

ABSTRACT

Memory, Identity, and Farce in Carnival Mirrors:
A Director's Approach to David Lindsay-Abaire's *Fuddy Meers*

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American playwright David Lindsay-Abaire's central subject of interest is a world turned upside down by hardship and pain. Although commonly labeled a dark farce, Lindsay-Abaire's 1999 play, *Fuddy Meers*, is haunted by the spirit of medieval folk festivals in its grotesque imagery and subversive laughter. This thesis offers an examination of the social function of laughter in *Fuddy Meers* and its generic influences. The study details the biography of the playwright, examines his body of work, and offers a complete analysis of the play. It also follows the production process of the Baylor University Theater 2009 staging of the play from conception to performance.

Memory, Identity, and Farce in Carnival Mirrors:
A Director's Approach to David Lindsay-Abaire's *Fuddy Meers*

by

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My graduate director encourages talking about plays in terms of their “About Set.” She asks what the play is interested in and what it addresses and places the answers in square brackets like a mathematical number set. DeAnna Toten Beard, Ph.D. is about many things herself, but ultimately her About Set is an old, familiar one:

love	goodness
joy	faithfulness
peace	gentleness
patience	self-control
kindness	

Thanks for all you have taught me and the friend you have been to me and my family.

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CHAPTER ONE

Critical Context

Any well-considered journey first requires a close inspection of the map.

Chapter One is a record of my own map consultation as I embarked on a production of David Lindsay-Abaire's *Fuddy Meers*. Here, I look at the path *Fuddy Meers* has taken as a piece of theatre, the roads travelled by the playwright, and the territory it occupies—both literary and theoretical. The play is relatively new, and the playwright only recently the subject of critical and scholarly attention, so the data is sometimes spare. However, neither David Lindsay-Abaire nor *Fuddy Meers* are artistic anomalies. They are informed and shaped by their proximity to the culture and heritage to which they belong. Therefore, the first step of the journey is to consider the biographical and literary influences on the creation of *Fuddy Meers*.

Biography and Production History

It is appropriate that David Lindsay-Abaire boasts a hyphenated name. His life and work are difficult to categorize and prone to multiple noun descriptors. His plays are serio-comic tragi-farces. He is a film-theatre writer and he has commercial-artistic goals. Even a personal description of the man requires a dualistic perspective. While all of his characters are insane, damaged people, he is a clean-cut, mild mannered individual. Raven Snook of *Back Stage* observes the surprising normalcy she found when she met the playwright in 2001.

Lindsay-Abaire's offbeat work is in stark contrast to his stable personal life. The 31-year-old playwright recently became a father to Nicholas, an angel-faced baby boy and lives in a cozy Brooklyn duplex with Nicholas's stunning mother (and Lindsay-Abaire's wife), actress Chris Lindsay-Abaire. Despite all of the 'bizarre' personalities dancing in his psyche, the playwright has chosen a traditional domestic life. He even owns a dog! (Snook)

Lindsay-Abaire's 2005 play, *Rabbit Hole* complicates a simple understanding of the playwright's voice. A stylistic mile from all his earlier works, it gently explores the rhythms and pains of a married couple coping with the death of their young son. It seems any effort to define the man, his goals, his art, or his accomplishments requires a fair number of hyphenates.

Growing up in a blue-collar family in South Boston, David Lindsay-Abaire was recognized early as a talented writer and given a scholarship to Milton Academy, a college-preparatory boarding school just outside the city. Lindsay-Abaire was a day student at Milton so each night and weekend he would return home to South Boston. Even as an adolescent, his life was difficult to categorize. He lived in a working-class neighborhood, but spent the bulk of his days among the affluent children of eastern Massachusetts. However, Lindsay-Abaire denies that his "outsider" status at the school is the source of his disaffected main characters. When asked if he ever felt alienated at Milton, he replied, "You would think so from my work, which often centers on an outsider. But actually, I think most people found me likeable. I was the funny guy" (Hughes). It was that reputation as the funny guy that prompted his peers to nominate Lindsay-Abaire as the playwright of his class and he was called upon to provide a script each year when the school would produce an original play. Even at age fifteen, he loved the works of John Guare, Georges Feydeau, and Eugene Ionesco. His first play at Milton, *Mario's House of Italian Cuisine*, was—as Lindsay-Abaire states—"a direct rip-

off” of Tina Howe’s *Museum* (Hodgman). All of his high school plays continued to be offbeat and funny forays into absurdism, but he did not consider himself the class clown. He took his studies rather seriously and was, in fact, the valedictorian of his class. In an interview for Milton’s alumni newsletter Lindsay-Abaire makes a distinction about his role. “I was the class comedian not the class clown,” he explains. “The class clown is the guy that runs naked across the football field and the class comedian is the guy who talked him into doing it. I was that guy” (Hughes). This distinction anticipates later critical arguments about his works. From the earliest reviews of his plays, critics would question if Lindsay-Abaire’s outlandish characters and wild plot turns served dramatic meaning or were merely clownish mayhem.

Lindsay-Abaire went on to attend Sarah Lawrence College for acting and took one class in playwriting to fulfill his degree course work. As a result of that class, he wrote and produced *A Show of Hands* (1992). The response was very positive and for Lindsay-Abaire “playwriting seemed so much easier than acting” (Snook). He later submitted *A Show of Hands* to the Trustus Theatre Playwriting Contest in South Carolina and won. However, it was not the award itself that propelled Lindsay-Abaire’s career, but rather an important connection and recommendation he received there. He recalls,

That’s actually how I found out about the Juilliard playwriting program. The guy who came in second place, Stephen Belber, (his play was much better than mine, by the way) was in Juilliard and suggested I apply. I explained that I didn’t have the money for graduate school and he told me that there was no tuition. I was like ‘Wait, it’s free?’ I applied right away. (Snook)

Lindsay-Abaire submitted a sample of his writing to the Lila Acheson Wallace American Playwrights Program at the Juilliard School. The program, directed by Marsha

Norman and Christopher Durang, seemed an obvious fit for Lindsay-Abaire whose early works already reflected his slightly dark and absurdist voice. Durang's style—exemplified in *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* and *Baby with the Bathwater*) strengthened Lindsay-Abaire's connection with the program (Hughes). Lindsay-Abaire was admitted to Juilliard and his offbeat comedies were encouraged. In fact, for years after his graduation from the program his plays were likened to Durang's.

The play that garnered Lindsay-Abaire admission to Juilliard, entitled *Devil Inside*, was characteristically frenetic. In the play, Gene is awoken on his twenty-first birthday by his mother who gives him a birthday gift and tells him a secret. The secret is that his long-dead father was actually murdered in the wilderness where his feet were lopped off and thrown into a drainage ditch. Her gift is a large jar containing his father's dismembered feet, lovingly preserved. While Lindsay-Abaire was still at Juilliard, *Devil Inside* was produced at SoHo Repertory Theatre becoming the first of Lindsay-Abaire's plays to be reviewed professionally. *The New York Times* gave it a positive, albeit brief acknowledgement. *Times* critic D.J.R. Bruckner summarizes the play as “murder, gore and psychosis, all purposeful and funny.” Soon after, the play was produced by the Whitefire Theatre in Sherman Oaks, California (June 1999). F. Kathleen Foley, writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, reviewed the play very positively, describing it as an “absurdist romp...that features a bumper crop of urban lunatics, all in the grip of peculiar obsessions, all on the cusp of apocalypse, all pressingly in need of Thorazine injections.” Foley becomes the first reviewer to note the difficulty of categorizing a Lindsay-Abaire play:

Imagine Jules Feiffer channeling Lewis Carroll and you'll get some idea of Lindsay-Abaire's indescribably wacky play, which blends elements of

Greek tragedy, Russian literature and millennial angst into one effectively paranoiac pastiche. (Foley)

Foley's description of the play as a generic pastiche calls attention to Lindsay-Abaire's liberal borrowing from genres, narrative structures and styles so typical to postmodern drama.

While at Juilliard, Lindsay-Abaire began work on *Fuddy Meers* as an assignment that required him to bring in ten pages a week (Riley). The idea for the play was sparked by a news story he had seen.

I saw a TV news report on a book about neurological disorders. The author talked about this kind of amnesia where, when you go to sleep, you forget everything you've remembered during the day, and when you wake up you're a blank slate. I thought of the first scene and then the very last one. Otherwise, the play unfolded itself to me as a series of surprises. (Wren 2)

Lindsay-Abaire's play follows Claire, a bright-eyed amnesiac, who awakens to a frighteningly chipper man claiming to be her husband, Richard. He introduces her to a seventeen-year-old Kenny who Richard says is her son. Richard hands her a book with pictures and descriptions of the people in her life and explains that she has a form of amnesia that causes her to lose her memory each time she falls asleep. While Richard is in the shower, Claire's perusal of her "memory book" is interrupted by a man who emerges from under her bed wearing a ski mask and claiming to be her brother Zack. He explains that Richard is not really her husband, but an imposter who wants to hurt her. Zack helps Claire escape out the window and a wild ride of disparate memories and desperate characters ensues.

In the course of writing the script, Lindsay-Abaire challenged himself to try to write a cliffhanger each week. For example, "when the masked man stepped from under the bed, I didn't know who he was or what he was doing there" (Wren 2). Even after

revision the effect of Lindsay-Abaire's episodic structure is observable in the pacing of the script's many plot turns. Once the play was completed, he submitted it to a fellowship program at the Manhattan Theatre Club. They did not accept the play for the fellowship, but selected it for a public reading, after which he took the play to the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center for further development.

In October 1999, the Manhattan Theatre Club produced what would be the final draft of the script.) David Petrarca, experienced director of the premier of *Marvin's Room* (1991), was signed on to direct and a seasoned cast was enlisted. (1991 Lindsay-Abaire contributed at least one suggestion to the casting of the production. Marylouise Burke, who had played the mother in the New York production of *Devil Inside* was cast as Gertie, Claire's aphasic mother in *Fuddy Meers*. "Marylouise is able to be totally off-the-wall and hilarious and likeable" Lindsay-Abaire explains, "but also incredibly grounded and genuine" (Pogrebin). It is interesting that even Lindsay-Abaire's choice in casting was informed by his hybrid aesthetics, in this case for both humor and authenticity. In his preface to *Fuddy Meers*, the playwright specifically notes the Manhattan Theatre Club's understanding of his play as dualistic in style.

The stars aligned, and it seemed every collaborator understood the play and knew where I was coming from. They collectively embraced the strange and wacky world of *Fuddy Meers* in a great big theatrical bear-hug. They understood that the play could be whimsical and silly, and still be very real and painful at its center. They knew to temper the sweetness with a dark edge. The tonal shifts in the play can make for a very tricky line to walk, but my collaborators walked it expertly. (11)

As much as Lindsay-Abaire credits the play's success to a dynamic collaboration of artists, it was the championing by critic Ben Brantley that elevated *Fuddy Meers* from an off-Broadway crowd-pleaser to a career launching pad for Lindsay-Abaire.

In November of 1999, Brantley published a rave review of the surprising little farce by a relative newcomer in *The New York Times*.

The production is willfully silly and grotesque, yet there's a cool, satisfying strategy in its piecing together of its jigsaw puzzle of a plot. By the evening's end, what started as a feather-light send-up has acquired a surprisingly touching depth. Claire's daylong road trip of a journey toward self-knowledge may be more antic than *Thelma and Louise's*, but it sets off sharp, far-reaching sparks of thought about women whose lives are determined by men. (Brantley, "Born Anew")

Brantley saw *Fuddy Meers* not as mere clowning, but as true comedy with "touching depth."

Brantley's voice was not the only one singing *Fuddy Meers's* praises, but his review specifically hinted at the thematic significance that lay beneath the mayhem about which most critics were commenting. Calling the play "heady fun," Brantley seemed particularly pleased by its forays into issues of gender, identity, and memory. Where other critics were categorizing the play as merely silly or playful entertainment, Brantley saw much more:

Since at least that famous time when Dante got lost in a dark forest six centuries ago and felt an urgent need for explanations, people have been waking up at halfway points in their existences and wondering what on earth they're doing there. Where, after all, would American literature be without the midlife crisis? Still, it seems unlikely that anyone has approached this much-discussed juncture with the buoyancy, friendliness and utter literal-mindedness of Claire, the perplexed but game heroine of *Fuddy Meers*, a dark, sweet and thoroughly engaging comedy. (Brantley, "Born Anew")

John Halperin of *The New York Observer* similarly gushed about the arrival of Lindsay-Abaire on New York's theatre landscape.

This exciting new dramatist has an original mind. When, for instance, the psychotic's hand-held puppet is killed with a kitchen knife, a touching death scene follows. But Mr. Lindsay-Abaire doesn't milk it. This is what the dying hand-puppet says: 'I can't feel my toes.' Now, I put it to you that any dramatist who can invent a line as good as that is some kind of

comic genius. *Fuddy Meers* surprises us all the way to the nuthouse.
(Halperin)

Finally, John Simon, of *New York Magazine* had kind words for Lindsay-Abaire as well. Simon writes, “Call the play errant, aberrant, or Abairant, Lindsay-Abaire proves a bare minimum less funny than Ionesco, whose true heir he is” (“Know-Brainers”). Lindsay-Abaire confessed in an interview that Simon’s review was particularly exciting to him since he had long loved Ionesco (Hughes).

Not all critics were in agreement about *Fuddy Meers*, however. While Brantley, Halperin and Simon found Lindsay-Abaire’s voice refreshing, Charles Isherwood, was less impressed, writing in *Variety*,

Also revealed, however, is the author’s dependence on contrivance and coincidence for the jack-in-the-box surprises of his plot. And what is missing in action throughout is an authorial voice that has reached maturity. Lindsay-Abaire is a recent graduate of Juilliard’s playwrights program, where *Fuddy Meers* was written and workshopped, and it doubtless had a brash, kooky charm in that environment. Fully—and excellently—staged at one of the city’s premier nonprofit theaters, it too often seems tiresomely sophomoric, heavily dependent on sitcom insults, vulgarity and pointless inanity for its humor. (Isherwood, “Fuddy.”)

While Brantley points out that Lindsay-Abaire is using the tired gags of sit-coms in a new way, “like the resourceful chef who turns leftovers into haute cuisine...with scarcely a tinge of residual staleness” (Brantley, “Born Anew”), Isherwood only sees leftovers, and certainly tastes staleness. Nancy Franklin of *The New Yorker* agrees, noting,

I’m all for tasteless humor—it can reveal a lot of awful truths worth hearing—but I couldn’t find more than one dimension to the muddled waggery and gaggery of *Fuddy Meers*. Call me spoiled, but I like to come away from the theatre feeling something other than that I just attended a Helen Keller-joke marathon. (Franklin)

Detractors of *Fuddy Meers* all tire of a gag-filled play with supposedly no deeper issues. And yet, the advocates of the play love it for the meaningful questions it raises. Clearly, either the pathos of the play is not apparent to all those who see it, or it is not significant enough to redeem the two hours of mayhem *Fuddy Meers* unleashes.

Fuddy Meers was successful enough in its debut at the Manhattan Theatre Club to be moved to Minetta Lane Theatre in January of 2000 for a commercial run. With *The Times* in its corner, the play that defied categorization rapidly became a fast success nationally. Once published and made available, the play was produced hundreds of times across the country.

Following *Fuddy Meers*, Lindsay-Abaire saw two more of his darkly comic plays produced by the Manhattan Theatre Club. And as his body of work grew, critics increasingly crystallized their appreciation and/or distaste for Lindsay-Abaire's writing. Almost all the reviews comment on his style of humor and its liberal use of broad and vulgar genres, debating whether it represents appropriation or pandering. Critics like Brantley and Halperin defend his use of sitcom and slapstick devices as a deliberate stylistic pastiche, recycling the common trash of tired comic gags into beautiful new sculpture. However, detractors like Isherwood believe he relies on those devices because he has no others at his disposal. Without fail, the critical opinion of his plays is connected to whether the reviewer finds meaning at the heart of the laughter. If the critic senses thematic merit at the heart of the play, he reads all of Lindsay-Abaire's stylistic hallmarks as masterfully employed to that merit's end. However, if the reviewer does not appreciate the pathos and pain experienced by the characters, he or she invariably finds Lindsay-Abaire's style stale. Positive reviews mention the mad-

capped fun that is anchored by serious issues of life; negative reviews claim the prolific and grating comedy has no basis in meaningful exploration of the tragic.

Lindsay-Abaire's next produced play *Wonder of the World* (2001) also debuted at the Manhattan Theatre Club. In this dark comedy, Cass opens her husband's sock drawer to discover evidence of an outrageous, secret sexual fetish and realizes she does not truly know the man to whom she is married. This, in turn, leads to a questioning of her own identity. She composes a list of 267 things she wants to do in life and sets out on a bus to tackle item number one. She encounters a woman with a barrel who intends to end her life by going over Niagara Falls. The women—one determined to live and one determined to die—form a kinship and discover more about themselves can be found on a list or in the spray of Niagara. Despite the plentiful resources devoted to the production—including celebrity actress Sarah Jessica Parker in the leading role—the critics were, on the whole, not as kind to *Wonder* as they were to *Fuddy*.

Charles Isherwood claims he “had to be physically restrained from rushing the stage in a frenzy of disgust.” Isherwood's complaints about *Wonder* are an extension of the argument he made in his review of *Fuddy Meers* regarding the playwright's style. “Lindsay-Abaire needs to learn that all good comedy is based in truth,” Isherwood writes. He is particularly unmoved by Lindsay-Abaire's attempt to season farce with tragedy. To him the application of violence and death throughout the script is a failed attempt to give the play some sense of gravity. Isherwood also comments on Lindsay-Abaire's use of humor. He is among those who find the gags more stale than fresh.

Beneath the fake gravity and the calculated whimsy, Lindsay-Abaire's comic voice really is a grindingly familiar one. Most of the laughs the play generates are of a boilerplated sitcom variety—insults, vulgarities, sex jokes. (When laughs are lagging, have the cute old lady say to her

husband, 'I am gonna kick the shit outta you!' Welcome back, *Golden Girls*.) (Isherwood, "Wonder")

Isherwood is part of the group of critics who do not find compelling truth or pathos at the heart of Lindsay-Abaire's comedies. As a result, he reads the use of established humorous devices as derivative and cliché.

John Lahr, a biographer of Lindsay-Abaire's stylistic role model, Joe Orton, was equally dissatisfied with *Wonder of the World*. In his review in *The New Yorker*, Lahr quotes Orton's philosophy of farce as a scolding indictment of *Wonder's* empty levity.

In order to be good, Orton says, farce must be grounded in the real. Farce is tragedy sped up, where mischief replaces destiny and suffering is shown but not felt. It's this detachment that makes laughter both wonderful and lethal. As Nabokov says, laughter is the best pesticide. But pesticides, unless handled carefully, can do damage. When jokes are good, they illuminate, challenge received opinion, and make unacceptable ideas irresistible. In other words, good jokes make meaning; bad ones merely add to the emptiness of daily life. (Lahr, "Wonder")

Wonder of the World, Lahr suggests, lacks any anchoring truth. Instead of balancing each outrageous occurrence with pathos, Lahr accuses Lindsay-Abaire of merely stacking on more absurd and shocking juxtapositions.

He paints his characters into fantastical narrative corners, then extricates them via some implausibility that shocks the audience without enlightening it. Implausibility is piled on top of implausibility until it builds a tower of guff. (Lahr, "Wonder")

Lahr, perhaps more than any other reviewer, analyzes Lindsay-Abaire's structure. Most critics steer clear of comment on the complicated movements of the playwright's stories. The bulk of the reviews about Lindsay-Abaire's plays breeze over plot points, instead focusing on his characters, humor, and style. Lahr, as a specialist in farce, is interested in whether Lindsay-Abaire's works live up to the genre. According to Lahr, *Wonder* falls

short of farce in its narrative. The argument is worth noting, although in chapter two I will address the question of whether *Fuddy Meers* is a farce at all.

Ben Brantley, who was Lindsay-Abaire's champion in his review of *Fuddy Meers*, is kinder to the playwright than other critics, but his praise of *Wonder* is notably lukewarm. He, too, puts his primary focus on Lindsay-Abaire's tragic-comic balance.

It's a tough balancing act, this mix of the cute and the sinister. One false step, and you're coasting on an exaggerated, eye-rolling irony that has been the province of topical e-mail jokes since the Internet came of age. The miracle of *Fuddy Meers* was how confidently Mr. Lindsay-Abaire pulled the balance off. In *Wonder of the World*, his footing is less secure. (Brantley, "Wonder")

Brantley notes that *Wonder's* antics are not rooted in the truth of the pain and violence with which it toys. In *Fuddy Meers*, Brantley describes a three-dimensional journey that the audience is swept into along with its main character. According to Brantley, *Wonder* has a similar journey, but the audience experiences it two-dimensionally. Brantley still sees merit in Lindsay-Abaire's style, which he notes, "both embraces and spoofs the all-American appetites for spiritual uplift, sitcom perkiness and slimy tabloid prurience" ("*Wonder*"). Brantley clearly sees self-awareness in the appropriation of broad styles of humor that Isherwood and Lahr see as sophomoric pandering.

Lindsay-Abaire's next major work, *Kimberly Akimbo*, was commissioned and premiered at South Coast Repertory in Los Angeles, and eventually went on to play at Manhattan Theatre Club in February of 2003. It is the story of a sixteen year-old girl with progenia, a disease which causes the human body to age at four times its natural rate. It possesses the playwright's characteristic snappy dialogue, and far-fetched characters and plots. Lindsay-Abaire's favored actress Marylouise Burke, was cast in the

starring role and David Petrarca, the director of *Fuddy Meers*, also came on board to direct *Kimberly*.

The play was critically well-received. Ben Brantley saw his faith in Lindsay-Abaire fully restored.

Kimberly Akimbo is at once a shrewd satire, a black comedy and a heartbreaking study of how time wounds everyone. And while its tone initially suggests a dysfunctional family sitcom a la *Married With Children*, the production keeps confounding your expectations of how you're going to respond to a given scene. (Brantley, "Akimbo")

Once again, Brantley shows himself to be strongly in favor of Lindsay-Abaire's hyphenate stylistic tendencies. He even uses a trashy pop culture reference (*Married with Children* – a vulgar sitcom popular in the 1990s) to praise Lindsay-Abaire's use of shopworn comic devices in the service of a higher purpose. As in his review of *Fuddy Meers*, Brantley focuses his comments on the deeper ideas in Lindsay-Abaire's work. "By crafty degrees," Brantley writes, "Mr. Lindsay-Abaire makes the case that all of the grown-ups suffer from a more leisurely form of Kimberly's disease: that is, plain old mortality" ("Akimbo"). Brantley not only stands opposed to those who say that Lindsay-Abaire's plays are about nothing, but he also proclaims loudly they are about nothing less than the human condition.

Critics began to take notice of Brantley's assessment of Lindsay-Abaire and reviews of *Kimberly Akimbo* reflect an increased interest in what lies behind the manic façade of Lindsay-Abaire's work. David Lohrey's review in *CurtainUp* typifies this critical trend:

Many concluded that like all balloons [*Fuddy Meers*] was just filled with air, while others, recognizing the play as top-flight farce, accepted it for what it was. *Fuddy Meers*, which opened to positive reviews and ran Off-Broadway for much of the season two years ago, played like a pin-pricked balloon in the minds of those who saw it... This time, playwright

David Lindsay-Abaire has written a play that buzzes along, only the balloon is not filled with air, but with laughing gas, and instead of being held by a string, it is tied to a firecracker. *Kimberly Akimbo* exposes all of the author's remarkable talents, plus one: dramatic depth. (Lohrey)

Lohrey suggests that he was underwhelmed by *Fuddy Meers*, but acknowledges an increased respect for Lindsay-Abaire's dramaturgy. Lohrey's change of heart is typical of the transformation many critics experienced regarding Lindsay-Abaire. It was only after Lindsay-Abaire had been championed by the likes of Brantley and Halperin that reviewers started seeing more depth in his plays. That being said, John Simon of *New York Magazine*—who had been very favorable toward *Fuddy Meers* and compared Lindsay-Abaire to Ionesco—moved into the camp of unbelievers with *Kimberly Akimbo*. “Such a subject calls for genius; offbeat whimsy will not suffice” observes Simon, “And does it ever not suffice here” (“War is Hell”).

In 2005, Lindsay-Abaire took on a writing challenge given to him by one of his mentors at Juilliard almost a decade earlier. He was encouraged to write about the thing that scared him most in the world. In an interview with Tonya Palmer of the Goodman Theatre, Lindsay-Abaire recounts his reaction to playwright Marsha Norman's challenge.

