

## ABSTRACT

A Director's Approach to Donald Margulies's *Shipwrecked! An Entertainment—the Amazing Adventures of Louis de Rougemont (as told by himself)*

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Donald Margulies's meta-theatrical script presents an imagined performance by the real-life 19<sup>th</sup>-century figure Louis de Rougemont, a man made famous by his memoir detailing his adventures at sea and while shipwrecked on an island off the coast of Australia, only to be later disgraced when his tales were determined to be lies built on plagiarized passages from adventure novels. This thesis examines the process undertaken in bringing Margulies's play to its November, 2013 performance run at Baylor University, with explorations of playwright and playscript histories, of directorial analysis and production concepts, and the creative collaborations established between director, designers, and actors.

A Director's Approach to Donald Margulies's *Shipwrecked! An Entertainment -- the  
Amazing Adventures of Louis de Rougemont (as told by himself)*

by

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A Thesis

Approved by the Department of Theatre Arts

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## CHAPTER ONE

### The Playwright and the Play

#### *Introduction*

*Shipwrecked! An Entertainment – The Amazing Adventures of Louis de Rougemont (as told by himself)* is a fast-moving, episodic theatrical narrative by Pulitzer-Prize winning playwright Donald Margulies. This thesis considers both the written text and the performance it inspired at Baylor University Theatre. This is accomplished in part through application of the theoretical writings of Bertolt Brecht, Peter Brook, and Jerzy Grotowski, coupled with historical appreciation for nineteenth century performance styles, Yiddish Theatre, and contemporary devised theatre practices. This thesis seeks to explore the process undergone by director and collaborators in pursuit of a unified, entertaining, and artistic presentation of Margulies' work for the Baylor community.

Those with only a casual familiarity with the career of Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Donald Margulies may be forgiven if they find his work on *Shipwrecked! An Entertainment – The Amazing Adventures of Louis de Rougemont (as told by himself)*<sup>1</sup> surprising. Much of the writer's fame and lengthy vitae have been built on the reputation of such dramatic works as *Time Stands Still* (2009), *Brooklyn Boy* (2004), and arguably his best-known script to date, *Dinner With Friends* (1998), all of which are built around the theatrical convention of Realism. By contrast, *Shipwrecked!* announces its theatricality throughout, and never seeks to convince the audience that they are anywhere

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the work's humorously long title, the following chapters will refer to the script and production with the shortened moniker *Shipwrecked!*, featuring the exclamation point as a titular symbol rather than as a traditional punctuation mark.



other than in a theatre. Moreover, the majority of characters that populate Margulies's scripts—especially those in the role of protagonist—are complex and multi-faceted affluent Americans who, more often than not, share Margulies's Jewish New Yorker background and concern with artistic pursuits. The cast of *Shipwrecked!*, meanwhile, includes a variety of archetypal character types, from salty old Sea Captain to a loveable canine sidekick. His collected work, which one West Coast journalist summed up as “complex, edgy, and interesting, if not always a barrel of laughs,”<sup>2</sup> hardly seems a natural breeding ground for the family-friendly, presentational, often funny, and ultimately imagination-driven tale of a dreamer/charlatan from 19<sup>th</sup> Century London, commissioned for young audiences. Still, as this chapter reveals, a careful consideration of the playwright's entire body of work, the inspiration that led to the play, and thematic similarities with other titles in his *oeuvre*, demonstrates the place *Shipwrecked!* holds among the many realistic and less-well-known non-realistic works Margulies has produced.

### *Pre-Career Biographical Study of the Playwright*

Born in Brooklyn, New York in 1954, Donald Margulies grew up in Trump Village—a Coney Island housing project built by Donald Trump's father<sup>3</sup>—in what he has called “a high rise Jewish ghetto.”<sup>4</sup> Margulies's own father worked as a wallpaper

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<sup>2</sup> Marcus Crowder, “Opening,” *The Sacramento Bee*, 22 August 2013.  
<http://www.sacbee.com/2013/08/22/5673894/sac-live-the-knockoffs-were-punk.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Clayton Beaton, et al., “The Author: Donald Margulies,” *Donald Margulies' A Sight Unseen: A Playgoer's Guide* (New Brunswick, CA: Saint John Theatre Company/Saint John University, 2006).  
<http://people.stu.ca/~hunt?22230506/archive/plays/sight/suguide.pdf> (April 10, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Jerry Patch, “Donald Margulies: From *Boitschick* to Man,” *The Playwright's Muse*, ed. Joan Herrington (New York: Routledge, 2002), 284.

salesman, while his mother stayed at home until he was ten. His family, according to the playwright, was “lower-to-middle-class,” and, while Jewish, was not particularly observant or “terribly celebratory.”<sup>5</sup> In a 1992 interview, Howard Margulies, Donald’s older brother, described their relationship with extended family members throughout the community, stating, “we were not wealthy, but our relatives thought we were because we had style. We had interests beyond television and food.”<sup>6</sup> While their lifestyle may not have been luxurious, the playwright claims the Margulies household remained dedicated to appreciating and experiencing theatre, noting Sunday mornings spent listening to showtunes that his father would play on the family’s hi-fi and, whenever they could afford it, trips into Manhattan to attend the latest Broadway plays and musicals.<sup>7</sup> In an interview with Lucas Kavner, Margulies describes his parents, stating:

Neither were college graduates, nor were they intellectuals, yet they were mavens for popular culture. I have said that my family didn’t go to synagogue but we went to Broadway, and that more or less sums it up.<sup>8</sup>

Still, despite this early exposure to the theatre, the stage was not part of Margulies’s early career goals. Concentrating on his visual art skills during high school, he received a partial scholarship to the Pratt Institute to study Graphic Design. Though a successful student, his interest in storytelling and literature led to his decision to give up that

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<sup>5</sup> Irene Lacher, “Donald Margulies’ multiculti holiday tale,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 23, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/dec/23/entertainment/la-et-cm-donald-margulies-conversation-geffen-20121223> (April 3, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Stephen J. Dubner, “In the Paint: Donald Margulies scores with a play about the art hustle,” *byliner.com*, March 1992. <http://www.byliner.com/stephen-j-dubner/stories/in-the-paint>

<sup>7</sup> Donald Margulies, “Afterword by the Playwright,” *Sight Unseen and Other Plays*, (NY: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 337-339.

<sup>8</sup> Lucas Kavner, “Donald Margulies,” *The Days of Yore*, February 28, 2011. <http://www.thedaysofyore.com/donald-margulies/>

scholarship and transfer to SUNY Purchase's writing program.<sup>9</sup> Even then, however, Margulies wasn't imagining a career as a playwright until the timely intervention of his mentor, noted critic and Purchase faculty member Julius Novick.

I wrote my first one-act plays under Novick's mentorship, and he was tremendously supportive. He told me I was good at playwriting and that I should continue doing it. I think we all need or have had someone like that in our lives, someone who validates our talent.<sup>10</sup>

After Margulies's graduation and a brief, abandoned stint in the MFA writing program at Brooklyn College, Novick introduced him to Jeffrey Sweet, a fellow writer interested in forming a playwriting group. The two joined with playwright Jane Anderson, and, in 1979, founded the New York Writers' Bloc.<sup>11</sup> According to Margulies, the group, which included such notable members as Jerry Stiller, Barbara Gordon, and William H. Macy, "proved invaluable to my development as a playwright. Most of the plays I wrote in the late seventies, early eighties, began in the Bloc."<sup>12</sup> It was this early association and membership with the Bloc that was to provide Margulies with his first opportunities for professional recognition.

### *Career, Notable Works, and Thematic Patterns*

Margulies's involvement with the Bloc was largely the result of his one-act play, *Pals*, (1977)—what he has called "my Brooklyn/realism/luncheonette play"<sup>13</sup>—which,

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<sup>9</sup> Patch, 284.

<sup>10</sup> Kavner.

<sup>11</sup> Jane T. Peterson and Suzanne Bennett, "Jane Anderson," *Women Playwrights of Diversity: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, (Westport, CT, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1997), 49.

<sup>12</sup> Kavner.

<sup>13</sup> Patch, 284.

while never produced, “began to attract admirers in various literary offices around town ... (and) helped me land invitations to join other writers’ units.”<sup>14</sup> By 1980, he left his position as art editor at *Scholastic Magazine*—the latest in a series of graphic design day jobs—to write for Jerry Stiller and Anne Meara’s program, “HBO Sneak Preview.”<sup>15</sup> *Pals*, bolstered in part by his acquaintances made through the Bloc, also led to his first commission as a writer-in-residence with the Jewish Repertory Theater, and he was soon writing with the Ensemble Studio Theatre, Circle Repertory, the Manhattan Club, and eventually New Dramatists.<sup>16</sup> During this time, Margulies saw a number of his early works produced, including *Luna Park*, *Resting Place*, and *Gifted Children*.<sup>17</sup> It was this last play—his first produced full-length, which tells the story of a Jewish New York intellectual mother and her artist daughter, and presents questions surrounding what it means to have a life in art—that first brought him together with famed NY theatre producer Joseph Papp,<sup>18</sup> and led to his 1984 Off-Broadway debut with *Found a Peanut*.<sup>19</sup> This was followed by *What’s Wrong With This Picture* (1985), *The Model Apartment* (1988), and *The Loman Family Picnic* (1989), which was named one of the Burns Mantle Theatre Yearbook’s “Year’s Ten Best Plays,”<sup>20</sup> and was the first of his works to receive

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<sup>14</sup> Kavner.

<sup>15</sup> Patch, 285.

<sup>16</sup> Kavner.

<sup>17</sup> Kavner.

<sup>18</sup> Romulus Linney, “Donald Margulies: Interview” *BOMB*, Summer, 2002.  
<http://bombsite.com/issues/80/articles/2502>

<sup>19</sup> Donald Margulies, “A Playwright’s Search for the Spiritual Father,” *The American Theatre Wing Presents the Play That Changed My Life*, ed. Hodges, Ben, (NY: Applause Books, 2009), 96.

<sup>20</sup> Linney.

notably strong audience and critical praise outside of the small community of theatre insiders. Margulies's theatrical career was progressing, and yet was far from solidified. "At that point I was getting my first bids from Hollywood," the playwright remembered in an interview with Jerry Patch. "I had just done a pilot for Norman Lear, and I could have easily gotten on a plane. I didn't because of some burning ambition I had to be a playwright."<sup>21</sup>

It was his next play that was to act as Margulies's breakout work. In what would become the first of many commissions—including, years later, *Shipwrecked!*—the South Coast Repertory Theatre in Costa Mesa, California commissioned *Sight Unseen* in 1991. The play's central character is a Jewish artist from Brooklyn, and while assigning authorial intent is a tricky and somewhat controversial process, it is hard to dismiss the degree to which Margulies appears to "write what he knows." The script features a successful artist dealing with the paradoxical pressures of his artistic success: namely, that any new project "could be spurned, causing the American art world to re-evaluate his work (...) or he could be further lionized, causing more demand and greater expectations."<sup>22</sup> In 1992, *Sight Unseen* transferred to the Manhattan Theatre Club's Biltmore Theatre, where it went on to win the 1992 Obie Award for Best American Play and earned a Best Actress Tony nomination for Laura Linney. Additionally, the script marked Margulies's first—though certainly not last—nomination for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

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<sup>21</sup> Patch, 286.

<sup>22</sup> "Sight Unseen," *South Coast Repertory Theatre*.  
<http://www.scr.org/calendar/view.aspx?id=4458#.UeObMUGsiSo> (January 31, 2014).

This collaboration with South Coast became a fruitful one: after *Sight Unseen*, the theatre would go on to commission and produce early productions of the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle Award winner and Pulitzer Prize-nominated *Collected Stories* (1996), the American Theatre Critics' Association's New Play finalist and Outer Critics' Circle nominee, *Brooklyn Boy* (2004)<sup>23</sup>, and 2007's *Shipwrecked!*. The company also provided an early, pre-Broadway home for Margulies's Pulitzer Prize winning *Dinner With Friends* (1998), originally commissioned by the Actors' Theatre of Louisville and produced by the Humana Festival of New Plays.

The current period of Margulies's work remains impressive. Since 2007's *Shipwrecked!*, and while serving as an Adjunct Professor of English at Yale University, his *Time Stands Still* (2009) was a Tony Award nominee for *Best Play* and *Best Performance by a Leading Actress*. His commissions continue, with the Geffen Theatre establishing his *Coney Island Christmas* as an annual production, and his still-developing comedy *The Country House*, based on *The Seagull* and commissioned by the Manhattan Theatre Club.

As Jerry Patch noted in his essay, "Donald Margulies: From *Boitschick* to Man," Margulies's collected body of work is "an evolving mosaic of plays, one with some common thematic threads but an *ad hoc* variety of styles and strategies."<sup>24</sup> At first glance, the structure and style of *Shipwrecked!* appears unconnected to the domestic drama of *Dinner With Friends*, and yet, as suggested by Patch, there are themes that emerge throughout his works; notably unresolved struggles with difficult moral and ethical

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<sup>23</sup> Press Release, "Sight Unseen," *South Coast Repertory Theatre*. <http://www.scr.org/press/11-12season/sightunseenpress.aspx#.UZHmLLXqmSp> (April 3, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> Patch, 279.

questions, the definition of art and an artist's relationship to the viewer, and an identification with Jewish-American neighborhoods and culture in the boroughs of New York. While *Shipwrecked!*'s meditations on the defining qualities of "truth" and the co-dependent and sometimes artificial nature of the artist/audience relationship play to these themes, the last—that of identification with his Jewish-American heritage and its influence on Northern American culture—deserves additional attention.

It is debatable whether Margulies would be best defined as "a Jewish playwright." Still, even a cursory look at his career and *oeuvre* reveal an ongoing connection to his American Jewish roots, and he clearly carried this distinction with him into his adult relationships. His commitment to the Jewish identity is clear, as can be seen in his essay, "A Playwright's Search for the Spiritual Father," in which he recalls his relationship with famed producer Joseph Papp:

I'd run into him in the lobby of The Public Theater and he'd ask, "how's my Jewish playwright?" and I'd stand there and kibbitz with Joe Papp, as I would with any one of my relatives.<sup>25</sup>

This personal connection to and affinity with the Jewish community of New York has been a recurrent theme throughout many of Margulies's works on an ethno-cultural, if not always a theological, basis. Though there are no overtly Jewish characters in *Shipwrecked!*, Margulies's publishing history suggests that an understanding of Jewish-American cultural philosophy and master narratives may provide a deeper insight into his stories and characters. In an interview with the *LA Times*, Margulies reflected that, while his family didn't attend synagogue, "there was certainly cultural identity. My

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<sup>25</sup> Margulies, "A Playwright's Search," 96.

grandparents spoke Yiddish, I had neighbors who were Holocaust survivors.”<sup>26</sup> As a playwright, he has been recognized by the Jewish Repertory Theatre and the National Foundation for Jewish Culture. He has dealt directly with Jewishness and the “New York Jewish” life many times, from his classically bickering, neurotic, and irreverent family-in-the-midst-of-Bar-Mitzvah-planning comedy in *The Loman Family Picnic* (1989), to his East-Side New York adaptation of Sholem Ash’s Yiddish melodrama, *God of Vengeance* (2000). Even his most recent work, *Coney Island Christmas* (2012), commissioned by the Geffen Playhouse as a “Christmas play,” examines a Jewish family from New York’s Coney Island and the familial chaos caused when the story’s heroine—their bright Jewish daughter—is given the role of Jesus in a school Christmas pageant.

But what of Margulies’s works—including *Shipwrecked!*—in which there are no Jewish characters? While *Jewish Theatre* critic Irene Backalenick rightfully posits that, “this American playwright, who happens to be Jewish, reaches far beyond a Jewish audience, well into the mainstream,”<sup>27</sup> it should be noted that the mainstream to which she refers, especially in the case of *Dinner With Friends* (1999) (for which her critique was written), is very often one of North East urban social coding with a lack of overt Christian iconography or allusions. That such a “mainstream” is inclusive of Jewish thought and tradition, whereas many other areas of the larger American culture are not, does not immediately make a text “Jewish,” but it does suggest an affinity with a world view shared in other Margulies plays.

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<sup>26</sup> Lacher.

<sup>27</sup> Irene Backalenick, “Playwright Donald Margulies and ‘Dinner With Friends’ at Westport Country Playhouse,” *Jewish Theatre*. [http://www.jewish-theatre.com/visitor/article\\_display.aspx?articleID=3432](http://www.jewish-theatre.com/visitor/article_display.aspx?articleID=3432) (June 1, 2013).



While *Shipwrecked!* is without a single direct reference to Judaism or Jewish culture, and the audience is given no reason to believe any of its characters have Jewish ancestry or theological views, the appreciation of the tendrils of New York Yiddish influence informs a thorough understanding of the work. When, in 2009, the playwright was asked by *the Jewish Daily Forward* about his recurring themes of Jewishness and a “preoccupation with success,” Margulies responded,

Certainly it’s a motif that runs through my work, a fascination or obsession depending on how strong a word you want to use. Look, I’m a Baby Boomer. I grew up in the shadow of the Holocaust and the Depression. (...My father) felt terribly insecure, so in some ways my own *mishegos* comes naturally (...) But yes, there is something Jewish about it. You know, the mother character in the *Loman Family Picnic*, who is somewhat based on my mother, she says: “Dream my son, but not too big.” That’s a Jewish problem. It would be disingenuous to suggest that this is not correct.<sup>28</sup>

As Margulies notes, he sees there being “something Jewish about” insecurity, and about balancing dreams of success with thinking practically. As such, it becomes reasonable to infer that the presence of these concerns in a Margulies character—whether or not that character is identified as Jewish—was created through the playwright’s natural cultural viewpoint. As Margulies said in a 2002 interview with Jerry Patch, “everything I’ve written has been a way for me to analyze more of my life through drama. I focused on my own past life and those I knew, my Jewish identity, and the role of the artist.”<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, even without describing a single character in *Shipwrecked!* as being of Jewish faith or ethnic background, one can find woven throughout the text the thematic threads of mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century American Jewishness, complete with the anxieties and rootlessness of the Holocaust and Great Depression juxtaposed against the showbiz and artistic

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<sup>28</sup> Gordon Haber, “Out of This Life: Post-Pulitzer, Playwright Donald Margulies Says He Still Feels Like a ‘Pischer,’” *The Jewish Daily Forward*, June 8, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Patch, 286.

successes of so many Jewish songwriters and entertainers. While needing to remain wary of putting too much stock in authorial intent, there remains a reasonable argument to be made that this show, despite its setting, continues the tradition of the thematically-autobiographical Donald Margulies script.

### *Production History*

*Shipwrecked!* received its world premiere on September 23, 2007 at the South Coast Repertory of Costa Mesa, California, under the leadership of Producing Artistic Director Davis Emmes, Artistic Director Martin Benson, and Managing Director Paula Tomei. The production was directed by Bart DeLorenzo, with set design by Keith E. Mitchell, costume design by Candice Cain, lighting design by Rand Ryan, shadow scenic design by Christine Marie, and original music and sound design by Steven Cahill. The script's three roles were originated by Gregory Itzin (Louis de Rougemont), Melody Butiu (Player #1), and Michael David Cassady (Player #2).<sup>30</sup> The path leading to this opening, however, proved complicated. As noted in the *Orange County Register* just days before the play's debut,

It seems poetically appropriate that a play titled “Shipwrecked! An Entertainment—The Amazing Adventures of Louis de Rougemont (As Told By Himself)” would have a history as convoluted as its name.<sup>31</sup>

The initial impetus for the script was a commission from the South Coast Repertory for their Young Audiences series, but, by Margulies's own admission, inspiration for the Youth-centric assignment came slowly. “I tried to hit on something that I thought

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<sup>30</sup> Donald Margulies, *Shipwrecked! An Entertainment—The Amazing Adventures of Louis de Rougemont (As Told by Himself)*, (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009).

<sup>31</sup> Paul Hodgins, “‘Shipwrecked’ celebrates the art of the tall tale,” *Orange County Register*, September 20, 2007. <http://www.ocregister.com/articles/louis-84975-play-margulies.html>

wouldn't condescend in any way to young people," the playwright told the *Register*. "I approached the project as if it were something families could see together."<sup>32</sup> While struggling with potential subjects, Margulies kept returning to a scandal that was receiving substantial media attention: the controversy surrounding James Frey, the bestselling author of *A Million Little Pieces* (2003). After initially receiving Oprah Winfrey's endorsement, Frey was accused and publically shamed by the television host on her talk show in 2006 following allegations that Frey had invented large sections of *A Million Little Pieces*, despite having promoted it as a non-fiction personal memoir.<sup>33</sup>

In the midst of this controversy, Margulies read Sarah Burton's non-fiction work *Imposters* (2000), which provides an in-depth look at several people who, over the course of history, invented names and personas for themselves. In Burton's research and writing, Margulies discovered the story of Henri Louis Grin, a Londoner who caused a stir in nineteenth century England. Grin—better known by his *nom de plume*, "Louis de Rougemont"—made a living convincing the London public that he had traveled to Australia, been shipwrecked there for thirty years, and had returned to tell the tale, complete with descriptions of strange, cryptoidal animals. Margulies writes,

Louis de Rougemont was a man who claimed to have survived in the outback for 30 years. He told his story of heroics publicly and in print, and became a celebrity—until the story began to unravel.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Hodgins

<sup>33</sup> "James Frey and the Million Little Pieces Controversy," Oprah Winfrey Show, Season 22, Ep. 69, January 26, 2006.

<sup>34</sup> Donald Margulies, "First Person: Donald Margulies: A Play about the Power of Storytelling," *Broadway.com*, <http://www.broadway.com/buzz/6315/donald-margulies-a-play-about-the-power-of-storytelling/> (April 3, 2013).

In his interview with the *Orange County Register*, Margulies states, “it seems very fitting that I take on a subject like (de Rougemont) at this time. Lying and deceiving and the ‘truthiness’ factor all seem to be very much a part of our current culture in the worlds of celebrity and politics and journalism.”<sup>35</sup> The playwright was fascinated by “the notion of people who make things up, which is arguably what I do for a living.”<sup>36</sup> He adds,

The debunking is one of the things that fascinated me; the tale he told is so captivating that it raises the question, ‘How significant is it that it was made up when the pleasure of the journey was so powerful?’<sup>37</sup>

It was this question—whether readers were better off knowing the truth about fabricators like Henri Louis Grin and James Fey, or whether they benefitted more from believing inspiring lies—that Margulies says moved him to tell the tale of Louis de Rougemont, and to see the play as “a story about the power of storytelling.”<sup>38</sup>

Once storytelling became a central theme, the work came together quickly. “Once I found the form for the play and decided it would be Louis himself telling us his story, it became a great deal of fun to write,” Margulies says. “I really got to tear loose.”<sup>39</sup> Creating the work proved to be a unique challenge; with the act of telling the story being more important than the story itself, the playwright knew he wanted the primary focus to be on the performers and their actions.

