

EXPLORING THE THEATRICAL EXPERIENCE WITH THE PLAYWRIGHT AS
DIRECTOR

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ABSTRACT

ALLAN TERRY MAULE: Exploring the Theatrical Experience with the Playwright as
Director
(Under the direction of Paul Ferguson)

This study is based upon the production of *Framing the Shot*, an original play written and directed by Allan Terry Maule, performed in February 2006 in Studio Six of Swain Hall on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

This project examines how the dual status of a playwright/director affects the production. Specifically this study examines a.) relevant literature concerning the playwright's role in rehearsal and b.) the development of a performance under a playwright/director.

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

My experiences with the multifaceted and complex world of live stage performance have been diverse. Over the last several years I have worked in a variety of roles both onstage and off in several different theaters on several different plays. As a performer, I have acted in a wide variety of theatrical styles ranging from musical theater to symbolist tragedy, while my acting training has included everything from improvised comedy to Shakespearean verse. In addition to my onstage endeavors I have stage managed, hung lights, and built sets, often performing the latter two tasks for shows in which I acted. I have also worked as a director, formulating a particular performative vision for a particular play script and guiding this vision from casting, rehearsal, and design to embodied public performance.

Yet of all the possible roles in the creation of a stage performance, my favorite by far is playwright. While I could supply a variety of reasons for this preference, the most important is the primacy of the playwright in the theatrical process. The writer of the play begins with a blank page and fills it, thereby creating the source material that other participants such as actors, designers, and directors will interpret for the performance. Without the playwright, there are no characters for the actors to embody, no setting for the designers to illustrate, and ultimately no play for the director to direct. Because of this theatrical primacy, some see the playwright's art and work as the most important element in a theater production. Playwright Edward Albee, author of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?*, describes actors and directors as "interpretive artists"

whose inventiveness ultimately depends on the work of playwrights, who are “creative artists” (Bryer 6). Playwright and dramatist David Mamet, known for plays such as *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Oleanna*, goes further by cautioning actors against interpretation itself:

“...The words are set and unchanging. Any worth in them was put there by the author. His or her job is done, and the best service you can do them is to accept the words as is, and speak them simply and clearly... If you learn the words by rote, as if they were a phone book, and let them come out of your mouth without your interpretation, the audience will be well-served” (62-63).

These views are rather different from my own. As a playwright, I enjoy having actors and directors read and interpret my work. Their creativity and interpretation in rehearsal can add much to a play script, strengthening it beyond my initial imagination. Working with director Jay O’Berski on my first produced play, *The Laundry Bastard*, gave me many new ideas for costuming and stage directions that bolstered the humor of that short comedy. At the same time, this experience gave me a taste of the tensions possible between playwright and director. While most of Jay’s staging ideas were brilliant, at times in rehearsal I watched him make interpretive choices that differed from the actions described in my text. He occasionally directed the actors to perform stage directions early or not at all, and when I was in rehearsal I voiced my disagreement and pointed out how the lines in my script already specified where the different actions should take place. Such instances were small bumps in an overall successful production, but I had seen firsthand how the playwright’s intention and the directorial interpretation did not always match.

That said, it follows that a major concern of any playwright is how an actor, designer, or director will interpret the play script. While almost all writers may consider how their work will be read by others, this is of even greater importance to the playwright given the

collaborative nature of theater. Just as the actors, designers and directors depend on the playwright for the source material, the playwright depends on these creative readers and interpreters to give life to her writing onstage. A play script is ultimately a potentiality rather than a stand-alone product. Furthermore, as the creator of the theatrical source material, the playwright will also have a strong artistic vision for staging the play. Knowing the play will be interpreted by other artists, playwrights often take pains to communicate their staging vision clearly to these readers through the dialogue and staging descriptions. Failure to do so may result in actors and directors making interpretive choices very different from what the playwright had intended or wanted. In some cases, these readers may ignore the playwright's staging ideas altogether. Once when confronted by two playwrights over his disregard for their stages directions, director Elia Kazan responded: "That chicken s***? ...I'm the director...I never read that kind of thing!" (Luere 70).

Given these difficulties in communicating his original vision for a play, it follows that a playwright trained in directing could take it upon himself to direct his own writing. After all, as the original creator, the playwright would possess the primary artistic vision for the play and thus hold a more intimate understanding of the script than any outside director. The playwright could then avoid the problem of directors misinterpreting the play and lead the actors to interpretative choices true to the playwright's original vision. At the same time, many scholars like Michel Foucault affirm that the writer is not the best interpreter of his own work and should "delegate his authority" to other readers (Luere 4). Central to this argument is the belief that the playwright's intimacy with the play makes it more difficult for him to understand its many possible subtexts and functional ambiguities. Thus, closeness to

the source material gives the playwright-turned-director a new set of strengths and weaknesses in preparing a play for performance.

My goal for this project is an experiential exploration of the playwright as director. If the playwright's control over the artistic interpretation of his play script is increased by acting as director, how does the play benefit and, conversely, what is lost by not having a separate director? This question propelled me into this production thesis, in which I directed my play, *Framing the Shot*, in order to explore how the production was affected by the greater interpretive control I possessed as both director and playwright. From the beginning of informal readings through my rehearsals and on to the final performance of the play, I used reflective writing in a journal to examine how my intimacy with the dramatic source material aided and hindered my process as a director. Ultimately, I hope this project will be a resource to playwrights interested in directing their own work and also aid them in understanding and anticipating how directors interpret play scripts.

