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Senior Honors Thesis

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The Writing and Production of *Last: A Tragicomedy in Six Scenes*

I will not bore the reader by trying to explain why I write plays. The only answer I could give would be the kind of esoteric nightmare that larger egos would try to turn into some grand, autobiographical *magnum opus*. However, if the question is narrowed down to why I wanted to write a play for my Senior Honors Thesis, I can answer. I have committed myself to the playwright's trade, and my four years of study at Tufts have taught me about the broad applications of the theatre arts, their history, and their purpose, but despite the opportunities I found to write plays, there was little structure in place to show me how a new play gets put onstage.

Despite my claim to be a playwright, I felt I had produced remarkably little material—and up to this point, no full-length works. Knowing how I work, I knew immediately that I would need to force the occasion on myself. Being a graduating senior, I had the opportunities to do either a thesis or a capstone to bring some closure to my academic career—and upon the advice of Dr. Heather Nathans, I elected to write my play as an Honors Thesis. What ended up getting set in motion was a year-long crash-course in the discipline, craft, and knowledge needed to be a working playwright in the modern American theatre. This particular document will hopefully demonstrate what I managed to learn in the process of writing, workshopping, and producing an original work—my original work: *Last*.

Conception

Whether this is a failing as a person or a playwright I am unsure, but I have never been compelled to write about the events of the everyday—I feel that examinations of world events or historical crises old and new are best left to those who were more personally affected by these struggles than myself. Furthermore, I feel that to write about my daily life, personal history, relatives, friends, or acquaintances as the young, middle-class white man that I am is ground so well-trod that any story seemingly unique or interesting to me would seem derivative, contrived, or boring. Thus, my task to find the concept that would become *Last* lay in my imagination—looking to the strange, absurd hypotheticals which occupy my thoughts, and dive deep into their implications and consequences.

Last began with a very simple question: “What will our extinction look like?” I immediately ruled out the more mainstream causes of Armageddon—nuclear war, zombies, alien invasion, plagues and famine—all were pushed aside in favor of a more mysterious, drawn-out and entropic process. The idea of the play taking place in the zoo-like Academy comes from a longtime fascination with extinct creatures. Though I spent most of my youth poring over books on dinosaurs and their ilk, I did come across some very notable cases of modern fauna being completely wiped out in the age of Man. Of these species many (including the Quagga, Passenger Pigeon, and the Thylacine) found their final specimen on display in a zoo before they disappeared forever. Given humanity’s complicity in the extinctions of thousands of species during the brief time we have inhabited this planet, the irony of finding the last human on display was irresistible.

To facilitate this I, without explicitly saying so, set the play farther in the future than most would conceive—somewhere on the order of a few million years from now. The biological clock

has reset, and humans are (obviously) no longer the dominant species on our planet. I ignore the world outside the Academy to focus on only what the Human (and by extension, the audience) can see, comprehend, and imagine. The effect is disorienting, and while I may not necessarily go to the Brechtian extremes of *Verfremdung*, I wish to, if nothing else, escort the audience out of their comfort zone of four-person living-room dramas.

Characterization

The Human

I had several thoughts going into the writing of the Human as a character—but above all I reasoned that the Human can and should be played by any person who seeks the role. My rationale was, and is, that at the end of our age, when there is only one human left on Earth, it is impossible for there to be any distinctions of race, gender, age, creed, or identity to otherwise separate it from other members of a species that no longer exists. As we move into a paradigm of theatre which champions the voices of the unheard and wishes to expose new narratives and viewpoints in America and beyond, the last thing I wanted to do was write another “straight white play.” Omitting the restrictions of casting, purposefully or no, I would like to think that *Last* will, if nothing else, allow more room for women and actors of color to grace the stage in a work that is not outwardly activist in that regard. It would be arrogant of me to think that I could solve these problems at all—especially with one play—but if nothing else, I wanted to remain cognizant of the new frontiers of American theatre, and play to the strengths of acting pools of the future.

My solution to the problem of making the character “universal” enough was, ultimately to dehumanize it. The Human does not have a name, nor does it ever receive a name in the play.

