

ABSTRACT

Tackling Difficult Dialogues:
A Director's Approach to Rebecca Gilman's *Spinning Into Butter*

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Tackling difficult dialogues, playwright Rebecca Gilman bravely explores big questions. Gilman is a worthy candidate for literary and performance study because her work documents the most compelling issues facing our country. In *Spinning Into Butter*, Gilman studies the dynamics of racism, attacking the issue in an unexpected way. In her play political correctness is a mask for a deeper form of racism—objectification and aestheticization.

Spinning Into Butter continues to engage audiences in racially charged discussions that are rare in theatres today. While admitting open dialogues are difficult, Gilman urges the audience to at least participate. An academic approach to play analysis and direction allows for a thorough investigation of the characters, ideas and images in Gilman's play. This thesis provides biographical information on the playwright, a textual analysis of *Spinning Into Butter*, and a detailed narration of the directorial process, from pre-production work to final product.

Tackling Difficult Dialogues:
A Director's Approach to Rebecca Gilman's *Spinning Into Butter*

by

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A Thesis

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CHAPTER ONE

Rebecca Gilman and *Spinning Into Butter*

Spinning Into Butter had its premiere in 1999 at Chicago's famous Goodman Theatre—a stage that has given birth to four of Gilman's works and has contributed greatly to her ascent to the position of one of America's leading, young playwrights. Her name has quickly passed through all of the major theatres in New York, Chicago, and various other regional, community and university theatres. Her work has been performed at London's Royal Court Theatre, New York's Lincoln Center, and Chicago's Eclipse Theatre. One reason for her popularity is that she is not afraid to examine life with suspicion, questioning human motivation and error.

In tackling difficult dialogues, Gilman reveals a sense of bravery and demonstrates an unfailing effort to explore big questions without neatly tying up loose ends. She does not pretend to have all the answers but expects the audience to engage the issues she highlights in her plays. Gilman sets the scene for arguments to occur; she introduces a hot button topic, then brings in characters who represent different sides of the issue and lets them loose on the stage. Their arguments are untidy and sometimes extreme; as in real life, her characters do not have everything figured out.

Audience members, critics, and collaborators have praised her work as provocative, truthful, and uncompromising. On the other hand, her writing has been met with mixed feelings from some corners. The *Christian Science Monitor* was unimpressed with *Spinning Into Butter* saying, "Yet there's too much teeth-grinding and self-loathing going on and not enough insight into the mixed bag that human nature is. Ms. Gilman's

message is heavy-handed” (Complete Review). A critic from *The Observer* faulted the play’s structure, but some critics found appeal in its message:

Gilman -- who's unusual in her ability to flesh out her ideas in plots— doesn't doesn't pack an equal punch, but she fires a good few shots across the bows of liberal opinion. You can argue that she's delivered only half a play here (.....) But *Spinning into Butter* does make you want to argue—which is more than most plays do. (Complete Review)

Pointing out that Gilman usually attempts to “do” something with her work, this critic acknowledges the play’s ability to spark a dialogue between stage and audience. She does not give audiences answers but an opportunity for debate. The dialogue she begins in her plays can be carried outside of the theatre. Gilman’s ability to entertain, engage, and leave the audience with more questions is characteristic of her work:

Gilman doesn't shy away from any subject matters, and she seems to enjoy most the issues that are complex and unresolvable...she explores difficult issues without pulling punches, and she doesn't try to tell audiences how they should feel about those issues. Her plays are the kind of plays you leave the theatre still talking about, the kinds of plays that demand a stop at a bar or coffeehouse on the way home so you can keep talking about them, the kinds of plays your mind returns to months later because those issues aren't easily solvable, and there's more thinking and talking to be done. (Swift)

By resisting a neat, happy ending, Gilman’s work acts as a dialogue catalyst. *Spinning Into Butter* is a play whose theme is painfully clear but allows for a rich dialogue.

The Playwright

Since Gilman is a relatively young playwright with a small—but growing—body of plays, the amount of scholarly criticism of her writing is limited. However, she is a worthy candidate for literary and performance study because she documents some of the most compelling and important issues facing our country. Violence, abuse, racism, guilt

and manipulation are common themes in her work, though humor is also frequently employed. Focusing on a specific issue, be it personal or political,

she seems to have a remarkable capacity to put her finger on the pulse of the zeitgeist. She understands how to write plays that are premised in something that seems immediate and recognizable to her audience, but she finds a way to dig very deeply into the characters and the milieu. And she has a remarkable capacity to hook you into a story. (Jones, *Beginner's Guide* 29)

As a storyteller, Gilman is able to not only entertain, but also to say something important about the world.

Gilman believes in theatre's ability to bring people together, as well as its capacity to enact change. For her, theatre is true to itself only when it has something significant to say. Gilman has not always felt comfortable sharing her personal outlook on the world, admitting, "For awhile I was scared to express an opinion in my plays" (Bacalzo). Now, a confident female theatre artist, Gilman does not conceal a point of view. Her journey to become a playwright was not without difficulty. From a Southern upbringing to life in a big city, Gilman gained experiences that have enabled her to write and comment on the issues that both interest and disturb her.

Though she was raised in the Deep South, Rebecca Gilman is not a typical Southern belle. She grew up in Trussville, Alabama, a city which boasts the motto "the gateway to happy living" and whose racial demographic is seventy-five percent white. Gilman, the daughter of a Jewish father and Southern Baptist mother, grew up in front of a critical social eye. In an interview for his *New York Times* article, "Spotlighting Racism Brings Anxiety as Well as Success," critic Chris Jones asked Gilman about the impact of culture in her childhood: "'My dad was about the only Jew in Trussville,' Ms. Gilman said. 'It always felt like we didn't fit in. Nobody was overtly mean or anything,

but people tended to judge us without knowing about us. They made a lot of assumptions”” (3). Though she knew what it felt like to be an outsider, she also found solace in theatre. She enjoyed reading plays, especially those of George Bernard Shaw, whom she admired for his willingness to make a stand on controversial issues.

Gilman’s higher education took her from the South to New England. She studied at Middlebury College in Vermont before transferring and eventually graduating from Birmingham-Southern College in Alabama in 1987. It was there that she studied English, began writing plays, and fell in love with the craft:

My senior year at Birmingham-Southern I decided to write a play for an independent study credit and the college was so supportive of my idea. Michael Flowers and John Tatter (English Professor) were my advisors, and they were both so helpful and encouraging. The play was *The Land of Little Horses*, and when it was finished Michael Flowers offered to let me use the theatre over the summer to mount a production...The production turned out well and I had a blast, and then I headed up to the University of Virginia to start work on a PhD in English. I was planning on teaching, but I’d had such a great experience with my play at ‘Southern that I started taking playwriting courses and spent more time in the Theatre Department than I should have. (‘Southern)

The Land of Little Horses is a Southern comedy which challenges the notion of Southern femininity and employs an unusual comedic structure. *The Land of Little Horses* is a simple, yet quirky story about three sisters—Evelyn, Jessica, and Jean Louise—and their Aunt Dot. Evelyn is engaged, Jessica is dating a foreigner, and Jean Louise and Dot decide to run away from home and become the first groupies of the Miniature Horse Racing Association. During their adventure, the girls’ emotionally absent mother Laura returns home, bringing questions and old memories, and eventually leading Jean Louise and Dot home again. Each of these women breaks the typical southern female stereotype, especially Jean Louise. Janet L. Gupton, in an article

discussing the unruliness of Southern female playwrights, says, “Jean Louise in *The Land of Little Horses* uses her youth to create unruliness by refusing to accept the tropes of femininity assumed by young Southern ladies” (131). This play feels very different from Gilman’s later work. It does not raise hot button social issues or spark controversy. Family is not a common theme in her more mature plays, though dysfunctional relationships are. Also, like many of her later plays, these characters are distinct, heightened. Jean Louise and Aunt Dot are absurd characters and run the fine line between caricature and crazy.

Continuing her education, Gilman received her master’s degree from The University of Virginia and a MFA in Playwriting from The University of Iowa in 1991. Upon graduation, she moved to Chicago to begin her career as a playwright. She had one small production in Houston during these early years, but for the most part she was still an unknown. She worked temporary clerical jobs to support her playwriting and also joined the Chicago Dramatists, a “professional, not-for-profit theatre, dedicated to the development and advancement of playwrights and new plays [. . .] Chicago Dramatists is a place where playwrights, theatre artists, audiences, producers, and donors join forces to build the theatre of the future” (Chicago Dramatists). Her association with Chicago Dramatists has probably been the most important in her career.

It was at Chicago Dramatists that Gilman found one of her first unrelenting supporters, artistic director Robin Stanton. Stanton was an advocate for Gilman’s first important work, *The Glory of Living*, a story of a young bride turned into a serial killer by her abusive, disturbed husband, inspired by an actual incident in Texas of a young woman turned murderer. The darkness of the play’s subject matter kept theatres away

even though Stanton “believed passionately in *The Glory of Living* and shopped it furiously around Chicago, with no success. ‘I was certain this was a very important piece of writing,’ Stanton recalls. ‘Rebecca is a playwright with real courage.’ Circle finally agreed to house the show, in part to get Stanton off its back” (Jones, *Beginner’s Guide* 28). Stanton’s belief in Gilman’s play paid off for Forest Park’s Circle Theatre. The show, directed by Stanton in 1997, was an enormous success. As Chris Jones stated in an April 2000 *American Theatre* magazine article:

It was the best decision the theatre ever made. Those few folks lucky enough to see Stanton’s premiere call it a revelatory night of theatre, the kind of event that makes a critic want to shout the playwright’s name from the rooftops. As would prove typical in her later works, Gilman laid out her story’s lurid events with almost clinical dispatch, never shrinking from physical depictions of abuse but constantly confounding her audience’s expectations. Instead of sensationalizing the killing spree or indulging in Southern stereotypes, Gilman made the case that we all bear responsibility for young people whose childhoods have been stolen by a society that no longer nurtures its young. (*Beginner’s Guide* 28)

She is able to reflect a world where abuse and murder corrupt the lives of the innocent.

In doing so, Gilman forces the audience to look at a society she feels is not living up to its potential.

The excitement surrounding *The Glory of Living* and Rebecca Gilman gained the attention of about every theatre in Chicago. The Goodman Theatre was quick to act, offering her the McPherson Award—a commission named after playwright Scott McPherson. This commission jumpstarted her career, spread her name across theatres all around the country, and led to what would be her most acclaimed play to date, *Spinning Into Butter*.

Spinning Into Butter, like *The Glory of Living*, does not shy away from ugly themes. Based on an event at Middlebury College in 1983, *Spinning Into Butter* is the

story of a female administrator at a small, predominantly white liberal arts college in Vermont who comes to acknowledge her own hidden racism. First produced at the Goodman Theatre in May 1999, its run was extended three times. This play has brought Gilman the most acclaim, as well as the most awards, of her young career. *Spinning into Butter* won the Joseph Jefferson Award for Best New Play and the Roger L. Stevens Award from the Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays. It was also the third most-produced play of the 2000-2001 season and *Time* magazine named it one of the best plays of 1999. The play has been made into a motion picture starring Sarah Jessica Parker (completed but still unreleased as of January 2008).

After her success with *Spinning Into Butter*, Gilman moved to another project based on an actual event. *Crime of the Century* was produced at the Circle Theatre in 2000 and was directed by Greg Kolack. This play, based on the novel by Dennis L. Breo, is a drama about the eight Chicago student nurses murdered by Richard Speck in 1966. Interweaving the details of the murder investigation with biographical sketches, Gilman does not sensationalize the actual killings. Chris Jones' *Chicago Tribune* review of the production called it "an intensely moving show" (1). He praises the show for its structure and the production for its performances, but he believes the three-hour long play could benefit from editing. However, the director did not believe the play could be shortened, saying that Gilman's writing is "totally original and economical. With Rebecca, everything ends up being just what it needs to be [. . .] It was amazing to watch her change one word or two and make it work. Nothing is there that does not need to be. Not an ounce of fat'" (Neumer 2). Circle Theatre's production was well received overall, earning Jeff Citation awards in the acting, directing, and best production categories.

Although this play was a success at the Circle Theatre, it has not yet been produced anywhere else in the country.

Gilman's next play, *Boy Gets Girl*, opened at the Goodman Theatre in 2001 and was directed by Michael Maggio. It, like *The Glory of Living* and *Spinning Into Butter*, has a female protagonist, but this time the subject is obsession and stalking. Main character Theresa Bedell's life is turned upside down by a barrage of unwanted attention after a one-time blind date with Tony. A series of violent calls and notes ends in a real threat to her personal security which forces her to leave her life, and her name, behind. Though she focuses on the victim's struggle, Gilman also paints a portrait of a perpetrator who is the product of an unbalanced American society. Joseph Bowen, reviewer for Centerstage Chicago, states: "Tony is portrayed as someone whose only exposure to culture comes not from books, but from movies—a fact that he is clearly insecure about. Tony was coddled by his mother, alienated by his father, and has very traditional views about the roles of men and women in society" (1). Gilman allows the audience to feel the victim's pain while at the same time, focusing in on bigger issues. At the end of *Boy Gets Girl* the audience members are left to examine their own attitudes about victims, perpetrators, and their creation. The Goodman's production of *Boy Gets Girl* received a Joseph Jefferson Award for best new play and was then produced in New York at the Manhattan Theatre Club. It was again remounted at the Royal Court Theatre in London where it received an Olivier Nomination for best new play. *Boy Gets Girl* is included in *The Best Plays of 2000-2001* and was named the play of the year by *Time* magazine for the year 2000.

Blue Surge, Gilman's next "issue play," was commissioned by the Goodman Theatre in 2001 and was directed by Robert Falls, her close collaborator. *Blue Surge* is perhaps the most adult-themed of her plays, discussing issues of class, the American Dream, and prostitution. Sandy, a young prostitute posing as a masseuse, forms a relationship with Curt, a Midwestern cop; together they form a special friendship. Curt, who wants to become a park ranger, has little motivation to make his own dreams a reality. He becomes consumed with the desire to save Sandy from a life of prostitution. Sandy, however, has found her own American Dream in the security she has working in the sex industry. *Blue Surge* won the Prince Prize for Commissioning New Work, and also was remounted in New York by the Public Theatre and the Magic Theatre in San Francisco.

Gilman's success as a playwright reached a milestone in 2001 when she won a Guggenheim Fellowship for playwriting and *The Glory of Living* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Since then Gilman has kept writing and collaborating with many theatres across the country. In 2005 the Goodman opened *Dollhouse*, a modern adaptation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, directed by Robert Falls. In 2006 *The Sweetest Swing in Baseball*, a story about a young artist pretending to be Daryl Strawberry in order to stay in a mental hospital, was opened at The Magic Theatre in San Francisco. That same year, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, Gilman's adaptation of Carson McCullers' novel, premiered at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta, in conjunction with The Acting Company of New York.

Most recently, she has opened yet another play at The Magic Theatre, *The Crowd You're In With*, which deals with family and suburban life. She also wrote the book for

The Boys are Coming Home, a new musical written and performed in conjunction with the American Musical Theatre Project at Northwestern University. Gilman currently resides in Chicago where she serves on the faculty in the School of Communication at Northwestern University. Her work in progress is an adaptation of Naturalistic playwright Emile Zola's *Germinal*. Looking towards the future, she says that she would like to go back to writing from her own imagination, putting aside any outside sources or events.

Gilman says she never thought her playwriting would be profitable, but admits, "it was cheaper than therapy" (twenty QUESTIONS). Even now, making a living from her craft, the theatre has retained its therapeutic effects. She says, "I'm lucky in that I get to spend my time with a lot of talented, inspiring artists. Between the work of the director, actors, designers, the end result on stage is often better than anything I imagined on the page. It's very satisfying work" (twenty QUESTIONS). Gilman has also served, in a way, as a therapist to young writers, encouraging them to write as much as they can, break conventional rules, and always improve their craft. She is quick to give support saying, "It's always important to offer encouragement when people are trying to be creative" (twenty QUESTIONS). Gilman's positive attitude towards writers is reflected in her own work where she encourages personal reflection and change.

Recurring Themes and Style

Though each Rebecca Gilman play is unique in topic, there are many recurring structural and thematic elements in her plays. Making important social commentary, Gilman writes about the ills of a society plagued by violence. Often her plays deal with an uncomfortable subject, yet end with a feeling of hope. Revealing both sides of

objectification, Gilman is interested in victims as well as perpetrators. She uses female protagonists who undergo a transformation in the midst of violence and oppression. In order to highlight the extreme situations these characters find themselves in, Gilman polarizes her cast, stretching the limits of believability by creating extreme characters with opposing viewpoints. The recurring elements in her plays reveal that as an author, Gilman concentrates more on message and less on reinventing dramatic structure.

One common thematic element in her plays is violence. *The Glory of Living*, *Crime of the Century*, *Spinning Into Butter*, and *Boy Gets Girl* portray all levels of violence—from offstage physical danger to onstage mental abuse. Gilman proves that violence takes many forms. The violence is manifested in varying degrees of gruesome detail, sometimes shocking and horrifying audiences. In response to *The Glory of Living*, Jones commented, “Gilman laid out her story’s lurid events with almost clinical dispatch, never shrinking from physical descriptions of abuse but constantly confounding her audience’s expectations” (*Beginner’s Guide* 29). Gilman’s “crime plays” are not rooted in sensationalism or a sadistic desire to portray violence, but seek to show how we, as a society, dehumanize each other. “She fights objectification but seems to understand its hold on modern consciousness. She’s never crudely polemical [. . .]” (Jones, *Beginners Guide* 29). Knowing that the events in these plays are based in truth makes them more difficult to witness.

Most of Gilman’s plays also present “an uncomfortable truth,” forcing the audience to take a stand and wrestle with the moral issues at stake in the play. In *Blue Surge*, for example, the audience is asked to decide whether prostitution can be a means to achieving the American Dream. The “prostitute with a heart of gold” has no problem

with her vocation, and in fact is very hardworking; Curt, the small town cop, has a respectable job but does nothing to further his real dreams. The audience must evaluate whose life is better. In *The Glory of Living*, they must decide how much responsibility to place on the murderess and how much to blame her abusive husband. In a more introspective “uncomfortable truth,” the audience is forced to examine their own racist tendencies in *Spinning Into Butter*. At times the reality surrounding racism, objectification and murder can be hard to digest. It can also be difficult to engage in hot button debates in today’s society. Theatre is the perfect medium for these kinds of debates because it is active enough that it can affect attitudes and begin discussion, but it is passive enough to allow the audience to decide how much they are willing to engage in the play’s message.

Another common theme in Gilman’s work is objectification. Chris Jones notes, “Her own experiences, Ms. Gilman said, have sparked her interest in writing about objectification—both from the point of view of those doing the objectifying and those suffering from it” (Jones 4). While *Boy Gets Girl* shows how it feels to be objectified, *Spinning Into Butter* depicts what it is to objectify. Gilman says of *Boy Gets Girl*:

I think this play is the flip side to *Spinning Into Butter*. It is not about what it is to objectify but to be objectified. As a society we tend to dehumanize each other, whether through prejudice, sexism, economics or the Internet. At some point we need to stop identifying so much with the things people are trying to sell us and try to think of each other on a more human level. (Jones, *Beginner’s Guide* 28)

Both Theresa Bedell in *Boy Gets Girl* and the black student at the center of *Spinning Into Butter* show us the impact of having felt objectified.

Another similarity between these two plays is the focus on female protagonists who are strong-mouthed and as Dan Bacalzo writes “emotionally isolated”:

Gilman's approach to this story is strikingly similar to her construction of *Spinning Into Butter*. Both plays revolve around a bright, introspective loner female, and both are set where the heroine works. Emotionally isolated, Gilman's heroines try mightily to find their own unique spots in the world, conscious of their personal gifts as well as their self-perceived flaws. These women can see and articulate the flaws in others, often with sharp humor. Gilman creates crises built around fundamental social issues, then surrounds her protagonists with characters who represent a cross section of attitudes. (Bacalzo)

Gilman creates characters that all have flaws, though they are depicted with varying degrees of sympathy. Each character represents one view surrounding the play's theme, even if it is extreme. As Peter Marks said in a 1999 *New York Times* article, "She is as eager as a Nightline producer to book all the representative points of view" (1). *Spinning Into Butter* is the kind of play that stirs emotions and teaches the meaning of a true dialogue, even when its characters do not learn the lesson.

An interesting dramaturgical device that appears in many of Gilman's plays is the use of parallel characters. She employs obvious pairings that sometimes mirror each other and sometimes are foils. For example, the two onstage students in *Spinning Into Butter*, Patrick Chibas and Greg Sullivan, are both intelligent and self-assured young men attending the same liberal arts institution, but they hail from very different social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds and respond differently to the events on campus. In the end, both learn an important lesson about life, but only one remains at Belmont. Likewise, in *Blue Surge*, Gilman sets up two pairs of opposites. Curt and Doug are small town cops who work together on the same prostitution sting, yet react in very different ways to what they witness. Each forms a relationship with a prostitute. Doug, the more aggressive of the two, develops a sexual relationship with the woman he meets, while Curt wants to save Sandy from her life. The two prostitutes are also opposites. While

Heather, the louder of the two, ends up pregnant and tending bar, Sandy remains content with her life as a prostitute. By writing parallel characters, Gilman highlights the role of choice and individuality in determining story outcomes.

Gilman's characters can seem very extreme, teetering between realism and satire. Perhaps this style comes from her desire to let each character be fully representative of one point of view. Another explanation for her broad use of types could be her ties to the South. Indeed Chris Jones has suggested that Gilman could be understood as a Southern Gothic playwright. She takes hold of her audience, he notes, and "once she has the viewer under her spell, she does not shirk from exposing complex themes with a feminist sensibility, dispensed with a quirky touch of nouveau Southern gothic" (*Beginner's Guide* 29).

The distinguishing characteristics of the Southern Gothic writing tradition are its themes of imprisonment and violence and the use of "outsider" or freakish characters. In twentieth-century Gothic literature, "The loss of human identity and the alienation of self from both itself and the social bearings in which a sense of reality is secured are present in the threatening shapes of dehumanized environments," writes Fred Botting (157). Carson McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, which Rebecca Gilman adapted for the stage in 2005 is a good example of the modern Southern Gothic. McCullers uses freakish characters and shows "nightmarish, near-surreal spaces on the margins of life" (Weson 5). Many Gothic tendencies can be found in Gilman's modern look at the ills of society as well. Sarah Daniels, the protagonist in *Spinning Into Butter* probably could not be classified as a "freak," but she is an outsider among her colleagues and the upper-class environment at Belmont. Sarah admits that "she doesn't live up to the architecture."

“But doesn’t it ever make you feel ugly,” she asks Ross, “Like being ugly, like saying ugly things? Sometimes I want to run out onto the quad and hike up my skirt and pee all over everything” (Gilman 51). Rebecca Gilman appears to be interested in presenting characters that appear to be normal but have hidden freakishness.

Recurring Structure and Form

Though Gilman seems to be more interested in theme and character than reinventing play structure, she has found a way of organizing her plays that can keep an audience in suspense. In nearly all of her works, Gilman uses a multi-scene structure that breaks the action into small digestible pieces. Together they become parts of a well-crafted whole. It is also difficult to pinpoint the climax in many of her plays because she pays so much attention to theme, rather than structure. Gilman writes theme heavy passages of dialogue that can feel like a climax.