History of Project

By the time I entered UNC Chapel Hill's MA program in Performance Studies, I already had experience in acting, backstage work, directing, and playwriting from my undergraduate studies. I also had spent a summer in Chicago studying improvisation and comedy writing at Second City while interning with the PROP Theater Group. While I have already described playwriting as my favorite theater work, my *least* favorite was directing. As an undergraduate I directed a one-act play by Lanford Wilson called *Ludlow Fair*. Taking its title from a line in A.E. Housman's poem "Terrence, This is Stupid Stuff," *Ludlow Fair* uses a pair of female roommates dealing with the aftermath of one's latest failed romance to explore the circular and repetitive nature of human existence. As this was my

directorial debut, I chose this play primarily because I knew it would be simple to direct: two actors in a single scene with a minimal amount of entering and exiting. Having no particular passion or love for the material, I managed to put up a competently executed production of the play without enjoying the directing process much at all. It seemed like an endless barrage of worrying about details of staging and body arrangement. At the time, I was much more excited about my upcoming acting work in the Duke Players' production of Federico Garcia Lorca's *Blood Weddings* and the New Works production of my original play, *The Laundry Bastard*. In these two productions, the directorial details were being handled by others more interested and skilled than myself.

However, as I began to study the process of developing new performances and plays within UNC Chapel Hill's Performance Studies program, I started to realize how exciting and interesting the directorial process could be. Working with Professor Derek Goldman in a directing seminar, I learned the importance of choosing material to direct based on personal interest and passion rather than ease and simplicity. In that course's three directing projects, I adapted and staged scenes from Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, Haruki Murakami's short story "Honey Pie," and an original work based on the universal language structure of Peter Brook's "Shoe Show" as described in John Heilpern's *The Conference of the Birds*. With each of these, I began with a rough but intriguing idea or image I read within the original text, something without form but nonetheless *there* within what I was reading on the page. These ideas and images propelled me forward and I began to figure out casting, staging, costumes, and music to give embodiment and theatrical life to the material. I realized working out such details in directing could actually be enjoyable and exciting when I had a strong interest pushing me forward. While my novice directing was far from perfect, I

finally understood why directors enjoyed their work and what made that possible: finding a striking idea in a written text that compels you to put that idea on stage, regardless of the difficulty or complexity involved. Having lacked this passion in my first directing experience, I discovered having a deep personal commitment to the material was essential if I was ever to direct again.

Not long after that course, I began to see another fascinating element of the directorial process in performance. I worked as an actor under director Paul Ferguson in a narrative theater adaptation of Sarah Dessen's novel *The Truth About Forever*. When I entered the project, primary adaptor Casey Walton's script numbered nearly 200 pages and was nowhere near ready for rehearsals to begin. Over the next three weeks, I watched as Ferguson and assistant director Lauren Shouse worked with the cast and scriptwriter to create an effective and much-condensed play text. Certain scenes and lines were cut entirely, their dramatic content being present elsewhere; other scenes were combined to focus the action with lines added for humor and clarity's sake. All these directorial insights led to an entertaining and moving production. Simultaneously, I was involved as director's assistant to Joseph Megel in the StreetSigns production of Jim Grimsley's *White People*. Grimsley had designed the play text of *White People* with directors in mind: the work was a collection of sketches and characters (some comic, some darkly serious) meant to be arranged in whatever order the director desired. As specified by the text, these individual segments could take place simultaneously or sequentially with as many or few actors as the director wanted. This was a performance work that not only acknowledged but demanded directorial choices to focus the themes and ideas in the script. As I worked with Megel and Ferguson on these projects, I saw how a skilled and imaginative director could give full performative life to a playwright's

script through their own interpretations and ideas. A great script might need the vision of a great director to make a great performance.

These discoveries concerning the director's relationship with the play text and all they implied led to this research project. I had had the playwright's experience of having an original play produced by a skilled director, and had likewise been a director interpreting another's text for performance. To better understand the process of new play development, I now wanted to combine these roles.

As a playwright who had acquired an appreciation and familiarity with directing, I wanted to learn how the director's process would change when director and playwright are the same person.

Problem

The primary research question questions are as follows: *When a playwright acts as director of his own work to ensure greater artistic control over the script, actors, and staging details of a production, what is gained by having the playwright as director and what is lost?* The experiential element of this project demands a more specific question: *How does my status as playwright of Framing the Shot both benefit and hinder my work as a director of the script, actors and staging details in the premiere production of the play?* By exploring these questions, I hope that this project will serve as a resource to playwrights by offering some answers to the final question: *By having greater artistic control in directing his own work, how can a playwright better anticipate how directors, actors, and designers will read and interpret his work?* In the following paragraphs, I will elaborate a bit on the implications of these questions.

How does giving directorial control to the playwright alter the way that a play script will be revised during the production? The play script is the traditional domain of the playwright and is usually under her control before and during the play's premiere production. It is not unusual for playwrights to revise and alter lines and scenes when the first production of a play is in rehearsal, as the work of actors and directors reveals both problems and unintended ambiguities that the playwright did not perceive on her own. Many of the sources discussed in my literature review have much to say about this issue both conceptually and practically. For example, playwright Robert Anderson describes how in rehearsal for the first production of his play *I Never Sang for My Father* director Alan Schneider helped Anderson see that the final scene "did not work as written." While Anderson affirms that "no one can *tell* the playwright to change anything," he also describes how the rewritten final scene "saved the play" (Bryer 29-30), suggesting the playwright appreciated the work of his director. In contrast, with this project I wanted to explore how my play script changed when there was not an outside director suggesting alterations. In Chapter Three I will discuss how reading my script as a director in rehearsal helped me discover problematic elements and uncultivated possibilities in my play, as well as the work I did to address these issues.

