

Creating Original Theatre with Adolescents

An Honors Thesis for the Department of Drama and Dance

Emily Bess Rosen

Tufts University, 2009

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	3
Introduction	4
Process Drama	5
The History of the PlayGroup Theatre	9
Early Development of <i>Pieces of Reality</i>	14
The Process	17
Week One	17
Week Two	41
Week Three	48
Week Four	56
Week Five	58
Performances	59
Conclusions	60
Bibliography	68
Appendix	
Student Questionnaire	70

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis committee members, Dr. Kathleen Camara and Dr. Barbara Wallace Grossman for their support throughout my research and writing processes. Both guided my research and helped develop my ideas at every step of the way. I would particularly like to acknowledge Dr. Grossman for encouraging me to write a thesis, and for suggesting that I focus on my summers developing original theatre with adolescents at the PlayGroup Theatre (PGT). I would like to thank my parents for their constant support throughout my summers at PGT and my year of writing. None of the work I did on this thesis would have been possible without Jill and Steven Abusch, who trusted me with their six-week teen show for three summers, giving me the opportunity to help develop the writing process I have outlined in the following paper. I would also like to thank Jill and Steven for being available to answer every question I have asked throughout the year; I have enjoyed learning more about their tireless work in youth theatre, which has inspired me to continue working in the field of adolescent education.

## Introduction

In the summers of 2005, 2006, and 2008, I worked for the PlayGroup Theatre (PGT), a theatre for children and young adults in White Plains, New York. Each year, I assisted Jill Abusch, PGT's Artistic Director, on the six week Summer Teen Conservatory project, which involved developing, writing, and directing an original musical. Though Jill had facilitated a partly-written student project once before, I played a central role in developing the process of creating a new musical over the course of my first two summers at PGT.

Though I was pleased with the first two productions I worked on, I feel that the 2008 project, *Pieces of Reality*, was the most successful. Jill and I conceived the idea, Jill directed, Bryan McAdams composed the music and lyrics, Evi Troester arranged the music, and I assisted Jill and wrote the script, with contributions from our students. I was pleased with the final product, which I felt was thematically complex and artistically interesting, but I was particularly proud of the meaningful experience I believe I helped foster for our students.

In the following thesis, I will outline the creation and production of *Pieces of Reality*. Through my discussion of the details of the development, writing, and rehearsal processes, I hope to highlight the positive effects that the experience had on the students involved. I hope to emphasize the value of collaborating with a group of adolescents to create an original theatrical production.

For copyright protection, I have not included the *Pieces of Reality* script or recording in this thesis. To obtain a copy of either, please contact Steven Abusch at the PlayGroup Theatre ([www.playgroup.org](http://www.playgroup.org)).

## Process Drama

*Pieces of Reality* was created at the PlayGroup Theatre (PGT) without any direct influences, but I have since found many similarities between its development and a type of theatre known as process drama. According to Pamela Bowell and Brian Heap, process drama is: “the genre of applied theatre in which the participants, together with the teacher, constitute the theatrical ensemble and engage in drama to make meaning for themselves” (59). Practitioners of process drama bring dramatic methods into classrooms to deepen the students’ understanding of a particular event, subject, or era; teachers also use process drama to explore social conflicts and broaden their students’ experiences—to help them “see what other walks of life feel like” (Wagner 1).

Dorothy Heathcote has been one of the main contributors to the development of process drama. While Heathcote explores specific subjects with her classes, her main goal is to broaden each student’s perspective of the world around them. She coaches groups through establishing specific scenarios, locations, and characters, but also uses various tactics throughout exercises to help her students “drop to the universal,” to understand the universal implications of their work (Wagner 72). She maintains a slow pace within the activity so the group can fully engage, and incorporates rituals to “reaffirm individual commitment to the drama” (79). She often stops students in the middle of an exercise to reflect on their work, and she applies “probes and presses,” specific ways of extracting her students’ ideas (86). During discussions, Heathcote classifies participants’ responses and presents them to the group in categories that clarify their implications (84).

The process of “dropping to the universal” is central to Heathcote’s practices (Wagner 72). As Betty Jane Wagner describes in *Drama as a Learning Medium*, her book about Heathcote’s work, asking students reflect on dramatic activities forces them to discover what their scene says about humanity. She writes: “with reflection, (feeling) can become an insight, an understanding, that makes possible later modification of behavior in the real world” (74). Unlike the effects of merely gaining knowledge, the effects of locating and understanding universals are long-lasting. By connecting her students to the implications of their work, Heathcote teaches them to identify with a broader range of people and experiences.

Heathcote conquers a problem many teachers face, “group inertia,” by giving class members the power to choose a subject for their drama (Wagner 9). As Wagner outlines, Heathcote enters each classroom with no predetermined ideas, leaving most of the decisions up to the students involved (9). She asks a series of questions to her students, to help them find and agree on an adequate subject for the activity. Heathcote allows the class to cast themselves, then assumes her own role in the drama in order to guide them through it (16). Throughout each session, teachers and students of process drama serve as actors, playwrights, and directors, crafting a story and acting it out together (Bowell and Heap 63).

Heathcote’s work never extends beyond the classroom in which it is created. There is no conventional performance component, but, as Bowell and Heap describe, “the external audience of the theatre is replaced by an internal audience, so that the participants are both the theatrical ensemble that creates the ‘play’ and the audience that

receives it” (59). Rather than producing plays, teachers of process drama use dramatic exercises to explore content in a classroom setting (Wagner 3).

Although there are many essential differences between process drama and the way in which I developed *Pieces of Reality* with my students at PGT, I see a few strong connections. While mounting a musical was our explicit goal, the director and I strove to improve our students’ understanding of the world around them. We asked them to identify themes as they brainstormed, which located the specific story they told within a greater context. We encouraged the cast to connect deeply with their characters in order to understand the implications of their experiences. The extensive discussions and character work we engaged in throughout the process of creating *Pieces of Reality* helped our students connect to the universal implications of their work.

Like Heathcote, Jill, the director of *Pieces of Reality*, and I collaborated with our cast, allowing our students to make as many decisions about the show as possible. We sometimes steered the students away from ideas that we thought could raise major problems, but tried to give them control over the project’s direction.

While Jill and I remained outside the drama, never stepping into roles alongside the cast, we served as playwrights and directors while our students functioned as playwrights, directors, and actors throughout the summer. We hoped that filling these roles would empower our students, get them to engage with one another, and allow them to share their ideas with each other and their audiences.

The most important distinction between my work and process drama is the performance component. Rather than letting the drama in the classroom stand on its own, Jill and I used it to develop a play which our students then rehearsed and shared with an

audience. In Heathcote's work, she tries to give her class a feeling of complete control. She withholds her knowledge, convincing students that they are the experts who will know how to make the drama work best (Wagner 96). Because we had a product to work towards, Jill and I needed to assert our theatrical expertise in rehearsals. We listened to our cast's ideas, but did not always have time to work through the possibilities. From prior experiences, Jill and I could often predict which options would succeed, and made certain decisions outside of rehearsal. Although we asked for our students' input throughout the summer, we informed them that time constraints would force us to make a few artistic choices on our own.

While we emphasized our development and rehearsal processes, Jill and I asked our students to create performance-quality work. We hoped our dramatic activities would broaden our students' perspectives, but we also tried to teach them about theatre—particularly certain principles of playwriting and acting.

Though many of our methods and goals differed from those of process drama practitioners, Jill and I wanted our work on *Pieces of Reality* to affect our adolescent students in ways that process drama often does. We hoped the experience of collaborating and sharing ideas would help our cast members learn about themselves, and that seeing their visions take shape on stage would increase their self-confidence.

In the following paper, I will outline the process of creating and producing student-written musicals that I have developed over the last five years at PGT, using the most recent, *Pieces of Reality*, as an example. I hope to highlight the effects the process and performance experience had on the students involved.

## The History of the PlayGroup Theatre

The PlayGroup Theatre (PGT) was founded in White Plains, New York, by Jill and Steven Abusch in January 1995. They began by producing one show each semester with elementary, middle, and high school students from throughout Westchester County. As Jill explains, she and Steven started the company with “the goal of providing children and teens an artistic haven—a place where being a supportive and collaborative ensemble is just as important as achieving a high level of artistry.” According to Steven, an average of one hundred students now participate in PGT’s classes and performances each semester, but the Abusches and their staff members still strive to create a sense of community and a positive learning experience for every child involved.

In 1998, PGT launched its first full-day summer theatre program. PGT Summer ran for six weeks and included twenty-two students and seven staff members. The program grew until it included approximately sixty students in the summer of 2000. That year, the Abusches added a three-week program for children who wanted to participate without committing to six intense weeks.

Though different teaching artists and directors came and went, Jill always directed the students in the Teen Conservatory, the oldest six-week group. Every year, actors would audition in April and May, and Jill would select a musical based on their gender breakdown, ages, and abilities. In the summer of 2004, Jill found herself with a very experienced group of teen actors:

We had kids returning having been there for four or five years. We had revamped and revamped the classes part of the program to keep them challenged and engaged, but the rehearsal portion, the real essence of the program, had remained the same. There’s only so much I can do by bringing in new and exciting classes—they needed more of a challenge

than just showing up, learning their lines, and being in a show. They needed something in addition.

While searching for the perfect musical, Jill found *Sometimes I Wake Up in the Middle of the Night*, a collection of scenes and monologues written by a group of at-risk teenagers at the Walden Theatre Conservatory in New York City. Inspired by the concept of giving a voice to teenage actors, Jill decided to try leading her advanced cast in a similar exercise.

On the first day of the PGT Summer in 2004, Jill presented her students with the script for *Sometimes I Wake Up in the Middle of the Night*. She explained the history of the play, and told her actors that she wanted them add their own monologues, scenes, and songs to the collection. According to Jill, the group was overwhelmed at first, but quickly engaged in the work. They came in each morning with new ideas. They wrote alone, in pairs, and in small groups. Jill edited the material her cast members brought her; she decided where each piece belonged in the show, but barely edited a word of her students' writing. By the end of the five week rehearsal process, the group had replaced about half of the original material with new scenes and monologues and had added six songs.

Though Jill had not planned on creating an annual writing project, she enjoyed watching her students perform their own material in *Sometimes I Wake Up in the Middle of the Night*. As she talked to the cast about the pride they felt after the show, she was inspired to continue writing with the PGT Summer Teen Conservatory in the summers to come.

I started working at PGT Summer in the 2005. I had just graduated from high school, and had applied to assistant direct after completing PGT's Actor Training

Program in the spring.<sup>1</sup> Having read a number of stories and essays I had written throughout high school, Jill asked me to assist her on her second teen writing project.

Because the cast of *Sometimes I Wake Up in the Middle of the Night* had written enough material to create a new musical without using any pre-written scenes, Jill decided that the summer 2005 project would only include original material. As a starting point, she chose Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. She wanted us to read the play with the cast, then brainstorm different ways to translate the story into a musical, and start writing. I would compile and organize the students' work, and communicate with the musical director who would help compose for the cast's original lyrics.

During the first few days of the rehearsal process, Jill and I realized that this group would need more help than her previous cast. The students were all young teenagers, mostly between the ages of twelve and fourteen; about half of them were new to PGT, and a number of those students had no prior theatre experience. The group was enthusiastic, but still learning basic acting technique.