At that time I was in my mid-twenties, and I remember her saying that and thinking, ‘What is the thing that frightens me most in the world? I don’t even know what that could possibly be.’ Then a few years later, I became a dad. (4)

Once Lindsay-Abaire identified his greatest fear he wrote *Rabbit Hole*, the story of a couple who loses their four-year-old son when he chases his dog into the road. *Rabbit Hole* is unlike any of Lindsay-Abaire's earlier works. It lacks the frenetic pace, deliberately unwieldy characters, and plot turns of *Fuddy Meers*, *Kimberly Akimbo*, and *Wonder of the World*. It was also his first play to open on Broadway and the critics'

reactions were largely favorable, albeit sometimes confused. Michael Feingold of the *Village Voice* admits a surprised reaction to Lindsay-Abaire's foray into more realistic drama.

Terse, quiet, compassionate: These are adjectives I never dreamed I'd be applying to a play by Lindsay-Abaire, whose previous works seen here have all been noisy, self-conscious forays into surrealist farce, with a seemingly unquenchable appetite for grotesquerie. (Feingold)

Feingold stops short of unadulterated praise by sheepishly arguing that perhaps Lindsay-Abaire's aesthetic pendulum had swung too far. In moving toward realistic portrayal, Feingold argues, Lindsay-Abaire has drained his work of theatricality.

Rabbit Hole is an honorable, decent, and decently gripping play, but a play can be too terse, too quiet, too compassionate. Lindsay-Abaire presumably wanted to avoid the subject's potential for cheap TV-movie histrionics, and he mostly does, gratifyingly. But a degree of dramatic excitement, plus a certain amount of substance, has drained off with them. (Feingold)

A few other critics note a lack of excitement in the play's cautious movement and subversion of a traditional plot. Some reviewers who were fond of Lindsay-Abaire's earlier work were disappointed by his stylistic experiment. Howard Kissel of the *Daily News* laments the playwright's new style.

I'm afraid I found it more like a TV Movie of the Week... *Rabbit Hole* is thin gruel. Lindsay-Abaire's earlier plays, like *Fuddy Meers* and *Kimberly Akimbo*, were extravagantly imaginative. By contrast, this one is tiresomely mundane. (Kissel)

It is worth noting that even though the play is markedly different in style, the same two categories of criticism emerge in the reviews: 1) Lindsay-Abaire's balance of humor with tragedy and 2) his use of well-worn dialogue devices and comic gags. Harold Shapiro of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* makes an interesting observation about *Rabbit Hole*'s balance of levity and gravity. He writes "[Lindsay-Abaire] weaves a cloth of one

strand light, two strands dark, then back and forth, and no fiber is cheap or synthetic” (Shapiro). In the same way that Lindsay-Abaire anchors his farcical plays in tragedy, he lets his most somber play breathe with the use of humor. Ben Brantley was very pleased with Lindsay-Abaire’s treatment of more realistic faire.

It is as if Mr. Lindsay-Abaire had set for himself the task of holding up a mirror to life that for once didn’t come from a fun house. The dialogue is blessed with Mr. Lindsay-Abaire’s customary grace and wit. But it never sounds less than organic. (Brantley, “Mourning”)

Brantley also points out that while the play may be seemingly miles away from Lindsay-Abaire’s raucous earlier works, it is traversing the same thematic territory: “Lindsay-Abaire established himself as a lyrical and understanding chronicler of people who somehow become displaced within their own lives” (Brantley, “Mourning”). Taking a very different road than usual, Lindsay-Abaire is once again exploring the thematic territory of lives turned upside down by tragedy.

Though *Rabbit Hole* is atypical of his body of work, it ironically reveals the playwright’s central subject: the topsy-turvy and grotesque world that lies on the other side of tragedy. Lindsay-Abaire sees the world through farce-colored glasses and his first three major works are indications of that outlook. He portrays the absurdity of the world with absurd characters who have surrendered the staid façades of normal society because their circumstances have allowed them to “see through the looking glass.” In *Rabbit Hole* we see characters that have come to the same juncture, forced into a Carroll-esque world, but trying desperately not to fall down the hole. In fact, Becca, the heroine of *Rabbit Hole*, suffers all the ailments of Lindsay-Abaire’s previous characters. Like Claire in *Fuddy Meers* she wakes up each morning unsure of who she is; she can’t go back to work because she “left all that to be a mom” (*Rabbit Hole* 46). Like Cass in

Wonder of the World, she discovers that she and her husband are strangers in the midst of their grief—"Do you really not know me, Howie?" (*Rabbit Hole* 86). And the loss of her son has aged her—like *Kimberly Akimbo*—at four times the natural rate. Surely she must feel as though her life has come to an early end. In both his comedy and tragedy, Lindsay-Abaire is interested in the absurdity inherent in a world with so much pain.

In addition to his serious stage writing, Lindsay-Abaire has done a fair amount of what he calls "commercial projects" for film, television, and Broadway musicals. He has writing credits on the 2005 animated film *Robots* and the 2008 fantasy film *Inkheart*. He has written a screenplay adaptation of his play *Rabbit Hole* that will be released in 2010 starring Nicole Kidman. He also wrote the books for the Broadway musicals *High Fidelity* and *Shrek*. Lindsay-Abaire does not hesitate to confess that his Hollywood and television endeavors are primarily bread-winning efforts, but he prefers the control a playwright has over his work. "I love movies," says Lindsay-Abaire, "I just think there's a lot of nonsense that goes with them. If the terms are right, I will sell out. All I want is control over my product, that's the difference" (Lindsay-Abaire, "Interview: Hughes").

Issues of Genre

In 2004, Angus Jackson, renowned British director of stage and screen, wanted a sure-fire American hit to launch his new production company Scamp. He turned to *Fuddy Meers*, which had never been produced in the United Kingdom; but compared to the gushing New York reviews, the British critics were downright icy in their reception of Lindsay-Abaire's breakout comedy. Several of the British reviews pointed to a disparity between American and British aesthetic appetites as the cause of the play's

varied trans-Atlantic reception, but I believe the evidence points not to the audience for blame, but to the production itself. Put simply, the New York productions of *Fuddy Meers* expressed the play's dramaturgical dichotomies while Angus Jackson's British premier neglected them.

According to the British critics, the production directed by Angus Jackson on the West End was anything but dualistic in its tone. Words like “zany,” “mad-capped,” “insane,” and “over-the-top” are employed regularly to describe the play's overall impact. Charles Spencer of *The Daily Telegraph* writes, “I giggled at first, but after two hours of punishing zaniness, laughter had long since curled up and died in my throat. Worse still, like so many New York shows, the piece goes all sentimental on us in the closing minutes.” And Susannah Clapp of *The Observer* writes “Angus Jackson's production strives over-hard to create an atmosphere of spiraling mayhem.” Apparently, the production failed to temper the silliness of *Fuddy Meers* with sadness. In fact, it is hard to find a reviewer who was not bothered by the tone of the play. Benedict Nightingale writes, “I have a taste for funny writers from Feydeau to Orton to Martin McDonagh, but, really, this piece needs a big injection of wit, point or something if it's to be rated as good farce or decent black comedy or a mix of both” (25). This criticism in particular raises important questions about what *Fuddy Meers* is meant to be.

Theories of Farce and Laughter

Broadly conceived, farce is a comedic form with a long—somewhat seedy—ancestry that includes the works of Menander, Plautus, Terence, the *commedia dell'arte*, Molière, Jarry, Wilde and countless others. Jessica Davis in her 2002 *Farce* narrows parameters for the genre. Davis describes the spirit of farce as that “which delights in

taboo-violation, but which avoids implied moral comment or social criticism and which tends to debar empathy for its victims” (2). Davis makes a specific claim about farce that specifies its political intention (or lack thereof). Farce, according to Davis, reifies social structures and values by ridiculing the deviant.

In contrast to satire and ‘black humor’, the style of humor in farce is essentially conservative: it has little reforming zeal—or even much despair—for the ways of the world. It tends to restore conventional authority, or at least to save that authority’s face, at the end of its comic upheavals. (Davis 3)

Davis’s argument is not a new one. Since classical writing about laughter, theories have afforded it political impact ranging from valueless to conservative of the status quo.

Quentin Skinner, in his essay on “Hobbes and the Classical Theory of Laughter,” notes these sentiments in the historical writings on the subject.

Aristotle’s basic suggestion is thus that the mirth induced by jesting is always an expression of contempt, a suggestion already present in his earlier observation that among the sources of pleasure are ‘ridiculous Actions, Sayings and Persons’. Comedy deals in the risible, and the risible is an aspect of the shameful, the ugly, or the base. If we find ourselves laughing at others, it will be because they exhibit some fault or mark of shame, which while not painful make them ridiculous. Those who are chiefly risible are accordingly those who are in some way inferior, especially morally inferior, although not wholly vicious in character. (Skinner 140)

Skinner explains that an Aristotelian understanding of laughter never vanished and was even propagated in writings by Renee Descartes and Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century.

More recently, farce’s derisive nature has been linked with catharsis and not merely ridicule. Eric Bentley, in his *The Life of the Drama*, (1964) identifies the sinister pleasures inherent to farce.

Farce in general offers a special opportunity: shielded by delicious darkness and seated in warm security, we enjoy the privilege of being

totally passive while on stage our most treasured unmentionable wishes are fulfilled before our eyes by the most violently active human beings that ever sprang from the human imagination. In that application of the formula which is bedroom farce, we savor the adventure of adultery, ingeniously exaggerated in the highest degree, and all without taking the responsibility or suffering the guilt. Our [spouses] may be with us leading the laughter. (Bentley 229)

Bentley hints at a cathartic release of unhealthy desires. Despite his seemingly more favorable view of farce, Bentley ultimately sides with Aristotle, Descartes, Hobbes, and Davis, in seeing the humor in farce as derisive ridicule. Even if we vicariously live the characters' vices, as Bentley suggests, the play ends with us laughing at our proxy's demise and, consequently, at our ridiculous subversive desires. Therefore, the end goal of the ridicule is to uphold the status quo.

Henri Bergson's essay "Laughter" (1900) presents a more nuanced understanding of laughter as a corrective force. Bergson methodically dissects acts that inspire laughter—the man falling on the street, absent-mindedness, a repeated sequence of events in varied settings—in order to assess what about them makes us laugh. Bergson notes that all comic elements are inherently human.

A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable. You may laugh at an animal, but only because you have detected in it some human attitude or expression. You may laugh at a hat, but what you are making fun of, in this case is not the piece of felt or straw, but the shape that men have given it – the human caprice whose mold it has assumed. (Bergson 62)

Bergson's view that humanity is requisite for humor idealistically connects him with his Platonic predecessors. He notes that the flexible, adaptable human species finds laughter in the inflexible. When a man falls on the street, he has made some error in adapting to a new walking surface, and his body is not able to correct quickly enough to prevent a mechanical walking failure. Bergson's dualism sees humans as soul-bearing

creatures and it is only when the mechanism of their body grounds them to this Earth that we laugh.

The soul, infinitely supple and perpetually in motion is subject to no law of gravitation, for it is not the earth that attracts it. This soul imparts a portion of its winged lightness to the body it animates...Matter, however, is obstinate and resists. (Bergson 78)

There is a certain positivism, even a spiritual humanism, in Bergson's corrective laughter. Bergson's is a far more idealistic argument than that of Davis, Hobbes or the classical theorists. Laughter, while still a corrective, is aimed at those who fail to adapt, who cannot tread lightly on this earthly coil.

Yet, there are critics who do not believe laughter has to be either derisive or corrective. Victor Turner, Erich Segal, and Mikhail Bakhtin have all explored the nature of carnival laughter. In contrast to conservative, socially reifying or metaphysically revelatory laughter, Bakhtin identifies revolutionary humor in the literary works of Rabelais based on the revelry common in medieval folk festivals. These festivals occurred in reaction to ordered, religious observances and rituals of the liturgical calendar. Days of carnival were those that shirked the typical hierarchal paradigms with satire and revelry. Contests, parades and performances on these days were occasions for those with the lowest social status to laugh at and alongside those with all the power. Behaviors seen as sinful only one day earlier were the order of the day during carnival. In his seminal work *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin depicts the power of the carnival spirit by claiming that it offered "the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things" (34). Carnival laughter performs a wholly different function than conservative corrective laughter. It mocks the status quo and liberates the possibility of change.

The central feature of carnival that persists in literary form is a celebration of the grotesque. Grotesque imagery distorts everyday elements (especially the body) through enlargement, multiplication, or juxtaposition. Medieval feasts and current day festivals around the world utilize oversized masks, blackface paint (with exaggerated features), and disfigured marionettes to revel in the grotesque. Then and now, grotesque humor was employed and enjoyed not oppressively, but subversively. In subverting metaphysical realities, with oversized head masks or disfigured bodies on folk art, revelers imagine the subversion of their social realities.

The carnival-grotesque form exercises this function: to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. (Bakhtin 34)

Critics of Bakhtin, including Noel Malcom and Aaron Gurevich, claim that folk festivals were not comic acts of revolt from the people, but rather ruling class sanctioned safety-valves designed to purge oppressed peoples of revolutionary desire. If the festivals were subversive, they never would have been allowed to continue. Instead, critics argue, the carnival spirit successfully reifies the social structures by pointing out the absurdity of subverting them (Davis 37). For the purposes of examining the function of humor, the success of festival as a revolutionary force is not as important as the nature of carnival laughter. Quite simply, the unexpected appearance of distorted reality incites joy.

The theories of laughter of Henri Bergson and Mikhail Bakhtin intersect at the body. Bergson finds the root of laughter in the body's inelasticity while Bakhtin finds the grotesque distortion of the body to be the cause of laughter. The body susceptible to the unexpected is at the heart of both theories. Bergson's dualistic idealism expects the body to trip along the Earth lightly as a limber companion to its occupant soul.

Therefore, when a craggy sidewalk or slippery embankment trips us up, it is funny.

Bakhtin is also interested in the unexpected—but in a socio-political setting. The revelers of medieval and renaissance festivals expect no permanent change of status or quality of life. Yet, on these days of folk festival, the expected is subverted and laughter ensues. The unexpected nature of both Bakhtinian and Bergsonian laughter is of particular importance when it comes to understanding the nature of farce. The two kinds of unexpected humor are not mutually exclusive of one another. One might remember Gerald Ford falling down a jetway or George Bush, Sr. vomiting in the lap of a foreign leader. These were occasions for laughter because we expected nobility and grace, and instead found hopelessly earth-bound humanity. Bergson would say we laugh at these moments because we are surprised at the subjects' inelasticity to adapt to their circumstances, and Bakhtin would say we laugh because the laying low of powerful figures subverts our expectations.

Eric Bentley also makes important observations about the unexpected nature of humor. Even though he holds that laughter conserves instead of subverts, he acknowledges that we laugh when something surprises us. "This experience is a kind of shock," notes Bentley "but, whereas shocks in general are unpleasant, this one opens a sluiceway somewhere and brings a sudden spurt or gush of pleasure" (198). According to Bentley, humor comes from a recognized dissonance between our innocent, childhood desires and our adult disappointments.

How does the sense of humor work? Its aim is to gratify some of the forbidden wishes. But what is repressed is repressed. We cannot get at it. Our anxiety and guilt are taking care of that. Only, there are tricks for eluding anxiety and guilt and the commonest, the least artificial, is the sense of humor. The mildly amusing preliminaries of a joke allay our fears, lower our resistance. The gratification of the forbidden wish is then

slipped upon us as a surprise. Before our guilt and anxiety have time to go into action, the forbidden pleasure has been had. (Bentley 198)

Bentley sees a distinctly Freudian duality at work in humor. We laugh when our normally restrained and muted id surprises us with a momentary outburst. It harkens to our younger selves that were free from the repression of the superego. Bentley interestingly points out that “neither supermen nor babies” have a sense of humor because their youthful desires are unimpinged by disappointment or social oppression. One might add amnesiacs like *Fuddy Meers*’s Claire to his list of people who lack sufficient pain and loss to experience humor.

Children develop a sense of humor as they move away from primal innocence. They have only to hear of the few of the ‘songs of experience,’ which are songs of setback, disappointment, and disillusion, and the wholehearted cheerfulness of baby’s smile can give place on the face of a three-year-old to the aggressive smirk or the twisted half-smile of defeat. ‘Innocence’ is whole and single. With ‘experience’ come division and duality—without which there is no humor, no wit, no farce, and no comedy. (Bentley 199)

Bentley’s theory is especially interesting in light of our discussion of farce. Whereas Bentley imagines humor springing forth from a collision of the innocent and naïve forces within ourselves, farce actualizes that collision on stage with its ubiquitous naïve hero adrift amid a wiser world. The juxtaposition of the morally pure, intellectually slow, or socially inept with the shrewd, clever and worldly is a primary source of humor for farce. Where Bergson finds humor in the clumsy body’s temporary coup over the noble soul’s rightful authority, Bentley finds humor in the unruly id’s surprising, albeit brief, victory over the ordered superego. And Bakhtin finds humor in the short-lived advent of the political “possible” from within the political “reality.” The clear trend is that laughter is a product of unexpected turns in metaphysical dualities.

Georges Feydeau

Studies of the history of farce trace its roots through Greek New Comedy, Roman Comedy, medieval interludes, the *commedia dell'arte*, Shakespeare's comedies, Moliere, and Eugene Scribe. The farce of modern times found its best expression in the pen of French playwright Georges Feydeau. Contemporary farceurs including Nicky Silver, Michael Frayn, and David Lindsay-Abaire list Feydeau among their primary influences. Playwright Albert Bermel, in his 1982 study *Farce: A History from Aristophanes to Woody Allen* notes, "For many people the words 'French' and 'farce' belong together like 'English' and 'muffins.' But when they use the term 'French farce' they are thinking not of Moliere, but of the nineteenth century and specifically Feydeau" (109). If Feydeau is indeed the source for modern farce, an examination of his style and structure will illuminate farce's current role in drama.

Georges Feydeau was writing comedy for the Parisian Boulevard during the French Belle Epoque. His career developed just as the well-made plays of Scribe were falling out of popular fashion. Vaudevilles, as such plays were known, were seen as tediously formulaic, populated by outdated caricatures instead of believable personalities. Feydeau writes "I noticed that vaudevilles were invariably built on obsolete plots with conventional, ridiculous, false characters, puppets" (qtd. in Esteban 25). Feydeau revitalized the form by inserting personalities, situations and social foibles of his time. "That was all I needed" Feydeau admits, "I started to search for my characters in real life, living and keeping their own personality. I tried, after a comical exposition, to throw them into ludicrous situations" (as quote by Esteban 25).

Even this cursory look at Feydeau's strategies recalls *Fuddy Meers*'s characters and structure. The play is populated by an overeager step-dad, a pot-smoking son, a

battered wife, and several other characters whose lives are clearly influenced by popular culture's fascination with the dysfunction of the American family. The structure is just as Feydeau describes it as well. *Fuddy Meers* boasts comical exposition, helped in no small part by the main character's amnesia, followed by ludicrous situations including escaped convicts, mistaken identities, disguises, masks, and failed schemes.

In addition to structure and character, *Fuddy Meers* seems the direct heir to a few of Feydeau's trademark idiosyncrasies. Nearly all of Feydeau's plots feature the roles of husband and wife as does *Fuddy Meers*. Feydeau also creates characters with strange speech problems or unusual maladies. Manuel Esteban's 1983 *Georges Feydeau* describes this tendency:

Physical impairments that affect speech are quite popular in vaudeville and Feydeau made ample use of such traditions. Just as popular was the deformation of the French language, and this is also a comical technique that he favored. (52)

In *Hotel Paradiso (L'Hôtel du libre échange)*, Feydeau creates a character who suffers from a speech impediment whenever it rains. In such a device, Feydeau is setting up the possibility for plot complications, misunderstandings, and comic possibilities. *Fuddy Meers* contains similarly strange maladies—like Claire's amnesia—and similar language confounding devices such as Limping Man's lisp, Gertie's aphasia, and Millet's puppet.

Joe Orton

The style and substance of nineteenth century farce were preserved in the early part of the twentieth century. There was little deviation from the established devices and purposes of the form among the most popular farces. However, the advent of British playwright Joe Orton in the middle of the twentieth century marks the beginning of a series of farceurs whose work modified the face of farce. In his short life, and

consequently small body of work, Orton contributed to the legacy of farce a heightened interest in the macabre, sexual deviancy, and institutional ridicule. Orton's dry wit and brutal characterizations of hypocritical Christians, unscrupulous police officers, and greed-addled families put contemporary clothes on the taboo-hunting methods common to comedy. Orton's dramaturgy is more clearly destructive of the status quo for example than Moliere's or Wilde's. Orton whole-heartedly adopts the Bakhtinian carnival spirit, subverting social norms and reveling in a state of moral disarray. In *Loot* (1965), a young homosexual man unloads his mother's corpse from its coffin into a wardrobe, so that he may pack his stolen cash in the coffin. He must first, however, undress her and remove her false teeth, which he uses as castanets to imitate the Spanish prostitute he hopes to employ in the brothel his stealing will fund. No institution was safe from Orton who used his comedy as weapon. In fact, the primary contribution of Orton to farce's evolution was his refusal to allow his characters a return to normalcy or order at the conclusion his plays. Joan Dean, in her article "Joe Orton and the Redefinition of Farce" notes this phenomenon: "Joe Orton departs from his predecessors and contemporaries by refusing to acknowledge a fundamental difference between the bizarre circumstances of his plays and the course of mundane reality" (485). Orton is not interested in a one-day folk festival liberation, but a permanent overthrow of the status quo. Orton wants the topsy-turvy to become the new norm. This is more than a stylistic change for the genre, but a wholesale reimagining of what farce could accomplish. Ortonian farce is not conservative, or even transformative. Leslie Smith, in her 1989 *Modern British Farce: a Selective Study of British Farce from Pinero to the Present Day*, makes a similar observation of Orton's theatre.

The conventional notion that farces usually end with a return to relative normality has already been questioned in this study. It is often not the case. But it is a matter of degree, and it is certainly possible to argue that order *of a kind* does normally reassert itself... But this is emphatically not the case in Orton's. (138)

Orton's violent attacks on social institutions can best be described as destructive.

The derision in Orton's farces is aimed squarely at those who resist his pet social "aberrations." The morally conservative, the institutionally protected, and the complacently affluent are the outsiders at whom we laugh and ridicule. The socially subversive nature of Orton's work occupies the political territory of carnival revelry:

In the medieval feast of fools, in, for a brief carnival period, order was subverted and anarchy ruled; but in Orton's modern and uncompromising vision, that feast of fools, in all its grotesqueness and license, offers a permanent image of the human condition, not a temporary one. (Smith 138)

The Bakhtinian duality between the actual and the possible is shattered permanently in Orton's world. The festival never ends. While Orton was breaking ground in farce with his destructive dramaturgy, other European writers were also using the stage to reinvent their reality. In fact, the works of Ionesco, Beckett, and Genet—before Martin Esslin's genre-naming *Theatre of the Absurd* (1961)—were often referred to as "absurd farces" or "metaphysical farces."

Since Orton and the concurrent birth of postmodernism, however, farce has indeed changed. In 1978, Jessica Davis, charged the form of "avoid[ing] implied moral comment or social criticism" (2), but twenty-four years later addended her earlier categorization in light of postmodernism's appropriation of farce. Here she modifies her view in light of developments in dramatic literature:

It is the essence of post-modernism that the 'signification' or 'meaning' of a text or a performance lies in the individual interpretation of the reader or the beholder. Such an awareness, both on the part of the writers

and the audiences, has meant that structural ambiguity has moved strongly to the foreground in the stage-comedy, as elsewhere, in the closing decades of the twentieth century. Deliberately playing with established genre patterns and signals, tilting and shading mood and feeling, undercutting expectations with reversals, incongruities, dead ends, pauses, using self-referential comments and parodic haloes drawn from well known genre-classics, comic artists in recent years have pushed 'pure' farce in many different directions, exploiting the riches of its structures and devices and producing plays which use farce for many different purposes. (16)

Davis does not abandon her argument that farce is primarily apolitical, despite the works of contemporary farceurs like Orton (or, I would add, Nicky Silver, Noah Haidle, and David Lindsay-Abaire) that appear otherwise. She categorizes postmodern comedies that utilize the tenets of farce as "farce-and-something-else." I postulate that *Fuddy Meers* is just such a play.