In what ways does having the playwright as director affect the work of actors in interpreting their characters? An actor's reading of the play and the character he embodies determines the interpretive choices he will explore and implement in rehearsal. While the playwright creates the words for the actors to speak as these characters, the interpretive task of guiding and shaping the actors' work in the rehearsal process traditionally belongs to the director. Much of the material I consulted, including *A Director Prepares* and *In Conference with the Gods*, examined various directorial theories and methodologies in working with

actors. These readings informed me as I examined how my dual status as director and playwright affected my actors' interpretive work. One source of particular interest is James McTeague's *Playwrights and Acting*, which describes how four major dramatists direct actors. Sam Shepard, for example, prizes the importance of the actor's interpretative contribution to his plays by "trust[ing] their instincts" and wanting them to "stretch their own limits and stretch the limits of the play" (McTeague 120-121). In Chapter Three I will describe how my familiarity and understanding of my own writing facilitated my guidance of actors in rehearsal, as well as how this closeness to the source material complicated the interpretive shaping of their characters.

How do the elements and decisions of staging a play – including blocking, set design, and lighting – change when the director is also the playwright? Similar to the interpretive work of the actors, the choices of designers in creating the visual world of a play are based on their individual readings of the play script and are shaped by the director. In the same way, the director's visual understanding of the play script's description of the setting and onstage action will influence choices of movement and blocking in rehearsal. With this project I explored what happens when the playwright acts as the interpretive guide in these visual choices. Many of the texts I consulted consider the interpretation of visual description of staging as well as practically describing how playwrights directing their own work translate their stage descriptions, sometimes making different choices from what they wrote. For instance, when Samuel Beckett first directed *Krapp's Last Tape* he altered the title character's costume from his text's description to avoid having Krapp appear too "clownish" (McMillian and Fehsenfeld 263). In Chapter Three I discuss how my initial vision for

Framing the Shot translated itself onstage through my blocking choices and my cooperative work with the play's composer, lighting designer and set designer.

Methodology

This project employed heuristic/experiential as well as critical/analytical methods. I tracked my direction of my play, beginning with first readings and casting; continued through scene work, staging, and revisions in rehearsals; and finally through a production for audiences. To analyze this experience, I kept a journal to reflect on directing my own writing. While not a daily journal, this writing chronicled my thoughts, observations and experiences throughout the process, and described the tensions between my dual roles as playwright and director.

In addition I consulted written sources concerning the playwright's role in rehearsals, developing play scripts into performance, and playwrights acting as their own directors. In my literature review I collated the content of these sources into three sections describing different aspects of the playwright/director. The first section discusses the playwright as director, detailing how these sources described playwrights directing their own plays. The second section is an examination of the playwright as collaborator, using the insights from my guiding sources to describe how playwrights cooperated with actors and designers in different productions. The final section defines a more negative side of the playwright/director: the playwright as hysteric. A hysteric playwright/director is incapable of seeing the play beyond his own initial vision, thus making it impossible to be objective about his work and so allow artistic control to his collaborators.

Limitations

The scope of this project is limited to my own experiences and observations as a playwright-director of my own play. I am not attempting to write a definitive treatise on the playwright as director (that would be outside the reach of a master's thesis project), but rather to examine that relationship in a single production. Hence, my use of the aforementioned sources will be limited to how they informed my work on this particular project.

While I may make reference to audience reactions in the actual performances, I did not conduct pre- or post tests to gauge formal audience responses. Given that this project is focused on the experience of the playwright as director, audience response stands outside the scope of this study.

Organization

The first chapter of this thesis is an introduction to the study, providing the origins and background of the project as well as my reasons for choosing it. Chapter One also poses my research questions and explains the experiential methodology. Finally, it describes the limitations of the project as well as the justification.

Chapter Two is a literature review presenting relevant writings on the experiences of playwrights in rehearsal with special focus on playwright/directors. Through this review I examine the playwright-director in three different capacities: the playwright as director, the playwright as collaborator, and the playwright as hysteric. These sections describe issues such as the separation of playwriting and directing, the need for cooperation with designers and actors in creating a performance, and the dangers of the playwright/director retaining too much creative control. In addition, this chapter illustrates how these insights from my source texts informed my directing of *Framing the Shot*.

Chapter Three presents my reflections on my work as playwright-director through an analysis of how my dual status affected the play script's development before and during rehearsals, my collaboration with the actors, and the staging and design aspects of the show. This chapter discusses identifiable successes and mistakes as well as describing my discoveries and observations. There are also comparisons between my experience, recorded in my rehearsal journal, and that of the playwrights described in my guiding texts.

This study includes two appendices: 1) the rehearsal journal and 2) the script of the play.

Justification

The first lesson I ever learned as a playwright was that I was writing for others to read: interpretation by actors and directors is not optional but essential to the development of a play. Hence, I hope this study will aid playwrights' understanding of their role in the interpretative process and how they might guide directors and actors toward a truer interpretation of their original vision. This research is not solely for my own benefit, but for every aspiring playwright who wants his or her work to be understood as he or she intended. Given that a possible solution to this desire is the playwright directing his or her own work, I also want to contribute reflections on my experience that other playwrights considering self-directing can use. By examining the ways that I learned to understand my own writing as a director, I want ultimately to help other playwrights learn how to best make themselves understood.