When you open up a Gilman play, you are usually met with two acts divided into multiple scenes. She writes plays almost as if they are for television, with short episodic scenes that fit together to create a complete story. *Spinning Into Butter*, for example, has two acts, thirteen scenes, and spans about two months in story time. *Boy Gets Girl* also has two acts, eighteen scenes, with action spread over six weeks time. Gilman frequently ends her scenes with a moment of high emotion, or an important plot point. At first, her writing style can appear choppy, which can be problematic for a director, but as the play develops, the story she is telling gets more complicated. The suspense builds, and a strong dramatic rhythm develops. The contentious content and the bold episodic structure work together to keep the audience interested.

A reading of all of Gilman's plays suggests she has a blueprint for dramatic structure. She consistently chooses to write in two acts and use short, high energy scenes. In all of her plays, there is a thematic climax related to her message and a traditional dramatic climax based on character action. Yet each play has its own unique hot button issue that provokes her characters and her audience. Gilman has been described as an articulate woman who, despite her gentle demeanor, attacks society from many angles. Critics have commended her for her honesty and courage to ask big questions, but have questioned her "heavy hand" and technical ability. The praise, however, far outweighs the criticism of her work.

Survey of Literature and Production Reviews

As a director, it is important to become familiar with the playwright, the critical analysis, and production history of your current project. Research can not only inspire but lead to a well-informed production. Biographical and personal information about a playwright can help the director understand the playwright's artistic sensibilities. Reviews of the production can give clues and warnings, but it is important to note that the content of each review reflects only one person's opinion. In the case of Rebecca Gilman's *Spinning Into Butter*, the amount of critical analysis is limited. The following is a short overview of first, key articles that examine the author, and second, reviews of *Spinning Into Butter* in production.

To begin, we will look at magazine and newspaper articles that feature Rebecca Gilman as playwright. She has caught the eye of many in the theatrical world, and her work has been noted by audiences and critics alike. Perhaps the most informative article, Chris Jones' "A Beginner's Guide to Rebecca Gilman," found in *American Theatre*

magazine's April 2000 issue, details Gilman's struggle to get her plays produced, as well as her interest in difficult themes. The subtitle of Jones' article states, "Don't let the gentle demeanor fool you. Her plays are rife with murder and mayhem" (26). The article is an excellent introduction to Gilman and the works that brought her name to the forefront of American theatre. Jones commends Gilman for writing accessible plays that both intrigue and inform audiences. The tone of the article is laudatory, but at the same time gives mostly factual information. He touches upon the common themes in Gilman's plays, and gives the reader an overall sense of Gilman's style and interest in social issues. Jones is neither negative nor critical of her plays, and gives a number of positive perspectives from those who have worked with Gilman. Jones does not seem surprised by Gilman's sudden rise to acclaim.

Three key articles written after Gilman visited and spoke at Northwestern University and The University of Iowa describe her reasons for writing and showcase her advice for future writers. Margaret Rhodes, a contributing writer for *The Daily Northwestern* notes, "As she told an audience of about 20 people Wednesday afternoon at the Block Museum of Art, the best part of theater is its ability to break free of conventions'" (1). Gilman encouraged her audience to break the rules and also to expose themselves to theatre. She said, "You probably don't want to write unless you love going to the theater. That is where you have to start, by exposing yourself to other drama'" (1). She also encouraged the students to avoid reading reviews, stating that it stifles a confident voice. Gilman said that she herself stopped reading reviews seven years ago. Continuing her speech, Gilman told the students where she gets many of her ideas: "Plays come from a seed of an idea that I actually became really obsessed with"

(2). She admits to eavesdropping, finding the way people talk to be musical. As far as professional advice, Gilman reminded the young writers to always edit their work and keep positive when facing writer's block. The students at Northwestern were inspired by her down-to-earth demeanor and honest advice. A first year graduate student said, "It's comforting to hear that she isn't a writer who gets up at the crack of dawn, before coffee, to write. She takes away the romanticism (of writing), but doesn't take away the mysticism" (2). Much as she does in her plays, Gilman inspired her audience without glorifying her profession; she encouraged through straight talk and honesty.

In another article written after this same speech at Northwestern University, entitled "Behind the Scenes: How to Write a Play," Justin Sondak, writer for *The Chicagoist* relates the advice given by Gilman on becoming a playwright. Gilman encouraged her audience to take acting and playwriting classes in order to learn the rules and break them. For inspiration "she recommends looking at what's right in front of you; your family, your friends, your co-workers, etc. She also recommends reading newspapers to find problematic, engaging situations" (2). Gilman said that the work of George Bernard Shaw inspires her because it reminds her that "drama requires opposing points of view and that intelligent inquiry can be exciting" (3). She warns that breaking into the market can be difficult because writers have to compete with dead people. Gilman recommended entering as many playwriting contests as possible, befriending directors, or even "self-producing a noble and terrific endeavor where you might find theater people to work on your show for free" (3). The students at Northwestern were themselves inspired by Gilman and her commitment to her craft. Meeting with young writers appears to be important to Gilman.

Although Gilman warned students against reading their own reviews, such critical responses can contain useful information for a director. They can provide ideas of what to do, and what not to do in production. Condensing a play's theme and plot, production reviews in magazines and newspapers can either spark the interest of a potential audience member, or give too much away. However, for someone doing research, reviews are helpful because they get to the heart of the play quickly and concisely.

In a 1999 *New York Times* review of the Goodman Theatre's production, author Bruce Weber focuses primarily on the Act Two racist rant that "has been stunning audiences into silence" (1). In this critic's opinion Sarah is the most sympathetic character in the play because she is able to examine her own faults. Weber is most interested in the audience's reaction to Sarah's monologue, showing that black and white theatre-goers all had differing responses to the play, from confused, to interested, to hopeful. The critic then describes a moment that occurred after a special performance for students in Chicago's public school system. In a post-show discussion, a white moderator asked the students, "How many of you think Sarah is a racist? Not a single student raised a hand. Not one. 'She's the least racist of all of them,' one student said, at last. 'Because she's talking about it'" (4). Weber is smart to focus on the audience's reaction because the play is intended to spark discussion and debate. The astute assessment of Sarah's character given by the young student reveals that the play did its job. Sarah came out a hero because she engaged in real dialogue—the kind of dialogue brought about in the post-show discussion as well.

In "A White Playwright's 'Spin' on Campus Racial Politics," found in the December 1999 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, author Kenneth Warren

describes Gilman as being “caught in the quicksand of the problems she is trying to solve” (1). He says it is a mistake to presume that an ethnic group has a distinctive voice “to be liked, disliked, understood or misconstrued” (1). He does, however, believe that Gilman portrays campus racial politics very well, with campuses across the country boosting minority enrollment and aiming to destroy negative press. Warren continues his analysis, criticizing Gilman’s comment that she can only write white characters with authority because she is white. Warren asks, “What makes being Puerto Rican more ‘available’ to a white playwright’s creative empathy than being African American?” (3). Though Warren commends Gilman for her willingness to discuss these issues, he believes she makes a crucial mistake in never bringing onstage Simon Brick, the black student who is the subject of racial incident on campus. He wonders what might happen if Simon was given a chance to speak for himself. Warren notices what is missing from the play, but he fails to acknowledge Gilman’s omission adds to the play. Gilman’s intent was to highlight the fact that Simon was never allowed to speak for himself. The absence of Simon makes her point stronger.

Conclusion

Rebecca Gilman has stated, “Theater is a place for complicated ideas. I try to write all kind of plays I always liked, plays that challenge people to think about themselves” (McCormick). *Spinning Into Butter* engages audiences in a racially charged discussion that is rare in theatres today. Both play and playwright encourage an open dialogue, no matter how difficult. Tackling difficult dialogues, Rebecca Gilman exposes the worst in society, but with a hopeful outlook. The next chapter of this thesis will take a closer look at the characters, the environment and the themes in *Spinning Into Butter*.

CHAPTER TWO

An Analysis of Spinning Into Butter

For any good director, the production process begins with a thorough investigation of the script. Play analysis can have many forms, from intellectual to artistic; I found my process of script analysis to take both of these routes. Putting aside a New Critical approach to textual analysis where a director focuses on “text-only,” I ventured out into multiple sources of study. By investigating the text of the play as well as the people, places, and issues, I was able to analyze the play through written word, drawings, pictures, and charts. This allowed me to uncover the key issues at the heart of *Spinning Into Butter*.

Three major ideas, rooted in textual analysis, have informed the production of *Spinning Into Butter* from my pre-production process to the finished product. First is the notion of practical and honest dialogue, both public and private. John Simon, writer for *New York Magazine*, asserts that the characters in Gilman’s play are so “concerned with doing the politically correct thing that they neglect doing the humanely right one, which is to engage in any sort of dialogue with the black student” (Simon 1). Gilman demonstrates the difficulty of honest dialogue through characters that fail to listen and admit their faults. No two characters exchange words very easily. However, Gilman’s ultimate lesson is that dialogue should be started even if it proves difficult. Whether personal or public, Gilman’s play should evoke a reaction. My ultimate goal in producing this play was to spark a dialogue at Baylor University. I was not necessarily concerned with the form the dialogue would take.

The second idea, and one that appears in almost every conversation, is the aestheticization of racial difference. Romanticization, objectification, and idealization of other people and of racial identity read heavily in the script. People are edited and made to fit into little ethnic boxes, by both the people who like them and hate them. Almost every character in the play idealizes other persons or groups, but with varying degrees of self-awareness of their actions. Sarah says, “to idealize is to fundamentally mark as different; it is not to respect,” and though she knows the evils of objectification, she does it anyway (Gilman 53). Sarah protests to Ross that she is not at Belmont to be aestheticized, but by making her the subject of the play, Gilman is aestheticizing Sarah.

The last idea that became a central focus in this analysis is expressed by Ross in a passionate appraisal of Sarah’s character. He tells her in Act Two, scene three to “go out on a limb” (Gilman 70). Though Ross mistakenly believes that a campus race forum is positive pragmatism, he does have the right idea. Greg echoes his sentiment, telling Sarah that action, rather than inaction, leads to positive results. Ross, Sarah, and Greg all have passion and conviction, but have varying degrees of understanding what to do with their feelings. A small step towards change is created when one learns what to do with conviction and passion. *Spinning Into Butter* urges the audience to act upon these attributes. Ross quotes the Irish poet, W.B. Yeats saying, “The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.” Though Ross does not use this quotation very appropriately, Gilman does. This message can boil down to “actions speak louder than words,” a concept that is demonstrated by the fact that the characters’ actions in the play tell us more about them than what they say.

The following chapter has evolved from research of not only the text of the play, but also the outside resources and ideas that helped inform my choices as a director. Most of the research points to these three key textual themes, elucidating them in rich and surprising ways. This chapter will include information about the historical, political and literary sources Gilman used to create *Spinning Into Butter*, and will offer a complete picture of the world of the play, including its environment and setting, its characters, main ideas, and the images that Gilman paints for the audience.

Plot Synopsis of Spinning Into Butter

The play opens in Dean Sarah Daniels' large office at Belmont College, in Belmont, Vermont. Patrick Chibas, a male Nuyorican sophomore at the college, arrives at the office upon Sarah's request where he is quickly offered the opportunity to apply for a large minority scholarship. Because the administration lacks "cultural sensitivity," Sarah asks Patrick if she can classify him as Puerto Rican in hopes that it will expedite the process. Though Patrick prefers his own ethnicity, the lure of the twelve-thousand dollar scholarship and Sarah's less than subtle urging eventually causes Patrick to give in.

At Patrick's exit, Ross Collins, an art history professor and Sarah's lover, enters the office. He has returned from picking up Petra, dance teacher and his previous live-in girlfriend, from the airport. Now that she has returned from her sabbatical, Ross has decided to resume their relationship, kicking Sarah to the curb. He attempts to leave on a positive note, asking Sarah if they can still remain friends. Still shocked, upset and a little vulnerable, Sarah agrees.

In the following scene, Ross, Dean Burton Strauss, and Dean Catherine Kenney are in the midst of their usual curriculum meeting/argument in Sarah's office. While they

are quibbling, Sarah enters and quickly announces that one of Belmont's students has been receiving racist notes at his dorm room. Not wasting any time, they begin arguing, making assumptions, and suggesting their next course of action, an all-campus race forum. Sarah disagrees with the other three and thinks that it would be best to talk to Simon first, before deciding what to do. Mr. Meyers, head of campus security, enters and says the police have taken the racist notes and will conduct a handwriting analysis in order to find the culprit.

In scene three we find Greg Sullivan, a Belmont senior, and Sarah in mid-conversation. Greg wants to propose a "Students for Tolerance" group, inspired by their initial introspective and confused feelings left in the wake of the first all-school forum led by Dean Strauss. Greg thinks the group would be a great way to keep the dialogue going as well as create a place for students to express their own beliefs and opinions, and pad his own law school resume. Sarah agrees and encourages Greg to go ahead and promote his group and asks Dean Strauss to be their sponsor.

Ross returns to Sarah's office, complaining and looking for sympathy. He is disappointed that he and Petra are not getting along as well as they used to, while Sarah, who has more important things on her mind, not only tries to make him feel guilty, but argues with him about the productivity of the race forums. Dean Strauss enters and thanks Sarah for recommending that he sponsor Students for Tolerance, and asks her to get Simon Brick to attend. Even though they have never met Simon, Ross and Strauss begin to talk about Simon as if they know him well. Without Sarah's help, they decide to write Simon a note, inviting him to the next meeting, and the next forum. After they exit,

Mr. Meyers then enters and gives Sarah another note that Simon has received, this one reading “Little Black Sambo.”

Patrick returns, frustrated because the financial aid office revoked his financial aid when he received the minority scholarship. His father is also angry that Patrick was “forced” to compromise his own race in order to get the scholarship. Patrick also wants to discuss the race forums that he found to be patronizing and discriminatory. Sarah tries to talk to him, but he is not easily pacified. She finally convinces him that she will fix his financial aid, and he reluctantly accepts her earnest attempt to correct the situation.

In the next scene, Sarah is in the midst of a tense telephone conversation with her alcoholic mother. Dean Strauss interrupts; angry that the students think he is a racist, he is adamant that Simon attend the next race forum to prove that he supports him, and therefore, is not a racist. Kenney arrives and quickly calms Strauss, telling him to write down what he wants to tell the students, then she sends him on his way. Clearly noticing that Kenney and Strauss’ relationship is more than professional, Sarah asks Kenney about why she was hired to work at Belmont. Kenney reluctantly admits that they were looking for a black candidate in order to diversify, and had originally thought Sarah was black because she had worked at Lancaster, an inner city college in Chicago. Kenney assures Sarah that the committee knew she was white when she was hired, so she should not be concerned. However, Sarah is upset because she was not aware that she was hired to be the liaison with the minority students.

In the last scene of the first act, Sarah meets again with an angry Patrick, who has written an editorial bashing the prejudiced actions of the administration at Belmont College. Their conversation becomes heated as Patrick reminds Sarah that she has never

listened to him, or his problems. Sarah continually apologizes, but Patrick does not relent, he wants to leave Belmont to go somewhere where he will not stand out.

Act Two begins with Sarah and Ross as they are criticizing one another. Sarah thinks Ross makes everything a subject of a lecture and Ross thinks Sarah is too cynical. In the next scene, Dean Kenney, frustrated with all of the possibly damaging events occurring on campus, demands that Sarah make a bulleted list of all the possible steps to take to end the campus turmoil. After she leaves, Mr. Meyers enters with a rock that was thrown through Simon Brick's window, increasing their concern for him.

Sarah continues to work on her bulleted list late into the night. Ross, on a walk, sees her light on and comes to investigate. Sarah tells him she has been toiling over her bulleted list aimed at solving racism. Ross can see her visible frustration and asks her what is bothering her. Sarah then opens up about her past and why she came to Belmont. Sarah admits to her own racism, which she discovered when she was in graduate school. After taking as many classes as she could in hopes of understanding the African American viewpoint, she learned that it was making her worse. She lived in Chicago for many years, working at Lancaster, an inner-city college with a predominantly African American student population. While working there, she became annoyed and contemptuous and increasingly angry with African Americans. In order to save herself, Sarah left Lancaster to live in Vermont, somewhere very white where she knew there would be less temptation to judge others. She does not want to be a racist, nor does she know how to stop. In order to achieve some relief, she makes a fake bulleted list which is very self-incriminating. Ross listens, advises, and encourages Sarah to find a way to make a change.

In the next scene, Mr. Meyers returns and hands Sarah an important letter from the FBI. Shocked by its contents, Sarah leaves to go talk to Simon. Kenney finds Sarah's "racist" bulleted list and leaves her office in silent satisfaction. Sarah returns to her office to find that her list is gone; she is worried that the missing list got into the wrong hands. She hides under her desk as Kenney returns to replace the list. Sarah, now sure that she will be fired, calls for Ross. Sarah tells Ross about the list and about her visit with Simon, after finding out he was his own perpetrator. In scene six, Kenney, Ross, Sarah, and Strauss are discussing why Simon wrote the notes to himself. Strauss thinks that he is like the character of Little Black Sambo, that he got the administration in a whirl on purpose. Sarah disagrees and submits her letter of resignation. Kenney expels Simon for violation of the honor code and Sarah, Ross, and Meyers leave to deliver the bad news to Simon.

In the play's last scene, Mr. Meyers returns from driving Simon home, describing Simon's house and admitting his fondness and sympathy for Simon. He also makes a point to tell Sarah that he is disappointed in her; he thought she was different. Greg Sullivan then has his last meeting with Sarah. He is dissatisfied with Strauss as the sponsor for Students for Tolerance because of the Dean's obvious lack of sensitivity. Greg tells Sarah that the group decided to have a secret meeting in conjunction with the Black Student Union where they had an amazing discussion, even though it only left them all with more questions. To Greg, what was most important was that they tried to have an honest dialogue. In the final moments of the play, Sarah calls Simon on the phone to ask him if he got home alright. Putting her own fears aside, she asks him if he would like to talk about what happened. This conversation provides a glimmer of hope

for Sarah; perhaps she can overcome her racial prejudice and find out who people really are.

Play Structure

As mentioned in Chapter One, Gilman structures her plays in small, digestible parts. *Spinning Into Butter* uses her common blueprint, but takes it farther. The play has two acts—six scenes in Act One and seven in Act Two. There are also many parts within each scene. Rarely leaving the stage, Sarah has an ongoing series of conversations with each of the play's other six characters. In Act One, scene one, Sarah begins onstage alone, waiting for her next appointment. Patrick Chibas then arrives for his scholarship meeting; as he leaves, Ross enters where he proceeds to break up with Sarah. The scene ends as Ross leaves her office. The play continues like this—a pair or group of characters has a conversation, then one person leaves, and another enters. Many of the play's characters never appear onstage together. For instance, the two students, Greg and Patrick never meet. Also, both Greg and Patrick mention meeting Strauss, but neither appears onstage with him. Gilman's scene structure creates a pattern that allows the audience to gain small bits of information at a time.

Gilman's particular use of climax is repeated in many of her plays. The dual design can be confusing to a director who is trying to locate the different parts of the play's structure. In *Spinning Into Butter* there is both a plot climax and a thematic climax. The plot climax occurs when the audience finds out that Simon wrote the notes to himself. However, this does not feel like the climax of the play. Though it probably is surprising to audiences, the information is presented too quickly to have a real impact. Usually a climax is associated with moments of high tension and emotion. Gilman does

not offer much build-up to the revelation; there is little tension. The climax of the play feels like it belongs in Sarah's Act Two, scene three monologue. This is the scene in the play where the most is revealed, and the scene that most critics comment upon. Writer Linda Rohrer Paige pinpoints this scene as the plays climax saying:

Not only does the play offer an insightful critique of political correctness regarding racial discrimination, but it also attempts to deal with the phenomenon of "white guilt." Sarah, the most sympathetic character in the play, confesses her own suppressed racist feelings at the play's climactic moment [. . .]. (Paige 398)

Gilman crafts a tight and complex drama within this scene alone. Sarah's monologue is memorable and impactful. It is the true climax of the play.

Source Material

Often inspired by real life events, Rebecca Gilman writes her social issue plays with honesty and creativity. Gilman's brief time at Middlebury College contributed to the setting and general atmosphere of the play. And a racially charged incident at Middlebury became her inspiration for the play's conflict. Another literary source heavily influenced the play thematically. The well-known children's book *Little Black Sambo* became intertwined with Gilman's story and inspired the play's title. She compares the actions of the administration towards Simon to the ravenous tigers' treatment of Sambo. Knowledge of these two sources is not vital to the understanding of the plot, but discovering how each informed the play reinforces Gilman's arguments with factual evidence.

Middlebury College

Rebecca Gilman attended Middlebury College, a liberal arts school in Vermont, for two years in the early 1980s before transferring to Birmingham-Southern where she graduated in 1987. Though Gilman does not disclose much about her time at Middlebury, she admits to basing the action of *Spinning Into Butter* on a similar incident that happened there in 1983. Belmont, her fictional college in Vermont, shares many if not all of the qualities of Middlebury College. Both are private liberal arts institutions where the tuition is high and the average student is wealthy and white. Racism is an ongoing problem on both campuses, and the administrations are accused of having questionable ethics. Unfortunately, little has changed at Middlebury since Gilman attended, and it no doubt has had a deep impact on her as a writer.

An October 1, 1983 article published in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* detailed the actual events at the college: “A student at Middlebury College who said he had been harassed by racist notes and vandalism, which spread fear throughout the campus, has admitted writing the notes himself [. . .]” (Springer 1). The article continues by saying that the current Dean of Students, Erica Wonnacott, would not release the identity of the student, although the press had previously received information from nineteen-year-old John Grace who stated that he was the one who had received the notes.

Grace had said that he was at the college less than a week when he found the first note taped to his window, and that night he found the window had been broken. He said he was alarmed and stayed overnight with friends. At 5 a.m. the next day he went back to his room and found a second note saying, ‘Die nigger.’ (Springer 1)

The article mentions that a forensic handwriting check concluded that Grace had written the notes. Erica Wonnacott said “‘that the student didn’t know why’ he had written the

notes. ‘He is obviously a young man with a lot of problems’” (Springer 1). John Grace sent a formal apology to the school’s president and withdrew from the school voluntarily.

All of these events are paralleled in Gilman’s play. Police at Belmont gather handwriting samples only to discover Simon is the perpetrator of his own crime. Simon is depicted as troubled but in good spirits by the play’s end. The reaction to the incident at Middlebury is also echoed in the play, where both the students and administration react quickly. The Middlebury article describes the air of discontent Gilman breathes into her play.

Students were frightened. Anxious parents telephoned the school. Administrators worried that the incidents would tarnish the image of the predominantly white, liberal arts institution known for high academic standards [. . .]. (Springer 2)

With such a small percentage of African American students on campus, the minority students became frightened to go out at night, which was not surprising given that the racial hoax spawned other racist incidents on campus. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* article concludes with an ironic statement made by the perpetrator before his hoax was discovered. “‘I don’t want people to get the wrong impression about the college because of this [. . .] It’s not something I’m going to leave school over’” (Springer 2).