I wanted to return to a bare stage and literally get back to basics, forcing the designers to use as few props and as little scenery as possible. (...) The theatricality of it is something I went in determined to explore, though it’s a

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<sup>35</sup> Hodgins.

<sup>36</sup> Margulies, “First Person.”

<sup>37</sup> Margulies, “First Person.”

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

collaborative piece—it really is dependent on actors and a director and designers. (...) Part of the fun of it is seeing how so much can be conjured with so little.<sup>40</sup>

According to the *Orange County Register*, the play experienced several major changes during its development in the Pacific Playwrights Festival reading series at the South Coast Repertory, chief among these being the size of its cast.<sup>41</sup> Margulies writes in the afterword to the acting and reading editions of the *Shipwrecked!* script,

Whenever I start contemplating a new play, I re-read one of my favorites, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. Revisiting Grovers Corners has become a ritual of mine, (...) for this new play, *Shipwrecked!*, I found inspiration in its very first words: "No curtain. No scenery. The audience, arriving, sees an empty stage in half-light."<sup>42</sup>

While both plays begin with a bare stage, they have far more in common, particularly that no artifice is hidden from the audience. Any theatrical trickery is performed in full view of the audience, encouraging an understanding of the production as a constructed and rehearsed performance, rather than encouraging a suspension of disbelief. If original plans had remained, however, the two scripts would have had even more in common. Margulies initially imagined a much larger cast of ensemble members to create the various worlds of the play, and in his introduction to the published work states that future producing companies may still choose to do so if they are "blessed with a large cast or few financial constraints,"<sup>43</sup> perhaps hinting at the rationale for the change. Meanwhile, this early process also led to the removal of Margulies's most overt *Our Town* allusion:

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Hodgins.

<sup>42</sup> Margulies, *Shipwrecked!*, 126.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 10.

the role of the Stage Manager. “It was my homage to Thornton Wilder,” said Margulies, “but it was just confusing everybody.”<sup>44</sup>

By the time the play opened and ran at South Coast Repertory (September 23 to October 14, 2007), the production had established what would become the “standard,” though not only, cast configuration. The arrangement features three actors (two male and one female), with that female, according to Margulies’s foreword, preferably being a person of color, thus arguably suggesting by omission that the two remaining roles would usually be played by Caucasian men.

This casting framework was continued when the script received its second production and East Coast Premiere. The run, starring Michael Countryman as Louis de Rougemont and Angela Lin and Jeff Biehl as Players #1 and #2 respectively, opened on February 13, 2008 at the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut (Gordon Edelstein, Artistic Director; Joan Channick, Managing Director). There, directed by Evan Cabnet and designed by Lee Savage (set), Jessica Wegener (costumes), Tyler Micholeau (lights), and Drew Levy (sound),<sup>45</sup> the play once again pleased audiences and many critics<sup>46</sup>.

The work made its Los Angeles premiere on June 25, 2008 at the Geffen Playhouse. The theatre was operating under the leadership of Gilbert Cates, who would later commission *Coney Island Christmas*.<sup>47</sup> The production was overseen by Artistic Director Randall Arney and Managing Director Stephen Eich in cooperation with the

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<sup>44</sup> Hodgins.

<sup>45</sup> Margulies, *Shipwrecked!*, 4.

<sup>46</sup> See the next section of this chapter, “Critical Response,” for examples and analysis.

<sup>47</sup> Lacher.

South Coast Repertory Theatre, and featured the same director, design team, and cast as the South Coast Production, though, Margulies notes, there were some changes in text and staging.<sup>48</sup> Finally, *Shipwrecked!* made its New York, Off-Broadway debut on January 27, 2009 at Primary Stages (Andrew Leynse, Artistic Director; Elliot Fox, Managing Director), directed by Lisa Peterson, and designed by Neil Patel (set), Michael Krass (costumes), Stephen Strawbridge (lighting), and John Gromada (sound). Michael Countryman reprised his performance as de Rougemont from the Long Warf production, while Players #1 and #2 were portrayed by Donnetta Lavinia Grays and Jeremy Bobb.<sup>49</sup>

### *Critical Reception*

While popular with many audiences, *Shipwrecked!* has not enjoyed the awards that many of Margulies's other works have received. Although it is impossible to be certain, this may be due to perceived industry bias against "family-friendly" theatre as somehow inherently less impressive. Such an idea is hinted at in Matt Windman's review, in which he complains that "the bulk of *Shipwrecked!* feels like children's theatre,"<sup>50</sup> and demonstrated on the review aggregate website, *Criticometer.blogspot.com*, which states that the work feels "dangerously close to children's fare."<sup>51</sup> With or without awards, however, early productions of the script were not without fans among notable critics. From statements such as "vivid and vastly

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<sup>48</sup> Margulies, *Shipwrecked!*, 4.

<sup>49</sup> Margulies, *Shipwrecked!*, 5.

<sup>50</sup> Matt Windham, "Review of Shipwrecked!," *AM New York*, [http://weblogs.amny.com/entertainment/stage/blog/2009/02/theater\\_review\\_of\\_shipwrecked.html](http://weblogs.amny.com/entertainment/stage/blog/2009/02/theater_review_of_shipwrecked.html) (April 15, 2013).

<sup>51</sup> "Shipwrecked! An Entertainment," *Criticometer*, <http://criticometer.blogspot.com/2009/02/shipwrecked-entertainment.html> (April 13, 2013).

entertaining”<sup>52</sup> to “a theatrical pop-up book,”<sup>53</sup> many critics praised both script and productions. Conversely, others accused it of lacking “any tension in the story until it is nearly over,”<sup>54</sup> and being “just sloppy.”<sup>55</sup> Whether offering praise or pan, however, the topics and ideas suggested by many critical reviews form several thematic patterns. One of the most obvious of these patterns is the aforementioned question as to whether Margulies’s play is, in fact, “children’s theatre,” as well as whether that status should be viewed as a positive or negative attribute. Margulies himself writes strongly about his desire to create something that is “more than children’s theatre,”<sup>56</sup> and yet has spent just as much time writing about the play’s appeal to child audiences. Just as the text has the ability to be simultaneously unique among Margulies’s scripts and at the same time thematically fit in nicely, *Shipwrecked!* manages to be simple enough to be understood by all ages, and yet complex enough to give even adult audiences pause.

In a personal letter, Margulies wrote that he was “especially pleased” to learn that the production was to be my daughter’s first play-going experience. “I have received wonderful letters from thankful parents over the years,” Margulies continued, but then added that he also received “one who took me to task for calling Louis’s veracity into

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<sup>52</sup> John Simon, “True Tale Makes Fake ‘Shipwrecked’ Fantastic Voyage,” *Bloomberg.com*, February 12, 2009. <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=ac.wXd1JkHEc&refer=muse>

<sup>53</sup> Charles Isherwood, “An Adventure Afloat on an Ocean of Story,” *New York Times*, February 10, 2009. <http://theater2.nytimes.com/2009/02/10/theater/reviews/10ship.html>

<sup>54</sup> Patrick Lee, “Shipwrecked: An Entertainment” (review), *ItJustShowsToGoYou.com*, February 14, 2009. [www.itjustshowstogoyou.com/blog/2009/02/14/shipwrecked-an-entertainment](http://www.itjustshowstogoyou.com/blog/2009/02/14/shipwrecked-an-entertainment)

<sup>55</sup> Matthew Murray, “Shipwrecked! An Entertainment: The Amazing Adventures of Louis de Rougemont (as Told by Himself)” (review), *talkinbroadway.com*, February 8, 2009. [http://www.talkinbroadway.com/ob/02\\_08\\_09.html](http://www.talkinbroadway.com/ob/02_08_09.html)

<sup>56</sup> Hodgins.



question which apparently caused her ten-year-old's first existential crisis."<sup>57</sup> Much of his public writing on the matter could be paraphrased as "they hired me to write a children's play, but I wrote this play instead." In his essay, "A Play About the Power of Storytelling," he writes that "everyone from eight-year olds to 80-year-olds are transported."<sup>58</sup> This "children's-theatre/theatre-for-everyone-including-children-but-still-not-to-be-called-'children's-theatre'" dichotomy is carried into critical reactions. Many critics have dubbed the play kid- or family- "friendly,"<sup>59</sup> thereby suggesting the ageless appeal proposed by Margulies's "eight to 80" cliché. Others, however, relegate the play (usually with condescension) to the same idea of "children's theatre" that Margulies appears to wish to avoid. *New York Times*'s Charles Isherwood, who is mostly complimentary of the work, still claims the piece is "probably best suited to children who are still susceptible to the magic of bedtime stories,"<sup>60</sup> and David Cote of *Time Out NY* writes that "for younger spectators, this may prove an amusing spectacle, but adults could chafe at the earnestness of Margulies's story-theater approach."<sup>61</sup> There are even reviews which handle this child-friendliness as though apologizing for it, even as they seek to offer approbation for the larger text. Particularly clear examples include is the *Epoch Times*'s 2009 review, in which *Shipwrecked!* is termed "a delicious mélange of (good)"<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Donald Margulies, email message to author, June 24, 2013.

<sup>58</sup> Margulies, First Person.

<sup>59</sup> Ex., Isherwood, *New York Times*; McCauley, *Baltimore Sun*, among many others.

<sup>60</sup> Isherwood.

<sup>61</sup> David Cote, "Shipwrecked" (review) *Time Out NY*.  
<http://www.timeout.com/newyork/articles/theater/71407/shipwrecked> (April 13, 2013)

<sup>62</sup> Parentheticals are from the original text.

children's theatre,"<sup>63</sup> or *Broadway World's* review of Penfold Theatre's 2013 Texas production, in which the writer states "there are some occasions where (sic) family fare is so well-presented that one can't help but be enchanted and enthralled."<sup>64</sup> In the end, there's nothing particularly "childish" about the themes or the lead character's emotional struggles; instead, it would seem the simple combination of direct address, a silly dog, adventures tales, and other fantastic qualities of *Shipwrecked!* is enough for many to dub the work "children's theatre." As a director, however, approaching it as a work for created only for children would render the play impotent. Instead, the director must realize the depth of the characters' struggles belong alongside those presented in *Dinner With Friends* and *Time Stands Still*, and can be examined just as carefully.

Less common, though notable, are disagreements regarding the change of tone that occurs in the final third of the script. According to a review in *Theatermania*, the change in de Rougemont's fortunes marks when "Shipwrecked turns from engaging artifice into breathtaking art."<sup>65</sup> Alternately, *Broadway World* claims the ending is the script's "only weak point," stating "the last fifteen minutes gets de-railed by an unsatisfying twist ending which seems to go against the major ideas of the show."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Diana Barth, Theatre Review: "Shipwrecked! An Entertainment—The Amazing Adventures of Louis de Rougemont," The Epoch Times, March 9, 2009. <http://www.theepochtimes.com/n2/arts-entertainment/amazing-adventures-of-louis-de-rougemont-13045.html>

<sup>64</sup> Jeff Davis, "Shipwrecked! Is a Rousing Family-Friendly Adventure," Broadway World, June 23, 2013, <http://www.broadwayworld.com/austin/article/BWW-Reviews-Penfold-Theatres-SHIPWRECKED-Is-a-Rousing-Family-Friendly-Adventure-20130623>

<sup>65</sup> Barbara and Scott Siegal, Review: "Shipwrecked! An Entertainment," *Theatremania.com*, accessed April 15, 2009, [http://www.theatermania.com/new-york-city-theater/reviews/02-2009/shipwrecked-an-entertainment\\_17422.html](http://www.theatermania.com/new-york-city-theater/reviews/02-2009/shipwrecked-an-entertainment_17422.html)

<sup>66</sup> Davis.

Nearly absent from the critical discussion surrounding the work are questions of race, gender, colonialism, and the portrayal of aboriginal culture. Feminist scholar Jill Dolan appears to be alone in calling attention to problems inherent in both the written and performance text regarding the depictions of Yamba, aboriginal culture, and women. This point becomes especially complicated when considering Margulies's suggestion that the character of Yamba be cast with an "actress of color."<sup>67</sup> In Jill Dolan's review, posted to her influential *The Feminist Spectator* blog, she notes that, in addition to portraying de Rougemont's colonialist attitude and the general "civilization vs. savage" prejudice of the day, the casting of an African American performer in the role of Yamba opposite an older, Caucasian Louis made for moments that were "wincingly, if unintentionally, racist."<sup>68</sup>

Finally, a survey of productions of the play (especially if that survey is broadened to encompass regional and educational productions) exposes widely different approaches to the number of players in the cast. While a single male playing Louis de Rougemont has thus far been a constant, and two accompanying clowns appears most common, many productions have cast a variety of Foley artists and stage hands to visibly assist the two multiple-part actors; meanwhile, a growing number of productions (especially in academia) have extended the size of the ensemble to include many more actors, dividing the roles accordingly. The benefits and challenges of cast size (either leaving it at three or expanding it further) must not be taken lightly. While many critics praised the skill and

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<sup>67</sup> Margulies, *Shipwrecked!*.

<sup>68</sup> Jill Dolan, "Shipwrecked!," *The Feminist Spectator*, February 9, 2009, <http://www.thefeministspectator.com/2009/02/09/shipwrecked/>

energy of the fast-paced two clowns approach, not all outlets agree. *Talkin' Broadway's* Matthew Murray dismissed the construction of the work by noting,

The diminutive, dumbed-down theatrical epic must be here to stay (...) as was the case with *the 39 Steps* and *Around the World in 80 Days*, the jagged nature of this production prevents easy assimilation of it if you try to connect with it intellectually or emotionally.<sup>69</sup>

Similarly, *Theatre Mirror's* Carl A. Rossi also laments the small-cast/large-story trend, calling *Shipwrecked!*

...one of those minimalist plays springing up like mushrooms in these budget-conscious times (...) where as few actors as possible impersonate a multitude of characters on a nearly-bare stage (costumes and props flying all over the place), where a chair becomes a car becomes a tree becomes a chair.<sup>70</sup>

Rossi notes he has “nothing against small-cast plays, provided the actors unfold and deepen rather than split apart like amoebas.” Nor, he says, does he have anything against “doubling and tripling up,” as he compares the play to another production playing simultaneously in Greater Boston,

Bad Habit's *An Ideal Husband*<sup>71</sup> has two men and two women sprinting through a near-dozen roles, but their transformations take place off-stage rather than on-, and give some much needed oxygen to a warhorse with a solid fourth wall. In *Shipwrecked!* (...) everything happens before you non-stop, without letting up (it doesn't help that Scott LaFeber has directed with his own pants a-fire) --- this is similar to watching three Benihana chefs chop-chop-chopping for two hours with technical virtuosity but who send you away hungry.<sup>72</sup>

The choice of many hands verses few, however, need not be limited to polarized views on the changing face and style of contemporary theatre. As seen in critical reviews from

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<sup>69</sup> Murray.

<sup>70</sup> Carl A. Rossi, “Shipwrecked! An Entertainment --- The Amazing Adventures of Louis de Rougemont (As Told By Himself)” (Review), *Theater Mirror*, <http://www.theatermirror.com/CRlyricshipwrecked.htm> (July 28, 2013)

<sup>71</sup> A roughly concurrent production, *An Ideal Husband* was produced by Bad Habit Productions at the Family YMCA Theatre of Cambridge, Massachusetts from December 3<sup>rd</sup> through December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>72</sup> Rossi.

around the United States, many producing organizations approach the question differently, from those who attempt to mirror the early specifications of only two ensemble members who handle every visible aspect (including Foley effects), to numerous productions who utilize two performers as the primary clowns, but include other performers as on-stage assistants, live Foley artists, and occasional “extra” characters.



Fig 1.1. From The Rogue Theatre’s 2012 production of *Shipwrecked!*. The cast list features Rougemont, two ensemble members, and three additional performers credited only as “musicians,” but whom, as seen above and in other photos on the theatre’s website, were clearly used in the staging. Photo by Tim Fuller.

Still other productions—often in academic theatre—cast a much larger ensemble, divvying up the roles usually played by the two central clowns accordingly. These cast-size changes could be seen as major alterations to the script’s intended aesthetic, and so naturally raise questions regarding the author’s intentions for the performance. Happily, Margulies himself addresses the question of cast size in his “Notes about the Play,” stating,

The play may be performed with as few as three principle actors [...] if a company or amateur group is blessed with a large cast and few financial constraints, roles may be distributed accordingly. Try it. See how it works.<sup>73</sup>

This suggestion to “try it” is not merely whimsical; as previously noted, Margulies himself had initially imagined a larger ensemble during the first readings and rehearsals at South Coast Repertory. Whether dealing with matters of cast size, staging style, or any other artistic or practical decision, the successes and failures reported in past critical responses work to create a backdrop of information and experience from which new productions may draw. This resource, carefully utilized, can help point out potential staging traps while simultaneously providing inspiration for brand new choices.

### *Conclusion*

While *Shipwrecked!* may recall theatre traditions of the late nineteenth century, its dramatic construction is rooted in the contemporary. As Murray and Rossi point out, the play joins a growing genre of works—popularized in part by The Reduced Shakespeare Company,<sup>74</sup> *the 39 Steps*, and *Around the World in 80 Days*—which are popular both for their interactive, approachable, and irreverent style, and for their budget-friendly design and cast-size in difficult economic times.

The following pages are meant to chronicle the process of bringing Donald Margulies’s *Shipwrecked!* to Baylor’s Mabec Theatre, from early analysis through final evaluation. This chapter has served as a general introduction to both playwright and play, with attention given to Donald Margulies’s biography, collected works, and the place

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<sup>73</sup> Margulies, *Shipwrecked!*.

<sup>74</sup> The RSC’s work includes *the Complete Works of Wllm Shakespeare (abridged)*, *the Complete History of America (abridged)*, and several other variations on a theme, all of which feature three actors engaging in quick costume changes and slapstick humor, with the bulk of the plays’ construction and appeal formulated around the vast amount of material covered within a comparatively short span of time.

*Shipwrecked!* holds in the playwright's career. Chapter Two considers the written script and its prompted "performance text" (those aspects of performance which are inherently extra-textual). As the script's structure would be underserved by an over-reliance on a Hodgean dramatic analysis, the chapter explores the script utilizing a number of methodologies, theories, and historical frameworks, seeking a holistic understanding that addresses early production concerns and questions of dramatic and cultural theory. This chapter will also consider those aspects of Rougemont's tale which betray the patriarchal and colonialist cultural assumptions of the character, and the challenges presented to a production presenting the man and his story.

In Chapter Three, the production's style and design choices are laid out, with emphasis placed on process more than product. In addition to design descriptions and, when possible, images from the design process, the chapter features a recounting of the complicated process of collaborative design, and attempts to offer an unbiased glimpse into the relationships and shared work which brought the production to life. This chronicling is continued in Chapter Four, with the focus of the narrative re-centering away from designers and onto performers. From auditions through performances, the working relationship with the cast will be chronicled, analyzed, and ultimately adjudicated based on its successes and failures. Finally, Chapter Five provides an opportunity for self-evaluation, both of the final product and the process which brought it about. The overall purpose of this document is to serve as a record of one particular director's approach to staging *Shipwrecked!* as well as the experiential learning which occurred throughout the process.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Analyzing the Play

#### *Introduction*

That *Shipwrecked! An Entertainment – The Amazing Adventures of Louis de Rougemont (as told by himself)* was originally commissioned as a work of children's theatre is more than simply an interesting bit of trivia. Although the text continues the playwright's exploration of a number of career-long themes, its style and structure is notably different from the majority of Margulies's other works. From the first moments of the play, direct address, reliance on imagination, and a thorough sense of fun propel the story forward. An anthropomorphic puppy, silly gymnastic displays, and the antics and humorous narration of the title character all lend themselves to a sense of light, family-friendly fare. The tale, however, also boasts complex and existential questions about the nature of truth, of storytelling, of celebrity, and of defining one's own life. Louis de Rougemont, in a role that blends fabricating memoirist with near circus-like performance, is always at risk of falling off his metaphorical high-wire. This dualistic harmony of hopeful, imaginative optimism with ever-present danger captures not only the courageous spirit of the Robinsonade, the Swashbuckler, the Western, and the Knight's Tale, but the very nature of two of the script's titular words: "entertainment" and "adventure." This chapter seeks to explore the dramaturgical principles inherent in Donald Margulies's text, documenting the directorial interpretation and analysis that went into staging the work.



## *Synopsis*

*Shipwrecked!* is structured without formal scene or act divisions, though when considering theme and setting, four distinct sections emerge. The first and last of these are the briefest, representing those times in which de Rougemont is dealing entirely with his “present” setting, standing in a theatre in front of an audience. Although he reconnects with this setting through asides and narration throughout the work, the first and last moments are entirely dedicated to interacting directly with the audience from a position of immediacy and presence, rather than storytelling or re-enactment. These two segments bookend the larger, central sections of the text, which recreate his life and adventures as detailed in *Wide World Magazine*, as well as the process by which he came to write, sell, profit from, and eventually be ridiculed for those writings. While dividing the performance of these sections into four acts would impose a structure that Margulies’s work neither calls for nor would benefit from, it is useful to keep these delineations in mind when considering the text. As such, for the purposes of this chapter, the sections will be explored under the sub-headings “Allow Me to Introduce Myself,” “Telling the Story,” “Selling the Story,” and “*pièce de résistance*.” The following several pages provide a synopsis of the text which following these section divisions in the hope of creating a useful vocabulary to be utilized throughout the rest of the chapter.

### *Allow Me to Introduce Myself*

*Shipwrecked!* begins with Louis de Rougemont’s entrance. Looking over the crowd, he directly acknowledges and comments on their presence and appearance, discusses the shared space as a theatre, and works to set high expectations of the

performance, noting both that the text is “amazing” and that “every word of it is true.”<sup>1</sup>

After introducing his assistants (by the actors’ real names), he begins his tale.

### *Telling the Story*

A fast-paced, episodic adaptation of the “real” Louis de Rougemont’s serial memoir, *The Amazing Adventures of Louis de Rougemont (as told by himself)* (1898), occupies much of the next hour’s worth of performance. It begins in provincial England, with de Rougemont’s birth and early childhood, spent in his room as a sickly child. Young de Rougemont dreams of grand adventures over the sea through the classic tales his mother reads to him, which he describes as “adventure stories. Fantastic tales. The great, timeless tomes. *Arabian Nights*. *The Odyssey*. *Robinson Crusoe*. Wondrous journeys, each and every one of them.”<sup>2</sup> Soon, the young boy grows into a young man, and like the adventurers of his favorite novels, he sets out to “find his way in the world.”<sup>3</sup> It is not long before he finds himself directionless and broke in London when, in a scene reminiscent of Hermann Melville’s *Moby Dick*, he meets a man who can grant him access to the sea adventures of his youthful imaginings.

