process. I had not noticed before that all of the characters voices sounded the same.

Ahlers mentioned to me how the voice of her character sounded the same as the other characters. I needed to make it a point to make the characters sound different. This was a challenge for me; the only voice that I knew was my own. How was I supposed to sound like someone other than myself? It was at this point that I looked back at the analyses that I had written in the beginning of the process. I reread them, just as if I was performing the role and then went back to the script and began changing the characters vocabulary and speech pattern. I had realized that the characters did sound the same.

Jacob will be played by Michael Dritto, a senior BFA acting major at UCF. Dritto had a hard time relating to the character of Jacob, he could not put himself in the mindset of having a mental illness. I gave him some advice on the subject telling him that it will be helpful if he started keeping a journal as Jacob. This would allow him to get into Jacob’s head outside of rehearsal. Dritto also suggested that more be added to the script that shows the audience what exactly is going on in Jacob’s head, this way the audience and himself have a better idea. Prior to this suggestion, I had not put any of Jacob’s obscure thoughts in the script. I decided that I would add them within the monologues. A section of one of his monologues read as follows:

I got a job, like my father had requested, at the Harvard Bookstore. For the most part it was a pretty good job. The only problem I had with it was when I was bored my mind would begin to wander.

“What if I stacked all of these books on top of each other outside, and climbed to the roof and jumped off?”
“I wonder if you could kill someone with a book?”

“I would kill someone with Infinite Jest, that’s a pretty big book.”

These intrusive thoughts would come rushing into my head and there was nothing that I could do to stop them. I quickly would push them out of my head and assure myself that I was completely fine. This never really worked.

Dritto had gotten this idea from watching “YouTube” videos on the subject. He had told me that there was a lot of videos that OCD suffers had uploaded. Dritto mentioned that it was extremely helpful for him to watch this because it gave him a better idea on what was going on in Jacob’s head. Hopefully adding these thoughts to the script will help the audience get a better idea as well.

The entire cast felt that my writing was too literal. There were points in the script where the actor was literally saying what they felt, such as, “I am sad” or “I am happy”. The actor’s felt that this took away from their own creative choices because the playwright was telling them how to feel. This happened mostly because some parts of the text I pulled directly from the character analysis that I had created for the characters. I removed the literal parts all together and kept the text around them. It was then that I discovered that I did not need them at all because the text made sense without them.

After the rehearsal I started to rewrite the script. I ended up cutting a lot more than I had planned; I noticed things that were unnecessary to the plot, especially in the monologues. I took the information from the monologues and incorporated them into scenes. There are now a lot more scenes within the script than I had originally intended.

By the time we got to the second rehearsal I felt that it was too soon to go into character discussions, mostly because the majority of the script had been changed. I felt that we needed to do
another read-through in order to get a better sense of the script and the characters. Throughout this read-through I kept my laptop out with the play up and cut words or phrases that sounded odd, along with fixing any grammatical errors. The cast expressed how the re-writes worked nicely with where they saw their character going. They felt that the arcs of each character were a lot smoother, and they saw what they wanted within each scene, their objective, and also what they wanted within the whole play, their super objective.

I was very excited about the next rehearsal we would have because it would give me a chance to see how the actors were viewing and grasping the characters. The play is only going to be a reading, so I wasn’t sure what my next step would be. Usually I would have the cast get on their feet, but I wasn’t sure if that was in mine or their best interest. I spoke with Mark Routhier, a professor at UCF. Along with working at UCF Routhier is also the director of new play development at the Orlando Shakespeare Theatre and a playwright himself. I asked him what his next step would be in the rehearsal process. He spoke to me about the power of improv when it came to playwriting. He suggested the characters get off the script at times and improv, this way I could see if they fully understand their character. This would also give me a chance to see where more might needed to be added or to see where something can be said more conversationally and not so contrived.

The scene in which Kyle is teaching Jacob how to masturbate was tricky to write. There needed to be more awkwardness and less directness. I did not realize this until both Dritto and Svetlik announced that this type of conversation would never happen so nonchalantly. Once this was brought to my attention, I fully agreed. During the second rewrite, I added a section where Jennifer brings up the idea to Kyle. She asks him to talk to Jacob about it. I hoped that this way it would not seem that it came out of nowhere.
When we read-through it the second time it still felt like there was something missing. So at the third rehearsal I had the actor’s improv the scene. Both Svetlik and Dritto did it perfectly. They opened my eyes to the way that it had to be written and acted. Both actors found the voice of the characters that I had written and found their own voice for the character. They were making the characters their own, which made me happy because I felt that this meant the characters were relatable. The scene read as follows:

Jennifer: I think you need to talk to Jacob.