Conclusion

Fuddy Meers certainly contains the elements of farce's style and structure, but its dualisms of tone, purpose, and characterization make it "farce-and-something-else." The play's thematic ambiguity at its conclusion qualifies its inclusion in this class of postmodern farce-like comedies. Perhaps Angus Jackson's British production failed because it stripped the darker, more dramatic elements which give the play its thematic heft. Jackson treated the play as a pure farce reducing it to a derisive reification of norms. *Fuddy Meers* contains elements of farce, but it articulates social and even philosophical commentary as well.

With this perspective it becomes clear why British reviews so frequently accused the play of turning sentimental in its final moments. Spencer writes in the *Daily Telegraph*, "British audiences, I fear, are made of less malleable stuff [than American audiences], and are more likely to spend the show's maudlin dying moments

investigating the back of the seat in front to discover whether the management has thoughtfully provided a sick bag.” If the play was conducted as a traditional farce, as the evidence suggests, with over-silly characters performing their wacky best, one can imagine how its last scene might be read as sentimental. But *Fuddy Meers* has more to accomplish than apolitical amusement. As critics like Ben Brantley observes “what started as a feather-light send-up has acquired a surprisingly touching depth” (Brantley, “Born Anew”)

This survey of the reviews of Lindsay-Abaire’s plays—from rants to raves—notes his stylistic hallmarks. He appropriates forms of humor high and low in service of his narrative conglomeration of the absurd and the tragic. Reviewers seem divided on the effectiveness of this strategy from play to play, but he is clearly interested in juxtaposing dark and light. In terms of genre, David Lindsay-Abaire’s *Fuddy Meers* uses patterns common to farce, but avoids completely restoring order in its conclusion. The play finds its humor in unexpected imbalances of Bergson’s soul-body duality, Bakhtin’s possible-established duality, and Bentley’s innocence-wisdom duality.

CHAPTER TWO

Analysis

Not all literature reflective of the grotesque and the carnivalesque is about carnivals. The social and cultural significance of festival can influence works in many different genres with varied central subjects. *Fuddy Meers*, however, is not only informed by the theoretical task of carnival—liberation from the norm through comic and surprising inversions—but is also aesthetically influenced by the tools of carnival—masks, grotesque figures, deformities, and heterogeneous language. Therefore, carnival will be as central to an analysis of the text of the play as it was to a theoretical understanding of the play's cultural lineage.

Plot Summary

Fuddy Meers is divided into two-acts and productions typically have an intermission between the two. The first act is divided into seven scenes and the second act has four.

The play opens with Claire awakening one morning with no memory of her own identity or of the chipper man, Richard, who brings her coffee. He chooses a dress for her to wear and—despite her mild protestation—insists she likes the dress. A seventeen year-old boy enters the room to get money for the bus. His name is Kenny and he is bitter and insulting toward Richard, screaming “Why can’t you just die?!” as he exits (Lindsay-Abaire, *Fuddy Meers* 24). Richard informs Claire that he is her husband and that the boy, Kenny, is her son. Sensing Claire’s confusion, he explains that she has

a rare mental disorder called psychogenic amnesia which wipes her memory clean each night.

RICHARD. The strange thing is that you're usually very lucid and capable of understanding complex thoughts. You even retain an enormous amount of information in the course of the day, but as soon as you go to sleep, it's gone. The next morning we have to start all over again. (26)

Richard then gives her a notebook that he "designed to get [her] through the day" (26). It contains a layout of the house, instructions for the home's appliances, and photos and descriptions of the people in her life. Richard exits to take a shower while Claire looks over her notebook.

After only a moment of being alone, a man in a ski mask pops out from under her bed. He has a limp, a lisp, and a manacle on his wrist. He claims that he is her brother Zack and that he has come to save her. The character, referred to as Limping Man in the script, explains, "That man in the shower ith going to kill you, Claire. He'th a very dangeroth perthon" (31). They escape out the window grabbing the dress and the notebook.

The next scene takes place in the Limping Man's car. Per Claire's request he takes off his mask, revealing a disfigured face including an ear that is a "twisted mass of burnt scar tissue" (33). Claire asks several questions that he is unwilling to answer, but he does reveal he is taking her to their mother's house. The Limping Man explains that Gertie, their mother, has had a stroke and suffers from aphasia. He throws Claire's notebook out the window of the car claiming it is unreliable and deceptive. For a brief moment, Claire hears carnival music that the Limping Man does not hear, which she

assumes must be a side effect of her amnesia. Before they arrive at Gertie's home, Claire discovers a scar on her forehead.

Scene three opens with Gertie drinking tea in her kitchen. Claire appears in the window and uses a photo (that she pulled out of her notebook) to identify Gertie as her mother. Gertie is surprised and unnerved by Claire's appearance, but even more bothered by the Limping Man's presence. Gertie invites them in, but before they enter the kitchen she takes the precaution of hiding a large kitchen knife beneath a dish towel. Gertie offers to make breakfast, but when she suggests bacon to Claire, the Limping Man reacts violently and throws the package out the window. He then exits into the basement to find a hack saw and Gertie tries to convince Claire to sneak out of the house. Claire, however, is relishing the memories recalled by the familiar kitchen and is suddenly interrupted by a puppet at the window. Claire unsuccessfully tries to identify the puppet and its owner, when the Limping Man returns and it becomes clear that he and the puppeteer, Millet, have planned this rendezvous at Gertie's house. Once Millet comes into the kitchen, the Limping Man, Millet and Claire go to the basement while Gertie tries to call 9-1-1. The Limping Man returns, however, and threatens to kill Gertie if she tries to contact anyone again.

Scene four takes place in Richard's car. Richard is clearly distressed as he searches for his missing wife. Kenny is smoking marijuana, detached from Richard and his worries. Richard hints at his own checkered past and asks Kenny for a "hit". As soon as he takes a puff, a police car pulls them over. The policewoman, smelling the marijuana, tells Richard "I'm gonna radio back to headquarters, and have them pop your name into a computer and see what turns up" (59). Hearing this, Richard panics and,

using a method he learned in his self-defense class, disarms her and takes the policewoman captive.

Scene five finds Claire and Millet alone in Gertie's basement playing with the childhood toys they have found there. Because Millet (when not speaking in the voice of the puppet) is easily intimidated Claire presses him for information about her true identity. Noticing Claire's ring, he mentions how it is similar to the ring that was stolen from the principal of the school where he was a janitor. Millet was arrested for the theft and he eventually met "Zack" in prison. Millet confesses that Zack frequently speaks of Claire as his "little blank slate." Claire is once again surprised by a sound that no one else hears—this time a distant barking dog. With further coercion, Millet, through his puppet, reluctantly reveals that Claire has been subjected to spousal abuse. She assumes he is referring to Richard.

Scene six takes place in Richard's car. Kenny has the policewoman, Heidi, at gunpoint and Richard is driving. Heidi tries to convince them to turn around or let her go. Richard and Kenny's adversarial relationship flares up until Kenny threatens to kill himself, but Richard and Heidi are distracted by a Denny's Restaurant.

Scene seven is back in Gertie's kitchen and begins with Claire vividly recalling the dying moments of a neighbor's dog. Gertie brings her a tin of photos and using a picture of Claire's brother Zack in a funhouse mirror, she struggles to convey that the Limping Man is not who he says he is. In another carnival music episode, Claire envisions a frying pan, but before she is able to place its significance the Limping Man reenters.

He wants to take Claire away, but Gertie slips her Zack's obituary. Claire realizes the Limping Man is not Zack just as Richard, Kenny, and Heidi arrive. The Limping Man tries to convince Claire to escape out the window, but Gertie stabs him with the kitchen knife. Chaos ensues with Kenny and Heidi struggling for Heidi's gun, Gertie and Millet fighting for the phone, Richard trying to win Claire's trust, and the Limping Man writhing on the floor. At the height of the mayhem, the gun fires and Act I ends.

As the lights rise on act two, it is revealed that Kenny has been shot in the arm and the Limping Man (hereafter referred to as Philip) and the puppet have been stabbed. Heidi has the gun and she quickly reveals that she is in cahoots with Philip and Millet. Claire demands straight answers, and to her frustration only Gertie steps up to tell the whole story. Neither Claire nor the audience gathers any information about the story from Gerite's garbled, albeit passionate, speech. Yet, Philip, needing medical attention reveals that Claire was once a school nurse. Kenny tries to tell his mom everything but Philip and Richard stop him, citing strict doctor's orders. To maintain order, Heidi orders Millet to take Richard and Gertie to the basement.

Act two, scene two finds Millet ineffectually guarding Richard and Gertie while his attentions are focused on his injured puppet companion. Millet asks Gertie to find a sewing kit to repair his friend. Gertie looks around basement while Richard tries to talk Millet out of Philip's scheme. Gertie returns with a sewing kit and a photo album. While Millet sews up the puppet, Gertie shows Richard photos of Claire in hopes of stirring him to action against their captors. Seeing a picture of Gertie in her garden gives Richard to idea to send Gertie to find her shovel in the basement. Alone with Millet,

Richard unwittingly confesses taking the ring that Millet was accused of stealing.

Furious, Millet starts to pursue Richard, knife in hand, but Gertie attacks Millet with the shovel neutralizing the threat.

Scene three takes place in the kitchen and overlaps with the previous scene chronologically. This is understood when the scene is interrupted early by Gertie's entrance looking for the sewing kit Millet sent her to find. Heidi's impatience with Claire's medical attention to Kenny and Philip, spurs her to reveal several pieces of previously concealed information. First, she is a kitchen worker—not a policewoman—who fell in love with Philip while he was on dish duty in the prison. She has become accessory to Philip's plan to escape and apologize to Claire, all under the condition that they will flee to Canada together.

However, the most important revelation of the scene comes from Kenny, who confesses that he is Philip's son and that Philip and Claire were married for nineteen years. Kenny also explains that Philip physically abused Claire regularly, but that his violence turned toward Kenny on his fifteenth birthday. At this point in Kenny's story, Claire begins to recall details of the story. After punching his son, Philip went into his room and fell asleep. Claire then emptied scalding bacon grease into Philip's ear. With Philip screaming, Claire took Kenny to the fair that her brother Zack had once loved so much and there she collapsed in front of the funny mirrors. When Claire awoke in the funhouse, her memory was gone. While they were at the fair, Philip set their home on fire, and was eventually arrested for arson.

Once the whole story has been told, Philip tries to convince Claire to come with them to Canada. Kenny steals the gun away from Philip and holds it to his head, but

Claire convinces Kenny to give her the gun. Once he does, she throws it out the window. When Claire rejects Philip's request for a second chance, he raises a hand to hit her, but Kenny intercepts the blow and throws Philip down, kicking and hitting him with anything at hand. From the basement, we hear a struggle and Heidi emerges having been shovel-smacked by Richard. She collapses to the floor. Millet collects the principal's ring and flees the house to clear his name.

In the final scene, Claire, Richard, Kenny and Gertie are headed home in the car. Claire looks through her notebook which Richard recovered while searching for her. She asks Richard to update it to include the painful truth of her life. "First sentence: Your deformed husband hit you hard and often" (140). They all wonder if perhaps things will be different for Claire in the morning; they wonder if she will remember. Claire falls asleep and they drive off into the darkness.

Director's Analysis

Carnival Spirit

Fuddy Meers is not only thematically influenced by a Bakhtinian spirit of carnival, but it also liberally uses carnival imagery. The title, a mispronunciation of "funny mirrors," is a reference to the mirrors in a carnival funhouse, which ultimately become a central symbol for the play. In addition, Claire hears carnival music and it is revealed that her mental breakdown occurred at those funny mirrors at the fair. The play boasts literal and figurative masks, a puppet, social reversals, and vulgar, grotesque humor throughout. Carnival imagery is undeniably central in *Fuddy Meers*. However, the connection runs beyond direct allusions to carnival. The play is informed at every

level by the subversive and dualistic elements of the carnival spirit. Therefore, I will use the lens of carnival to analyze the play's structure, characters, language and theme.

The word "carnival" warrants a semantic clarification as it has both historical implications and contemporary cultural significance. Carnival, as discussed in Chapter One, refers to the cultural phenomenon of medieval folk festivals and the descendant literary devices explored by Mikhail Bakhtin, Victor Turner, and others. Contemporary understanding of the word "carnival" also bears semiotic and phenomenological significance. Modern carnivals include Rio de Janeiro's *carnaval* and New Orleans's Mardi Gras. In addition to these regional, long-standing festival traditions, Bakhtin might identify a diluted version of the carnival spirit in today's travelling fairs known for rides and games. Fairs are generally perceived as events for children and families, but as Lindsay-Abaire explains, they are not completely free from the darker, more subversive undertones that characterize their medieval forbears.

I remember going to these incredibly cheesy country fairs when I was a child. They had this giddy, joyous quality and at the same time they were horribly frightening. Those kiddie roller coasters were great, but they could bust apart at any moment, and the guys working at the game booths were obviously recent ex-cons. Those places were just filled with the scariest, scariest, people. (Wren 36)

While the contemporary carnivals and fairs bear less political potency than their historical precedents, a dualistic spirit of play and terror still pervade these events. Parades, costumes and funhouses are designed to both delight and scare; while competitions that reward the largest pumpkin or squash resonate with the grotesque aesthetic connected to carnival. What is more, until the 1950s, freak shows—displaying grotesquely deformed men and women—were a common feature of fairs and festivals.

Carnivals may have changed over the centuries, but they still tread the same thematic territory.

Given Circumstances: Apparent and Actual

A director's analysis of a play often begins at with an examination of the given circumstances. And it is in this very analysis of given circumstances that *Fuddy Meers* presents a unique problem because those circumstances are unknown to both the audience and the main character. The central problem of the play is to determine the true given circumstances. In fact, false or incomplete circumstances are provided throughout the first act of the play, but by the end of the play, a clearer picture of the characters' pasts is revealed. The first act is largely about misinformation, while the second act reveals the truth. It is here we encounter the first element of carnival that pervades the play's structure. The circumstances of the play are masked. As a result, I will first assess the masks worn and the purposes for them, then I will analyze what is learned when the masks come off.

The characters that surround Claire distort or hide the truth from her for varying reasons. However, masks are not only worn for Claire's benefit. The masks worn by the characters of the play hide insecurities, checkered pasts, vulnerability, and pain. Even though each of the characters is unmasked in the second act, much can be learned from the masks they choose to wear for the first half of the play.

Claire's first encounter in the play is with Richard, whose eager explanations and aggressive cheeriness seem forced, and indeed, it is this cheeriness that indicates the first mask of the play. He wants so desperately to make a normal life of his marriage to Claire. He painstakingly explains her condition to her every morning, patiently has the

same conversations, and tirelessly tries to connect to her angry son Kenny. But it becomes clear very quickly that Richard is hiding behind a mask of normalcy. In scene six, after he has kidnapped the policewoman who has pulled them over, he speaks nervously to Kenny:

RICHARD. You see why I need your mother? This is the old me. You're in the car with the old me. Can you tell? ... I try to be a good man. I get a job at the hospital. Get a good family. And then one morning it's all gone. I'm back where I started, smokin' reefer, kidnappin' cops, crossin' state lines. (75)

Richard references a past life that sounds very different from the one he presents to Claire each morning. This admission is not a complete revelation of his true identity, but it makes clear that he wears a mask.

Philip is the next masked figure Claire encounters. He wears a literal ski mask in the first scene, but he has psychological masks as well. As far as Claire understands at this point, the man in the mask is her brother Zack and he has come to rescue her from the dangerous Richard. His mask, like Richard's, slips a few times in the first act. The clearest example comes at the end of scene five. After Millet almost reveals the entire truth through Hinky Binky, Philip (who Claire still believes is Zack) reassures her that she is safe and she goes to give him a sisterly kiss on the cheek. He turns at the last moment, however, and she finds herself kissing him squarely on the lips. When the kiss lasts a moment too long, Claire asks "Is our family always so friendly?" And he replies "Go have thum breakfatht. Your mom'th waiting for you. *Our* mom, I mean. *Our* mom" (72). As with Richard, the mask does not come off completely, but just enough for Claire to start to suspect that her apparent circumstances may not match up with the actual circumstances.

As act one progresses, it is evident that nearly everyone around Claire is masked. Heidi is pretending to be a hard-boiled cop and Kenny feigns apathy toward his family as a defense mechanism, protecting himself from the violent images which haunt him. Act one, scene six gives us an excellent opportunity to examine the masks worn by Kenny, Richard, and Heidi. In fact, dramaturgically the scene is designed to draw the audience's attention to the slippage of all three masks. Each of the characters challenges the others' selected identities. Richard has abducted Heidi—who he still believes is a cop—and Kenny is holding a gun on her.

HEIDI. I said I'd forget about it if you let me go.

KENNY. Pull over, butt-munch. She said she'd forget about it.

RICHARD. That's just a cop trick, Kenny. They are wily, wily creatures...Kenny, don't light up in here...

KENNY. Bite me.

RICHARD. I try to be fatherly to this kid—

HEIDI. Open the window! I'm hot and claustrophobic!

RICHARD. We need to have an intervention here.

HEIDI. I'm starting to feel like the car is shrinking.

RICHARD. I'm intervening! (*grabs joint and throws it out the window*)

KENNY. Hey!

RICHARD. I love you, Kenny. Heidi and I are here for you. We love you and support you.

KENNY. You make me wanna puke!

RICHARD. That's it, Kenny! I am so sick of your pissy wise-ass comments! You can go fuck yourself, you miserable little prick!

(*Kenny is visibly stung.*)

RICHARD. There! How do *you* like it?

HEIDI. I gotta unbutton my shirt.

RICHARD. That uniform looks too big for you. Didn't they have one your size?

HEIDI. I wear my clothes baggy.

RICHARD. Well, it's not flattering. You should wear something that fits.

HEIDI. I'll give you something that fits when I shove my billy-club up your ass and slap you around like a piñata!

RICHARD. You see, Kenny? The cop shows her true colors. The mask is slipping. (79)

Richard claims Heidi's mask is slipping, when in fact, all three masks are failing their wearers. Each character presses the others regarding their apparent personas. Kenny's self-defensive apathy and belligerence are challenged by Richard's outburst; Kenny challenges Richard's put-on family normalcy; and Richard challenges Heidi's identity as a policewoman. Ironically, this scene that takes place in a car travels no narrative distance. The central dramatic function of the scene is this questioning of each of the characters' self-imposed masks. It is the clearest and most direct example of "mask challenging," but numerous examples pepper the rest of the play. Lindsay-Abaire clearly wants to explore the idea that identity is both constructed and tested by those around us.

Claire's use of masks in the play is unique: she is neither concealing nor disguising her true self, but rather trying on masks in order to discover her identity. In the opening scene, she is assigned the mask of happy wife by Richard. Then, she is given the mask of sister and daughter by the Limping Man. In the second act, she tries on the identities of nurse and mother and quickly notes how familiar they feel:

Yes, apply pressure, stop the bleeding. This is familiar. All those kids running around with scrapes and cuts and cigarette burns and a souvenir paperweights sticking out of their foreheads. *(beat)* Is that right? That doesn't seem right to me. (101)

The wreckage of her memories is being released in jumbled clusters. She is a long way from constructing a lucid narrative of her past, but she is effectively constructing a present from the remnants of her memory that "fit" the best. Throughout the play, she is given or discovers masks of identity which she must try on to discern if they really fit her.

One noteworthy instance of Claire's identity play is complicated by the fact that she chooses to try on a literal mask. The moment occurs in a basement scene in act one

when Claire is trying to convince Millet to reveal what he knows. She comes across a monster mask that she concludes must have belonged to her brother and dons it to aggressively interrogate Millet.

MILLET. I can't. I'm just here to saw my manacle. I'm sorry.
CLAIRE. (*playful*) Oh. You're sorry? (*puts on mask, silly monster voice*). Millet's sorry he can't talk about Claire's amnesia.
(*MILLET laughs nervously.*)
CLAIRE. (*creeps to him, monster voice*) Well, what if I *made* you talk about it? (*points squirt gun at him*)
MILLET. I thought you were gonna put that away.
CLAIRE. (*threatening monster voice*) What if I tortured you until you *had* to talk about it? (*She puts down squirt gun, and grabs the saw from him.*)
MILLET. Hey.
CLAIRE. (*grabs MILLET's arm*) What if I said I'd cut off your hand if you didn't tell me about my amnesia?!
MILLET. (*petrified*) That's my puppet hand.
CLAIRE. Tell me what happened, Millet!
MILLET. Please!
CLAIRE. Tell me!
MILLET. I can't!
CLAIRE. (*whips off mask*) Kidding! (*She screams with laughter. He just stares at her, frightened.*)
CLAIRE. What's the matter? (*pause*) I wasn't really gonna do it. I'm not like that Millet. I don't have it in me.
MILLET. (*beat*) Yes you do.
CLAIRE. (*pause*) What's that supposed to mean?
MILLET. Nothing. (68-69)

Claire uses the liberating mask of medieval folk festival to transgress her usual sweet and compliant composure, all in the service of discovering who she really is.

As will be discussed later in this chapter, Claire is participating in the post-historical task of sifting through the wreckage of her past in order to construct her present. Interestingly, it is who Millet identifies Claire's put-on violence as characteristic of her true self. In this complication we have yet another indication that *Fuddy Meers* is not merely denying the rightful influence of exterior identity formation.

Rather, the play suggests that while using the input of others to determine one's identity is problematic, completely ignoring the input of others is inadequate. The mirrors may be "funny," but they are the only reflection we have.

In review, there are three reasons why masks are used in the play: to deceive, to hide, and to discover. All of these uses of mask connect to the dualities of laughter discussed in chapter one. Masks designed to deceive Claire, like Philip's mask of "brother" is based solely on Claire's ignorance. In Bentley's terms, she is like a baby, and we can find pleasure in her idealistic innocence juxtaposed with the regretful, shrewd Philip. We are especially pleased when Claire's innocence overpowers wisdom by befuddling Philip's schemes or seeing through them with innocent questioning. In the same way we would laugh at a child asking a burglar why he is stealing, we laugh at Claire asking Philip about his manacle, his deformities, or his "love affair" with Heidi.

Richard, Kenny, and Philip all utilize masks to hide from a truth of their past. Richard and Philip have checkered pasts and all of their efforts in the play are designed to hide from those lives. Kenny uses drugs and belligerence to avoid facing the circumstances that surround him. All of them would fit into Bergson's category of the inelastic. Instead of being able to adapt, grow, and genuinely change, they have chosen to hide. They are like the child who covers his own eyes so no one will see him. They are laughable because of their inability to take the proper adaptive steps, which would include acknowledgement of their flaws and wrongdoings. Richard's chipper neurosis, Philip's poorly managed rage, and Kenny's belligerent apathy are all paper-thin defenses against true adaptability.

Finally, Claire's experimentation with various masks qualifies as Bakhtinian subversive revelry. Over the course of the play, Claire tries on the masks of wife, sister, mother, nurse, and monster. In so doing, she is experimenting with transformation and liberation from the role of helpless victim assigned her in the wake of her incident.

The start of act two signifies the beginning of the unmasking process. The apparent circumstances give way to the actual circumstances. The first mask to come off is Heidi's. With gun in hand she begins barking orders to Millet and showing concern for the injured Philip. It becomes evident that Heidi's true identity is the polar opposite to the mask she has worn through act one. In act one Heidi appears to be a hardened police officer, but the second act reveals her to be a lovelorn criminal. Her participation in Philip's scheme began because she fell in love with Philip while working with him in the prison kitchen. He wrote her love poems and she was seduced into breaking the law to help him escape.

Act two reveals that Philip is wearing one mask over another. In act one, he portrays himself as Claire's savior and brother. But when it is revealed that he is Claire's abusive ex-husband, he performs the role of "changed man." The second mask is flawed as well and quickly starts to slip. It is a mask he has used to disguise himself from Heidi as is evidenced when he tries to change the plan by bringing Claire along to Canada. He has clearly used and manipulated Heidi and has no intention of continuing a relationship with her. Then, when Claire rejects his invitation, his second mask slips the rest of the way, and his violent temper surfaces.

Kenny's mask comes off in reaction to Philip. Throughout act one, Kenny has played the part of the brooding teenager. But in act two, his true nature starts to

manifest itself through his hostile attitude toward his abusive father. He is the first character who tries to tell Claire what has really happened to her. And throughout the second act, he keeps leaking information about the past. He sees his revelations as the chance to save his mother and retaliate against his abusive father. The play spotlights the moment Kenny decides to drop his mask when he tells Claire, “She [Heidi] doesn’t know you. You were a good mother” (102). Kenny has emerged from his alternately numb and passive-aggressive mask revealing a caring son who wants to protect his mother. He ultimately enacts this transformation by physically defending his mother from Philip’s temper.