Dean Erica Wonnacott is a template for the Sarah Daniels character; she is described in accounts of the case as having a great deal of sympathy for the African-American student. Wonnacott, who was Middlebury’s first Dean of Students, is noted by the University for her awareness of the issue of race on campus during her twenty year career. In a 1987 article from the Middlebury College newspaper, writer Fred Hechinger describes Wonnacott as someone

who exudes concern for the students who come to her for advice and guidance, is distressed over what she considers a loss of student passion for civil rights [. . .]. Another disturbing development, she said, is that for the first time in two decades some white freshman have told the college they would prefer not to room with blacks. (1)

Worried that this would become a trend, Wonnacott supported several unique tactics used by the college to prevent continued prejudice on campus. Describing one of these tactics Wonnacott tells the college newspaper, “The college has brought an expert to stage training sessions in which verbal insults are directed against white students to teach them how harassment feels to members of minority groups” (Hechinger 2).

Like Sarah in *Spinning Into Butter*, Wonnacott had a strong desire to help her students on both a personal and academic level. Hechinger mentions that one of her goals was to increase minority enrollment at Middlebury College. Wonnacott introduced an “Honor Loan” program, where economically disadvantaged students were given scholarships with the understanding that they pay the loan back someday. On a more personal level, Wonnacott desired open and honest dialogue between herself and the students. A 2002 article remembering the Dean’s accomplishments mentions Wonnacott’s desire to “foster personal relationships with as many Middlebury students as possible.” She “was direct in putting forth her views” and “stood up for what she believed was right for the student community” (Bourne 2). These are all attributes found in Gilman’s fictional Dean of Students as well. Whether Wonnacott’s desire to help students stemmed, like Sarah’s, from a “plantation mentality” or “paternalism” is difficult to know, but it is interesting to note the similarities between the two women, and the two universities.

The racial incident in 1983 was unusual because it was self-inflicted by a minority student. Yet, unfortunately, racially motivated crime in general has always been present on the Middlebury campus. The climate at the university has never been extremely volatile, but has never been described as tolerant. A 2004 student editorial states, “Intolerance at Middlebury College? Unthinkable. That is, unless you’re black, gay, Republican or any other minority on campus. Then, suddenly, you realize that Middlebury has a long way to go before it can define itself as tolerant” (Seigel). This Middlebury student condemns the hypocritical façade of his university. He states that racial epithets can be heard on a campus that prides itself on its “encouragement of discussion” (Seigel). He accuses Middlebury of having the inability to “embrace meaningful, difficult, or uncomfortable dialogue” (Seigel). This student editorial echos the issues and actions of the administration at Belmont

Both the Middlebury and Belmont administration take a “zero-tolerance approach to racism” (A call). Reacting quickly and severely to racial incidents appears to be the norm at the colleges, and students find fault in the rationality of the administration. In an anonymous editorial entitled “A call for public dialogue,” posted in a 2006 issue of the student newspaper, a Middlebury student condemns the college administration for taking a reactive response to a racist altercation on campus. He wants to embrace a “helpful and encouraging campus-wide discussion” (1). Much like Greg in *Spinning Into Butter*, this student believes that “broader issues only come to light through open dialogue in response to specific incidents” (1). Unlike Greg, however, this student commends the college for leading open forum meetings.

Students at both Middlebury and Belmont seem to have no trouble voicing their opinions about their respective institutions. In a scathing assessment of Middlebury's administration, an alumnus warns students against enrolling in the university. In an online blog whose purpose is to review colleges, the student writes:

Middlebury students are close-minded, pretentious, and socially graceless. They exist in their own fairy tale where everyone is a rich WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) from a gated community. RACISM runs wild on this campus the likes of which you'd never expect to find in a small southern town...Every campus has its share of sexual and racial intolerance, but Middlebury College takes it to another level. (Rate It All 1)

The Belmont students appearing onstage are likable, but the audience can imagine the majority of the student body as "socially graceless." Patrick Chibas accuses the administration of discriminating and tokenizing the minority students.

What is more, the student bodies at both universities do, however, lack the same diversity, and the blog continues to describe the general atmosphere at Middlebury.

The campus atmosphere feels like an Arthur Miller play; the small New England community with its share of hypocrisies and witch hunts. I am surprised that public stonings are not offered as a winter sport alongside skiing. The students are too hung up on frivolous concerns and they lose sight of the intellectual purpose of this institution [. . .]. (Rate It All 1)

The writer compares the hypocritical actions of the university to the Salem witch trials in Miller's *The Crucible*. The comparison, though amusing, is harsh. Poking fun at the college's favorite pastime, the writer does make a good point. If the students were as involved in the educational atmosphere of the university as they are in skiing, perhaps more could be done to fix the political climate on campus. In *Spinning Into Butter*, little attention is paid to the students' academic pursuits; it seems as if all intellectual rigor is replaced by an effort to save the school's reputation.

In a last attempt to convince the reader of the hypocrisy of the institution, the writer labels the administration as crooks.

The administration (swindling rat bastards!) offers virtually no protection for victims of harassment. The administration **BLAMES THE VICTIM** for the harassment [. . .] You get the impression that they simply don't care, and they deny what is happening in order to avoid controversy that could potentially tarnish the school's image. They sacrifice the psychological and, indeed, physical well being of its students for this false image. (Rate It All 1)

This heated thrashing of Middlebury College, though probably unfair, accurately describes the atmosphere and characters at Belmont. Both Kenney and Strauss, long term veterans of Belmont, run themselves in circles to protect the school's image and their own. They pay little attention to the students' feelings, ignoring their concerns at the race forums, yelling at them, or trying to escape the situation altogether. Even when they discover Simon wrote the harassing notes to himself, Kenney and Strauss still show their harsh reactive natures. They accuse Simon of a personal attack; they believe that he is a "con man," and are convinced that his actions were deliberate and cunning. Like Rebecca Gilman, the author of this online commentary about Middlebury experienced a collegiate atmosphere that lacked diversity and aroused suspicion.

Little Black Sambo

For many years *Little Black Sambo* has both been a favorite children's story in England and the U.S. and a subject of controversy. The story was written in 1898 by Helen Bannerman about the adventure of a young dark-skinned boy when he is confronted by four tigers. Sambo receives brightly-colored clothes from his parents, Black Mumbo and Black Jumbo, and goes for a walk in the jungle. As he is walking, he has to give each piece of his clothing to the tigers in order to avoid being eaten. The

jealous tigers then begin to fight with each other, arguing over which of them is the grandest tiger of all. They begin to chase each other faster and faster around a tree, eventually spinning themselves into a giant pool of melted butter. The butter is then scooped up and served with pancakes for the family's evening meal.

Bannerman, a Scotland native, wrote *Little Black Sambo* when she was living in India with her family. Although originally written to amuse her young children, she was persuaded to publish it in England, where it became a bestseller in 1899. The book, illustrated by Florence White Williams, gained further attention when it was published in America in 1900. The success of the story inspired other authors to capitalize, creating version after version of the same tale. Phyllis Yuill's 1976 article in *School Library Journal* entitled "Little Black Sambo: The Continuing Controversy" mentions that "there were at least 27 English Language versions published in the U.S between 1905 and 1953, including such variations as inexpensive paperbound volumes and novelty books with pop-up pictures or animated illustrations" (Yuill 2). However, Bannerman did not receive any credit for these alternate versions because she had already sold the copyright.

The story has a short, simplistic structure and an easy-to-read, uncomplicated storyline. Even the illustrations are plain, having little detail and few colors

The format—an innovative small size with illustrations to match each page of text—has been noted by British and American children's literature experts, who consider it to have been a revolutionary model for a new style of picture book. As far as the content is concerned, there seems to be unanimous agreement on one point—that *LBS* has all the elements of a good story for young children: a sympathetic hero, a simple and exciting plot, repetitive rhythm, abundant action, and a satisfying conclusion. (Yuill 2)

In addition to its innovative design and engaging story, *Little Black Sambo* became popular because of its cathartic effect. Reading the book and feeling pity and praise for

the little hero caused white Americans to be proud of their positive thoughts about a black person. To some, reading the book resulted in a therapeutic break-through.

We could all approve of Sambo and his family without feeling either guilty or anxious...Sambo was taken to everyone's heart precisely because he allowed us to acknowledge what we knew inside but avoided confronting: that black people were human beings just like us. In loving Sambo, unreservedly, in some way every white had the feeling that he was also accepting the black man as a human being. (Yuill 2)

Despite the dominant racist attitudes of the time, Sambo's blackness was itself a reason for his success in America. It is likely "that the appeal of *LBS* was established largely because of a fascination with black stereotypes presented in the entertainment of the early twentieth century" (Yuill 3).

While some were drawn to the story, others began to protest the book's stereotypical portrayal of African Americans. The story's original illustrations were considered to be the most offensive aspect of the book. The most disturbing images were the garish colors of Sambo's clothing, the unsanitary use of the butter scooped off the ground and eaten, and the huge appetites of the dark-skinned characters. "These details were condemned as reinforcing the negative image of blacks as flamboyant, slovenly and gluttonous" (Yuill 3). The characters were drawn with very dark skin, exaggerated red lips, big eyes and big hair. Sambo was depicted as a classic picaninny character, the dominant racial caricature of black children of the time, rather than as a young Indian boy. "Mumbo was often shown as a fat, barefoot 'Aunt Jemima,' while Sambo might be nude or little more than a black silhouette in a forest of plumed trees" (Yuill 3). The crude depiction of Sambo left many readers angry, which prompted them to find more faults in the children's story.

The name “Sambo” itself created controversy. The name, holding negative connotations, had become a term to symbolize black people in America. The term dates as far back as 1564. In America it had been first used by the Spanish as a name for slaves and “half-breed” children of black and Native American Indian parents. It has also been used as a term for “mulatto” children. By the mid-1800s the name “Sambo” was used widely to refer to any black man, and was also a nickname for shoe-shiners through the mid-twentieth century. By the 1930s and 1940s, the term was seen as explicitly derogatory and many socially progressive Americans began to be turned off by “Sambo.”

Bannerman, whose Sambo was Indian and not African American, did not intend the depiction or the story to be racist.

[. . .] after all, the story was conceived as a private fantasy tale to share with her children. It is also likely that she did not understand the racist overtones of the book. She tried to write an ‘exotic’ tale. The book reflects, but does not exceed, the prevailing anti-Black imaging of her time (Pilgrim 6).

Bannerman’s Sambo was not a negative character but a brave boy who used his wit, bravery and intelligence to outsmart the tigers. The tigers, concerned with power and prestige, let their prizes slip away. Paying little attention to Sambo, they were destroyed by their own greed. Perhaps the protestors of Bannerman’s book became like the tigers, interested too much on surface, rather than content.

The book’s public protest reached its height during the early Civil Rights era when parents became aware that the stereotypical portrayal of Sambo could hurt the unconscious views and attitudes of white children toward black people. The book was also potentially damaging to the positive identity of young African Americans. Remembering how the story affected her, social worker Marjorie Hammock tells Yuill:

I remember how some of my classmates would refer to me as Black Sambo after hearing the same story (they were too sophisticated to say nigger) and how for the first time I didn't want to go to school ever! To this day I hate that teacher and the principal who told my mother it was harmless. (4)

Another student comments that he both related to Sambo and felt confused about his portrayal:

When I read *Little Black Sambo* as a child, I had no choice but to identify with him because I am black and so was he. Even as I sit here and write the feelings of shame, embarrassment and hurt come back. And there was a bit of confusion because I liked the story and I especially liked all those pancakes, but the illustrations exaggerated the racial features society had made clear to me represented my racial inferiority—the black, black skin, the eyes shining white, the red protruding lips. I did not feel good about myself as a black child looking at those pictures. (Pilgrim 5)

The story of Little Black Sambo, though originally devised to be amusing, made this student feel shame, not pride, in his blackness.

Even though petitions were filed to ban the book and pull it from library shelves, book sales did not seem to decrease much even in the 1970s. First editions by Helen Bannerman became collectables, “Sambo’s” became a popular restaurant chain, toys and products depicting the characters were sold, and alternate versions of the book were published. A new edition entitled *Little Brave Sambo* told the familiar story in an African jungle, but this time Sambo was a white-skinned, red haired boy with blue eyes. *Little Black Sambo* was a well-beloved story for years, popular because of its little hero, and kept alive by the controversy surrounding him. As long as the story was popular, people capitalized upon it, and tore apart its hero.

Spinning Into Butter uses the Sambo story as a thematic image, comparing the administration to the tigers and Sambo to Simon. Knowing nothing about him, they continue to run themselves in circles making assumptions about his background and

motives. Kenney, Strauss and even Ross are too concerned with personal gain and appearance to take heed of the real situation. They spin so fast, they lose sight of Simon. The actions of the administration are as heedless and arrogant as those of the tigers in *Little Black Sambo*. Simon, though not the play's hero, gains as much sympathy. Sambo became the center of a heated debate across the country just as Simon is the subject of controversy in the play. The audience pities Simon because he never gets the chance to speak for himself. I feel pity for Sambo because, as a fictional character intended to be a positive role model, he has ended up on a banned book list. Rebecca Gilman has, however, resurrected the story, and has problematized the tigers, who bear the brunt of our scrutiny rather than Sambo.

Spinning Into Butter takes the comparison of the two stories even further. Dean Strauss's attempt to compare Simon to Sambo is flawed, where Gilman's is astute. Strauss reads the story of Sambo and judges the hero to be at blame for the tiger's demise. He vilifies Sambo, and by extension, Simon. Strauss accuses Simon of deliberately taunting the administration, getting them into a whirl over nothing" (Gilman 78). Yet in Bannerman's story, Sambo is the subject not the cause of the tiger's argument. And he retrieves his clothing only after they have become distracted by their violent in-fighting.

What is more, Gilman plays with the Sambo source material by developing interesting meanings around the image of butter. Belmont begins as a solid prestigious institution, but when turmoil is brought to it, everyone gets heated and the situation bubbles over. The incident causes some characters to stay the same while others have made personal transformations. Just as butter changes shape, so does Belmont; just as

butter re-hardens, so does Belmont in the end. The audience watches the changes happen; they listen and make judgments, and in a way, the audience consumes the characters. Gilman has cleverly paralleled the two stories, and upon a closer look, more parallels could probably be found. However, this would require making assumptions about Simon, which the play teaches us not to do.

The World of the Play

Attending Middlebury College in New England allowed Rebecca Gilman to write from experience. *Spinning Into Butter* takes place at Belmont College in Belmont, Vermont, a fictional liberal arts university in New England. Vermont is an idyllic setting, known for its autumnal beauty, warm summers, cold winters, and for bringing vacationers from all over the world to escape the city to enjoy the bright colors of the country. Sarah Daniels, Gilman's principal character, wanted to move to Vermont, a place she describes as "quiet and clean and white" (Gilman 68). Moving from Chicago, she wanted a quiet place to hide, a place she knew would be free from smog, yelling on the subway, and black people. Sarah is not as intimidated by the racial make-up of Vermont, but more intimidated by its beauty. The granite, the white columns, blue shutters and slate roofs are just a bit too idyllic and beautiful. The New England location might be a perfect place for her to escape, but she does not fit in.

Many of the wealthiest cities in America can be found in New England, as well as many of the nation's most expensive colleges. *Spinning Into Butter* highlights the affluence of New England, but also the division of wealth among ethnic lines in the student population. To affluent white students like Greg Sullivan, the high cost of a private liberal arts education is not a burden. However, to Patrick Chibas, who breaks the

ethnic and economic mold at Belmont, paying the tuition is difficult and burdensome. Patrick is offered a twelve-thousand-dollar minority scholarship, but even this sizable amount is nowhere near the cost of attendance.

The play is set in present day, though it is important to note that the play could happen at anytime. Even though Gilman based the events in the play on an actual event in the eighties, she wanted to use a fictional setting to show that this event was not the only one of its kind. The play is not about that particular event and people, but racist attitudes of white's across the nation. The play begins in the fall semester and spans about a five week period of time. Stage directions indicate the passage of time, though exact times are not given. Most of the scenes take place during the normal working day, but we see a couple of evening scenes where Sarah is spending hours pouring over papers in her office late at night.

There is some contradiction in the play whether or not Belmont is a religious university. The text indicates several series of chapel bells that ring throughout the play, but are they meant to indicate passage of time, a religious affiliation, or merely a reminder that there is still life going on outside of Sarah's office? Gilman does not directly address the aspect of religion in the play, but she does use a scattering of religious references and images. Some of the characters, Ross in particular, use "Christ," "God," and "Jesus" as words of exasperation. These words indicate that Ross is most likely not an extremely religious man. Ross' flippant use of religious words only adds to his hypocritical portrayal. Ross recounts an extraordinary experience he had on the subway, painting a picture of a strong, yet tattered man reading a Bible verse from a laminated card. He throws out a random biblical verse, John 12:24, as if he has biblical

knowledge, though we know he is spouting it out at random. Ross then decides to play analyst and preacher with the man he starts to idealize. He says that the man was using the flimsy laminated card as a lifeline to his faith. To Ross he was “a man who kept himself in one piece by a dedicated devotion to God. But a devotion that was so fragile that he literally had to keep it here, before his face, like a beacon” (Gilman 11). Ross, later describing the man as a strong, almost Christ-like figure, saw the man as a metaphor for religion in today’s world. The religiously convicted man on the train needed something to remind him of his faith. Ross believes that the world requires physical rather than metaphysical in order to be fully satisfied.

Language

Gilman’s language, though honest and straightforward, is also evocative. Her characters are intelligent, articulate, and opinionated. They are often descriptive when they lecture, conjuring up vivid images for the audience. The six most vivid images in the play highlight the three key issues that informed my analysis: 1) the difficulty of honest dialogue 2) the objectification and aestheticization of minority groups and 3) the lesson that actions are more potent than words.

The first image is the eloquent depiction of the man Ross sees on the subway. The audience gets a clear picture of the disheveled man in his tattered suit and laminated Bible verse held fervently before his face. Like one of the pieces of art at the MOMA, Ross makes the man something to study. Ross explains that he just wants to understand him, but his words prove otherwise. Ross says that the man appeared strong, but he also describes him as “a man about to disintegrate” (Gilman 11). The man can serve as Ross’s ideal subject in any situation. Ross makes the man his piece of art to study and

manipulate. Ross' monologue gives the audience an example of how having an analytical nature can lead to the dehumanization of people. He does not maliciously objectify, but his inability to objectively see the man proves Gilman's point that there are many ways to idealize others.

The second most vivid image occurs when Sarah describes her difficult talk with Simon after finding out that he has written the hateful notes to himself. Sarah remembers sitting next to Simon, looking at his hands: "I kept looking at his hands...hands...Just hands" (Gilman 75). Each pair of hands were in their respective laps—white hands and black hands resting next to each other. They were hands that differed in color but revealed similarities in fear and hesitation. This emotional moment held important meaning for Sarah. She realizes that she and Simon have more in common than she thought, and yet she remains afraid to reach out to him. She is still fearful of saying the wrong thing—she freezes up. Standing at the precipice of change, she can either recede into her old ways, or she can take the next step. Gilman uses Sarah's struggle to demonstrate the difficulty of dialogue.

The next defining image in the play emerges as Sarah describes her method of choosing a seat on the bus in Chicago. Sarah admits that she has created a racial and gendered hierarchy that informs the choices she makes. Her first seating preference is next to a white woman while her last is near African American men. As Sarah describes the people on the bus she would rather not sit next to, the audience can visualize them. Sarah was aware that her system was unfair, but admits that she was unable to stop thinking that way. Sarah's admission exposes an act that most will not admit to. Gilman

reveals one of Sarah's most difficult secrets not only to allow Sarah to purge her bad thoughts, but to give yet another example of how we objectify others.

The last two images that informed my analysis stand in dark contrast to each other. During her memorable Act Two monologue, Sarah describes working at Lancaster where she found herself in the overwhelming minority. She uses vivid and offensive words to depict the students she worked with—mean, lazy, stupid, and stinky.

Recounting a time where she was pushed in the hallway, Sarah describes her students: “They were loud and belligerent and abusive and they walked down the hall in these packs” (Gilman 65). This image is of a white woman walking down a dingy hallway, crowded and full of boisterous African American students. The opposite image occurs when Ross and Sarah debate the effectiveness of the race forum in the second act. When Sarah tells him that the minority students were boycotting the forum, Ross admits that he did not even notice. Sarah replies, “Didn’t you notice that there were just a lot of white people there?” (Gilman 60). Ross reminds Sarah that even if everyone was there, it would still just look like a room full of white people. It is an ironic image, a race forum with only white people there to argue. This last image also parallels the make-up of the cast of *Spinning Into Butter*, a cast of six Caucasians and one person of color. The majority/minority duality is demonstrated in both images in the play. Gilman depicts both sides of the issue; Simon Brick and Patrick Chibas are the minority at Belmont, while Sarah was the minority at Lancaster. By using these opposites, Gilman is proving that one must look at an issue from more than one direction.

Rebecca Gilman is also a master of contemporary language. She cleverly uses the language of academia, as well as the language of political correctness. Marion J. Reis, dramaturg for *The Theatre of Western Springs*, states that

Gilman is extremely sensitive to the nuances of language of racism and sexism and the struggle we have with being politically correct [. . .] Rebecca Gilman proves her mastery of language through her very sensitive use of politically correct nuances. Her characters, as academic and social liberals, take great pains to be politically correct; as academics they are careful in defining words. Sarah, in true academic fashion, quickly defines 'Hispanic,' and also tries to prove her mastery of Webster's English, by pulling out the dictionary to define 'equivocal.' Gilman's style makes fine-line distinctions in words ('quiet' vs. 'shy,' 'students of color' vs. 'minorities,' 'folk art' vs. 'outsider art,' 'uneducated' vs. 'undereducated.' (Reis 4)

Both the imagery and word choice in Gilman's dialogue paint a complete picture of Belmont.

Playwrights use dialogue to reveal character, theme, idea, but also to affect the audience. Rebecca Gilman uses language to create distinct characters that have a different worldview, reacting to the key issue, and she makes the audience reflect upon the issue as well. The dialogue in *Spinning Into Butter* sounds like a tennis match, a heated debate, or an academic lecture. Words are lobbed back and forth quickly between arguing academics. While much of the dialogue is short and direct, some is long, articulate and emotive.

Character Analysis

Sarah

Sarah Daniels, the play's protagonist and Dean of Students at Belmont College is a well-meaning, helpful, articulate, sarcastic woman who cannot catch a break. Her life has been a series of ups and downs, soul-searching revelations, and attempts to overcome

her faults. Sharp-tongued, abrasive and quick-witted, she walks a fine line between authority and vulnerability. Sarah, while trying to balance the needs and wants of the students and the desires and actions of the administration, is forced to face the demons of her past, at the same time trying to maintain her dignity. She reaches her breaking point when she can no longer hide her past causing her to wade through a sea of ugly thoughts and words. If Gilman writes her characters to display different views on one situation, then Sarah's view is the most complex. She cares for her students, but is also part of the institution that discriminates against them.

Sarah has never been able to fit in; at graduate school, at Lancaster, and finally at Belmont, Sarah has been unable to find her place in the world. She has not made many friends at Belmont but instead has decided to make the students her top priority.