Kyle: why?

Jennifer: Well, he is very stressed out. I don’t know what his problem is; I mean school doesn’t seem to be that bad, he is just all worked up.

Kyle: So what do you want me to do?

Jennifer: Well I was thinking...maybe, well that maybe you could talk to him about some techniques to relieve his stress.

Kyle: What are you talking about? What am I suppose to be like “Oh hey Jake, you wanna go get a massage?”

Jennifer: Well it’s a sort of a massage, a private massage.

Enter Jake

Jennifer: Hi sweetie, I am just running out the door now, but your dad wants to talk to you. See you guys later.

Exit Jennifer
Kyle: Hey Jake, how was school today?

Jake: Fine I guess, I have a lot of homework tonight.

Kyle: Your mom was saying you seem to be a little stressed out.

Jake: Yea, I guess you could say that.

Kyle: Well, I want to tell you about something, now you might feel awkward about what I’m about to tell you, but remember I feel just as awkward about it.

Jake: ok.

Pause

Kyle: Well....so...ummmm......have you ever...umm well masturbated?

There’s something that men do when they want to relive stress

Jake: Are you talking about masturbation dad.

Kyle: It’s more of a sensual massage

Jake: Are you trying to teach me how to masturbation?

Kyle: Well...yea.

Jake: Oh My God!

Kyle: Well do you know how?

Kyle: First you grab the shaft.

Jake: Oh my God. Stop.
Kyle: And you move your hand up and down repeatedly until you reach climax.

Jake: AHHHH. DAD.

Kyle: ok well now you know.

Jake: I’m gonna go to homework.

Kyle: Oh...I gotcha.

Jake: No, no. HOMEWORK!

Throughout the rest of that rehearsal, I let the actor’s improv anything the script did not give them. Another example was the fights between Jennifer and Kyle; both actors felt the arguments themselves were written weakly. The actors needed to be more passionate. I let them come off the page and say what they needed to say to each other. Doing this showed me which particular section needed more, in order to help the actors get where they needed to go emotionally.

I felt torn as the playwright and director. Once I put my director hat on I noticed sections that could be fixed within the script as far as character development. When my playwright hat was on, I felt that the characters were completely developed. Looking back at my writing process I wish I would have thought as the director as well as the playwright and the characters themselves.

The script is mostly monologues and those monologues are the characters inner voices. I wanted these monologues to have a human quality to them, make them feel as if they were talking to someone. I wanted them to think about the fact that someone could be listening to what they were saying, would they speak quietly, would they say a line a different way? This was an exercise that I
wanted the actors to use to help with character, not necessarily how the monologues would be presented during the performance. I also created another level to this exercise where the other actors were allowed to interrupt what the actor was saying within their monologue. The actors would interrupt as their characters. For example, if Jennifer was telling the audience how worried she is about Jacob; Jacob could interrupt her saying she has nothing to worry about. I also gave the actors the freedom to improvise a scene using the interruption as a spring board. This helped the actors get a better understanding of who they were playing, and the relationships they had with each other.

These improvisations helped me make changes throughout the script. A lot of the changes affected Jennifer. Jennifer had a monologue telling the audience that she was worried about Jacob. In the first draft of the script it read as:

*You see things on the news all the time, teenagers taking their own lives because of the thoughtless actions of other people. What bothers me the most are the people who sit there and say that kids need to have a thicker skin, that teasing is a part of growing up. My own husband is one of these people. He thinks that the bullying that Jacob endures is brought upon himself. That maybe if he got more involved or played football he would have more friends. What hurts me and I think Jacob as well, is that his own father doesn’t support him, or think that his pain is real. Kyle thinks that he is being dramatic, over reacting.*

This monologue has a lot of passion behind it, and I felt that the message would be better received if it were in a scene. In a scene, the actor could react off of the other character. The final scene read as:

*Jennifer: Something is not right. I don’t feel like this is normal, Kyle.*
Kyle: When did you ever think that Jacob was normal? He just needs to learn to toughen up a little bit Jenny. He is too sensitive. He takes everything too literal, to serious.

Jennifer: That’s not it. I think he needs to talk to someone. A psychologist.

Kyle: Do he doesn’t. I think he needs to get more involved in things. Go out and play some sports. You know, go out get a group of guys together, and go play football.