Richard and Millet also make revelatory moves in act two. It is revealed that their paths intersected when Richard stole a ring and Millet was blamed for the crime. The events radically impacted each man’s fate, and consequently their chosen identities. Millet went to prison and supplanted his anger and violent feelings into a puppet. Richard’s life was impacted when he used the stolen ring to propose to his girlfriend, who rejected him spurring a radical lifestyle change. When Millet receives validation of his innocence, he too experiences an unmasking. Millet’s suspicions from act one are confirmed, that he is not, in fact, a violent person. He later decides to take the ring and clear his name with his former employer.

Richard, in addition to revealing his own violent past, reveals that he manipulated Claire’s affections in order to win her hand in marriage. At the end of the play, when Claire has the entire story, her attentions turn to her marriage to Richard. She asks if she agreed to marry him and he replies, Claire then asks if she agreed to marry Richard in her amnesiac state. He responds:

RICHARD. Not the first eight times I asked. Once we made it as far as the license, and you backed out. But then one day I got lucky. You woke up in that hospital bed and I was waiting with a cup of coffee and I said ‘Good morning, Huckleberry’ and you smiled at me. And I told you I’d been in love with you for many months and we shared a lot together and would you marry me. And you said okay. (141)

In essence, he forced the ring off of one woman’s hand and finessed it onto another’s.

Both the robbery and the proposal are challenged as transgression. Regarding the robbery, Millet scolds him “You can’t hurt people like that” (112) and Claire labels his proposal story “weird.” The play has come full circle, calling attention to the first mask it introduced. Richard is not fully condemned and is allowed to remain a part of the family even with the acknowledgement of his mask. Richard’s unmasking, in the final moments, reinforce the play’s ambivalent verdict on masks and their role in identity formation. Richard clearly put on a contrived sense of normalcy, but the mask has genuinely transformed him.

There is a relevant note to make about Claire’s understanding of herself in act two. When Gertie appoints herself the best candidate for an explanation of the day’s events, she only confuses Claire. Claire uncharacteristically lashes out “What the fuck are you talking about?!” and then offers an apologetic “I’m sorry. I’m not myself today” (98). This is a particularly interesting statement from a woman who does not know who she is on this or any other day. It implies that even though she lacks a cognitive sense of her identity, she has a deeper knowledge of what is and what is not true to her nature.

Structure

Just as I examined the given circumstances in two phases—corresponding with act one and act two—a similar approach to analyzing *Fuddy Meers*’s structure is helpful.

There is a stark difference between the structure and pacing of the two acts. Again employing the carnival metaphor, act one feels very much like a carnival ride, where the audience and Claire experience a dizzying journey through dark curving corridors with surprising elements popping out from every corner. The second act, however, allows Claire and the audience to get off the ride, and take a look behind the scenes at the contributing factors and characters that have made for such a wild experience.

Early twentieth-century carnival rides, especially those known as “dark rides,” are famous for their quick turns and surprising twists. Figure one shows an actual path

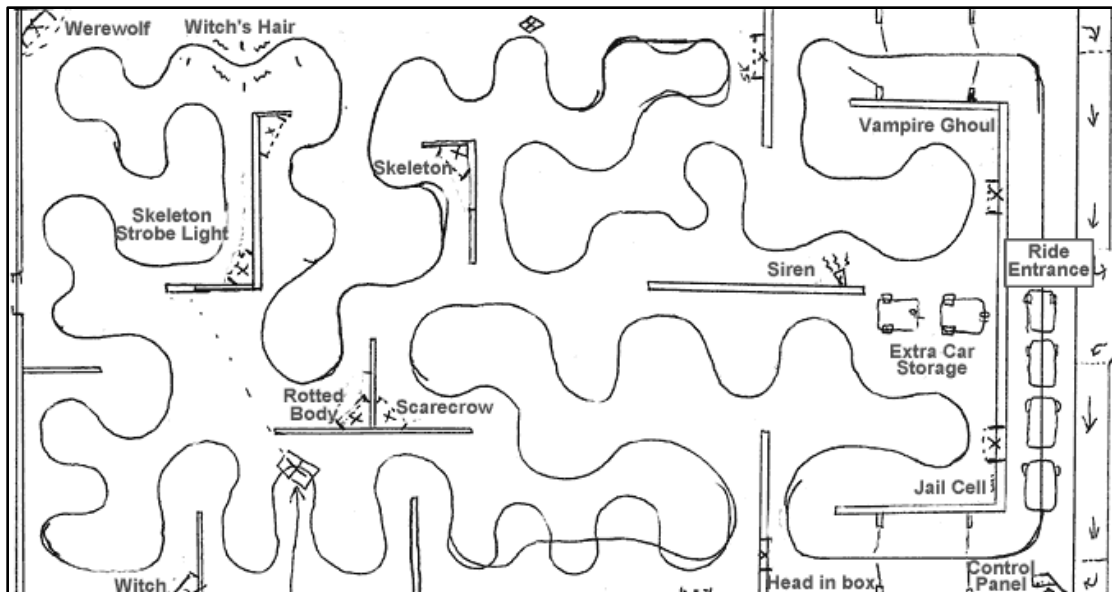


Fig. 2 Ride map of Laff in the Dark. Dudko, Mike. Digital image. *Laff in the Dark*. 2004. 8 Feb. 2010 <<http://www.laffinthedark.com/articles/compounce/compounce3.htm>>.

of just such a ride. *Fuddy Meers*’s first act follows a similar journey. Lindsay-Abaire confesses to writing the scenes of the play incrementally and claims he tried to “leave a semi-good cliffhanger every ten pages” (Warburton). This titillating style still exists in the play’s narrative as evidenced by the particularly chaotic opening scene. Before Claire or the audience has a chance to settle into the play’s strange narrative, a masked

man emerges from beneath her bed and whisks her out the window. Not only is the masked man a surprise, but he also undermines much of the exposition that the audience assumes is reliable. The first act continues to surprise with the kidnapping of a cop, violent threats, exceedingly quirky secondary characters, and startling entrances.

In addition to the narrative twists and turns of the first act, there are a series of tonal shifts as well. Dizzying juxtapositions of levity and gravity keep the audience off kilter and anxious for what the next moment holds. For example, after Claire has been told of her psychogenic amnesia she asks Richard about the cause of her disorder.

CLAIRE. Isn't amnesia usually brought on by some sort of physical or psychological trauma?

RICHARD. *(beat)* Uh... I'm not sure what you mean.

CLAIRE. I mean something horrible happens and then amnesia kicks in. Yes, I believe that's correct. I don't know why I remember that.

RICHARD. I need to hop into the shower.

CLAIRE. I don't usually mention the trauma, do I?

RICHARD. No, actually you've *never* mentioned it.

CLAIRE. I could tell by your face that I hadn't. Oh, today *is* a special day, isn't it? (27-28)

The scene, up to this point has been light and funny. Claire seems optimistic in the face of her strange condition, and then we see a peak of the darkness that lies behind the disorder. And yet, Claire's buoyant spirit gives the audience escape from imagining the evil that has befallen her.

Another example of the fast-paced tonal twists and turns in the first act comes in scene three. Millet has just made his strange and funny appearance at the window in the form of his puppet Mr. Hinky Binky. Philip begs patience for Millet because, "hith mother wath a free-bather" (49). Claire does not understand and Gertie explains,

GERTIE. A base-freezer, Clay. Day base-freeze croquet.
CLAIRE. Oh. I love croquet. I was always the blue mallet.
(*Millet enters.*)
MILLET. (*Noticing the kitchen*) Wow this is so weird. Because one time— (*in cheery puppet voice*) Millet was sodomized in a house like this. (49)

In a few short lines, the subject of the dialogue moves from drug-using parents, to a yard game, to sodomy. These tonal twists and turns perfectly mirror the dualism of carnival rides. Shock quickly turns to laughter and back again.

The scene structure of act one also contributes to its frenetic pace. The first act of the play contains nearly twice as many scenes as the second act, and nearly half of those are set in a moving vehicle. The quick cutting between Claire with the Limping Man and Richard with Kenny create a chase like sequence throughout the first act. The act ends in a climax of chaos where all seven characters are onstage at once, struggling for control of a phone, a gun, and a puppet when suddenly the gun is fired. The audience's topsy-turvy "ride" through act one ends with a literal bang, and after a brief moment, the lights come up. It is this first act of the play that most resembles farce. Characters strange maladies and unusual circumstances spiral into a chaotic climax. But for the most part, *Fuddy Meers* diverges from the tone and structure of farce at the intermission.

When the play resumes in the second act, there is a notable shift in the type of action. The chase has ended; the chasers have arrived and been taken captive. The primary action of act two is the emergence of the truth despite obstacles of deception, miscommunication, and violence. The play moves into two primary arenas, the kitchen and the basement. And it is notable that the action of the two settings occurs simultaneously. Act two, scene two takes place in the basement, the dark place where

the memorabilia of the past has been boxed and stored. In the midst of the dark place, Gertie retrieves photos of the bright past to show Richard and remind him of happier times. In the kitchen, a bright and cheery place, Kenny helps Claire recall memories of the darker times. The efforts for recall that occur simultaneously in the basement and kitchen are both designed to incite action. Gertie wants to move Richard to defend Claire and Kenny wants Claire to stand up against Philip's plan.

It is also worth noting that the second act of the play has less humor than the first. Characters are anchoring themselves in the actual circumstances of their lives, and the idiosyncrasies are less prominently displayed. For example, Philip's dialogue seems less devoted to playing with his "lisp". The lines designed for comic effect in act one, for example, "Thpeedy, thpeedy, ethcape"(32), are gone. Kenny has come down from his marijuana high and Gertie's lines (with the exception of her "explanation" to Claire) are more lucid. Even Hinky Binky's lines are subdued in the second act, in part, because he is out of commission until Millet has the chance to sew him up.

Language

Distorted communication and speech is so central to *Fuddy Meers* that even uttering its title requires speaking with aphasia. In addition, many of the characters of the play demonstrate distorted or unusual ways of speaking. By the middle of act one, we witness the interaction of one character with a severe lisp, another character who spouts his profane impulses through a puppet, and a woman who speaks in garbled dialogue. And yet the audience has attuned their ears to each of these unique dialects. This multifarious speech of the play is a feature well-rooted in medieval folk festivals. The spontaneous and temporary culture that sprang up during festival engendered new

speech patterns that would have been considered inappropriate for official use on any other day. As in *Fuddy Meers*, the bulk of these involved profanities and abusive language. Bakhtin explains,

The familiar language of the marketplace became a reservoir in which various speech patterns excluded from the official intercourse could freely accumulate. [They] acquired a general tone of laughter, and became, as it were, so many sparks of the carnival bonfire which renews the world. (17)

The language of the carnival was both heterogeneous and familiar. Bakhtin calls it dialogic heteroglossia. Diverse in its origins, the linguistic conglomeration of tongues high and low, young and old, rich and poor was merely another manifestation of the “second life” that carnival invariably created for the people of its culture.

Humor

A close look at the use and sources of humor within *Fuddy Meers* quickly calls to mind the discussion in chapter one of the theories of Bakhtin, Bergson, and Bentley. Each of these theorists locates the heart of laughter at an imbalance between metaphysical forces. The humor found in *Fuddy Meers* depends heavily on the nature of laughter scrutinized by these three theorists.

First, *Fuddy Meers* finds a source of laughter in the carnival grotesque. Bakhtinian grotesquery celebrates the disproportionate and the transformed. Costumes with enormous heads and men who walked on their hands greeting each other with their feet were the common traffic of the medieval folk festival. Paupers pretended to be kings and royalty consorted with commoners. Inversion of the norm and violation of the expected incited laughter. The humor of *Fuddy Meers* relies on these transgressions.

The clearest example of inverted communication is seen in the character Millet and his alter ego Hinky Binky. Millet is an escaped prison inmate convicted of assault, and yet, he acts very much like an innocent child. In addition, he carries around a puppet. Typically, puppets indicate childhood fun and play, but this particular puppet has been burdened with the darkest, most repressed parts of Millet's psyche. He blurts out Millet's most socially deviant thoughts and his most embarrassing biographical facts with no regard for social norms. This is very much in the spirit of carnival's topsy-turvy sensibilities. The criminal beast acts like a child and the child's puppet he bears acts like a beast.

There are many other examples of characters who dodge our expectations to comedic effect. Gertie, the sweet grandmother, has a foul mouth and ultimately resorts to violence. Kind, optimistic Richard attacks and kidnaps a police officer. Heidi, the seemingly stoic police officer, begins to unravel in the confines of Richard's car. Best of all, Philip, a menacing abuser, turns out to be humorously weak as evidenced by his lisp, limp, and cowering to Heidi's aggressive affections. In all the examples, the unexpected contradictions and surprising juxtapositions are the result of characters who are wearing masks. The revelation of the real person beneath a "put on" personality is funny. The humor comes from the unexpected slippage of their masks. In fact, as with dramatic irony, the impact of revealing a character's true nature is most compelling when the audience is made aware of the truth before the character on stage.

Appropriating yet another element of carnival tradition *Fuddy Meers* uses unlikely allegiances between characters as a source of humor. Just as there was a joyous joining of prince and pauper at medieval carnival, there are a few occasions where

characters who should be enemies are momentarily aligned. For example, when Millet is guarding Claire in the basement the scene begins with them jumping rope together. He is her captor, and in cahoots with her mincing former husband, yet in the basement they find a childlike bond. This moment with the two characters laughing and playing together occurs immediately after Philip has made a threat on Gertie's life. The audience understands that Claire and Millet are on different sides of a very real struggle, so the sight of them jumping rope together is an inversion of expected behaviors.

There are other moments where Lindsay-Abaire temporarily connects disparate characters. On one occasion, Richard and Limping Man—adversaries throughout the play—find themselves speaking the same line.

KENNY. I'll tell you what happened, Mom.

RICHARD and LIMPING MAN. Kenny, no! (*Richard and Limping Man look at each other.*)

RICHARD. Remember what the doctors said, Kenny. There were strict instructions.

LIMPING MAN. Better listen to your dad.

In their joint outburst, they—and presumably the audience—are surprised at their unity of purpose. The unexpected relationship, momentary though it may be, generates a pleasure response in the audience as they see disparate beings coming together. Folk festivals similarly joined together typically heterogeneous groups in laughter.

Aristocracy and the plebeian citizenry would find themselves comically unified. Laid over the surprising allegiance that occurs on stage is a spontaneous communion among the audience as they share laughter.

Within *Fuddy Meers* there are several characters and occasions which call to mind Eric Bentley's prerequisite juxtaposition between innocence and experience in order to incite laughter. From the very beginning of the play, Claire is presented as the

ultimate naïve hero. With no memory of disappointment, she approaches her world with a child-like innocence that often flies in the face of her severely damaged family. In the first scene, Richard explains her condition like he does every morning. But, of course, the idea of the amnesia is new to her.

CLAIRE. Tell me, Richard, if my memory serves me correctly – (*Stops and laughs at herself.*) Aren't I being ironic?

RICHARD. You make the same joke every day.

CLAIRE. Hm. Do you ever laugh?

RICHARD. No

CLAIRE. How sad. (27).

Richard plays the part of the wiser soul that recalls disappointment and pain, in this particular case, the familiar pain of waking up to a wife that does not know him. Claire has a fresh, unsullied attitude about her condition. This naiveté, Bentley claims, is amusing to us and a source of laughter. There is an interesting parallel to carnival laughter here. Witnessing a naïve innocent approaching the world unaware of pain and disappointment is similar to witnessing the playful subversion of societal roles. We laugh because the innocent's faith in the world is silly, and the pauper's claim on royalty is ridiculous. But in both cases, Bentley would argue, it is hopefulness unfettered by disappointment that brings pleasure. With these innocent heroes and carnival revelers we are living out, if for only a moment, the dream of childhood, free from disillusion.

The third source of laughter we find in *Fuddy Meers* might be classified as buffoonery. Quite simply, people act stupidly in the play and it is funny. This calls to mind Bergson's ideas about inelasticity. We laugh at those who are unable to adapt and adjust to their changing environment. Millet is the best example of this kind of humor. His inability to control the puppet on his own hand, and his apparent anguish at the destruction of the puppet point to a mental and emotional obsession that is humorous.

He cannot see, as we can, that the puppet, is merely his repressed side, and so he treats Hinky Binky as autonomous. This inelasticity, this inability to see himself as clearly as we do, is a source of delight.

CLAIRE. Why are you nervous?

MILLET. (*As puppet.*) Millet's a chicken-shit! (*Laughs at Binky.*) I just don't like basements. (*As puppet.*) Plus *I've* got biiiiiigggg mouth!

(*Normal.*) Sorry. Catholic school.

CLAIRE. Oh, you're Catholic.

MILLET. Not me. Just Binky. (66-67)

In this exchange, we not only see Millet's buffoonery, unable to understand that he has control over his own puppet, but we get a taste of Bakhtinian topsy-turvy as the puppet seems to control the man. If we also consider that Millet and his puppet exemplify Bentley's innocent/wise dichotomy, we see that Millet is the intersection of all three forms of laughter used in the play.

Themes

Identity. At its most basic level, *Fuddy Meers* is about identity formation. The funhouse mirrors of the play's title are a metaphor for the inaccurate reflections of ourselves cast by the people around us. Claire must determine who she is despite everyone's effort to dictate an identity for her. From the start of the play, there are indications of the conflict between external expectations and her inner sense of self.

RICHARD. (*holds up dress*) How about this today?

CLAIRE. You mean for me?

RICHARD. You like this dress.

CLAIRE. Oh, it's hideous.

RICHARD. You wear it all the time. You wore it to Jackie's Thanksgiving party. (*motions to coffee*) That's your coffee. You can drink it.

CLAIRE. Who's Jackie?

RICHARD. Your cousin.

CLAIRE. Oh. (*takes coffee*) Aren't you having coffee?
RICHARD. I don't drink coffee. I had some juice
CLAIRE. Oh, juice is nice.
RICHARD. No, you don't like juice, sweetheart.
CLAIRE. I don't?
RICHARD. No.
CLAIRE. I don't think I like that dress.
RICHARD. You do.
CLAIRE. I don't.
RICHARD. You do, darling. You like it very much.
CLAIRE. This is very unsettling. (20-21)

Not only is Claire told who she is, but even her specific tastes in food and clothing are dictated to her. The dress and the juice are narratively inconsequential, but are iconic of the struggle she will face throughout the play and perhaps of the struggle we all face as we work to construct our own identities, daily and ceaselessly.

Claire's predicament is further complicated by the arrival of Philip who tells her that Richard is not who or what he says he is. He throws her tenuous identity out the window with the notebook of labeled photos that Richard gave her. Philip's ultimate plan is to permanently abduct Claire. Presumably he imagines that when she wakes the next morning with no one to marry he can convince her they are a happy couple, doing essentially what Richard does on a daily basis.

In regards to Claire's identity, it is significant Philip calls Claire his "blank slate." He, like Richard, sees her amnesia as a tabula rasa on which he can write his future. It is significant that Gertie calls Claire "Clay", because she has a pliable identity easily shaped by whoever is with her when she awakes. Through the lens of this theme, the spine of the play's action is to find her true self. The music, sound effects, and intermittent memories that are battling to rise above this particularly cacophonous day are the residue of her previous self. She must find the courage, aided by the love and

bravery of her son and mother, to claim her true past. As the play settles into relative *denouement*, Claire shows us that she is no longer willing to be shaped by others. When Philip's plan is foiled, Richard tells Claire, "You're doing okay, Claire." And she snaps "Richard, don't tell me how I'm doing" (139). It is a direct contrast to her earlier acquiescence about what she likes to drink and wear. She must overcome their control of her past and subsequent future in order to become an autonomous woman.

Gender. In light of Claire's task to resist male narratives foisted upon her, it would be a mistake to overlook the play's latent gender politics. *New York Times* theatre critic Ben Brantley notes this particular aspect of the play's meaning. "Claire's daylong road trip of a journey toward self-knowledge may be more antic than Thelma and Louise's," Brantley writes, "but it sets off sharp, far-reaching sparks of thought about women whose lives are determined by men" (Brantley, "Born Anew") In fact, the daily recurrence of her amnesia could be read as a reminder of constant struggle for identity in the face of male hegemony. Each morning, she has an existential to-do list which includes determining her own identity, remembering her love for her closest family members, and questioning men who want to tell her who she is.

Memory. Prerequisite to both identity formation and gender politics however, is *Fuddy Meers's* central subject, memory. Exploration of memory and history are pet topics of postmodern culture and postmodern theatre in particular. At the time of *Fuddy Meers's* premier and ever since it is easy to note a preponderance of films, plays, and novels which explore memory in what Pierre Nora calls *posthistoire* culture. Nora, and other theorists, including François Lyotard and Mikhail Bakhtin, have all addressed the

failure of a singular historical narrative. Nora specifically portrays the destruction of a linear historical narrative, where significance is gained through tracing causal connections. Nora diagnoses the condition of history: “An increasingly rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good, a general perception that anything and everything may disappear—these indicate a rupture of equilibrium”(7).

Because of his perception that humanity is faced with the wreckage of innumerable narratives, Nora advocates for an approach to history that engages with the crumbled pieces rather than the imagined whole. To use a theatrical metaphor, Nora forgoes the dramatic plot of history and heads rather for the sets and the props. “There are *lieux de memoire*, sites of memory,” Nora writes, “because there are no longer *milieux de memoire*, real environments of memory” (7). He recognizes that memory crystallizes not within a context, but rather in a specific place or at a particular point. Monuments, historical landmarks, images, and even mottos contain a more robust meaning than any narrative which tries to arrange them. Jean Baudrillard is another important voice who notes the end of history. He claims that the loss of an organic past, and subsequently a predictable future, are at the heart of the postmodern sense of an “end of history.” Jeanette Malkin, in her book *Memory-Theatre and Postmodern Drama*, characterizes Baudrillard’s end of history as “an antiapocalypse of stasis and entropy, of repetition and simulation” (Malkin 33).

In this context, the relationship between history and memory must be re-imagined. History was once the authoritative and definitive narrative, whereas memory was unreliable and personal to a fault. Therefore the postmodern view not only demands that we rethink history, but memory as well. Nora contrasts the two,

Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. (Nora 8)

Nora describes two accounts of the past: history, constructed by “hopelessly forgetful modern societies” put forth by victors and oppressors with an indelible desire to maintain their position, and memory, born out of innumerable human experiences, with no mandate to be definitive. Memory is specific and “installs remembrance with the sacred” (9). In this context, memory—multiplicitous, biased, inaccurate, and non-linear—lays as valid a claim on truth as history.

Baudrillard goes so far as to connect recollection to amnesia. “We arm ourselves with the whole battery of artificial memory,” he writes, “all the signs of the past to face up to the absence of a future that will consist only of a replaying of the past”(as quoted in Malkin 34) Malkin summarizes Baudrillard’s thoughts: “We recall in order to rewrite, we collect in order to reform. The past is evoked in order to be overcome and forgotten” (34). In the context of *Fuddy Meers*, Claire experiences all of these post-historical tasks. The historical narrative handed to her is discarded—literally thrown out the window of the car; she sorts through *lieux de memoire*—scavenging for clues of her identity in Gertie’s kitchen and basement; and finally she recalls in order to rewrite—only after remembering her past as an abuse victim is she able to ascend to the role of agent.

The theatre in particular has been greatly impacted by this change in approach to the past. If what history has experienced can be called an earthquake, then theatre is a

building very near the epicenter. Memory theory has become an important aspect of theatre. Why is theatre so deeply shaken by history's collapse? Attilio Favorini traces the vital relationship between memory and theatre in his book *Memory in Play: from Aeschylus to Sam Shepard*:

As a 'time art' (like music, dance, and literature), rather than a space art (architecture, painting, sculpture), theatre has a formal affinity for memory...The phenomenologies of memory and theatre interpenetrate one another. On the one hand, theatre's fundamental mode of repetition makes it a child of memory. This by no means renders theatre unique among the arts—all the Muses, not just Thalia, are daughters of Mnemosyne, goddess of memory. Yet, theatre seems particularly thick with memory. From rehearsals to memory plays to theatrical memorabilia to theatres themselves—which constitute the exoskeleton of theatre's memory—theatre can be fruitfully contextualized as an activity of remembering. (2)

Favorini dubs theatre a close cohort of memory and he is not alone in this declaration.

Marvin Carlson in his *The Haunted Stage; The Theatre as Memory Machine*, conveys a similar role for theatre in a post-history culture. He sees memory as the central purpose of theatre.