Determined to at least make a difference in one student's life, Sarah calls in Patrick Chibas, a Nuyorican student with financial need. She thinks that giving him a twelve-thousand dollar scholarship will make up for everything she could not do at Lancaster. She wants to put the scholarship in the university's debt column, but she also wants to assuage some of her own guilt at the same time. Her "stick it to the man" mentality shows that Sarah not only sees some of the injustices of the institutional system, but that she is pragmatic in her desire to help.

Sarah's Act Two monologue has been described as the most memorable scene in the play. It is not only the most character revealing moment for Sarah, but the point of the highest intensity; it is the climax. Sarah is very intelligent and articulate in this speech, letting her knowledge and education come to the forefront. On the other hand, her words are sometimes brutally honest. At times in the play Sarah falls into a sharp

manner of speaking, probably as a result of communicating with a drunk mother throughout her life. Though Sarah's speech shocks and surprises, her's are the most honest words spoken in *Spinning Into Butter*. Few people are able to assess themselves the way Sarah does. Spending so much time trying to keep words from slipping out of her mouth, they have built up inside, finally spilling out onto the stage in a giant sigh of white guilt. Her words disappoint, but also evoke self-evaluation from the audience. Recognizing that Sarah's journey is her own, one audience member admits that "the racism in this play reaches out and grabs the audience as we instinctively recognize the validity of Sarah's internal conflict as our own" (Reis 3).

In this heated scene, Sarah reveals her deepest secrets which have begun to resurface during the racially charged events of the previous weeks. Feeling she has regressed into old ways, she begins her self-critical diatribe. She reveals that she learned she was a racist when she was in graduate school, from her other liberal, abrasive colleagues. They explained that her desire to help minority students did not "have anything to do with a sense of justice or fair play," but instead stemmed from her "plantation mentality"; her "desire to help the noble savage" (Gilman 62). From this point on Sarah was an avid self-editor and self-educator. By the time she ended her graduate career she thought she had undergone a conversion.

It is interesting to note that it was not Sarah who realized her paternalism. How much was Sarah a racist before she was told? Did she become more racist once she was accused of it, or was she only made aware of it? Sarah's realization parallels Meyers' assessment of Simon. Meyers says:

[. . .] I figured that he wouldn't have done that to himself if somebody hadn't made him feel bad. If somebody hadn't put the words in his head....and I don't think you see yourself like that, like he did in those notes, if somebody hasn't already seen you that way first. (Gilman 85)

Not minimizing Sarah's actions or words, it is ironic that Meyers' quote relates to the way in which Sarah learned she was a racist. Perhaps Sarah's classmates did not accuse Sarah wrongly, but instead gave her a working vocabulary to describe what she was scared to admit. By telling Sarah her desire to help minority students was rooted in racism, her classmates did her both a great service and disservice. She was made more self-aware, but was her racism augmented by their accusations?

Sarah's monologue continues by describing her paternalism turned objectification at Lancaster. Sarah continues with the monologue, but this time her words are harsher and more damaging. She says:

I found myself sitting across from my students and thinking that they were scary, or that their hair was stupid, or that it was no wonder that they were pregnant. I knew it was wrong, but I didn't care. I just felt tired and contemptuous...They weren't going to do anything with their lives. Not because they couldn't, but because they didn't want to. Because they were lazy and stupid. (Gilman 67)

It is apparent that Sarah lived and still lives with a great deal of inner conflict. Ross encourages her to move past her doubt and to try to offer solutions. Putting up yet another boundary, Sarah is afraid to make a move.

The last scenes of the play hold a series of baby steps towards change. First, Sarah is able to stand up to the actions of the administration, finally telling Strauss how she really feels about him: "you so totally suck" (Gilman 80). Sarah also decides to resign from her position at Belmont, leaving the door wide open for Sarah to either run away again, or continue to face her demons. Sarah's conversation with Greg at the end of

the play finally moves her towards action. Through Greg's recount of his eye-opening experience in joining the BSU and Students for Tolerance, Sarah begins to understand that she must reach outward in order to make a change. During the last few seconds of the play Sarah decides to call Simon. Though she is a little nervous, we see her laugh and honestly reach out to Simon, someone probably just as confused and lonely as she is. Though we do not see Simon, we can imagine and sense a mutual connection and shared energy. At the end of the play we see her try to get to know Simon, something she had attempted with Patrick but which failed. By the end of the play we see another journey beginning.

Ross

Ross Collins is a thirty-five-year-old Art History professor who believes the personal is political. He is a charming, passive aggressive, energetic educator who sees everything as a subject of a lecture. He has an inability to have meaningful and lasting relationships with women and a misdirected over-abundance of passionate energy. Ross is likable and well-meaning, but despite his semi-good intentions, his incessant aestheticization of the world around him makes him appear callow and patronizing.

Ross grew up on a farm, though he never felt he belonged there. He was a shy teenager and did not have much experience with women until graduate school. Even then, his relationships were few and meaningless. An inability to communicate effectively has severely hindered his capability to have a real adult relationship. When he began teaching at Belmont, Ross began a relationship with Petra, a dance teacher and fellow passive-aggressive lover. When she left on her hippie adventure/sabbatical, Ross began dating Sarah, Belmont's new Dean of Students. He felt like a teenager again with

two women in his court. But when Petra returns, he finds himself in an awkward predicament. Ross breaks up with Sarah in a cruel, rehearsed speech; it smacks of egotistical adolescent. It is almost as if he is enjoying the adolescence he never had.

One of the most significant things Ross says about his worldview is, “This wrangling over particulars is not going to change the big picture” (Gilman 14). This statement reveals a contradiction within Ross’s personality. In a way, Ross looks at the big picture; he thinks the forum will prove to be a learning experience for the students; he thinks the personal is political. Ross has many students, but he does not know their names or faces; he sees Belmont as a whole body of students, not as an institution of individuals. He wants to do things for the greater good, but at the same time he objectifies, idealizes, aestheticizes, and dehumanizes Simon, the man on the subway, and the Belmont student body. On the other hand, Ross seems observant of the minute details of life—the man’s stained cuffs, cracked shoes, and frayed suit. Though he wants to focus on the big picture, he is acutely focused on the tiny, unimportant details in life.

Like many professors, Ross has the habit of lecturing and over-analyzing. Ross quickly decides that a race forum could be a great learning experience for the students, making Simon’s private horror the subject of a lecture. Although Ross’ intentions are aimed in a positive direction, he makes the same mistakes as the other administrators. He gets so caught up in his own view of what is best for the students and Belmont, that he does not slow down enough to examine all the facts. Sarah would rather talk to Simon first where Ross wants to use the incident as a talking point.

Though Ross spends a lot of the play objectifying others, he ends up learning an important lesson. During his long scene with Sarah, Ross becomes more aware of the

effects racism has on people, and instead of making a lecture, he hears one. At the end of the scene he admits that he is also guilty of choosing seats on the subway. It was a simple, yet difficult admittance, but his first step towards change. Perhaps in the future he will spend less time lecturing students, and more time attempting a real dialogue with them. Though he is still a firm believer in offering solutions, at the end of the play he is more positive and understanding; he is a better listener.

Ross has a very important role in *Spinning Into Butter*. He represents one tier in the hierarchy of the university. He is not an administrator, nor the head of his own department. He takes an important role organizing the forums, but all final decisions are out of his hands. Unlike Kenney and Strauss, we find something to like in Ross. He is charming, attractive, and has an un-ending passion for life. His over-abundance of passion can appear phony. His energy is often misdirected. Ross tells Sarah that if she was an artist, she would be Jackson Pollack, but it is Ross who has the attributes of his paintings.

The most important role Ross plays is confidant to Sarah. He is the only friend she has at Belmont, and despite being lied to about their relationship, she trusts him more than anyone else. He is Gilman's listening ear who keeps her talking. Especially in Act Two, Ross serves as Sarah's audience. Ross allows Gilman to write Sarah's long monologue. Ross suggests to Sarah that she find real solutions to the problem at Belmont, even if it is not in a bulleted list. He says, "You have to go out on a limb. Otherwise the best lack all conviction" (Gilman 70). Sarah has conviction and Ross has passionate intensity, but neither knows what to do with it. He tells Sarah that she has to

take action in order to change. Though his attempts prove fruitless, Ross understands that action is better than inaction.

Kenney

Catherine Kenney is the sixty-year-old Dean of Belmont College. Her meticulous, scrupulous, and dedicated nature has landed her in a position of power at the university. She is a no-nonsense leader who looks as organized and neat as her bulleted lists. Kenney is an authoritative, sharp, and intelligent woman who is unwavering in her attempts to keep up appearances. Determination is probably her most positive trait, though it is often misdirected. Her role in the play is clear, to maintain order at all costs; her disposition is unlikable, despite her often sharp, clever dialogue. She is always well-dressed and well-groomed and finds peace and recreation in making memos, inter-office emails, and bulleted lists. In Gilman's play she handles damage control while maintaining her authority, earning no respect from the audience.

Kenney's primary motivation is to protect the university's name, increase enrollment, and preserve the untarnished Belmont image. At the same time, she wants problems to be solved quickly with the least amount of hassle. She wants easy solutions to difficult problems, and tries to control everything and everyone, without getting her hands dirty. When the racist incident with Simon Brick occurs on her turf, she is afraid that the story might leak to the press. She becomes panicked, though she has no idea how to handle the situation effectively. She decides to sit back and let the other administrators come up with a plan that she can then take to President Garvey. Making sure that the plan is actually well-thought out is not as important as if it seems like a good idea that everyone agrees on. She says, "I'll tell him everyone at the committee meeting thinks it's

a good idea. He does not have to know we're missing half the people" (Gilman 20). She seems a bit apathetic about the "forum thingee," but goes along with it because it "seems" like the right thing to do. Even though she says that the incident is internal, the external is what she is concerned with. In her case, she does judge a book by its cover, making content suffer at the cost of aesthetics. With this mindset, the happiness of the students at the university may be jeopardized for the sake of its illustrious façade.

Even Kenney's words reveal an attitude focused on appearance. Her frequent use of words such as technically, seems, memo, and list highlight her need for order and neatness. Her preoccupation with prestige and order is reflected in her concern that Sarah's office is larger than her own. She even thinks that the building feels slanted. To Kenney, anything can be solved with a "to-do" list, even the university's race problem. Her almost obsessive-compulsive desire to focus on the appearance of things and to control is put into overdrive when things begin to spin out of control on campus.

At the end of the play when the administration learns that Simon was sending the notes to himself, Kenney is the first to want things back to normal. Kenney, who says, "The quickest way to heal is to get on with things" decides that the quickest way to forget about the incident is to expel Simon (Gilman 80). She refuses to talk with Simon, believing that he wrote the notes to get attention. She obviously does not care who Simon is. If she had, she would not have refused to call his parents. Kenney ends the play as closed-minded and unaware as she entered it.

Strauss

Burton Strauss is a fifty-something member of academia. As Chair of Humanities at Belmont University, Strauss spends his time making sure he is right, but trying to

project a positive image to the world. This is where he goes wrong. He is a tweedy, reactive, touchy member of the faculty who says he is not a racist, but everyone knows that he is. Concerned with appearances, this member of the Belmont elite shows his vulnerable side when he constantly searches for approval and never gets it. Unlike Kenney, Strauss will do anything to make himself look good, even if involves a lot of work.

Strauss represents the reactive nature of the administration when it comes to the Simon Brick incident. He does not miss an opportunity to take charge and look good. In quite a bombastic manner, Strauss suggests that the administration immediately condemn the notes saying, “We have to be pro-active on this. We must make it known, loud and clear, that this sentiment is not Belmont. That Belmont cannot be reduced to this trash...” (Gilman 19). He continues by suggesting that they “issue some sort of statement, right away, condemning this—” (19). Strauss is happy to help in any way, of course, and hopes to save the Belmont name. More importantly, however, he hopes to polish up his own. Unlike Kenney who wants to protect the university more than herself, Strauss wants to protect himself first, and the university second.

Strauss does not think about the effects of his own behavior. He is an academic snob who patronizes the black students and then is offended by their negative reaction to him. His racism is unacknowledged, but given the chance he would do anything to defend himself. He wants Simon to join Students for Tolerance to prove to everybody that he is not a racist. Strauss has little interest in who Simon really is. He wants the students to like him, but they see through his phony and patronizing manner. Offended that they think ill of him, Strauss becomes defensive. He convinces himself that if Simon

was onstage with him at the race forums the students would see him differently. Strauss says it will create a united front, but really it would only be a façade masking his own passive form of racism.

One person in the play who thinks she understands Burton, and displays a visible amount of control over him is Dean Kenney. From her tone of voice to the way she touches his shoulder, Kenney knows exactly how to manipulate him. The audience can see Strauss' softer, more vulnerable side when Kenney calms him. We can see that though Strauss seems perpetually touchy and ridiculous, he has a very common and endearing weakness when it comes to women—unless that woman is Sarah. Strauss and Sarah seem to continually butt heads. Sarah thinks before she says something, and Strauss does the opposite. Sarah does not pretend to have everything figured out, Strauss does. Burton Strauss is much more closed minded than he would like to believe. His worst crime in the play is his inability to look past his own world and look at the big picture. Unaware of his own faults, Burton will probably continue on the same path at Belmont.

Patrick

Patrick Chibas is the only non-white character in Gilman's play. He, unlike Simon Brick is given a voice, but still falls prey to categorization, manipulation, and a form of racism which dehumanizes its victim and non-violently suppresses them. Patrick may come off as a touchy, reactive young man who reacts harshly to anyone who may say the wrong thing, but he is also the victim of others working through him. He has been used by not only his father, but the university to send messages.

Patrick and his parents' identify as Nuyorican (New-Yor-Ican), a blending of the terms "New York" and "Puerto Rican" and refers to the self-titled group that are members of the culture of the Puerto Rican diaspora in and around New York City. Patrick is a third-generation Nuyorican who has assimilated into American culture, yet remains, like most Nuyoricans, close to his heritage. But to Nuyoricans, "to be Nuyorican is not simply a category on a census form: it is a state of mind. It is to be part of an intellectual movement. It is to have pride in their past and their present. It is the fight through a common struggle. It is strength" (Cardenas 1). So, when Patrick is asked if he minds disclosing his ethnicity in order to receive a minority scholarship he simply states, "I don't mind. I'm Nuyorican" (Gilman 7). It is not until Sarah explains that nobody will know what "Nuyorican" is and asks for an alternative, that Patrick shows his refusal to be incorrectly categorized. Not only does the scholarship force Patrick to compromise his beliefs, it creates a hassle when his financial aid is revoked. This is the kind of bureaucratic problems many students encounter at college, but for Patrick it only makes his wounds worse, and tension with his father rise.

Patrick mentions his father constantly in his second meeting with Sarah, so much so that it almost seems as if his father is talking through Patrick. He says: "My dad said I should insist on talking to you," "My dad is furious," "[. . .] he said I shouldn't have to make compromises to get something," "[. . .] he didn't want me to come here," "[. . .] my dad was already complaining about how much this place costs" (Gilman 35-36) It is as if all of Patrick's frustrations have been scripted by his father. In a way his anger directed at Sarah is understandable; he has lost all trust, and all confidence. But on the other hand, his anger verges on unbelievable. Most students would never have the courage to stand

up to someone in Sarah's position of power. He succumbs to the pressure, however, eventually agreeing to take the scholarship. Even though Sarah's intentions are ultimately good, her manipulation of Patrick into taking the scholarship makes him another victim in the play. Like Simon, he is not seen as a complete human being with hang-ups, fears, and motivations. Nobody takes the time to listen to what he has to say.

It can be difficult to decide whether to like or dislike Patrick. Gilman has written Patrick as a character in danger of combustion. On one hand he seems like a reactive young man who lays out a minefield for any character to step across and who might lacerate you at any moment for saying the wrong thing. On the other hand he seems like a confused teenager who is being pulled many ways by his father, the university, his friends, and is just trying to figure out what he wants. He says, "I don't want any more compliments! I'm not some genius or something. I'm just whatever I am and I just want to go someplace where I will not stand out!" (Gilman 49) This smacks of angry teen angst, but Patrick reveals here a part of himself that is free of his father's influence. By his final scene Patrick appears to be speaking more for himself. Sarah continues to apologize, but Patrick feels as if he is being put atop a minority pedestal from which he can be praised, but not understood. Patrick's heated words culminate into his dramatic exit from the university and the play.

Greg

Senior at Belmont College, Greg Sullivan, is a law school applicant and an upper-class New Englander. Greg is the typical Belmont student. This is how he starts the play, but by the end, he is perhaps the character who has undergone the biggest transformation. In typical Belmont fashion, Greg leaps to action, wanting to understand

the world around him, but by the end of the play he is confused as ever, though perhaps a little smarter.

Greg is the antithesis of Patrick. Greg grew up in Greenwich, Connecticut, one of the most affluent cities in New England; a city whose median household income is \$99,086 and whose African American population is only two percent. Greg is the kind of person who wants to know things, is eager to enact change, and will be a leader in the fight to do what he thinks is right, as long as he can also benefit in the long run. Greg says, "I've always been taught that you should capitalize on your strengths" (Gilman 87).

Greg is the least experienced character in the play and it shows. He has had little experience with people of color or with racism. Once the Simon incident occurs, Greg becomes a leader amongst his friends, beginning a private dialogue to discuss how they can help the situation on campus. His wide-eyed reaction is a little trite and almost overdramatic as he describes his feelings towards the incident:

I guess when we heard about the thing with the notes, it was almost so horrific that it made us numb...we didn't want to even contemplate that one of us could have done it...we were acting like something outside was responsible. Instead of inside. Which is what hit me. You know? It's in here. Inside. (Gilman 25)

Greg's words prove that he is trying to understand the dynamics of racism, but he does not quite fully grasp the situation. Introspectively, Greg begins to question the world and the people around him. In this way, Greg is the audience, who at this point has begun to analyze the world of the play, the characters' actions, as well as their own attitudes towards race.

Greg has two very important roles to play in *Spinning Into Butter*. Not only does he represent the typical upper-class student, but his reaction to the racist incidents on

campus both mirror and oppose the actions of the administration. Much like Ross, Kenney and Strauss' immediate call to action, Greg decides he wants to do his part and keep a student dialogue going. He asks Sarah about the logistics of starting a Students for Tolerance group, but is discouraged when the work entailed seems a little daunting. The red tape does not deter him from his cause, however, because it is something he believes in. Like the administration's race forums, Students for Tolerance launches right away. However, the dialogues the two groups create are very different. Unlike the administrators call for a public forum Greg's group is focused on private and personal dialogue.

Greg's group hits a snag, however, when they realize that an open dialogue about race is impossible when all the participants are white. Their difficulty proves that honest dialogue is unattainable without a variety of perspectives. To remedy this, Greg invites the Black Student Union to join their meetings. He says once the group moved past their initial discomfort and began discussing race issues openly "the spirit was right." Greg took a chance; by reaching out to others on campus Greg was able to open the eyes of his peers, and perhaps enact change on campus. The race forums did not have the same outcome, proving, perhaps that Sarah was right, "public dialogue is never real dialogue" (Gilman 69).

Greg is the character that has the largest transformation in the play because he is the only person to make a real commitment to change. He has a real desire to talk about the world and the difficult issues he has never encountered. In his last scene with Sarah, Greg reveals the lesson the administration did not learn. The group realized that Simon was the only person who could speak for Simon, an idea so simple, yet it takes the entire

play to be said. By the end of the play Greg is more honest in his intentions yet still unsure about life. This time his confusion is rooted in a desire to learn. Greg teaches Sarah, and the audience, the ultimate lesson in the play—to go out on a limb. Though his motives in the beginning might have been a little self-serving, Greg learns that he cannot assume to know something without getting all the information. Gilman, through Greg's attempt to grow, is encouraging the audience to do the same.

Meyers

Mr. Meyers, a twenty-year veteran of Belmont College has seen his share of fumbles and mistakes. His career is a routine of cleaning up other peoples' messes. Mr. Meyers is not a complicated man and prefers an easy, get down to business approach to life. Though he comes in and out of the scenes quickly, he rarely says more than he thinks is necessary. Meyers' first priority is to do his job and to do it without getting involved in the actions of the administrators. Besides personal income, the only thing keeping him at Belmont is his deep commitment to hard work and the students he has grown to care about and protect. Mr. Meyers has witnessed a lot at Belmont, but it is not until he meets Simon Brick that he is able to voice his concerns.

Meyers' role in the play is minor, but important. He serves as a messenger who forwards the action of the play. He represents the low man on the university totem pole. He is the only person to care about who Simon is for the entire play, as well as being one of the very few who actually meets him. Meyers enjoys his job when it comes to interacting and helping students, but has become disillusioned by all the years of watching the schools' administration fumble and put the students' interest second to the university's. Meyers' responsibility is to be the contact between the police, the school,

Sarah and Simon. When Simon receives the notes and notifies campus security, Meyers is the first to inform Sarah, the person he most trusts. Throughout the play, Meyers reappears to deliver news of Simon's continued harassment. He is more concerned with finding the culprit and keeping Simon safe.

Mr. Meyers has developed an important friendship with Sarah because they are both committed to the students. However, their relationship is severed when he discovers she has concealed her true self. Sarah is a self-confirmed racist, and her confession saddens him. He has very simple ways of stating his feelings, saying, "Well, I guess that upsets me" (Gilman 85). Unlike many of the other characters, Meyers avoids flowery dialogue, long tirades and egotistical rants. He tells her, "I thought when we started this, that you weren't like them. You didn't want to make speeches or stand up in front of everybody, you just wanted to get down to work. I thought you were different. But I guess you were just hiding out, huh?" (Gilman 85) In his father-like lecture, Meyers is unforgiving of her actions.

For most of the play Meyers refrains from voicing his feelings; he is all action and no talk. It is not until the end of the play that Meyers finds an opinionated voice. First, Meyers stands up to Kenney, refusing to do her job for her; second, he scolds Sarah, disappointed in the way she disguised her motivations. Before the event with Simon, Meyers gives Sarah an honest assessment of her character. "Either you're not as good as you think you are, or you're not as bad as you think you are" (Gilman 86) In the end, even Meyers has hope for Sarah, and perhaps some hope for himself. He has been changed by Simon and Sarah, and there is hope that he will not stick around to watch the university flounder again.

Simon

Though he is not a character and never appears onstage, the idea of Simon Brick is very important to *Spinning Into Butter*. He is the subject of everyone's interest, the person characters argue over and are speculate about. There are some concrete things we learn about Simon, but like the play proves in the end, everything else is just speculation; we can never really know who he is or why he wrote the notes. By not giving him a voice, Gilman is teaching us that assumptions are only assumptions until we meet and really get to know somebody.

These are the things we know are true about Simon: he is a freshman at Belmont who lives alone in a single room in Houghton Hall on campus. Simon is from Pittsburgh, where he used to attend Catholic school and lives with his mother and father when he is not at school. He writes the racist notes to himself, telling Sarah that he knew he would get caught; he does not know why he did it. When Meyers returns from taking Simon home after he is expelled we learn that Simon likes baseball, especially the Pirates, that he has a big appetite, and that he describes himself as shy. Meyers describes his house as nice, but not lavish. It is apparent that Simon comes from a middle-class family. He rides the line between an affluent lifestyle like Greg's and a lower-income background like Patrick's.