Both the Voice and Aristotle refer to the Human as “it,” with a notable exception at the end, when Aristotle uses an appropriately gendered pronoun. Gone are the human foibles of ambition, ego, or outrage—replaced by the sort of complacency found in more domesticated beasts. The Voice’s monologues are important to this characterization as well—with the Human supposedly believing all of the misinformation the Voice spouts at it. This human does not initially seek to challenge anything, and only after it sees past the lies and manipulation does it seek to improve its station in any way.

Aristotle

The idea of a “baboon named Aristotle” started out as a joke. The brief history of the character deals with the fact that we were studying the *Poetics* of the philosopher Aristotle in Ancient and Medieval Theatre this fall, and my general antipathy towards the man was made even greater. Any similarities to the philosopher, aside from his penchant for problem-solving and being wrong, are incidental. Other than serving as my great, uplifted finger to Aristotle and his philosophies, the name only invokes a few basic Aristotelian philosophies: chiefly that of Man’s position as the “rational animal.”

I knew that the Human would need company in their enclosure, and sought to pair it with something conceivably related but patently foreign. Though I had flirted with the idea of including two or three other animals, ultimately “Aristotle the Baboon” was the only one who stuck through the entire process. Though I tried to tie in Aristotle’s “baboonity” to the play in several ways, I ultimately wrote the character as the sort of role that an Olivier or Barrymore would play: a grandiose old windbag—self-centered and frighteningly insecure. Additionally, I wanted the role to be as demanding physically as it was intellectually, and gave Aristotle several

opportunities to explore the physicality of a baboon. Of all the parts I've written, I feel this one might be the most fun for an actor to play.

The obvious problem here is that Aristotle and the Human engage in extended conversation for most of the play, and baboons can't talk. Aside from the obvious "suspension of disbelief" (which I honestly feel must be earned, not assumed) I originally conceived of the character much like the Tiger in Rajiv Joseph's *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*—a more existential creature, dressed in rags and evoking rather than portraying an animal. Ultimately, I leave the exact characterization up to the director, but I hope that the audience's desperation for company mirrors the Human's, and accepts Aristotle as he is.

The Voice

That I cannot recall an exact genesis for the character of the Voice probably says more about the character's necessity than I ever could in words. The Voice is integral to the setting and feel of the show—cementing both the Human's and Aristotle's captivity and establishing the world of the play. Again, it is the Voice's botched insights of humanity that give the Human and the audience their only real taste for the future history of Man. The Voice fulfills the dual role of antagonist and narrator in *Last*—controlling and manipulating its captives for the enjoyment of the Academy's patrons, and for implementing a rather dubious application of "science."

The most important thing about the Voice is that it remains unseen. When discussing the play with my potential directors, this was one of the most important points I stuck to. As the Human and audience have already been established as analogues, it should come as no surprise that the audience's ignorance of the Voice and its constituent species should mirror that of the Human. My second mandate of the Voice contradicts the first, in a way—the part should be performed live. I cannot imagine that a pre-recorded performance could adequately play off of

the other actors in the several interactions it has with its detainees. Though I've seen success in pre-recorded sound performances in the past (the Drama Department's 2015 showcase production of *Footfalls* was no exception), knowing that the actor is there to respond to the nuances of the on-stage performance and vice-versa assures me that the performances will remain as fresh as possible.

First Draft

In order to produce a draft over the course of a semester, I knew I would have to keep to a fairly regular writing schedule. Many of my writing projects (including this one) are written in short bursts—often late at night. Given that I was going to be grappling with a 60-to-90 page project rather than my usual five-to-ten, this model would not suffice for creation. Here, Prof. Montez became an excellent resource; serving both as a sounding board for ideas on the script in progress and as an enforcer for a weekly deadline for my scenes. I also implemented the additional deadline of the “half-draft”—mostly to serve as a symbolic halfway point in the drafting process. Later, the full-draft deadline morphed into the date of the first workshop, late in the semester.

In addition, I was given a list of a dozen or so plays to read and ponder over the course of the semester. The plays, all recommended by Prof. Montez, were all from the *avant-garde* theatre scene from the past twenty-to-thirty years. I had made my intentions clear from the start that I wished to work outside of the scope of naturalism, and my experiments in playwriting have always leaned heavily towards the Absurd. Still, when I compare my work to that of playwrights such as Mac Wellman or Richard Foreman, I realize how far out the leading edge of theatrical experimentation can be—and how far from that edge I still am. This being said, a few of the

plays, particularly Will Eno's *Thom Pain: Based on Nothing* and Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, did inform my writing—emboldening me to put onstage what I may not have considered had I not read them. Equipped as I was, I entered into the process of drafting.