The retelling of stories already told, the reenactment of events already enacted, the experience of emotions already experienced, these are and have always been central concerns of the theatre in all times and places, but closely allied to those concerns are the particular production dynamics of theatre: the stories it chooses to tell, the bodies and other physical materials it utilizes to tell them, and the places they are told. (3)

Carlson imagines theatre inextricably tied to memory in its subject matter and its performative nature. With such an intimate relationship between the stage and the memory it is easy to see why such a seismic shift in the way history and memory are viewed would greatly impact theatre. The impact is twofold.

First, there has been a wave of playwrights and plays that are interested in postmodern memory as the subject and/or setting of their work. Malkin depicts postmodern theatre's fascination with memory,

The theatricalization of this new memory discourse has produced some of the most powerful and provocative works on the contemporary stage: works by Samuel Beckett, Heiner Müller, Sam Shepard, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Thomas Bernhard. These authors, in their various voices, give sophisticated and often moving expression to the ways we remember and forget, to the traumas we have repressed or obsessed, to the traces of a no longer cohesive past, and to the circulations. (1)

To Malkin's list we could easily add Tony Kushner, Tom Stoppard, Charles Mee, Sarah Ruhl, David Lindsay-Abaire, Stephen Adly Guirgis, and David Hare as playwrights who have written at least one play directly concerned with memory and its role in a postmodern climate.

Secondly, the destruction of history has forced theatre artists to reconsider structure and form. Now that history has left the epistemological party, theatrical storytellers have to learn to dance with memory. Memory, however, refuses to lead as history once did. Instead, the characters of postmodern drama are often self-aware editors of their own recall and the result is deliberately layered and disjointed. Malkin describes the nature of post-history drama:

Postmodern memory-theatre is often overburdened by disconnected stimuli: conflicting discourses, unexplained objects, intruding images, overlapping voices, styles that veer and shift in baffling and sudden ways... Often, the memories burst upon the stage without order, causality, direction, or coherence. (9)

Her account of these plays sounds remarkably like Nora's description of memory, and for good reason. The very nature of storytelling had to be rethought once universal narrative was destroyed. "The long term result of this explosion," Malkin writes, "was

the shattering not only of the continuum of history, but also the shape of its representation” (28). It could be argued that when it comes to plays dealing with drama in the postmodern era, form follows cognition. And the change in conception of the past from unified to multi-layered makes for a compelling, sometimes overwhelming, theatre of pastiche or what Mueller called “flooding.”

Flooding entails overwhelming and even superfluous imagery and theatricality that defies obvious linear or rationalistic reading. Again, we hear Nora’s ideas about history/memory in a description of theatre that deals overtly or latently with memory. Just as the current desire for an uber-archive of each bit of mnemonic minutiae renders the artifacts meaningless, the flooding of the theatre with images and accounts leads to an almost indiscernible thematic map. Mueller encourages this type of theatre to fight uncritical response or easy reception. In other words, where Nora sees over-archiving as problematic to significance, Mueller sees flooding as a strategy to challenge audiences and deepen meaning. Nora believes too much information problematizes significance; so does Mueller, but that complexity interests him.

Into this well-spring of theoretical and dramatic discussion of memory’s role in the postmodern era comes *Fuddy Meers*. The play is deceptively simple; its implications in light of the theoretical movements swirling around it are significant. Farce has long used maladies to drive plot, but Lindsay-Abaire uses his protagonist’s malady to do much more. Claire’s amnesia makes her an agent uniquely positioned to undertake the postmodern project of identity formation amidst toppled master narratives. Claire is faced with artificial *milieu de memoire* constructed by her those around her, but she instead seeks out the truth amidst the *lieux de memoire* of her shattered past.

Conclusion

Fuddy Meers explores all the complexities and failings of both history and memory and offers no solid footing for navigating them. The play's ambiguous ending is a poignant whisper of humanity's perennial battle for a personal narrative. In Claire's liminal final moments between waking and sleep, between knowing and forgetting, she tells her husband to include facts about her painful past in her "book." But, what will tomorrow hold? While the structure of *Fuddy Meers* possesses a dénouement common to traditional farce, thematically the play leaves room for ambiguity. Lindsay-Abaire withholds a fully realized return to the order established at the play's open. In so doing, he reminds us that freedom is eternally "for now." Claire, will have to decide daily if she will participate in the rituals of the actual or if she will join the carnival of the possible.

CHAPTER THREE

The Design Process

The collaborative nature of theatre can be exhilarating and exasperating. After unpacking a play's themes, tone, structure, and dramaturgical power, the director is then faced with the challenging task of sharing an artistic vision. The director must move the world of the play from a private creative understanding to a language of image, movement, color and sound in order to convey and inspire others to embark on the artistic journey. This process typically begins with designers.

The evolution of *Fuddy Meers*'s design elements can be traced through three stages of development: 1) conceptualization, 2) preparation, and 3) actualization. The research and thinking I had done about the play (represented in Chapters One and Two) were the beginning of my conceptualization process. Next, I had to crystallize my concept into visual and auditory language and then share my ideas with the design team. The first design meeting was late in August, eight full weeks before rehearsals were scheduled to begin.

Conceptualization

When it came to speaking with the collaborating designers I had many goals. I wanted the design to make tangible the ideas of carnival and grotesquery; I wanted the play to feel like a ride through Claire's day; and I wanted to illustrate the play's juxtaposition of light and dark tones. My vision was ideologically well-supported, but I had to come up with language for the images, shapes, sounds, and colors that would speak to designers whose objective it is to move the play from page to stage.

As an exercise to access this visual language I put myself in a designer's shoes. I pretended to be the scenic designer for the production and made a crude sketch of what the set might look like (Figure 3.1). In so doing, I was quickly jarred from my world of ideas and into the world of actual theatre. The first thing I became aware of during my scenic sketch exercise was the importance of the kitchen and the basement of Gertie's house. It became clear as I imagined the needs of the set, that the bulk of the play takes place in those two locations. Knowing that the play would be dominated by those two settings, their juxtaposition became an opportunity to represent the play's light and dark duality. I was reminded of an idea triggered by Elizabeth Malkin's (1999) book *Postmodern Memory Theatre*. In a chapter exploring the unique nature of postmodern memory and the related deconstruction of master narratives I wrote the following words in the margin: "Any semblance of order is but a façade hiding darkness and chaos." The kitchen represents the bright façade—the artificial narrative that is being fed to Claire by those around her. The basement, on the other hand, represents darkness and chaos—the wreckage of Clair's past full of violence and loss. This became a guiding principle for the way the kitchen and basement would contrast with each other. I decided that I wanted the kitchen to be elevated higher than the basement for a few reasons. Thematically, the bright, cheery narrative is laid over Claire's darker and violent history, so the layering of the light over the dark was important to me. In addition, I wanted the aesthetic complexity, blocking options, and playfulness of multiple levels.

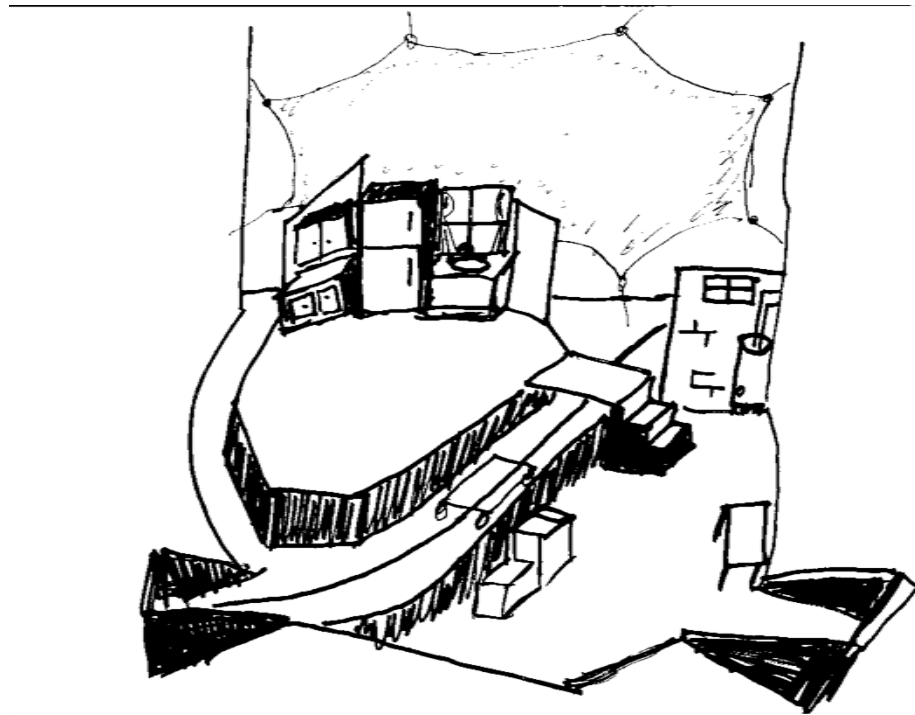


Fig. 3.1 Director's sketch.

Secondly, my scenic sketch exercise forced me to deal with the play's narrative pace, with its sharp turns and surprises around every bend. With carnival looming large in my theoretical work, I realized while sketching that I wanted the set to feel like a ride. I wanted scenic allusions to carnival rides and the most logical opportunities for those allusions were the "car" scenes. Therefore, I sketched a single rail track that would guide a carnival ride-like car through the center of the set. Claire's ride through the events of the play should be similar to the carnival ride in its mix of joy and terror. Nearly every aspect of the play—tone, theme, pacing, characterization, humor—straddles a dark/light dichotomy. To illustrate this, I wedged the "ride" on my imagined set between the bright, clean kitchen, and the dark, menacing basement.

Forcing myself to sketch a set provided insight into what was most important to me about the play and, specifically, what I wanted portrayed through the design. After completing my exercise, I hid my sketch. After all, my purpose was not to design the set, but merely to begin thinking in images. I had been so immersed in theory and analysis for so long. It was now time to get my hands dirty in the physicality of the play in order to remind myself what really mattered when considering design elements. From that point on, my language about the play was no longer centered on the theoretical and analytical, but rather on the theatrical and pragmatic.

In addition to my sketch exercise, I did some research on amusement park rides. I knew from my analysis of the play's structure, style, and themes, that I wanted the pacing and set to be influenced by a "ride" dynamic. And the persistence of carnival imagery and theoretical significance in my thinking about the play lead me to research the rides found in carnivals. I was quickly drawn to dark rides common to travelling fairs and amusement parks in the middle and late twentieth century. Dark rides are indoor amusements where vehicles (boats, cars, trains, etc) guide passengers through corridors with scenes and special effects. Dark rides first started appearing at amusement parks and fairs in the late nineteenth century and included haunted house rides and tunnels of love. The rides I researched varied in how frightening they were designed to be, but even those for children were meant to be thrilling and surprising. The rides I studied—and those I could remember riding myself—included fast twists and turns and often contained surprising set pieces that would "jump out" toward the car when it passed. Even as a child, I was able to notice a very artificial and mechanistic aspect to these moving pieces, which produced a latent effect. Each rider gets the sense that every

twist and turn of the ride has been designed for ultimate impact on the rider. This contrived experience was a part of what I wanted Claire and the audience to experience as her unusual day unfolds through the course of the play.

My research into dark rides and my set sketch exercise had given me sufficient conceptual language to create a presentation of my ideas to the designers. I used PowerPoint to present my ideas, and in addition to the words I had come up with to elucidate my vision, I filled the presentation with colors and images that captured the aesthetic I had in mind for the play (Appendix A). The meeting was attended by my thesis directing adviser, thesis writing adviser, scenic designer, lighting designer, costume designer, departmental technical director and the faculty adviser to the student sound designer and technical director who were not in attendance.

I made a conscious decision to construct the presentation around my ideas and not around the design elements. It would be easy to first address the scenic designer, then the sound designer, and so on. However, I knew I wanted the same aesthetic values guiding all of our thoughts. I did not want to exclude any of the designers from any part of the conversation. My goal was to present general aesthetic concepts and occasionally give examples about how these might apply to various scenic elements. I began the presentation with a slide that listed three short-phrases representing the principles I wanted to inform the design process: 1) the familiar made strange, 2) remembering ourselves, and 3) idyllic fantasy vs. ugly truth. These ideas, I hoped, would be simple distillations of the themes and tones of the play that I wanted every aspect of the production to reflect.

“The familiar made strange” was, for me, the most revelatory of these principles and it became one that I could fall back on for many artistic decisions throughout the design process. I came to the phrase informed both by Claire’s state of mind and the carnival aesthetic to which I was committed. I wanted Claire and the audience to be frequently put in that strange place where various stimuli strike them as simultaneously familiar and odd. Often in the play Claire is presented with information that is somewhat true, but which has been altered by someone. For example, the Limping Man tells Claire he is her brother Zack. Claire did have a brother named Zack, but the Limping Man is lying in claiming to be him. Claire later believes that her husband Richard has been abusive to her. Again, this is a half truth that has been manipulated. She is, in fact, a battered wife, but the guilty party is the man who now claims to be her savior.

I communicated in my presentation how the scenic and sound design would most able to convey this phrase. I imagined the set appearing realistic at its center, but dissolving into confusing menace at its edges. Perhaps the line of the walls and floors might be skewed or faded into darkness. Perhaps some stage elements could be grotesquely deformed, for example, a single table leg much fatter than the others or a clock on the wall with hands too big for the face. In addition I gave an examples of how “the familiar made strange” might impact the sound design. During Claire’s episodes—when she hears sounds of carnival music and dogs barking—I imagined the carnival music distorted, warped, and maybe even underscored by the sound of rides on tracks.

The second aesthetic principle, “remembering ourselves” was about placing the audience in Claire’s amnesiac state of mind. I want them grasping for their own past,

and having visceral triggers to access their own memories throughout the play. I wanted, as often as possible, to send the audience on personal mnemonic journeys. In my presentation I told the designers that the details of the carnival experience—the swinging doors and the mechanized movement of the set—were examples of this kind of memory trigger.

The third aesthetic principle I shared with the designers at the presentation was “idyllic fantasy vs. ugly truth.” This was a simpler way of expressing my aforementioned decision that any semblance of order in the production must prove to be a façade hiding darkness and chaos. I gave a number of examples of how darkness could be hidden beneath elements that are superficially bright and cheery. I explained how I imagined the kitchen as a manifestation of this bright façade, and I imagined the basement as the dark and menacing presence of the truth. I also mentioned that costumes could convey a similar dualistic connection between bright and dark. Limping Man and Heidi both might wear a dark or even black undershirt peaking, through their clothes. I want to convey that there are lies and malice underneath the personas that have “put on”.

The next two slides in my presentation introduced (or reviewed) the idea of phenomenology, an audience reception theory that examines, among other things, the significance of visceral stimuli. Whereas semiotics is concerned with the associations and meanings of symbols and images, phenomenology is interested in the bodily response an audience has when they take in a stage experience. I explained to my designers that I wanted the audience of *Fuddy Meers* to phenomenologically experience Claire’s journey through the play. I imagined that the audience would feel more like

they were experiencing the story through Claire's eyes if her mental episodes (carnival music and dogs barking) came at them very close to their ears. I recommended that perhaps speakers could be placed behind the audience so that they might feel as though the sounds were in their heads as well. I imagined using colored and moving lights that corresponded with these episodes as well.

The other element of sound design that I imagined would help give the audience a phenomenological experience similar to Claire's amnesia involved the music we would use. I imagined using strange versions (or surprising covers) of familiar songs both during scene transitions and as pre-show music. The audience should find themselves caught trying to place the song, but unable to come up with the title before the lights come up on a new scene. This mnemonic disorientation is very similar to what Claire is experiencing throughout the play, and I would love the audience to be put in that place as often as possible. I had a few examples of this for my design presentation. I played—among others—an electronic dance version of the Batman television theme song and an alternative version of Buddy Holly's 1957 "Everyday." I noticed an interesting phenomenon in the design meeting. I had not planned to use much time playing the music selections I had brought, but the designers would not let me skip to the next song until they had a chance to place and name each song. This was early confirmation of my idea. I had hoped that having unfamiliar versions of well-known songs would be arresting for the audience. They would have a sensation of knowing the song, but also sensing something was strange about it. If the audience was unable to fully recall a song's title before we stopped using it, or the action onstage jarred them from their mnemonic pursuit, all the better. This cognitive disorientation

would be a considerable phenomenological step toward Claire's amnesiac state. My hopes about the effects of these unusual performances of familiar songs were confirmed by insistence of the designers in that meeting that I give them the chance to identify the tunes before moving on. Even in the design presentation meeting, it was already working.

Next, I showed my designers the video I had found of the dark ride. The Haunted Mansion at Knoebel's Grove in Pennsylvania typifies the dark rides of early and middle twentieth century amusement parks. The video, which I found on the Internet, was made by a rider who merely held a video camera as he enjoyed the ride. The first thing seen in the video are two grey swinging doors fast approaching the ride car. The car smashes into the doors with a clumsy thud and they fly open to reveal a very dark world inside. Once inside, the car swings the riders to the left showing them a domestic living room scene colored with bright, almost neon hues. But all is not well in this haunted living room. Ghosts pop up from behind the couch and monsters leap out of the grandfather clock and fireplace. The car quickly spins around to reveal a similarly domestic kitchen scene, again colored in strangely bright hues and equally possessed by creatures of terror.

After showing the video, I presented two lists (Appendix A, Figs. A1,2). The first catalogued the aspects of the dark ride that I wanted to influence the design, and the second was a list of things I was not interested in echoing. I liked the mechanical nature of the ride. The sounds and the jerky movements of both the cars and the effects appealed to me, and I imagined a set with similar characteristics. I already established well above. The dark ride is fun and mysterious. It is full of surprises, but also feels

specifically designed and constructed for the benefit of the rider. This was certainly the way I wanted the audience to feel about their journey with Claire. My second list featured the elements of the dark ride that were not a part of my vision. This list specified that I was not interested in the literal elements of rides and funhouses. I did not want actual monsters, clowns or overtly circus patterns on wall paper or floors. I wanted real elements that were influenced by the qualities of funhouses and carnivals.

I also included in my presentation a group of images that captured the spirit of my concept. For each of the photos, I also mentioned what I liked most about the photos. Most of the images were strongly influenced by carnival. They specifically featured the light-dark duality that the play imitates. There were also photos that were indications of what I wanted for my two primary set locations, including bright kitchen images and dark basement images. Some of the photos were specifically included for the benefit of the set and lighting designers, but there were also images that captured the overall ideas and themes of the play that I think moved all the designers closer to an understanding of my concept.

In the discussion following my presentation, there was some initial confusion about how real I wanted design elements to seem. This was understandable because my concept was neither entirely anchored in reality, nor entirely divorced from it. Many later design choices had to do with this issue of “how real”. Interestingly, I think it was during the presentation of my sound design ideas that the designers most seemed to connect with the concept. It was difficult to gauge the designers’ comprehension or enthusiasm for my ideas until they came to me in the next few weeks with their design ideas.

Preparation

Scenic

Over the next month I had the chance to meet with the scenic designer twice. In these meetings I was much more specific about what I wanted. In the first meeting with him, we walked the floor of the theatre where the play would be performed and talked about the various ideas we both had. Initially, he was thinking about a pivoting unit that would have the kitchen set on one side and the basement on the other. As we talked, however, we discovered there were a number of problems including sight lines and the weight of the unit. Additionally, the quick transitions from kitchen to basement needed to maintain the play's fast pace would be impossible if a very large unit had to be rotated.

Once we had eliminated the rotating unit, I offered my idea of a split stage with a raised stationary platform for the kitchen upstage, and the basement downstage. We were conscious, however, that we still wanted mechanical/ride-like elements in the set. The set designer also mentioned that he was very enthusiastic about the cars coming out of the vomms with a swinging door at the entrance to emulate the video I had shown in the design meeting. This was exciting for me because it meant he was interested in the ride element of the set and had localized it in the execution of the car scenes. This is exactly what I had imagined.

After he had a few days to mull it over, the scenic designer was ready to show me some preliminary images. He had a great idea about the basement that involved using a labyrinthine design for the floor. He thought a maze pattern would convey the confused and disoriented state in which Claire finds herself. He imagined the outside

edge of the kitchen platform with waves cantilevered out over the floor, like the edge of a circus tent flapping in the wind. I was thrilled with that idea and it seemed the perfect degree of reference to funhouses and carnival. It would not interfere with the reality of the kitchen moments, but the audience would sense “strangeness” encroaching at the edges. It was at this moment that I knew keeping my drawing to myself was the right idea. His kitchen platform was superior to mine in a number of ways and his maze on the basement floor was something I never would have imagined.

With a clearer vision of how both the kitchen and the basement might look, I asked the designer how he saw the two areas being divided. And he said “I just think that we need to have a track that runs right up the middle of the two.” My sketch exercise convinced me to use a track, but I was uncertain it was possible. So to hear him come up with this idea was a confirmation of our similar feelings about the design, and an indication that the track idea was feasible. At that point, we did not know what this track would look like or how the car would move on it, but it was a start.

Next, the scenic designer asked what I imagined behind the set pieces. I told him that I was thinking of stretched spandex with curved edges. I wanted them to reinforce the playful circus-like lines and to aid lighting in conveying Claire’s mental episodes. He was enthusiastic about this, as was the lighting designer.

In subsequent meetings, the designer showed me drawings and models. The kitchen platform was circular in shape including the back wall. Even the counters and cabinets that ran along the upstage wall were curved. This added a softness and cheeriness that I wanted from the kitchen. For the basement, his drawings included the labyrinth floor and an upstage wall with pieces missing. I wondered about these

decisions at first. I wondered if these unrealistic elements of the design were too geographically near to the action of the play. I had initially imagined the more unrealistic elements at the periphery of the play's action, but these were more centrally located. However, I had a feeling that the stage space would be anchored in reality by the presence of boxes and the workbench that needed to be in the basement.

When it came to the car, I was open to something that could look like a car or look like a ride. I was willing to treat the car as a real thing playfully represented (by a toy car, or an especially small set piece) or as a playful thing treated realistically (like a kiddie ride car, or roller coaster car that was played as a real car). The latter option proved difficult to find and we realized very quickly that we needed the car to be self-propelled. We began to investigate a more car-like option, specifically golf carts. We needed it to be electric and we needed to be able to remove the top for lighting purposes. When we found a local company willing to loan us a cart that fit those parameters, we knew a golf cart was the best solution. Although the golf cart does not capture the amusement park ride like I had hoped the car would do, I was convinced its placement on a track with moving set pieces and swinging doors would convey "rideness". I also needed to be able to make the cart look like Limping Man's car in one scene, but like Richard's car in all the other scenes. The set designer suggested using removable decals to help the car look different and I suggested fuzzy dice or a dash board ornament to help distinguish the two cars.

The final piece to be designed by the scenic designer was the spandex backdrop behind the set. When I first saw his drawings I was surprised on two counts. First they were triangular. They looked much more like literal circus tents than I had imagined

them. I imagined the spandex stretched by tie lines at several places around the fabric's perimeter. I was also surprised by how small they were. I had initially imagined them virtually filling the back of the proscenium space. The set designer had conceived of pieces as only six to eight feet tall. The shape of the "tents" (as they came to be called) was a happy surprise. These set elements were physically far removed from the realistic action of the play, so they were free to capture the carnival spirit of the play. In addition, the designer conceived of the tents as rippled. The steel frame upon which the spandex would be stretched would have a wavy lower edge that echoed the cantilevered edge of the kitchen platform. Not only was I pleased with the visual unity that this gave the set, but I was also excited by the lighting possibilities of rippled spandex. The size of the tents still seemed too small, however. The theatre where the play would be produced has a large proscenium, and I was concerned that the triangles as he had imagined them would be aesthetically ineffectual. So, while we were still in the drawing phase, the designer and I resized and repositioned them to my liking.

Lighting

The lighting design for the production grew and expanded throughout the process. The designer was in constant communication with me about ways to accentuate choices being made in rehearsals and design meetings. My collaboration with her was by far the most productive. From very early in the process she was presenting ideas and altering looks to forward my concept. Many of the most effective stage moments are due to the lighting designer's comprehension of the play's ideas and style.

One idea she had that became an important part of the production's overall aesthetic was to install LED lights along the cantilevered edge of the kitchen platform.

She found lights that were programmable to such a degree that specific bulbs could light in various patterns and colors. She had several ideas about how to use the lights to convey action, mood, and theme. Their primary use was during the car scenes. The path of the car arched right in front of these LED lights so whenever the car was supposed to be driving the lights would run in a pattern that implied motion. Secondly, the lights were used to accentuate Claire's mental episodes. When she heard carnival music or barking dogs, the LEDs would show a quick flash as though we were seeing a synapse fire in Claire's brain.