CHAPTER 2:

LITERATURE REVIEW

As I began researching source material for this project, I discovered that few texts had been written on the subject of the playwright as director. My search turned up an abundance of texts about both playwriting and directing, but there seemed to be a general assumption that these were separate acts performed by separate people (as seen by such titles as *Playwright Versus Director*). While this worked nicely to justify this research project, it also made my task more difficult. Ultimately, I examined how relevant texts addressed the playwright's role in production when he was the director and, more often, when he was not.

My research led me to organize this literature review into three sections describing different roles for the playwright/director in production. The first section summarizes what has been written directly about the playwright as director and how these sources influenced me in directing *Framing the Shot*. The second section is a discussion of the playwright as collaborator, describing how playwrights work with actors and designers in their productions. While the sources in this section largely concern productions where the playwright was not the director, I will discuss how these collaborative observations informed me as I directed my play. During my reading of the texts a third, more negative role of the playwright also emerged. In this final category, the playwright as hysteric, I will examine the problems created by the playwright's direct involvement in production and how understanding these problems guided my direction of *Framing the Shot*.

The Playwright as Director

“The author must discover and assume what belongs to the *mise en scène* as well as what belongs to the author, and become a director himself in a way that will put a stop to the absurd duality existing between director and author.”

-Antonin Artaud (112)

French director and theater theorist Antonin Artaud describes his ideal theatrical author as an individual who grasps “what belongs” to both playwright and director and so becomes “a sort of unique Creator upon whom will devolve the double responsibility of the spectacle and the plot” (94). It might seem unusual to begin with the words of one who called playwrights “human snakes” and blamed them for many of the problems with the theater of his day (45). Yet much of Artaud’s disgust with such playwrights derived from their limited understanding of the theatrical experience, and their too heavy reliance on words and dialogue. Artaud’s ideal theater “differentiate[d] itself from speech” with a language “addressed first of all to the senses instead of being addressed primarily to the mind as is the language of words.” As a director, Artaud wanted to communicate with a “poetry of space” that assumed “the aspects of all the means of expression utilizable on the stage” ranging from music and dance to lighting and scenery (38-39).

With his idea of the “unique Creator,” Artaud introduces a principle essential to this examination of the playwright as director. The playwright/director must understand the play not only as a writer, appreciating the intricacies of language and dialogue, but also as a director, aware of the visual and auditory choices that engage the senses in a play’s production. The assumption behind this idea is that the author’s vision for the play propels him beyond the written text and into the sensory world of the staged production. As playwright Edward Albee said, “The only reason...I became a director was to direct my own work with as much accuracy toward what I *saw* and *heard* when I wrote the play as I

possibly could..." (Bryer 15, emphasis mine). Hence, the playwright/director's creative vision unites these two roles, moving beyond the text of his play script to create a theatrical experience engaging the senses of the audience.

Samuel Beckett's 1969 production of *Krapp's Last Tape* is an excellent example of how a playwright can employ the visual and auditory techniques of a director to move beyond the words of the script in creating an experience for an audience. *Krapp's Last Tape* was a product of "Beckett's long time interest in integrating mime and dialogue" (McMillan and Fehsenfeld 241), a one-act play with one actor. It began with "a carefully orchestrated series of stylised movements of hands, eyes, head and torso" specified explicitly in the director's notebook. The title character performed these actions, which ranged from opening a drawer to eating bananas in a very precise manner (263-265) all before uttering a word. Hence, the audience experiences Krapp's actions visually before the spoken text of the play begins. In writing this play, Beckett also utilized images of light and darkness to explore the human tension between the "spiritual" and "sensual" within Krapp's present and past. In his director's notebook for the production, Beckett listed 27 different moments in the play stressing the "contrast" of light and dark, and 18 points where the two are "integrated." To communicate these moments Beckett made use of lighting, set construction, and costume design in addition to the spoken words of the script (259-261). Beckett also directed the actor playing Krapp to audibly "call attention" to certain objects at different moments by coughing or placing them on a table "with a noticeable slam" (268). These are only a few examples of the visual and auditory details Beckett incorporated as a director with *Krapp's Last Tape*, but they demonstrate how his authorial vision for the play extended beyond the words of the script and into the sensory-focused realm of the director. While the text of

Krapp's Last Tape suggests such elements in its stage directions, it is worth mentioning that these directorial choices in Beckett's 1969 production were confined to the director's notebook rather than permanently written into the play script. This implies that Beckett separated the work of directing from playwriting, not wanting to mandate these staging choices in his script for future directors.

Playwright/directors also retain a special engagement with their play script, and are attentive to verbal details that may be missed by separate directors. Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks describes directing her own work as "hearing the voices you've heard in your head for years and making sure they're coming through" (Cole 121). Parks explains that "each word" of her writing "is configured to give the actor a clue to their physical life" (85). When directing a reading of her play *In the Blood*, Parks gave specific instructions on pronunciation of certain words and even sounds in the script, such as "-nnnnnnnn-" (89). Parks also explained to her actors how to communicate the silent "spells" written in the text as "moments of high focus and high concentration" (86). The performers in the reading found this authorial direction very helpful – one actor commented that the best note he got from Parks was about the "pacing" of the lines and what that "had to do with [his] character;" another described how Parks helped him "catch the spirit of a line or a scene" and "gauge the style of the play" (98). Thus, by directing her own work Parks added a special layer to the performance by contributing an artistic understanding of the play's original sounds.

When considering the theatrical potential of playwrights directing their own work, it is important to note that many such playwrights are careful to separate the work of writing and directing. While a playwright often writes with the directorial details in mind, there is a definite need for the play script itself to be complete before the directorial work can begin.