Captain Jensen, an archetypal “drunken ol’ sea dog,”<sup>4</sup> happily exploits de Rougemont’s inexperience and naive enthusiasm to pull him into service aboard the aptly named ship, *The Wonder World*. Jensen, de Rougemont, and the crew are to set sail to the

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<sup>1</sup> Margulies, *Shipwrecked!*, 12.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 15.

Great Barrier Reef of Australia, in pursuit of the “miles and miles of precious pearls”<sup>5</sup> that serve as the subject of Jensen’s Ahab-like obsessive-behavior. Before the crew leaves port, however, de Rougemont makes the acquaintance of a character that becomes instrumental throughout the storytelling portion of the text: the captain’s dog, Bruno.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a four-legged creature of the most ungainly sort—a preposterous canine of the mongrel variety—knocks me to the deck and slathers my face with kisses (...) Bruno, the captain’s dog, is to accompany us on our expedition. Of all the men boarding this ship, he’s singled me out as his new best friend. It is devotion at first sight. And I must say, the feeling is mutual.<sup>6</sup>

With a new best friend and an adventure before him, de Rougemont sets sail with Jensen and the crew. The voyage soon becomes perilous, as a giant octopus pulls a boatsman to a watery doom, Jensen obsessively chases pearls far past the point of safety, and storms descend on *The Wonder World*. Jensen’s greed ultimately brings about his death as his refusal to pull up the anchor leads to the ship’s destruction in a storm and whirlpool. Amid the chaos the crew is lost, with only de Rougemont and Bruno surviving the catastrophe, and ending up stranded on a small island.

In his role as narrator, de Rougemont quickly fast-forwards through two and a half years of living on the island with Bruno, jumping to the arrival of Yamba, Gunda, and Bobo, three aboriginal Australians who appear on a catamaran dehydrated, adrift, and in need of help. De Rougemont develops a deep bond with Yamba, the young woman of the group. Her father, Gunda, and her younger brother, Bobo, accept this new island family, and the four—along with a briefly jealous but eventually content Bruno—find a brief but happy existence on their island home.

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<sup>5</sup> Margulies, *Shipwrecked!*, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

It is not long, however, before Yamba communicates her longing for her tribe. By combining salvaged parts of the catamaran and the Wonder World, the group sets sail for Yamba's homeland. Needing only minimal convincing, the tribe quickly accepts de Rougemont, not merely as a member, but as their exalted leader. Over time, Yamba and de Rougemont marry and have two daughters, who, according to de Rougemont, "grow, seemingly overnight, into strong and beautiful young women."<sup>7</sup> "There is," he says, "a pleasing rhythm to life."<sup>8</sup>

This period of calm proves temporary. A rival tribe declares war, and though de Rougemont emerges as a hero for developing tactics to scare off the attackers, the event unsettles him nonetheless. Worse, the event is shortly followed by grief, as Bruno, de Rougemont's beloved friend, dies. Despite his happiness with Yamba and his daughters, de Rougemont's sorrow becomes too much for him to bear. "With Bruno gone," he says, "something inside me changes. My heart is no longer here."<sup>9</sup> After an aborted attempt to return to London by boat with Yamba, de Rougemont says goodbye to his adopted family, and sets out alone across the Australian outback. He happens upon a group of prospectors who help him to Brisbane and, from there, he is able to gain passage to London. The memoir published by the historical Louis de Rougemont ends here, providing an important structural division between the telling of de Rougemont's adventures, and the next section in which he describes his experience in England attempting to sell and promote his tale.

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<sup>7</sup> Margulies, *Shipwrecked!*, 33.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 34.

## *Selling the Story*

With the story of his adventures in hand, de Rougemont experiences a whirlwind rise to prominence. He becomes “richer than [he] ever imagined! (...) more than rich, (...) a phenomenon!”<sup>10</sup> Soon, his success leads to an invitation to address the Royal Geographic Society, “the most prestigious such organization in all the land.”<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, his appearance before the Society is met with disbelief and dismissal. His inability to name or describe specific locations in Australia, his numerous references to cryptoidal species, and his claim that he rode sea turtles are all mocked, and his appearance soon descends into ridicule. With the veracity of his tale questioned and his own morale standing called into doubt, his success begins to unravel. Hecklers taunt, society shuns, and reporters investigate, discovering evidence that de Rougemont is actually an odd-job holding and wife-abandoning Englishman who plagiarized most of his information about aboriginal tribes from library books. De Rougemont’s status in society plummets, he becomes an outcast where he was once a hero, and he is diagnosed as “deluded.”<sup>12</sup> In line with the script’s more meta-theatrical qualities, the downfall appears not only to affect the de Rougemont of the past—as portrayed in the storytelling—but also de Rougemont the narrator, present in the theatre. He becomes confused and forgets his lines. His actor-companions approach him with concern, offering assistance and asking whether he feels well enough to continue the performance. He claims that he does, but something has clearly changed in both the performance de Rougemont is presenting, and in de Rougemont himself.

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<sup>10</sup> Margulies, *Shipwrecked!*, 42.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

### *la pièce de résistance*

Final insults fall on de Rougemont as he descends into poverty and homelessness. These new ills are presented in a dry, factual manner, as though once the downward spiral took hold, such details became merely incidental compared to the loss of what was. The script's meta-theatrical nature is emphasized as the "performed" and "performing" sides of de Rougemont continue to blur. He admonishes the audience, stating "there are and there shall always be man-made gods the *hoi polloi* eagerly creates and then just as eagerly destroys. I am merely one in a long illustrious line,"<sup>13</sup> and then, for the finale, re-establishes the relationship with the audience he had set-up during his first entrance, trying for "one last attempt to restore my good name"<sup>14</sup> by riding a sea turtle, and thus discrediting his critics.

### *Theoretical Approach*

#### *The Empty Stage*

Three themes stood out in early stages of applying theoretical analysis to Margulies' text: a complex treatment of the meaning and possibility of "truth," feelings of insecurity and unsolidified personal identity, and a clear decision on the part of the playwright to avoid clear answers or easy morals. Careful consideration of these themes reveals much regarding the method by which Margulies has adapted and combined these ideas into a unified dramatic concept. The role of de Rougemont presents a complex character of ultimately unresolved contradictions. De Rougemont's complicated relationship with ideas of truth, of performance, of success, and of a relationship with his

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<sup>13</sup> Margulies, *Shipwrecked!*, 49.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

audience is at the foundation of the entirety of the script. Themes of insecurity, of identity, and of tempered ambition—ideas Margulies has, as seen in chapter one, equated with Jewishness—feed directly into de Rougemont’s efforts in selling his story and himself. As such, this tightly knit trinity—complex questions of art, identity, success, and audience, as considered through the playwright’s cultural lens, and as told without simple resolution or a clear moral stance—must inform any interpretation and directorial concept of the work. As is discussed in greater depth in chapter three, for the Baylor University production, these ideas led to an overall production design and approach which focused on presenting “performance” over “reality,” explored with many aesthetics pulled from the presentational and often “poor” theatre common in the New York Yiddish community at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Yiddish Theatre, however, was certainly not the only resource available to Margulies. In several interviews and essays about *Shipwrecked!*, the playwright has referred to Thornton Wilder’s American classic *Our Town* as a major source of inspiration and, specifically, its stage direction that audiences should arrive to an “empty stage in half-light.”<sup>15</sup> Recalling the desire for simple, direct, actor-centric staging and performances put forward by seminal director Peter Brook in his *The Empty Space* (1968) and theatre director/theorist Jerzy Grotowski in his *Toward a Poor Theatre* (also 1968), *Shipwrecked!* embraces the bare stage as a limitless playground of storytelling. This approach demands to be at the heart of the design, casting, rehearsal, and performance of any production of the Margulies text. As the rebuked de Rougemont states, “If I am

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<sup>15</sup> For example, see Donald Margulies afterword to the acting edition of *Shipwrecked!*, entitled “An Empty Stage in Half-Light”

guilty of anything, it is of dabbing a few spots of color on the drab canvas of life.”<sup>16</sup>

While thematically the imaginative flourishes, highly physical actions, and robust characters existing on a relatively “set-less” stage provides the “dabbing of color” suggested by this statement, the approach is more involved than mere spectacle. Rather, we are faced with what performer and teacher Julie Goell refers to as a “Clown’s Toybox”—an empty space brimming with kinetic energy as it awaits performer and audience to collaboratively create a world teeming with passion, play, and life.

Louis de Rougemont’s “creatively autobiographical” tale provides a pleasurable and spectacular alternative to the unremarkable life Henri Louis Grin apparently lived, and yet, due to its falsehood, it is purely performance, with no foundation beneath the artifice. The setting of an empty space mirrors this, showcasing the emptiness of an untouched canvas while highlighting the inherent potential of its clean surface. In the case of Baylor’s production, this is represented by a visual echo of the London Hippodrome where the real de Rougemont performed in 1902. From that empty space, the pure theatricality and storytelling encouraged by Margulies’s text emerges. Rather than slick production values and automated technological innovations, Margulies demands “determinedly low-tech” solutions, which he describes as “alternatively thrilling and cheesy.”<sup>17</sup> With Margulies’s repeated calls for traditional theatrical storytelling and an eschewing of contemporary staging, a rich history of theatricality becomes the playground of the director. De Rougemont’s relationship with the audience echoes street buskers, tumblers, and mountebanks. The storytelling, live sound effects, and shared complicity with the audience suggests inspiration from Yiddish Theatre, Magic Lantern

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<sup>16</sup> Margulies, *Shipwrecked!*, 47.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.



shows, travelling carnivals, variety acts, puppetry, and all manner of late 19th Century Music Hall and street entertainment.

The result is that, instead of designing sailing ships and remote islands, a production finds itself rooted firmly on a turn-of-the-century wooden stage glowing under limelight, busting with imaginative storytelling and world-creation by characters and prop pieces inspired by the aforementioned genres and techniques. In the middle of these somewhat bohemian ensemble proceedings is Louis de Rougemont, a man who, from his sickly childhood, was not meant to become anything—but through use of his imagination and appetite for reading was able to make himself into the hero of his childhood dreams.

### *Structure*

Structured as meta-theatrical storytelling, *Shipwrecked!* balances its narrative between three states of mimetic “reality.” Prominent throughout most of the script, there is the “reality” inherent in the titular storyline of Louis de Rougemont’s adventures at sea, representing the dramatization of the narrative described in the historical de Rougemont memoir. This is accompanied by a mimetic portrayal of creating this memoir and the subsequent public reaction, with this aspect bringing with it a decidedly darker tone to the final third of the text. Linking both of these, a third “reality” emerges, in which Louis de Rougemont directly interacts with the audience, treating them as characters in the work and potential supporters to be won over.

The audience is first introduced to de Rougemont as he speaks directly to the audience present in the theatre (level one). During this presentation, he recounts telling his story to previous—often skeptical—audiences (level two). This “story” he has told

involves his three-decade-long “amazing adventures,” leading to and including his shipwreck (level three). Importantly, all three of these levels are portrayed on stage rather than discussed as memory, resulting in a structure that simultaneously exists in the past and present, in a way a traditional “memory” or “dream” play does not.

Unlike so-called “fourth wall” or “realistic” theatre (i.e., the dominant non-musical play structure of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries), the presence of the audience is a vital component of Rougemont’s world. That Margulies wants to do away with the imaginary fourth wall is clear from the opening stage direction: “With the house lights still on, Louis de Rougemont (...) emerges from the darkness, and looks out over the audience.”<sup>18</sup> Margulies continues to set the rules for the performer/audience relationship throughout the first few moments of the play. In this initial meta-theatrical “level,” de Rougemont’s first lines address his awareness of the audience, making it unmistakable that he is as affected by their presence as they are by his. Margulies begins,

(*To us.*) Well well well!  
Look at all you lovely-looking people out there!  
My, So many of you!  
(*To others; surprised.*) Oh! There, too!  
Greetings!<sup>19</sup>

First, it is important to note that the entirety of this opening—the first five lines of the script—demand that the character of Louis de Rougemont actually see the audience. Far from the invisible audience of “realistic” drama, the lights in the auditorium remain lit, and de Rougemont sees and comments on those sitting in front of him. Even beyond the importance of acknowledging the audience, however, is the way in which Margulies

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<sup>18</sup> Margulies, *Shipwrecked!*, 11.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

crafts the lines. In the following repeated excerpt, emphasis is placed on lines of surprise with italics, whereas lines that directly reference sight are capitalized:

(*To us.*) *Well well well!*  
LOOK at all you LOVELY-LOOKING people out there!  
*My!* So *many* of you!  
(*To others; surprised.*) *Oh!* There, too!  
Greetings!<sup>20</sup>

This passage clearly is not describing an actor entering a stage and addressing a somewhat-seen crowd hiding in the shadows of an auditorium. Instead, in addition to referring to the audience as “lovely-looking,” de Rougemont expresses his surprise several times at the number of people in attendance and to the various areas of the auditorium they have filled. While pre-written, in the moment of performance these lines work as reactions to an action by the audience (namely, their attendance at the theatre), and thus communicate that the audience holds important power in this audience/performer relationship.

Margulies continues to establish the rules of the relationship over the next several lines. De Rougemont reacts to an audience member’s imagined overheard comment, stating, “aren’t you clever, you’re quite right, it *is* French.”<sup>21</sup> The line suggests that, instead of a uni-directional monologue from the actor, a collegial aura of conversation will reign; and yet, because the unspoken audience line is clearly false, it also signals to the audience that this “conversation” is fully under de Rougemont’s control. The “audience” may have spoken, but they did so because de Rougemont/Margulies said they

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<sup>20</sup> Margulies, *Shipwrecked!*, 11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

did so. This is not to say that the audience has absolutely no voice, however. Only two lines later, de Rougemont encourages the audience to speak:

Are you ready to be astonished?  
(*He coaxes a response for the audience.*)<sup>22</sup> Are you? Well, good!  
You've come to the right place!<sup>23</sup>

By “he coaxes a response,” one can assume some level of extra-textual freedom from both actor and audience member. It remains a stretch, however, to refer to this as truly open communication; de Rougemont has told them what to say (“yes!”), when to say it (now), and in turn rewarded their behavior with approbation (“well, good!”). The audience-performer relationship structure that has been established, then, is neither the silently voyeuristic audience of realistic theatre, nor the open, two-way communication of a friendly conversation. Instead, the production will take on the carefully controlled give-and-take of a cabaret performance or college lecture hall.

Before beginning the portion of the performance dealing with his “amazing adventures,” however, de Rougemont/Margulies establishes one last, important rule. Although the actor speaking has introduced himself as Louis de Rougemont, he now introduces his “assistants at today’s proceedings,” by using the “actual names of actors.”<sup>24</sup> Even in settings in which the audience would not know the actors personally, the fact that their names would be listed in the program is evidence that Margulies

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<sup>22</sup> While treating stage directions as intended by the playwright is commonly viewed as suspect due to the formerly common publishing practice of printing notes from the first production’s stage manager, Dramatists, the publisher of *Shipwrecked!*, explicitly states that any stage directions in their collection printed within the last twenty years “come from the author and reflect their vision of the play.” “Frequently Asked Questions” *Dramatists Play Service, Inc.*, <http://www.dramatists.com/faqsmanager/applications/faqsmanager/index.asp?ItemID=32>, last accessed 29 September, 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Margulies, *Shipwrecked!*, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Margulies, *Shipwrecked!*, 11.

wanted the audience to recognize the device at work. With this choice, Margulies has established a meta-theatrical paradox in which the actors are simultaneously portraying their own reality (even while playing various characters), and creating a false reality in which they exist and interact with a fictional character. This potentially confusing and multi-leveled approach is arguably warranted by the events the play draws inspiration from, considering the original, “real” Louis de Rougemont was both a historical person and yet a fictional character of his own creation. Either way, by the end of the first page of the script—a mere eighteen sentences into the first speech—Margulies has established a world that balances conversation with monologue and truth with fabrication. After this, all that is left is to make announcements about shutting off cell phones and finding emergency exits before leading, finally, to the beginning of de Rougemont’s story, recounting his self-proclaimed “amazing adventures.”

*Brecht, Grotowski, and Brook*

Through the diverse critical reaction, *Shipwrecked!* remains a script that resists being easily defined or categorized. From a thematic point of view, it is both an adventurous romp and an existential exploration of “truth.” Repeatedly, critics have commented on the script’s “kid-friendly storytelling,”<sup>25</sup> and its ability, as noted in *the New York Times*, to “scamper to the defense of good old-fashioned yarn spinning,”<sup>26</sup> making the play’s structure sound as simple and homey as a good campfire tale. Conversely, in a letter to this author, Margulies recalls being taken to task by a

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<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Mary Carole McCauley, “Kid-friendly ‘Shipwrecked!’ opens at Everyman Theatre, Baltimore Sun, September 23, 2010, [http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2010-09-23/entertainment/bs-ae-family-story-0924-20100923\\_1\\_kid-friendly-vincent-lancisi-everyman-theatre](http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2010-09-23/entertainment/bs-ae-family-story-0924-20100923_1_kid-friendly-vincent-lancisi-everyman-theatre)

<sup>26</sup> Isherwood.

parent “for calling Louis's veracity into question which apparently caused her ten-year-old's first existential crisis.”<sup>27</sup>

This existential pursuit of “truth” introduces many challenges for a production team and audience. “What is truth?” de Rougemont asks. “Can you hold it? Is it a rock? Is it a bone?”<sup>28</sup> Performance is, by its nature, replication and mimesis, and as philosophers from Plato to Baudrillard have pointed out, replication and simulacra are not the same as essential truth. De Rougemont, from the first, is interested in staging his life, for “what does a man leave behind but his name and the stories that he told?”<sup>29</sup> Yet, neither the stories of one's life nor even a man's name are themselves the essential truth of the living being. De Rougemont leaves home because he wishes to perform the acts read about in novels; he impresses others during his seafaring and marooned years through the performance of gymnastics. Eventually, in London, he performs authority and experience. The fact is, the script—even through the title—is designed to excite an audience with the promise of great performativity, and yet to simultaneously all-but-ensure a lack of credibility.

Choices of staging also feature heavily in this question of “truth.” Much of contemporary Western theatre utilizes “realistic” staging techniques based on the Naturalistic aesthetic theories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This “representational” staging is thought to be more realistic—more “truthful”—than the highly theatrical nature of presentational staging. Not all dramatic and theatre theorists agree, however. Strongly encouraged by Bertolt Brecht and boosted by the later work of

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<sup>27</sup> Margulies, personal note to the author.

<sup>28</sup> Margulies, *Shipwrecked!*, 108.

Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, and many others, there continues to be an argument that such “realistic” stagings are, due to their efforts to mimic reality, inherently less authentic, whereas a presentational work which offers direct address and utilizes techniques to admit and address the staged nature of the event is, in its own way, a truthful, authentic experience. With a large enough budget and a world-class creative staff, perhaps a production could stage *Shipwrecked!*’s man-eating octopus scene in a way that would appear “real,” though it would only have succeeded in being a very convincing lie. Alternatively, to have a performer stand on stage and announce “I’m going to tell you about a man-eating octopus” only demands that the audience believe that there is a performer standing in front of them, saying those lines, for it to be an authentic experience.

With this noted, the work of both Brecht and Grotowski present themselves as possible theoretical structures from which to approach *Shipwrecked!* As with the work of twentieth-century German director Bertolt Brecht, the script provides multiple opportunities to utilize seemingly unrelated items to represent places or ideas. This proves not only entertaining, but often provides enough of a sense of juxtaposition and alienation—what Brecht would call “*verfremdungseffekt*”—to encourage the audience to rethink their connection to both the idea being signified and the image serving as signifier. When a richly cobalt blue bottle is used to portray a fish (as in the Baylor Production), and—remarking on the beauty all around him—Louis de Rougemont metaphorically describes the view under the ocean waves as “God’s Aquarium,” the audience is encouraged to re-think and re-connect to the shine of a fish’s scales, the beauty of the ocean, God’s greatness, and mankind’s infinite smallness. As with Brecht,

*Shipwrecked!* refuses to offer clear answers to complex moral questions, but rather provides space to pitch audience members against one another and against the show itself. That said, veering strongly away from Brecht, these are personal, not political, questions being explored, and no sense of revolution or outrage seem to be motivating the action. Equally, despite “showing its hand” in terms of how various bits of theatrical magic are created, *Shipwrecked!* differs from a Brechtian play in that it creates wonder and seeks a cathartic response from spectators. Despite the many techniques involved that may be called “Brechtian,” these aspects create an undeniable conflict with Brecht’s writings.

As noted by feminist author and scholar Jill Dolan, in her review of the work for her *The Feminist Spectator* website,

*Shipwrecked!*’s transformational acting style is presentational but not Brechtian (...) the schizophrenic style isn’t meant to provoke political commentary on the vicissitudes of history and agency. Instead, with clear and clarifying quick changes in posture, diction, and facial expression, [the performers] illustrate the tale more than they historicize its meanings.<sup>30</sup>

The script repeatedly uses Brechtian techniques, but without the political rationale for which Brecht designed them.

Similarly, *Shipwrecked!* would appear to owe a great deal to the Polish theorist Jerzy Grotowski. In terms of acting style, announcing the cast’s real names, using physical theatre to create environments, making the audience part of the production, and focusing on limited, hand-made spectacle, the script echos much that is called for in Grotowski’s most famous work, *Toward a Poor Theatre* and some later experiments in

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<sup>30</sup> Jill Dolan, “Shipwrecked!,” *The Feminist Spectator*, February 9, 2009, <http://www.thefeministspectator.com/2009/02/09/shipwrecked/>



paratheatricity. This second connection also does not escape the attention of Dolan, who writes,

Part of the production's fun is in fact seeing the effects produced in a poor-theatre style that underlines how simply theatre can conjure other worlds. Fantastic storms are evoked with sheets of metal, a large thundering drum, and a mobile of tinkling, anachronistic house keys.<sup>31</sup>

There remain, however, important distinctions between *Shipwrecked!* and Grotowski's vision, and especially so in the Baylor production. On one hand, Grotowski wrote against "rich theatre," referring to theatre featuring expensive sets, costumes, and spectacle as "rich in flaws,"<sup>32</sup> preferring organic constructions and physical, truthful performance—an idea *Shipwrecked!* embraces whole-heartedly. On the other hand, Grotowski's writings regarding such spectacle were far more restrictive than the style of production Margulies has essayed about for his script, or that Baylor's production was willing to adhere to for this staging. Grotowski rejected the common embracing of theatre as an interdisciplinary art form made up in part by music and dance, believing it distracted from the purely dramatic art of an actor expressing an emotional truth to an audience. This idea is echoed in much of the aforementioned Peter Brook's work, notably in Brook's assertion that nothing is needed to create an act of theatre beyond a performer, someone to see the performance, and a shared space in which the event occurs. However, Peter Brook—and many Grotowski admirers since—have gone against the strictness of the theorists' strictest theatre rules, instead seeking out and exploring the great benefits music, dance, and discerningly-considered spectacle may bring to a production. Dolan is correct in that much of the work does exude a "poor-theatre style," but certainly the original

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, (London, Routledge, 1968), 19.

production's reliance on music, or Margulies's own essayed call for "unsparingly gorgeous" lighting, may create a distance between the theorist's work and the playwright's script.