For some reason, writing things out of order has never sat well with me—though I will often make a note of ideas for later use. Instead, I approach things from a stream-of-consciousness (or perhaps more appropriately, stream-of-conversation) perspective and allow the events to transpire before me. Among the laughably few things I remember from high school chemistry class is the fact that reactants in a closed system will always build in heat and pressure. Though this scientific process has little application for me in reality, I need only substitute “reactants” for “characters” and “closed system” for “set,” and the analogy creates itself.

I had a few basic ideas heading into the first draft—some which proved to be integral and others, detrimental. Part of my Aristotelian angle on the show gave me the idea to base each scene around one of his six elements of tragic drama: Plot, Character, Thought, Language, Song, and Spectacle. Each scene would, in theory, revolve around one of the elements, and the play would become more disjointed as it went on. What ultimately went on to survive were the more initially comedic aspects of the show. The use of The Buggles' “Video Killed the Radio Star” began from a simple musing of “what would be the worst bit of human culture to survive for this long?” and eventually became the crux of one of the plays most emotionally charged and cathartic moments. For this moment, among others, the comedic effect was still present, but imbued with deeper meaning.

Still, due to the somewhat rapid-fire pace of weekly deadlines and my own propensity to procrastinate, much of the material was decidedly sub-par. For instance, my initial take on scene IV, which at that point was still titled, “Language,” took the form of a clichéd and self-indulgent

dream sequence born from my own inability to initially avoid writing it. Looking back, there were many parts I ended up disliking, and just as many bits I found worth keeping, but I avoided the temptation to begin reviewing until after the first of several workshops.

First Workshop

In the past, Bare Bodkin has been a tremendous resource for my playwriting, through its workshops and performances throughout my Tufts career. Naturally, while writing *Last*, I wanted to include them in the process to help get others involved in the workshop and production process. The first Bodkin workshop took place last November, where the first complete draft of the play was read. At this point, the *Human* was read by Tessa Barlow-Ochshorn, the *Voice* by Michele Herzog, and *Aristotle* by Kevin Lombard, who filled in at the last minute, due to the original reader's absence.

As I mentioned, I brought in the first draft more-or-less untouched—with little but cursory formatting and basic editing between my initial drafting and the workshop script. Even with the noted problem passages such as the infamous scene IV, I waited to see what insights could be gained from the readers and listeners at the first workshop. A good portion of the feedback was positive, and what criticism I received ended up being of great help. Many of the comments dealt with the development of the themes—particularly for me to couch them a little more subtly in the action of the play rather than coming off as didactic or pushy.

It was also at this first workshop that I was not only given the idea for the present (and vastly improved) scene IV, but also became convinced that the framework of Aristotle's "six elements" was largely unnecessary. From here, I was ready to sit down and make changes over the winter break.

Director

At no point in the process did I intend to direct my play. This was partly due to the workload required and my inexperience as a director, but mostly due to my philosophy that my limited perspective would not and could not elucidate the fullest interpretation of the work. In the past, I had incredibly positive experiences with directors, and I was not shy about soliciting one for *Last*. I ultimately selected Tori Otten from the candidates who approached me. Though the fact that she alone of the three volunteers had attended the first workshop gave her an advantage, it was her openness to collaboration and enthusiasm for the play which won me over.

One of the first things we did after I brought Tori aboard the project was to delineate exactly who had control over what—an activity which saw me ceding a good deal of creative control to Tori. As a playwright, I wish to serve as a resource to the director and not as a dictator. I made very clear that I had no final say on matters of design, casting and to a degree, interpretation. Even so, I found Tori relying almost as much on my input as I did on her. There were remarkably few things on which we didn't agree—from the casting choices to the themes of the play itself. Overall, my experience working with a director was incredibly rewarding, and collaborating with Tori was as rewarding as could be.

Winter Break Revisions

With the notes from the first workshop still tucked away, I moved on to making some of the bigger revisions over the winter holiday break. At the top of my list was replacing almost all of scene IV, which I soon turned into a late-night existential chat as Aristotle attempts to remedy the Human's insomnia. The scene turned out much better than its predecessor: further shaping

the budding friendship between the Human and Aristotle and expanding on some of the more epistemological themes in the play.