Playwright John Patrick Shanley describes how experience directing his own plays has taught him to have the text ready for the first rehearsal. A playwright/director can alter lines and words during rehearsal, but as Shanley says: "...You can't fix *structure*—you can't fix big, big things and direct the play. You don't have time" (McLaughlin 259-260). Playwright and director Maria Irene Fornes divides writing and directing further, into private and public spheres: "The writer has to concentrate inside himself, the director outside: on the actors, on the space, dealing with all the people" (Delgado and Heritage 103). Hence, the playwright/director must have a simultaneous familiarity with the origins and rhythms of the text and an artistic vision of the theatrical experience to be created in the space "with all the people" collaborating with him (Delgado and Heritage 103).

In studying these sources, I understood the importance of directorial thinking in my writing of *Framing the Shot*. As I crafted the words and dialogue, I also gave thought to how I wanted the blocking and the set to complement the text in production. My vision for the characters' onstage actions also informed how I wrote the script, as I knew that nonverbal action would be integral to communicating the play's story to the audience. At the same time, I saw the need for a distinction between how a playwright/director handles the script as a writer and as a director: I knew eventually I had to move beyond the text itself and into creating a theatrical experience for an audience. True to Shanley's advice, I made sure that the dramatic structure of the play was firmly in place before my first rehearsal. As I prepared for this meeting and reread my first scene, I began to examine my play as a director, plotting the moment-to-moment actions of my characters to facilitate my work with the actors. My collaboration with them and my design team would carry me into the next step of the work.

The Playwright as Collaborator

“You have to enjoy the collaborative process to work in the theatre...if you don’t enjoy that go off to your desert island and write your novel or your sheaf of poems.”

-Terrence McNally (Bryer 204)

As playwright Terrence McNally suggests, writing for the theater demands cooperation with other creative people to realize the play script in production. A playwright/director may command a complex vision for her play that integrates the verbal prowess of a playwright with the visual acumen of a director, yet she will still need the help of designers and actors to give this vision life on the stage. In this section I will discuss how my sources described playwrights in collaboration with such artists. While most of these playwrights were not directing the productions described here, their insights into the nature of theatrical cooperation informed my direction of *Framing the Shot*.

Suzan-Lori Parks characterizes the attitude of most playwright/directors on stage design when she says “...Any elements that are added—like light and sound—should bring out and not cover up the play” (Cole 103). Director and theater theorist Peter Brook wrote a great deal about how such staging details affect a theater production. In *The Open Door* Brook described how filling the “empty space” of a theater with scenery furnishes “the mind of the spectator” from the start (30) and leads the spectator’s imagination in a certain direction. This idea fits well with Parks’ assertion that the choices of a visual designer for a play’s production must be in accordance with the play script in order to guide the audience’s experience. The same principle applies to a composer writing original music for a production: Brook instructs such a person to “enter into the unified language of the performance” as part of the “group’s activities” and not try “to appeal to the spectator’s ear in a separate language of his own” (36-37). Hence, the playwright/director should trust the

designers as collaborators on his play who share a communal vision for how it will be realized onstage.

Much of the collaboration that McNally describes refers to his work with actors, whom he credits with his “early nurturing” as a professional playwright. For example, his second big success came with his play *Next*, which he wrote as a vehicle for comic actor Jimmy Coco (202). McNally later wrote *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* for Kathy Bates and F. Murray Abraham, and said these actors “really did create the play.” As a dramatist, McNally is keenly aware of how much a new play depends on quality actors to create the performance. He describes how with first productions “what we *see* in the theatre’s pretty much what you absorb” (emphasis mine), so the work of quality actors is more apparent to an audience than the words of the playwright. Hence, even the best play script can fall flat without skilled actors to bring it to life, as seen by McNally’s belief that Shakespeare and Chekhov partially owe their success to the excellent actors of their first productions (188).

Similar to McNally, Arthur Miller affirms that “what the audience is relating to finally is the actor’s imagination” and if that imagination “doesn’t catch fire, you’ve got a dead thing” (Cole 159). As a playwright in rehearsal, Miller works to “impart to the actor the original image that the characters spring out of” hoping the actor will “go on from there” (149). The phrases “spring out” and “go on” suggest that Miller wants the actor to begin with the author’s original vision and expand it, developing the play script into a fuller theatrical experience for the audience. Actors also provided Miller with insight about needed revisions of his plays. In the first day of rehearsal for a production of *The American Clock*, Miller asserted the script “would not undergo revision” and hours later rewrote and added to

the text as he heard the actors speak the lines. Often comparing his playwriting to musical composition, Miller's listening to the actors was described as "both a return to the moment of composing and a hearing of new soundings of the notes" (137-138). The result of all this is a production of the play augmenting the author's vision with the creative contributions of a skilled group of actors.

Playwright and director Sam Shepard takes the actor/playwright collaboration a step further. While Miller values the actors' imaginations in relation to his initial vision, Shepard credits his actors with a more primary role in creating a play in production. Regarding his "first true directing experience," Shepard said: "Because [the actors] were so good and they had so much experience, it wasn't me making absolute decisions, though I ...tried to mold a little bit from what they were doing" (McTeague 106). This suggests a playwright/director with enormous trust in the interpretive abilities of his actors, one who "mold[s] a little bit" from their work rather than beginning with his own vision. In this vein, while directing several productions of his plays at the Magic Theatre, Shepard was "reluctant to give out a great deal of information" to his actors, granting them "a great deal of freedom" in discovering and defining their characters (120). When his play *Curse of the Starving Class* was in production, Shepard even gave an actor a role as "co-creator of text" by asking his opinion of two possible changes to a line (Cole 9). While such a change seems minute, it demonstrates a confidence in the actor's creative contribution to the play. Thus, playwright collaboration in the Sam Shepard mold gives primacy to the creativity of actors rather than adhering strictly to the vision of the author.