It is tempting to create an entire life for Simon, to decide why he called himself Little Black Sambo and why he wrote the notes to himself. On the other hand, creating a life for him would reject Gilman's message. Giving Simon a voice would be putting words in his mouth. It is more interesting to let Simon remain a mystery. He should remain in the realm of the unseen and unknown.

Conclusion

This academic approach to play analysis has allowed a thorough investigation of the characters, ideas and images in Gilman's play. Making connections between theme and research ended in a better understanding of the world of the play and the people who inhabited Belmont. The image that continued to come to mind was a pristine canvas, a place where physical beauty could be juxtaposed with ugly words and thoughts. This idea was carried to fruition by the team of actors, designers, and crew.

CHAPTER THREE

The Design Process

As my research of the play was well underway, I began to form a personal vision of *Spinning Into Butter*. Certain ideas, both thematic and stylistic, led to a visual understanding of what the play should look and feel like. In analyzing the text, I was reminded continually that Belmont University has an extreme focus on appearance. Characters attempt to clean up messes while leaving reputations untarnished. Given that Belmont has money and prestige, the outward appearance of people and place must have a grand exterior. However, as the play continues, the audience begins to see and hear things that break the university's perfect façade. I visualized a design that reflected Belmont's pristine exterior while contrasting with the ugly words that were uttered inside.

Along with this metaphor for the play's setting, I knew that the play's design needed to be functional and realistic. *Spinning Into Butter* places realistic demands on its director and designers, especially concerning place and climate. Set in Vermont in the fall, the play needed to not only reflect a specific locale, but hint at what makes that environment unique. Fall colors, foliage, and climate became the primary depictees of the play's place and time. On a functional level, the set needed to have a groundplan that allowed for variety in blocking. These were all challenges that faced me as the design process began.

Play Selection

During the fall semester of the second year of study in the MFA in Directing program at Baylor University, the graduate students are asked to choose a thesis production which will serve as the culmination of their years as a graduate student and the basis for a written thesis. The play selection process is not painless as it is designed to make sure the student is choosing a play that will both serve the audience at Baylor, the season in general, and the students' strengths and weaknesses. Because of my interest in current social and political issues, I wanted to direct a contemporary play with commentary on a difficult topic. My personal taste also leans to the hard-edged and theatrical. *Spinning Into Butter* was not originally on my long list of choices; in fact, I was unsure about my decision for a short time. After all of my top contenders had been turned down, I was discouraged and upset at the way the selection process was going.

I stumbled upon Rebecca Gilman's *Spinning Into Butter* almost by accident. I saw it on one of my professor's bookshelves one day in the midst of my frustration. I almost did not give it a second look, but despite some minor hesitation, I picked it up and read it quickly. As soon as I was finished reading I felt that the play met most of the criteria I wanted in my thesis play—it was contemporary and dealt with controversial social and political issues. The faculty felt this was a great choice for me because it had big questions at the heart of the play. More importantly, it presented a three-dimensional protagonist with a full character arc, which they felt was something I needed to work on. Looking back, I am glad that the selection process was so long and frustrating. It allowed me to read more plays and examine and question my taste in dramatic literature. I am

also grateful that I directed *Spinning Into Butter* because the experience was truly rewarding and meaningful.

Once the season was chosen there was a small lapse in time before I met with designers to begin the pre-production process. While waiting for the designers to be chosen, I read and re-read the play, researched its past production history, and bought every Rebecca Gilman play that I could find. In preparation for the start of this thesis, I read these plays, looking for common themes and structure in Gilman's work. I also started my visual analysis of the play which could be shown later at the initial design presentation.

I could not choose the designers myself, but was sure that the faculty would make good decisions. I enjoy collaborating with both the students and faculty at Baylor and I felt that *Spinning Into Butter* would be a good project for student designers because it is contemporary and has very straightforward design needs. One faculty designer and three student designers were assigned to the team, and soon after their assignment we began work on what would be the first show of Baylor's 2007-2008 season. My visual analysis of the play was presented to the designers so that they could begin to formulate their design ideas in time for the slew of design meetings that took place over the summer. The designers worked hard to combine their efforts to create a visual picture of the collegiate atmosphere which would become our Belmont, Vermont.

Stage Space

The next step after establishing a design team was choosing a theatre space for the production. After the consideration of the faculty, it was decided that *Spinning Into Butter* would be performed in the modified thrust space of the Mabey Theatre, located in

the Hooper-Schafer Fine Arts Center on the Baylor University campus. It is a space that has challenges for a director, but also allows for creative blocking choices and a semi-intimate environment. The Mabee seats approximately 250 patrons in a semi-circular seating arrangement that surrounds three sides of the acting area. Sometimes sight lines can be an issue in this theatre but can be solved with creative design choices. The backstage area is also very small, limiting scenic storage and opportunities for scenery upstage of the proscenium line. However, the benefits of this space far outweigh its disadvantages.

In my mind the Mabee Theatre was the only space that would benefit the play. The audience, surrounding the stage on three sides, would allow for a three-dimensional environment which would serve the play well. The actors in close proximity to the audience could enhance the play's intimacy. It also affected the theatrical environment by making uncomfortable moments even more uncomfortable. The Mabee Theatre allows audience members to become closely involved in the action onstage, but perhaps not as much as they might in a black box theatre. I wanted the audience to relate to the play and its characters, but also to be separated enough from it that they could think objectively about its subject and themes.

Pre-Production Design Process

The pre-production process is the period before the director begins work with the actors; it is a time for the designers and director to imagine the visual world of the play. A series of design meetings take place to discuss the set, costumes, and lighting—what they will look like and whether the needs and wants of the designers and director can meet the time and budget constraints. It is vital that early in this process everyone feels

that they are speaking the same language, agreeing on the play's themes, style, and environment. A true collaboration is formed when everyone works toward the same goal. Communication is important, especially upfront, because it is the director's concept that will inspire future design choices. Therefore it was my job to communicate my director's concept, both visually and thematically, to the designers during our first design meeting.

In this first meeting, it was important that I gave the designers clues, but not orders. These "clues" were meant to describe the vision I was developing for the play, both visual and aural stimuli to inspire the designers. From the beginning, I made it clear that I wanted the designers to create their own ideas and that I wanted to build an open atmosphere. I believe in the collaborative nature of theatre, so I prefer to put a lot of trust in everyone I work with. I had some ideas about what I wanted from the design, but I was more interested to see what others would create based on a few prompts. Wanting to keep things organized and simple, I presented my prompts as a short digital slide presentation detailing my thoughts about the play. The slides provided information about the visual and thematic elements that were the most important to me. Presenting sensory images, I communicated what I thought the play should look and feel like.

There were five main ideas I wanted to communicate in the design presentation. First, the play speaks loud enough for itself; any design choice that might overstate the themes or overwhelm the story should be avoided. Second, I told the designers that the script holds a lot of clear indications about what the set should look like. Gilman describes the office in her opening stage directions, repeating the word "large" to describe just about every element of Sarah's office—the room, the rug, the window, and the furniture. I told the designers that her office should appear large and stately. I knew

that this request would hold benefits and challenges. With such a large space, I was worried about creating a variety of blocking patterns, so I asked for many acting areas to break up the stage. The fourth main point was that the set should be pristine and expensive looking. It must look believable as an affluent liberal arts university in New England. The neatness of the set should contrast with the ugliness of the words and actions that take place within it. The fifth and final point I made was that the play takes place in the fall in Vermont, and I wanted time and place to be reflected in some way in all of the design elements.

I then showed some pictures of the fall colors, trees, and landscapes in Vermont, mentioning that the cool temperature of Vermont in the autumn would be important for costuming. I also gave a timeline of the play, a scene by scene breakdown of the passage of time and the time of day in each scene. Quickly mentioning costumes, I noted that I was open to the designer's ideas, but the direction I was thinking of taking Sarah might be different than past productions. Past production shots depicted an older, plain, matronly women dressed in unflattering skirt and pant suits. I did not see Sarah as a frumpy or stuffy academic, but a younger professional that wanted to be hip and current without being inappropriate.

I kept my discussion of sound and lighting very short as well. I mentioned that instrumental music would be my preference because songs with words could send messages that either could be confusing or influence the audience. I hoped that sound could help create a natural pacing during the scene changes as well as enhance the upper-class and pristine feeling that the university projects. Knowing the least about lighting, I mentioned that lighting should be used to show the passage of time, but more or less

simply create a realistic office atmosphere. However, I was open to any ideas that the designer might have to heighten or theatricalize the play.

Relating the play to each of the five senses was one of the last things I talked about at the design presentation. I did not bring in the actual stimuli, though that might have been a fun addition to the design meeting. Instead I tried to appeal to the designers' senses by describing the different items that reminded me of the play. The smells I assigned to *Spinning Into Butter* were Febreze and coffee. Febreze, a very neutral smelling cleaning product, is used to get rid of odor, not only by masking it, but by also attempting to get rid of it completely. The university's administration spends a great deal of time preserving their reputation, focusing on appearance, and ridding themselves of bad press or negative gossip. The covering up of scandal or the expulsion of negativity is as common as using Febreze as part of your daily chores. Coffee is a predominant smell that can be associated with the play because as educators, the characters spend a lot of time downing caffeine, talking around conference tables, sipping cappuccinos, and gossiping. Coffee is a professor's drug of choice.

I told the design team that Belmont tastes like coffee, but also of expensive white chocolate. This chocolate is pure, very white and only can be eaten in small quantities. Belmont feels like a preheating stove, slowly heating up, and returning to stasis once things are all over. The play sounds like a ping pong match with dialogue flung across the stage quickly and with quick silver ease. Academic discussions, big concepts, and ideas are lobbed around right and left, leaving the audience as a panel of opinionated spectators. I told the design team that the play looks like a carton of eleven perfect white

eggs with one brown egg sitting quietly out of place. *Spinning Into Butter* examines the “other,” both people that feel out of place or are made to feel out of place.

Overall, the first design meeting was a success. I felt the team was on the same page and beginning to create a shared language to discuss the play. The designers responded well to the pictures and sense imagery. I feel I ran the meeting well and that collaboration was already taking place. I gave them enough information about my vision of the play without ordering a specific design. The next stage in the design process was a series of design meetings where the designers and I discussed their ideas and began to finalize production plans.

Costumes

Costuming a contemporary play has fewer challenges than costuming a period piece. Clothing can be more easily bought or borrowed, and often little construction is needed. However, it is important to note that even though the actors might feel more comfortable in modern clothing, they must be transported into the world of the show. In theatre, clothes are no longer just garments; they become costumes which enhance not only the visual aspect of a production, but they enhance an actor’s sense of character and reflect a character’s sense of self.

During my first meeting with the costume designer we discussed the environment of the play as well as the characters that inhabit it. From the beginning we were in complete agreement that the costumes needed to reflect the world of academia, and also New England in the fall. Each costume would reflect the character’s personality, economic level, and personal attention to detail. Fall colors, heavy fabrics, and layering would be used to reflect the cool climate of Vermont. As I mentioned in the first design

presentation, one of the most important aspects of design needed to be the quality and rich appearance of the university. Along with the set, the costumes should look expensive, loaded with name brands and styles that will reflect the pristine, stuffy and upper class attitudes of the university and its students. Most of the characters, with the exception of Patrick, have a higher income level which should be reflected in their wardrobe. The characters want to reflect the image they want others to perceive. Through short discussions and the designer's sketches, we agreed upon a personal style for each character.

Sarah Daniels is a woman who wants to appear "hip" and "cool" to the students she helps; she is the kind of woman who, during her frustrating, neurotic bouts of rage back when she worked at Lancaster, would shop on Chicago's Magnificent Mile, in order to do some "retail therapy." The costume designer and I had decided that Sarah has not yet conformed to the life at Belmont by purchasing sweaters and cardigans; instead, she has preferred to wear the slick suits and modern separates she acquired while living in Chicago. Sarah is hip, yet comfortable; she is sexy, yet not obscene. I made sure that the designer understood that I wanted her to look different than the other faculty members, but still appear a part of their academic world.

Early on in the design discussions, the costume designer and I talked about ways to maneuver quick changes since it was important that Sarah's costumes follow the play's passage of time. As a director, I felt it was important that the audience understand that this racial incident spanned a period of weeks, not just days. Sarah's wardrobe needed to be full of separates and accessories that could be used in a variety of ways. The designer was clever about mixing and matching a gray skirt, black pants, and brown pants with a

variety of button up blouses, suit coats, and necklaces. Sarah was able to transform in the matter of seconds with a wardrobe that enhanced her modern sensibility and professional style.

Ross Collins is very much stuck in his world of liberal academia; therefore, it was appropriate to dress him as a stereotype of himself. Sweaters and slacks which he can easily throw together each morning are the staple of his wardrobe. Quite the academic, he often wears the same brown suit coat and brown trousers with a variety of colorful sweaters and cardigans. A New England feeling would be achieved through color and fabric choice. Ross's color palette would be browns, oranges and blues. When discussing Ross with the costume designer I emphasized that Ross should not appear completely put together. The nerdy, awkwardness of his artistic personality needed to come through in his personal style. He is the kind of person who would go shopping at the only thrift store in town because it was anti-establishment to do so, even though the racks consist of high end labels that were barely worn. However, Ross spends more time admiring the beauty he thinks he finds in others than paying attention to his own. Like Sarah, Ross's costume changes would need to include plenty of tops and bottoms that could be mixed and matched to reflect passage of time.

A tweedier product of his environment, Dean Burton Strauss epitomizes the atmosphere of the university. Dressed in mostly dark, fall colors, Strauss reflects the professional and sometimes stuffy appearance-oriented attitude of the administrators at Belmont. The costume designer and I discussed not only the character's age, but his disposition. We decided that Strauss likes to be comfortable, yet professional, and that his stuffy, pompous attitude could be reflected in a "tweedy" wardrobe. Strauss feels he

must always look his best, learning the importance of good grooming at an early age at Groton. Professional and warm, his costumes consisted of crisp khaki pants, button up shirts and ties, out-dated sweaters, and wool suit coats.

Dean Catherine Kenney is the more severe, female version of Strauss. She is concerned with appearance on a more neurotic level. A closet filled with well-fitting, expensive skirt suits all go nicely with a string of pearls she almost never takes off. The designer and I decided that Kenney would adhere to all the feminine rules she thought were appropriate, particularly the notion that women should wear skirts in a professional environment. Being almost sixty, Kenney's costumes needed to reflect her age and her ordered sensibility. Always well-groomed and aware of detail, Kenney's skirt suits needed to fall below the knee, but not appear too matronly. The costume designer would either buy or build these costumes to ensure a perfect fit. Her color palette would be mostly neutral, because she is a no-nonsense type of woman, but with purple as a primary color choice because of her sense of authority, self-importance, and somewhat regal demeanor.

One of the easiest characters to dress would be Mr. Meyers, the security guard. Given that his job requires him to wear a uniform and that we never see him off-duty, he has no costume changes, except perhaps a hat or a coat. The designer and I decided that a blue, basic security uniform would be the most appropriate. The designer also added a security guard badge and an American flag patch on the arm of his jacket to his uniform. Meyers' costume was simple and to the point; his occupation was evident and separated him from the other characters. It was clear that he represented a service and support branch of the university.

There were two student characters to costume, each from a different end of the Belmont social spectrum. Patrick Chibas has the lowest income level of any of the characters in the play. When first talking to the costume designer, we agreed that Patrick should look like any normal, casual college student who rolls out of bed and goes to class. His wardrobe consists mostly of jeans, t-shirts and sweatshirts. Unlike most Belmont students, neither he nor his family has a lot of money, making him unable to buy name brands on a regular basis. The designer and I agreed on earthy colors such as dark green and blue and that layering would be a good option for Patrick because it is comfortable, useful, and warm. The designer chose to reflect Patrick's personality not through overtly "ethnic" apparel (Puerto Rican flag shirts, etc.) but through earth tones and an environmental pattern. These choices reflected Patrick's personal interest in environmental sciences and his casual personality. One of the most interesting choices by the designer was to purchase a Belmont sweatshirt from Belmont University in Tennessee. Using this sweatshirt in the opening scene of the play was a smart idea because it indicated not only the play's setting, but the climate.

Greg Sullivan represents the upper-class, frat boy majority at Belmont and therefore should oppose Patrick in personal style. Where Patrick is unable to wear name brands, Greg owns little else. The designer and I discussed brands such as American Eagle, The Gap and Eddie Bauer as examples of stores Greg would be likely to shop. Even when going to class, Greg keeps up a stylish appearance. He also keeps up with current trends and fads. One particular trend the designer chose for Greg was "the front tuck." Apparently the "front tuck" is a fad associated with "frat boys" where they tuck in the front of their shirt but not the back. It sounded strange, but I trusted the designer's

knowledge of current men's fashion. Greg's costumes of cool colored slacks, a polo shirt, a button down shirt and a rugby shirt all typified the upper-class Belmont man. Through a series of meetings, the designer and I were able to agree on and justify personal styles for each character.

Hair and Make-up

The costume designer and the hair and make-up designer were one and the same. I felt early on that it was not necessary to have separate designers given that it was a contemporary show with no need for any unusual hair and make-up needs. The designer decided to have the actors apply their own make-up, instructing them to create a normal, everyday appearance. All men, except Greg, were told by the designer to keep, but trim their facial hair. Much like he did with Sarah's costumes, the designer allowed for quick and varied hair styles. Sarah left her hair down and flowing at the top of the play, later pulled it up in a barrette, and then let it down once again for the end of the play. By going through so many transformations, Sarah's hair was less pristine looking by the last scene, which highlighted the fact that she had undergone a lot of stress and personal frustration throughout the play.

Kenney and Strauss, given that they are nearing sixty, required some age make-up and gray in their hair, but I told the designer that I wanted the age make-up to be minimal and preferred that the make-up not overwhelm the character or distract the audience. Kenney's hair would be pulled up neatly in a classic style and Strauss' hair would be slicked back with his beard fuller than the other men onstage. These slight alterations would add age and personality. As the director, I wanted to make sure the hair

and make-up would not distract from the actors' performances. Like the costumes, I wanted it to reflect each character's focus on appearance and personal sense of style.

Set

The set design process was just as smooth as the costume design. From the first design meeting to closing, I was extremely pleased with the development and implementation of the scenic design. During the design presentation I discussed what was most important to me as a director—creating atmosphere and a practical stage space. Sarah's office should be large, expensive looking and have multiple playing areas from which I could create interesting and varied blocking patterns. It was also important that the set reflect an upper-class environment where how things look are just as important as what is said. In order to illustrate how I visualized Belmont, I showed the designer pictures of the campus at Middlebury College as well as pictures of the fall foliage in New England. The landscapes and fall colors stimulated conversation and inspired the designer to incorporate a fall atmosphere into his design. The most unique aspect of the set design were the fallen leaves that surrounded the stage which added to the picturesque quality of the design.

From the beginning I had little to no disagreements with the designer's choices. He agreed that the set needed to look finished and clean; meaning construction would need to be impeccable. The designer almost immediately chose a time period from which he would make all of his design choices. He showed the entire design team pictures of offices and architecture from the Georgian period (1730-1800) which is a style found in many New England colleges. The designer went further by exploring all of the different architectural details within the era. He asked me to choose between moldings, archways

and paint colors. In the end we decided on doorways and windows that were rounded, rather than square, and a pastel green color that was common in the Georgian period. These choices added a feminine and elegant feeling to the room. The designer and I decided that masculine or hard features would make the set too cold and uninviting. Although the structured environment and rigidity of its administration could possibly warrant a clean and structured design, we decided that a feminine quality would add to the regal and rich quality the university should project. Women in higher positions of authority dominate the play, giving the designer and me yet another reason to feminize Sarah's office.

During these meetings we also discussed the treatment of the stage floor. I was extremely pleased with the scenic designer's choice for a period appropriate wooden planked floor. His research showed floor boards that were wide and had an elaborate stenciled boarder around the perimeter of the room. The planked floor acted as the boundary of Sarah's office, which gave the set a structured, square, and finished look. The visual quality of the floor reflected Belmont's focus on appearance, detail and strict boundaries that are rarely crossed.

One design choice in particular added something unique and special to the production. I initially discussed that the play is realistic but has theatrical elements. Some of the characters reach towards the extreme but all deal with a very real problem. Though the play deals with serious subject matter, it has a great deal of humor and wit. A hint of satire is found in the play's comedic moments. I wanted the design to reflect both the realistic environment of the university but also the more theatrical and satirical moments in the play. In order to achieve this, as well as create environment and give the

audience a sense of time, the designer wanted to surround the wooden floor of Sarah's office with leaves. Initially he had envisioned flower petals, but soon opted for fall colored leaves which would highlight the play's setting. He also discussed hanging leaf covered netting outside the window, which would complete the look and separate which parts of the stage were inside and which were outside. These leaves were meant to be the non-realistic, theatrical element of the design. The leaf addition also led to an important discussion among the design team about why the play only takes place in one room and what the leaves represented in the design. Allowing the audience to see something outside the window, though vague and artistic, would remind them that there is a whole other world outside the office; there is a campus on which much of the play's unseen action takes place and where people live and discuss things they can never see. The audience can only see the personal conversations that happen inside Sarah's office, while they are reminded that there is something even bigger occurring on campus.

The initial groundplan included many acting areas, as I had requested; the set consisted of one wall unit that spanned the space between the proscenium line. It included a large, arched door on the far stage right side, a bookshelf that was built into the wall in the center, and a large, beautiful window and window seat on far stage left. The wall was topped by intricate molding as was the door, window and bookshelf. No detail would be ignored, and it was clear from the beginning that the key to making the design work would be precise, clean construction. The set designer first indicated three areas on the set: the desk area, a table with three chairs, and a smaller side table with two chairs. In the center of the room there would be a large rug, two paintings and two diplomas would be hung on the walls, and a coat rack would stand beside the door. This

arrangement provided a very realistic environment to begin rehearsals. As rehearsals began and the design process continued, I decided to move furniture around to solve blocking problems. I even added a few pieces of furniture late in the rehearsal process. The furniture arrangement was the most changed aspect of the design because it is the most functional aspect used by a director. The already detailed set was tweaked and enhanced as we made it a more lived-in space while still maintaining a sense of elegance that the play needed. An important contrast began to take shape between the beauty of the set's interior and the ugliness of the words and actions that were uttered inside.

Properties

Properties, or props, can be a vital aspect of a production in establishing time, place, or simply adding to the atmosphere of a play. At other times, the set designer acts as the designer, or a separate designer is appointed altogether. In the case of *Spinning Into Butter*, no designer was specified, but the set designer and myself acted as the decision makers while another student gathered and collected the props for the production. The majority of the props in *Spinning Into Butter* were office supplies, paper products specially made for the production. These props included notes, letters, lists, and folders that would need to be realistic not only for the audience's eyes, but for the actors who would use them. Props are one design area that undergoes a great deal of change as a result of the actors' rehearsal process. In the case of this production, more and more props were added during rehearsals in order to give the actors additional stage business. Late in the rehearsal process we added a candy dish, a water cooler and more files and papers to clutter up Sarah's office, creating a more lived-in, personalized space. These small additions gave the characters more personality, as they found special ways to use

the props that were unique to their character. The play ended up requiring more props than expected, props that were vital to the plot and creating a realistic environment.