The lighting designer also utilized the LEDs to convey the action occurring inside Claire's mind. The lighting designer suggested programming the lights along the edge of the kitchen to slowly and incrementally illuminate as Claire is recalling the domestic violence she endured. Once she attains full recall of the incident, the LED lights would all be lit fully. Then, when Kenny recounts the moment where she loses her memory, the lights gradually would gradually go out again. This was a particularly interesting moment in the process. At first hearing the idea from the designer, it sounded too obvious. I did not want to patronize the audience by showing them that Claire's "lights" were literally coming on as she recalled the past. I was worried it might draw attention away from the story and toward the design. I was especially worried about the "lights out" sequence. This seemed too blatant of a statement on the action and I was worried about it. However, the designer asked permission to show it to me with the actors performing on stage. After watching it, I was very excited by the illumination of the lights, but the lights turning off still bothered me. I asked the designer if she could program the lights to fade out slowly at the point where Kenny

describes her descent into amnesia. When she did that, it worked. It was gentle, but still meaningful, and instead of drawing our attention away from the action, it underscored it beautifully. I was struck by how the slightest change of a lighting cue could make a moment move from jarring to powerful. In the world of theatre, the speed at which a slider is moved on a light board has the potential to make meaning.

The lighting designer also had excellent ideas for using the spandex tents that would hang above and behind the set. She would use lights from two directions to use color combinations which would imply time of day. The ripples in the fabric would cause the two colors to appear in interesting stripes. In addition, she suggested attaching rope lights along the bottom, wavy edges of the tents that would mirror the LED lights at the perimeter of the kitchen platform.

The lighting designer was also responsible for the “flashes” used at the opening of act one and act two to convey Claire’s disorientation. The designer came to me with the idea of starting act two with flashes of light interspersed with moments of darkness. The opening of act two is a moment of confusion. The chaos that ended act one culminated in a gun shot, and the opening of act two represents the following moments as the smoke literally clears. The flashes were meant to convey Claire’s disorientation amidst this chaos. I immediately liked the idea, but it struck me that it could work very well in act one as well. As Claire awakens to her confusing life, I imagined these same flashes putting the audience in her confused state of mind. In the dark moments between the flashes, we would hear the carnival music of Claire’s mind. Using this “flash” device at the top of both acts unifies the play’s style. Using a somewhat impressionistic effect like that only once in the play would make it seem out of place, but employing it

at the beginning of each act made both moments seem appropriate. In addition, the flashes remind the audience in both acts that they are experiencing the story through Claire's eyes.

Sound

I had done a lot of thinking about sound design for this production, and was particularly interested in its successful execution. Because the play features a main character who regularly hears sounds in her head, sound design plays a prominent role in the telling of the story. When the designer and I met for the first time we brainstormed several uses of ride sounds (including machinery and joyful screams), carnival music, dogs barking, and unusual versions of familiar songs. The designer was especially interested in using digital recording effects to distort the sounds giving the impression of music heard from within Claire's addled mind.

She told me that she was working with the technical directors to construct small speaker stands for the back of the house. These speakers would allow sound to come from immediately behind the audience members. This supported my effort to theatrically place the audience within Claire's experience. When Claire heard music in her head, they would hear it in theirs.

In the last week of rehearsals I simplified my idea for the music used in scene transitions. I had initially imagined using high-energy dance versions of familiar songs like the *Batman* television theme song, or the James Bond theme. However, I found a recording by the alternative rock band Cake of "Mahna Mahna" (1968), a song made famous by its use on *The Muppet Show*. The song reflects the play's funny and odd style perfectly, but it is also an example of the familiar made strange since the version

we used was not the one most of the audience would know. The song was ideal for transitions because it contains several different sounding sections, but then it always returns to the familiar refrain. I made the choice that this would be the only song used for transitions, and asked the sound designer to find various segments of the song that could be used for transition.

It is not uncommon for major lighting and sound decisions to be made very late in the process. Often at technical rehearsals—where light and sound cues are played in the theatre—ideas that seemed good on paper or in a production meeting just do not translate to the performance space. At our technical rehearsals, a number of sound cues needed to be changed. I was concerned about clarity. Ride sounds had been digitally manipulated such that they were not obviously ride sound. The distorted carnival music was jarring and even disruptive to the pace of the scenes. I ultimately asked the designer to stick with more traditional versions of sounds. The play is frenzied and confusing enough; I did not want audience members having to exert energy trying to decipher the sounds Claire was hearing in her head.

In addition, the sound designer had worked to apply the “familiar made strange” concept even to those sound effects that needed to be more realistic. Therefore, the police siren and the truck horn sounded strange and distorted. This too was confusing and I asked her to make them more realistic.

At the technical rehearsal I discovered that the sound designer found many more unusual covers of well-known songs for the walk-in and intermission music. She started gravitating toward songs from the fifties and sixties, which I think worked perfectly. They conveyed that idyllic artifice that we often apply to the past, but their

reinterpretation gave aesthetic distance. It was a perfect realization of the familiar made strange. There was one exception, however. There was a song that I had never heard before, and neither had the colleagues I informally polled. The sound designer was particularly attached to the song and believed it to be very familiar. I acquiesced, in part because of all the other “cuts” I had made to her work during technical production. Out of guilt and a desire to give the sound designer a positive experience, I allowed the song to remain a part of the walk-in and intermission music mix.

Costume

From the start my ideas about costumes had been fairly simple. I believe that the costume an actor wears can dramatically influence the way they perform. Since I had decided that the characters needed to be anchored in reality, I wanted their costumes to be largely realistic. The costume designer and I both wanted to wait to design costumes until the play had been cast. There were roles that were “open” enough in my mind that they might be filled by a variety of actors (and bodies). So, before we dreamed up how to dress the characters, we wanted to get a feel for what they looked like. For example, Kenny could have been played as a large violent character, but because the actor I cast was skinny we wanted to portray him as a rail-thin “emo kid”. I found a cartoon of a boy wearing a black shirt with long sleeves that covered his hands, and tight, ripped jeans. He also had spiky hair with a single green streak, black eye-liner, and a lip ring. This image was very helpful to the costume designer and also inspired Kenny’s hair and make-up.

Once the costume designer came to me with drawings, I could see she understood that realism was important for the production. She had discerned from the

script that would need to be dressed in a police uniform shirt that was too big for her, and Richard would wear an obnoxiously cheery orange dress-shirt and khaki pants.

She had also done some research on the kind of pants that we might see two escaped convicts wearing (for Millet and Limping Man). We did not want anything as obvious as orange jumpsuits or black stripes, because both Claire and the audience should discovered only later that they are prison escapees. She settled on light denim when she discovered that many correctional facilities (especially those that include manual labor) dress their inmates in this fabric.

There were a few costume choices that I was asked to make. For example the designer imagined the Limping Man in a plaid shirt over a black tank top. She asked me what color plaid I imagined him in. I knew immediately I wanted him in red because of that color's aggressive and violent connotations. In addition, we knew we would be putting t-shirts with prints on both Kenny and Millet, so my designer allowed me to shop for the shirts that I liked best. I wanted Kenny's t-shirt to be mildly offensive, but to betray a sense of hurt. I asked the designer if she could find or make a shirt that read "Mean People Suck" but in which the word "Mean" had been crossed out so the shirt read "People Suck." Within five minutes of me dreaming up such a shirt, the designer found one online and ordered it (Appendix B, Fig. B.13) For Millet, the script tells us he has stolen an outfit from J.C. Penney. I wanted to convey Millet as a child in a man's body, so I asked for him to appear in a Spongebob Squarepants t-shirt under a blue sport coat that still had store tags attached to its sleeve.

The designer conceived of most of Gertie's costume. When she imagined Gertie as Claire's protector, she conceived of what she called "an old lady uniform". It was

made up of a floral print turtle neck, cotton pants with stirrups for the feet, sensible shoes, and a colorful hat and vest. The costume designer explained that the hat and vest were worn nearly every day and were part of her daily uniform.

The costume that required the most collaboration was Claire's. I knew I wanted Claire in a neutral color and I wanted her costume to be manipulative and changeable. I wanted to convey her blank status in the play with color; and I wanted to simulate her "trying on" different personalities by wearing her costume in a variety of ways. The costume designer's first idea was to use "Multiples," a line made popular in the late 80s

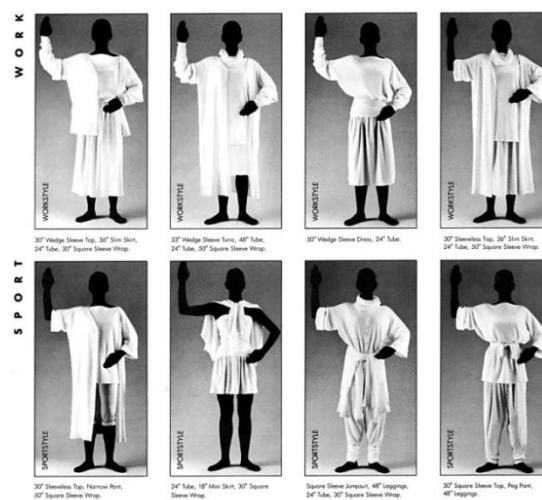


Fig 3.2 Twelve configurations of Multiples clothing line. Garratt, Sandra. *Sandra Garratt Modular Collection*. Digital image. Sandra Garratt Design. 8 Feb. 2010 <<http://homepage.mac.com/sandragarratdesign/Menu1.html>>.

by Sandra Garratt. The images she found, however, looked dated to me, and I believe they would have read strangely on stage. They were so unusual that they would not have played as blank but as exotic, the opposite of what I was looking for in Claire's costume.

We decided that Claire's entire costume could be her sleepwear. She is shown a dress to wear in the first scene of the play, but she does not like it and there is virtually

no time for her to put it on. So, we imagined that Claire's adaptability could be shown in her pajamas and robe. She could alter the way these pieces are worn using the robe and the belt in various ways to change the appearance of the costume. For example, when she is administering medical attention to Kenny and Philip, she wears her robe open like a doctor's lab coat. In trying to decide what exactly her neutral color should be it struck us that she is referred to as "Clay" and a "blank [slate]." We found a sleepwear set with a robe and belt in a grey color that suggested shale.

Conclusion

I learned a lot about the nature of collaboration with designers throughout this process. I have never really worked with designers. All of my past directing experiences have required that I do my own design. So, I was forging new territory in working with skilled designers committed to my vision.

I think the most specific challenge for me was balancing my specific vision for the show with the contributions of the designers. I wanted to share equally in the creative process with all the designers, but I found that each relationship was unique. The costume designer allowed me to make almost all the artistic choices, sometimes decisions I was not comfortable making. The sound designer's contributions seemed to constantly miss the mark in either conceptual consistency or quality of execution. However, my lighting and scenic designers worked perfectly in tandem with me when it came to imaging and designing the production. From each relationship, I learned how to get what I needed for my production, but the strategies with each were different. The best relationships were those that I began the earliest. From the earliest meetings with designers I was in regular communication with my scenic and lighting designer. This

was ideal because they witnessed—and participated in—the germination process of the ideas. Both my sound and costume designers came late to the table with ideas. In the future, when possible, I will try to treat the designers as the “conceptual team.” They will understand and “own” the play’s concept if they have helped form it.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Rehearsal Process

When it was time to begin thinking about casting the play and directing the actors, my inclinations were guided first by the theories of laughter discussed in Chapter One. Reflecting on the dichotomies put forward by Bergson, Bentley, and Bakhtin, I realized that each depends heavily on the presence of earthbound and flawed humans with whom the audience can somewhat identify. Bergson's inelastic subjects must remind us of ourselves when we fail to adapt to our environment. Bentley's innocent subjects call for absolute earnestness in order for us to recognize and secretly pine for our own long-gone naiveté. And Bakhtin's subversions of the expected (in body and society) require an environment of mundane normalcy so that the transgressions are surprising and, consequently, funny. All of these theories rely on believable humanity at their core. Therefore, instead of seeking out the wildest or most clownish actors, I was interested in actors who could harness the outlandish plot and dialogue of the play into nuanced and plausible characters.

My casting inclinations were also informed by the missteps of the British production, as discussed in Chapter Two. It seemed clear from my research that the director's interpretation of the play as purely farcical and his choice to guide the actor to simplified, exaggerated characterizations resulted in a less artistically successful production. The playwright himself warns against this approach in an interview with Backstage.com:

When I see productions or pictures or read reviews, the big mistake is that [the actors are] always so overtly wacky. I feel like, ‘I take care of the wacky. Your job is to make it grounded and real. Don’t worry about the comedy.’ But the instinct seems to be, ‘Oh, I’m in a wacky David Lindsay-Abaire play; I’d better wack it up.’ And it’s deadly. Those plays drift away when you do that. If you’re not making the stakes real, the audience will stop laughing after 15 minutes. (Riley)

It is worth noting that this interview took place after the British production received such poor reviews closing after just a few weeks.

With the British production’s missteps in mind, I was committed to finding actors who could play the truthfulness of the characters. The play’s action and characters are outrageous, but I knew that the play called for actors that could harness all that zaniness into believable portrayal of human beings in extreme situations. Prepared with this perspective I set up the auditions.

Auditions and Casting

The first decision to make about the audition process was what materials I would ask actors to present. Directors have two primary approaches to audition materials: prepared monologues or cold readings. Asking auditioners to prepare monologues has the benefit of seeing the kind of work an actor is capable of with some preparation. Many actors will grow into a role after they become familiar with the text, so asking auditioners to come prepared with a piece demonstrates how they will perform when they have had the chance to rehearse. Prepared monologues have drawbacks as well. The monologues are typically from a play other than the one being cast, and the auditors do not have the chance to see actors interact with each other.

The second option available to directors is cold readings. In cold readings actors do not come to the audition with any prepared material, but are instead given “sides,” or

excerpts from the script of the play. This method allows auditors to see actors responding to each other (since the sides can include scenes with multiple characters) and, because the actors are reading the script of the play being produced it is easier to imagine them in the roles being cast. However, some actors are simply better cold readers than others. The way the actors read in that moment does not necessarily convey how much they will grow into a character over the rehearsal process.

Like many actors, I do not have a standard methodology regarding audition materials. My audition process is largely dictated by the play and the circumstances of the audition process. For example, the auditions for *Fuddy Meers* were closed auditions. Only Baylor University theatre majors could audition; in fact, they are required to do so. Therefore, I knew I could communicate in advance to everyone who would audition. This is a serious advantage that allowed me to use a hybrid of the two audition methods. I sent out a note to all those would be auditioning and included copies of the sides we would be using encouraging actors to rehearse the sides. I chose this approach in part because a fast-paced comedy such as *Fuddy Meers* benefits significantly from seeing actors engaging each other in a text with which they are familiar. The auditors can then observe the actors' comic timing and execution of the rhythms in the frenetic dialogue. This audition format allowed me to reap the rewards of both the prepared monologue and cold reading systems of audition.

The ability to communicate with the entire pool of auditioners gave me an additional benefit: the opportunity to share my ideas about the style of the play. I had spent long hours developing my ideas about how the characters should be portrayed. Having already written a full analysis of the play, I was immersed in my own

interpretation. The last thing I wanted was to overlook a qualified actor simply because they had made stylistic choices that differed from mine. So, I began my note to auditioners with an explanation of the style of *Fuddy Meers*. In particular, I wanted actors to understand that the play has real people and pain at its center. I wanted actors to convey the truth of their characters. It is easy to want to make the director laugh while auditioning for a comedy, so I encouraged actors to show honest character exploration.

I also used the note as an opportunity to lay out the audition process. This was a first step in treating the actors and the work with respect. Clarity and organization in the audition process sets a tone of professionalism that I wanted to prevail throughout the entire production. I was very intentional from the start to demonstrate the importance of the project and the people who would be giving their time to bring it to fruition.

Finally, I offered character summaries in my note to the auditioners including details about what I was looking for from actors. This required a distillation of my in depth analysis of the characters to only that language that spoke most to action and intention. For example, in my description of Limping Man, I wanted to avoid actors limiting the character to a purely villainous or silly character, so I wrote the following about him: “He is earnestly trying to give himself a second chance at life...He spends most of the play trying to convince others and himself that he is a changed man” (Buck, “Fuddy Meers Audition”). I hoped these descriptions would give a clear and simple insight into the realistic portrayals I sought, without overburdening actors with the details of my analysis.

The auditions were held on the evening of October 5 and 6, 2009. The first night consisted of a large, general audition of one hundred eligible actors. Students signed up

in groups of five and I allowed each actor to read for the part that he or she had prepared. I took a few notes but the scale of the audition did not allow the opportunity to give direction. If there were a smaller number of auditioners, I would have had to take thorough notes because I would need to consider every remote possibility for every role; even if I only liked some aspects of an actor's performance I would have to keep them on my "maybe list." But with such a large pool of talent to choose from, I simply wrote the names of each of the seven characters on a piece of paper, then I listed the names of actors I could imagine in each role.

Occasionally (between groups), I would confer with my advisor and my graduate counterpart about who I was adding to my callback list to see if they saw something in an actor that I did not. By the end of the night, I had eight to ten names listed for each character. Because a callback with that many actors for each role would be long and unproductive, I narrowed each list to the five or six actors in whom I was most interested.

There were a few surprises in the initial auditions. Two freshman men gave particularly good auditions and were called back for leading roles. They had impeccable comic abilities and made bold choices. "Bold choices" are actions taken by actors that demonstrate strong imagination. When an actor devises for themselves an action that conveys their character's inner life clearly, it is an indication that they can place themselves solidly in the given circumstances using the tool of imagination. For example, one freshman, while reading for Richard in the opening scene with Claire, handed her a mirror just before she requested it. At first, I thought he was anticipating—acting from memory without waiting for the impetus of the moment to carry out an

action. I quickly realized however, he had correctly imagined the world of the character. Richard performs a daily routine of explaining to Claire who she is, how she lost her memory, and how she will manage her day. By retrieving the mirror before she had even asked for it, he was demonstrating his understanding that Richard knows each step of this process and can even guess what Claire is going to say next. This is exciting to a director because it often indicates an ability on the actor's part to contribute significantly to the construction of a character. There are actors who can perfectly carry out a director's instructions, but even more exciting are those actors who do not need such instruction. Seeing freshmen in this audition with the intuition, confidence, and imagination to make bold choices was a pleasant surprise. Usually, actors need maturity and experience before they start making bold choices during auditions.

Another surprise in the general audition was a senior woman that gave a very good reading for Claire. This particular actress is known primarily as a dancer and her only experience in main stage productions at Baylor (or anywhere) had been limited to non-speaking chorus roles. She was not among those I had initially thought of as possibilities for the role of Claire, but her reading immediately called to mind the simple naiveté I imagined for the character.

Once I had seen all the auditioners and narrowed them to a list of five or six actors per character, I began preparations for the callback process. Callbacks give a director the opportunity to see the narrowed field of actors reading additional sides in various arrangements. The most important thing I wanted to see in callbacks is how well the actors read with each other. The stage manager contacted those who were called back by email and included a note from me giving further specifics about the characters.

I am looking for Millet to be emotionally disabled. He should feel like a child in a man's body, always afraid. But when he speaks with the puppet I want a distinct change in voice, tone, and attitude. I also noticed in the auditions that some of you were dreaming up interesting things to do with the puppet throughout your scene. Keep this up! (Be sure that your puppet voice can be clearly understood!) (Buck, "Callbacks")

After seeing the general auditions, I had more specific ideas about what I wanted from actors.

In the callbacks, I assigned actors to read together and gave them time to rehearse the scene before performing it for me. I allowed groups to stay in the theatre as others performed their sides. I find that this encourages a strength and variety of bold choices and promotes understanding of the scenes. I took a few breaks to confer with my advisors and periodically sent groups home based on choices I had made.

One particular challenge I had was in casting Claire. I typically weigh experience and acting skill more heavily than type when casting. Actors who have been in productions before have an understanding of physical presence, vocal communication, and consistency in characterization that is virtually "unteachable." There are some skills that only stage time can give an actor. I am sometimes charmed by a good audition by an actor or actress, but their lack of experience eventually shows through during the rehearsal process. Therefore, I was initially reluctant to seriously consider an inexperienced senior for the lead. However, this actor kept performing very strongly in the callbacks. Over the course of the night, her natural inclination toward Claire's sweet and wide-eyed innocence continually caught my attention, and my advisors agreed. Toward the end of the callbacks, I had sent home all but three of the "potential Claires." It came down to the surprise actress and two actresses who I had long imagined as the leading contenders for the role. I had worked with the other two and knew them to be

very talented and polished in their acting. Yet, no matter how much guidance I gave to the two more experienced actors, they just could not convey the compelling openness I saw in the less experienced actress. I asked the three actresses to perform a number of readings, including Claire's most difficult monologue. A part of me was hoping the less experienced actress would falter at some point and I would get a clear picture of what struggles I would have to face if I cast her. Yet she remained confident, clearly in touch with Claire's "blank slate" quality. What is more, she was supremely endearing throughout the callback. By the end of the night, I knew she was the right choice for the role. It was a bit of a risk, but my decision was bolstered by the fact that most of the rest of my casting choices reflected my tendency toward experience and acting polish. Therefore, I had confidence that the actress cast as Claire would be well-supported in taking on the largest role of her life.

Early Rehearsals

My rehearsals started six weeks before *Fuddy Meers* was scheduled to open, but with allowances for Spring Break and other conflicts, we had about four and half weeks of rehearsal time. I chose to give actors one day off each week and each rehearsal was between three and four hours. My decision to work with actors in the style of realistic acting led me to utilize the theories and methodologies of those directors whose work was similarly focused. It was one such director, Marshall Mason, that I considered closely when shaping my first rehearsal. Mason explains in his book *Creating Life On Stage: A Director's Approach to Working with Actors* that the first rehearsal is:

a director's best opportunity to:

- identify the goals for the work you are about to undertake,
- outline the process by which you hope to reach those goals, and

- establish the standards of discipline the process will demand. (64)

I was interested in doing all these things. But I spent the most time on the third item in Mason's list. Setting the tone of the rehearsal process is so important to me. And I had a few guiding ideas about the process that I wanted to convey as I began my first rehearsal.

First and foremost, I wanted to instill confidence in the actors and to empower them to treat themselves and each other as professionals. Bill Arnett, the head of instruction at ImprovOlympic Chicago, writes "Almost all questions asked by amateur improvisers really amount to 'Am I good?' While professional improvisers' questions amount to 'Is the work good?'" I wanted to set the actors free from the first kind of question. I told them that I had cast the actors that I wanted more than anyone else in the department. Out of one hundred auditioners I had hand-picked them. Quite simply, I told them "You are all good, very good." Their confidence was so important to me that they know that my faith in their ability was the first thing I discussed in our rehearsal process. I wanted these young actors to move away from assessing themselves as actors during the rehearsal process, and toward assessing our collective work on this particular project. I told them that any criticism, notes, or experimentation that occurred in rehearsals was not to improve them, but to improve the work to which we had all chosen to put our hands.

The next goal I had for the first rehearsal was to convey a spirit of what I called "focused play." I firmly believe that actors must look forward to coming to rehearsal. A joyless rehearsal process will mean a joyless performance. Yet, in a comedic production filled with actors who love joking and laughing, it is important to convey that we will be

taking our comedy very seriously. To demonstrate this spirit I played a game that, at first, seemed silly, but which required concentration and excellent team work. Throughout the exercise I encouraged actors to process the ways that playing the game is similar to ensemble performance. The actors were able to identify the importance of focus in a comedy. In particular, when something funny happened, we all had to stay focused on the game at hand or else we quickly became confused. This was a great metaphor for responding to audience laughter. The actors identified the importance of not allowing the thrill of laughter to distract them from their characterization or stage tasks. The game gave rise to discussion of 1) the nature of ensemble, 2) the importance of listening, and 3) the meaningful impact of individual actors' energies on a small cast.

The next task for our first rehearsal was to do a careful read-through of the script. I made sure every actor understood every action, reference and relationship. It is a somewhat complicated script, so comprehension is of the utmost importance. Actors were encouraged to ask any questions of me or of each other during the read through. We spoke of our first impressions of these characters and how we wanted the audience to feel about them.

Finally, before I sent the actors home from our rehearsal I gave them character homework. I did this at the first rehearsal for two reasons. First, I wanted to let the actors take ownership of the analysis of their characters. It is important that each actor feel like the first expert on their character's inner life. Secondly, it encourages actors to extend their imaginative character work beyond rehearsal time. I was quickly anxious to establish the expectation for character exploration outside of rehearsal.