These collaborative principles guided me in my work with the designers and actors of *Framing the Shot*. Early in the production's development, I was indebted to the creative

contributions of my lighting and set designers¹. Their suggested additions to my original plan for lighting and set not only focused the play's visual experience, but made their way into the script by affecting the way the characters spoke and interacted in the world of the play. In addition, I also brought on a composer² to create some original music for the show. So he would "enter into the unified language of the performance" as Brook described (*Open Door* 36), the composer attended most of our rehearsals to acquire a sense of the life and rhythms of the play in performance. My actors also were invaluable to my work as a director. In my casting choices, I made sure to choose performers who were also experienced in writing and directing. Given that this was the original production of a new play script, I desired their help in sharpening the dialogue and onstage action. Hence, my cast and crew for *Framing the Shot* in many ways took on the "co-creator" status described by Cole (9).

Yet for this collaboration to freely occur, it necessitated a certain relinquishing of authorial control. Since I began directing my own play with a strong creative vision, including the contributions of others demanded a fine balance between co-creation and staying true to my original idea. While reviewing my guiding sources with authorial control in mind, a final and more negative role for the playwright/director emerged – with accompanying warnings to take to heart.

The Playwright as Hysteric

"Some playwrights should not be allowed into the theatre: they're hysterics."
-Edward Albee (Luere 50)

What Albee describes is a playwright unable to "be objective about his own writing": the author is unable to distance himself from the text and thus unable to see the play beyond

¹ Lighting was designed by Cecilia Durbin and set designed by Rob Hamilton.

² Original music composed by Enrique Varela.

his own understanding of it (50). This is essentially the polar opposite of the collaborative principles described in the last section; the hysteric playwright/director values creative control so highly that he cannot relinquish it to other artists. The principle behind such thinking is that the superiority of the author's original artistic vision does not require the creativity of anyone else.

This ideal of authorial superiority resonates within the writing of playwright David Mamet. While many actors want “to invent, to mold, to elaborate” and “to influence” with their performances, according to Mamet these things are “the work of the *writer*.” Instead of trying to usurp the writer's job “to make the play interesting”, actors should rather have the “*courage*” to practice the adage “*Invent nothing, deny nothing*” (41). The implication is that actors have nothing to offer the play creatively and must trust the writer's authority. Later in *True and False* Mamet goes further, advising actors against interpretation itself for the sake of the production: “If you learn the words by rote, as if they were a phone book, and let them come out of your mouth without your interpretation, the audience will be well served” (63). While Mamet's point of view may appear extreme, it raises an important question: since the playwright/director possesses the original creative vision for the play, is her artistic control the most important element in a successful production?

According to the majority of my source texts, the answer is a resounding “no.” As Peter Brook asserts: “An author's point of view or an author's style is never really what matters, so to do a play out of admiration and respect for the author is not something that has interested me – only the potential quality of the human material behind it.” By “human material” Brook refers to the “essence of playwriting,” which is “two people ... sharing something through dialogue, each one of them ... equally, fully, objectively alive” (Delgado

and Heritage 311). What Brook suggests is that the objective content of the play, subject to the discovery and interpretation of everyone involved, is much more important and interesting than whatever the author intended when writing it. A hysteric playwright/director may expect his text to speak for itself without the interpretation of others. However, as Brook comments in *The Empty Space*, let the play speak for itself “and it may not make a sound.” Instead, meaning must be “conjured” from it through careful and creative work in production (38). Similarly, director Anne Bogart describes seeing many novice directors make the mistake of thinking that directing is “about being in control...and getting what you ask for.” Rather, Bogart attributes quality directing to “being in the room with other people” such as actors and designers (85), calling to mind the collaborative creativity described earlier. Instead of endorsing greater artistic control, Bogart suggests directors constantly ask: “[H]ow do we get out of our own way?” (86) and so allow the performance to take shape gently and without force.

Is all this to imply that the author’s intent is entirely meaningless, that the playwright has nothing to offer as a director? Again, the source texts suggest otherwise. Edward Albee affirms: “...the writing of the play when a playwright sees it and hears it performed on a stage as he writes it, is the best production he’ll ever see of a play of his that’s any good” (Bryer 2). Thus, if a dramatist has taken a blank page and conceived a play in its entirety, from every turn of the plot to the most specific intricacy of a character, it follows that his ideas for the directorial interpretation of that same play should be considered. Yet in the end his original vision is still just one more vision in the collaborative act of theater, and he does well not to let it dominate all others. While observing Beckett direct his own writing, John Lahr described the “the dead weight of the playwright’s authority”, and Tony Kushner

explained how the playwright's presence in rehearsal "precludes experimentation" (Cole 123). An authorial understanding is hence both useful and dangerous at the same time.

The task for a playwright/director thus becomes a balancing act between the desire to adhere to one's original creative vision while allowing the collaboration that will produce the best possible production of the play. Applying the ideas from my guiding sources to my work as a playwright/director was the most difficult task in the entire project. I had to be careful not to let my dual status as director and playwright give me an excessive control over rehearsals. This in mind, I was often reluctant to describe the precise way I imagined a character moving or speaking, knowing that my actors might take my suggestion as a sort of divine ordinance from the play's creator and end all experimenting. Instead, I tried to guide their thinking as gently as I could, offering suggestions to try different movements or intentions behind their lines. At times we disagreed, and on many of those occasions I came to realize their instinctual choices *were* more effective, that they had seen their characters more truly than I had. In these cases a hysteric playwright might have been angry or disappointed in himself, but I was happy – my play was going further because I was not doing it alone.