Though all of the props ended up on the stage, there were a few problems getting them all there. It was difficult to communicate with the student prop master. Some props were late being found or forgotten about while some design choices were made without approval. I felt that many of these problems could have been avoided if a props designer was assigned or a props master was included in design meetings from the beginning of the process.

Lights

The pre-production meetings with the lighting designer occurred during the design meetings over the summer. The designer was out of town for the summer but made herself available via speakerphone. This was an interesting way to exchange ideas, but it did make things a little difficult. Though it always seemed as if we understood each other's ideas, it can be difficult to make sure you fully understand each other without eye contact or visual recognition. However, the designer provided ample information and design research which was impressive. This eased my mind about how our communication had been going. She sent pictures and a digital slide presentation detailing her ideas for the production. We discussed both natural and artificial light which would illuminate the office. The window and plenty of practical lighting instruments were key to her design from the beginning which I felt added to the play's realistic setting. She would use the natural shadow the window would cast upon the floor by shining lights from behind into the office.

The two main looks would be outside natural light pouring into the room and artificial lighting created by sconces on the wall, an overhead light, and a lamp on the desk, aided by other theatre lighting to create the illusion of fluorescent lighting. The designer wanted to keep the natural look in the room while depicting the time of day in each scene. She also experimented with ways to light the non-realistic elements, casting gobos on the leaves to create depth and texture. She also took special care in making the transitions not only flow well, but give the audience something interesting and beautiful to look at while the audience waited for the next scene. The most difficult lighting decision came late in the process after I decided how the transitions should run. The designer seemed to prefer not using blackouts from the beginning, but allowed me to come to the right conclusion myself. Lighting became the vital element in making the transitions work, and I felt that the designer and I worked well to smooth out the pacing of the show. Lighting comes in late in the production process, but I felt that the pre-production work prepared us well, though it was not done face-to-face.

Sound

The sound design process was not as easy as the other design elements. In fact, it was probably the most difficult design element to conceive and execute. Pre-production for sound is often minimal, given that decisions are usually made after rehearsals have begun. However, it seemed as if choices were made extremely late in this process, which left little time for corrections. This sound design was particularly frustrating not only because of lack of communication and apparent lack of effort by the sound designer, but also because it is a difficult show to design. The play does not call for one specific genre

of music very clearly; the only sounds called for in the script are chapel bells that ring intermittingly throughout the play.

Early in the process the designer and I decided that music would be used in pre-show, intermission, post-show, and in between all of the scenes. The music needed to fill the gaps to cover important costume changes. It was important to me that the music enhance the mood of the play as a whole, as well as the mood of each individual scene. The designer and I talked about classical music that would harmonize with the Georgian set and add to the collegiate atmosphere of the upper-class university. I felt that the designer and I had communicated well and that we were on the same page. He never expressed any concern with my idea, nor provided any of his own design concepts, but assured me that he understood where he was going.

It was not until later in the process that I heard any actual tracks. I was initially dissatisfied because what he presented me with was very contemporary instrumental music which was not what we had discussed initially. I reiterated the fact that I wanted the heightened element of the play to be reflected in the music, but I did not want any of it to be too dramatic or cinematic. The next set of music I heard was jazz music which I felt did not capture the clean, rich mood of the play. At this point I was feeling like the designer might have an entirely different vision of the play. Initially, I felt that I was making myself very clear about what I wanted. I was very open to hearing justification for his first two selections, but never got any. However, I feel that I could have more clearly voiced my frustration and made sure choices were made in a more timely fashion and if the designer and I could have figured out our error in communication. However, the final design worked well; the classical music fit the overall mood and the shape of the

play, while enhancing the atmosphere. Though I wish there had been more time to fine tune the selections and clean up the editing, the design helped achieve a unified performance.

Conclusion

The process of collaborating with designers was sometimes as challenging as it was rewarding. I developed ways of communicating visually as well as aurally in order to help tell a story and communicate emotion, character, time, and place. Though the time period of *Spinning Into Butter* was contemporary, it held challenges of its own. The designers were very clever and artistic in the ways they chose to handle the problems and highlight the strengths of the script. The pre-production process led to the superb execution of all the designs which culminated in a unified, complete, and beautiful production. All elements worked together to create a world where appearance is everything, though ugly things hide inside. The work that was done leading up to the rehearsal process was an exercise in analysis, collaboration, communication and time management which not only deepened my understanding of the play, but helped me on my path to becoming a successful director and team player.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Rehearsal Process

The rehearsal process is an ever-evolving series of successes and failures, but what is most important is serving the work in an individualized way. Every play is different; therefore each process will be different. It is vital that a director assess the strengths and weaknesses of the script, the space, the actors, and the time allotted to develop a rehearsal plan that will both serve the play and the actors. The process has always been important to me as an artist. There needs to be more safe places to fail in the theatre and more directors that focus not only on product, but process.

Artists should focus on creating and improving their art, not simply displaying their craft. This rehearsal process was meant to reinforce this idea; I wanted to work collaboratively with a group of artists who wanted to create something meaningful. My intent was to create a collective ensemble wherein each individual was as equally invested in the process as they were the product. I wanted to work with actors who engage in the entire process and the whole world of the play. It was my job as a director to create an environment where everyone could learn, contribute and feel invested in something unique.

In my leadership of rehearsals, I wanted to create an environment that was 1) open, allowing everyone to feel comfortable contributing; 2) artistic, where actors could respond creatively to their characters; and 3) academic, supporting, and encouraging articulate responses to the plays themes. I assigned the actors pre-production homework

which enhanced their understanding of the play and led to well informed character analyses that were realized onstage. We began our fall semester rehearsals with play analysis, moved on to blocking, and then began the long process of discussing and working through each of the fourteen scenes. This chapter will give a detailed account of the rehearsal environment that was created, from auditions to performance.

Auditions

The audition process is a critical time for a director because it is often the first opportunity to hear the dialogue aloud. It is also an important time for actors because they are given a very short amount of time to demonstrate their talent and personality. For both the actor and the director, a lot is riding on what happens in those few minutes, making the process a tense experience for all involved. Directors are often looking for specific things from actors in an audition, hoping that they will find the talent the roles require and actors that are easy to work with. A professor once told me that if you make the right casting decisions, then most of your battles have been won before you begin rehearsals.

Auditions for *Spinning Into Butter* were held on Tuesday, April 11 at the end of the Spring 2007 semester, approximately four months before rehearsals would begin. This is not necessarily a normal timeframe, but given that the school year was coming to a close before the summer, and rehearsals would begin before school began in the fall, I felt it was necessary to make casting choices early. I feel that this turned out to be a good decision because it allowed me to have a calmer rehearsal calendar, more time for actors to memorize lines and study their character, as well as having time to lead more acting

exercises and fun activities. In the future I will always consider lengthening the process by casting early.

The auditions took place in Baylor University's Theatre 11, a convertible black box theatre. This would not be the performance space for the play, but I knew it made little difference if the actors auditioned in another space. I was interested in seeing the actors in an intimate environment, which the black box allowed. In the initial audition I asked for a one minute monologue from the play. I gave the women three pieces to choose from, all of which were pulled from Sarah's long monologues. The men had to choose either a Greg, Strauss, or a Ross monologue. Approximately two weeks before the audition copies of the monologues were made available. I wanted them to put effort into the audition, stressing that memorization was an important part of the audition. Their level of preparation at the audition would give me an idea of their future commitment to the project.

The monologues themselves were chosen to demonstrate the academic language in the dialogue and the maturity of the characters. I was also looking for the actor's ability to make sense of the lines, make a distinct character choice, and have a general understanding of the play. The first two female monologues I chose were cut from Sarah's Act Two speech in which she reveals her ascent into white guilt and racist territory. I chose these two monologues because they get to the heart of Sarah's problem and show her vulnerability. The language was blunt and direct. If an actress chose these monologues I would know they were not shy or afraid to say ugly things. Their third choice was safer in terms of content, but would give the actors an opportunity to show a range of emotion. In this monologue Sarah tells Ross that Simon was writing the notes to

himself. Sarah then admits her inability to open up to Simon which allows for an emotional moment.

The men were also given three monologue choices. The first was a condensed version of Ross's description of the man on the train. I was looking for the actor's interpretation of Ross, a radiant energy, and sincerity. The second monologue was Strauss's *Little Black Sambo* story. I would not only get to see the actors' ability to tell a story, but also their ability to play age and capture attention. Last choice was Greg Sullivan's recount of his secret meeting with the Black Student Union. I selected this for Greg because it reflected his intelligence and eagerness. I was hoping to find an actor who would not overplay Greg's tendency to be emotional but capture his sincerity.

The actors entered the room in small groups, each performing their short monologue; I then assigned them each a ten line scene from the play according to the character to which I felt they were most suited. This allowed me to see them interact with each other and hear the quick-paced dialogue. Most of the women chose the second and the third monologue choices. I suppose these two were popular because they involved the most risk, either in content or emotion. Upon reflection, the first choice probably was the weakest monologue because it had little story. I took note of those who chose the second monologue because it was the most "dangerous." Only three men chose the Strauss monologue, which did not surprise me very much, given that there are few men in the department who can play to that age range. The rest of the men were split between Ross and Greg. The only surprises from the men came when an actor chose a different monologue than I expected them to. There were many actors who handled the monologues well; however, I was surprised by the number of people who forgot their

lines and asked to restart. Either they were ill-prepared, or they panicked. I tried to give everyone the benefit of the doubt, though it was quite evident that some actors did not prepare at all which disappointed me. On the whole I was pleased with the auditions, but I had hoped the students would have been more prepared and confident.

Callbacks were held the day after the initial auditions. This is probably the most important time in the audition process because callbacks allow the director more personal time with the auditioners. The director can give actors direction in order to see if they are able to communicate with the director and able to make different choices. Deciding not to limit myself, I chose to have a large callback. I called back ten women for two roles and fifteen men for five roles. The stage manager and assistant stage manager were stationed outside of the theatre, in charge of distributing scenes and organizing the actors into their groups. The first activity at callbacks was a word association game; I said a word and the actors were asked to say the first thing that came to mind. I was less interested in what they said than their ability to think on their feet without embarrassment or hesitation. I chose to do the exercise because I knew that open and honest conversation would be important in the rehearsal process. Though I feel the exercise was beneficial because it started the audition in a creative way, it did not directly affect my casting choices. I feel it was a good use of time because it began the evening on a positive note.

Callbacks were organized according to character in order to use everyone's time wisely. Though the stage managers and I were very organized, I felt the time rushed by too quickly. Even though I wanted to give each actor ample time and attention, I felt that I did not get to read everyone as much as I would have liked. I wanted to make sure I

was making the right decisions. Many of the actors were performing very well and making bold choices, which made my decisions that much more difficult. Perhaps I had too many people in callbacks for the time allotted. In the future I need to consider the amount of time I need more realistically. After callbacks, I made a few final casting choices, but felt that I needed some additional time with a few of the actors.

Instead of rushing myself into a decision, I decided to have five actors come read for me one last time. I read two women for Sarah, two for Ross, and one for Greg. Since I did not get the chance to read one of the Ross' with either woman in the initial audition, I wanted to see how each pair would communicate with each other. I was trying to find two actors that looked good together physically, but communicated in strictly platonic way. I had the actors read from the script as I looked and listened closely to their chemistry. I was also interested in how the actors would communicate and contribute to conversation in rehearsal. There was only one actress with whom I chose to have a private conversation with. I asked her how she felt about the ideas of racism in the play and how racism had affected her life, if at all. In this conversation, the actress held herself very well and spoke openly and articulately about a relationship in her life. This discussion eased any doubts I may have had about her ability to engage her real life experiences openly as part of the artistic process. I was ready to cast the leads. The second callback for Greg was quick. The purpose of this reading was to confirm my decision. I had decided that I needed to read him one more time since he had to leave the initial audition early. This final callback gave me complete peace of mind, and I was ready to make all my decisions. After getting approval from the entire theatre faculty, I was able to post the cast list and move the process on to its next stage.

Casting

During the audition and casting process I was lucky to have a trusted professor at my side to serve as a sounding board. In the end, all the decisions were my own, but I was very happy to have somebody to give advice and listen. The easiest role to cast was Patrick, the Nuyorican student at Belmont College. In my eyes there was one actor who stood out from the others and who delivered an outstanding audition. This actor had the right energy and charisma and his relaxed delivery and natural style was ideal for Patrick. Of course, there is never a “perfect” actor for any role. Any casting choice carries with it the understanding of work that must be done to get to the desired performance. When casting, I was aware of the challenges that would face each actor. With Patrick, the challenge would be capturing his pride and connection to his ethnicity. I was afraid that the actor’s natural acting style might overwhelm Patrick’s passionate personality. Mr. Meyers was also a character that I was able to cast easily. Though there are many ways this character could be played, I decided that what was most important for Meyers was a nurturing and calm disposition that was neither over or underplayed. In the end I cast an actor whose disposition and acting style would lend itself to both the character and the rehearsal process in general. This actor’s challenge would be playing Meyers’ age and the wisdom that comes with experience.

The next characters to cast were the oldest characters in the play, Dean Burton Strauss and Dean Catherine Kenney, and given that the actors are all college-aged, casting these older characters was a challenge. Age make-up and costuming can help, but the maturity and sense of authority these characters must project became my focus. I was looking for actors who could play unlikable characters without making them caricatures.

In the end, I felt very confident that I found two actors who would not only look good as a pair, but bring the characters to life realistically and truthfully. Not overplaying the character's flaws would be their challenge. With these characters slated out, I turned next to college student Greg Sullivan. This character was one of the most difficult to cast because Greg is the most like the college-aged men at Baylor. Greg is a rich fraternity boy, but he also shows a softer, more vulnerable side. Though I did not cast an actual fraternity boy, I was sure he would be able to play both sides effectively. I had some concern about the actor's vocal quality, but knew that he was aware of the problem and was already working on it.

Sarah Daniels is a highly desirable role; it carries a lot of responsibility and requires a lot of work, as well as memorization. In fact, the role can make or break the performance. The play records Sarah's journey as she wades through her internal vault of racial guilt and suspicion. It was important to me that I cast an actress who would be able to communicate openly and effectively and be eager and willing to do the work the role requires. For the play to work, the audience must buy into her journey, like her, but also be disappointed in her, and also find a bit of themselves in her. Obviously, the leading roles were the most difficult to cast. Ross and Sarah lead the cast and must have the right chemistry. Like Belmont, they look good on the outside, but on the inside, something just does not work. I had to make some hard decisions, but I am positive that I made the right choices. The actors cast as Ross and Sarah were two strong-willed, hard working actors with whom I felt very comfortable working. Their special challenges would be memorization and commitment to their character's journey.

As a director it is very important to work with people who are dedicated to creating something important, not just getting something on their resume. I wanted actors who would be academically challenged by the play and able to verbally and artistically respond to the play. I cast actors who would create a positive group dynamic and participate actively in the process.

Actor Preparation

Casting the show four months in advance gave me a special opportunity to engage the actors in plenty of pre-production preparation. I knew that the four-week rehearsal period would fly by and that the actors' schedules would be busy once classes began in the fall semester. The extra time over the summer would allow for character analysis and discussion to take place before the first rehearsal. From the beginning I wanted the entire process to be a special learning experiment in artistic and academic collaboration; I wanted the process to be filled with activity and discussion.

The first read-through took place on Sunday, May 6, 2007 in the Mabee Theatre. The reading was exciting because it was the first time I heard the entire play aloud; it gave us all a taste of what was to come. Before we began the read-through, we discussed the rehearsal schedule and filled out the stage manager's information sheets. I spoke to the cast about my goal to make the rehearsal process a unique, engaging process and an experience befitting the academic environment of the play. I hoped that they would be willing to immerse themselves into the world of the play by participating in assignments related to the play. I then explained that I expected the cast to accomplish four pre-production assignments over the coming summer holiday.

In an attempt to save a lot of precious time, I asked the cast to be almost completely off book by the first week of rehearsal. If the actors memorized their lines before rehearsals, more time could be spent on character. Both Ross and Sarah would have a great deal to memorize and an early start would ease the pressure that would face them later in the process. The second assignment was to begin a character analysis. I wanted the cast to formulate a background for their characters. Gilman does not give many details about her characters' personal lives; instead, it is left up to the actor and director to fill in the blanks. I was aiming for three-dimensional portrayals, and this would be achieved through an in-depth character analysis. The actors were instructed to begin thinking about their character's life, background, and motivation.

Later in the summer I met with each actor to discuss their character at length. I brought character analysis worksheets with me which we used to discuss various aspects of the character's life and background. The worksheets were a fill-in-the-blank format asking for information about the character's physical appearance, personality, relationships, actions, motivations, and idiosyncrasies. I also left pages for a character collage and favorite quotes. (Appendix A) We touched upon the most important questions and I told them to finish the rest on their own, encouraging them to put as much on paper as possible. These meetings were meant to save a lot of rehearsal time by creating a working language for each character that could be used in rehearsal. Once we were in rehearsal we could spend less time on given circumstance and more on action and motivation. Each actor that I was able to meet with seemed to appreciate the one-on-one time. I was pleasantly surprised by their already articulate and astute ideas about their characters and the play.

The third assignment was to read and think about the digital slide presentation I would send them later in the summer. As part of my own process, I like to create and present information about the play and playwright to the cast. This gives the actor additional information about the play as well as the academic and visual concept I want to achieve. In July I sent the actors a presentation, giving them basic information about Gilman's life and career, common themes in her work, and style. I also condensed the information about each character that the actors and I discussed during their one-on-one meetings. Finally, the presentation included pictures of Vermont, Middlebury College, and other images the play brought to mind. My hope was that the slides would inform the cast but also get them excited about starting rehearsal.

The last assignment, requiring a more creative response from the actors, would be due at our first rehearsal. During that first meeting, I would host a salon where each actor would need to present an artistic response to the play. Their piece of art could take any form (song, poem, painting, photography, etc.); the only requirement was that it be inspired by the play. My hope for this assignment was to get the actors to think abstractly about the play's themes and ideas. After explaining their summer homework, I led a short warm-up and we read through the entire play. I was very encouraged; the cast was already finding a lot of humor in the script, and I was already dreaming up ideas for staging and character choices. A positive group dynamic was already forming.

Actor preparation can be a useful tool for a director because it can set a positive tone for the rest of the rehearsal process. It can save time and encourage actors to become active in the process. I do not like to work with lazy actors and I am truly impressed by the amount of work and thinking that was done by these actors. They

inspired me a great deal by their commitment to their characters early on, and I feel that this period of preparation resulted in seven three-dimensional characters portrayed by seven hard-working actors who understood the world of the play and created a well-reasoned inner life for their characters.

Rehearsals

Every rehearsal process is a unique experiment in creation. Every day is one step towards the larger goal in the production process. From start to finish, the rehearsal process for *Spinning Into Butter* was an amazing collaborative experience; I felt a lot was accomplished in such a short amount of time. We were given just a little over four weeks of rehearsal, starting August 16, 2007, and culminating in the first performance on September 18, 2007. The time we were given was adequate, but only because of the work that was done prior to rehearsals and the dedication on the part of everyone involved.

Salon and Artistic Response

As part of a complete and full experience, I decided to integrate art into the rehearsal process. This was not something new to my directing style; I have always had actors draw and react creatively to their characters. I feel it has always helped actors think creatively, develop new ways of discussing character, as well as adding variety to rehearsals. Analogues are a way to express a character through drawing and personal expression. They are an analytical tool developed by Philip Kinen, my high school theatre teacher, who first taught me to think outside of the box. An analogue is a visual description of a character, play, emotion, etc., drawn on paper using color and line only.

The only rule is that no symbols or words can be used. These analogues are then explained by each actor which usually results in an interesting examination of a character's personality, objectives, desires, and fears. (Appendix B) As a director, I am always looking for new ways for actors to explore character, and I have found that art can be a positive medium of expression.

I led two artistic exercises during the first week of rehearsal which I feel helped create an open and creative learning and performing environment. The first was during our first rehearsal on August 16, 2007. Since *Spinning Into Butter* has some discussion about art, more specifically, outsider art, I decided that this could be a fun project for the actors. During this rehearsal I gave each actor a large piece of brown paper and a plethora of art supplies and let them express their character through art. Right away they went to work with the finger paints; they created art as we discussed questions about the play. It was a unique experience for both the actors and me. The results were amazing. Each actor took their turn explaining their art and was met with interest and praise as creativity and ideas sprang from each artist's mind and mouth. I found it both eye opening and educational to see the different ways the actor connected to their character. Some focused on one aspect of their character while others thought of their character amongst the backdrop of the entire play. Either was helpful and both created a vocabulary from which improved character development occurred. (Appendix C)

The second artistic activity took place during the second rehearsal. Just like Ross does in the play, I hosted a salon at rehearsal. Breakfast food and beverage was served as we talked and socialized. After relaxed mingling, I gathered everyone in a semi-circle and asked that each actor share their artistic response to the play that I assigned at the

first read-through. Each response was unique, communicative, and moving in its own way. Two actors read monologues from other plays, one sang a song and played guitar, one shared a photograph he took, and one actor made a sculpture. Using canvas as their medium, one actor made a collage, and one created a painting. (Appendix D) After seeing their work and hearing about how the play inspired them I was confident that this approach to analysis works because it leads to an interesting and deepened understanding of the play. We ended the salon with a creative writing assignment. I asked the actors to write at least one haiku inspired by the play. One of my favorites reads:

Blindly pursuing
Forever running circles
Rules, bulleted lists

This poetry brought some laughter and some interesting and concise ways to talk about the play. The salon was moving, fun, intellectually stimulating and a great team building activity.

Warm-Ups, Games and Activities

During warm-ups, actors are asked to ready their body, voice and mind. As part of a complete and collaborative rehearsal process, warm-ups can become a time for fun team building while at the same time getting actors alert and physically ready for rehearsals. I have always believed that a consistent warm-up routine in rehearsals can improve and fortify the final performance product by bringing the artists closer together as a group. It is up to the director to maintain a sense of order while allowing the actors to have fun as well. In early rehearsals, I led warm-ups to establish a sense of order and give an example of the exercises I find most useful. The actors then took turns leading the warm-up, deciding which activities to lead that day. Warm-ups consisted of four

parts: a stretching, body warm-up, a facial and vocal warm-up, games as an energy warm-up and concentration. Most days were full of fun and energy as we rotated through a variety of warm-up activities. I gave the actors a lot of freedom, which sometimes led to chaos, but I quickly got everyone back on task. Overall, warm-ups were an excellent use of time and established a daily routine.

After warm-ups I sometimes led group activities. To keep rehearsals interesting, I try to incorporate activities that would not only get the actors thinking creatively, but also help them understand the play's themes, ideas, and action. Three activities were particularly helpful in rehearsal. During the first working rehearsal, I chose to meet with the entire cast for a short discussion over the ideas and images in the two scenes we were going to work that day. I taped two large sheets of paper on the floor labeled Scene 1 and Scene 2 and surrounded the paper with colored markers. I asked the actors to write key words or any ideas that came to mind that related to each scene. We then discussed the words and ideas that were written before moving on to rehearsing on our feet. I felt it was very beneficial to talk about the scene directly before working it because the ideas would be fresh in our minds. The activity was also a useful, visual way of learning and exploring the plays themes and characters. Including the entire cast in the discussion, even those who were not in the scene, was a deliberate choice relating to my creative vision of building a collaborative and unique rehearsal process. Each character builds the world of the play just as each scene does. We did the same activity with the last scene in the play and again discussed the ideas before working. We also discussed the differences between the first lists and the last. It was very interesting to see that the words in the first scene were more technical and those in the last were emotional. The words on the Act

One, scene one list included: scholarship, ethnicity, background, disclosure, culturally sensitive, \$12,000, designated, and minority. Words appearing on the paper for the last scene in the play included: sorry, disappointed, energized, scared, group hug, and spirit. This obvious difference in tone demonstrated the play's world of academia transformed by very real, life-changing events. The characters' journeys were highlighted by Gilman's shift in tone and dialogue.