Jennifer: Jacob doesn’t have a group of guys Kyle, he is not you. You know he is going to talk with someone, someone that can maybe help him.

Kyle: I think you’re over reacting.

Jennifer: Do not tell me I am over reacting. This is my son.

My fourth rehearsal was by far the most productive we had, as far as working on character development was concerned. Michael Dritto had told me that he was going to be late, which gave me time to talk to Ahlers and Svetlik about their characters and the relationship that they have with one another. Both actors agreed that Jennifer is more understanding towards Jacob’s illness. Kyle wants to understand but is a very literal person and finds the whole thing hard to grasp. Kyle believes that Jacob can be “fixed” with some tough love.

Ahlers spoke about Jennifer’s journey. When Jennifer was younger she let Kyle’s priorities become more important than her own. Kyle was used to this being the way that their relationship worked; he was the one who got to call the shots, so to speak. Throughout Jacob’s life, Jennifer has
gotten stronger because she had to be stronger for her child. In Jennifer’s mind, she needed to be in control of Jacob’s health. Kyle did not feel like he was a part of her life anymore or even a part of his own family. In his mind, Jennifer had changed, and Kyle did not know how to handle or react to this new person that Jennifer had become. She was not actually listening to him anymore; she was taking control of everything. Kyle felt that he was no longer needed and subconsciously blamed Jacob. Jacob was Jennifer’s main concern and in Kyle’s eyes her only concern. Kyle acted out towards Jacob out of jealousy and bitterness. Once Dritto arrived at rehearsal, we focused on Jacob, and how he felt his relationship was with his parents. He expressed that Jacob is misunderstood by both of his parents, his dad does not want to understand him and his mom tries too hard to understand him.

What was very exciting for me as the playwright was that the actors saw the characters the same way that I saw them but also added more to them. I felt such a sense of accomplishment as the playwright; if my message was getting through to them, then it would also get through to an audience.

Dritto was still having a difficult time getting into the mindset of a character suffering from OCD and depression. In order to help him, I had him go through his monologues in character and had the other characters whisper intrusive thoughts into his head (just like the ones that Jacob would create on his own). This helped Dritto a lot, so much so that he told us it was “driving him crazy”. This type of technique was first introduced to me by Professor Maggie Lally at Adelphi University. Lally would call it “outward inner monologue” in other words having other actors speak aloud another characters inner monologue. This would only be used in the rehearsal process. It would help the actors get “out of head”, to stop thinking about everything and just be in the moment with the other character. It would help the actors simply react off their instincts without the preconceived idea of how they would.

After our fourth rehearsal, I felt a sense of completion with the piece. I had made all of the re-writes that I was able to make, given the time period of the process. The fifth rehearsal will consist of a
straight read-through (something that we have yet to do), talk about blocking, and costumes. I did, however, run into a problem with one of my actors. The actor that was playing “the girl” and “the woman” had missed a lot of rehearsal; consequently I had to remove her from the cast, due to her lack of professionalism. I did find a terrific replacement that will play the part even better than the former actor.

Our last rehearsal was finally here. I had felt that we were in a good place; I was excited and eager to have a full run of the play without stopping. Trevin Cooper, a classmate of mine had asked me if it would be alright if he stopped into rehearsal because he would not be able to make it to the reading. Although I told him yes, I was a little worried that my actors were not quite ready for an audience, but then on the other hand, I felt that maybe at this point, they needed it. I know as an actor, I like when there are audience members (even just one person) who will react and give some sort of feedback. As the director and playwright I too was excited to hear some feedback.

Before we began the run, I went over the blocking with the cast. Because it is a reading there will be no actual movement; the only movement will be is the actors standing up when they are in a scene and sitting down when they are “off stage”. I want this reading to be about the story, and I feel that a lot of moving will distract the audience from getting the full message. After blocking I discussed costumes and told them not to wear labels. I did not want Kyle wearing a NIKE shirt that reads “Just do it”. It would be too distracting. I instructed them to wear something that would suggest their character. Svetlik asked if he could wear a sports coat as the father, I told him that was perfectly fine. I told the actors that they could wear anything that would help them with their character. This is something that helps me at times. As an actor, I do not usually work outside in, but when I do costumes always help. Working outside in means that things like make-up, costumes, and the way that you physically move
help you get into character. Whereas, working inside out would mean that character analysis and research help you get into character; this is the method that I prefer personally.