We took the entire first week of rehearsals to get through Shakespeare's original text; the students struggled with the language and we stopped after each scene to discuss its content.<sup>2</sup> I posted large pieces of brown paper on the walls and recorded lists of character relationships and a scene breakdown for us to refer to later when outlining the plot of our adaptation. On Friday of the first week, after five days of rehearsals, we were finally ready to begin brainstorming.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Actor Training Program is PGT's fall and spring semester program. Students act in one show per semester and take a class in acting, movement, voice, or a related elective.

<sup>2</sup> At PGT Summer Theatre, each cast has three hours of rehearsal and three hours of class every day.

Jill led the conversation that day, asking our students to think of different settings for our new play; we then discussed the merits and challenges of each. Jill and I helped our students develop each idea, and tried to guide them towards the ones we thought would best translate to the stage. After hours of discussion that continued on the following Monday, we concluded that our musical would place Shakespeare's basic plot in a contemporary American high school. The players and young lovers became high school students; the lovers' controlling parents became a guidance counselor; Puck became an inconspicuous high school janitor; the forest into which Shakespeare's characters retreat became an abandoned construction site. We wrote an outline of the scenes we wanted to include next to my original scene breakdown, making sure we hit all of the crucial plot points along the way.

The four weeks that followed were hectic. Jill and I led our students in improvisations to explore characters, and writing exercises to create song lyrics. I spent my mornings, while the students were in acting classes, compiling their material, turning some of their recorded improvisations into written scenes, and writing new scenes to fill the holes. Sometimes I would continue writing in the afternoons, while Jill blocked scenes and songs with the cast. By the end of the fifth week of the program, the script of the musical, entitled *Foolish Mortals: A High School Faerie Tale*, was complete and the students were ready to perform.

Jill and I were pleased with the final product. The students were proud of their work, and their families and friends seemed impressed. Though I thought the script looked unsophisticated on paper, I knew it was important to keep the lines in a contemporary teenage vernacular. For a group of relatively inexperienced actors, our

students looked confident and poised on stage because they were comfortable with the language I had written. Jill liked the results of the project, and decided to write a show with the teens the following summer rather than looking for a good ensemble piece.

I assisted Jill on the next Teen Conservatory writing project in the summer of 2006. Jill came up with the prompt once again, which was a pile of newspapers. We asked each cast member to read a section and search for stories he/she thought could work on stage. We spent the first week reading and discussing stories, and improvising scenes based on different articles. One piece, about the arrest of the beloved owner of a local coffee shop, inspired two hours of conversation. Though the students had not known the man, they were intrigued by his situation. They wondered how someone who served as a role model in a suburban community could have also committed a crime. They imagined the pain his friends and patrons must have experienced when they learned about his arrest, and shared stories about adults who had let them down in similar ways. We chose to fictionalize the story of the coffee shop owner in order to explore the issues his arrest had brought up in our talk.

The process continued much like the *Midsummer* project had—we chose a setting, developed a basic plot structure, and made lists of characters and songs with the students in the second week of rehearsals. Jill and I led them in improvisations to further develop the characters, and asked them to write monologues, character biographies, and song lyrics during and after rehearsal. Because we were creating a new plot rather than adapting a prewritten one, the writing process took more work than it had in the summer of 2005. Again, Jill put me in charge of the script. Though most of my material was

based on our cast's writing and improvisational exercises, by the end of the third week of rehearsals, I was writing on my own.

The final product, titled *Second Cup*, was much more complex than *Foolish Mortals* had been. The group was slightly older and had more acting experience than the previous group, which allowed us to explore more sophisticated subject matter on stage. I paid more attention to lyric-writing, which led to more polished songs. Because Jill and I were more confident that we could write a completely original show, having completed *Foolish Mortals*, we let ourselves take the time to fully develop every character and scene. Due to the success of *Second Cup*, Jill decided to write another original musical the following summer.

In the summer of 2008, I returned to work with Jill on the Teen Conservatory's fifth summer writing project. As I had completed my third year of studying Drama and English in college when I accepted the job, Jill wanted to expand my responsibilities as her assistant director. I felt I understood more about theatre and writing than I had in previous summers, and she was willing to let me control more of the process than I had in the past.

#### Early Development of *Pieces of Reality*

When Jill and I met in May 2008 to plan the upcoming summer's project, we began by discussing past shows. We agreed that writing and rehearsing *Second Cup* had been the most rewarding experience. The process had been intellectually stimulating, as the cast engaged with stories from the newspaper, and we had learned a lot about them by considering the different issues each article raised.

I suggested we try the same approach again. There were only two people in our cast who had been involved in *Second Cup*, and every newspaper is full of articles with dramatic potential. Jill wanted to try something new, and encouraged me to think of ways to evoke the same kinds of discussions from our students without using the same technique.

One of my favorite aspects of *Second Cup* was that it started with a true story. The plot and characters in the musical were fictional, but came from a real situation to which the cast could relate. Our students could imagine what the real coffee shop owner, his employees, and his customers were like, and audience members seemed intrigued by the real newspaper article we displayed in the lobby of the theater. We had pulled that story from a text, and the 2007 Teen Conservatory had based their show on photos. While discussing options with Jill that afternoon, I suggested we start the 2008 project with an audio recording.

The first potential audio prompt that came to my mind was Chicago Public Radio's *This American Life*, which I had started listening to weekly that spring. Each episode of the show features a collection of stories based around a particular theme. I thought the show might be a good starting place for us because it included real people's voices; using someone's voice as he/she discusses a significant personal experience as the basis for a character in a play seemed like an exciting experiment. I enjoyed listening to the show because it features true stories that rarely make the front page of the newspaper. The producers usually choose pieces about average Americans in dramatic situations, which seemed like the perfect fit for our young actors.

After I described a few of my favorite episodes to Jill, we agreed that the one centered on high school proms held a lot of theatrical potential. The longest segment in the episode was about the 2001 senior prom in Hoisington, Kansas, that had been interrupted by a tornado. One man was killed, and nearly half of the residents lost their homes and businesses in the storm. The show featured interviews with students from Hoisington High School, who talked about their prom night traditions and described the night of the tornado. One senior who had been filming the prom on a handheld video camera gave his footage to *This American Life*, which allowed listeners to hear the voices of the students at prom as they were ushered into the basement, before any of them understood the gravity of the situation. (“Prom”)

Jill and I discussed different possibilities for our new project, but kept coming back to the Hoisington prom story. Though we could not think of any other exciting prompts for our show, Jill did not want to impose one idea upon our students. We decided to play the radio segment in our first rehearsal; after discussing the story, we would allow the cast to choose how to incorporate it into the writing project.

In preparation for our first rehearsal, I made a list of possible directions that our project could take. Nervous that our cast members might have trouble thinking of ideas at first, I wanted to be able to present them with a few of mine. I started my list with the obvious option: to tell the story of the prom and tornado in a linear fashion. Worried that the cast would feel trapped into telling the story of the Hoisington prom, I ended with the most obscure idea I could think of: to take an issue the broadcast raised, such as the role fate plays in our lives, and explore it through an assortment of original stories and songs.

The night before the first day of PGT Summer, Jill and I met one last time. When I told her I was concerned about our students feeling tied to the prom story, she suggested we not start the morning by playing the recording, as we had originally planned. Instead, we could ask them to respond to a few key phrases such as “prom,” “small town,” and “tragedy.” I would make a list of the students’ first responses, which we would revisit after listening to the radio segment. Jill did not know how we would use these lists, but she thought they could help if we became stuck later.

At the same meeting, I insisted that Jill and I determine what we wanted to accomplish at the first rehearsal. I suggested that we try to pick a focus for the show by the end of the morning. I thought we should decide what story we were telling and the general outline of how we would tell it. Jill and I would meet at the end of the day to plan the next few rehearsals, once we knew more about the group we would be working with for the six weeks that followed.

### Week One

#### MONDAY

The cast of PGT Summer’s 2008 Teen Conservatory assembled for its first rehearsal on the morning of July 7. Jill, the two musical directors, the ten teenagers, and I sat in a circle on the floor and introduced ourselves. The students were quiet and shy, and I worried that we would not be able to achieve our goals for the morning. Regardless of how prepared I felt, I knew that the success of a collaborative writing project, more than any other rehearsal process, depended on our students’ enthusiasm and willingness to participate.

I taped a large piece of white paper to the wall and wrote the words “prom,” “small town,” “tragedy,” and “tornado” across the top. I asked the group to read those words and share the first phrases that came to mind. I recorded the students’ thoughts under each word as they called them out. In long pauses, Jill would remind the teens not to censor themselves. “No idea is a bad one here, we’re just thinking out loud. When you think you’re done, push yourself even further,” she said. When the paper was almost full, I plugged in a CD player and Jill asked the students to take out pens and paper. Without introducing the radio segment in any way, we asked the cast to listen and write down any sentences, phrases, or ideas that intrigued them.

As we listened to the recording, I found myself taking notes on things I had not noticed before. Some of the teenagers who were interviewed raised interesting questions that I hoped our students would want to explore. I was particularly intrigued by discussions of luck, as the Hoisington High students tried to make sense out of whose houses were lost and whose were spared in the storm.

I was relieved to see every member of the cast listening intently to the radio segment. When it ended, Jill gave them a few minutes to think and write down their initial reactions to the story before we began our first group discussion of the summer.

I took notes as Jill led the conversation, asking our students to share what they had written while listening to the recording. They started by telling us phrases they had heard and felt were significant, like “cruel irony” and “no rhyme or reason.” One boy, John, liked the way a Hoisington teen had described the tornado, saying “it looked

purposeful,” as if it were choosing to destroy certain buildings and not others.<sup>3</sup> One student, Katie, said her favorite quote from the broadcast came from a girl who called the tornado “a twist of fate.”

The “twist of fate” comment led us to a discussion of the logic Hoisington residents tried to use to explain what had happened to their town. Some who were interviewed felt the destruction was random, others felt personally unlucky and targeted by the tornado. (“Prom”) I was glad to hear our students engaging in such an intelligent and serious conversation on the first day of the program.

The next question Jill asked our students was: “What is theatrical about this story?” The list I recorded of their responses reads:

lots of raw emotion  
you can feel their pain with them  
anything can happen- even in Hoisington- expect the unexpected  
so many coincidences and narrow misses  
happy becomes sad- the tornado destroyed things, but miraculously saved others  
people making tough choices—in the moment—how to care for family, what to lose, leave behind—choices is what acting is all about  
connection to these kids- what you want in theatre  
rooting for our main characters  
meant to teach us a lesson  
each person made a journey  
entirely different town—individuals made a journey, had an arc- so did the town as a whole

Jill then asked our students to share any strong theatrical images they remembered from the recording. That list read:

one half of the town upright, other in ruins  
glass of lemonade on the table with no roof overhead  
kids inside having fun, everyone outside screaming—two different worlds  
people in prom dresses in flip flops in the rubble

---

<sup>3</sup> To protect the students’ identities, all of their names have been changed throughout this paper.

in prom clothes digging parents out  
kids with flashlights exploring the town  
no one told them what was going on- some still worried about having a  
party, getting drunk, because they didn't know it was serious

I was pleased with the students' initial reactions, which displayed their understanding of what Jill meant by "theatrical elements" of the story. I was relieved to learn that our cast members liked the Hoisington tornado story, and were excited to create a new piece of theatre.