Collating these three roles for a playwright/director from my source texts gave me a comprehensive understanding of the possibilities and challenges of directing *Framing the Shot*. In taking on the role of playwright as director, I knew I needed to move beyond understanding my text as a playwright and into the sensory mindset of a director creating a theatrical experience. To do so, I would also have to assume the role of collaborator by combining my directorial vision with the imaginations of my designers and actors. This amalgamation of creative energy would take the play further than I could envision on my

own. This in mind, I sought to avoid the disabling tendencies of a hysteric playwright/director who could not surrender creative control to his collaborators. Though I had begun this project with a strong theatrical vision for *Framing the Shot*, the caveats I learned from the hysteric playwright director taught me that I could not force the play to conform to this vision. Rather, I needed to approach the play in rehearsals with a sense of discovery and exploration, allowing it to take shape gradually through the work of the actors and designers. While this meant our rehearsal work could become mercurial and unpredictable, I knew this was the best way to proceed. As Peter Brook wrote of this kind of directing in *The Open Door*: "...a constantly changing process is not a process of confusion but one of growth" (144).

CHAPTER 3:

THE PLAYWRIGHT/DIRECTOR EXPERIENCE

Information about the playwright/director emerged in abundance as I worked on *Framing the Shot*. To focus the analysis of this information, I have organized it into four categories. In the first section, I will discuss my work as a playwright in revising the script prior to beginning rehearsals. The following section will describe the development of the text by examining how rehearsing the play led me to alter the script. In the third section, I will explain how my role as director/playwright affected the work of the actors in embodying their characters. The final section will describe my directing choices in staging my play and my collaboration with the composer and lighting and sound designers. Throughout this chapter, I will articulate what I believe was gained and what lost by my dual role as playwright/director.

Revising My Script

The play text was read aloud for the first time in Joseph Megel's scripting course to an audience of my peers and professors in Performance Studies. The plot structure of that early draft was largely identical to the final script. It portrayed Jacob the sniper's investigation of his neighbor and assigned target, Terry Ledbetter, and how, despite opposition from Jacob's criminal boss Lance, Jacob and Terry form an unusual and life-changing friendship. My classmates responded to the farcical humor and plot twists with great enjoyment, so before the post-reading discussion began I judged that the play was functioning well as a comedy. In addition to the encouragement of their laughter, the reading

passed my most important comedic test: hearing actors speak the lines made *me* laugh. I knew then that regardless of whatever problems the discussion revealed, the play *was* funny – the sort of show I would enjoy directing. This enjoyment guided my work as playwright and director: I knew I would stay true to the comic energy that inspired me to create the play as I continued to develop it.

The post-reading discussion revealed revisions I needed to make. The common thrust of the responses was a desire for more information to frame the action of the play. Several responses centered on Jacob, which seemed appropriate since the play conveyed his emotional journey from treating Terry with professional distance to seeing him as an intimate friend. These listeners wanted to see more of Jacob's background to have a better understanding of who he was. Clearly Jacob had gone from a romantic photographer to a loner who murdered people for a living, but the severity of this change demanded the explanation of untold formative events. Other responses were curious about the work of photography as a dramatic metaphor, and pondered the significance of Jacob anonymously snapping a photo of Terry on the street versus Terry asking Jacob to take multiple photos of him inside Jacob's apartment. Jacob's photography was more than an arbitrary character choice, and the respondents were interested in what it suggested about both the character and the play itself.

It was a comfort that my listeners responded by wanting to know more about the play rather than suggesting major cuts. Much of my eagerness to embrace their desires for more information was due to their similarity to my own thinking in developing the play. I had already imagined the formative events that led Jacob to his solitary life of crime, but these details had not seemed necessary to the plot. Thinking the audience would not be interested,

I had omitted them from that early draft. In contrast the discussion revealed a definite curiosity about Jacob's character, and I saw how illustrating his past in greater detail was important to the audience's engagement with him as the play's protagonist. My new draft expanded the back story of how Jacob began a career as an assassin using the details I originally imagined. Jacob suffered a painful breakup with his girlfriend due to Jacob's racial background – a part of himself he could not control. This loss gave him a desire to seize control of his life through his newly discovered skill with a rifle, a skill he had unknowingly developed as a photographer.

My listeners' interest in this photographic element of the play also resonated with me, and I began to consider the connection between Jacob's taking a picture and shooting a rifle. This led me to another original idea omitted from the draft: Jacob's photo album of past victims. Much of his photography involved capturing a moment of real life in the taken picture, and this idea of "life contained" informed Jacob's work as a sniper. His photographs of past targets were a dark and romantic element of Jacob's character. While it was certainly macabre to keep mementos of people he murdered, to Jacob these photographs eternally preserved the arrested lives of his victims in the moment before death. In this moment the individual could "truly understand his life's significance," hence Jacob's simplistic assassin's adage: "Death is that which gives meaning to life." I had originally omitted the photo album of victims, thinking its dark nature would alienate my audience from the comedy of the play. In contrast, in the discussion I was surprised by a strong audience interest in the darker aspects and how they contrasted with the humor to make the comedy funnier. Like the aforementioned curiosity about Jacob's past, I realized my readers were actually interested in

the same details of plot and character that I was. I was encouraged to follow my original creative instincts.