For character homework, I asked them to come to the next rehearsal with two things: 1) a theme song for their character and 2) their character's superobjective. A character's superobjective—sometimes called a super-task or spine—is the overriding want that drives all the characters' actions. For example, Hamlet's superobjective might be described as "to avenge his father's death." It is a pivotal element of a character, and yet often actors fail to consider superobjectives adequately. I find that actors either come to a conclusion about superobjective quickly and superficially, or they overcomplicate the superobjective and never reduce it to a single want that drives the character. This theme song/ superobjective exercise was designed to avoid both of those pitfalls. By asking the actors to find a theme song, they had to put serious thought into the needs, emotions, and circumstances of their characters. And yet, since they also had to arrive at a superobjective, they could not leave their character's central want vague and unfocussed.

I was pleasantly surprised to see how seriously the actors took the assignment. Some of them brought two or three songs unable to narrow down their selection. Some actors brought songs with lyrics that were an accurate description of the character, or the character's state of mind, and others brought songs that conveyed something about the character in the tone or style of the song. For example, the actor playing Millet brought a recording of the Sesame Street theme song. Listening to that song in the context of an adult character had a chilling, disturbing effect. The actor was certainly making the familiar seem strange.

As actors explained their song choices, it took a fair amount of directorial patience not to jump in and expound upon their comments. After all, I had been

studying the play and its meanings for almost a year by the time they were just embarking on their initial character analysis. Some actors had failed to connect the songs to their superobjectives. I asked a lot of questions to push actors toward new discoveries. I did not try to get them to final decisions or concrete conclusions, but merely worked to get them thinking about their character in new ways.

Listening to the songs was a particularly enlightening exercise. Of course, each individual song had special meaning that the actors explained; but the net impact of the exercise was interesting as well. Someone noted that the songs were, on the whole, quite depressing. A rehearsal dedicated to the theme songs of characters from a very funny comedy was surprisingly sad. The songs all had to do with loss, pain, and longing for redemption. It was an organic discovery of something I had wanted the actors to embrace in *Fuddy Meers*. The play, even though funny, is painful at its center. The darker events of the characters' lives are what incite the entire story. I told them to remember the theme song exercise throughout the process and give themselves permission to think seriously about their seemingly unserious characters.

Warm-up Games

I am a firm believer in the benefit of group warm-up games. Certainly actors have the capacity to ready themselves for rehearsal. And yet, I find that performance warm-up games and exercises together serve a number of purposes in terms of rehearsal preparation.

Warm-up exercises and games help actors leave their outside lives “at the stage door” for rehearsal. The activities I choose require a fair amount of concentration, and actors will quickly realize if their head is not “in the game”. The warm-ups also help me

diagnose anything my cast is bringing to a rehearsal before we begin. I would hate to work hard on a scene that is not working only to find out later that a personal actor issue is what is derailing our efforts. Games can identify issues in an actor's state of mind that may influence the work. In fact, the actors usually enjoy the warm-ups so much that the games can actually be a welcome escape from whatever is occupying the actors as they come to rehearsal. The games create an environment of play and safety that leads to a positive creative atmosphere. It is never long into the rehearsal process before actors are begging me to play their favorite games. I want my rehearsals to be a place where actors feel free to experiment and even fail without judgment; games set that tone.

Secondly, the actors coming together in a circle working toward a common goal, or even competing against each other are actively engaging each other. There are few things less productive than rehearsing actors who are performing as isolated entities. They can forget to allow other actors' posture, speech, or movement can impact them. I find that it can take as much as a half an hour or an hour—depending on the scenes being worked—for young actors to start responding to each other onstage.

One game I use to accelerate this “other awareness” is called Go. It is a very simple game, but its impact is significant. The actors stand in a circle and one of them asks to take someone else's place in the circle. But the way they “ask” is by making eye contact. Once the person they have locked eyes with says “Go!” the person may start walking toward that person in order to take his or her place in the circle. The person who gave away their spot, must find a new spot by making eye contact with someone else in the circle. Once they do, that third person says “Go!” and the process continues. This is an effective game for making sure actors are connecting to each other

before communicating. So often in a play, the actors find themselves automatically talking at each other, simply waiting for their turn to speak. However, each line of dialogue must be delivered as though the speaker hopes to be heard and received as if it is being heard for the first time. Eye contact is one way to do this, but body language and non verbal cues also ready the hearer for communication.

The “Go” game forces each actor to make sure their partner is ready to receive communication before they may achieve their task. In every scene, each character has a task he or she is trying to accomplish, but the actors around them affect the accomplishment of that task—as obstacle or aid. This game reminds the actors to “read” and even rely upon the other actors in their scenes when considering how to accomplish their goals.

As long as the actors feel like we are spending enough time for them in the text, warm up games create an environment of play and safety that leads to a much more positive creative atmosphere. I try to make rehearsal a time actors look forward to during their day. When this atmosphere is created actors are more generous with their time and more committed to the larger project of the production.

Blocking

One of the early tasks of a rehearsal process is to determine the blocking, or stage movement, that will effectively tell the story of the play. In addition to planning the physical movements of the actors, I use this time to make general connections to movements in pacing and tone. At this stage in the rehearsal process, I rarely coach about single line delivery. Instead, we use this time to repeat certain sections trying to convey shifts, crescendos, or stops in the dialogue.

Directors approach the blocking process in a variety of ways. Some directors carefully plan out each movement in order to inspire compelling actions and effective stage pictures. Other directors are more concerned that stage movement appear motivated by actor impulse. It is the standard theatre dilemma of balancing spectacle with believability. I typically tend to fall into the latter category, allowing my actors to wander the stage in the early rehearsals, exploring the movements and arrangements that seem driven by the text and their characters' intentions. However, I made a deliberate effort during the rehearsal process for *Fuddy Meers* to pre-plan my blocking.

My tendency toward pre-planned movement was motivated by the space in which the play would be performed and by the fast pace that I planned for the production. The theatre space for the production is an interesting one with its own unique blocking challenges. It has a pronounced thrust stage that extends deep into the house so that audience members nearly surround actors onstage. This stage arrangement allows for an intimate connection between an actor and the audience, but requires special diligence for directors. I found very quickly that any actor who is more than one quarter of the way downstage will have their back to a portion of the audience. Because the audience wraps so far around the stage, I had to constantly be aware of how long each house section had been looking at someone's back, so that I could give equal "face time" to all. The basement scenes were particularly difficult for this reason. The basement was considerably further downstage than the kitchen and therefore, actors frequently had to have their backs turned to audience members. However, the theatre has two vomes, or stage entrances, at the downstage edge of the stage. I found that I could use these spaces to my advantage. When actors were downstage, I tried to get

their backs toward the vom so that no audience member was both looking at the back of an actor. With their back to a section with no seats, most people had at least a partial view of downstage actors' faces. In addition to the limitations of the space, our choice to split the set into two distinct acting areas, the kitchen and the basement, resulted in greatly reduced playing space.

My desire to block in advance of rehearsals was also motivated the fast pace I had planned for the show. In order to reflect the wild ride I believed Claire was experiencing I intended to have much of the play—especially the first act—move at an almost dizzying speed. As a result of these decisions, I knew there would be little use in trying to find organic movements and scenic arrangements since so many moments would be dictated by the timing of comic lines, the set-up of unexpected entrances and the visibility of visual gags. I still left room during rehearsals for actor input, and I would often read actors' body language in order to add or cut some of the blocking I had devised. If an actor, for instance, seemed to want to stand on a certain line, I would ask, "Do you feel like you need to stand there?" And if he answered yes, then we would adjust the blocking. However, I believe my more deliberate pre-blocking was a necessary strategy, especially in scenes with several characters.

For example, in the first scene, Richard has been scurrying about the bedroom telling Claire about her total loss of memory and her unusual life as he drinks coffee and puts away his slippers. However, when Claire asks if her condition was brought on by some sort of trauma, it surprises Richard and he is taken aback. I wanted to give the opportunity to the actor playing Richard to convey this surprise with his whole body. So, I told him to begin to stand up—after kneeling at Claire's bedside—right before she

says the word trauma. I imagined his rise interrupted by her question, conveying to the audience his surprise at her question. When he executed the blocking like I asked, sometimes it looked authentic and other times it looked like he was standing at that point because the director told him to do so. I sensed his discomfort and struggle to make this movement seem motivated by his character. So, I told him that he could experiment with the exact timing of his “stand.” He seemed relieved by this freedom and the way his movement was influenced by her words was different each night. Sometimes he would stiffen all the way to a standing position when she said “trauma,” other times his rise looked interrupted, then quickly resumed. In some situations, actors can make sense of the director’s blocking by justifying the movements with some sort of internal motivation. In the situation with Richard, however, the actor’s impulse to move had to come before my planned arrangement of the scene.

Scene Work and Character Building

Once the blocking had been determined for the entire play, we went slowly through the scenes, allowing the actors the chance to try on various movements of energy and intention. I would frequently stop them at this phase and ask questions about the choices they had made. This methodology allows some room for actor contribution. If I did not like what they had done, but it came from a place of impulse and character exploration, we could jointly find a way for them to carry out their instincts.

I also used this time to help broaden their awareness of the circumstances acting upon them. For example, in the second scene of the play, the Limping Man is driving to Gertie’s house with Claire. His acting choices were all appropriate. He correctly imagined the mix of guilt and worry that his character would experience while fighting

for a second chance with the wife he had previously abused. However, the scene lacked the urgency of a kidnapping. So, I asked the actor what he wanted. He told me he wanted to convince Claire that he was trustworthy. I understood and affirmed this desire; however, I also reminded him that he had just escaped from prison, broken into a home, and stolen another man's wife. He immediately recognized that his focus should be split between Claire and the road behind him. Trying the scene again his head darted between his rear view mirrors but quickly morphed into an easy smile when giving Claire his attention.

Throughout the rehearsal process I would take time away from working on scenes to give actors opportunities to further discover their characters. This fosters an attitude of continual exploration and self-reflection. Sometimes a rehearsal process can be reduced to routine repetition of scenes with little character development or exploration. Exercises that engage the actors' imaginations produce dynamic discussion and fresh consideration of characters.

About one week into the rehearsal I borrowed a character building idea from Marshall W. Mason, the director of choice for playwright Lanford Wilson. He describes the exercise in his book *Creating Life on Stage*:

I empty my pockets on a table and invite everyone to analyze my identity from the things I carry in my pockets. When the police arrest a suspect, this is the first order of business, not only for the obvious reason of checking for weapons, but also, as Sherlock Holmes could tell you, we can deduce a person's fundamental identity from detecting the details of such evidence... Identity isn't limited to your driver's license. A human being is a collection of values, and these values are embodied in choices. So the essential things that we choose to carry with us provide important clues to our nature. These 'props' are emblems of our identity, as surely as certain fossils speak of dinosaurs. (76)

After our warm up games, I asked the actors to gather around a table. I then emptied my pockets onto the table and asked them to tell me as much about me as they could from what they found there. The actors enjoyed picking through my items and identified me as a proud father—with many photos of my children—and a bit absent-minded or clumsy—from the scratches on my cell phone.

After I retrieved my personal items, I gave them each paper and a pen and asked them each to come up with a list of items their own character might have in his or her pockets. I asked Phillip and Millet to imagine their pockets from before prison and told Claire to imagine what items might be found in her pockets from before her memory loss.

After ten five minutes, I asked each actor to share their list with the group. After each list I encouraged the other actors to comment. I find that open discussion among actors allows for meaningful ensemble because they thinking about other characters in addition to their own. We all agreed that the most telling items on each actor's list were the ones that played against the character's type. For example, Heidi—the tough, foul-mouthed prison cook—kept lipstick in her purse. It was very helpful to the actress to imagine her character as someone who is trying to be pretty and feminine in spite of her aggressive demeanor and unglamorous daily existence. I encouraged actors to use recall of this exercise as a way of getting into character right before a scene began or before they entered a scene. The moments before the lights come up or before an entrance can be daunting for an actor as they are scrambling through their weeks of character work to get in touch with their character's deepest motivations. It is a virtually impossible task. This exercise is especially effective because I encourage actors to literally reach into

their pockets offstage or before the lights come up and imagine clutching those items. This can be a powerful physical trigger for actors struggling to connect to their character.

Shomit Mitter, in his book *Systems of Rehearsal*, recounts an exercise in which Konstantin Stanislavski wanted to give actress Molchanova an experience similar to the blindness she would have to portray for the role in which she was cast. Stanislavski turned off all the lights in a dark room and instructed Molchanova to come to him. But in the dark, he moved to a different location. When she called out for assistance, he refused to answer her. Frustrated she eventually began quietly weeping in the corner. Stanislavski turned on the lights and told her “Now you know what blindness is like” (Mitter 21). I am not personally comfortable with an exercise that would bring one of my actors to the point of tears, as I want a safe and playful atmosphere. However, I found myself in a situation similar to Stanislavski. The lead actress of *Fuddy Meers* had to portray a woman with amnesia. She had no frame of reference for such an experience. So I wanted, like Stanislavski, to give this actress a source for emotional recall.

As mentioned before, warm-up exercises were a regular part of our rehearsals, and the actress playing Claire had been to all the rehearsals and learned all the games. However, during the hours outside of rehearsal I had been going to the other actors to teach them a game that we had not played. Then, at the next rehearsal we formed a circle on stage and I instructed everyone that we would be playing the game we had learned “last Friday.” We began playing the game, which involves strange actions and complicated verbal patterns. We kept the game away from the actress playing Claire for

quite some time so we could all observe her response. Her eyes were wide and her head bounced around the room quickly. She watched with rapt attention hoping that some detail or moment would help her recall this game that we all seemed to remember so perfectly. The actors included improvised inside jokes as we played the game, and they even compared their performance to the “last time” we had played the game. When it was finally her turn she took a deep breath and apologized. “I’m sorry; I don’t know this game at all!” We egged her on a bit, insisting that she should know it in order to further observe her reactions. We finally let her off the hook and she was a very good sport about being fooled. I asked the other actors to tell the actress what they had observed about her during the exercise. They made several observations about the positioning of her hands, where her eyes went and how apologetic she was that she did not remember. Then I asked her to describe her own thoughts in the exercise. After we had adequately debriefed the moment, I encouraged her to use this moment as a reference point for her character’s confusion throughout the play.

Images

For this production I experimented with a slightly different technique with one of my actors. In my own experience as both actor and director, I have often associated characters I have portrayed with well-known images and even clichés. For example, when playing Simon Stride, the slimy chairman of the medical board in *Jekyll & Hyde*, my mind went to a snake. Specifically, I thought of the cartoon snake villains in Disney films such as *The Sword in the Stone* and *The Jungle Book*. This became quick reference points for my speech patterns and movements. However, I was hesitant to admit I was mimicking instead of truly acting. This came from a naïve belief that all genuine

character portrayal had to start within the actor, from a deep emotional and intellectual understanding of the character. At some level I suspected that using my cartoon snake image was cheating. Recently, however, I read David Kaplan's *Five Approaches to Acting* that explains a methodology he labels "Building Images".

For the role of Richard III, Olivier based his characterization, in part, on the Big Bad Wolf from the Disney cartoon version of *Little Red Riding Hood*.

'I'm afraid I do work mostly from the outside in,' Olivier said, 'Perhaps I should mention what everybody's been talking about for years, and that's the Actor's studio and the Method. What I've just said is absolutely against their beliefs, absolute heresy.'

Oliver's heresy is any actor's healthy instinct, a child's pleasure in pretending to be someone else by putting on a mother's hat.
(Kaplan 121)

Reading Kaplan and Olivier's words I was set free of the guilt I had felt about mimicry as a methodology and vowed to allow it to inform my directing without shame.

Very early in the rehearsal process I gave an image for mimicry to the actor playing Richard. I believed we could gain a lot of scene energy and momentum if the actor could quickly jump into the skin of the neurotic father Alan from the television sitcom *Two and a Half Men*. Alan, as played by Jon Cryer, is a single father who has delusions of maintaining the archetypical American family despite the disintegration of his marriage and the presence of his womanizing bachelor brother. Richard, in *Fuddy Meers*, bears a similar anxious desperation to protect the appearance of normalcy with his amnesiac wife and his pot-smoking stepson. Even my actor balked at first at the idea of imitating such a cliché, but I shared with him Kaplan's idea about images.

Like the bad sketches that precede a drawing, or the clumsy notes a pianist hits when practicing a sonata, so too the first use of imagery in rehearsal might be crude, or halting, or just plain wrong. But images get you started; that's their usefulness. Images give momentum to rehearsals in ways that working toward a task does not. In painting, you have to

start with bright color to get bright color. A careful build of pastel tones does not build to vivid color. It makes gray. (132)

I hoped providing the actor with this image of a sitcom character would supply vivid colors for the “painting” we were doing in our early rehearsals.

The actor agreed to give it a try and spent some of his time outside of rehearsal watching the television show and taking special note of the actor playing Alan. I remember the actor mentioned to me during one rehearsal, that Alan—despite his neurosis and desperate quest for normalcy—was very “honest.” The methodology of mimicry was effective with the actor playing Richard at first. His postures and vocal pacing helped the actor connect to the physicality of the character very quickly. Even other actors benefited from his fast transformation. His nervous energy impacted the ensemble positively and the level of early rehearsal play received a shot in the arm because of the image the actor playing Richard was using. In fact, much of the actors’ physical presence and body language with Kenny that could be seen in the final product was discovered in those early rehearsals while he was utilizing the “Alan Image.” However it did not take long for him to outgrow the cliché in his characterization. He specifically had trouble navigating the play’s tonal shifts using his Alan image. My method for aiding him past the two-dimensionality of the image was to give him a mantra. Mantras were something I used in my run-through rehearsals in the second half of our rehearsal period.

Mantras

When learning to swing a golf club or a baseball bat, there are a bevy of instructions that must be memorized and incorporated by the learner. Keep your head up or down. Lift this elbow. Keep this arm straight. There comes a point in the process

however where the student needs to free themselves from the contortions so many instructions invariably inspire. It is the same for actors. When they are first working their way through a scene, they need to remember blocking, stage business, moves of momentum, focus of attention, overall stage picture, and pacing. When the rehearsal process moves to run-throughs of acts or entire play it is important for actors to start feeling more comfortable in their work. Yet, the rehearsal process is still about learning and improving. Therefore, I employ run-through mantras. I feel as though actors can legitimately feel free in a role while still applying a single “big picture” note from the director to their work. Sometimes, the entire cast will have the same mantra while other times each actor will have a specific mantra tailored to their particular character’s development. I also try to limit side coaching (calling out things from the house) to just the repetition of the mantra.

For example, the aforementioned actor playing Richard needed to give more depth to his character. He had effectively utilized the Alan image but was ready to go deeper. For one run his mantra was “Matt” (the actor’s first name). I challenged him to drop all characterization, just for that particular run, and to pretend that Matt had an amnesiac wife who had gone missing. I was asking him to go back to the Stanislavskian “magic if” in which the actor pretends that all the circumstances of the character apply to his own life. It was during that run that the actor and I both sensed that we were discovering the true Richard. The actor commented on his process in a panel discussion after the performances in a Baylor University Theatre Appreciation class,

I started off way over the top, imitating Alan from *Two and a Half Men* but then Dan encouraged me to strip that away for more realistic acting and build up the craziness. Eventually, I think my character ended up looking at the end like it

did at the beginning. But by the opening night it felt like it came from a lot more honest place. (Tolbert et al.)

Even after the image had lost its power for the actor, he still maintained the physicality of Alan, but undergirded his actions with authentic intentions.

On another occasion, my mantra for the entire cast was “news.” Since the actors know the whole story so well, they can easily forget when the revelation of information by one character is in fact “news” to their own character. As a result, I encouraged actors to listen to the things being said and revealed around them and consider if this was something they knew already or if it was “news”: something revelatory to their character which they must react to appropriately.

Storytelling

One strength of my directing is a strong focus on story and character. In fact, in the past, I have sometimes neglected theatricality and visual effect in favor of telling the story clearly. My counterpart in the graduate program has confessed to the opposite tendency. She is far more interested in visual spectacle and movement onstage, and that often muddles or obfuscates the story. So I was quite surprised when a faculty member came to a preview shortly before opening and told us that he did not “believe” the larger story. He told me that the characters were all interesting and funny, and that many of the comic moments worked well, but that he was not convinced that the events of the story were really happening to the characters. This was difficult to hear, but accurate. He later also observed that my notes to the cast were mostly technical ones. I would try to manipulate the way they were saying this line or the timing of their reaction to things. Without realizing it, my direction had begun serving the laugh instead of the story.

Instead of allowing the actors to organically live out the moments of the story I was treating them like puppets. In the same way that my counterpart's proclivity toward spectacle had sometimes blinded her to the truthfulness of the story and the characters, the comedy of *Fuddy Meers* had blinded me.

It took me a few days to process what was happening and it was not until the eve of our opening that I truly understood the import of this note. As a result, I sent an email to the cast granting them permission to forget my technical directions.

As we go into our first performance, I'd like to give you permission to 'forget everything'. You've learned all the blocking, the ways to deliver lines that I like most, and every detail about the perfect performance. Now, forget it all. I want you to concentrate on your character's 'want' and live it fully. Concentrate on your character's experience of every moment. Listen to others and construct your lines as though you're saying them for the first time. If the way someone says a line makes you want to hesitate in a place you've never hesitated before, then hesitate!

No two performances will be the same from this point forward. And that's as it should be. The play will stay fresh if you're experiencing the story anew each night.

Remember that you will never have any control over the laughs you get, but you will have control over how truthfully you convey each moment. And that will result in audiences enjoying the performance.

So your mantra for tomorrow night is IN THE MOMENT. Let every line and action influence your character's want. (Buck, "Day of the Show")

I wanted to free them to live authentically in the moments of *Fuddy Meers*. They knew their characters and their blocking. And I was confident that nothing would keep the production as fresh, interesting, and even funny as their living each moment honestly. I believe that it paid off. Opening night was not our best performance, but I noticed that it might have been the most emotionally poignant performance. The second act had a weight to it that I think the audience sensed. The other indication I have that the actors were successful in telling the story honestly was that so many of the conversations I overheard as people exited the theatre were about what happened next to Claire and her

family. Audiences were invested in the lives of the characters and haunted by the play's intentional lack of dénouement.

Previews

I think that I may have made a misstep in trying to have several mini-previews in the days leading up to opening night. I am always amazed by the impact an audience has on actors. Audiences bring a production to life in a way that a director simply cannot. Therefore, I thought it would be helpful to invite handfuls of people throughout our late runs and dress rehearsal period. Unfortunately, I learned that a small audience rarely responds vocally to a performance. Only our last night of preview had more than a dozen people watching, and as a result the actors felt like the production was not funny enough in those early previews. And, perhaps, I worried about the same thing. I still think its valuable to have a preview night before you open, but one strong preview is better than several weak ones.

Conclusion

As we neared opening night, one thing I think I did effectively was to remove myself from the ensemble. I wanted the production to run on its own, and to give my stage manager the space to take control. I began by letting the actors lead their own warm-ups. About one week before technical rehearsals I told them to start rotating who would lead the warm-up games and to let each leader choose the games they would play. This went very well. While the stage managers, designers and I were setting up for technical rehearsal and dress rehearsal of the play, the actors were warming themselves up. A few days before opening night the actor playing Limping Man had to begin to hide under the bed before the house doors opened at 7:00 PM. The warm-up games

were so important to the cast that they made sure to start them promptly at 6:45 so he could be a part of them. I wanted the cast and crew to have a real ownership of the production and their independent decision to move the warm-up time for their cast member demonstrated that this was occurring.

To further help remove myself from the productions, I spent less and less time backstage as we moved into techs and dress rehearsals. After the show opened, there were even a few performances that I did not attend or arrived only at intermission. It was difficult to let go of the play, but it was necessary for me to experience that separation and it was better for the production as a whole. Everyone in the cast and crew agreed that Saturday night, our second to last show, was the best performance and I think that speaks well of how the production continued to grow without my guidance.

In the end, my desire to have real characters populate this quirky play required a significant amount of trust. I had to trust the actors to connect to the reality of their characters. I had to trust the text in order to allow the narrative to be the driving force behind the comedy. And I had to trust that the atmosphere of focused play that we had created in the rehearsal process would result in fresh and in-the-moment performances.

CHAPTER FIVE

Self-Critique

The Performances

Fuddy Meers opened on Tuesday, December 1, 2009, ten years after its premier at the Manhattan Theatre Club. The play ran through December 6, with seven performances in six days. All the performances sold out, with the exception of Saturday's matinee which was added late once the other performances sold out—though even that matinee was two-thirds full.