The read-through went extremely well, and Mr. Cooper gave me great comments mostly positive but also a couple of things that I could think about changing. For example at the end of the piece, Jacob has a monologue to the audience in which he calls all of the audience members that are not suffering from a mental disorder “assholes”. Cooper felt that it insulted the audience, and it was an odd way to end the play; it was not very positive. Cooper is someone who I respect a lot, and I was very happy to hear all of the great feedback. Cooper had told me that he could easily relate to all of the characters and that he felt a great deal of empathy for each of them.

Before rehearsal ended I wanted to make sure that the actors felt comfortable, and ready for the reading tomorrow. The cast assured me that they felt good and were excited to share their work and the story. I too felt ready for the reading. I am currently organizing a talk back session which will hopefully be helpful in supporting my thesis.

It is crucial for playwrights to hear their words aloud, and to create an environment within the rehearsal process that lets the actors feel safe. If they do not feel safe they will be unable to communicate their opinion. This piece has come a long way, and I am proud of it. It is my hope that it will reach people; that the audience can find the characters relatable, even though they might not have any experience with mental illness themselves.
CHAPTER FIVE: REFLECTION JOURNAL

March 12, 2013 was the public reading of my play *Drowning*. The purpose of a reading is purely to tell a story. During a reading there are no sets or props and minimal costumes. There are only scripts and the actors. There are music stands that hold the script. In my reading the actors stood up with the stands when it was their turn to speak. I wanted to keep it simple.

One of my main worries going into this performance was that there would not be enough people. I wanted to hear as much feedback as possible for my own knowledge as the playwright and for my thesis. There ended up being about 25 people there. I knew that once the audience was there everything was out of my hands. There was nothing more that I could do, no more re-writes (at this point) and no more directing. It was now the actor’s job to share the story that had been written. My only objective was to watch my work and to enjoy it. I wanted to be able to view it as objectively as possible as if I did not know the story.

While the reading was happening, I could not help but watch the audience. I wanted to see their reactions to things. I was surprised to see what they found humorous. There were some moments that I had found serious and dramatic yet they found funny. Their laughter had something to do with the way that the actors were delivering the lines. It was fascinating to see how their performances changed, now that they had an audience. Speaking as an actor I know that this can happen; an audience can throw off a performance because they are giving reactions that one may not expect (laughing, gasp, crying or coughing). It is the actor’s job to stay in the moment no matter what is happening in the audience. If an actor is getting laughs at a moment where they usually do not, they should not change the way they deliver other lines in hopes to get more laughs. There were some actors that did exactly
that last night, but I do not think that it was so extreme that the audience could notice. The only reason I knew was because I have been with them throughout the rehearsal process.

Talk-back sessions are used a lot in theatre. It is a way for the audience to share their thoughts about the show. These sessions are especially beneficial for the playwright because it gives the playwright a chance to see how the play was received.

Going into the talk back for *Drowning*, I found myself anxious to see what the response was. I had hoped that the timing of the play was clear. I realize that it may be confusing because time jumps back and forth so often. I had also hoped that the audience could relate to the play; most of my audience members were not parents and most of them probably do not suffer from OCD and/or depression.

During the talk-back session, the audience expressed that they delighted in the fact that the piece was not too serious and that I was able to find light in such a serious subject. Another patron said that the transitions were remarkably smooth, and they were not lost within the story. Worried that this may be the opinion of just one particular patron, I asked the audience as a whole if they ever felt lost. Everyone agreed that it was utterly clear.

There were some questions about how I began my writing process and why I would pick a subject that I was not connected to personally. I explained that I wrote this play in order to hopefully prove that a playwright can write something to which they had no actual personal connection. I spoke about how I took the “actor’s approach” to the writing; that I had completed character analyses for the main three characters in order to understand them better.

After the talk-back was over an audience member approached me saying that they hoped to see a clearer message. This is something that I struggled with as a writer; I was afraid that the piece would
become too “preachy”. I have seen shows in the past that slap the audience across the face, so to speak, with the message; I did not want to do this at all. The message that I hoped the audience would receive, was that even though life sometimes gets a little overwhelming and you feel as if you’re drowning, you have to keep swimming, keep going on; things will get better.

One thing that I did not expect at all happened to me: a student of mine sent a message telling me that she had a brother whose name is Jacob, and he had been diagnosed with OCD. She said she related to Jennifer and Kyle because she had to learn how to treat her mentally ill brother. She was always torn emotionally catering to his every need and letting him be the independent person he needs and wants to be. I never thought that this piece could truly connect to someone’s actual family life. I was so pleased to hear this.