Taking some of the other notes from the workshop, I incorporated more of the “fake anthropology” gags into the script—expanding upon the “you eat like a pig” exchange and adding in the “variety is the spice of life” gag. One of the other big structural changes came from me moving the “disagree with me” argument from the first scene to the second. Where the conversation seemed out-of-place in the first scene, it actually fit very well in scene II, and was transplanted without too many other changes.

I also used the opportunity to hone much of the dialogue—cutting away many of the unnecessary, repetitive, and (frankly) bad lines to streamline and solidify the work. My cuts may not seem quite as deep or extensive as others at first glance, but I do a fair amount of self-censoring in my initial drafts, and in reading and comparing my first and final drafts, many of the lines remain unchanged. Still, much of this work lies in simple deletion or re-wording.

Looking back now, most of my initial changes left the latter two scenes alone. Though this was partly due to poor time management on my end, I feel that by the time I got to the end of the play, the ideas had coalesced in a unified manner—and my task soon became one of making the beginning and middle fit better with the ending. Eventually, I would get around to more substantive changes in scene V, but—save for a few changes—scene VI remains remarkably similar to the original.

Workshop Process

After bringing the work back from break, Bodkin held the auditions for *Last*—after which we cast Sarah Wolfson as the Human, Ben Nissan as the Voice, and were delighted to see

Kevin return as Aristotle. Also joining Tori and Peter Secrest (our stage manager) on the rehearsal staff were two freshmen: assistant director Ethan Whitman (who had previously directed my short play, “Budgie,”) and assistant stage manager Justine Aquino.

The first read-through was open to the public—and started the process of condensing the script into something which would become increasingly solid. One point of revision in particular was in the mannequin scene; where before I had the Human reach a fruitless and exhaustive anti-climax, I instead led it just up to the point of contact, then cut the action short of coitus. Really, though, the importance of the first read-through was in hearing the actors get into the roles for the first time. Tori ended up using as much time as I did—talking through the play with the actors and discussing their interpretations of the play and their characters. On occasion, the actors would ask me about some of the play’s details, but if the answer did not lie within my purview I re-directed their question to Tori, that they could cleave to her interpretation of the play.

My editing process during the workshops was fairly straightforward—I attended the workshop, took notes, made changes over the course of the week, and resubmitted the script. Over this process, I took to labeling the scripts by date and order, to avoid confusion between drafts. The next two workshops were closed—restricted to show personnel only—but what I lost in breadth, I gained in focus. The actors and designers gave me very detailed suggestions, and greater insight into the play and its meaning.

One particular set of changes ended up affecting the tone of the show incredibly as I dealt with the demeanor and outlook of the Voice during the mannequin scene. After running into the extremes of churlish and clinical, I eventually settled on the happy medium at which I now leave

the scene. While this change was prompted by Prof. Montez outside of the workshop space, it was actually Ben Nissan who helped me find the Voice's true character here.

Though I conceded that the work would not be finalized at that point, by the time rehearsals began on March 14th, the script was in a place where I was comfortable with it being performed—or at least rehearsed. From here, I relinquished most of my control of the production to Tori, and allowed myself a brief respite from the hard work of writing.

Production Process

Even before rehearsals got underway, I was party to one or two Production Staff meetings. In the early meetings, I was fielded specific questions about my particular vision for the script, and also interviewed on several matters dealing with the play's particulars. Naturally, I answered to the best of my ability, but found soon that apart from some of the more esoteric aspects of the show, the designers had a better idea of what to do than I did. A few ideas floated in the meetings actually made it into the script—including the scene where the Human learns to make a spoon out of its pudding cup lid. Mostly, the P-Staff meetings served to assuage my fears about the technical aspects of the piece, and I found myself saying less and less each time, until I determined that I wouldn't be of enough help to warrant my presence.

Once rehearsals got underway, I was given an outstanding invitation to attend. Partly out of respect for Tori and Ethan's direction, and partly out of my need to not have the play spoiled for me any more than it already was, I only attended a select few rehearsals. When I found time out of the *Urinetown* rehearsal room, I went to one of the early, character-oriented rehearsals—mostly as moral support, but also to observe Tori's rapport with the actors and her directorial

style. Satisfied with both of these, I remained apart until much later in the process—coming once the show was already half-blocked.