While Brook and Grotowski may be separated in decades and geography from turn-of-the-century New York Yiddish Theatre, it should be recalled that all three were operating outside of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century imposed standard of "realistic" theatre. Brecht provides a useful bridge between the two, in which we see the Yiddish influence clearly in Brecht's early collaborations with Kurt Weill. Thus, what may at first seem a theoretical crossroads—whether *Shipwrecked!* should be considered in the context of nineteenth century theatre styles before the popularization of fourth-wall realism, or whether it should be seen as a partner in the reaction against the realistic genre—may be too limiting a means of considering the text. Rather, *Shipwrecked!* may be understood as simply not being beholden to the constructs of twentieth century realism, pulling inspiration instead from those areas that a Yiddish playwright like Sholem Aleichem shares in common with a director and theorist like Jerzy Grotowski.

This straddling of theoretical worlds further suggests that *Shipwrecked!*, despite its century-old aesthetics, fits firmly in the contemporary postmodern dramatic tradition. The Brooks/Brecht/Grotowski model proves particularly useful in approaching an analysis of themes of moral ambiguity and gradation. Unlike the pointed socio-behavioral training and reinforcement of Victorian melodrama or the Hegelian march to synthesis of classical comedies, Margulies's text answers no questions and leaves the audience with an uncertain, multivalent ending. While audiences at Margulies's *Dinner With Friends*

may face a view of marriage complete with “ambiguity and free of authorial judgment,”<sup>33</sup> and those attending his *Time Stands Still* questions of “moral ambiguity of journalism,”<sup>34</sup> the gradation inherent in the very idea of Truth itself is on display in *Shipwrecked!*. As noted in a *Times* NY Region review of the playwright’s work, “the very best plays usually come from writers who don’t necessarily have all the answers, who don’t insist on telling us what to think about the developments on stage and who don’t offer neat solutions to their characters’ problems.”<sup>35</sup> Does *Shipwrecked!*’s turtle represent ascension to greater things? A spiral into madness? Does its appearance signal proof of his tale or proof of his adeptness at spectacle and hoax? Perhaps both, or neither? Most strikingly—and most importantly in this pursuit of multivalence—is *Shipwrecked!*’s ending a finale of joy or of woe?

These unanswered questions bring an understanding of *Shipwrecked!* beyond staging conventions or the influence of notable twentieth and twenty-first century theorists. It suggests, instead, that *Shipwrecked!* is a play firmly rooted in postmodernism. It is this postmodernity that allows the performance text to exist in our present time and simultaneously in (a version of) the nineteenth century, allowing the performance to carry the depth of history without the weight of verisimilitude or political historicization. Similarly, it is this postmodernity that allows the pastiche of styles, and, from an analytical point of view, suggests the most useful reading would be one which explores the text with a toolbox of theorists and structures, rather than forcing the work into a

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<sup>33</sup> David Kennedy, “Dinner with Friends: A Cultural Touchstone,” Playbill: *Dinner With Friends*, West County Playhouse, October, 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Sylviane Gold, “War Leaves Wound Behind the Camera, Too” *New York Times*, August 23, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/25/nyregion/a-review-of-time-stands-still-in-hartford.html>

<sup>35</sup> Gold.

single generic construct. Most of all, however, it is this postmodernity that allows a meta-theatricality so thoroughly engrained in the performance text that, when de Rougemont stumbles in the final moments of production, forgetting his lines and losing his sense of place, the show itself appears to falter. Though he tells his assistants that he is alright and seemingly recovers, a fundamental change has occurred: the man who began the performance controlling the entirety of the production now seems unable to control even his own faculties. Whereas he had spent the prologue (*Allow Me to Introduce Myself*) establishing a relationship with the audience in which they were taught to follow his lead, his sudden withdrawal leaves them alone. In short, whereas an audience attending *Death of a Salesman* may collectively feel concern for Willy Loman as a character within a fictional world, in *Shipwrecked!*, the audience becomes concerned for the character, the actor, and for the play itself.

### *Hodge and Longman Readings*

None of the above, however, addresses the script breakdown offered by a Hodge Analysis—that is, a commonly and popularly utilized methodology of organizing and examining a work of dramatic literature for both analysis and rehearsal needs, following the techniques and theories of famed theatre scholar and directing teacher Francis Hodge. While Hodge’s methods are appropriate for many of Margulies’s titles, attempts to examine and analyze *Shipwrecked!* by utilizing this approach introduces a number of challenges. Instead, the nature and structure of the work suggests use of the Longman analysis model,<sup>36</sup> as developed by Greenwald, Schulz, and Pomo. Whereas the Hodge model could be said to encourage discovering the many ways in which a script follows

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<sup>36</sup> Mike Greenwald, Roger Schulz, and Roberto Dario Pomo, *The Longman Anthology of Drama and Theater: A Global Perspective*, Longman, 2004.

generally understood patterns in dramatic literature, plot structure, scene work, and “real life,” the Longman model emphasizes those aspects about a play which stand out as different in each of these categories and therefore—according to the technique—serve to lead the artists’ approach to the script.

One of the chief challenges of breaking down Margulies’s text along Hodgean analytical structure is the aforementioned trilectic presence of three inter-related story platforms. Not simply a primary plot and two sub-plots, *Shipwrecked!* features Louis de Rougemont’s story of adventure contained within the story of de Rougemont selling that tale to London readers and audiences, with both contained within the real-time happening of de Rougemont telling the present audience all of the above. It’s worth noting, the only events of the play that exist as happenings rather than reports are de Rougemont’s direct relationship with the current audience, his temporary loss of lines and composure, and the *pièce de résistance* turtle finale. With this in mind, even something as basic as breaking the script into acts, units, and beats (the major components of Hodge—as well as of most Stanislavski-derived realistic acting analysis) becomes a complicated affair, and—owing to all performers being present all the time—the idea of French scenes becomes far too tortuous and rapid fire to prove useful for any reasons of plot analysis or rehearsal planning.

Furthermore, a Hodgean analysis, working under Stanislavskian conventions, assumes a character to be “real”—that is, the goal is to encourage audiences to suspend their disbelief, forget they are in a theatre, and connect in a deeply emotional way with seemingly-authentic characters through theatrical voyeurism. In *Shipwrecked!*, every performer on stage (no matter how many are cast) is portraying a actor who is, in turn,

portraying one or more characters. It is this idea in particular that reveals an important Longman-worthy difference inherent in the script. Even superficial research of *Shipwrecked!* will point to its historical origins. The script is based on a true story—a man really did write a book entitled *The Amazing Adventures of Louis de Rougemont (as Told by Himself)*, and, under that pseudonym, did sell out performance venues. Donald Margulies did, in fact, seem to rely quite heavily on his source materials. With that noted, according to standard contemporary (and Hodge) theatre practices, the majority of scripts with similar “based on a true story” origins would call for extensive research by performer and production crew alike, and would benefit from this historically accurate verisimilitude. Donald Margulies’s text, however, does not. Margulies almost seems to go out of his way not to draw attention—either in the text or in interviews—to the existence of his source material. While a standard historical fiction or biographical theatre piece would likely explore the motivations behind a character’s historical actions, Margulies does little to explore de Rougemont’s mental health, other than one ambiguous moment of confusion. This lack of delving should not be taken lightly—nor should the fact that the audience is never introduced to Henry Louis Grin as himself, but only his de Rougemont alter ego. With these decisions, Margulies makes clear that this script is not the story of Henry Louis Grin (a real life man who told a very large lie), but rather about Louis de Rougemont, an imaginary man who experiences amazing adventures. That we must reconcile the difference between the two becomes an important aspect of the viewing experience, rather than a conflict within the story arc to be resolved.

Unlike Hodge’s search for the familiar, The Longman “Vertical Analysis” begins by asking three fundamental questions: how is this play different from actuality and other

plays, why is the play different in this way, and what is this play about? In taking all three of these questions together, the reader is arguably left with the simple question of “what qualities in this play are unlike anything else, and what do those qualities communicate to an audience?” Instead of treating the complicated, Matryoshka-like script as a work that fails to live up to the Aristotelian form, Longman encourages an exploration of that which makes *Shipwrecked!* unique. Within a Hodge analysis, work would be done to find traditional scene breaks and motivational “units” within the structure Margulies has laid out, whereas within a Longman analysis, emphasis is placed on *Shipwrecked!*’s existence as a trialectic structure with a primary, secondary, and tertiary text.

The last moments of *Shipwrecked!* provide the clearest representation of the benefits of Longman. In a standard Hodgean understanding of the script, the climax is usually understood to be the moment of greatest conflict and intensity. In *Shipwrecked!*, this would be the moment at the Royal Geography Society when London society turns on him. According to the usual patterns, that moment captures the climax, with the remainder of the play providing the dénouement of de Rougemont’s subsequent downfall.

If, however, one is to assume the climax is not the moment of greatest conflict, but rather the moment of greatest thematic concatenation and synthesis, then surely the very last moments of *Shipwrecked!*—the turtle’s appearance and de Rougemont’s ride in the water tank—meet that modified definition, exchanging a de Rougemont “loss” (his downfall in society) for a triumph (his ascension on a turtle). “What does a man leave behind,” asks de Rougemont, “but his name and the stories that he told?”<sup>37</sup> Through a

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<sup>37</sup> Margulies, *Shipwrecked!*, 49.

Longman analytical structure, we are able to place the work's climax at de Rougemont's greatest moment of telling his story, as he is convinced that the audience will see the turtle beneath him, and finally understand. Though Margulies makes no demands as to how the audience is to feel about his character's final moments, it is clear that de Rougemont, at least, is happy.

### *Feminist and Post-Colonial Challenges*

Further juxtaposition of ideas continues as one considers the play in the context of twenty-first century cultural theory. As Jill Dolan's aforementioned feminist and post-colonial criticism suggests, de Rougemont—and arguably the whole of the Victorian-era British Empire—deserves equal parts approbation and disdain due to the embracement of patriarchal and ethno-centric prejudices balanced against the childlike optimism of naïve and misguided “charitable” master narratives. As events of the script play out and de Rougemont's prejudices are revealed, the folly of aboriginal exoticism and the conqueror class's “White Man's Burden” is exposed. It is also, however, couched by the misguided assumption of “charity” which underpins it, creating a text which risks being, as Dolan points out, “wincingly, if unintentionally, racist.”<sup>38</sup>

“Its only troubling aspect,” according to Dolan, “is Margulies's treatment of the Aboriginal family as ‘savages’ who need to be civilized.” When de Rougemont becomes a member of the tribe's royalty, his assumption of the role of divinity plays into the ‘white savior’ archetype; when his desire to return home overwhelms his happiness with his native wife, he curses the time he's ‘wasted’ in the outback, suggesting that his love

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<sup>38</sup> Dolan.



for her and his daughters was less vital and important than his devotion to his trusty, finally dead dog, whom we see him bury with tenderness and grief.

“These moments of unthought colonialism are sad reminders that heroic adventure stories remain the province of straight white men who conquer the ‘savage’ other before they return triumphantly home to the bosom of ‘civilization,’” claims Dolan. “De Rougemont’s disgrace doesn’t redeem the fact that he’s told his story with less humanity than he means to convey. *Shipwrecked!* makes him a hero with whom it’s difficult to identify or ultimately to applaud.”<sup>39</sup> This becomes a challenging reminder to a production team, demanding a staging that neither vilifies nor glorifies de Rougemont’s problematic assumptions about the world he inhabits, but rather presents the complicated nature of his “heroism” for the audience’s inspection and reflection.

### *Conclusion*

This analysis demonstrates that the structure and execution of *Shipwrecked!* argues that a gifted narration on a nearly-bare stage can offer emotional impact, copious humanity, and edge-of-seat excitement equal to, if not greater than, big-budget spectacle and cinema-inspired effects. In short, as with children’s theatre, but also as with any old-fashioned tale told beside a campfire, the script asks of its directors, performers, designers, and audiences the ability to simply engage in a world of make-believe and to communally share the age-old experience of getting wrapped up in a good story. A textual interpretation which focuses on the performative qualities and ambiguous message of the script while noting the thematic threads that run throughout Margulies’s

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<sup>39</sup> Dolan.

career circumvents the style differences which, on the surface, seem to make *Shipwrecked!* an outlier among the playwright's other works.

Furthermore, a production team must never forget that the script demands respect for the excitement and promise of a bare stage for an eager audience member. "I wanted to write a play" Margulies wrote, "that would invite people who had never seen one into the theater and give them a sense of the excitement I had when I was a kid at my first Broadway shows."<sup>40</sup> Of course, enjoying *Shipwrecked!* is not limited to the young or first-time theatre go-er. In a letter to the Rogue Theatre's Managing and Associate Artistic Director Cynthia Meier, Margulies writes that the script also "represents a return to the childlike essence of playtime for seasoned theater professionals." As far as accomplishing such a feat in a loud, Hollywood- and Mtv-influenced contemporary theatre landscape, the playwright directs Meier to "Keep it simple and true."<sup>41</sup>

This direction is the heart of the play, and warns its reader of the play's inherent trap for directors, actors, and designers alike. The story is simultaneously "simple and true" and complicated and false. Should one wish, case studies on psychological and behavioral patterns could be devised around the central character. If it proved helpful, great effort could be taken to recreate authentic aboriginal costume and dialect, or to seek spectacular verisimilitude in the octopus, the turtle, and the starry sky. Beyond simply unnecessary, such attempts at authenticity would actually harm the work. It is the play's sense of presentational expansiveness, of "making it up as you go along," and of echoing the adventurous and dangerously naïve spirit of turn-of-the-century British colonialism, that ultimately succeeds in accomplishing what Margulies claims he set out to do:

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<sup>40</sup> Margulies, *First Person*.

<sup>41</sup> Margulies, personal letter to Meier.

namely, to share that “sense of excitement” he felt while attending the theatres of his youth, while telling a story of the sad but true life of one of England’s most famous liars.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Design Process

#### *Introduction*

Having developed an understanding of the theoretical needs and aesthetics of Donald Margulies's script, the directorial process moved on to include collaboration with a team of fellow theatre artists. This group included Baylor student and faculty members, as well as an alumnus of the department's BFA program serving as a guest designer. Collectively, the group covered lead and assistant design positions in scenic, lighting, costume, and make-up/hair, as well as positions in props and technical direction. Scheduling and general communication between these separate entities—both in meetings and correspondence—was largely handled by the stage management team made up of Baylor students. My role was to provide leadership to all positions as to the overarching direction and aesthetic of the project, as well as, I felt, to establish a tone of collegiality and teamwork in building the community of artists.

This chapter is designed to provide an understanding of the design process utilized in the creation of *Shipwrecked!*, from original concept to final execution. Owing both to the nature of the production's needs and the style of each collaborative relationship, some sub-sections will necessarily require a lengthier consideration than others, but will seek to capture the most important aspects of each design process. Before exploring these collaborations, however, it is useful to note that the schedule of the design process was somewhat amended from its normal calendar. My own summer development plans included substantial travel throughout the latter half of the summer.

As such, the design process became “split” between pre- and post-break. This is notably different than Baylor University Theatre’s standard production calendar, and did provide some challenges. Overall, however, the design process resulted in a visual aesthetic which largely captured the directorial interpretation of Margulies’s script.

### *Conceptual Approach*

A carefully considered and uniformly employed production concept is singularly important in translating a work from a written to a performance text. This central element, which in contemporary western theatre falls under the purview of the director, seeks to capture the ideas presented by the playwright (visual aesthetics, major themes and metaphors, style considerations, and so forth), and produce them in a visual and spatial language that communicates the director’s interpretation of the text to the intended audience. While a director’s concept is vital for keeping any production unified, a script like *Shipwrecked!*, which affords production teams so much leeway in design and staging decisions, is at particular risk of chaos and confusion without a well-defined and clearly communicated concept supported by all involved. In seeking to establish such an overriding concept that would inspire and govern all design, staging, and performance choices, the world of the play was considered from its three distinct “realities.”<sup>1</sup> Since Margulies begins the text with Louis de Rougemont entering onto a bare stage and directly addressing an audience, the search for aesthetic cohesion began there.

Very often, a play’s given circumstances play a large part in determining much of the director’s concept. In the case of *Shipwrecked!*, even such vital expository information as setting and the ensemble’s individual, “not-in-character” names and

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter two of this manuscript.

gender are largely left up to the individual production. In establishing setting, many productions of *Shipwrecked!* have employed a meta-theatrical approach, suggesting the production exists in a sort of timeless “present.” While Baylor University’s production also sought some degree of this meta-theatrical quality, the historical structure of the work was too richly complex to not emphasize as source material. As such, being mindful not to cross the line into minutely-detailed verisimilitude, the decision was made to pull aesthetic inspiration from the actual historical event connected with the play.

In 1902, the “real” Louis de Rougemont—that is, Henri Louis Grin—staged a presentation at the Hippodrome in London, England. Already denounced as a fraud in the press, de Rougemont argued his case before the audience, revealing a grand finale in which he successfully rode a live sea turtle in the Hippodrome’s water tank. While Margulies never mentions the Hippodrome or the year 1902, the entirety of the script involves de Rougemont trying to win over an audience, culminating with him riding a giant sea turtle as the evening’s “*Pièce de résistance*.” With these similarities in mind, as well as some superficial similarities between the thrust stage design in the Mabee Theatre with that of the Hippodrome, one of the earliest design decisions made on the production was to pull visual inspiration from this event. Turn-of-the-century music halls, panto acts, touring troupes, buskers, magic lantern presentations, Yiddish Theatre and Klezmer bands were all considered in capturing Margulies’s view of de Rougemont/Grin’s turn-of-the-century world. In all cases, these inspirations were meant to be “reminiscent” of the era, with that word being an important qualifier. The designers were repeatedly encouraged—in keeping with script’s “storytelling” theme—to find aesthetics that “felt” like the era rather than worrying about antiquarianism and historical accuracy.

An early priority of the design process was determining the aesthetic that Louis de Rougemont/Henri Louis Grin would have drawn from in selling his story. The basic facts surrounding Grin's life give some context and inspiration. Grin clearly had experienced sea travel since he had moved from London to Sydney and back again. As such, some awareness of nautical and maritime visuals is perfectly appropriate. The only evidence, however, that de Rougemont/Grin had any formal knowledge of the life of a sailor is his apocryphal tale of adventure. As such, the production pursued "seafaring" through the romantic lens of passengers or those on land, looking at the fictional accounts and touristic souvenirs that have remained popular from that time until our own. His love affair with adventure tales and the Robinsonade is well-established throughout the script, leading to a design consideration of the many seafaring adventure novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with special attention paid to the dynamic illustrations popular in the genre. These images were often highly dramatic, featuring a great deal of visual information crowded into a single frame, depicting sea monsters, storms, or highly embellished maps (see fig 3.1). Not only does Margulies emphasize that de Rougemont/Grin spent considerable time with these books, but the illustrations that eventually appeared in the *Wide World's* publication of his memoir follow very much the same pattern (see fig 3.2).

Finally, a tangible metaphor of the "poor theatre" was required to give designers a common visual inspiration for capturing the thematic and aesthetic qualities of de Rougemont's tale. The process required something beyond the existence of the bare stage to suggest hand-made, presentational, and "authentic" in its manufacture. Combining



Fig 3.1. Genre representative illustration from *The Swiss Family Robinson* by J Wyss. *The International Library of Famous Literature*, Volume XIII. Published by Edward Lloyd Limited, London, 1900.

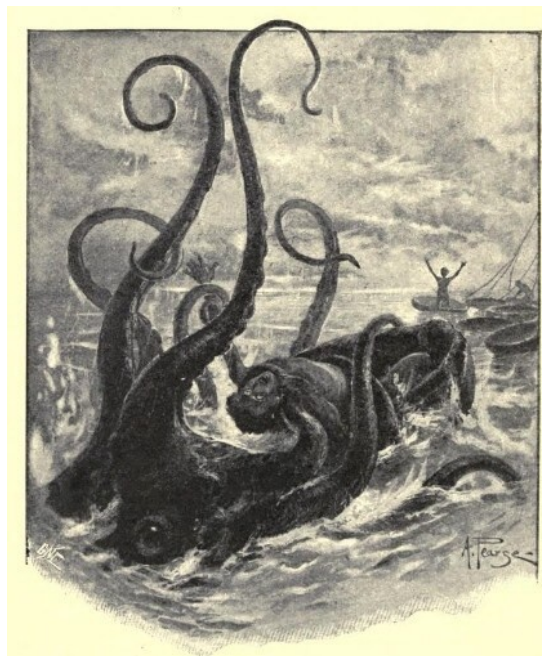


Fig 3.2. Illustration by Alfred Pearse depicting the sea monster attack in de Rougemont's tale. First published in *Wild World Magazine*, and later collected in *The Adventures of Louis de Rougemont as Told by Himself*, George Newnes, Limited. London 1899.



elements of storytelling, sailor-lore, exoticism, adventure, and antiquarianism, the idea of maritime scrimshaw emerged as a useful candidate. A folk art popularized by sailors on whaling ships in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, scrimshaw involves text, portraits, pictograms, or other engravings carved into the teeth and bones of whales and the tusks of walruses (see fig 3.3). Though the works were amateur in nature, many sailors became quite skilled at the practice. The carvings, sometimes quite elaborate, often featured a cross-hatch technique not dissimilar to many of the engraved illustrations printed in the aforementioned Robinsonade books. The carved bone would be dipped in soot, squid ink, or tobacco juice,<sup>2</sup> giving a dark brown/black color to the image lines.



Fig 3.3. Scrimshaw depicting a whaling expedition. Carved by Edward Burdett (1805-1832). Dates of creation unknown. Nantucket Whaling Museum, Nantucket, MA.

From old books to scrimshaw, visual inspiration focused not on the items as initially produced but as they would be found as part of a collection. As de Rougemont/Grin pieced his story together from libraries and museums, it seemed fitting that the items should be taken in that context. As such, the yellowing of book pages, the

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<sup>2</sup> “FolkArt: The Art of the Scrimshaw,” *ArtTalk*, February 17, 2014, <http://www.arttalk.com/archives/vol-18/artv1812-3.htm>

cracking of leather bindings, and the encroaching patina prevalent on scrimshaw became important qualities of these objects. A vital aesthetic of this aged collection idea focused on the non-uniform visual evidence of time and handling that tend to occur with scrimshaw and books. Scrimshaw has the most patina in those places it was most often held, the leather on book spines is most worn along its hinged edges, and books' pages become most yellowed at the edges that are exposed to the air.