The students' enthusiasm grew with Jill's next question, as it got them thinking about the specifics of the musical we were to write together. She asked: "what are some different ways we could tell this story on stage? Don't hold back, don't think about what we can or cannot realistically do—anything goes for now." The students were quiet. I glanced down at my list of ideas and decided to feed them the most obvious choice, hoping that they would come up with more obscure ideas as the conversation continued. "Well, one thing we could do is translate the same story they tell in the broadcast directly to the stage," I began, trying to keep a casual tone in my voice. I hoped my students would be less self-conscious about sharing their ideas if I made it sound like I was saying the first thing that came to mind.

Jill responded: "okay, let's add that to the list. One option we have is to tell the story exactly as we hear it on the radio." Jennifer, who had been in the writing program twice before, raised her hand. After Jill reminded her that we were not in school, so she should relax and not worry about raising her hand, Jennifer said: "or we could use the same kind of story, but develop different characters, and not just use the ones from the podcast." I added this idea to my list, writing: "same scenario, different characters."

The ideas flowed quickly after that initial comment. As Jill and I reminded our students not to censor themselves, the list I recorded was broad, and degrees of specificity varied. It read:

ten characters whose stories intertwine throughout school  
show a little bit before and after the tornado- how the town copes with it,  
what they were like before  
could use the story as a stepping stone- find a similar story and connect it  
use a small town setting but create our own 'big thing' that happened- a  
parallel story  
show people like us who heard about this on the radio- they are relieved it  
did not happen to them, but then something does  
use the tragedy scenario, but not a natural disaster- a local tragedy that  
affects everybody in a town  
use two people with parallel stories, but one is lucky and one is unlucky,  
show how fate affects their lives  
Wizard of Oz motif—what if the tornado was just a nightmare  
people having trouble discerning between dreams and reality  
“I wish it was a dream but it’s not”- people needing to learn to cope and  
deal with what happened

Once we had completed this list, the three-hour rehearsal was almost over and Jill suggested we stop brainstorming for the day. Conscious of the goal I had set the night before, I asked if anyone wanted to share his/her final thoughts on what general story he/she wanted to tell. I reminded the group that this project was a great opportunity to take dramatic risks, to tell a non-conventional story or use a non-traditional format. The few students who responded all voiced the same opinion—they liked the tornado story and wanted to put it on stage.

Jill gave the cast a ten-minute break and asked me what I thought we should do with our remaining thirty minutes. One of our musical directors, Evi, had left rehearsal to accompany a musical theatre class, but Bryan, who would serve as the main composer for the project, joined our conversation. We agreed that further discussion would be futile; the students had done great work, but seemed tired of talking. We also wanted the

chance to talk to each other without them before we took the development of the show any further. I asked Jill if she could think of an activity that would exercise other parts of the cast's creativity, and she looked to Bryan. She asked if he could lead a musical improvisation, and he eagerly agreed. He told us to give him a topic or a theme, and promised to get the students to begin creating a song.

When the break was over, Jill turned the cast's attention to Bryan, who had sat behind a keyboard in the corner of the room. He asked them to stand in a semi-circle in front of him and led them in a short vocal warm-up. As soon as they began singing, I could see the students become as tense and shy as they had been when we first assembled three hours earlier.

While the cast warmed up, Jill and I glanced at the list of words and phrases we had compiled that morning. The phrase "twist of fate," taken directly from the radio segment, had prompted a long, compelling discussion to which almost every student contributed. They talked about fate and luck, and someone had pointed out the way the phrase played on the physical attributes of the tornado. I assumed we would come back to the "twist of fate" again in our process, that it could end up in the show in some way, so I gave the phrase to Bryan to use in his improvisational exercise.

Bryan told the cast that he would start playing some chords inspired by the phrase "twist of fate." As he played and established a pattern, he told the students to start singing. I saw most of them tense up when he said this; none of them opened their mouths. To get them going, Bryan told them to start with only the words "twist of fate." John, who was new to PGT, began singing the phrase repeatedly on one pitch. Bryan

encouraged others to sing along, or to sing lines that musically complimented the first. One or two students sang slightly different lines, but most stayed quiet.

As Bryan continued to play, Jill stepped into the semi-circle and called on one of the returning campers, who had been in *Second Cup* and the 2007 project, *Unpaved Roads*, to sing something completely different. The girl froze for a second and blushed, but then started improvising a musical line over the small group that was repeating “twist of fate.” She chose to sing “oo” rather than using words, but her willingness to let go and sing inspired others to do the same.

Bryan kept the improvisation going for about ten more minutes, trying to get as many students singing their own parts as possible, but only a few were comfortable enough to sing alone by the end of rehearsal. As we led the students downstairs and outside to lunch, I thanked Bryan. Jill told him that it usually took a few days for the cast to feel comfortable improvising and singing in front of each other. She thought we were off to a good start.

That afternoon, while our students were in class, Jill and I met to discuss our first rehearsal. In spite of any personal preferences she or I had, we understood that the cast wanted to write a musical about the tornado in Hoisington. I was pleased that they liked the story, and we agreed that having a pre-determined general outline would save us some time. I was glad that Jennifer had suggested we create our own original characters, because I probably would have insisted that we do that if the cast had proposed we extract characters directly from the radio segment. Though we could loosely base a few on the interviews in *This American Life*, I felt it was important to create characters and relationships that fit our cast well.

Though we both wanted to let the students make as many decisions as possible, I told Jill I did not want us to end up formatting the show in a linear fashion. I liked the story, but I was not sure if it was complex enough to hold an audience's attention for the length of an entire musical. I thought revealing information in an interesting way might help make the show itself more compelling. I also wanted to use the project to teach our young students, many of whom had only worked on traditional musicals, if any at all, about different approaches to storytelling. Jill understood my argument and we discussed some of our options. We decided to spend the next rehearsal exploring various storytelling techniques, and hoped to have chosen a general style by the end of our second rehearsal.

## TUESDAY

We began the second day with a theatrical styles exercise. Jill split the cast into small groups and asked each to figure out an innovative way to tell the story of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears." When the students looked bewildered, I gave them a few suggestions—news report, soap opera, musical. Jill gave them five minutes to come up with something and stage it, and reminded them not to worry about performing perfectly.

Two of the groups chose to perform the story as a musical, one as an opera, and one as a silent film. The two musicals and the opera looked almost identical; the actors sang through the story without adding much to it. The actors in the silent film used large physical gestures and exaggerated facial expressions, which worked well. Though the

exercise stretched the students' creativity, it did not yield any creative approaches to storytelling that we could apply to our project.

Rather than discussing style and format right away, Jill suggested we start making decisions about the characters in the show. We all sat in a circle on the floor, and I took out my laptop so that I could take notes as we spoke. Jill reminded the students that we had discussed creating brand new characters, with a few based loosely on people from the radio segment. She told them that she and I liked this idea, and that we wanted start developing the new characters that morning.

Jill asked the students to start naming some character ideas. Once again, she reminded them not to censor themselves. One student started by saying that we should show some of the high school seniors going to prom, as that was the focus of the radio broadcast, and an important element of the story. I asked the students to name some possible prom-goers, and they made a list of high school stereotypes, such as “the jock,” “the prom queen,” and “the nerd.” When Jill asked them to get more specific, one girl suggested we represent a pair of female best friends who we had heard on *This American Life*. Throughout their life-long friendship, the eighteen-year olds had come to believe that one was lucky and the other was not. On prom night, the “lucky” one found her house untouched, while the “unlucky” girl’s had been destroyed. (“Prom”) I added “Lucky Girl/Unlucky Girl” to my list.

After the students had exhausted their ideas about different high school seniors, Jill asked them to think about the adults in the town. Because Jill had brought in a newspaper article about Hoisington’s only pharmacist, someone suggested “Town Pharmacist” first. The cast then listed adults that were linked to the prom in some way,

such as the seniors' parents, the high school principal, teachers, and the football coach. Jill encouraged the students to look deeper into the story for the less obvious characters. One student remembered a girl describing her prom dress in the radio segment, and suggested we add "dress shop owner" to the list. Another thought that police officers and firemen would play crucial roles in the tornado relief.

Once the cast had created a substantial list of character ideas, we had to decide how many to include in the show. I asked the students if they wanted to each portray one character or more, and everyone who responded said "more." They felt, and I agreed, that we could create the most vivid picture of Hoisington if we introduced a greater number of characters throughout the course of the show.

I told the students I saw two options—we could have twenty characters, allowing each actor to play two people, or up to forty, allowing each actor play three or four. If we had twenty characters, each could appear multiple times. If we had more than that, it would be hard to show each more than once. One student, Dan, suggested that we write ten main characters, one for each cast member. Though others would come in and out of the story, the ten central characters would recur throughout the show. The students liked this idea, but they could not agree on how many extra characters to include. I kept my personal thoughts on the matter to myself, knowing Jill and I would discuss it privately before we made the final decision.

Jill told the cast that we did not have to decide right away, and asked that we focus on the identities of the ten core characters. When no one spoke up, I suggested that the ten be Hoisington High School seniors. Because there are not many musicals about teenagers, young actors almost always play adults. I saw the summer writing project as

an opportunity to create characters to whom my students could directly relate. Everyone in the cast liked my idea, and we decided to use it.

For the last forty-five minutes of rehearsal, Jill turned the group over to Bryan and Evi. Bryan asked the students to improvise on the “twist of fate” theme again, so that Evi could hear and record their work. She had brought a tape recorder, as she and Bryan planned to revisit the cast’s ideas when writing music later on.

To our delight, the cast starting singing right away. John repeated the original “twist of fate” phrase, and others joined wordlessly above that line. After a few minutes, once everyone was singing, Evi conducted the students to all slowly fade out. She wanted to try another improvisation, and asked me for a new theme.

I glanced at my list of the cast’s initial reactions to the radio segment. After the tornado, once the high school seniors had checked in with their families, many congregated in the streets to look through the post-tornado rubble; the image of a group of teenagers in formal wear, using flashlights to explore their destroyed town in the middle of the night, had made it on to everyone’s list of theatrical images. I did not know if this would work as a song, but I wanted it depicted in the show in some way. I reminded Evi and the cast of the scene and asked them to use it as a starting point in their next musical improvisation.

Evi gave the students three minutes to each think of a short line of text. They immediately bombarded her with questions: “How long does it have to be? Does it have to rhyme? Can we work together?” Evi did not answer them directly. “Just write something,” she said.

After a few minutes, Evi asked Bryan to start improvising. Some students were not done writing, and I could see a couple still staring at blank pages. John, who had started the “twist of fate” improvisation, began singing first: “This is where a wall used to stand. It’s hard to imagine it here.” The other students hesitated to join him. They stood uncomfortably and guarded their pages, as if trying to hide their lyrics from each other. Erica sang a few lines: “My roof is in Missouri, but my house is still here.” John repeated his lines a few times. When no others volunteered, Evi told Aaron, who was standing at one end of the cast’s semi-circle around the piano, to begin with two lines he had written down. As soon as he was done, the person next to him had to sing something, and this would continue until everyone had sang.