During rehearsals, I also found it useful to conduct original acting exercises. The first was used as an exercise to increase awareness of tension and intent. After a week of rehearsal I felt that the opening scene lacked energy and the relationship between the characters was unclear. The fault was not the actor's, however, because they were doing everything I was asking. I was finding it difficult to explain the energy and the tension in the scene. I wanted Sarah to be both confident and nervous at the same time. She is an authority figure, but also wants to be seen as "hip" and "cool." The audience must believe that she has a desire to help the students and the capability to do so. Sarah must feel comfortable in the space but uncomfortable with Patrick. She wades through quicksand, careful not to offend or say the wrong thing. These dual actions were difficult to achieve; the actress needed to appear confident on the outside, while nervous on the inside.

In order to get this response I brought a dozen eggs to rehearsal. At first the cast was worried, wondering how I would use them. I used my knowledge of the actors' dispositions to achieve my goal. I asked the actors playing Sarah and Patrick to stand close and face each other. I handed one of them an egg and asked them to begin the scene. As I began to feel tension rising in the scene I asked the actors to take a small step

away from each other. By the end of the scene they had to toss the egg across the stage. The egg represented the fragility of the conversation. Sarah does not know how Patrick will react to the idea of the scholarship, so she forms her words with great care. The actor playing Sarah had to take care in tossing the egg to the actor playing Patrick in order to protect her words and intentions. Sarah has to maintain composure with Patrick. Knowing that the actor playing Patrick would have no hesitation throwing the egg and the actress playing Sarah would be nervous in the situation helped me as a director. As they tossed the egg, I noticed a great deal of shakiness in Sarah's voice. I asked her to stand with better posture in order to project her authority as she kept the egg (the intention) in control. The mixture of her controlled posture and her shaky voice projected the right energy for the scene. As they continued, I saw and heard the intention of their words shift. By the end of the exercise all three of us had a better understanding of the scene and how the dynamic between the characters should work. When something as simple as tossing an egg between actors can give a greater sense of intent between characters it can become an unforgettable learning experience for all involved.

Another activity in rehearsal involved another prop. This time I used rope in a tug of war game to illustrate relationship and intention at the same time. Kenney and Sarah constantly engage in a power struggle. They are both strong women in high positions in the academic hierarchy. Whenever Kenney enters Sarah's domain she wants to prove her authority. Sarah also wants to hold her ground. Many of their conversations seem to shift back and forth between gaining and matching authority. In order to illustrate this I decided to have Sarah and Kenney play tug-o-war. I asked the actresses to stand a few feet apart with a rope held between them. As they delivered their lines they would pull

the rope between them as they felt the need to overpower the other, until ultimately the tension between the two was so great that one of them had to win. Though this exercise tired them more than the egg exercise, making the vocal quality unrealistic, it gave the two actors a physical and visual understanding of the tension, power, and energy that fluctuated in their scenes together. Both the egg and rope exercises were interesting ways to invigorate rehearsal and they also gave us a greater understanding of character and objective.

Staging

Staging, or blocking a play, is one of the most difficult parts of the rehearsal process. There is not one fail-safe way to stage a play because each play requires something different, and each actor responds differently to a director's method of blocking. Some directors take total control, mapping out the actors each and every move, while some give total control to the actors, allowing them to move wherever they please. Some directors mix the two, trying to achieve a very organic, but controlled use of space. I feel that it is important for a director to understand the needs of both the actors and the script when deciding what method of staging to employ in rehearsal. While some actors like to have freedom to make choices, others feel more comfortable being told when and where to move. A director's job is not only to use blocking to help tell the story and emphasize character relationship, create stage pictures, find motivated movement, but also to use methods that save time and create a good working environment for the actors and stage managers.

I prefer to prepare a rough blocking plan before rehearsals begin, but I go into the process knowing that what I originally plan will probably not end up being the final

product. My pre-blocked, scored script is only a jumping off point for the actors and myself to build upon. I knew going into *Spinning Into Butter* that blocking would be difficult because of the natural nature of the script and its realistic environment. The initial groundplan provided a great starting point which had both benefits and challenges. I had asked the set designer for multiple playing areas in order to create a variety of blocking choices, and to fill the large stage. When pre-planning, I found it difficult to create motivated movement in an office space where normally little movement takes place. An office is usually a very dead space where people sit, work and talk. Keeping the actors moving, and moving naturally would be the biggest challenge in rehearsal. In the end, I found it was, in fact, very difficult to create motivated, natural movement when I told the actors where and when to move. We were the most productive when I gave the actors a basic idea of where conversations should take place, and let them organically find the movement.

I was lucky to have very competent, confident and creative actors who were not uncomfortable finding their own movement. Working together, we found a way of working that used the space well and appeared natural. Overall, I feel the blocking was realistic and natural and at the same time had variety. Though I started with a plan, I did not always follow it. Many unexpected things can happen in rehearsal as the play develops; the director and actors find out how the play works and what makes it work better. In retrospect, I should have given more responsibility to the actors from the beginning, allowing them even more time to explore the space because I knew they could handle it. As a director it is important to find a middle ground where you are prepared, but also flexible.

Originally, the groundplan consisted of three major acting areas: downstage right, downstage left and upstage left. These three areas helped create many triangular pictures, which is always visually interesting. However, the large empty space centerstage started to become a problem. Actors began to drift either very close to one another, or very far away from each other. These pictures looked unnatural and awkward. Also, the furniture placement was creating a flat picture, almost as if the play was being set on a proscenium. To solve this, a fourth acting area was added far downstage, making the set more dimensional and the movement more natural. The action was brought downstage, towards the audience, creating more intimate moments. We also moved some of the furniture in towards the center and added a second chair to the desk. This filled the vacuum, and gave the actors more obstacles to encounter.

My goal in staging *Spinning Into Butter* was to create a very natural environment with realistic movement, but also to create variety, using levels and distance, highlighting relationship, and heightening the most dramatic moments. This was a very unusual staging experience for me because I have typically chosen to work on stages that are non-literal or abstracted in some way. In a realistic environment with a lot of furniture, I almost felt that there were too many staging options. At times, I feel I might have created more movement than was necessary. There were, however, many opportunities that the set afforded; the window seat, table, and desk allowed for both professional and casual moments, created obstacles for the characters and let us experiment with a variety of levels.

Entrances and exits never were a mystery because there was only one door in and out of the set. However, special attention had to be made to how the actors entered the

space, how they knocked on the door, and from which direction to the come and go. Some of the action even took place in and outside of the doorframe as the characters were exiting. It was important to me that the space be used in any and all ways possible in order to create a variety of interesting pictures and make sure each character had their own relationship to the space. I talked to each character about how they feel in the space, how they treat the office, and what sense of authority they have over the space. For instance, Sarah has the most personal attachment to the space, while Greg is the most uncomfortable in a space of an authority figure. Each of these attitudes towards the space dictated the character's movement in the space, and enhanced characterization.

Transitions

I feel that it is necessary to have a brief discussion about our handling of a device that is commonly used in Gilman's plays and probably always a source of stress for any director. Gilman, as I have discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, uses a common blueprint for many of her plays, two acts with multiple scenes, ranging in length from one page of dialogue to twenty. The length of each scene varies as does the time elapsed between them. The need for props to be shifted and actors to exit or enter during the transitions varies. At times nobody leaves the stage from one scene to another, but the time of day changes, and at other times everybody leaves the stage, and re-enters days later. As a director, I was nervous about how these transitions could be seamlessly integrated into the action of the play. I was concerned that the breaks in time and dialogue would interrupt the rhythm of the show and appear out of place. From the beginning I was constantly mapping out how the transitions could continue the plays action between each of Gilman's fourteen scenes. To solve this structural issue, I paid a

great deal of attention in rehearsals to the staging of the transition moments. In the end, the production had a quality of precision and choreography while staying very simple and realistic. I never meant for the transitions to be as interesting to watch as they became. An audience member even referred to the transitions as a “coffee cup ballet.”

Early in the rehearsal process a professor discussed with me the importance of Sarah’s office in relation to her position of authority. This discussion not only got me thinking about Sarah’s characterization, her movement within her own personal space, but how important the door actually is to the space. To begin addressing the transitions, I took special care to write out complete door choreography, without looking at Gilman’s written stage directions. There were discrepancies in the script as to when the door needed to stay open and when it should have been closed, so I decided to start from scratch, only considering the need for privacy and authority onstage. Whenever Sarah was not in her own office, the door needed to stay open, unless one of her colleagues was trying to snoop or hide something. The door needed to stay open when students were meeting with the Dean, unless Sarah was trying to keep the conversation private, and the door was closed during private discussions about Simon and the university. When we began to pay special attention to the use of the door, the aspect of privacy, authority, and how people moved and felt in Sarah’s domain was highlighted in rehearsal. They also began to treat the space differently. Both Kenney and Strauss wanted to break rules of decorum, while Greg and Patrick seemed aware of how they should act around an authority figure. Attitude and movement were altered by the mere presence of an open or closed door.

The transitions needed to continue the action between scenes. The dialogue ending one scene would swiftly be followed by a shift in light and a music cue, while the actors exited, reacted to the moment, or continued in character to their place for the next scene. Some characters needed to exit while others needed to enter. Quite often in the show, Sarah needed to exit the stage for a costume change. These lapses in time were the most difficult to cover because the action onstage needed to continue both the mood of the previous scene and segue into the next scene. During transitions, actors were told to stay in character, to interact with each other when possible. This stage business included drinking coffee, moving and sorting, cleaning, or straightening pictures. I left the business up to the actor but instructed them to stay in character while quickly moving to places for the next scene.

The “coffee cup ballet” as one audience member put it, I suppose just occurred out of necessity to move dirty cups offstage and new ones onstage. It also added business and added a very real aspect of life in academia. All of the professors enjoyed a cup of coffee onstage, and the addition of the water cooler and candy dish gave variety to the blocking and stage business. Also, the actors were able to create personal nuances, defining their characters’ personal tastes, likes and dislikes. For example, Kenney disliked the taste of both the coffee and the mints in Sarah’s office, she prefers her own, and Strauss takes both whatever he can get, and what he should not have. Strauss finds himself not only drooling over Sarah’s lunch, but sneaking into her office to steal some of his favorite treat, or listening into her telephone conversation while enjoying a peppermint.

The final element to be added to the transitions came during the last dress rehearsal. There were two transitions that were taking too long due to a costume change for Sarah backstage. Sarah was the first person to enter the scene but nothing was happening onstage while she changed. The stage, though painted in beautiful light, was stagnant and uninteresting. It was suggested by one of my mentors that the time be filled by stage business. One of these moments actually became one of the biggest laughs in the play. While Sarah left her office Strauss entered casually, acting as if he might be waiting for Sarah to return. His thoughts then turned towards the candy left sitting in a dish only a few feet away from him. Once he got what he came for, he casually walked out of the office. This moment was priceless; the actor gently underplayed the humor while filling the necessary time for Sarah to change and have a moment to rest.

The second hole in the action was filled by Mr. Meyers. He entered the office, looking for Sarah, and left a note for her when he found the office empty. After the first performance I re-thought this stage business. During the intermission for the performance I overheard an audience member commenting on the note that Meyers left for Sarah, wondering what it would reveal later in the show. Little did they know it was not in the script and they would never find out what it said. The moment was playing very mysteriously when I just wanted it to be a light filler moment. Instead Meyers came in and left a form on her desk. The moment became more work-related and relaxed. These two moments polished the transitions and added personal touches to the production. There is little I would change about the transitions. If anything, I would add more character interaction and additional specific character business.

Technical Rehearsals

Technical rehearsals are a vital part of the production process because it is the time for all technical aspects of the production to step into the forefront and for the stage manager to become comfortable calling the cues in the production. During technical rehearsals the stage manager takes the primary leadership role and the director starts to let go. Though it can be difficult to release authority, I felt very confident in the abilities of my stage manager and knew that she would handle the tech rehearsals with no problem at all.

The first technical rehearsal, called paper tech, is a time for organization between the director, designers, stage managers, their cue sheets and prompt books. Cues are established and written into prompt books, though they may change during later tech rehearsals. Depending on how many cues a production has, dry tech can take some time, but given that this play has little technical needs, dry tech was very brief. The next stage in technical rehearsals is the dry tech, which also occurs without actors. Dry tech is a vital time for the stage manager because they must begin to call the cues correctly, finding the right order and timing. It is also very important to the director because it is usually the first time she hears the music and sees the lights in the space. Final approvals are given, though some adjustments can still be made. Dry tech also went very smoothly. I was very impressed by the lighting design, but had to ask for some adjustments in the sound design. The order of cues was practiced, and most importantly, the transition cues were finally established.

The next stage is usually the most time consuming phase of technical rehearsals. However, I feel that technical rehearsals for this production were unusually short and

painless. Adding the actors finalizes the tech rehearsals, giving everyone a clear picture of the final product. The actors, crew members and stage managers were able to run the show from beginning to end with few stops. Early in the tech rehearsal process, I decided to cut the chapel bell chimes, which left the only sound cues between scenes. All major light shifts took place between scenes as well. Therefore, the transitions became vital to the running of the show. There were a few errors in timing during technical rehearsal, but all issues were perfected with a little practice. The stage manager did a wonderful job of calling the show and using time well. We managed to have two tech run-throughs and practice all costume quick changes before dress rehearsals began.

If I could do anything differently in techs, I would have made sure that the lighting designer had more of my attention. I spent a lot of time dealing with sound issues, finding music and discussing choices with the designer. During this time, I gave quick responses to the lighting designer, and then returned my focus to sound. I could have multi-tasked in a more productive manner and made sure each design element had enough of my verbal approval and attention.

Dress Rehearsals

Dress rehearsals begin the day after technical rehearsals end. Hopefully, all technical problems will have been resolved, allowing costumes to be the primary focus of dress rehearsal. This is a magical time where characters finally come to life as they perform in their costume for the first time. Actors are able to transform into their characters and take all the final steps in their performance. At the same time, the director must be aware of any changes in an actor's performance. The director does not want an

actor to change his/her performance drastically so close to performance. The dress rehearsal should be treated as if it were a performance, without stop or interruption.

In addition to focusing on the performances of the actors, I was also focusing on the execution of the transitions. The transitions were vital to the overall pace of the show and I wanted them to flow seamlessly into the action of the play. There were a few minor timing issues, late cues and slow quick changes during dress rehearsal, but nothing I was too worried about. I also received some good suggestions from my graduate mentor in order to make a few of the transitions consistent and interesting to watch. After the first dress rehearsal, we added two short character entrances to cover costume changes. One of these transition fillers ended up being one of the biggest laughs in the show. Sometimes last minute additions can be lifesavers.

As dress rehearsals came to a close, I became very confident in the final product. The actors looked comfortable in their costumes and confident in their performance. Last minute fixes to the lights, sound and set were made as the last tickets were sold. Everyone in the company was ready and anticipating audience response. By the end of the entire rehearsal process, from day one to final dress, we had become a cohesive team of artists that were united by a common goal. The rehearsal process had finally come to a close; we were ready for opening night.

Performance

Spinning Into Butter opened to a sold out house on Tuesday, September 18, 2007 at 7:30 pm in the Mabey theatre at Baylor University. I attended this production on my own and sat amongst the very student-dominated audience. It was a very surreal experience to watch the audience watch the play. Mostly, I felt odd because nobody

knew who I was and I tried not to listen in to everyone's conversations during intermission and after the show. The first performance is always an interesting experience for the director. It is the day you officially have to let go of the show and allow everyone else to take over.

Each audience reacted differently and emanated its own energy, but I felt that each performance got better and better. The actors, though surprised by some of the unexpected laughter from the audience, became more comfortable and confident as the week continued. They kept the humor fresh and exciting; their performances were consistent and exciting. I attended every performance, and though I saw a few very minor changes, they only improved the performance. Audience response was overwhelmingly positive and I was hopeful that the play would spark a dialogue amongst the audience in Waco.

Conclusion

Spinning Into Butter ran for seven sold out performances and one very full extra matinee performance, closing on September 24, 2007. The sell out success can be contributed to the efforts of the marketing team and the show's interesting and controversial themes. I feel it was an important play to present in Waco and that it was a catalyst to many discussions, both public and private. This process of creation was life-changing for me, and, perhaps, led to some eye-opening moments for the audience. Though it might be difficult to look back and think anything but positive thoughts, it is important for a director to critically examine their process in order to objectively find error and ways to improve. The final chapter of this thesis will outline my personal critique and examination of the production.

CHAPTER FIVE

Self-Analysis

The success of a director can be measured in two ways, by the process and by the product. Often a process can be great, but the product can be poor. A terrible process can yield a great performance. During my education at Baylor I have honed my skills as a director, developing a personal style and way of communicating with actors.

Previously, as a graduate student I have been encouraged to experiment, take risks and concentrate on developing my skills in rehearsal, with less focus on product. However, as I entered the final year in the graduate program, I knew the bar needed to be raised. Tickets would be sold and audience members would expect a high level of professionalism from a mainstage production. Going into the project, I was comfortable with my level of knowledge about the play and my skills working with actors. I was, however, nervous about creating a finished product, with actors, designers, professors and audience members depending on my leadership and vision.

It is a challenge for directors to critically examine their own work because it is difficult to separate process from product. Directors become emotionally attached to not only the script and the actors, but also to the process that led them through from the first reading to the first performance. As a director, I know I often become so caught up in rehearsals that I cannot take a step back and view the work critically. I have always been a believer in the process of creating theatre; if you have a great method of working you will have a great product. Though I know this is not always the case, process can be just as important as product. A director can learn a great deal from critically examining the

product in order to improve and grow as a director so that next time, perhaps the process, and therefore, the product can improve as well. Reflecting upon this production of *Spinning Into Butter* will enable me to locate my strengths and weaknesses as a director.

If my main goal in production was to get people thinking and to begin private dialogues about sensitive social issues, then the production was successful. The greatest strengths of the production were the pacing, the acting and the overall use of humor and dialogue. The visual aspects, the set and the lighting complemented the script and enhanced the overall mood and environment. The performances of the actors were very strong but could have benefited from more vocal and physical coaching. The sound design would be the only element that I felt was not up to the level of the other aspects of production. It did have the overall feel that I wanted, but it could have been executed more cleanly and with a stronger complement to mood and tension. The remainder of this chapter will examine in more detail all aspects of this production, from the visual to performance. Through this critique I hope to focus on product as well as process.

Design

Effective communication with designers is essential in the directorial process. Directors must clearly explain their vision but not take away the designer's creativity. In the case of *Spinning Into Butter*, I was able to express a clear vision for the production while allowing the designers the freedom to express theirs as well. When talking about the overall effectiveness of each area of design, I will discuss both my process of working with the designers and the final product itself. The overall strength of the production design was its unified, pristine, and clean appearance. The area in which I could have

improved was voicing my concerns and communicating more decisively with designers during technical rehearsals.

Lighting

I am first to admit that my knowledge of stage lighting is very limited. I can, however, discuss color, mood and visibility. What is most important to me as a director when it comes to lighting is that the actors' faces are properly lit. I know from experience that a lot is lost if you cannot see the actors' lips and facial expressions. Though it is important for a stage to create atmosphere and look aesthetically pleasing, the most important aspect of stage lighting for me as a director is general illumination. In this production both were achieved.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, the initial communication between the lighting designer and me was via telephone. Though I had complete trust in her abilities because I had worked with her before, I felt a little nervous that I never got to speak one-on-one with her during the design process. The designer had worked hard to overcome this obstacle by sending pictures and digital slide presentations to share with the team while she explained them via speakerphone. While our communication was adequate, I could have made more of an effort to be sure she had enough information and more of my attention. I also was never very clear about what I wanted for transitions, mainly because I did not know myself. I wanted to wait until the rehearsal process was underway. This might have been beneficial to me as the director, but it did not allow her to work them into her initial planning.

I was extremely pleased with the overall look of the lighting. It created atmosphere and showed time change, as well as helped create smooth transitions between

scenes while giving a great deal of visual interest. Using a variety of lighting sources, the designer created both natural, realistic looks as well as accenting the unrealistic aspects of the set. I loved the practical lighting, the sconces on the wall, the desk lamp and the hanging lamp above the stage, which together created a very multi-dimensional space. Subtle changes in intensity indicated the time of day, and were especially apparent in the nighttime scenes which had a bluish, darker glow. She accented the leaves with additional patterned gobos which shone on the stage to create more texture and depth. In a design that I thought would be limiting, the designer made complex choices. She took in account the different sources of light, from natural, to fluorescent to incandescent, to adding artistic elements.

Lighting can be a director's best friend when it can establish rhythm and help pacing. As soon as I decided that blackouts would disrupt the flow of the play, the designer suggested transitions that would sculpt the stage, making it visually interesting, and shifts of light that would signal a scene change to the audience. Each transition was similar in that the cues were called in the same order, but the designer played with different looks for each transition. During each transition, lights would lower in intensity as the actors would shift props, or exit. Once actors were set for the next scene, the lights would rise to full intensity. The smooth change in lighting was not jarring; the audience knew where the scene was starting and ending. The transitions were a great time for the designer to play with many different looks and pictures. Beautiful pictures were created using the window. Light shone through, painting a shadow on the floor which was a point of visual interest. There is little to no criticism I could give to the lighting designer.

Despite some initial lapses in communication, the relationship was open and collaborative, which led to beautiful work. (Appendix E)

Costumes

The costumes were exactly as they should have been. They were contemporary, fit each character's personal style, complemented the set, and most of all, felt natural. They did not distract from any acting moments, and allowed the actors to flawlessly transition from their own street clothes to their characters'. The designer took great care in creating a distinct look for each character with justifications for each choice. Early in the process I had emphasized the fact that the costumes needed to look expensive, crisp, and neat. I was pleased that the designer was able to find items that complemented the upper class feeling of Belmont. The initial drawings were helpful in discussing the overall look of each character and I was able to communicate with the designer based off of these drawings. It was also helpful to go shopping with the designer when I could because it allowed for collaboration. I was able to give input and the designer was able to ask specific questions about my vision of the characters.

The only aspect of the final costuming that I would want to change was the execution of the pieces built especially for the show. It was apparent which costumes were built and which were bought. Of course there are always time restraints, but there was ample time to build the few costume pieces that were constructed. The designs were nice but the finishing was sloppy. Some seams puckered and the hems were visible to the audience. The construction distracted from the pristine look I was trying to achieve. This is only a minor detail, however; the costumes were entirely appropriate and beautiful. They not only indicated time, place, and season, but each character's

personality and style, and in one case, symbolically depicted a character's role amongst her peers.