Considering the above in conjunction with the time and setting of the production, patterns quickly emerged. Everything on stage, from props to the wooden floor to people's clothing, would show specific evidence of age and use as suggested both by the scrimshaw and old books, and as motivated by the difficult life of performers, sailors, and buskers in a northern port town. However, just as with the scrimshaw and the books, it became imperative that people and items not merely appear distressed or ragged, but rather tell a story of handling, hard-fought longevity, and use. Equally important, the leather binding, the bone scrimshaw, and the hemp rope of the sailing ships and theatrical riggings of the day demanded an adherence to organic materials, standing in contrast to the industrialized city of London in which the last section of the play (and, arguably, the entirety of the narration) takes place.

These ideas culminated in a single, overarching concept—*Shipwrecked!* was to be presented in a manner reminiscent of the music hall and panto performances of turn-of-the-century London, utilizing an aesthetic of organic textures and materials showing signs of overuse and wear, designed in earth tone color palettes, and presented in a manner suggesting skilled and earnest, if not necessarily trained, amateurs. The resulting

performance style is documented throughout chapter four, whereas the resulting production designs make up the rest of this chapter.

### *Selecting the Performance Space*

The Hooper Schaefer Fine Arts Building, which serves as the home of Baylor University's theatre department, boasts three performance spaces: a large, proscenium-style auditorium in which all audience members view the stage from essentially the same direction, a thrust space, in which audience members are seated on three sides of the performance area, and a black box, which provides a flexible space adaptable to multiple performer/audience configurations. For *Shipwrecked!*, the thrust space, Baylor's Mabee Theatre, immediately proved the right home for this production.

The Mabee Theatre presents an unusual layout, even as compared to other thrust spaces. The upstage playing area—that is, the one side of the stage without audience seating—is designed with a proscenium arch that frames an additional performance space. The audience configuration, however, is such that those audience members furthest away from center and toward the upstage walls lack a clear view inside this proscenium frame, thereby limiting the usefulness of this space. Meanwhile, the thrust stage in front of the proscenium opening is highly asymmetrical, with a floor plan resembling a two-dimensional kidney bisected at its thinnest point. The result is that the space lacks a traditional center line and creates visual angles that provide both challenges and opportunities to the director.

The benefits to selecting the Mabee Theatre, however, far outweighed by the drawbacks. The performance space, which bears a superficial similarity to the thrust that

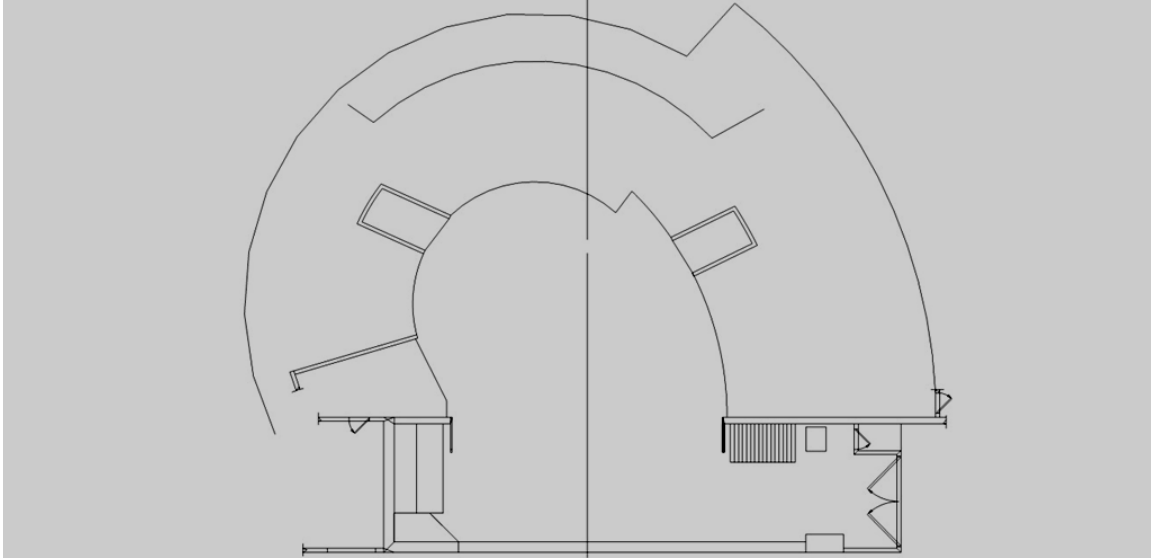


Fig 3.4. Groundplan of the Baylor University's Mabee Theatre.

was in place at the London Hippodrome in 1902, allows for both the presentational qualities of a proscenium stage and the intimate, conversational qualities of a thrust space. Due to its set-up, the proscenium emphasizes the presentational nature of de Rougemont's performance, while the thrust allows the actors to seek closer connection with the audience, thus aiding the Grotowski aim of erasing the line between performer and spectator. Though the theatre seats approximately 250 people, the wrap-around design ensures that no audience member is ever more than twelve rows from the stage, and the relatively steep angle of the seating keeps audience members close to the action. This intimacy helps establish a bond with the lead character, supporting a charismatic, conversational tone in a way that would be extremely difficult in the building's larger, proscenium theatre, while still retaining a grandeur of scale and theatricality that would be missed in the smaller black box studio theatre.

Most importantly, the sight lines created by having the audience on three sides create an environment in which the audience's awareness of its collective self is

heightened. Those sitting stage left, in looking across the stage, see the faces of those audience members sitting on stage right. By embracing this feature of the theatre's architecture (and emphasizing it through lighting), the audience ceases to be the invisible, silent observer, instead becoming an observed and notable part of the proceedings. This audience-inclusion approach is well supported by the Margulies text. The opening lines of *Shipwrecked!* feature Louis de Rougemont directly addressing the audience, referencing specific architectural and safety features of the theatre, and even responding to imagined lines from audience members. Throughout the play, de Rougemont utilizes asides to develop rapport, ensuring the important performer-audience relationship remains a focal point of the production. With its blend of large theatre openness and small theatre intimacy, the Mabey Theatre met *Shipwrecked!*'s need for a performance space capable of presenting de Rougemont's charismatic persona, whether in its gregarious, presentational form, or in quiet, intimate, and more personal moments.

### *Approaching Collaboration*

While the design process for *Shipwrecked!* did feature an unusual "break" in the process due to summer travel plans of several production team members, the collaboration otherwise largely fell in line with the standard operating procedures set up for main stage productions at Baylor University. After a few informal, individual meetings with the costume and set designers, an initial design concept meeting was held, attended by the scenic, costume, sound, and assistant lighting designers, as well as the professor assigned as directing mentor.

The meeting consisted of an eleven page electronic slideshow to cover major topics and introduce several key images and visual themes, followed by a nearly ninety

minute conversation, largely prompted by thematic questions posed by the costume designer. The slideshow began, after a few introductory slides, with a four-bullet-point slide, titled “The Basics,” which was designed to clarify the most important aspects of the design concept. Those four bullet points were as follows:

- |                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| Characters:     | Louis de Rougemont and nine ensemble members make up a travelling troupe—they are used to playing side shows and sketchy music halls; tonight is “big” for them.                            |
| Space:          | We are in a theatre, and have no desire to forget that fact   |
| Sound:          | ALL sound is handled by the ensemble as live Foley—whether human voice, wind machines, musical instruments, etc.  |
| Stage elements: | Costumes, props, lighting, scenic, sound, etc. should have the “feel” of the turn of the century (19 <sup>th</sup> /20 <sup>th</sup> ) without getting too carried away with antiquarianism |

Following this was a photograph of an intricately carved piece of scrimshaw (see fig 3.5), alongside a text block listing a series of qualities found in the picture, including the item’s patina, cross-hatch technique, coloring, images of ship riggings, organic nature, and the unevenly worn-down and distressed surface.

This meeting was soon followed by individual brainstorming design sessions. Although it was too early in the process to accomplish anything with lighting or sound, the majority of attention during the period of time before the summer break was focused on collaboration with the scenic and costume designers. While each design area will be discussed in greater length later in this chapter, the initial challenges of setting a color palette for the production deserves early attention.

A clearly communicated color palette is one of the most important steps in the early stages of production design. Unfortunately, my directing and design skills are



Fig 3.5. Scrimshaw image presented to design team as visual inspiration. Artist and era unknown. Source: <http://hlwe.wordpress.com/2010/04/23/scrimshaw-antique-whale-tooth-art/> (Several “reverse look-up” and digital image scans of the internet and searches of nautical museum collections have revealed several uses of this image on websites about scrimshaw, but no artist credit or collection information.)

hampered by my fairly acute color-blindness. While working on past productions, I had compensated for this condition by developing a “color language” with someone else on the production team, most often a designer or the technical director. Substantial time would be spent early in the process explaining the context and “emotion” of the desired colors through metaphor and practical examples. Once the language was established, that production team member could then act as a “translator,” helping communicate the desired hues and saturations to other designers and ensuring the production’s aesthetics were capturing the established production concept. However, at Baylor, it became clear that developing such a relationship and code was not part of the standard procedure, and a different solution was needed. This concerned me, as I worried this weakness would

introduce conflict and chaos into the production due to my inability to confidently name colors I preferred, respond to designer's color choices, or ensure different design areas were utilizing the same color palette.

Happily, technology came to my aid in the form of a free online software application named “Chip it” by the paint retail company Sherman Williams, which allows consumers to create a balanced color palette for home decorating based on photographs. Users upload a photograph to the website, and the software instantly determines the individual colors in the image, along with the corresponding Sherman Williams paint names. Conceptually, this allows a home decorator uploading a picture of the ocean to not only find the perfect greenish sea blue color for the walls, but just the right shade of foamy-crest-of-wave white to handle the trim. For *Shipwrecked!*, it allowed me to upload pictures of old sailing ships, canvas tarps, circus wagons, and aging theatres, resulting in the automatic development of a color palette comprised of the common colors in the source images. Thanks to this free online software application, I was able to confidently hand the designers a palette made up of Sherman Williams paint swatches. For example, the Sherman Williams color “Tri-corn Black” appeared in nearly every photo I selected, and became the darkest end of the production's spectrum. When I presented this color to the designers, they informed me that it was a black with a very pronounced brown base (a concept I understand, though cannot always see). This exchange established a pattern in which everything in the production design strictly adhered to earth tones, and in which even black had a feeling of brown. This discovery and others like it allowed for fluid conversations regarding color, avoiding many of the communication traps that



productions often face, and completely solving the problems usually created by my own color deficiencies.



Fig 3.6. Scanned Sherman Williams paint swatch, “Tricorn Black.”

Color was not the only aspect of the design process that called for a rethinking of common practices. Whereas many Baylor University Theatre productions produce fairly clear delineations between duties, *Shipwrecked!*'s conceptual approach created multiple areas of overlapping responsibilities. Whereas it was a notably unusual event when, during the previous season, the props and costumes departments collaborated on a knife gag in Baylor's production of *the 39 Steps*, *Shipwrecked!* demanded numerous examples of just this sort of collaboration. Whereas sound design, for example, would usually involve fairly insular duties of sound recording, sound mixing, and speaker placement, *Shipwrecked!*'s live Foley design demanded a close collaboration between the sound designer, props master, scenic technicians, the composer/music director, the director, and the actor/musicians. Similarly, while the lighting designer handled a majority of the lighting needs in a traditional manner, both the underwater and stars scenes required collaboration with members of the props and the scenic departments to create the necessary practical lanterns. From puppets to dog ears, questions of who would build

what, and to whose specifications, became an ongoing challenge and source of creative opportunity for the production.

### *Scenic Design*

When designing most productions, one of the first things to be determined is the number of settings that will be represented. This basic question is complicated by *Shipwrecked!*'s structure; it simultaneously requires dozens of locations and a single, unchanging one. The characters in the play travel across time and geography, and yet are always playing a performance troupe on a London stage, circa 1902. This dual-use setting is not entirely unique, and, notably, can be found in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, a script which Margulies credits as an early inspiration for *Shipwrecked!* As such, any consideration of *Shipwrecked!*'s scenic design would be incomplete without also reflecting on the design of Wilder's work. In his essay, "Empty Stage in Half-Light,"<sup>3</sup> Donald Margulies discusses the manner in which *Our Town* informed much of the early creative process surrounding *Shipwrecked!*, including Wilder's opening stage direction, "No curtain. No scenery. The audience, arriving, sees an empty stage in half-light."<sup>4</sup> Wilder's opening is designed as a metaphorical blank canvas and, despite scenes in multiple settings throughout the fictional New Hampshire town of Grover's Corners, the intended set design remains that of a stage, without desire to suspend the audience's disbelief. In traditionally-realized *Our Town* productions, minor changes in small set pieces, hand props, staging, and lighting are all that is needed to establish new locations. While audience members are encouraged to imagine these new locations, they are never

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<sup>3</sup> Margulies, *Shipwrecked!*, 51.

<sup>4</sup> Thornton Wilder, *Our Town*, (New York: Coward-McCann, 1939), 3.

expected to forget that these settings remain merely theatrical representations.

*Shipwrecked!* follows a similar model. Margulies's tale visits several locations, from an underwater vista to the peak of an island mountain. As with Wilder's script, however, it is clear from the opening moments that the only actual location to be portrayed in the scenic design is a theatre.

The collaboration and communication surrounding the production's scenic design was largely positive, though not without complications and concessions. Many of the challenges that occurred were related to the limited availability of the guest designer, lost momentum over the summer break, and miscommunications between the director, designer, and technical director, though these challenges were never enough to derail the larger process. The initial meetings between the scenic artist and director were very positive, revealing a mutual attraction to many of the same qualities in the script. Much of the early design process concentrated on the Mabee Theatre's architectural similarities to the London Hippodrome (see fig 3.7). Both stages shared the outline of a three-quarter rounded-thrust with a large proscenium-framed playing area upstage. While far from identical, these similarities provided a starting point from which to draw inspiration.

Plans soon developed to emphasize and strengthen the commonalities between the two spaces, without attempting to directly replicate the Hippodrome. The Mabee's natural proscenium opening was adapted with a false proscenium arch, complete with decorative flourishes suggestive of the era. The upstage area was built up to include a raised stage with an extended apron, thereby both echoing the Hippodrome and giving the production a much-needed second physical level. Since the production concept relied

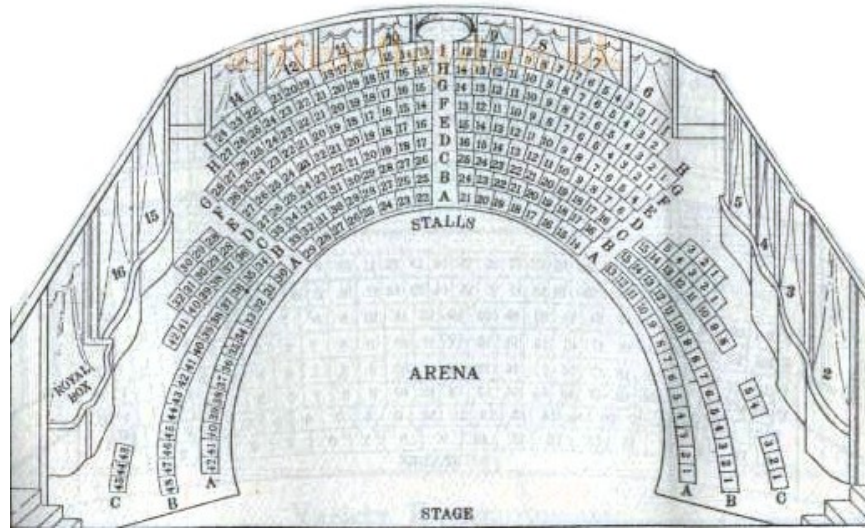


Fig 3.7. The lower level of the London Hippodrome Theatre, as it was in 1902. Although the Mabey does not share the Hippodrome’s symmetry, the design team felt there were useful similarities between the two performance spaces (see page 61, Fig 3.4). Image edited (upper levels deleted) from scan of Keith, Prowse, & Co.’s diagram, as found at the *Music Hall and Theatre History Website*, accessed 11 November 2012, [www.author.lloyd.co.uk/LondonHippodrome.htm](http://www.author.lloyd.co.uk/LondonHippodrome.htm).

heavily on the performers’ relationship to the audience, designs were made to de-emphasize the separation between the two. Whereas the Mabey Theatre has squared, gray metal railings surrounding the stage, the design called for *faux* wood covers in a style matching the false proscenium to cover these railings, extending the aesthetics of the scenic design into the liminal space between “on” and “off” stage. This choice would, it was thought, suggest the design’s reach throughout the theatre, encompassing performer and spectator alike.

The various locations addressed in de Rougemont’s tale would be handled by actor manipulation of a number of trunks, props, and poles, as well as through the movement and behavior of the actors themselves. Meanwhile, calling on the historical connection of sailors being hired to create backstage riggings in theatres, the design emphasized those aspects shared by theatres and ships of the era. Following a series of

conversations between director and designer, the aesthetic took on aspects which represented a theatrical stage and yet also echoed many qualities of *the Wonder World* and other sailing ships. By utilizing wood planking running the length of the stage, the design called to mind both old stage floors and the decks of ships. Similarly, the raised stage simulated a ship's raised quarterdeck, complete with *faux*-wood railings and backdrop positioned in the place of a sail. Additionally, the placement of an onstage "pit" for the musicians was soon settled and, while months later I would second-guess the wisdom of its location, at the time it received my full endorsement. Throughout this period, I approved early sketches the designer presented and, overall, was quite happy with the process as it was coming together.

Due to the summer break, final costume and scenic designs were due before the production process was put on hiatus during my several weeks away. This required that a full maquette—that is, a scale model of the proposed set built by the designer as a guiding visual reference for the rest of the production team—be built and approved before the production staff dispersed for summer plans. Challenges surrounding this maquette, however, ended up being at the heart of the majority of later instances of design team miscommunication and frustration. Due to various other time commitments, the maquette was not completed with appropriate lead-time, but instead arrived at the final pre-break design team meeting without having received the appropriate approval of the director. In the minutes before the meeting began, I was able to look at the maquette and point out a number of problems, including the floor boards facing the wrong way, the failure of the faux-wood railings to surround the thrust, and paint colors which failed to achieve stated design goals. Most problematically, while the backdrop rigging system had

not yet been mechanically figured out, the designer had chosen to install a possible solution that had not been previously discussed, and would not eventually be used.

The hope had been to have an approved maquette going into the break, so that, upon the production team's return, there would be a completed, three-dimensional guide on which the scenic crew and other designers could base their work. Unfortunately, what was presented was a maquette with several major problems. Due to timing, however, the maquette received a qualified approval, contingent on the designer making several important fixes. The designer agreed that, with the break scheduled, he would have the time to make those adjustments, thus justifying the unusual "qualified" approval. During the ensuing meeting, some brief mention was made about the model not being finalized yet, but the topic was treated lightly on the assumption that the designer would soon fix it, coupled with a desire to keep the working relationship between director and designer as cordial and respectful as possible.

Unfortunately, the decision not to discuss the maquette's problems in detail during the meeting turned out to have long-term consequences. Because the operating calendar was altered due to the aforementioned summer plans, none of the stage management team had been available during these early meetings. Whereas usually these meetings would have been chronicled by a member of the stage management team, and so concerns about the maquette would have been documented, I had failed to secure alternate note-taking during the meeting. The result of this oversight was that the production team broke for summer only vaguely aware of the challenges surrounding the maquette, with all responsibility for fixing the issues sitting squarely on the designer's shoulders.

Upon returning from break just over eight weeks later, it became clear that nothing about the maquette had changed. The designer expressed confusion regarding the need to change anything, but then agreed to a few adjustments. On September 9, approximately one week after this conversation, the first full production meeting of the semester took place. At that point, a new solution for rigging the backdrop mechanics was represented, but otherwise, the proscenium color-scheme, the floor planks facing the wrong direction, and the lack of a complete wooden railing all remained unchanged. This was addressed during the meeting, and the technical director expressed some concern over changes happening this late in the process, but all agreed things would be quickly resolved. This “quick resolution,” of course, still relied entirely on the scenic designer fixing the maquette as the model from which all scenic work would be based.

By September 22, the only updates were a few frustrating one-on-one conversations between director and designer, in which concern was expressed over the quickly speeding calendar, and a lack of time in the designer’s schedule to affect the changes in the model. In an effort to resolve the issue, a meeting was called, bringing together the director, designer, and technical director to deal directly with the continued miscommunication and missed deadlines. During the meeting, several issues were quickly settled. First, the technical director agreed to place the planks going the correct direction whether the designer fixed the maquette or not. He also initially agreed to placing railings around the thrust, despite—owing to their absence from the model—their absence from the established budget. Most importantly, the technical director was able to propose practical suggestions regarding how to rig the backdrop. Unfortunately, having been unaware of the full needs of the backdrops, he also noted that the cost of the number

of drops as proposed would be far greater than would be possible, and asked that we limit the number of drops needed. Through some reworking of scenic needs, the number of drops was able to be scaled from ten to six.

This meeting also included a somewhat unfortunate incident which, nevertheless, became an important part of the educational component of the process. During the conversation, it became clear the designer had communicated to the technical director that I been asking for new changes well after the summer break deadline, instead of, as I understood it, demanding that old changes due before the deadline be finally dealt with. This coming to light helped explain why the technical director had previously seemed sympathetic to the designer's lack of progress, and established a new tone that lasted throughout the remainder of the production build. Without this personal issue coming to light, it is not clear if everything would have been completed in time for opening. Even so, as cast and crew morale is one of the director's responsibilities, and while feelings of agitation over the delays and miscommunications may have been justifiable, it was important to ensure a strong working relationship with everyone on the team. As such, the technical director was engaged in a series of emails, in which guidance was sought in understanding missteps I may have taken, protocols I was failing to follow, or general leadership failures which might have led to the situation. It became an important educational moment when he expressed that nothing had necessarily been "wrong," but that things would likely run far more smoothly if I were to be more assertive when stating what I did and did not want, and clearer when expressing whether I felt I was getting what I had asked for. Although this point will be dealt with in greater detail in section five, this important lesson has emerged as one of the most important that I will carry with



me into my next directing assignment. With these communication issues resolved and open dialogue with the technical director now established, the majority of the scenic design process, including both successful and challenging moments, finally settled into the main building process.

This is not to suggest that the rest of the process was entirely without challenges. The *faux*-wood railing covers that were to surround the stage and help turn the boundaries of the playing area into a liminal space between performer and spectator were cut, owing to a recalculation of the budget. The color of the false proscenium also failed to be corrected, though in this case it was the result of the designer being a single day too late re-mixing the paint, only to find the shop's paint crew, assuming the maquette was correct, had already used his original batch. Still, once the primary issue of miscommunication was resolved and the technical director became more involved, the process lost the majority of its former tenseness, and the production's designs were largely realized. Overall, while the design process featured several communication and timing issues and was not able to deliver on a few aspects of the approved design, the final product remained strong. While further reflection on the collaboration is presented in chapter five, it is worth simply noting here that, while imperfect and plagued by several issues that were arguably avoidable, the collaboration should still be viewed as successful and an ultimately positive experience.