I was surprised to see all of the students participate. Though some did not have completed lines, and some chose to speak instead of sing, every cast member found something to contribute when it was his/her turn. Their lyrics were simple, and most did not rhyme, but I was excited to hear their ideas. Emma, who had not written anything down, tensed up when the person next to her finished singing. Evi reminded her to sing whatever came to mind, but Emma silently shrugged. Bryan continued to play. At this point, Jill, who had been watching with me from behind the piano, stepped in. In a stern but encouraging manner, she told Emma the group would not continue until she participated— she did not have to sing much, but she needed to contribute in some way. Emma timidly asked: “Can I take a second to write something down?” Jill nodded, and Evi suggested we come back to Emma when she was done writing.

When Emma put down her pencil, Evi indicated that it was her turn. Emma sang quietly: “Dear Dorothy, please come and save us. We’re lost in the storm.” I smiled, and

saw many students do the same. I had already forgotten one Hoisington teenager's account of the graffiti he had found on the morning after the storm. In reference to the tornado that sweeps through Kansas and brings Dorothy to Oz in L. Frank Baum's novel, someone had written: "Dear Dorothy, Come back. We miss you." Because the tornado in our story also took place in Kansas, I loved the idea of subtly incorporating *The Wizard of Oz* in some way.

Evi asked Emma to repeat her line for the rest of the improvisation. She relaxed as she sang, and continued to change her melody as others added complementing lines, such as: "Won't you find us in the storm? Come and save us from the storm." Erica elaborated on the *Wizard of Oz* theme, adding: "There's no place like home, but home is gone. I don't like Oz."

While our students were in class that afternoon, Jill and I talked through the discussions we had led that morning. I wanted to choose a format for the show and finalize a number of characters soon, so that we could outline the plot and start writing by the end of the week. Jill and I both liked the idea of having ten main characters, as it would allow each student to focus on one for the majority of the rehearsal process. While Jill was open to having them all play many other characters as well, I wanted to limit the number each student played to two. Though I wanted this show to challenge our actors and audiences, I thought we might overcomplicate it by adding too many characters. Jill suggested we start with twenty, but remain open to adding more later.

When we discussed the show's format, Jill and I agreed to encourage the cast to develop a non-linear piece. Our main goal was to challenge our students' straightforward ideas about storytelling. Though I believed the Hoisington story would work, I also

thought we could make it more stageworthy by finding an innovative mode of presentation. As Jill and I talked through different ideas, we developed a non-linear format that we both loved; it excited us as teachers and artists, and we decided to pitch it to our students on the following day.

### WEDNESDAY

We began Wednesday's rehearsal with a revised version of the "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" exercise. We kept them in the same groups and asked them to tell the same story, but this time insisted that they not use a linear format. Jill gave them a few examples, such as a series of flashbacks or interviews with news reporters. During the ten minutes they had to plan, I approached the different groups. They all needed help getting started, as they were still confused about the requirements. I suggested they think about books or films with unconventional storylines. After ten minutes, as all the groups had started something, Jill gave them extra time to develop and rehearse their ideas.

Although the cast struggled at first, every group managed to present the "Goldilocks" story in a non-linear way. When Jill asked the students to share their thoughts on the exercise, they claimed to have enjoyed the presentations. The ideas were harder to develop, but the four final products were more unique and interesting to watch than they had been the day before. When the discussion ended, Jill asked me to explain our idea for the show to the cast.

I told them that we thought the show could take place after the tornado had passed through the town. We would start at the beginning of the story and tell it straight through—from the pre-prom preparations to a few days after the storm—but the

characters would have already lived it. Rather than presenting every detail onstage, we would have the characters retell the story in a series of monologues.

Knowing that “a series of monologues” sounded boring, I asked the students if any of them had ever seen a production Moises Kaufman’s *Laramie Project*. Jennifer raised her hand first, so I asked her to explain the show to her castmates. When she was done describing the plot, I asked if she remembered anything about the format of the show. “Um, it’s a bunch of monologues, isn’t it?” she replied.

I told the cast that Jill and I had thought we could use *The Laramie Project* as a model for our show. Although *Laramie* is made up of monologues written in the past tense, it engages audiences as the actors relive the stories they tell. We would not directly mimic Kaufman’s work, but Jill and I thought we could learn from the tone of his show.

Our students were quiet. Attributing their silence to confusion, I continued describing our concept in greater detail. I explained that we would reveal information slowly throughout the show. We would open with characters explaining everyday life in Hoisington; others would talk about typical Hoisington proms and describe the events leading up to the storm. We would not reveal what had actually happened until we reached that point in our telling. If we wrote and presented it well, the audience would feel like they were seeing the actions as they happened, but our presentation would be more creative and challenging than that of a traditional musical. Though the students did not seem entirely convinced, they agreed to try our idea.

When Jill left to observe one of the younger cast’s rehearsals, I decided to work with the cast on a definitive list of characters. I read their initial list of Hoisington

teenagers out loud, and asked them to narrow it down to the five males and five females they would most like to keep. We did not name the characters, but made a list using indicators that reminded us of their most important characteristics. We called one character “Prom Committee President,” and another “New Boy.” A girl who was eager to leave for college in a big city was called “Outta Here Girl.”

As we talked through the individual characters, the cast created stories that I knew we could use. For example, as the students began coming up with ideas about one boy who did not fit in with his classmates, “Misunderstood Boy,” a story about his family life began to form. One student suggested that he might not fit in because his father is an artist from a big city and not a farmer like most people in Hoisington. Rather than using the barn on his property for traditional purposes, he makes and stores art there; no one in the town understands him until after the tornado, when the artist and his son play a central role rebuilding the town.

Many stories like this one came out of our lively discussion, in which every student participated. Although I had planned to play a game or lead an improvisation at the end of the rehearsal, our discussion lasted until Jill returned right before lunch time. A few of the students enthusiastically described some character ideas to her, and Jill responded by giving them an assignment for the evening. She explained: “For tomorrow, I want you to each pick one character you talked about today—it doesn’t matter which one—and write their biography. Try to write it in the first person, like a monologue, but you can also make a list of facts about the person if you’d rather do that.” Some cast members asked specific questions about what exactly was required, but Jill refused to

answer directly. She told them to write whatever and however much they needed to in order to describe their characters.

After lunch, Jill and I met to discuss the morning. We agreed that the group dynamic was developing well. John and Erica, who were new to the program, were two of the most active participants in the musical improvisations and character discussions; they seemed comfortable with their cast mates. Jill and I had both noticed that Emma barely spoke in discussions. Though Jill had directed her before and thought she would participate once she got to know the cast, she feared that the number of outspoken students in our group would overpower her. As we saw in the musical improvisation, Emma had great ideas to share. Jill told me to encourage her by personally asking for her to participate or to read her writing out loud.

Though the students had not received our concept as well as we had hoped, Jill believed that they would appreciate it more as they saw the show take shape. Meanwhile, she would show them a scene from a filmed production of *The Laramie Project* to show them how engaging a series of monologues could be.

Having chosen a basic format for the show, I wondered how we could effectively incorporate music. Though we included songs primarily because the program required it, I wanted to find a way to place the songs that did not feel forced. After watching Bryan and Evi guide our students through good improvisations, I believed we could successfully convey certain dramatic moments through music; we just needed to figure out how to consistently justify singing throughout the show.

As I talked through my concern with Jill, I thought of an idea. In order to separate songs from the spoken past tense monologues, we could set them in the present.

Characters would use monologues to describe what happened; they would sing when they reached moments in the story that they could not explain in words alone. While the monologues talked about the past, the songs would serve as flashbacks which would show the events as they happened. For example, I suggested we write a monologue that described the seniors leaving prom, but use a song to show them looking through the rubble late that night.

#### THURSDAY

When I described my concept for justifying the music in the show, the cast seemed excited, and more enthusiastic about the overall format of the show. Because we had Bryan and Evi in rehearsal for the whole morning, Jill asked them to lead another musical improvisation. The more material they gathered, the sooner they could start working on writing each song. Bryan played the musical theme he had developed for the post-tornado improvisation, which we temporarily named “The Flashlight Song,” and Evi recorded the students elaborating on the work they had already done. I then gave them a new theme, “prom preparations” and Evi asked each cast member to write down some ideas for lyrics. Once each of the students had sung his/her prepared lines, Evi asked the cast to improvise new ones. She started at one end of the semi-circle, and told them to try to create rhyming couplets. One person would sing a line, and the next would try to rhyme with it; another would sing a new line, and the next would rhyme with that. The improvisation was successful, as it yielded a lot of usable material, and Bryan and Evi left to begin putting together ideas for the final versions of both songs.

During a ten-minute break, a few students asked if they could give me the character biographies they had written. Jill had to go oversee another rehearsal, and she asked me to discuss the students' work with them while she was gone. I asked the cast to sit in a circle with their writing in hand and let all who felt comfortable sharing read their biographies to the group. Erica read a monologue about finding a prom date from the perspective of the "Unlucky Girl" from the radio broadcast, which led us to discuss who each of the girls would go to prom with in our play. Someone suggested "Lucky Girl" go with her long term boyfriend while "Unlucky Girl" went with an underclassman who she did not like. As other students shared their character biographies, similar conversations about plot details emerged. I took notes on things that I thought we could use later on.

When everyone who wanted to had read his/her assignment out loud, I collected the students' writing and brought up the adult characters in the show. I asked the students if they had thought more about how many adults to include, and no one responded. When I said that Jill and I both thought we should try to limit ourselves to ten adult characters, the cast seemed pleased. I suggested we start choosing which Hoisington adults we wanted to include.

After I read the cast's initial list aloud, I asked the students to name the characters I had mentioned that they definitely wanted to put in the show. One student suggested "Pharmacist," as Jill's article about the town's only pharmacist had come up many times throughout the first few days. I liked the article, as it reminded the students of how small Hoisington was compared to the New York suburbs in which they lived. Because our audience would be coming in with the same perspective, I thought the character could serve a similar purpose. I put "Pharmacist" at the top of my list.

I asked the cast to consider which adults they wanted to depict who would have been directly involved in the prom. Someone immediately mentioned that the principal and a few teachers would have been at prom when the tornado hit. When the cast agreed, I suggested we use one character represent the high school authorities, so we could use the nine other adults to show different aspects of the town. We discussed the various options, and decided on “Football Coach,” as he might be an authoritative figure who knows the students in a less formal setting than the principal and classroom teachers.

As our discussion continued, I encouraged the cast to think of ways to work in as many different perspectives as possible. Someone suggested we put in an old man who had been living in Hoisington his whole life, as he could describe what the town was like long before the tornado hit. By the end of the rehearsal, I had written down fifteen adults that Jill and I could consider as we worked on a detailed outline of the show that afternoon.

While I waited for Jill to arrive at our afternoon meeting, I began making a basic outline of the show as I imagined it. Because our concept relied on the gradual revealing of information, I started by making a list of what I wanted the audience to know at each point. I called the first section “Welcome to Hoisington.” Here, we would introduce the town by having older residents discuss their everyday lives. The next section was “Meeting the Teenagers,” where I thought we could bring in the high school students who would attend the prom later on; they would describe growing up in Hoisington. Towards the end of the teenagers’ segment, they would start discussing the prom, which would lead into a section called “Prom in Hoisington.” This piece of the show would

focus on prom's importance in the town. The high school students and older Hoisington residents, including the dress shop owner and the football coach, would talk about different aspects of typical Hoisington proms.