Early in the process I had discussed Sarah's sense of fashion with the designer. Though I wanted Sarah to be mature and well-covered, I wanted her to stand out from her colleagues. She is not a New Englander like Kenney, Strauss and Ross; she has not assimilated to the New England style. Like her colleagues, her clothing is relatively expensive and nice looking because she is an administrator, but I wanted her to stand out a bit from the others. To achieve this, the designer chose modern color combinations, such as red, black and white. He also chose contemporary fashions such as a high-waisted skirt with a wide belt and many fashionable necklaces. Sarah's modern fashion contrasted with the tweedy and neutral color palette for the other members of the Belmont faculty.

One moment that really demonstrated Sarah as an outsider was in Act One, Scene Two when Sarah announces that Simon Brick has received racist notes at his dorm room. During this scene, Sarah is wearing a modern black suit while the others are dressed in their typical brownish attire. Sarah stands out among the other three faculty members not only in attire, but in her reaction to the situation. The three others leap into a fast-paced discussion about what to do about the incident while Sarah wants to talk to Simon before making any decisions. This shows the audience that early in the play, Sarah is separating herself from the crowd. The designer did a nice job of making Sarah unique in a subtle and creative way. Overall, the designer impressed me with his knowledge of the characters by making design choices that added meaning to the production. (Appendix F)

Set

Walking into the theatre, audience members frequently gasped as they saw the set for the first time. It was crisp, clean, grand and aesthetically pleasing. It was also practical and became a very easy space to sculpt and create great acting moments. From the non-realistic elements that the designer and I discussed, to the very realistic interior of the room, the set added to the entire feeling of the play and created an environment which was rich, elegant and stood in contrast to the ugly words that were uttered within.

I had never worked with a faculty designer before and to be honest, I found it a little intimidating. However, I knew that my intentions were heard and smartly incorporated into a design that enhanced the overall mood of the play. I could have been more vocal about small concerns I had in the actual construction of the set, but I adequately communicated with the set designer. I did not see him very often, except in design meetings and occasionally when I visited the scene shop. When I decided to change the furniture placement during the first rehearsal, I could tell it confused the designer, but I knew the changes and additions to the set would make the space appear more lived-in. I was not very sure that the designer completely liked the changes and additions, but I knew they would improve the play. In retrospect, I could have discussed the changes with the designer, though furniture placement and prop choices are most often the director's.

The overall look of the set was extremely effective and the execution was particularly strong. There were many aspects of the design that I was very happy with. Little about the set changed from the original design and model to the actual product. I knew the overall look would be nice, but it was not until it was complete that I saw and

felt the effect the set had on the production. It was elegant and rich, which gave the actors a space in which to feel important. I was particularly pleased with the arched moldings and the window. The scale was large and regal, giving Sarah a sense of pride in her office and Kenney an air of jealousy. The designer gave me a space where a lot could happen; it was a large space that captured the university's focus on appearance.

My favorite aspects of the design were the floor and the leaves. I liked the idea when we discussed them, but it was not until seeing them in production that I truly felt that they completed the entire look. The floor was well-laid and defined the large space. I was worried at first with creating a wood floor because there is always a danger in making a floor look realistic and well-constructed. It completed the academic, upper-class mood of the Georgian period room. The actors were able to not walk on a stage, but the actual floor of the Dean's office of Belmont University. The floor, as well as the hanging lamp, gave a multi-dimensional feeling to the set.

There is little to nothing I would want to change about the set design of this production. The only frustrations with the set came when we did not have enough leaves and had to order more and almost did not get them in time. I also had a great deal of frustration with the construction of the wall and the door. Up until the second performance, the door never worked properly and the wall would shake when the door was closed with even the smallest of force. I had asked repeatedly for it to be fixed, but the technical director never seemed to completely understand my frustrations. The doorknob was cheap and the door was not made properly, making closing and opening it difficult. The door was vital to the production because so many people came in and out of the office. It was important that the door be slammed in moments of anger and

frustration. The poor construction was frustrating for the actors and me, and could be distracting to audience members. Both the stage manager and I asked for the problems to be addressed multiple times, but we were told that nothing else could be done. The door was finally fixed after the first performance, but the shaking wall continued to be a problem. These things, however, had little to do with the actual design, which was beautiful and memorable. (Appendix G)

Sound

As I have mentioned, the sound design was the most difficult theatrical element in the play. In retrospect, the sound design worked as a whole and contributed to the general atmosphere of the play. It was difficult coming to a compromise with the sound designer because we did not communicate well. Perhaps we both were too confident that the design would fall perfectly into place. I should have heard music earlier in the process, but each time I asked for sound samples I was told that it was too early to actually hear anything. Looking back, I should have been more demanding because I was so unsure of what I actually wanted.

I liked the overall feeling of the music in the show; it was classical, elegant, rich and complemented the Georgian style of the set design. The upper-class feeling exuded by the set and music was set in contrast to the ugly words and situation that occurs in the play. The most successful aspect of the sound design was its ability to blend in with the architecture, while Sarah could not. This mimics the idea that neither Sarah, Simon nor Patrick could ever become a permanent part of the university; they were isolated and felt and unique. Like Sarah admits, they feel as if they can't live up to the architecture.

More time could have been taken to make sure each song fit the mood and energy of the end of the scene. With a bit more time and communication, the designer and I could have found a piece of music that both led the audience out of a scene and into the next. In a way, I might have given up a little in perfecting what I know could have been a better. In the future, I hope to take what I learned from this experience and give more of my time to each design area, and making sure I am entirely comfortable with the end product before letting it go.

Working with Actors

Working with actors is one of my greatest strengths as a director because I build a small community within the theatre. I have always attempted to create open, collaborative environments when working with actors. Actors and directors should develop a special bond in and outside of rehearsals. In an ideal situation they begin to speak the same language. I am glad we spent so much time discussing and analyzing the play and the characters because it helped create mutual understanding and a well-informed performance. Good performances not only come from talented actors, but from a well-informed and well-run rehearsal process. The rehearsal process should be a unique experience; I try to fit the process to the play and to the actors with whom I am working. Being in an educational theatre setting made this a lot easier because I had the advantage of knowing the actors before beginning rehearsals. I will not always be afforded this luxury.

I am confident in my growth as a director here at Baylor. My strengths are shown through my ability to organize, research, and create a feeling of community. I believe in the power of research, analysis and intellectual rigor within each area of production. I

wanted the actors not only to understand their character's place in the world, but the whole world of the play. From the salon, where we discussed the play through artistic mediums, to actual discussion in working rehearsals, the actors gained and contributed a lot of information that not only showed in their performances, but was able to be passed on to others in discussions about the play. I am extremely proud of their ability to discuss the adult themes in the play with such care, concern, and passion for the world we live in.

The areas in which I could have done better were blocking and giving each character enough of my time. As I have mentioned before, blocking was a bit tough for me at first. I had planned to pre-block everything, but when we actually got on the set and had to move some of the furniture around, most of that blocking had to entirely change. I should have trusted the actors a bit more to experiment with blocking from the beginning. It would have saved time and perhaps led to more natural movement patterns.

Looking back, I could have spent more one-on-one time with the actress playing Kenney. I do not say this because her performance was weak, but because she expressed a lack of confidence late in the rehearsal process. I was unaware of her frustration. She improved a great deal in later rehearsals, and I was quite proud of the job she was doing. Kenney is, in my mind, one of the most difficult characters to portray because of her age and her intense commitment to the straight and narrow. In early rehearsals the actress had been overplaying the character, making her slip too far into caricature. I had a difficult time finding a way to tone down the performance. The fault is my own, however, because I was not giving the actress enough of my attention. More one-on-one time could have given her the confidence she needed. Once we communicated more she began to believe in herself, and consequently, her performance solidified.

Acting

Throughout the process each actor had their own specific challenges and strengths. It was my job to guide the cast and encourage them to find not only what defines their character, but also the little things that motivate and drive the action of the play. I was impressed by each actor's skill and satisfied by the level of maturity and commitment that was reflected in their performance. In particular, I was extremely proud of the level of talent that was exhibited by the two leading actors playing Sarah and Ross. On a weaker note, the acting could have benefited from more coaching in voice and movement.

The greatest strengths in the play were the use of dialogue, pacing, and relationship. We found that it was the little things that gave the play a lot more meaning, humor and depth. In performance, the character subtleties were not only amusing but detailed and well-paced. Each actor developed idiosyncrasies that were reflected through stage business. For example, Strauss had a particular interest in the candy in Sarah's office, while Kenney disliked Sarah's taste in refreshments. Sarah liked sugar in her coffee, while Ross did not. These small actions not only gave the actors something to do, but brought detail to their character's personality. In performance, the cast not only appeared committed to their character, but to working as an ensemble. Though many of the actors never appeared onstage together, they felt like a unit. The group dynamic was as positive in performance as it was in rehearsal.

I was especially impressed with the work of the actor playing Sarah. This actress had never acted in a mainstage performance before and, though I cast her with full confidence, she ended up surpassing even my own expectations. To my delight, audience

members repeatedly complemented her dynamic performance. Her understanding of the character was strong, and she had carefully mapped out the character's journey through the play, establishing tempo, emotion, and had clear relationships with each of the other characters. The Act Two monologue makes or breaks the play and I was lucky that she was able to deliver this long speech with great care, honesty and commitment. Ross's performance was just as pleasing. Though his fast-paced dialogue would at times overwhelm him, causing problems with his diction, he was able to capture Ross's energy and passion.

Acting weaknesses came from technical aspects. Movement work can often be forgotten in rehearsal for a contemporary play. So much time was spent on the action and characterization in the play, that little time was spent on the external quality of the acting. I tend to work from the inside out, thinking that if an actor plays the right emotion and objective, then the physicality will come naturally. I spent about an hour in rehearsal one day working on finding organic movement for each character. I asked the actors to explore the movement of their character by performing a short improvised scene. This exercise was helpful, but it was very cursory and did not serve much overall purpose. A bit more attention to how each character moved could have helped create an even more detailed performance. I especially felt that movement could have improved the performances of both Kenney and Sarah. At times, they looked a little lost onstage and awkward in their blocking. There were moments they should have space more and a stronger physicality could have helped this. Sarah also had a series of hand gestures that were repeated throughout the play. I could have worked with her more on being aware of her body language.

Vocal quality could have improved a little as well. As a director it is difficult to keep a critical ear in rehearsal because you practically memorize the script. It can be difficult to pinpoint the areas that are difficult to understand when you know what the actors are saying. There were a few actors who had some diction issues. Some sentences got muddled in the midst of Gilman's fast-paced dialogue, and sometimes an actor's volume was either too high or too low. I could have spent a bit more time with an open, critical ear. Both the movement and vocal quality could have been improved; nevertheless, the actor's performances were still very strong and focused.

I could not have been happier with the cast of *Spinning Into Butter*. Most directors say they had the best and perfect cast, and in this case, I cannot deny that is true. I could not have asked for more. The actors were hard working, intelligent, articulate and committed. Their performances were tight, controlled, humorous and informed. While Gilman left out personal details about the characters, the cast created compelling histories. This helped to achieve seven dynamic performances.

Final Product

As the show was ending each night, I grew nervous. How would the audience react? How could I tell if they enjoyed it? Did they get anything meaningful from the production? I did not know what to think each night as curtain call was ending. There was no standing ovation, or roaring applause, but I suppose this would have been an inappropriate response, given the subject matter. The audience would quickly clear the theatre and exit out of the building in a kind of quiet rush of air. After a few days of this unexpected reaction, a friend gave me a steady and meaningful answer to my visible confusion. He told me that I cannot expect people to overflow with praise; they are still

digesting what they just saw. They are contemplating and examining themselves and still searching for answers to the play's questions. After hearing his comforting analysis of the audience's reaction, I was put at ease. In fact, it was not until the Saturday night performance that the praise began trickling in. I started receiving a great number of complements on not only the quality and acting in the production, but the play's theme and message. People were talking, which was my ultimate goal.

The play discourages the idea of public dialogue, so it was only fitting that the audience leave the theatre very quietly, in order to have their own private discussions when driving home, or the next day in class. I was pleased to hear of many such discussions that took place because of the show. Some of the cast members visited with a drama class from the English department and had a very enlightening and open discussion with them about the play and its themes. I had talked with this group of students after one performance and found their comments to be articulate and eye-opening. It was the first time I got to speak with someone about the play who had studied it as well. One of their observations that struck me the most was how funny they thought the play was. They had read the play, but had not realized its potential for so much humor. We had not openly sought laughter, but in rehearsal we would a lot of humor packed in the script within the dialogue and situation. I was happy that they discovered something new in the play, as we had done in rehearsal.

My goal for this production was to get people engaged in dialogue. Since discussion was my measure of success, then it was an extremely effective performance. The entire cast visited a Theatre Appreciation class, known for its sometimes apathetic and quiet students, and participated in a meaningful exchange of ideas. We were excited

that the students were eager to talk. Some of the students shared their opinions about the play, while others asked the actors about their acting process. One student mentioned that the play encouraged her to admit her own racist tendencies; another student recognized the characters as people in her own life. Watching the students at Baylor connect the themes of the play and make astute observations made the experience worthwhile. While it produced laughter, pity, and disgust, Gilman's play more importantly sparked discussion and debate. It sent audience members home to uncover the racist hidden within; it sent people to the local coffee shop to ponder the dynamics of racism; it made students speak up in class. *Spinning Into Butter* allowed the Baylor audience an opportunity to witness a play that engages the mind more than the heart.

Conclusion

I believe that our personal journeys are made up of a few life changing experiences strung together by many days of trying to live up to those moments. The important lessons you learn will stick with you for a lifetime. Directing *Spinning Into Butter* is one of those life changing experiences for me. Though I hope the play had an effect on the actors and audience members, it had the biggest effect on me as its director. It has become part of my soul as an artist. It became not only the capstone of my years as a student, and the subject of this thesis, but it has also sparked within me a desire to participate in a global dialogue.

This experience has taught me to act upon my convictions. I have always been a passionate person—about art, theatre and social justice—but like Ross, I have never found the most appropriate way to channel it. Gilman's ultimate message is to take action—"to go out on a limb" (Gilman 70). Sarah realizes that pragmatism coupled with

a willingness to engage in dialogue will allow her to move on with her life. By doing this she takes a brave leap into the unknown. Ross reminds Sarah that “the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity” (Gilman 70). You must have both in order to enact change; you must actually do something once you have them. Working on this project has allowed me to realize that I do a lot of talking about what I believe and have not done enough with my convictions. Conviction should end in action. I find it amusing that as a director I help actors find “action,” but rarely step outside the theatre to do so. Theatre for social change can have a call for action, but as a director making this kind of art I will spend my life inside a theatre. *Spinning Into Butter* has encouraged me to engage in dialogues both inside and outside of the theatre. Open discussion and debate are important steps in enacting change in people and the world. Often these dialogues are difficult, but the first step towards change is simply starting the conversation.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Character Analysis Worksheets

Spinning Into Butter/Character Analysis

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

☐ physical traits - what the character looks like, how he/she dresses, how he moves

☐ psychological/personality traits

☐ motivation

☐ behavior /actions

☐ relationships - with other characters in the story, how others see/react to him/her

☐ weaknesses/faults

☐ strengths/virtues

☐ moral constitution - often a character will agonize over right and wrong

☐ protagonist/antagonist - does the story revolve around this character's actions?

☐ complex/simple personality

☐ history and background

☐ change - has the character changed during the course of the story? What was his/her motivation? Why?

☐ similarities and differences of the characters

☐ Does the character have a function in the story?

Nine character questions to ask yourself in order to act:

1. Who am I? (Character, age, occupation, family, wealth, etc.)
2. What time is it? (Century, year, season, day, minute)
3. Where am I? (Country, neighbourhood, room, etc.)
4. What surrounds me? (Animate and inanimate)
5. What are the given circumstances? (Past, present, future and events)
6. What is my relationship? (To events, characters and things)
7. What do I want? (Character, main and immediate objectives, super-task)
8. What's in my way? (Obstacles)
9. What do I do to get what I want? (Action: physical/verbal)

WORKSHEET FOR GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES

A. Environmental Facts

1. Geographical location—the exact place
2. Date—year, season, time of day. What is significant about the date?
3. Economic environment—MONEY. Class level, state of wealth or poverty. What does economics mean to the characters? If you don't think economics matters to the characters, think again.
4. Political environment—the specific relationship to the form of government and laws under which the characters live. Does the political setting and its laws affect the behavior of the characters? Look carefully throughout the script, for the author may be taking this given circumstance for granted on the assumption that those who read the play will understand the context. If you don't think politics matters to the characters, think again, harder. It does.
5. Social environment—The specific characters in this play—how they function together or don't. Friendships and love relationships.
6. Moral environment—Formal and informal psychological controls. What is considered "right" and "wrong." Accepted codes of religious or spiritual beliefs. Who controls those?

B. Previous Action

1. What has happened before the present action begins. Explore how the past plays a part in propelling the present action, intruding upon the present and catching it off guard.
2. The Intrusion—describe the "something" that upsets the play.

C. Polar Attitudes of the Principal Characters-- Every character in a play is conditioned by the world of his or her own prejudices, tolerances and intolerances, assumptions and "hang-ups." In the course of a play principal characters do not change in character as much as their attitudes change under pressure from forces outside their control. The development in a play's action is composed, therefore, of the changing attitudes in the principal characters towards their inner environment and towards their special world. It is usually easier to find the initial pole for each character by noting what happens to his or her character at the end.

CHARACTERS

A. Summary list of adjectives

1. Desire

2. Will

3. Moral stance

4. Decorum

B. Initial character-mood-intensity

1. Heartbeat

2. Perspiration

3. Stomach condition

4. Muscle tension

5. Breathing

COLLAGE OF IMAGES

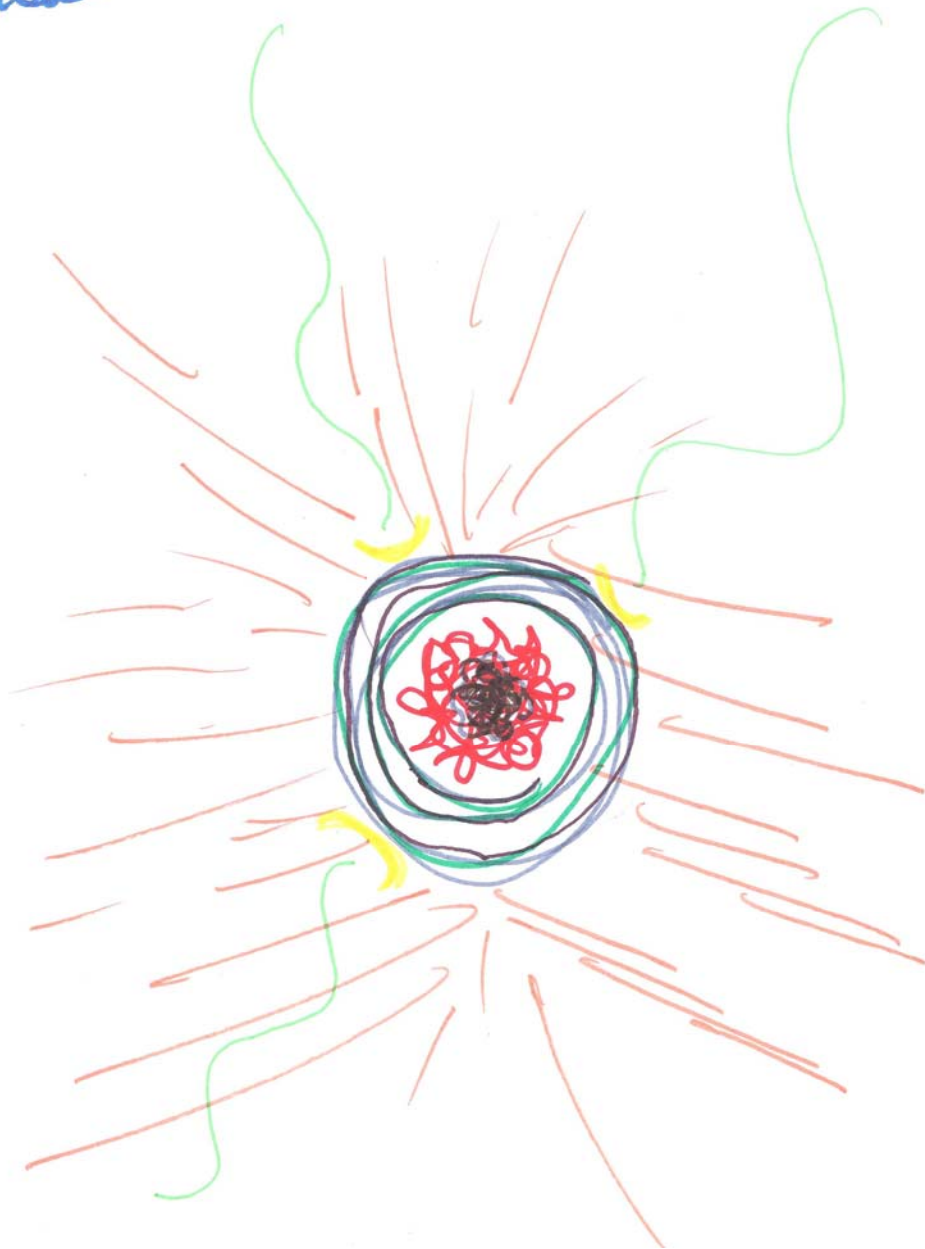
BODY POSITIONS

COLORS

APPENDIX B

Completed Analogue Drawn by Actress Playing Sarah Daniels

Lisa



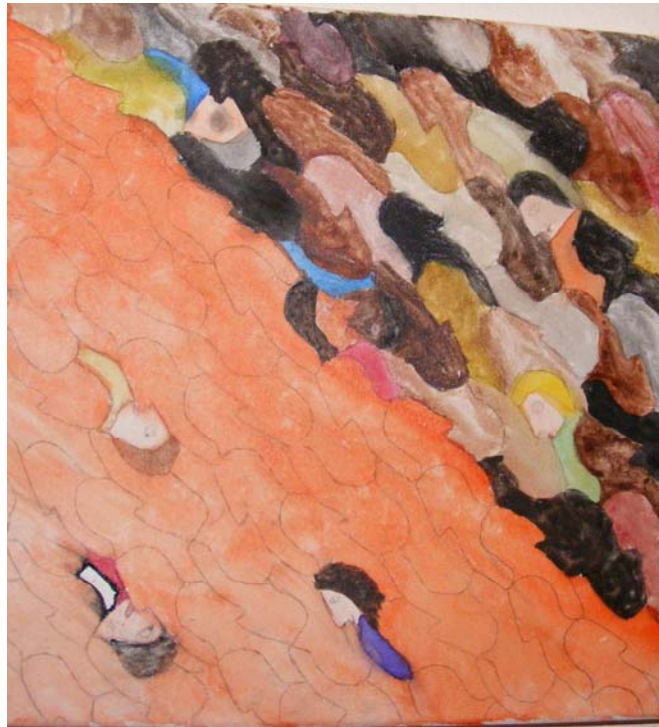
APPENDIX C

Outsider Art Created by Cast Members



APPENDIX D

Artistic Responses Created by Cast Members



APPENDIX E

Production Photos Featuring Lighting Design









APPENDIX F

Production Photos Featuring Costume Design







APPENDIX G

Production Photos Featuring Set Design











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