### *Costume and Puppet Design*

As much as timely communication and face-to-face meeting opportunities proved difficult with the scenic designer, the costume designer made herself constantly available. During peak design weeks meetings occurred almost daily, ensuring that anything that

made it to the stage had been discussed and vetted at length. The process included a faculty designer and two student assistant designers, handling all costume needs, the design and creation of two puppets, and several instances of providing properties. With the notable exception of the puppets, the process was timely in delivery of designs and final creations, despite being the design area that had to deal with the largest mid-process aesthetic change. The change in question occurred immediately following the break, but was the result of conversations and decisions that occurred very early in the process and which, on reflection, lend strong credence to the technical director's advice regarding the need for assertiveness and clarity.

The first few meetings between director and designers are crucial. Both artists will have read the script numerous times and come to certain conclusions and interpretations before ever meeting. This often leads to confusion and tension if the director's vision is not quickly and effectively accepted by all members of the production team. While the worst-case scenario occurs when designers purposely ignore or contradict the director's vision, these instances are not the only way a production's central concept may fail to find unity. Often, as in the early days of *Shipwrecked!*, it is simply the result of well-meaning but flawed communication.

During early meetings, the costume designer expressed repeatedly that the script's "dream-like" atmosphere, "magic," and "memory-play" qualities were what first attracted her to the play. These descriptions clashed with the directorial interpretation at the heart of the design concept. Instead, the production was to pursue a "trunk and drop" show aesthetic, a theatre colloquialism referring to low-budget touring productions similar to Victorian buskers, Yiddish and Roma travelling troupes, and many modern children's

entertainers, which perform in front of backdrops hung on easily transportable pipe frames while using only those props and costumes they can fit in a few trunks. Unlike “dream” plays which, as a sub-genre, tend to emphasize illusion and seek to create the seemingly impossible or surreal onstage, “trunk and drop” performances traditionally make little effort to hide the artifice and presentational quality of the proceedings.

In the case of *Shipwrecked!*, the designer saw the script’s fantastic elements (the man eating octopus, the riding of sea turtles, etc.) as an opportunity to create a magical theatre-going experience, in which the audience would become swept up in the story, suspending their disbelief and forgetting for the moment that they were in a theatre. While the directorial concept also sought audience engagement with de Rougemont’s story, it was important that those same audience members never forget that they were witnessing a manufactured performance of his travels, and not the travels themselves. The play, in this reading, is not about the adventures of a man, but about a man who claimed he had adventures.

This distinction was profoundly important to the interpretation, and therefore, the design of the production. Whereas the designer entered early conversations imagining costumes built from beautiful cloths that could transform into any number of graceful silhouettes, the directorial concept was geared toward actors in basic street clothes of the era, with the entire costume plot distressed to suggest age and over-use. Whereas the designer assumed opportunities to create lovely outfits for the female cast members, the director’s concept suggested the actresses would look as though they were wearing their brothers’ hand-me-downs.

Although the costume designer differed in her initial interpretation of the play, she nevertheless worked consistently to support what she understood the directorial concept to be. Still, as we both were doing our best to give the other the room and artistic license of our job responsibilities, an early directorial approval of a retrospectively unsuitable design attempt came very close to derailing the production's entire aesthetic. With Margulies's script calling for constant gender switching among the ensemble, it was important that the design not create too stark of a visual divide between the men and women, but rather establish a sense of uniformity throughout the group. As the characters existed in 1902, photographic examples from that era were sought of women wearing pants and relatively masculine clothes, so as to justify the concept and provide visual examples to the designer (see fig 3.8).



Fig 3.8. Example of a costume inspiration image used to consider turn-of-the-century era-appropriate pants for women, 01 January, 1918. Photographer unknown. Getty Images, file 78966942.

After studying the photographs and considering production hopes surrounding the importance of the actors' roles as performers, the need for relative costume uniformity, the goal for women not to be in skirts, and the setting of 1902, the designer presented several drawings depicting men and women in gymnastic/circus costumes of the era. Somewhat similar to turn-of-the-century swimming attire, the figures wore tightly-fitted one and two-piece outfits with exposed arms and lower legs, with the overall look clearly emphasizing their troupe-member status (see fig 3.9).



Fig 3.9. Initial costume renderings of male and female ensemble members

My initial reaction to the costume designer's presentation was meant to be carefully encouraging and without a sense of micromanagement. In retrospect, I fear it came off as vague and confusing, serving as another example of the collaborative skill the technical director spoke of and as discussed under *Scenic Design* in this chapter. In this case, while we were eventually able to resolve the issue without intervention, this lack of directorial clarity ultimately cost the design process a substantial amount of time.

While it was immediately clear that the flashy spectacle of the outfits did not fit the world of the play and the tightness of the clothing would suggest a troupe more physically impressive (and thus professional) than warranted by the text, the designer countered that the costumes could be constructed in such a way to suggest the characters had attempted to achieve a professional look and failed, as though the troupe had once seen a professional group, and now were doing their best to emulate them. The individual outfits could be made a bit looser, fabrics could be rougher and cheaper, and everything could be distressed. The designer presented a photo of Harry Houdini in just such an outfit from early in his career (see fig 3.10).



Fig. 3.10. Harry Houdini, circa 1890, at this point still Ehrich Weiss. Photographer unknown. Library of Congress Rare Book and Special Collections Division.

While this new concept did not match the original intent, the idea of a group trying to be something that they were not lent a certain charm and seemed to fit the overall show narrative. I think, however, my decision was truly built on a fear that I brought with me into the process of micro-managing the designers. In past production experiences, the majority of design decisions had rested squarely on me, and so, in entering this process, I felt it was important to guard myself against instantly turning down an idea just because it did not match what I had presupposed. While this distressed-circus look did not quite feel right, I was very nervous about becoming judgmental and prejudiced against any idea that was not my own. Emphasizing that costume pieces should steer clear of sequins and flashiness, capturing some of the pathetic quality of the Houdini photograph, I left for the summer break having approved the basic performance troupe costume plot.

Although I am unhappy it took me so long to recognize my mistake, I am nonetheless glad that I eventually saw the need to change the design. These circus-like costumes risked making the ensemble seem like professional performers, when what the ensemble needed to be were average people intently focused on creating a performance. It was with this discovery that I returned to Texas, having decided the changes were absolutely necessary for a production of *Shipwrecked!* to successfully communicate Margulies's themes. I spoke with the designer and explained that, while I had agreed to the current proposal and we had passed the due date for completed preliminary designs, I strongly felt the success of the production required returning to the original vision of the show. Although extremely accommodating, her first reaction was tempered by considerable—and understandable—fear toward creating an entirely new design so close

to the beginning of rehearsals. Complicating this, she felt one of the benefits of the circus-style costumes was how inexpensive they would be to make, and any new design was unlikely to be as affordable. Her worries were quickly ameliorated, however, when I laid out exactly what I had in mind. I did not want to create a traditional design and build scenario for this show, but rather wanted a world of clothes onstage that—while generally complimenting each other in era, silhouette, and color palette—expressed a diversity of crafter, origin, age, and taste. All aspects of the costume plot needed to belong to the same world, but not to such an extent that they felt “planned.” To achieve this, I suggested moving the design to an almost entirely “pulled show,” in which as many costumes as possible would be used from the theatre’s existing stock. This not only meant requiring far less new design work and rendering, but also fewer tasks for the costume shop and much lower budget needs. We researched pictures of refugees, of port side musicians, of Yiddish, Klezmer, and Roma/Gypsy musicians, and quickly saw how well this hodge podge costuming scheme could work.



Fig 3.11. “Tabor Orchestra, 1900,” *Gypsy Electronic Journal*, accessed 1 August 2013, [http://svenko.net/costume/street\\_1.htm](http://svenko.net/costume/street_1.htm).



Instead of the standard design process, the costume designer suggested she and I schedule trips to the theatre's costume stock room to explore and pull clothing pieces together. This process allowed for an extremely efficient method of fine-tuning our joint-aesthetic, as we were able to provide instant feedback to each newly discovered item of clothing. By utilizing this method of design, the production was left with plenty of time and budget to purchase or build any items not found in stock. After the play was cast, a costume plot was developed that truly fit the production concept, came in under budget, and ultimately captured both of our visions (see fig 3.12 and 3.13).

Not every item, of course, was pulled from stock. For example, de Rougemont's look was deemed too important to accept any of the concessions that would have been made necessary by pulling, and so the designer located and ordered a suit online (See figure 3.14). Even his costume, however, included a vest, shirt, hat, and sock garters pulled directly from stock, saving considerable time and money. These savings allowed for a greater degree of flexibility and higher aesthetic standards for the ensemble's footwear than may have otherwise been possible, as well as extra funds being available to purchase a number of raw silk scarves to be used as both costume and hand props.

Despite the schedule set-back surrounding the break, overall the costume process went smoothly, with pieces provided to the actors well-ahead of dress rehearsals and designed to fit into the overall production concept and aesthetic. Timing did not work as smoothly, however, when it came to the construction and delivery of the production's puppetry needs. This was especially problematic since, besides shoes and odd-fitting garments, it was arguably far more important to give the actors rehearsal time with the puppets than with their finalized costumes. The faculty designer had taken on the design



Fig 3.12. Actress in pulled costume



Fig 3.13. Actor in pulled costume



Fig 3.14. Actor cast as Louis de Rougemont in costume

and construction of “Bobo,” a true-to-scale puppet of a small boy (see figure 3.15), whose movement was based extremely loosely on the Japanese Bunraku style, while one of the student designers was assigned the creation of “Queen Victoria” (See figure 3.16), a large backpack puppet with papier-mâché head, reminiscent of the style made famous in part by Vermont’s Bread and Puppet Theatre, and popularly used in many street fairs, parades, and protest marches around the world.

Unlike many hand-props, in which a stand-in rehearsal prop may be used until the beginning of technical rehearsals, puppets demand a familiarity with their exact weight, movement, and physical characteristics. The puppeteer needs time to successfully animate the puppet in a manner that suggests to an audience that the armature is “alive.” Unfortunately, both puppets were the last items the designers completed, leaving the cast



Fig 3.15. “Bobo” puppet with designer. In keeping with the design aesthetic of the show, the life-sized puppet of a young boy was constructed from brown paper and extra cloth originally pulled for other show uses. (also see fig A.12)



Fig 3.16. “Queen Victoria” puppet with designer. (also see fig. A.13)

struggling to learn how to manipulate and perform with the puppets long after the production's technical rehearsals had begun.

On reflection, I believe this too was a matter of poor communication on my part. First, I had never set a deadline to receive the puppets, but rather assumed that, since the designer had worked with puppets before, she would be well aware of the timing needs. More importantly, when the puppets did not appear in a timely manner, I chose to passively “hint” at their lateness, rather than directly addressing the problem.

As disappointing as the timing of this aspect of the design was, however, the costume collaboration remained an overall success. Despite a major design change introduced well into the process, the costume plot itself was completed on time, built under budget, and successfully captured the visual needs of the production. The collaboration remained friendly, criticisms and disagreements were few, and the costume design proved to be one of the more admirable aspects of the final production.

### *Hair and Make-up Design*

Partnered with and complementing the work by the costume department, hair and make-up designs were handled by a student designer and developed around the same general aesthetic principles. The collaboration began with a very friendly and spirited atmosphere built over several strong brain-storming sessions. In keeping within the production's “poor theatre” framework and holding to many of the anti-illusionary principles championed by Bertolt Brecht, we agreed to neither age the characters nor allow the actors their usual process of utilizing make-up and hairspray for the purpose of making themselves look more “attractive.” Instead, all the male actors who were able were encouraged to grow out their facial hair in as bushy a manner as possible, and all

women with naturally curly or frizzy hair were encouraged to skip any usual straightening treatments. Furthermore, any facial make-up was to be carefully crafted by the designer to emphasize, rather than minimize, each actor's unique physical features. Other than when done to create certain character effects, both fashion and basic stage make-up tend to minimize or emphasize a performer's facial features to bring the wearer closer to a societally-fashionable "ideal" beauty. *Shipwrecked!*'s design concept suggested the opposite. Noting that some make-up is necessary to avoid being completely washed-out by the stage lights, it was important to create a look which would not only avoid appearing made-up, but would boldly announce the (seeming) lack of make-up by emphasizing those features make-up traditional obscures. The designer was given the task to study each actor, find the facial characteristics that made each unique, and then gently emphasize those qualities so as to capture a "no make-up" look under the lights.

Additionally, the production called for two moments of overt make-up effects; the first being the application of a clay-based make-up to both de Rougemont and his dog by the aboriginal tribe. The second—stumbled upon over two-thirds of the way into the rehearsal process—was a staging moment I suggested for the epilogue in which de Rougemont would finger-brush baby powder into his hair in front of the audience. This suggested his age during the last moments of the performance, while the unhidden action of him applying this make-up also, in a technique keeping with Brechtian staging techniques, reminded the audience of the manufactured nature of the entire production.

### *Lighting Design*

Because lighting design is one of the last technical aspects of a show to be added into rehearsals at Baylor University, the collaboration insists on faith and collegial trust

that each collaborator is working toward a shared vision, rather than individual interpretation. While changes can be made early in the technical rehearsals, a full re-hang or reprogramming would be a considerable undertaking. As such, during the many weeks of build before the lighting process begins, it is hoped that the director and lighting designer are able to work out the majority of their needs and aesthetic design plans. In the case of *Shipwrecked!*, several meetings had been held regarding the “poor theatre” concept of the show, and the desire to not create any quality of “magic” artifice. When technical rehearsals began, however, the design was far more complicated than the concept called for and, while visibly pleasing, failed to achieve the Brechtian goals referred to in earlier design discussions. Instead, the lighting design came closer to the costume designer’s original thoughts on the beauty of “dream” plays. I was able to communicate this fear, and the designer agreed to make changes without dispute. However, the reality of lighting design is that as much as changes are able to be made substantially quicker than in scenic or costume design, re-positioning and re-programming is far from instantaneous. While a few minor cues were able to be reprogrammed on the spot, most concerns fell to an agreement that issues would be worked on during the intervening non-rehearsal hours, with the results considered at the following evening’s run. This process repeated, as the first set of changes were positive, but did not go far enough, until eventually there were several days in which small improvements appeared at every rehearsal. Had there been several more technical nights before opening, the design may have been able to finally reach the emphatically-theatrical, clearly presentational look the concept called for. Unfortunately, as little time as was available, the schedule for changes became even tighter. During this last period of

rehearsals, I was alerted that a member of my immediate family had been placed in hospice, and likely did not have long to live. After careful discussion with the graduate department, the decision was made to leave rehearsals and travel out of state. Although cast, faculty, and production team alike were able to cover my absence, working with professionalism, kindness, and generosity of spirit, these missing days did put adjustments to lighting on hold. As it appeared neither the designer nor the directing mentor felt as adamantly about what I saw as a strongly problematic departure from the production concept, I felt it would be both inappropriate and potentially counter-productive to ask them to continue trying to fix it in my absence.

It does not do, however, to overstate the problem. In fact, arguably, the designer achieved the playwright's stated request of an "unsparingly gorgeous" design far better than the aesthetic the directorial concept imagined for the production. In terms of being aesthetically pleasing, the designer's work was unimpeachable, and many of the specific ideas requested in meetings were present. It remained, however, "magical"—and while such an adjective is a compliment in most theatrical settings, I still hold that this production wanted something different.

For example, it was decided that spot light operators would be lit, so as to always remind the audience of their presence and make it clear that the lights following de Rougemont did so because he paid two people to move them, rather than through the "magic of theatre." Just as Brecht called for exposed lighting instruments so as to eliminate illusion, it was hoped that lighting the technicians—seen above the audience and in period costume—would help solidify the production's reality as "a show in a theatre," and help expand the performance space to above the audience's head. Instead,



the lighting of the two was so subtle that it could be easily confused for ambient spill from work lights that the audience was meant to ignore, no different than exit signs in theatres and cinemas which modern audiences have learned to tune out.

Similarly, lengthy conversations were had about creating flashes of lightning in a way that would announce the actual act of creating the special effect. This conversation reached its most exciting when an idea emerged, involving the aforementioned follow-spot operators simulating lighting by setting off old camera-flash style flash pots, complete with their distinctive “pop” sound and tendrils of smoke. Though the idea was abandoned when the department technical director deemed it a fire hazard, the designer agreed that the aesthetic principle was sound. It was therefore disappointing when fairly traditional lighting effects were being used during technical rehearsals to represent the storm. The result was very impressive lightning that arguably helped the audience believe they were in a storm at sea, and thus fulfilled the goal of the vast majority of design concepts. To help the audience slip into suspension of disbelief was, however, contrary to this production’s concept and goals. These moments, several other similar decisions, and the general beauty of the colored washes meant that much of the lighting for *Shipwrecked!* was expertly and crowd-pleasingly beautiful, yet counter to what the production concept called for.

### *Prop Design and Management*

Prop design on *Shipwrecked!* was one of the more unusual aspects of both the design process and production team division of labor. In most productions, the job of the props department is fairly clear: find or build hand props as called for in the script. *Shipwrecked!*, however, operated quite differently. First, with very few exceptions, props

tended not to be used as what they actually were. A bottle first became a fish, and later a boat; scarves became tunics, marriage ceremony binding chords, and the roof of a hut; lanterns became stars, an octopus's eyes, and a projector. In many cases, finding props became less about seeking verisimilitude with the object being represented, and more about finding simple shapes made out of natural materials that the performers could manipulate during the production. In many cases, however, the prop needs required an interdisciplinary approach, involving designers in unique and exciting ways, and shifting the job description of the head of props to include a far greater degree of delegation and coordination, all the while still accomplishing the more traditional prop-hunting responsibilities of tracking down a stuffed dog, a book, or a basket.

In the case of the trunks, which could fit almost as neatly under the category of "set" as they do "props," this meant coordination with the stage manager, the scenic designer, and the scene shop supervisor. As the trunks had very specific needs in terms of size, shape, stability, weight, content space, and aesthetic appearance, the props manager worked closely with the stage manager to ensure these needs were met, sometimes through pulling existing trunks from storage and painting/adapting them herself or with help from the scene shop, and sometimes through coordinating their construction with the scenic designer and the technical director.

To provide the lanterns, the props master worked closely with both lighting technicians and the scene shop, arranging for nine individual lanterns to be built. Each lantern was meant to match the general aesthetics of the show and provide enough light to create the effect of stars, octopus eyes, and, in one case, a lantern. Though the original hope was to find nine appropriate looking lamps for purchase and adapt them, budget

concerns on the part of the technical director rerouted this plan to construction. In retrospect, I do strongly wish the design of these had been handled by the scenic designer rather than directly by the shop, as their final construction—while certainly a quicker and cheaper build than something more ornamental would have been—was so simple that they suggested rural, unskilled hands, rather than lanterns used onboard a nineteenth century sailing ship. As the scenic designer’s schedule had become complicated, leaving little room for additional projects, the task of building the lanterns was left to the scenic construction team.

Overall, *Shipwrecked!* taxed its props manager far more than the average production, but was fortunate to have a person in the position that was up to the challenge. Repeatedly, despite last-minute ideas and needs from the director, delayed shipping schedules, and racing deadlines, the props manager proved ready to work and dedicated to creating the strongest production possible.

### *Music and Sound Design*

As unusual as the props management process was, music and sound design arguably deserves the title of most experimental process. The vast number of settings and environments called for by the script created an opportunity for a large number of sound effects and soundscapes so as to help set the scene. A faculty sound designer had signed up for the process, assuming he would be responsible for providing recorded music and sound effects; as such, he was justifiably surprised when I informed him that there would be absolutely no recording technology used. Instead, all music, sound effects, announcements, etc., would be handled as “live Foley,” that is, as sound effects created live and in real time through analog means, whether produced by vocal effects, banging

two found objects together, or an infinite array of possibilities in-between. In these early conversations with the sound designer, details remained intentionally vague, as the sound effects that would be used were to be based partially on the talents of the as-of-yet unknown cast.

In addition to sound effects, the presentational nature of the *Shipwrecked!* is extremely well-suited to music, as seen in the original South Coast Repertory and Broadway stagings. Original plans for the Baylor production included casting actors who could also play instruments, so that during certain moments of the play they could retrieve their instruments and provide the underscoring, while moments of sound effects would be handled by any and all cast members as needed.

These original music plans did not last long, however, as I early planning work began on many of the most important and/or spectacle-heavy moments of the script. The octopus attack, the turtle finale, while seeming most in need of music, sound effects, or both, also represented moments in which I did not want to spare a single ensemble member to create these sounds. As such, I realized that the production would be far better served by having dedicated musicians, rather than actors trying to squeeze in music while busily sprinting around the stage. The decision to cast people specifically for music and sound needs had three additional effects on the production. First, it meant that, rather than occasional music, it would be absolutely practical to create underscoring beneath the majority of the production. Second, it meant that, with these performers concentrating on sound, the majority of the Foley needs could be assigned to them as well, allowing for more complex effects and freeing up the actors from worrying about this task. Finally, as these performers would not be part of the general ensemble, I was able to cast them

primarily on their musical talent and collaborative natures, without being limited to performers who could also serve the acting needs of the ensemble.

With music composition and directing the musicians a far larger task than originally assumed, I reached out to Baylor Theatre's musical faculty members. They agreed that it was appropriate that I hand off these responsibilities, and one agreed to join the production team as composer and music director. In discussions with the sound designer, it was decided the three of us would work collaboratively on the overall design and process, with each overseeing specific tasks. The music director would be responsible for composing musical themes, as well as rehearsing the musicians. The sound designer would work with the musicians to create sound effects, whether utilizing their musical instruments, found items, or, if needed, new sound effect/musical instruments that he would build. Finally, I would stay heavily involved throughout both processes and in rehearsal to help the musicians create the timing and placement of the various sounds and soundscapes, as well as provide instruction and feedback to both the music director and sound designer as to what was and was not working during rehearsals. Additionally, as these musical/Foley artists—"Buskers," as they were soon to be titled—were going to accomplish their tasks in full view of the audience, it was my responsibility to make sure their performance not only sounded wonderful, but was enjoyable to watch as well.

In discussing and planning the compositions, I expressed my interest in music that called to mind similarly skilled-amateur artists, rather than the professional and polished chambers of classical music. Sea-faring bands, street musicians, and Yiddish music were discussed and integrated into the overall musical aesthetic. Similarly, discussions with the

sound designer focused on the need to create the feeling of homemade sound effects, rather than necessarily creating the most realistic sound possible. As I stated in one sound meeting about creating the sound of wind, “we don’t need the wind machine to sound exactly like wind ... we need the wind machine to sound like a wind machine!”