In this time, I had the pleasure to attend a brief seminar with playwright and stage manager Charlene Donaghy at the invitation of Jo Williams. The topic of the talk was about the working relationship between a stage manager and playwright in the process of mounting an original work. This relationship also deals heavily with the director as well, and so I learned a good deal of rehearsal-room etiquette in the process—behavior that I was determined to take with me into my own rehearsals. My working relationship with Tori was far from strained, of course, but I maintained this decorum partly out of respect, and partly to practice for my inception into the “real world” of theatrical development.

When next I entered the rehearsal space, I sat patiently and took whatever notes I felt were germane to the interpretation of the script and the audience’s understanding thereof. Then, when the rehearsal was finished, I explained my notes to Tori and Ethan with the actors out of earshot, and left them to take or leave my suggestions as I saw fit. At the conclusion, I would congratulate the actors on a job well done and we would exit the space; doing so not only felt professional, but relieving as well. Knowing that there was a protocol to efficiently add my input to the rehearsal process with a minimum amount of fuss was liberating for me, especially given that I am currently on the precipice of doing this work for real. I can only thank my directors and actors for being so open to my suggestions, and for doing as wonderful a job as they did at fulfilling them.

Attending the rehearsals had an impact on the script as well, and some of the last-minute changes I made, though small, were necessary to sand down whatever rough edges the play had remaining. For instance, I took careful note of any time I used the words “think, “thought,” or

“thinking” when not specifically referencing the human’s “thinking” in the play. Though it may have been the sort of error only found in repeated readings and viewings of the play, it should be the playwright’s hope that such things are possible, if not inevitable, and thus required this extra attention. I took care not to add any extra dialogue to the script, but did find a few places to cut or condense lines—and I did not alter anything dealing with the technical elements of the show. Having borne witness to part of this process over the summer while working on Bruce Graham’s *Funnyman* at Northlight Theatre in Skokie, Illinois, I was especially careful not to undermine any of the hard work being done for my play. As the rehearsals went on, I found myself taking fewer and fewer notes, until by the end, there was nothing left for me to say.

Performance

The last rehearsal I attended before the premiere was the designer run—as I felt it was the opportunity to make a showing to support my actors, and to see what reactions the designers and other personnel would have to the performance. After that, I blinded myself to the progress taking place with my show, as I wanted somewhat selfishly to be as surprised as the audience would be once I sat in the theatre and saw it for myself. Though I may be going back on my original assertion in saying this, sitting down in the audience and being able to watch and listen to them react to my writings has to be one of the most personally gratifying experiences of my life—and further incentive to continue writing for the stage. I knew the capability of the actors, the wonderful work of the directors, and the quality of the script, but nothing could have prepared me for the moment the light flicks on, and we first see the Human in its habitat.

I’d like to think I’m objective enough to say that the play was good. Some personal defect does not allow me to say definitively that it was, despite the overwhelming number of

people who have told me it is and more. I will say; however, that—to me—*Last* was one of the most tremendous performances I had ever seen. Kevin’s performance as Aristotle was a particular delight, and even as I write this the following evening, I still feel the chills and jitters of ecstasy from seeing my own show performed so well. Perhaps an element of this Thesis was to cope with the immense burden of being one’s own critic—both before and after the fact—but if it was, I feel all the better for how hard I pushed myself, for on that Wednesday evening, I could find no flaws.

Conclusion

As I mentioned at the beginning, this Honors Thesis is ultimately a test of my abilities to write plays in a professional environment, and while I’m certain there are vast differences between the collegiate and post-collegiate theatres, the skills that I found and developed over the course of this year have instilled the confidence in myself and my work that is required for one to spread one’s artistic message to others. Furthermore, the experience and vindication gained from this endeavor have already galvanized my resolve to pursue this profession to my fullest potential, and given me the tools to do so.

I’d like to think that this essay contains a fairly thorough account of my contribution to the work—even if I eschew some level of precision to encompass the breadth of my experience—there is not enough time in a lifetime to properly thank those who helped me produce *Last*. From the first tidbits of guidance and encouragement I received in September to the rousing applause of the audience at the ends of both shows, there is nothing I feel I can give of myself to compensate everyone for this great honor: except, perhaps, for a few more plays.