I called the next section "Tornado." Though I could not yet imagine how we could represent the storm on stage, I knew we would place part of it in the basement of the high school gym, where the seniors waited to hear if their families were safe. That scene would lead into "The Flashlight Song," which showed them exploring the rubble late that night.

When Jill arrived, I was contemplating the show's conclusion. I did not know much longer the show could continue after the tornado, and was unsure of how to resolve the story. Jill and I talked through some ideas, but ultimately decided to raise the issue with our students in rehearsal the next morning. We would ask them what messages and themes they wanted our audiences to remember most, and would try to work their responses into our ending somehow.

Jill liked the way I had structured our outline, but suggested that we add more detail before presenting it to the cast. Though the style in which we had chosen to write did not lend itself to a conventional storyline, she reminded me that we could not create an entire show about a tornado without adding any specific plot points or compelling relationships. After talking through potential conflicts between different characters, particularly the high school students, Jill asked if I thought any central characters should die in the tornado.

One older man was killed in the real Hoisington storm. As *This American Life* had pointed out, the high school seniors who would have been out on any other Friday

night were saved by being at prom with adults to usher them into the basement.

Although all of us, including the cast, wanted to make sure our teenagers made it through the night, I liked the idea of having an important figure die in the storm. I suggested a beloved teacher from the high school, which would force our characters to experience a great loss without needing to grapple with the complexity of losing a fellow teenager. I reminded Jill that the reflective style we had chosen meant we could never show the deceased teacher on stage, even in the scenes that took place before the tornado, but she liked the concept of referring to him throughout the show without ever seeing him. We decided to propose the idea to our students the following morning.

## FRIDAY

Jill started Friday's rehearsal by sharing a scene from the DVD of PGT's 2005 production of *The Laramie Project*. Our students loved the clip; they appreciated seeing a concrete example of the style, as it convinced them that a series of monologues could tell a compelling story and present an exciting challenge.

Next, I presented the outline I had written and asked the cast to think about where they might want to add songs. Someone suggested that we start with a song, in order to establish the show as a musical. I asked what the opening song should be about, and another student suggested "everyday life in Hoisington." I wrote it down, but told them to keep thinking of different ideas as well. Everyone agreed that the songs they had begun working on—the pre-prom song, "the flashlight song," and "twist of fate," had to fit in somewhere. The pre-prom and "Flashlight" songs clearly belonged in specific places in the outline. As I remembered "Twist of Fate," I realized it could serve as an

interesting prologue as it would allow us to set up the musical without giving away any important pieces of information. The cast liked this idea, so I added it to my list.

When I told the cast that I had intentionally left out the ending, I asked them to think about how they wanted to conclude the show. I wrote down their initial thoughts on the closing messages, which included the following:

Fate—something that you think is sidetracking you from your road might  
lead you somewhere else  
Be careful what you wish for  
You can rebuild  
Friendship comes out of tragedy  
You can gain deeper understanding about who people are as their true  
colors come out in aftermath of a tragedy  
You are alone with your problems in the end—when everyone else is  
suffering, you have to help yourself  
Family is the most important thing—material goods lose their meaning in  
comparison  
Community will get you far, but ultimately you’ve got to pull it off  
yourself- you can’t count on the community to carry you

As I was pleased with the sophisticated list of themes our students were able to compile, I decided to bring up the plot questions Jill and I had discussed.

When I mentioned the option of having the one casualty in Hoisington be a beloved high school teacher, almost every one in the cast approved. Dan, one of the oldest cast members, said he was particularly excited about the idea because it “raised the stakes” for our characters. He thought the tornado gained much more importance when it caused the characters to lose someone important.

Sarah, a younger cast member, was worried that the show would be too sad if we ended with a death. Dan objected, telling her that we could end the show with a sense of hope even if someone had died. As we continued to talk about the issue, we discussed how and when we could establish a character without revealing that he was killed in the

tornado and without ever putting him on stage. Though we all agreed that the teenagers should talk about him when describing the high school, Jill suggested that we bring in someone else who could talk about him a lot without letting on that he was dead.

Through that conversation, the character who we first referred to as “The Teacher’s Wife,” was born.

We would introduce “The Teacher’s Wife,” whom we later named Linda, at the beginning of the show. She would talk about her own life in Hoisington and mention her husband a few times, without referring to his death.

For the last third of rehearsal, Jill and I handed the cast over to Bryan, who had approached me that morning with a few completed sections of the pre-prom song. The previous morning, after the musical improvisation, Bryan had compiled the students’ material and written some of his own to string it all together. Because the pre-prom song did not seem as though it would change based on the individual characters, Jill asked him to spend the last hour of rehearsal teaching it to our students. She knew as well as I that the cast’s morale would remain high if we sent them home for the weekend having learned the beginning of a song they had helped to write.

Before we dismissed the cast for lunch, Jill assigned some work for the weekend. First, she asked them to look for and bring in all of the information they could find about Hoisington, Kansas. She also reminded them to keep a pen and paper nearby at all times so that they could write down any ideas that popped into their heads. She told them to keep writing character biographies, monologues, and random details as they thought about different aspects of Hoisington life.

When I talked with Jill that afternoon, I decided that I would spend my weekend rereading *The Laramie Project* and sorting through the students' character biographies. By Monday, I wanted to solidify a list of twenty characters so that we could begin leading improvisations to help develop each character more fully. I wanted to make sure I was ready to start writing the script on Monday afternoon.

### Week Two

At the start of the PGT Summer's second week, I was optimistic, but aware that our relaxed brainstorming time had ended. I loved spending hours of rehearsal discussing character and plot details with the cast, but as soon as Monday morning hit and I learned how far along the other shows in the program were, I felt pressured to move faster. If I did not start writing soon, the ten teenagers who had trusted me with their summer experience would not have a show to perform on opening night. I asked Jill to give me a deadline for finishing the script; she suggested Friday, July 25, which gave me two weeks.

### MONDAY

I began Monday morning by leading a discussion of the Hoisington research our cast members had done over the weekend. As each student shared his/her findings, others commented on which facts we could potentially work into our show. Aaron had made a list of statistics, which said that Hoisington had three thousand inhabitants and six churches. Katie shared a story about notorious ghost sightings in the area, and an advertisement she had found for the annual Hoisington Memorial Day Nature Festival.

Everyone in the cast laughed at the festival's list of events, which included a "Baby Judging Contest," but Bryan interjected to remind the group that such activities might seem less absurd to those in rural areas. Because Bryan's family lived in a small town in Kansas, I asked him to share some insight into their lifestyle. Our students listened intently as he told them about the big open spaces and lack of activity, particularly for teenagers.

When Jill arrived for the second hour of rehearsal, we began the improvisations that I hoped would inspire me to begin writing that afternoon. First, Jill introduced the group to some basic rules of improvisation. She emphasized the principle of always saying "yes, and" to one's scene partner, which was particularly important as we were still making up facts about our version of Hoisington.<sup>4</sup> In order for the scenes to work, the actors had to build off of one another's ideas without resisting them in any way.

Jill called on Dan and Jennifer, two of the more experienced actors in the group, to begin. When she asked me to suggest characters for them to play, I glanced at my list of Hoisington facts and said the first thing that came to mind: "You're an older married couple, you've both lived in Hoisington since you were born, and you're sitting on your front porch." Dan and Jennifer pulled up two chairs and sat down. Before they could begin, Jill decided to add one more character. She said: "Jake, jump up there with them. I want you to play the new boy. You just moved in across the street and you need help finding your way into town."

---

<sup>4</sup> Teachers of improvisational acting often stress the importance of agreeing with and adding to suggestions made by one's scene partner. In order to keep an improvised scene going, one must never say "no," but always "yes, and..."

I could tell from Jake's nervous manner that he had not improvised much before, but Dan and Jennifer's work as the characters they named Herbert and Cynthia held the scene together. I noticed elements of the stereotypical elderly people commonly depicted by adolescent actors, but Dan and Jennifer developed a unique relationship and enough specific quirks to set themselves apart. They also added a few relevant details, such as memories of their son's senior prom. As Dan and Jennifer spoke, I wrote down many lines and ideas that I hoped to work into the script later on.

When the scene ended, Jill asked a new group of students to stand and I tried to think of another scenario. We facilitated a few more improvisations, all of which felt forced and yielded less material than the "Herbert and Cynthia" scene. For the last hour of rehearsal, Jill turned the group over to Bryan who taught the rest of the pre-prom song, which he had named "Sleepy Old Town."

## TUESDAY

On Tuesday, Jill and I led character interviews which she thought would serve our show better than improvised scenes. I assigned each student a nameless character, such as "Pharmacist" and "Dairy Queen Manager," from the list we had made the previous week, and Jill announced that the first set of interviews would take place before the tornado had hit. She then instructed the students to mill about the room in character. She led an exercise to help them develop physical traits and asked them a few questions rhetorical questions about their everyday lives.

When the students looked comfortable with their characters, Jill turned on a tape recorder and brought it over to Chris, who was playing the mayor. She indicated that I

should follow to interview him. “Hello, sir,” I began. He smiled and replied: “Welcome to Hoisington!” He told me we were standing on Main Street, in front of Town Hall, and proudly shared information about the buildings around us and the people who worked in each. When he seemed tired of inventing details, I moved on to the rest of the cast.

Once I had interviewed everyone, Jill asked the students to imagine that the tornado had just swept through the town. She had them walk around the room once more, thinking about how their characters’ lives had changed. I interviewed each actor again, and was pleased with their thoughtful responses. Later that afternoon, Jill transcribed our conversations, excluding the leading questions I had asked. The post-tornado response from Chris, who had played the Mayor, read as such:

Oh. I’m just...uh...observing the damage of the Post Office. The trees have, uh, the trees have just, the storm damaged almost every store on Main Street. I’m speechless. It’s just – I’m just – seeing all of this just takes the life out of you. Some of the schools – the elementary school is destroyed, but we can use the classrooms in the middle school as shelters. To be honest with you, I have been completely devastated. Yes. I have been just so overwhelmed – it feels like there is just no hope for this town. I think that these are good people – they are good people, you know. I feel ashamed that I have not been able to get into gear yet. I’m starting to. My house survived. My wife is fine. She’s fine. Thank Heaven for that. Thank Heaven for that. My house hasn’t been damaged. Some of my neighbors – Herbert and Cynthia, they seem to be holding up pretty well...so, mmm hmmm. I just feel like...it’s tough. It’s tough, I’m going to say that. I know I haven’t gotten into gear yet. I’m the Mayor. It’s tough. I hope you have a good day in...what’s left of Hoisington.

I was pleased with the way Chris and a few of his castmates maintained newly developed character traits from one interview to the next. Though the tone of the conversations changed, the physical choices and diction each actor used remained consistent throughout the morning.