As an actor and as a director I long ago surrendered the practice of trying to gauge the success of performances through the observable responses of audiences. First, the most measurable forms of feedback (e.g. laughter and applause) do not account for inaudible responses such as emotional impact and intellectual engagement. Even if they did, there are a number of factors that can affect an audience, such as the time of day (matinee or evening performance), day of the week, weather, or even how difficult it was to find a parking spot outside the theatre. These exterior elements can have positive or negative effects. For example, weekend audiences tend to be much more vocally responsive in Baylor Theatre productions. This may be, in part, because the audiences on weeknights are made up largely of students in the Theatre Appreciation class, whose attendance at the performance is compulsory. These students are typically polite and engaged, but the audiences who come on Fridays and Saturdays are there by choice; the same enthusiasm that prompted them to purchase tickets is evident as they watch the plays.

Understanding that audience response is neither accurately measureable nor wholly indicative of success or failure, I will give an account of the observable facts of the performances. Opening night had a relatively quiet crowd, that did not laugh loudly but that was clearly attentive. In watching the audience, I noticed more response to the narratively significant moments of the play. For example, when Heidi first indicated that she was in cahoots with the Limping Man, a few audience members around me whispered to each other excitedly about the revelation. When Kenny revealed that Limping Man was his father, I heard audible gasps from the audience. They were clearly invested in the narrative and were as anxious as Claire to know who was who. When the play ended, some of my non-theatre friends approached me with questions about what would happen to Claire the next morning. Even before giving me the customary “Good job!” greetings, they needed an answer to the unresolved issues of the play.

This was exciting, especially in light of my concerns before opening. Just a few nights earlier, a previewing faculty member had told me he “didn’t believe” the story. Yet, now the audience believed it so much, they wanted to know what happened to Claire after the final scene. I would like to believe that this connection to the characters and their story had something to do with my eleventh hour shift from technical notes to actors about timing and delivery of lines, to an emphasis on living in the moment. In the email I sent out on the eve of opening night I wrote,

Remember that you will never have any control over the laughs you get, but you will have control over how truthfully you convey each moment. And that will result in audiences enjoying the show. (Buck, “Day of the Show”)

It is possible that the very presence of an audience and the coinciding rush of adrenaline is what impacted the actors' performances. Whatever the cause the entire audience, including me, were engaged with the characters, especially in act two as the sad details of their pasts begin to unfold.

The second night, Wednesday December 2, was a stage manager's nightmare. There were many technical surprises including missed sound cues, the gun's clip falling out of the gun at a particularly important moment, and the golf cart bucking uncontrollably into the kitchen platform. I was particularly proud of the cast and crew. These kinds of issues can derail a performance as actors become jittery and worried about what might happen next. But I went backstage during the intermission and encouraged them to remain focused on the moments as the characters experience them. I do not believe the technical issues overshadowed the story for audience members. In fact, it was on this night that the local newspaper sent their reviewer to see the show and his published comments reflect a connection with the play's story and ideas. Carl Hoover of the *Waco Tribune-Herald* writes:

By play's end, we discover who Claire is as well as her connection to everyone around her, yet an ambiguous ending suggests all this self-knowledge may vanish after her next sleeping spell. It's here where the playwright leaves the audience to chew on the meat of his play, answered questions leading to unresolved ones. Because of her amnesia, Claire proves the only character not burdened or haunted by her past. Yet is this blissful ignorance of a painful past worth the loss of one's identity, one's relationships? (Hoover)

Hoover's observations about the play sounds a lot more like Ben Brantley's reaction to the show than those who found the gags tired and unrelenting. Hoover is interested in the deeper questions the play raises. The title of his review is "Baylor Theatre's *Fuddy Meers*: Fun Questions That Lead to Serious Ones." I believe this is an indication that

the production was successful in its effort to treat seriously both the pain at the center of the play and the mayhem on its face.

After Wednesday, there were no technical issues of note, and I sensed that the actors were “settling in.” Their timing in response to audience laughter improved and they developed a clarity of speech and action that was prompted by wanting each audience member to understand the story. As much as a director tries to get actors to be effective storytellers, using enunciation and volume, nothing is as transformative in this regard as a house full of people. Actors become very aware of their role as communicators when they are faced with 250 people who do not know the story. I continued to overhear encouraging remarks about the play as audiences filed out of the theatre each night. As much as the audiences laughed, I was pleasantly surprised by how much of the post-show conversation was about the story and what it all meant.

It is worth noting that I received some negative audience feedback. The chairman of the theatre department received an email from a group of five patrons who were offended by the play. Their letter voiced a distaste at the play’s scatological humor, depiction of drug use, and its overall dark tone. Their email claimed that they stayed for the entire play hoping to find “redeeming value” but by the play’s conclusion they were still dissatisfied. From my admittedly limited perspective, I believe their reaction represented the experience of a small minority of those who saw the play.

Design

I think I may be proudest of the visual aesthetics of the show. Between the lighting designer and the scenic designer the show looked beautiful. It could be playful or menacing and it contained a handful of surprising elements that seemed automated.

These were all the elements of the dark ride I had hoped to emulate. Carl Hoover commented on the visual impact of the set as well,

William Sherry's smartly designed, compact set, neatly lit by Allie Hahn, features whimsical touches such as a curved floor edge trimmed with running lights and yellow and pink tented fabric above the set suggesting a circus. It's fantasy commenting on reality - Claire's life as seen through fuddy meers. (Hoover)

Hoover's comments seem to directly address the discussion after my first meeting with designers. When the designers wanted more guidance about "how real" the concept of the play was, I conveyed that I wanted the characters and the action to seem realistic but I wanted their world to be strange and menacing at its periphery. Hoover uses the phrase "fantasy commenting on reality" which captures succinctly what the set does. I wish I had thought of that phrase for the design meeting.

Scenic

The set accomplished a lot of my conceptual goals. The carnival aesthetic was supported by the line of kitchen platform edging, the LED lights, the spandex tents and the rope lights in their lower edge (Appendix B, Fig. B.2). My interest in the dark and light dualities of the play's themes, characters, and tone was conveyed by the contrast between the bright kitchen, and the menacing basement with its disintegrating edges (the maze and back wall). (Appendix B, Fig. B.4, B5) I believe the movement of the stage pieces was theatrically interesting and gave a playful, and ride-like feel to the production. Often during performances I could hear audible responses to the movement of set pieces (with no visible stage hands) or the appearance of the golf cart.

Scenically, the car was the most problematic element. I was not happy with how often the car had to be seen backing up. If I could direct the play again I would place the

kitchen more centrally in the set and have the car make circles around the perimeter of the stage. In addition, I wanted a steel rail to act as a track on which the car would ride. However, once we tried driving the golf cart on the rail, it was virtually impossible to stay on the rail. The cart was so heavy (over 1000 pounds), that it easily jumped the rail and therefore added to the already difficult task of driving while acting. My compromise was to remove the rail and to paint tire marks on the stage indicating the path the cart took. I am not sure this conveyed the ride-like quality I had hoped the car scenes would embody. (Appendix B, Fig. B.6)

There were a handful of sight line issues that I was encouraged to deem “unavoidable” in this space. But I was very bothered by the fact that a dozen or so seats could not see any of the window interaction moments. I am not sure how much control I had over this. I was under the impression that my designers would be aware of these problems and avoid them. I was frequently told “that’s just going to happen in this theatre.” I was satisfied with that answer in the building process, but as I watched the play with a full audience my mind constantly went to those with an obscured view of some of the action. This was a reminder that I cannot have faith that others will worry about the audience’s experience. As a director, I am the head storyteller, and as such, my job is both to tell the story well, and ensure it is told in a way that can be received by everyone. Ultimately, I am the advocate for my audience, and I let my guard down for those audience members whose view was obscured.

Lighting

Of all design elements, I was most pleased with the lighting of the production. It accomplished so much in service of the play’s tonal shifts and thematic underscoring. I

was especially satisfied with the lighting of the “tents” that hovered above and behind the set. The rope lights at their bottom edge helped with Claire’s episodes and they were theatrically effective in conveying several moments of action, like the police siren lights. Even when they were not used for special effects, they were lit so beautifully. The LED lights were effective and the flashes at the beginning of act one were a fantastic introduction to the disoriented heroine of the play.

My one issue with the finalized lighting design was with the flashes at the start of the second act. They were supposed to function much like the flashes in act one, placing the audience within Claire’s confusion. However, in the act two flashes it was never quite clear that this was what we were experiencing. Upon reflection, I think one of the reasons it worked better in act one was because we first saw Claire alone on stage. One actress alone on stage, looking around immediately became a proxy for the audience. We saw that she did not know what was going on, and we joined her in the task of making meaning of her surroundings. The act two flashes, lacked that moment where we connect to Claire’s task of making sense of her world. I am not clear about the best solution to the problem, but I know that beginning the scene with all the characters on stage as the flashes begin failed to connect us with Claire’s cognitive process as I had hoped it would.

Sound

The sound design might be where I experienced the most dissatisfaction. The transition music was certainly effective. We used “Mahna Mahna” by Cake for all transitions that were not instantaneous. The song is fun, playful, and familiar, yet this particular version was less known and “strange.” However, there were some sound cues

that ended too soon or were not clear enough. Despite my request that these be fixed, they never were. I was told there were technical reasons these sounds could not be changed, but I am still not sure if it was impossible or just inconvenient for the sound team.

In addition, there was a single song in the walk-in/intermission music mix that I did not believe was nearly familiar enough to accomplish what the other songs did. But I was told by a faculty supervisor that I should compromise on this specific decision because my sound designer felt her voice was being stifled by my specific vision for the sound design. Acquiescing to this request was my mistake. I should not have compromised on this issue. Despite winning a little favor back with the sound designer, I was bothered every time I heard that song. I think it could have been detrimental to my concept for the music of the production embodying the “familiar made strange.”

Costumes

I was very pleased with the costumes of the show. It was the easiest design element because we kept the costumes realistic. Gertie’s costume was particularly effective (Appendix B, Fig. B.8) and I noticed it had a transformative power over the actress. I never had to coach her to “act old” or “move gingerly” because of her age. Her costume had an “outside in” effect on her and she became Gertie when she put it on.

Millet’s Spongebob shirt was a bright and significant image onstage (Appendix B, Fig. B.12); the cartoon face staring out from underneath the navy blue blazer was a vivid reminder that he was a child trapped inside a man’s body. Richard and Heidi started act one in red and blue respectively (Appendix B, Fig. B.10, B.11), but by the second act they had shed their outer shirts and were wearing matching black tank tops.

They stood in dark contrast to Gertie and Richard who were dressed more colorfully. Claire's costume was most effective in its use of color. I think her neutrality and "blank slate" condition was underscored effectively by her shale colored costume (Appendix B, Fig. B.7). I would have liked the outfit to change more from scene to scene, so that the idea of her "trying on" various roles and personality traits might have been clearer.

I also have to wonder if Hinky Binky might not have been more effective as a larger puppet. My initial design presentation included images of puppets that looked like those used in church Sunday School puppet shows. I imagined the audience recognizing the puppet from childhood experiences (their own or their children's) and then being especially surprised at the violent and foul language that sprang forth. Our Hinky Binky did not look like one of those puppets, so I think we lost an opportunity at conveying "the familiar made strange."

Actors and Staging

I was largely satisfied with my cast. All of them had an outstanding working attitude. They were constantly enthusiastic, prompt, and hard working. They fully embraced the tone I had set in the first rehearsal of serious play. For example, one evening when I came to rehearsal, the actors playing Heidi, Richard, and Kenny told me that they had rehearsed their car scenes in an actual car. While they rehearsed, they took note of the ways they behaved in that real setting, and then they applied those observations to the scene. The actor playing Richard told me that when they rehearsed the scene where Heidi pulls them over and asks him to step out of the car, he was much more aware of the passing traffic. As a result, he added this awareness and embarrassment to his performance.

The greatest risk I took was casting a relatively inexperienced actress in the leading role. Looking back, the things I liked about her performance in the auditions were ultimately a boon to the production. I believe her natural sense for the character's innocence was extremely endearing. Carl Hoover praised her portrayal, calling her "calm" and "open faced." And I believe her calm, open faced quality acted as an anchor for the antics that swirled around her.

However, the actress's limited experience result in weaknesses in her performance, as well. The best actors will be able to reflect the growth that their character undergoes over the course of the play. Characters should be consistent from start to finish, but we should see an evolution brought on by the experiences they endure. The actress playing Claire was not very effective in conveying this change. There may have been more emotional weight to her personal story if we had seen the growing knowledge of her identity impact her throughout the play. If we had seen the true parts of her character being "written" onto her initial tabula rasa personality, then the prospect of her losing all of that when she fell asleep would have seemed like a greater loss.

In addition, there were a few moments where her portrayal was not wholly convincing, specifically, those moments where she had to act surprised or startled. When the masked man appeared at the window, or the puppet appeared at the kitchen window, her reactions belied her foreknowledge of those events. In retrospect, there were probably opportunities to give her the guidance one should give a beginning actor. For example, in a preview late in the rehearsal process a faculty member gave her the

note that she was occasionally looking at the audience. This is a common habit in young actors, but I had neglected to address it up to that point.

In hindsight, I could have gone through a few basic actor exercises that would have been helpful to her. For example, I have had rehearsals where I warn actors that I may yell “Cheat!” during the course of the action. Cheating is an actor term for ensuring that one’s face is visible to as much of the audience as possible. Young actors often stand in direct profile to the audience or turn upstage without realizing it. Yelling “cheat” from various places in the house reminds actors of the audience’s gaze before the audience is present.

Another technique I have used is the “gut check.” I was once a member of a choir where the director would check singers’ breathing technique by reaching toward their stomach to make sure it was tight. Correct breath control requires a tightened diaphragm, which makes the stomach hard. This director would not actually touch our stomachs, but him pretending he was going to reminded us to breathe from the diaphragm. I have adopted this practice of checking on actors. However, I am not checking their breathing; I am making sure they know their intention. My “gut check” involves stopping the action of a scene and asking actors what their character wants. It makes sure they are always moving toward a desired goal and not just coasting through the scene. I will typically dedicate an entire rehearsal or more to gut checking. However, in *Fuddy Meers*, I wanted to treat the actors as professionals and so I only did a few gut checks over the course of the rehearsal process. I did not want to patronize them.

I realized after the production how much the actress playing Claire may have benefitted from these techniques which I typically reserve for beginning actors. In the panel discussion with the Theatre Appreciation class, one student asked all the actors what they learned most in the process. The actress playing Claire answered, “I really just learned how to be an actress” (Tolbert, et al.). In an effort to treat the actors with respect, I overlooked some elemental needs of the inexperienced actor I had cast in the leading role.

Analysis

Even as late as opening night directors can come to understand elements of the script that they may have overlooked or misread. For the most part, I was quite pleased by the fruit that my analysis had produced. However, there was a sequence in the play that always seemed a bit empty to me. The scene occurs in act one when Claire and Millet are in the basement. The part of the scene where Claire threatens Millet in order to obtain information from him always felt uncharacteristic of the otherwise gentle heroine of the play. Upon reflection and discussion with a faculty member I now wonder if it was a hint at an aspect of Claire’s personality that I neglected. The mean streak she displays, even momentarily, points to a Claire that my production of the play never depicted. Claire’s innocence could also be called into question in act two as she “innocently” needles Heidi with questions about her relationship to Philip. The questions seem innocuous coming from someone who has been so confused for the entire play, but there is also a hint of design in them. It is as though Claire is using her confusion to push Heidi to the realization that her relationship with Philip is a sham. If that is what is really happening in this scene, then Claire is a bit wiser and shrewder than

I chose to portray her. If this discovery had been made earlier in the process, I might have been able to explore the intentional side of Claire. For example, in character building, I might have done exercises or improvised scenes that required the actress playing Claire to acquire something from someone else. Perhaps we could have created a scenario where she had to get information out of someone who did not want to divulge that information. By removing the intention from the action of the play, she could focus on her various methods of attack. Or perhaps, we could have rehearsed the scenes where Claire is trying to gain information about herself, and added an object that Claire was physically trying to get away from the actor with the information. We could give Millet a tennis ball, or something like it, and as she asked him questions she could try various techniques to take it from him. These exercises, I believe, would have helped give the actress an action for those particular scenes. In our production Claire was largely passive until her moment of revelation about her past. If we had worked on her intentionality in earlier scenes, we may have laid some subtle, nuanced seeds of the strong, independent Claire that emerges by the end of the play.

Now that some time has passed since the performances I can see clearly a disparity between my theoretical approach to the play and my work with actors and staging. While I believe my design was informed both by direct allusions to carnival and the theoretical influence of the carnivalesque, I can see that my staging failed to demonstrate that influence. I was not mindful of conveying the grotesque nor the Bakhtinian inversions of the status quo. I do not have specific ideas of what I might have done differently, but my concerns for character truthfulness and comic impact superseded my concern for stage picture and theatricality.

Comedy

I have only directed two comedies before *Fuddy Meers*. Even though I love comedy I have always been more interested in directing dramatic projects. Therefore, choosing this particular play was important for me as a thesis production. From the start, I warned myself to pay attention to the serious moments as well as the funny. I wanted to play against words like “zany” and “mad-capped” so often applied to Lindsay-Abaire’s work because I believed the play had more to offer. And yet, I still fell into the trap of spending a lot of rehearsal time trying to make the funny moments work. I probably spent ten percent of rehearsal stopping scenes and suggesting a particular way to deliver a line, or suggesting emphasis on a certain word to optimize its comic impact. Invariably, the first time it was attempted it worked and the cast and production crew would laugh. Believing we had “solved” that joke we would move on ready to find another moment to “make funnier.” But soon after, maybe the next time we rehearsed that scene or the time after, the moment would lose its funniness. I did not know why what worked once did not work later. But I know now. In only working on the technical delivery of the joke, the actor was not considering the truth behind the gag. The comic moments always worked better when they came from genuine character-driven action. Luckily, a faculty member encouraged me to pursue the truth of the play for our final rehearsals. That effort made the story fresh and the jokes funny again. From that experience I have devised a phrase for whenever I am directing a comic play: comedy is just drama that happens to be funny. I need to treat even the zaniest of comedies like they are the most serious stories ever told. The comedy will take care of itself through the text and the actors’ abilities.

Conclusion

This production represents my largest directing project to date. Its budget, crew, and audience were larger than anything I have ever directed before. The resources afforded the show were both a fantastic boon and a serious challenge. The primary challenge was learning to work with designers. Ultimately, it made the production a more collaborative project than I have directed before. Their contributions to the overall product were tremendous. However, I must confess that as I watched the show, a part of me was proud of how much of it had my aesthetic fingerprints on it. Yet, at the same time, I had to wonder how the show might be different if I had let go of the reins a bit and allowed my designers more control over their various elements. To be fair, the nature of the project lends itself to this predicament. From the time graduate students enter the MFA program they are anticipating their “thesis show.” It is designed to be the culmination of all we have learned in our graduate course of study, so there is a natural inclination to infuse the show with everything we can do. I think I did that effectively. I demonstrated that I have an aesthetic sense deep enough to bring an entire large scale production from page to stage. Now, I think I need to focus on doing less. The aspect of theatre that has always thrilled me the most is its collaborative nature and as I go forward in my artistic career I will make it a goal to more fully allow my collaborative artists to create with me instead of for me. On this show, I was proud of how much of it was mine, but on my next show I hope to be proud of how much of it is everybody else’s.

Consulting a map and taking the journey are two wholly different experiences. Yet, there is much to be learned from both the study of the map and the actual journey.

When it comes to my journey of directing *Fuddy Meers*, big lessons were learned at both stages of the trip. As a result of the preparations for my travels, I have a better understanding of the causes and function of laughter, the role of the grotesque in modern literature, the current state of farce in works of theatre, and the complicated relationship between history and memory in postmodern culture. As a result of my actual journey, I learned to treat collaborators as co-conceptualizers and to give serious care to the story even in a play that is interested in making the audience laugh. Ultimately, I am very satisfied with the project because I was able to both create a successful end product and learn along the way. When I remember this production, I will remember that both the journey and the destination were valuable experiences.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Director's Concept Presentation



FIG. A.1 Title Slide



FIG. A.2 Aesthetic Principles

HOW REAL?

Closer to the action = More real

At the "edges" there is confusion, darkness, menace

Set, lighting, music is less familiar just outside Claire's immediate attention



Fig. A.3 Realism vs. Fantasy

SET DESIGN

What I want from dark rides...

Mechanical movement - Objects, set pieces, scenery moving into place very artificially.

The feeling of a RIDE – Claire (and the audience) is being guided through a journey

Memory response in audience of ride devices (lap bars, strobe lights, etc.)

Levels - I want the kitchen and basement to be at different levels with stairs that clearly connect them

Fig. A.4 Dark Ride Slide 1

SET DESIGN

What I don't want from dark rides...

NO literally frightening elements - no ghosts, goblins, etc

NO carnival/fun house set – This play takes place in REAL places. It merely FEELS as scary and menacing as a carnival ride to Claire.

NO circus designs – I don't want circus tent patterns on the wall paper or clowns on sweaters, but I do like lifting the "darkened" primary colors from the funhouse palette

Fig. A.5 Dark Ride Slide 2

APPENDIX B

Design Photos

All photos © 2009 Baylor Photography unless otherwise noted.

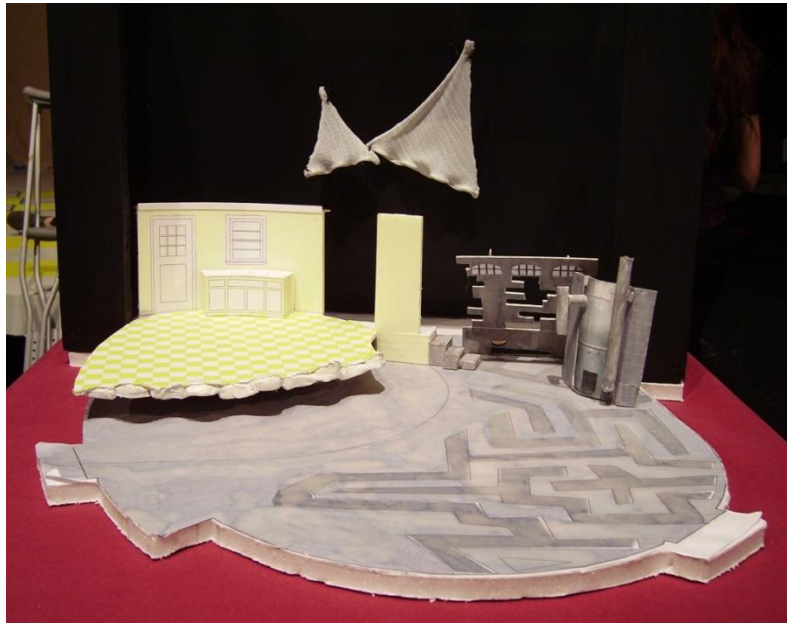


Fig. B.1 Photo of scenic design model.
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Fig. B.2 Photo featuring completed set.



Fig. B.3 Photo featuring act one, scene one



Fig. B.4 Photo featuring the kitchen.



Fig. B.5 Photo featuring the basement.



Fig. B.6 Photo featuring the car.



Fig. B.7 Photos featuring two costume configurations for Claire



Fig. B.8 Photos featuring costume for Gertie.



Fig. B.9 Photos featuring costume for Limping Man.

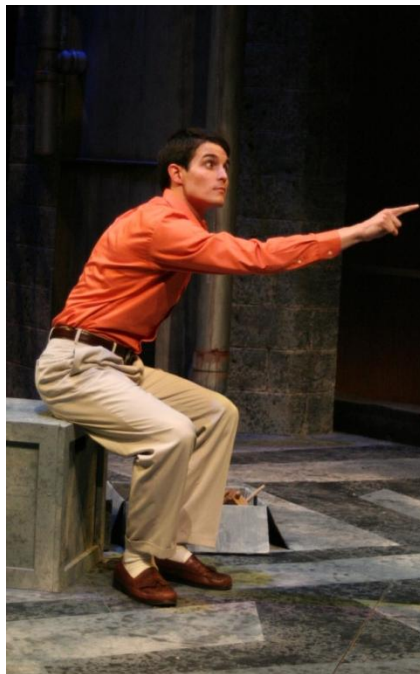


Fig. B.10 Photos featuring costume for Richard.



Fig. B.11 Photos featuring costume for Heidi.



Fig. B.12 Photo featuring costume for Millet



Fig. B.13 Photo featuring costume for Kenny

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