As I was watching the reading, I could not help but feel a sense of pride in myself, the actors and the work that we had all contributed to the project. What certainly helped the script were the scenes that were interspersed throughout the play. I find plays made up solely of monologues to be somewhat tiresome, and I did not want to create one of those plays.

There is a feeling that I get as an actor after a performance that has gone well. I love to go out to the audience after the show, not to hear that I did great work or that I was funny; what I want is for them to say to me is that I moved them; that they were affected in some way. This is why I want to become an actor; I want to inspire people through my craft. What happened to me last night was more powerful than that. As an actor, I am speaking for the playwright, but as the playwright I am speaking directly to the audience. Last night there was nothing in between my thoughts and the audience; it was an incredible experience. There was nothing that the audience heard that did not come from my brain. I never thought about the power that a playwright has.
The question raised in this thesis is, could a playwright write about a topic that is unknown to them. Actors are constantly playing characters that are different from themselves. In fact, actors often look for roles that are the farthest from themselves; they are most challenging to portray. Through the research that was conducted throughout this process, it was concluded that Tennessee Williams and Eugene O’Neill both wrote autobiographical pieces. This thesis is also questioning if a person without a mental disorder can write about the topic. Mental illness is something that is highly internal. It cannot be explained to someone. It has to be happening inside you. My goal was to be able to reach people that are suffering from a mental disorder and to inform those who did not know a lot about the subject.

This process as a whole has been a learning experience for me. It has taught me many things about myself, playwriting, and acting. When first taking on this topic I honestly did not see the project going in the direction it did. I knew that I was going to write a play but did not know the topic. When I came across Triggered, I knew that it was the story that I wanted to share. I spoke to family and friends about the idea and the main response that I received was, “Well, could you write a story about that?” I did not see why I could not. I thought of playwright August Wilson. Wilson wrote about the “black experience” and the struggles of the black American, but he did not necessarily live it. In order for him to master the voice of his characters Wilson would write while he was in neighborhoods of poorer communities mostly made of up African Americans. I felt it could be done and that I would be able to reach people who are affected by mental illness.

I also learned a lot about grammar while writing this thesis. Grammar is something that I have not studied since high school and even then it was not instilled in me. Looking back on it now I wish it had been. It is something I know now and will never forget.

I also have gained more knowledge about different types of mental disorders and how they affect people. I believe that this knowledge will benefit me with future roles that I may play.
I chose to use Williams and O’Neill because they were two playwrights who wrote autobiographical piece and also suffered from mental illness. There were strengths and weaknesses in using them in my thesis. The main weakness is they wrote what was familiar to them; they did not try to write something that was out of their realm. This went against what I was trying to do. The strength is both men suffered from mental disorders themselves, so researching them and then comparing them to Wortmann was helpful in my writing process. It was as if I was the middle man between Wortmann and playwriting. I wrote something that was relevant to him and transformed it into a script with the hope to reach out to more people; simply because of the form in which it was being produced.

Looking back on the reading, I would’ve liked there to be students or professors from the department of psychology there. I would have found their feedback insightful. The audience that came was filled entirely of theatre students who were very supportive. I would have liked the play to be heard through another lens.

At this point in my process, if I chose to make any changes to the script I would revise my character analyses and also add an analysis for “The Girl”. I would change all of the analyses to Uta Hagen’s “Nine Questions”. I felt that Petron’s analysis was too in depth, it was more beneficial for the actor than the playwright. Shurtleff’s analysis was not an analysis at all, I tried to use it in a different way; it did not work.

There was an event that happened on March 18, 2013 at the University of Central Florida, four days before my thesis defense. A former student by the name of James Oliver Seevakumaran had been planning on attacking the university; thankfully he had not gone through with it. He did take his own life due to the pressure that he felt he was under. There is speculation now that Seevakumaran was mentally ill. It is instances like this that make me want to write pieces like Drowning. I want to educate
the community on what it is to have a mental disorder and that it is not a shameful thing to ask for help, to get treatment. Pieces like *Drowning* can save lives.

In the news today, there are so many stories about young people taking their own lives due to extensive amounts of bullying. I think about the children that I worked with in the summer of 2012, and I am so grateful that they have theatre as an outlet. The theatre is a place where they can be involved, create and learn lifelong lessons. Throughout this process I thought of Amber, the young women I had in camp. It is my hope that my play would inspire her and her family.
REFERENCES