The two hours of character interviews that we conducted on Tuesday gave Jill and me a wealth of material to work with as we began writing. During the following few afternoons, we developed a system for turning the students' words into polished monologues. Jill would transcribe the interviews on one computer in the office and e-mail them to me. I would open the documents on my laptop, edit them, and send them back for her to read and critique. I left a few sections almost entirely intact. I completely rewrote others, only saving specific ideas, details, or phrases. If an actor had captured a tone I found appropriate, I would try to recreate it in my writing. Chris, for example, had portrayed the mayor well in the post-tornado scene. I had to change many of the ideas when I found the right context for his monologue, but maintained his general speech patterns and word choices.<sup>5</sup>

By the end of the week, I had combined a few of the improvised and edited monologues to create our opening scene. I wanted to start with a few characters on stage, individually addressing the audience about aspects of Hoisington life in order to introduce the audience to the town. I decided to start with the mayor; I liked Chris's way of describing the buildings on Main Street, and thought a "tour of Hoisington" could work well as an opening monologue. After he pointed out a few favorite spots, I introduced the "Teacher's Wife," whom Jennifer had played in the first session of interviews. I chose to keep the name Jennifer had given her, Linda, and the idea that she was an outsider. Jennifer said she was from Chicago, had met her husband in college, and had come back to his hometown to raise a family. I thought she could relate to the audience as a fellow newcomer and highlight a few things they might find strange about

---

<sup>5</sup> See the bottom of page 29 of the *Pieces of Reality* script for the final version of this monologue.

Hoisington at first glance. Herbert and Cynthia came in next, to contrast Linda with an older perspective on the town. I worked in a lot of the material from the first improvised scene—a few specific lines and the way the couple had finished each other’s sentences and elaborated on each other’s ideas. Then, I brought Linda and the mayor back to establish some continuity in the scene. Each had a short paragraph of material that built upon his/her earlier monologue.

Those four characters remained on stage for the rest of the scene, and I brought on three more: a Reverend, the Pharmacist, and a ten-year old named Annie. I tried to justify each character’s entrance by having him/her represent a different perspective of Hoisington. The Reverend discussed the importance of faith in Hoisington, which we had deduced from the existence of six churches in the town; the Pharmacist emphasized the size of the population by sharing his ability to fill every prescription by himself; Annie added a younger point of view, giving the audience a sense of the intimacy of small town life by describing her close relationship to her classmates. Throughout the scene, I tried to weave monologues in and out of one another. Only Herbert and Cynthia interacted directly, but I looked for thematically appropriate moments for the different speeches to interrupt one another. For example, after the mayor praised the buildings at the center of town, Linda added: “I know what this town can look like to an outsider. We don’t have much—a few churches, the schools, some beautiful little homes—lots of cornfields. It doesn’t look like a lot. These people, though, to them it’s everything. You have to understand that” (3).<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> See pages 2-7 of the *Pieces of Reality* script for the final version of this scene.

When I finished the opening scene, Jill and I discussed the outline once again. With a better understanding of how the show would work based on the writing I had done, we decided which characters would come in where and how they would interact. Though we finalized almost every detail by the end of the week, we could not figure out how to end the show. I continued writing scenes we had outlined, such as the teenagers introducing Hoisington prom traditions, in the style of the opening scene and hoped the finale would develop organically as we blocked and worked through the beginning of the show.

#### WEDNESDAY – FRIDAY

By the middle of the second week of the program, Jill and I had run out of helpful exercises to do with our cast. Because we could not accomplish much without more of a script, Jill replaced one or two hours of rehearsal each morning with class time. By taking them out of rehearsal that week, Jill gave our students more time in classes they loved and gave me extra time to write. Though it felt counterproductive to take the cast out of rehearsal as I grew nervous about finishing on time, Jill reminded me that we could not use our time well until we had enough material to work with. She assured me that we would cut down our cast's class time in the two weeks before the show in order to get back the rehearsal time that we had lost.

During the few hours of rehearsal that we kept that week, I led more improvisations and discussed further research the students had done on Hoisington and tornadoes. One morning, Jill and I split the cast into two groups and asked each to write one set of song lyrics. We assigned one group a song Bryan and I had tentatively named

“Friday Nights,” in which a high school senior who had grown up in Hoisington explained the social scene to the new boy in town. We asked the other group to write a rant that “Misunderstood Boy” was to give to his classmates after the tornado, as they focused on petty concerns and ignored the big picture.

When I approached the groups, I found the students struggling to write as team. I gave them a few ideas and encouraged them to keep trying. When I came back half an hour later, I found that the “Friday Nights” group had written a whole page and wanted extra time to finish. Though we did not use their complete set of lyrics, Bryan worked many of their phrases and ideas into his own version of the song.

Before Jill sent the students home for the weekend, she reminded them that she was proud of all of their creative work. She announced that she and I planned to cast the show over the weekend, and warned them that the tone of rehearsals would change when we began blocking on Monday morning. She said that the following three weeks would require the cast’s complete focus and dedication, and asked them to maintain the high level of maturity they had displayed up to that point.

### Week Three

On the Sunday night before our third week of rehearsal, Jill and I met to discuss casting. A few choices seemed obvious based on earlier improvisations. Though I had assigned roles randomly for those scenes and interviews, many students had fit their parts well, such as Chris as the mayor and Dan as Herbert. I wanted to cast Jennifer as Cynthia, but we could only give her one adult character and she had also done beautiful work as Linda. Jill thought Jennifer would benefit from the challenge of playing Linda,

and did not hesitate to cast Katie as Cynthia instead. I let Jill, as the experienced director, make the final decisions in such cases.

## MONDAY

Jill asked me to read the cast list to the students at the beginning of rehearsal on Monday morning. Jill reminded the cast that we were writing an ensemble show; we had already developed some characters more than others, but this did not mean they would be featured more in the end. The students seemed satisfied with their roles, and ready to start blocking the show.

We devoted the first hour of rehearsal to reviewing and perfecting the music for “Sleepy Old Town.” As soon as Bryan and Evi finished, Jill started staging the song; she told me that she hoped to finish it by the end of rehearsal that morning.

As I watched Jill block the first four lines of the song, I realized that she was not going to finish by lunchtime. The students were enthusiastic, but many of them struggled to learn blocking quickly. I could sense Jill’s frustration as she kept stopping the students to fix their acting as well. Her main concern was that most of the cast members looked like they were running from place to place rather than crossing with intention. She worked patiently with the cast, asking John, for example, to pretend he was walking to a mirror in his bedroom rather than crossing downstage left. I had planned to leave rehearsal at some point to write, but ended up staying to keep the group focused while Jill worked with individual actors.

That afternoon, Jill and I discussed the problems the cast had faced while blocking “Sleepy Old Town.” Having worked with the group for two weeks, I had

gained confidence in their maturity and abilities. After two weeks of discussion and writing, I had forgotten how little experience most of our students had on stage. Even those who had acted in plays or musicals before had struggled that morning; they had taken a long time to learn the blocking Jill gave them, and had needed specific suggestions for the intention with which they should sing each line. In such a short process, I knew the students needed to pick up staging quickly and do a lot of acting work on their own. I had seen Jill help beginners achieve great acting work on stage before, but I was not sure she could block and work through each scene in only three weeks. We had to use our time wisely.

## TUESDAY

Jill finish blocking “Sleepy Old Town” on Tuesday morning. Although the students did not absorb the new material right away, they had retained much of the direction Jill had given them the previous day. In order to start scene work, Jill replaced an hour of our cast’s class time that afternoon with an extra hour of rehearsal. I would skip rehearsal to write, as I wanted to give the cast more of the script as quickly as possible. Halfway through the afternoon, I took a break and decided to stop by rehearsal, where Jill was working through opening scene of the show. When I walked in, it seemed that she was having just as much trouble getting what she wanted from the cast as she had when working on “Sleepy Old Town.”

I first watched Jill work with Dan and Katie on one of Herbert and Cynthia’s exchanges. She asked them to focus their eyes on one point, as if they were both speaking to the same person sitting in front of them, but Katie kept looking down at the

floor. Jill then tried to get Katie to sit up straight. She explained: “When you slouch, you look like Katie. I want to see Cynthia.” Katie giggled uncomfortably, explaining that she had always had bad posture. Jill stopped the scene and asked Katie to stand up. When she tapped Katie’s back and adjusted her neck slightly, Katie transformed. A few cast members commented on how mature Katie looked when she stood up straight. Jill added: “Now that we know you can stand this way, I’m not going to leave you alone all summer.” Katie giggled, slouching again, and told Jill that her mother would be pleased to hear it. I stayed for the rest of rehearsal and noted what Jill worked on with each actor. I wanted to make sure I knew what to look for in each student’s work when Jill left to oversee other rehearsals in the program later in the week. Knowing Katie’s was posture an issue, for example, I would remember to critique and compliment it as I saw fit.

At the end of rehearsal, Jill asked the actors how they felt about the work they had done that morning. After a few had responded, Jill asked if they thought she was being too hard on them. Katie was silent, but Dan said that he liked being challenged. He wanted Jill to continue to criticize him until he was doing his best. A few of his castmates timidly agreed. Jill concluded the conversation by reminding the students that she only asked a lot of them because she knew they had potential. She believed that the show could be great, and told them that she would do everything she could to make sure each person did his/her best work. Before the cast left for the day, I distributed the “Meeting the Teenagers” scene, which I had edited and finished. I told the students to read it and begin memorizing; we would block it the following morning.

WEDNESDAY AND THURSDAY

I traveled back and forth between the office and rehearsal room for the rest of the week. Though I wanted to make writing my priority, Jill was often called away from rehearsal for various reasons, which left me in charge. I wrote every night and afternoon in order to make sure our students always had new material to read and learn.

Fortunately, Bryan was as dedicated to writing music and lyrics as I was to writing the script. Though he accompanied musical theatre classes and other rehearsals throughout the day, he spent each of his free hours working on another song. When he was done with each, Evi would help him arrange it and assign solos. I was pleased with Bryan and Evi's work, and relieved that I could focus on the script without needing to write lyrics on my own.

When Bryan and I were both free at the same time, we would work side by side in the office and go over our ideas with one another. He would consult with me about the work he had done and ask for help with lyrics when he was stuck. Though the cast was no longer directly involved in the writing process, I held onto all of the material they had given me and tried to work in their words whenever possible. I gave Bryan all of the cast's lyric ideas, which he used for inspiration.

Though rehearsals still moved slowly, I was impressed with the group's morale. Each actor did his/her homework, and came in each morning having memorized more of the many long passages I had written. They acted as a true ensemble— supporting each other and working hard towards the common goal of creating a show. I often grew frustrated with the slow pace at which most of them worked, but their dedication and love of the process kept me from getting upset.

On Thursday of the third week, I had not reached my goal of finishing the script. Jill reassured me that we would be fine; I was writing faster than the cast was learning the material, and there were still a few songs to teach and block. I still feared arriving at opening night without a completed script, mainly because I had not yet figured out how to end the show. Bryan and I were both done with the material leading up to and including the tornado scene; I knew that “The Flashlight Song,” which Bryan had renamed “Pieces of My Reality,” would come soon after the tornado, but I did not know where to take the show from there. On Thursday afternoon, Jill and I read through completed sections of the script and discussed the list of themes we had made with the cast, but we could not think of a meaningful ending. We both left for home disheartened, hoping that inspiration would strike on the following day.