While the audition process is discussed in detail in Chapter Four, it is worth noting our team’s expectations coming out of the casting process, and how they changed over time. While the music director would be providing them with guidance, our team realized that a great deal of responsibility would still sit directly on the Buskers’s shoulders. Going into auditions, we realized that three Buskers would be needed: one to provide single-note melodies (ex., clarinet, violin, flute, trumpet, etc.), one with an instrument that could supply the “body” of the music through polyphonic chords (ex., guitar, banjo, accordion, autoharp, etc.), and one to supply rhythmic percussion (ex., drums, blocks, etc.). It was reasoned that, as long as an auditioner was an extremely strong musician, they could be relied on to act as band leader, and—like a dance captain in a musical comedy—provide the necessary pressure and side-coaching for the other two in order to deliver the best product possible. During the auditions, the melody player (a violinist) proved an extremely competent musician, and so it was assumed he could provide some grounding to the three. Meanwhile, one performer auditioned showing great amounts of creativity and enthusiasm in a presentation built around creating textured soundscapes out of found objects. Just as the violinist seemed a perfect team captain, this student seemed ideal to lead the sound effects efforts. This only left the polyphonic player—a guitarist—without such leadership responsibilities. However, as the

musician in question communicated that she was fairly new at the instrument, it was assumed this was for the best.

Over the course of rehearsals, however, these leadership positions changed dramatically. While the violinist was extremely skilled at his instrument, he was unable to successfully foresee the musical needs of a given moment, admitting toward the end of the rehearsal process that he had very little experience with musical settings that did not depend on strictly following a written musical score. Meanwhile, the student chosen to lead sound effects and provide percussion showed repeated difficulties with the social aspects of leadership, and—while extremely creative at sound effects—lacked a thorough understanding of creating structural percussion. It was, instead, the guitarist who not only proved resourceful and talented, but also the cast member most intuitively understood the aesthetic needs of the production. Repeatedly, she was quickest to discover the same challenges and opportunities that I was reacting to, and was often able to immediately react with concept-appropriate work. Thus, despite not being the most experienced instrumentalist, she quickly earned the title of “band leader.” While the music director, the sound director, and I all contributed creatively to the Buskers’ performance, it was largely the guitar player’s leadership that built up the group to the level of performance and synchronicity with the play’s plot and emotional experiences that was necessary.

As the rehearsal process continued, the Buskers continued to benefit from the guidance of the music director, though needed his direct involvement less and less. As he had created a number of musical motifs associated with different emotions (see Appendix B), the Buskers were able to utilize these musical puzzle pieces several ways, connecting them to thematic cues. The pastoral melody established early in the production as the

“Mother’s Theme,” connecting with de Rougemont’s descriptions of his “saintly mother,” could in turn make numerous appearances throughout the show—sometimes cheerfully, sometimes mournfully—in an infinite number of dynamic, tempo, volume, pitch, and other changes. When de Rougemont thought sadly of home, this “Mother’s Theme” could be sadly played beneath in a somber tone, whereas when de Rougemont triumphantly boarded a ship for a return voyage home, the same piece could be played with sweeping grandeur. By providing such motifs, the music director had given the Buskers the tools necessary to create a score for the entirety of the production, and the guitarist provided the leadership and organization to put those tools to work.

As the production progressed, the sound designer worked with the technical director and scene shop to create the proper acoustics around the Buskers’ playing area and various sound effect items, including a thunder sheet and a wind machine. He, the music director, and I would take turns sitting in various seats throughout the theatre audience, determining sound levels and helping to correct imbalances. Although we could never find a way to master the balance as well as had we may have using recordings, speakers, and volume knobs, we still discovered many physical methods to manipulate the acoustics of the space and the instruments, eventually overcome various volume issues and generally creating a well-balanced production. Most importantly, by building, buying, or borrowing instruments and sound effects that fit the era and concept, by creating musical motifs that fit the era and mood, and by performing the music in a style which suggested enthusiasm and skill, but always kept “professionalism” and “polish” at bay, the sound and music design strongly fulfilled the concept of the production, and proved one of the great highlights of the performances.



### *Conclusion*

Bringing together a group of artistic individuals who each have their own skill sets and aesthetic temperaments in an attempt to produce a unified vision is always tricky. Though the process on *Shipwrecked!* was certainly not without its challenges and frustrations, I strongly feel it was far smoother than many productions I have been a part of. For my part, the technical director's suggestion that I work on being much clearer about exactly what I want has been taken very much to heart, and it is not difficult to see how many of the problems during the design phase could likely have been avoided had I not allowed my desire to remain respectful and "open" morph into a lack of clarity regarding specific needs of the production. Still, I believe the final product achieved a particularly impressive level of success, feeling unified, aesthetically pleasing, and visually engaging.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Rehearsal Process

#### *Introduction*

*Shipwrecked!*'s production concept was designed to be performer-centric, in which the acting ensemble itself was to create much of the scenic and auditory wonder of the show. As such, any consideration of the production's development necessarily demands close attention to the rehearsal process. From careful casting to actor exercises to rehearsals, the relationship between director and performers proved a complex and often joyous experience. This chapter will explore the rehearsal process—from casting to dress rehearsals—undertaken during the weeks leading up to *Shipwrecked!*'s opening night, with an emphasis on how casting, exercises, staging, and acting coaching reflected and expanded upon the directorial concept of the production.

#### *Establishing Casting Needs*

As previously discussed, *Shipwrecked!* presents an uncommon casting challenge and opportunity for directors. Unlike many scripts, *Shipwrecked!* does not have a standard or “correct” cast size. The decision to include a larger ensemble was made even before pitching the show to the department, and was based largely on the production concept's need for the actors to “build” their own world. While realizing that a single actor can do things to suggest the atmosphere around them, a group of performers—especially when armed with adaptable hand props and some basic movement training—has infinitely more options. Early stages of the octopus design called for eight performers

(plus de Rougemont and Bruno as witnesses), suggesting a base ensemble of nine actors in plus the actor portraying Louis de Rougemont. Additionally, the Baylor University Theatre production's decision to cast three performers as musician/Foley artists brought the total cast number up to twelve.

In preparing for auditions, it was essential to determine desirable qualities in potential cast members. Relying on the presentational and meta-theatrical nature of the production, there was little need for physical verisimilitude in casting the various characters within de Rougemont's story. Since each actor cast in *Shipwrecked!* would be, first and foremost, portraying a performer (who is, in turn, playing several characters), the emphasis was on casting performers rather than on casting mothers and sea captains. This meant that concerns regarding gender, race, and body type were severely muted, while the demand for ease with audience interaction and the ability to work together as an ensemble increased dramatically. Due to the ensemble-devised nature of the staging plans and the need to assess actors' ability to be creative, take risks, and break from Stanislavski-derivative performance styles, a creative approach to auditions was required.

With these needs in mind, auditions were set to occur over three days, each round focusing on very specific goals. The first day of the three days was designed to consider the ability of actors to engage an audience through direct address while simultaneously establishing their atmospheric given circumstances. The second day was designed to explore group/ensemble creation of atmospheric soundscapes, the teamwork and creativity involved in the process, and the ingenuity required to use a physical item/prop for a purpose not previously intended. Finally, while the third round of auditions did include a small number of call-back monologues, its primary structure revolved around

improvisational games and group exercises so as to elicit an idea of how the actors communicated and related to their fellow performers. Achieving these tasks, of course, took careful planning.

Most importantly, the auditions needed to convey a sense of what the rehearsal process would be like. It was clear that creating the production would require actors to take a greater ownership over staging than many of them would likely be accustomed. Although the production would have a preexisting text to work with, the interpretation and physical embodiment of that text encouraged a greater degree of group creativity and innovation than most. As such, discovering which actors responded to this relationship with a sense of excitement and freedom rather than withdrawing or fearing the process would necessarily become a major factor in casting.

The first round was additionally complicated by its status as a “cattle call” audition, meaning every Baylor University performance major in the freshman, sophomore, and junior classes, as well as a great number of seniors, would need to be seen within a reasonably short amount of time. To deal with time limitations, short monologues which capitalized on direct address and relationship to atmosphere were carefully selected and provided as the mandated audition material. This strategy proved successful, as it kept auditions short and ensured that questions regarding an actor’s abilities wouldn’t be complicated by material choice. The chosen monologues helped to move auditioners quickly through the room while providing a clear line between those who used the opportunity to connect with the audience and those who felt compelled to retain a characteristically “realistic” distance.

Those selected from this first round of auditions were then invited to day two. This day began with a short round of musical instrument auditions in an effort to cast the so-called “Busker” roles—that is, the trio of musician/Foley artists that would perform throughout the production. Musicians were invited to perform a short piece of music of their choosing, followed by prompts from the creative team to create certain sound effects or moods with their instruments. The goal going into these Busker auditions was to find a melodic, a polyphonic, and a rhythmic player—essentially covering the melody, the accompaniment, and the rhythm of any music the production should need. Happily, the audition showcased enough talented musicians that the creative team was able, in the end, to pick a trio of talented musicians, including a violinist (melodic), a guitarist (polyphonic), and a performer who specialized in various percussive sound effects (rhythmic). The musical portion was followed by an exercise in which students performed pre-planned soundscape group presentations. These inventive and creative auditions proved extremely useful, as they not only showcased actors’ ability to collaborate, but suggested the depth and ingenuity which a performer was likely to bring to the rehearsal process. Because the performers were welcome to come up with any scenario they chose, there was a great range of scenarios and sound effects presented. While many groups focused on loud, distracting, somewhat obvious noises (car horns, alarm clocks, etc.), others stood out with discoveries of unexpected sounds or methods of reproduction. Through careful observation of the ideas groups presented and the cooperative spirit members of groups brought to their performance, it was possible to make further determinations regarding which auditioners should be invited to the third round and final round of auditions.

As noted, day three began with a series of monologues for those auditioning for de Rougemont, as well as several scenes to introduce the characters of Bruno, the Captain, Yamba, and Fitzgerald. These readings soon gave way, however, to a series of improvisational games and exercises designed to highlight both the performers' ability to be creative and their ability to play off one another for the benefit of the scene. This process was extremely useful in exposing those actors who turned to "upstaging" and pulling focus. Since *Shipwrecked!*'s ensemble requires an ability to work as a tight-knit group, those auditioners who left room for their fellow actors to perform and generally worked in a manner commonly referred to as being a "generous actor" were the ones who made up the final list of potential actors. The last round of cuts, handled in consultation with two professors, resulted in a final cast of students who, for the most part, exhibited excitement regarding the style, had shown a true sense of "play" during the auditions, and had proven throughout their time at Baylor to be hard working and conscientious. The cast was swiftly announced, and rehearsals were set to begin.

### *Rehearsals*

The unusual nature of Margulies's script called for an equally unusual approach to beginning the rehearsal process. The first rehearsal commonly begins with a "read through," at which all the actors sit together and read through the entire script, thereby giving them all a sense of each other's "voices" (both literally and metaphorically) in the character roles. This read through is then often followed by beginning discussions regarding major plot points, character analysis, or other script-driven concerns. This standard process asserts the script as the primary foundation of a production, and centers the actors' attention on the playwright's work.

In the case of *Shipwrecked!*, Margulies leaves so much up to the imagination and interpretation of the director, actors, and creative team, that the rehearsal process benefited from devoting more attention to the performative elements of the work. As such, the actors' physical embodiment of the text, rather than the text itself, claimed primary focus on the first day. Whereas the actual production would require all actors to be onstage throughout the performance and actively involved in the majority of scenes, a read through of the script threatened to give the ensemble a false impression that de Rougemont was the sole character in the play. Since establishing ensemble morale and camaraderie early in the process was an important goal for ensuring a strong rehearsal process, such a de Rougemont-centric approach was unacceptable. Instead, the first rehearsal explored the underwater scene, in which de Rougemont and Bruno are meant to swim underwater, witnessing the various ocean life and beautiful geography that exists below the waves. The actors were encouraged to brainstorm what creatures might be seen below, and begin finding ways of manipulating their bodies and various seemingly-unrelated hand props to create those images. The cast also began experimenting with ways to have de Rougemont and Bruno "swim" by trying a number of different lifts. As more lifts were tried, actors with expertise in cheerleading, martial arts, and even circus skills stepped forward, and the collaboratively creative structure began to take shape. Instead of the strongly dictatorial framework of many productions in which a cast follows the instructions of a director, this was meant to be a collaborative and engaged process which would be steered and led, though not forced, by a director/coach. The result was a safe lift that was determined based on the actors' own comfort levels. The approach gave the cast a sense of ownership of the play's staging from the very first day of rehearsal.



Fig 4.1. Rather than a table read, the cast experimented with lifts to portray underwater “swimming” at the first day of rehearsals.

The next two rehearsals were approached with the intention of locking in this creativity and sense of teamwork. Instead of jumping into staging scenes or considering the text, these rehearsals focused on actors discovering ways to bodily communicate the atmospheric conditions around them. This was accomplished through a process in which a cast member was selected to stand apart from the others and announce a physical location that echoed some aspect of the script (on a boat, underwater, on an island, in the city, etc.). All remaining actors would then “create” the announced setting on stage, utilizing nothing beyond their own bodies. As expected, this skill did not come quickly. Many actors began by attempting to “show” the imaginary audience where they were through pantomimed actions and storytelling. During these early stumbles, clown and



movement coach Avner Eisenberg's mantra, "Be interested, not interesting" proved extremely useful. When an actor became too "showy," a simple reminder to "be interested, not interesting" would recalibrate their actions. They would cease attempting to "show" the audience what they were doing, and instead become fixated with the act of doing it. The more this occurred, the richer the scenes became. Soon, actors were finding the rhythm of the wind or the roll of the sea, rather than just fixating on playing a pirate walking the plank.

As their skills and comfort grew, actors leading the exercise were asked to stand outside of the action and call out changes to the surroundings. Once, a rainstorm would visit the city, becoming a downpour, and eventually easing up again. Another time, a serene underwater location was momentarily disturbed by the arrival of human divers, but soon settled back into its peaceful norm. As the "outside" actor would call out these changes, the actors onstage would—without any lines or miming props—engage with the world around them, and even become that world themselves. The process proved so useful and enjoyable that the activity was instituted as the warm-up to occur before every rehearsal. With each new day, a new cast member was asked to lead the exercise. This decision not only ensured that they were in a creative mindset by the time we got to staging, but also meant that every cast member would be a leader at one point or another, and that all the actors could expand their usual rehearsal experience to allow everyone to share a part in the direction and staging.

Following the daily warm-ups, the bulk of early rehearsals turned to staging the production and experimenting with blocking. While some staging processes rely on pre-planned blocking, *Shipwrecked!* rehearsals approached every day's blocking as an

improvised series of tableaux. With the occasional aid of a student movement coach and under the coaching and organization of the director, the ensemble discovered physical portrayals of cities, ship decks, and tribal communities. As a scene's initial blocking leapfrogged from tableau to tableau, the rehearsal would begin to fill up with a series of well-defined moments. By rehearsal's end, an attempt to perform all the dialogue would help the ensemble move through the various moments, connecting them in ways that both emerged from the preceding tableau and naturally flowed into and supported the next.

These improvised and ensemble-devised methods made up over a third of the rehearsal process, and repeatedly resulted in exciting and energetic rehearsals. This enthusiasm, however, became more difficult to call upon once rehearsals moved into the next phase of the process. Although vital to a smoothly-running production, repeatedly working material can be taxing on the energy and moral of any cast. In the case of *Shipwrecked!*, the fact that early rehearsals had achieved such an unusually high level of vitality meant that, as the production moved away from the improvisational and toward the repetitive, the drop-off in enthusiasm had that much further to fall. After two rehearsals feeling this lack of excitement, two important changes were made to the day-to-day routine. First, the original warm-up activity, while proven useful, had become stale and in many ways lost its connection to the daily work being done. This invited new warm-up activities to be introduced, moving from the broad-based improvisation of the atmospheric work into specific, focused exercises that demanded concentration and exactitude. The second important change came when the second half of two consecutive days of scheduled reworking were traded for workshops in the techniques of Flash Theatre.

Flash Theatre is a physical theatre-based form of storytelling, devised and promoted by performing artist Julie Goell. Combining aspects of traditional storytelling, clowning, and Montanaro-style mime, it asks performers to, through direct address, perform a story without transitions, jumping from high point to high point (hence the “Flash” in the title), while utilizing a number of very specific and highly stylized physical theatre, clowning, and mime techniques. By its nature it demands the energy of improvisation, but quickly falls apart without extremely clear and specific techniques utilized by the story teller. In this way, Flash Theatre ties back to the performance concept of the production. It is inherently “handmade” and performer-centric in a clear “poor theatre” manner, and is based in art forms (clowning and mime) which are often popularly derided as “lesser” arts; yet it demands a specificity and skill in its performance that demands audience attention and appreciation. Further, like *Shipwrecked!* itself, it is a sort of “greatest hits” storytelling, rather than an attempt at realistic portrayals of passing time. An exciting moment happens, followed by another, followed by another, creating peak after peak with no opportunities for natural valleys to form in-between. While such a progression could never be sustained over a full production, Flash Theatre’s short burst structure allows for great excitement and specificity in a very short amount of time.

This methodology was first introduced in the second half of a moderately low-energy rehearsal. Actors were put into groups, and asked to perform a Flash Theatre rendition of one of the group member’s day. Through this initial exercise, the group learned the process and technique behind the style, and received a much-needed dose of energy. It was at the next rehearsal, however, that the exercise was to be put to its full use. The actors were once again gathered into groups, though this time were instructed to

create a Flash Theatre performance examining one of the “hidden” moments of the *Shipwrecked!* text, referring to any moment that is alluded to within the storyline, but not seen onstage. Examples the actors came up with included Captain Jensen’s fight within the bar leading to the scene in the script in which de Rougemont meets the Captain as he is tossed out by the barkeeper, as well as Yamba, Bobo, and Gunda’s turtle hunting trip that resulted in their being marooned on the island. This activity created multiple benefits for the rehearsal process. First, it provided a fun and creative distraction after days of repetition. Second, it put the actors back into the role of world-creation, and forced them to re-focus on carefully portraying atmosphere and situation; several of the ideas created for these scenes were even appropriated and included in the performance run. Third, it introduced a back-story component to several of de Rougemont’s characters which had not yet been explored, giving those performers an additional window into the characters they were portraying. Finally, due to the “no spoken narration” rule I had put forward, the scenes demanded precision and a specificity of movement that played directly into the needs of the production overall. By taking this time out of traditional rehearsal work, the ensemble was able to achieve a far greater reward for its time.

Throughout these physical and script-based rehearsals, the three “Buskers” were also hard at work. In a hierarchy that was never established with finality, and yet largely worked nonetheless, the three musician/Foley artists worked collaboratively with one another, with the sound designer, and with the music composer and director, all the while keeping up with the production’s staging directions. Utilizing the composer’s creations, the three created numerous variations to elicit moods and moments as called for during staging, while integrating the sound effects and auditorium balance needs as suggested by

the sound designer. Though cast as a trio of equal status, it was originally assumed by director and music director alike that the violinist, having the most experience, would assume a leadership role with the music, the sound effects performer would help the others with those skills, and the guitarist, being the least experienced, would work to fill in and keep up. Within the first couple of weeks, the folly of this assumption was clear. The guitarist, while the least experienced, proved extremely adept at understanding the role of music and sound effects in the overall rhythm of the text, and showed superior leadership skills in aiding the other two Buskers in their process. Though each were gifted at their specific task, it was the guitarist who understood how to blend these gifts together and with the production as a whole. Although there was some temporary tension surrounding the unspoken shift of power, it seemed all three quickly realized they were better off with a strong leader, and by mid-way through the rehearsal process, they were working together to create soundscapes and musical interludes to the great betterment of the production.

The continuing problem faced by the Buskers was that of balance. The set design had placed them right beside some audience members, and quite distant from others; and yet, the Busker's music and sound effects needed to be loud enough to be heard by everyone in the room, and soft enough to not drown out the actors' lines, even for those audience members sitting right behind them. A great deal of time was spent with director, music director, and sound designer all sitting in various spots around the Mabee Theatre, calling out directions of "louder" and "softer" to attempt a perfect balance. Mutes were tried, carpeting was installed, and different methods of playing were experimented with to find the needed adjustments. In the end, the balance proved appropriate for the

majority of the performance, though the storm scene, in which the Buskers needed to simultaneously be loud enough to portray a convincing and scary storm as well as be subdued enough to allow de Rougemont's lines to easily carry, never fully found its way to a solution. Nevertheless, the overall balance of Busker-to-actor-voice balance appeared to work well, with the only complaint coming from a few people sitting in the very first row behind the Buskers during an early performance.

As noted in chapter three, one of the few long-standing frustrations of the rehearsal process was the delay in working with several technical elements, including the Queen Victoria and Bobo puppets. As tech rehearsals began, considerable attention was given to providing crash-course puppetry training for the puppeteers. The actor playing Queen Victoria was, unfortunately, permanently hampered by design flaws which made getting into and out of the full-body puppet awkward and time-consuming, as well as by the puppet head's tendency to tilt and its arms to twist. As such, simply accomplishing the scene took a great deal of control; under the circumstances, it was impressive that that the actor was able to do as much with the character as he did. The actress portraying Bobo, on the other hand, faced far fewer complications. Upon first manipulating Bobo, there was a defining difference between puppet and puppeteer, and it served as little more than a prop. However, in the third or fourth attempted crash-course workshop, she embraced the ideas of never allowing the puppet to stop moving ("a still puppet is a dead puppet"), and discovered that, by holding the puppet against her torso, it would naturally raise and lower with her ribcage, thus appearing to "breathe" along with her. This simple addition—breathing together—seemed to connect the actress with her puppet on a fundamental level, and by the next rehearsal, every action was mirrored between

puppeteer and puppet, resulting in an extremely impressive manipulation and performance that showed no evidence of the limited time available for rehearsal.

Beyond these concerns, technical rehearsals proved a relatively smooth affair. Two faculty members expressed concern that the lead was continuing to work on memorization into tech—long after the standard deadline for being fully memorized. That said, due to the unusual amount of memorization expected of him—noted by the chair of Baylor’s department as likely the most any actor had been asked to memorize during his tenure at the university—coupled with the actor’s consistent improvement from one rehearsal to the next, any additional pressure on him felt potentially counter-productive. As such, he was allowed the extra time for memorization, and was fully off-book in time for the final round of dress rehearsals. Meanwhile, visits from professors to rehearsals resulted in additional notes and insights, many of which were either directly implemented or led to new discoveries.