## FRIDAY

On Friday morning, Jake and Chris, who are brothers, told Jill that they had written a song for the show and asked if they could share it with the cast. I was excited that they had taken initiative, but worried about needing to tell them that we could not use their song in the show. Jill set aside time for the brothers to perform at the end of rehearsal, but privately told me that she shared my concern. Neither of us knew Chris composed music, and we did not imagine that his work could be on par with Bryan’s. We were proud of the quality of the completed scenes and songs. If the new song did not fit in the show for some reason, neither Jill nor I knew how to tell Jake and Chris.

Before the brothers performed, Jill told them that she was proud of their initiative and teamwork; although we could not promise that their whole song would end up in the

show, she explained, she applauded them for sharing their writing with the cast. Jake announced that the song was called “Rebirth.” The boys’ mother had said the word over dinner the night before; when Jake heard it, he thought of an idea and immediately ran to his room to start writing. As soon as he shared the first few lines with his family, Chris had sat down at the piano to put them to music.

The song began with four simple chords, which Chris tentatively played on the keyboard. Jake, who sat beside him, nervously clutched his page of lyrics and began singing softly:

I know you think we’re starting with nothing  
I know hope seems far away  
But with hearts and hands, nothing can be something  
Thinking like this is just the artist’s way

Suddenly this town is a canvas,  
And suddenly this town is made of clay  
You can pick and choose to see which part fits  
You can shape and form this town in any way.

Tears welled up in my eyes as I listened to Jake’s poetic lyrics and watched the boys perform. When they reached the chorus, Chris sang with his brother in harmony:

Rebirth  
A time for change and new beginning  
Unearth  
The confidence to keep on living  
Rebuild  
A bridge that brings us together  
Binding us forever.

Jake then continued on his own, much more confidently than before:

So pick up the shovels and clear the mess  
Pick up the shattered wood and pieces of glass  
We need everyone to do their part, no matter what the load  
Go build a place that’s from your heart  
A future bright and bold.

After the brothers had concluded by repeating the chorus twice, everyone in the room stood up to applaud. Jake bowed; Chris, who was one of shyer members of the cast, sat still on the piano bench. I wanted to tell the boys that we would use their whole song in the show, and that they had saved me from struggling to figure out what to do next, but I knew I had to consult with my colleagues before making a definitive statement. Jill congratulated the brothers and asked their peers, as is customary at PGT, to compliment three specific aspects of the song.

As the cast walked to lunch, Jill, Bryan, Evi, and I discussed “Rebirth.” We were equally impressed by Jake’s eloquent lyrics and Chris’s simple and moving music, and we agreed to place the song directly in the show. Jill asked Bryan and Evi to help the brothers arrange their music that afternoon, so that they could teach it to the rest of the cast as soon as possible.

Over lunch, I shared an idea for the scene that would precede “Rebirth.” I told Jill that I thought it should take place the morning after the tornado, as Hoisington residents saw the wreckage in daylight for the first time. After many characters expressed the dejection they had felt that day, one boy would sing “Rebirth,” reliving the moment when he inspired his friends to rebuild their ruined town. The rest of the characters would join in throughout the song, as each gained the confidence to move forward.

Before we went home for the day, Bryan and Evi asked me who I wanted to sing solos in “Rebirth.” Evi and I agreed that Jake should sing the beginning of the song as his teenage character, Todd—“Misunderstood Boy,” as we had called him early on. We had been looking for a place to give Jake a solo, and it worked well for his character. Bryan suggested that Jennifer sing the last verse, as she was a hard worker with a great

voice who had not yet been featured in a song. I did not think the lyrics made sense for her teenage character, but I liked the idea of seeing Linda sing there. Bryan objected, as he could not figure out how to justify a woman who had just lost her husband telling others to “Build a place that’s from (their) heart(s)/ A future bright and bold.” The more he protested, the more convinced I became that Linda had to sing these words. She would change the tone of the song—rather than singing sweetly, she would angrily tell the town to “Pick up the shovels and clear the mess.” Her ability to sing through her fear and sadness would remind Hoisington residents of the triviality of their destroyed buildings. When I consulted Jill, she liked my idea and looked forward to the challenge the scene would provide for the mild-mannered Jennifer.

On Friday, Bryan taught music and Jill blocked a few scenes while I wrote. I finished the scene leading up to “Rebirth,” but did not know where to go from there. We had to wrap up the story somehow, but we only had two weeks to fix things and block the rest of the show, so I did not want to add much. I decided to write one more series of monologues. After “Rebirth,” a number of characters would reflect on how the town fared in the months after the tornado. Jill and Bryan wanted to end with a song, and I suggested a reprise of our prologue, “Twist of Fate.”

#### Week Four

Throughout the fourth week of PGT Summer, I scrambled to finish the script of the show we had finally titled *Pieces of Reality*, after the song “Pieces of My Reality.” I thought the material I had already written was complete, but Jill kept reminding me of details I had left out and ways I should lengthen certain scenes. I began to grow

frustrated with her perfectionism. She had high standards, but mine were getting lowered as I grew more frustrated with the process. We had not finished staging the scenes and songs that were already finished—would we be ready for the performance if I kept adding more? I wanted to include all of our original ideas, but I was tired of writing and scared of giving our students too much to learn.

Jill accomplished a lot in rehearsal that week, and gained a few extra hours by replacing a few of our students' classes with rehearsal time. She asked those who taught our cast's Acting Technique and Mask Classes to devote some time to monologue and character work for the show; every time our students shared scenes they had worked in either of those classes, I was impressed by the improvements.<sup>7</sup> The actors' abilities to learn lines and retain blocking improved over time, and they maintained their positive attitudes. When I was available during rehearsal time, Jill would split the cast into groups to increase productivity. While she blocked a scene in one room, I fixed another next door.

By the end of week four, I was almost done with the script. I would write and edit at night, and occasionally ask other teachers to take over the classes I was supposed to teach so that I could work more during the day. One afternoon, Bryan found me writing in the office and asked if I had decided what I wanted for the closing song. When I told him that I had not yet found time to think about it, he told me that he had thought of an idea, and had begun writing lyrics. He handed me a piece of paper, which read:

I heard today that supplies are gonna cost a lot  
I heard today that my family's gonna lose the crop

---

<sup>7</sup> In Mask Class, the students wear plain white masks; the teacher leads them through a series of exercises that help them explore characters physically and vocally.

I heard today that my friend's house is standing strong  
I heard today that they're going off to Wichita  
On my own but not alone  
The wind came down on my home town  
I heard my name called  
Yeah I heard a dark sound  
But I'm gonna build the walls again in my home town.

I told Bryan that I loved the direction he had chosen for the song. When I asked where the lyrics had come from, he explained that he had tried to capture the complex themes we discussed with the cast early on. He wanted to leave the audience with the opposing sides of the message we had explored—the strength of community can help individuals through tragedies, but each person has to face his/her problems alone in the end.

#### Week Five

I distributed the final pages of the script to the cast on Monday of the fifth week of the program—exactly one week before opening night. I had regained my enthusiasm over the weekend, and had raised my standards in order to deliver a product that the cast could be proud of, but I knew I had left out a few important details. Jill, excited to have the script complete, asked if she could add the final touches. I let her finish it, and found that the additions she made on Monday night made the show feel more complete.

When the cast ran through *Pieces of Reality* for the first time, on Thursday afternoon, I was extremely disappointed. The students knew their lines, but lacked energy, forgot some of their blocking, and had lost many of the specific acting moments they had discovered in class and earlier rehearsals. As soon as the run was over, Jill asked the students how they felt. Most of them said they were proud of getting through

the whole show; only a few of the more experienced actors said that they felt they could have done better.

Jill told the cast that she was disappointed with their work. She was proud of them for learning a lot of material quickly, but knew they could take the acting much further. She asked them to look review their blocking and think through the specifics of each monologue that night. She and I gave notes on a few positive things we had seen and suggested some ways they could improve different scenes.

We spent Friday morning fixing the full cast songs and scenes, but we did not have time to work through everything that had gone wrong on the previous afternoon. I worried that we had made a mistake by choosing to write a completely original musical. It was unfair of us to ask a group of young actors to put together a full-length show with only three weeks of rehearsal. If they did not perform well, I would blame Jill and myself for asking them to do too much.

When the cast ran through the show on Friday afternoon, it looked completely different than it had on Thursday. I could tell that everyone in the cast had done their homework, because they managed to fix the messy blocking and incorporate the notes Jill and I had given them. When Jill asked, after the run through, how the students felt about their work, they all said that they could feel the difference. We sent them home proud of their show and excited to share it with their families and friends on Monday.

### Performances

The final dress rehearsal that the students performed for their peers on Monday afternoon went even better than Friday's run through. When asked to compliment the

cast, the PGT students in the audience said they were impressed with the group's ability to make them laugh and cry throughout the course of one show. My fellow staff members complimented our students' poise and maturity as they handled difficult subject matter on stage.

Watching the students perform for their families and friends on opening night, I relaxed for the first time since I had started writing the show. The concept Jill and I had developed came across well, and the actors transitioned smoothly between their teenage and adult characters. At each of the three performances, the students grew more confident in their roles; they applied the notes we had given them, deepened their connections to the text which created more honest moments on stage, and discovered something new in every scene.

### Conclusions

On Wednesday afternoon of the final week of rehearsals, Jill asked me to write a director's note for the *Pieces of Reality* program. I knew I had to discuss the positive elements of the writing process, but I felt worn-out from five weeks of teaching, writing, and directing, and did not yet know if the show would be successful after all. I started by describing our first week of development discussions. I wrote that I appreciated the chance to have real discussions with the students and to hear their opinions on the world and the art they wanted to create. Though I was able to remember some positive aspects of the process that afternoon, I still wondered if writing an original musical was worth the stress I had felt in the final weeks. Putting together a pre-written musical with a group of

young actors in five weeks is difficult enough—was it worth the extra effort needed to write and direct a new show?

The performances of *Pieces of Reality* and the reflection that followed as I evaluated the production with my colleagues and students reminded me of the value of collaborating with adolescents on original works of theatre. Through the process of developing a show, educators can empower their students, fostering their creativity while creating a strong ensemble.

Working on a production written for a specific group of adolescents can lead to a well-performed final product. The writer and director must work well together, so the director can keep the writer informed about how the script can best serve each actor. If one or both of them observe the cast closely in the early brainstorming and improvisation rehearsals, they can understand students' skill sets and write material each actor is capable of performing well.

The *Pieces of Reality* cast was made up of students with varying levels of talent and experience; by writing a show, we could ensure that each actor had monologues and scenes in which he/she could succeed. The inexperienced actors were not overwhelmed by a difficult script, and those returning did not feel they had compromised their summer by working with newcomers. In writing a show for a specific group of actors, my colleagues and I were able to cater to each member's needs, strengths, and weaknesses; this allowed us to create a better final product than we could have otherwise.

Plays developed through the writing process I have outlined provide appropriate material to educators wishing to hone their adolescent students' acting skills. When a playwright creates roles for specific actors, he/she can challenge individuals in different

ways. During auditions and early rehearsals for *Pieces of Reality*, Jill acquainted herself with our cast and decided what she wanted each member to work on. She shared her ideas with me, and I tried incorporate them into my writing. When we both observed Aaron's chaotic energy and tendency to express himself using large hand gestures, Jill suggested that we cast him as the Reverend; she thought playing an older character could help him learn to focus and save his gestures for the moments he wished to emphasize. I wrote a few calm and commanding monologues, which required him to develop a powerful but controlled character. Aaron's performance as the Reverend contrasted the work he did as Nick, his teenage character, and I was impressed by the way he learned to transform his mannerisms as he played each.

Though Jennifer played Cynthia well in the early improvised scene, she had played an elderly woman at PGT once before. Jill knew she could succeed as Cynthia, but thought she would learn more by playing Linda, who needed to grieve for her husband on stage. Katie needed a few weeks of rehearsal to find Cynthia's physicality, but she learned about playing age and manipulating her posture to become different characters in the process. Educators can use original plays to teach acting to their students; by considering their actors' personal strengths and weaknesses when writing, they can create roles that will challenge each accordingly.

Providing learning experiences for students is important during PGT's summer program because of the time and energy each commits to the program. During the fall and spring semesters, Jill and her fellow directors only ask each cast member to attend rehearsal when he/she is needed for a particular scene. As Jill explains: "During the summer (the actors) are all there all the time—in rehearsal for three hours each day. It's

my job to make sure that they are working, learning, growing, and busy for as much of that as possible.” The freedom of the writing process creates an ideal scenario for directors of youth theatre who strive to create personal challenges for each student.

I would advise anyone who runs an ensemble-oriented children’s theatre group to develop original plays with his/her students. While developing original work allows educators to teach individuals, it also helps create a true ensemble. Although some actors in *Pieces of Reality* ultimately performed more text or music than others, all felt like members of an ensemble because they contributed to the development of the musical.

On a questionnaire I sent to the cast in February 2009, I asked the cast for two ways in which the process of *Pieces of Reality* differed from shows they had done elsewhere. Of the eight students who responded, seven claimed the writing process made them feel like valued members of the group. Erica, who was new to PGT in the summer of 2008, responded: “Everyone’s ideas were written down and considered. It was really a collaborative effort. It never felt like one person mattered more than another. Though it was my first PGT show, I never felt left out.” Creating an ensemble of adolescents from different backgrounds with varying levels of theatre experience can be difficult. The writing process allowed all of the actors, including John, Jake, and Erica, who were new to the program, to feel that their participation was essential to the creation of the final product.

Regardless of how many cast members know each other beforehand, collaborating to create an original piece of theatre can turn a cast of adolescents into a cohesive ensemble. In developmental brainstorming sessions, broader issues, similar to Dorothy Heathcote’s universals, always arise. Heathcote emphasizes universals because

they help students identify with people from other cultures and eras (Wagner 72). While working on *Pieces of Reality*, I observed that reflecting on universals can also help connect a group adolescents. When responding to my question about the differences between *Pieces of Reality* and other shows, Aaron wrote: “I think that we bonded even more than the average theatrical cast, because through actually writing our show we got to know each other in deep and profound ways; we knew how important certain things were to some people, and then had the privilege to act out their passion on stage.” When sharing their ideas about fate, for example, the students in my cast learned about each other’s belief systems; some bonded when they found they agreed, but the whole cast grew closer by debating such personal issues.

When deciding to lead a cast in creating an original theatre piece, a director must be willing devote a substantial amount of time to discussions throughout the rehearsal process. Although I occasionally resented losing the first two weeks of the summer to developing and writing the show, allowing our cast to engage in important and meaningful conversations made the entire process more worthwhile. Talking through issues taught the students more about each other, bringing them closer together, and allowed me to learn what was important to them as well. After hearing them express themselves in rehearsal, I could represent their ideas more accurately in the final script.

Heathcote acknowledges the importance of taking time to discuss universals, and sees these talks as essential to educational theatre. When students are given the chance to reflect on the implications of their drama, they learn valuable lessons that transcend the classroom and theatre. As Betty Jane Wagner writes: “in our real lives, we seldom stop for this kind of pondering; in drama, Heathcote deliberately makes time for it. Such

reflection is the only thing that makes drama worth the doing” (73). Such conversations help broaden students’ perspectives in ways that outlast memories of the dramatic exercises themselves.

When I asked my students to recall the most important themes of *Pieces of Reality*, the eight who responded provided me with thoughtful and accurate answers, such as: “hope in the face of adversity,” “the strength of community,” “friends and family are the most important things,” and “the value of teamwork.” Their ability to recall central themes of the show six months later reflects the effects of the discussions Jill and I facilitated at the beginning of the summer. By talking through different ideas and stopping to discover the universals involved, we helped our students connect with various issues in ways that outlasted the production itself. When creating original theatre with adolescents, educators need to ask their students to reflect on the implications of the events of their play. This helps their students learn about one another, connect deeply to the material at hand, and understand its broader implications.

Involving adolescents in developing a play they will perform makes them feel ownership over the final product. They grow excited about working on and sharing the show with an audience, because they know they are communicating their own ideas. Heathcote encourages students to decide “the what, when, and where of the drama” because it helps her conquer group inertia (Wagner 10). As I learned from creating and assisting Jill in directing *Pieces of Reality*, students who contribute to a show’s conception also feel personally connected to the material. Although I added my own ideas and rewrote much of their language, the cast felt the final script contained their voices. Six of the eight students who responded to my questionnaire wrote that, of all the

work they did on *Pieces of Reality*, they were most proud of their contributions to its writing and development. When I asked about the highlight of participating in the process, John wrote: “The best thing about working on *Pieces of Reality* was getting to contribute to the songs and text and later looking at the show and seeing something you came up with.” Because of our early brainstorming sessions, improvisations, and writing exercises, many cast members felt, like John, that they had been integral to the creation of the script.

Performing monologues and songs written and improvised by their castmates leads some adolescent actors to work particularly hard. They respect their material and commit to it completely, as they know it came from their peers. When describing the difference between *Pieces of Reality* and other shows, Aaron wrote: “we all really wanted to do the characters justice because it wasn’t just the performance or the show, it was giving our friends’ ideas and creations what they deserved.” One student, Laura, who has been involved in all four of the PGT Summer Teen Conservatory writing projects, wrote: “writing our own story I think made us so much more invested in the final product—it was our own ideas and we believed in them.” Due to the unique process used to develop the show, the actors in *Pieces of Reality* felt strongly connected to the material. I believe this is one of the most valuable aspects of involving adolescent theatre students in the playwriting process—when they feel responsible for communicating each other’s ideas, they commit strongly to the material in performance.

When creating an original play with a cast of teenagers, it is important to include as much of their own ideas and writing as possible. If the program works towards a final product, the adults involved often need to edit the students’ words and add their own

work as well. Throughout PGT Summer 2008, Jill, Bryan, Evi, and I strove to create a positive experience for our students while also producing good art. Although we wanted the material to come from the cast, we decided to assert our expertise when making certain decisions because we wanted the script to work well. If I were to repeat the process, I would try to give the students more freedom to explore their ideas. Because we felt pressured by time constraints, Jill and I often imposed certain things, such as the format of the show, upon our students without letting them try other options. I think the success of the final product taught our students the value of making strong artistic and structural choices. Educators developing original works should defer decisions to their students whenever possible; when directors feel they must assert their authority, they should explain their reasoning so their students can learn from every aspect of the process of creating an original production.

By collaborating with a group of adolescents to devise a piece of theatre that challenged them and catered to their talents, I believe those of us working on the PGT Summer Teen Conservatory project in the summer of 2008 helped foster a caring community and positive learning experience for each actor involved. Our methods differed from the practice of process drama, or drama in education, but the results we achieved compared to Dorothy Heathcote's results as we promoted our students' creativity and asked them to connect deeply with their material. By collaborating with our cast on the creation of an original musical, we enabled them to learn about themselves and expand their understanding of playwriting, acting, and the greater implications of the subject matter at hand; we empowered the individuals in our cast, providing them with a meaningful summer learning experience.

## **Bibliography**

- Abusch, Jill. "PGT Summer." E-mail to Emily Rosen. 15 March 2009.
- Abusch, Jill. "Sometimes I Wake Up Info." E-mail to Emily Rosen. 11 Oct 2008.
- Abusch, Jill. Telephone interview. 10 Oct 2008.
- Abusch, Jill. Telephone interview. 23 Oct 2008.
- Abusch, Jill. "Thesis Question." E-mail to Emily Rosen. 8 Feb 2009.
- Abusch, Steven. "PGT History." E-mail to Emily Rosen. 20 Feb 2009.
- Abusch, Steven. Telephone interview. 23 Oct 2008.
- Abusch, Steven. "Thesis." E-mail to Emily Rosen. 6 Feb 2009.
- Bolton, Gavin. "Changes in Thinking about Drama in Education." Theory into Practice. 24.3. (1985): 151-157. JSTOR. February 11 2009  
<[www.jstor.org.ezproxy.tufts.library.edu](http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.tufts.library.edu)>
- Bowell, Pamela and Brian Heap. "Drama on the Run: A Prelude to Mapping the Practice of Process Drama." The Journal of Aesthetic Education. 39.4. (2005): 58-69.  
Project Muse. February 11 2009 <[muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu](http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu)>
- Glass, Ira. "Prom." 26 May 2008. Podcast. "This American Life." National Public Radio.  
26 May 2008. <[www.thisamericanlife.org](http://www.thisamericanlife.org)>
- Heddon, Deirdre and Jane Milling. Devised Performance: A Critical History. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Martin-Smith, Alistair. "Setting the Stage for a Dialogue: Aesthetics in Drama and Theatre Education." The Journal of Aesthetic Education. 39.4. (2005): 3-11.  
Project Muse. February 11 2009. <[muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu](http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu)>

Oddey, Alison. Devising Theatre: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook. New York: Routledge, 1996.

O'Neill, Cecily. "Imagined Worlds in Theatre and Drama." Theory Into Practice. 24.3. (1985): 158-165. JSTOR. March 2 2009.  
<[www.jstor.org.ezproxy.tufts.library.edu](http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.tufts.library.edu)>

Sometimes I Wake Up in the Middle of the Night. 2008. Dramatic Publishing. 11 Oct 2008. <[www.dramaticpublishing.com](http://www.dramaticpublishing.com)>

Wagner, Betty Jane. Dorothy Heathcote: Drama as a Learning Medium. New Hampshire: Heinemann Drama, 1999.

## Appendix

### 1. Student Questionnaire

**Name:**

**Date:**

If you need more room to write, please continue on the back of your sheet! If you'd rather type, feel free to type your answers on a separate page and send that back to me. Don't forget to include your and your parents' consent forms! Thanks again for your help!

1. Was "Pieces of Reality" your first show? If not, what shows had you done before?

2. Name the two or three of the biggest ways the rehearsal process for "Pieces of Reality" differed from rehearsals you've had for other shows (mainly school and fall/spring PGT shows)?

3. What was the best thing about working on "Pieces of Reality?"

4. What was the hardest part of working on "Pieces of Reality"?

5. What were you most proud of in the process or the show itself?

6. What do you think are the most important themes of "Pieces of Reality" (try to come up with 1-3 themes if you can)?

7. Do you have any other reactions/impressions of the process or the final product you would like to share? Any thoughts you have about your experience would help me out!