Perhaps the two greatest changes that came during this period were the re-working of the pre-show/prologue and the inclusion of an intermission. Each developed in part out of concern for the actors’ well-being, and in part to ensure a pleasurable experience for the audience. The preshow had initially been designed to include actors onstage from the moments the first audience members arrived, a full half-hour before curtain time. The actors would mill about, set props, and wait for the cue to perform—the idea being partially inspired by performers at bars, Renaissance Faires, and similar performance spaces where there is no backstage to speak of and direct contact with the audience before and after the performance is common. The hope was for organic conversations and interactions to occur between actors and audience members during this

half-hour, thereby emphasizing the liminal space between spectator and performer. As the production neared the end of the rehearsal process, however, it became clear that this tactic not only risked causing confusion and a sense of “low-stakes” around the performance space, but also proved a potentially unreasonable demand on the actors before engaging in such a physically-demanding performance. As such, the decision was made to limit the preshow to the time it took to set up the stage, with actors moving at a determined and hasty pace. As performers entered the stage, setting up props, tuning instruments, the house manager would enter, give any announcements, and exit just in time for the play to begin. It was here that a ship’s bell would begin to ring.

The ship’s bell—serving as a bridge between preshow and prologue—provided an important connection to the production concept. As noted in earlier chapters, Margulies had pulled a great deal of inspiration from Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* in the creation of *Shipwrecked!*, and in particular called for an opening which replicated the excitement generated by Wilder’s “bare stage in half light.” It is here that some controversy regarding the role of the director comes into play. In bringing a playwright’s work to the stage, opinions differ as to whether a director is to follow a playwright’s exact directions, or whether, in some cases, a director may attempt to determine the ultimate goal or effect the playwright appears to have intended, and then take steps to elucidate that idea through means appropriate to the audience. In this case, Margulies called for an empty stage in half-light, but also for a sense of excitement. Owing to several reasons including the lack of a curtain or other means of revelation and the large population of audience members who were attending due to a class assignment, a vibrant sense of excitement in anticipation of the things to come seemed unlikely with the staging as suggested.



Therefore, it was determined that the actors should provide a series of actions (whether slow, as in the original preshow version, or fast, as in the new, truncated one) to create a sense of the status quo, which would then be interrupted by the sounding of the ship's bell. As the bell clang, performers sprang to attention and formed a line reminiscent of recruits in basic training, awaiting their drill sergeant. Due to the suddenness of the action followed by an immediate stillness, the anticipatory effect of an "empty stage in half light" emerged, as the stage, though still full of people, was suddenly devoid of any movement. In this sudden stillness, the excitement and expectation of an event about to happen filled the space.

In this stillness, de Rougemont entered, motioned for the spotlights to be turned on him, and then began the prologue. At this point, the script calls for a great deal of camaraderie between performers and audience members; however, the initial plan for establishing such a relationship—the lengthy preshow—was now cut. As such, experimentation began with the prologue, looking for opportunities to form an alliance with the spectators. While Margulies provides a number of conversational lines, they did not seem, on their own, enough to build the bridge the production required. Meanwhile, a moment in which de Rougemont asks the audience whether they are "ready" for the performance and waits for an answer was repeatedly falling flat. With repeated preview audiences, there was an uncomfortable beat as the actor playing de Rougemont pleaded for a response, often receiving tepid, polite applause.

This, surely, was not the relationship Margulies intended de Rougemont to have with his patrons. The problem was solved when, in an early technical rehearsal, the actors were instructed to provide a "drum roll" of sorts by slapping their thighs as de

Rougemont asked his question. Now, instead of a mistakenly awkward moment, the bit was devised to purposely create an abrupt silence as de Rougemont finished his question and the drumming suddenly ceased. The moment, seemingly a mistake (though too expertly handled to be one) elicited laughter, and de Rougemont, with charming, self-deprecating humor, smiled and asked again, “well, ARE you?” to which audiences—both in final previews and during the production run—cheerfully answered in applause. This bit, aided merely by adding a tinge of humor, created a clear rule for the performance: the show would be earnest, if not perfect, and would need the audience’s active attention if it was going to be at all successful. By implicating the audience as equally responsible for the success or failure of the performance, major steps were made toward Grotowski’s aim of eliminating the barrier between spectator and performer, and the sense of the “skilled amateur” was firmly established.

The second major change was the addition of an intermission—a decision made only after extensive discussion with several faculty members and the cast. The script does not call for an intermission, and unlike the bare stage example of the preshow, adding one seemed a greater threat to the playwright’s intentions. The concept of the show itself, struggling as it did to suggest semi-amateur status and a co-existence with the audience, seemed to argue against the formalized break in action and ushering of audience that an intermission would create. Furthermore, since the world of the play was built on the idea that de Rougemont urgently felt the need to tell his story, it didn’t seem likely that he would take a break.

There were, however, very compelling reasons for considering an intermission, most important among these, caring for both actors and audience. In terms of protecting

the ensemble, most expressed relief at the thought of a break in such a physically demanding show, but all agreed that they could continue without one. This was not necessarily so for the actor playing de Rougemont. Although he repeatedly vowed to “do whatever it takes” with or without an intermission, it was clear that his voice was suffering by the end of every run due to the extraordinary number of lines and range of volume his character was facing. Furthermore, during the few rehearsals in which the show was run without a break, the quality of his vocal projection (let alone his physical stamina) was clearly flagging in the final third of the performance. Although undoubtedly he would have performed without complaining should the production have remained intermission-free, it was clear that doing so would not only risk affecting the quality of the show, but cause enough discomfort to risk long-term damage to the actor.

Furthermore, there was concern for Baylor’s patrons. The script has a usual running time of approximately ninety minutes—a long time to ask patrons to go without a break, though perhaps not unreasonably so. Baylor’s production of *Shipwrecked!*, however, featured a number of quiet moments and, thanks in part to opportunities created by a larger cast, indulged in a few instances of spectacle that the Broadway three-person cast would not have been able to do. Together, these additions resulted in the show running one hundred and ten minutes. With a play running nearly two hours, the audience aisles would have inevitably had a series of patrons coming and going for the lavatory. The unique actor-audience relationship that had been created, the thrust configuration of the space, and the house lights that had been left half-up, would have magnified the distraction of such movement throughout. Just as problematic, those that felt the need but chose not to get up would slowly shift their attention to looking for the play to end.

Whereas the shorter performance could allow people to remain engaged throughout, a full two hours with no breaks threatened to have an entire audience looking at their watches and wondering when the actors planned on wrapping things up.

The combined fears for the actors and the audience overruled those of misrepresenting the playwright, and an intermission was added after Yamba, Bobo, and Gunda's arrival. In order to restore the energy of the play after intermission, a similar technique to the beginning of the performance was utilized. From the bare stage, a ringing ship's bell sent actors scurrying into place in half light. Then, in silence, de Rougemont entered and, like before, motioned for the spotlights. With complete silence and all eyes on him, he announced the beginning of the second act before leaping right into action, thus manipulating the excitement of silence-to-action once again, and propelling the audience back into the story.

### *Final Rehearsals*

With these changes in place, and several faculty-member visits having gone well, the ensemble exuded confidence and camaraderie as the production process neared the final days of rehearsal. Unfortunately, news of the likely impending death of an immediate family member meant that I, as director, had to decide whether to leave the rehearsal process as it entered its final days. Often, these last days are imperative for final tightening and polishing of moments, for encouraging actors to live in the moment, and for keeping up morale despite the exhaustion common at this phase of repetitive technical and dress rehearsals. Removing the director at the final stage—who, at this point, is largely focused on encouraging cast members and keeping the energy and spirit of a production strong—is a large gamble. Though difficult to describe, beyond the matter of

cues, of blocking, and of line readings, there is an intangible energy that exists in a theatre when a production is capturing everyone's attention. There is, to quote clown and movement coach Avner Eisenberg, a "collective breath" between spectators and performers that can occur when a performance goes particularly well. It is perhaps impossible to quantify, and yet may be the defining moment of many productions. For a great many rehearsal processes, to lose the director at the last moment—and thus to lose those last days of coaching, specificity, and encouragement—could have easily jeopardized that "breath."

It was therefore a sign of how fervently I believed we had successfully achieved cast "ownership" of the production that I felt able to step away. It was clear the cast had taken on the role of encouraging one another, and that their commitment to specificity and energy seemed unlikely to diminish. In a production process which had prided itself on an actor-centric rehearsal style, the actors—with limited supervision from faculty in the directorial absence—accomplished the last important days of rehearsal on their own, thereby truly claiming ownership over the production.

### *Conclusion*

While the rehearsal process is a central component of any theatrical production, the actor-driven nature of *Shipwrecked!* lends it special importance. Much of what would normally be considered design work—from creating the roof of a hut out of scarves to the use of bottles as colored fish—was discovered and executed solely in the rehearsal space. Much of what would normally be considered the homework of the director—from where an actor should stand to how to create an octopus on stage—was determined by actors experimenting as a community. Perhaps most strikingly different than the norm, sound

effects like rain, waves, or birds, when not handled by the Buskers, were created on-the-spot by actors. The success of this actor-ownership was proved in its last days, when I made the decision to step away from rehearsals.

The overall course of bringing *Shipwrecked!* to the stage had its share of frustrations, miscommunications, and stumbles, but the rehearsal process with the actors proved the least troublesome and, ultimately, the most enjoyable. By focusing early on encouraging actors to take an active role in the creation of the production as a whole, the ensemble was able to mirror the character's roles of performing artists, rather than the specific characters involved in de Rougemont's tale. Additionally, determining that the actors should always remain on stage—becoming extended members of the audience when not directly involved—encouraged a greater degree of blending between audience and performer, thereby eliminating much of the “professional distance” inherent in a theatrical performance and suggesting an organic, hand-made, and approachable air that complimented the production concept and proposed designs.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Production Assessment

#### *Introduction*

Donald Margulies's *Shipwrecked! An Entertainment – The Amazing Adventures of Louis de Rougemont (as told by himself)* experienced an entirely sold-out run at Baylor University from November 19 – 24, 2013. Reaction to the final product was overwhelmingly positive from both audience and Baylor faculty alike. While the success of the performance run will be taken into account, an assessment of the entire production process must balance this against expectations and initial directorial goals. The primary focus of an assessment must be the Grotowski-inspired attempts at overcoming the separation between spectators and actors, the directorial aesthetic concept of handmade, organic, skilled-amateur designs hinting toward a turn-of-the-century touring performance troupe archetype, and the degree to which these ideas were achieved and helped support the written text. This assessment will necessarily center on the directorial role in devising, communicating, and achieving the aforementioned concepts and qualities, and the knowledge and experience gained by engaging in the process.

#### *The Actor-Director Relationship*

*Shipwrecked!* represents professionally, for me, the production during which I solidified my new approach to the actor-director relationship. Before coming to Baylor, I approached blocking as a puzzle to be completed by the director in private, long-before its dissemination in the rehearsal space. Over the years, I experimented with various

models, approaching scenic pictures in a fashion similar to how a film director might create storyboards. From positioning toy figurines to stacks of notebooks full of stick figure drawings, every moment and motivation was decided ahead of rehearsal time, and every question I could image an actor posing was answered in advance. I would begin rehearsals sharing a basic framework of these directions and roadmaps, temporarily withholding the more detailed information. Actors would then try to fit themselves within what I had constructed, and if, by doing so, they either accomplished the full scale of what I had intended or created something that announced itself as better than what I had planned, then their actions were adopted as correct. Otherwise, we would repeat the process, slowly layering on additional levels of detail until it matched my pre-determined plans. At the time, I fooled myself into thinking that the small window for actor input involved in the first staging meant that I was a generous director who allowed actors room to experiment and practice their craft. As I would often work with a relatively unchanging pool of talent from show to show, eventually actors became used to this style and, as such, familiarity created a false sense of quality. As actors were responding quickly, and as the need for explanations were getting shorter, this must—I reasoned—be a sign that my directing skills were improving.

I carried these practices with me into my first directing projects at Baylor, and found that Baylor's students, trained in a different methodology, seemed constricted and flat within these confines. At first, it was easy to blame the young actors, but I soon began to see the limitations of my own efforts. As directing assignments continued, I struggled to develop new methods of opening the rehearsal process up and trusting the



actors to bring their own intuition to bear. Reading texts on various ensemble-minded directors introduced plenty of new ideas, though their execution continued to be difficult.

This all changed when I was tasked with directing an entirely ensemble-devised production as part of a course in postmodern staging. The structure of the project demanded that, beyond simply letting go of my own interpretation of a script being the sole vision, I lead a project which began without a script at all, and, over the course of two weeks, work with the cast members to generate a work of art that truly came from all of us. The realization that none of the strategies I had used in the past could possibly work allowed me to shed my old approaches, and engage in a freedom of play and fully ensemble-centric interaction during the rehearsal process. From a position of viewing the director as the most important artist involved in a work, I was able to step back and, instead, see my job as an attempt to coach and guide the efforts of the actors. When the piece, entitled *a rabbit as king of the ghosts* was performed, it not only garnered the most positive faculty reaction I had thus far received, but also became the first time I felt as though I had truly captured the role of “director.”

This success lifted an enormous burden from my directing style, lessening the feeling that, as director, I needed to get certain aspects “right,” and that productions were entirely reliant on my judgment and skill to achieve any level of success. I now saw the production process as similar to coaching an athletic team. My abilities can certainly contribute to success or failure, but they are entirely impotent without the right team bringing their own skills, intuition, and talents to the project. Although my next two directing projects—a Moliere comedy and a pair of scenes from Shakespeare—relied heavily on directorial interpretation of text, I approached the casts with the same respect

and openness as I had with *a rabbit as king of the ghosts*. As a result, while each project had its own shortcomings, these works emerged as continuing successes on a trend toward a substantially changed and improved directorial style, boasting extremely strong actor-director collaborations. It was with this growth in mind that I approached pitching thesis show possibilities, looking for scripts which encouraged a large amount of actor input, physical experimentation, and ensemble-minded concepts.

When the Baylor Theatre Faculty selected *Shipwrecked!* for my thesis production, the opportunity to explore these approaches was clear. Due to the substantial latitude given by the playwright, the script invites a particularly creative and original approach to staging and, in doing so, makes room for a vibrant and dynamic ensemble-devised approach. Though working with an existing text, rehearsals were approached with much of the same freedom as had been explored in *a rabbit as king of the ghosts*. Although not every future production may afford this freedom, and not every actor may be as quick to embrace a less-structured process, this production nevertheless solidified what has become my standard in setting actor-director relationships. From workshops to *Shipwrecked!* to actor coaching since, reacting and guiding the work of the actors, rather than asking them to fit into pre-conceived molds, has proven extremely useful in producing honest performances and encouraging greater trust in the relationship. Though this discovery process extends beyond the boundaries of *Shipwrecked!*'s rehearsal calendar, it was this production which proved such an approach could be sustained over a longer period of time, could produce the quality necessary for a mainstage production, and could be applied to an existing text without subverting the playwright's intentions. In assessing the educational aspect of the thesis production, building this strong and lasting

foundation to approaching actor-director relationships in the future proved an unqualified success.

### *The Designer-Director Relationship*

Such exciting discoveries and positive experiences were not as forthcoming in navigating *Shipwrecked!*'s several designer-director relationships. This is not to suggest a complete breakdown in communication or any "failure" to the extent of harming the overall audience experience. However, in recognizing that the ensemble process proved how well a group of people can be collaboratively creative, it would be disingenuous to claim a similar level of co-creativity occurred in most of the design areas. Although each area had its own stumbles and problems, the common fault of communication falls back on a directorial failure to elucidate goals and, more importantly, to find the balance between "giving space" and "taking over."

As noted in chapter three, the technical director—after a particularly rocky meeting between he, myself, and the scenic designer—suggested that I would be well served by being more assertive in stating what I did and did not want. This particular flaw in leadership may be found in every design area, emphasizing a lesson well worth learning. Just as I had previously storyboarded every bit of actor blocking before Baylor, I had similarly approached most designers with completed sketches of what I expected to see on stage. Entering into *Shipwrecked!*'s production process, I carried a determination not to overstep my bounds, but instead allow designers the room to truly bring their creativity to the table. This was matched, however, with a strong sense of production concept, which called for a specificity of aesthetics, materials, and design. The result was a series of meetings in which I felt an idea didn't fit the world of the play, and yet also

felt extremely hesitant to be seen as micro-managing the designer's position. As the technical director correctly suggested, this meant a forced vagueness when describing production needs in an attempt to leave designers room, and simultaneously vague and "soft" disagreements with designs that, in turn, failed to support or further the production concept. By the time it was clear firm decisions needed to be made, many demands which I felt had been communicated from the beginning felt like new or changed visions to many of the creative staff. That there was notable frustration on some of the creative team's part can be easily understood, for although a production and aesthetic concept was in place from the earliest days of the design process, the clear communication of that concept was clearly lacking.

Admittedly, I am not sure that I walk away from this process fully confident in my ability to master the designer-director relationship by the next production I mount. That said, I have seen the dangers of being too prescriptive in my past work, and now have seen the danger of confusing vagueness for "giving space." Just as in the actor-director relationship, some sense of coaching and guidance is needed, but must stop far short of handing over blueprints. I look forward to tackling this next great challenge in my journey to becoming as strong and capable a director as possible.

### *Execution of Concept*

The devising and execution of the production concept is arguably the primary evaluation of a director's work. That Margulies's script was well-served by the amateur performance-and-storytelling approach of the production, the Grotowski and ensemble-devised acting approaches, and the worn, handmade, and organic qualities of the design seems to have achieved strong agreement between creative staff, faculty, and audiences

alike. The execution of these approaches, meanwhile, was admittedly varied. Performance-based aspects, including acting, use of props, and the sound and music design proved extremely successful in capturing the tone and aesthetic qualities suggested by the directorial analysis and interpretation of the script. Similarly, the scenic and costume design, while troubled by numerous issues during the creation phase, largely succeeded in this same manner. Standing notably apart was the production's lighting, which arguably better fit the playwright's call for an "unsparingly gorgeous"<sup>1</sup> design and received substantial approbation from several faculty, cast, and audience members, and yet existing in a manner that played into the "magical" elements of the script that the rest of the design and performance elements had worked hard to eliminate. Although not enough to deem the execution of concept a failure, this aspect certainly was notable to pulling the production toward the sort of contemporary theatre Baylor's audiences may be used to, and failing to present the "hand-made" and "poor theatre" quality sought in the initial concept.

I would like to think, however, that the most prominent and memorable aspect of the production remains the performance delivered by the ensemble, both as led by and apart from de Rougemont. In their creation of scenes and relationship to the audience, the earnest, hand-made, and somewhat worn around the edges echoes of turn-of-the-century music halls, Yiddish Theatre, Klezmer bands, and side show entertainments came alive. As with the sailor-carved scrimshaw of old, earnest and artful—if unpolished—production values captured the last gasps of de Rougemont as he toured England, begging for a last shred of respect.

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<sup>1</sup> Margulies, *Shipwrecked!*.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, *Shipwrecked!* stands out as a production which explored a “poor theatre” approach to storytelling, notably different than the high-spectacle Broadway-style musical preceding it or the “magical” qualities of the performance following it within Baylor Theatre’s season. Margulies’s script focuses on direct address, storytelling, and the performance-audience relationship in a manner that proved new to many of the department’s acting majors, and brought a family-friendly production which held the interest and imagination of quite a few children throughout its run. In a personal letter to this author, Donald Margulies wrote that he had “done [his] best to astonish.”<sup>2</sup> *Shipwrecked!* does just that. Without the grand, expensive spectacle of Broadway musicals, it seeks to surprise and delight its audiences by engaging their imaginations and re-awakening a sense of childhood wonder, all the while remaining firmly aware of its own façade and artificiality. Margulies’s play, like de Rougemont’s tale, demands of its audience a modicum of faith, for it becomes palpably false under scrutiny. In most aspects of production, I believe the cast, creative team, running crew, and execution of directorial concept succeeded in achieving this quality. From the conversational aspect of the prologue to the tears shed over Bruno to the nearly nightly standing ovations, audiences seemed eager to clutch onto the story de Rougemont and our production were selling, despite the repeated evidence the script, the performers, and the designers gave them that it was all simply a performance. In this, we see the power of faith, the strength of simplicity, and, perhaps most importantly, the draw of a good story. Chapter one included a quotation from Margulies, in which he noted that his mother warned him,

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<sup>2</sup> Margulies, personal letter to the author.

“dream my son, but not too big.”<sup>3</sup> In the play’s last moments, seeing de Rougemont at his most vulnerable and then his most triumphant, Margulies encourages the audience to dream wildly, to recognize and face the harsh consequences of dreaming, and then to choose to dream again.

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<sup>3</sup> Haber

## APPENDICES



## APPENDIX A

### Selected Production Photographs



Fig A.1. Louis de Rougemont welcomes the audience into the theatre. Two spotlight operators follow his every move.



Fig A.2. As his mother reads him a bedtime story, a young Louis stands on his bed (a trunk), clutching a toy boat and stuffed dog, imagining himself traversing the ocean.



Fig A.3. De Rougemont finds that rough ocean waves don't agree with his stomach. A new backdrop, a long rope, and a pole stuck in a trunk are all that are needed to convert the stage to the deck of a sailing ship.



Fig A.4. The three Buskers, responsible for music and sound effects, perform “the Mother’s Theme.” Behind them sits a wind machine, built specifically for this production.



Fig A.5. As de Rougemont treads in the ocean water, a blue bottle represents a gleaming fish, which “swims” up to investigate the human visitor.



Fig A.6. As de Rougemont clings to his raft, actors portray rough waves crashing against its sides.



Fig A.7. After the sinking of the Wonder World, ensemble members lift de Rougemont and Bruno as he swims (and she doggy paddles) to safety.





Fig A.8. Backdrops were designed to recall the crosshatching of scrimshaw and echo the aesthetics of old Robinsonade illustrations, paralleling de Rougemont’s story with his source material.



Fig A.9. A strong effort was made to explore and blur the liminal space between “performer” and “audience member.” Here, de Rougemont performs while three actors and a puppet (foreground) watch from “within” the scene. The rest of the ensemble, despite their presence onstage, lean against the railings and become extended members of the audience



Fig A.10. Even the heavens follow the “poor theatre” design, as a starry sky is represented by actors lifting candles on wooden poles.



Fig A.11. A silk scarf is used as a tribal sash around Yamba’s waist, while three more are held aloft to represent the sloped roof of a small island hut.



Fig. A.12. “Bobo” puppet in performance



Fig. A.13. “Queen Victoria” puppet in rehearsal





Fig A.14. The final moment of Donald Margulies's *Shipwrecked!* calls for Louis de Rougemont to mount and ride a giant sea turtle. In a production full of Brechtian performance techniques, this meant giving the audience an image that was at once compellingly convincing and undeniably false, leaving them to choose whether or not to engage with de Rougemont's dream.



## APPENDIX B

### Mother's Theme

Guilherme Almeida (ASCAP), 2013

The musical notation for the "Mother's Theme" motif is presented in two staves. The first staff contains six measures of music in 4/4 time, with chords Am, D7/A, Am, Am7, Dm7, and Dm9/F written above. The second staff begins with a measure number '6' and contains four measures of music, with chords Gsus, Am(sus), Am F7(#4), and Esus E7 written above. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4.

Fig B.1. “Mother’s Theme” motif, as composed by *Shipwrecked!*’s music director.

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