A final important change emerging from the discussion concerned the play's first title, *Degree of Distinction*. I had begun the play thinking primarily of a compromised professional distance in the work of an expert assassin. Hence, "distinction" suggested both the difference between shooter and target as well as the exceptional skill of the shooter. My readers did not grasp this connection; one commented that the title made "no sense" to him. This response led me to reconsider it. The event that begins the play and forces Jacob to rethink his one-dimensional view of human life is missing his shot at Terry. Jacob's journey towards understanding why this happened continually takes him back to that moment – hence, Jacob's primary action in the play is gaining an appropriate perspective on the event. In other words, Jacob spends the play "framing" the shot, not in the sense of lining the picture up correctly in the viewfinder, but rather trying to figure out how to interpret it. This led me to alter the title from the original *Degree of Distinction* to *Framing the Shot*, because I wanted the audience to identify with Jacob's struggle. Through his discovery of the significance of an individual life beyond the look of a framed picture, Jacob realizes the truly awful nature of his profession and finds new meaning in life and friendship.

From this first reading of the script, I learned anew how feedback from my peers and professors in Performance Studies can inform rewrites. I knew their responses were not mandated changes, but I trusted their comments as honest opinions from friends and colleagues experienced in performance work. This trust was facilitated by their reactions supporting earlier ideas I had omitted. At the same time, their confusion over elements like the play's title led me to rethink those details and change them. It would have been helpful

to have had a second reading and discussion after the rewrites to hear responses to the changes. While time did not allow for this, I also believed the plot structure and humor of the play functioned well enough to begin rehearsals without more outside feedback. Ultimately, I wanted to let the responses inform my rewrites rather than control them.

I aimed to finish these revisions to the script before rehearsals began to keep my dual roles as playwright and director distinct, just as my guiding sources suggested. Artaud had taught me the import of discerning “what belongs” to author and director in directing my own play (112). Hence, I hoped to let my knowledge and insight as the playwright inform my work as a director rather than complicate it through an internal struggle to impose large-scale revisions on the script as opening night neared. The warning of John Patrick Shanley that a playwright/director will not “have time” to “fix *structure*” in a new play during rehearsals (McLaughlin 259) had taught me the importance of solidifying the script as much as possible before beginning directorial work. The more a playwright can address structural difficulties in the writing, the less a director has to be concerned with them in rehearsal. Thus, I worked to implement the revisions clarifying character and plot before my second reading with the cast.

While I was encouraged that the cast liked the revisions and saw no gaping holes in the plot or the characters, I knew I had to consider their approval carefully. This is not to imply I did not trust my actors’ opinions, but I sensed their reluctance to suggest large changes close to the beginning of rehearsals. This avoidance of criticism could have come from their respect and friendship for the writer. Having worked with these actors several times before, I knew they might hesitate to give me difficult critiques. In addition, these actors would ultimately have to embrace the text and their characters regardless of their

uncertainties and questions. While at this point such over-respect for the author was just a suspicion, it would later emerge as a fact in our more difficult rehearsals.

In spite of these concerns, I felt that after the in-class reading and subsequent revisions my primary work as a playwright – the crafting of the story and dialogue – was accomplished and rehearsals could begin. Most importantly, I liked the way the new script read and still laughed at the play’s humor. Perhaps the most important lesson I learned from the pre-rehearsal period was to trust my own judgment as a playwright, appreciating the honest questions and comments from my readers while ultimately using that information to make my own decisions.

Directing My Script

As we rehearsed *Framing the Shot*, the actors’ work with their characters revealed no unanswerable questions or problems in their motivations or actions within the script. Hence, these elements of the play were not altered. This allows for a focused examination of the small but important script changes that did take place because of rehearsal. These alterations included significant additions to the written stage directions, as well as line changes that stopped dialogue and action from conflicting with the setting of the play. In addition, a final category of changes emerged unique to the playwright/director process: minute adjustments to lines based on the character’s personalities and speech rhythms.

As I began to read the play script as director, one of my primary concerns was accompanying the dialogue with appropriate actions. In this way, I could fulfill Artaud’s ideal of a playwright/director who discerned “what belongs” to each side of the dual role by combining visuals with spoken language that better engage the audience (112). One such moment occurred in the play’s third scene, when Jacob and Terry drunkenly arrive home

from a baseball game. As they enter, the dialogue reveals Jacob has been continually questioning Terry about his past in the hopes of learning why Terry's life merited a professional assassination contract. While Terry appreciates Jacob's fervent interest, he eventually wonders aloud: "So Jake...why you wanna know so much about me?" The tension in this moment was the possibility that Terry had figured out Jacob's role in the assassination attempt, and that Jacob might kill Terry if he actually accused him. In our initial blocking of this moment, I had the two simply sit at the table saying the lines. While this was I how had imagined the scene in the script, a different staging idea eventually emerged that heightened the dramatic tension. Rather than have the two sit unmoving, I gave Terry a new line asking for the bottle of tequila, which sent him offstage to Jacob's kitchen. As Terry continued questioning from offstage why Jacob was so interested "since [he] got shot at the other day," Jacob responded to the growing suspicion by taking the rifle out from under the couch and preparing to shoot Terry. The tension of the moment was enhanced visually by adding the image of Jacob cautiously readying the rifle during the dialogue.

This was a new addition to the script revealed through directorial exploration, not simply an interpretation of stage directions already written. This suggests that for a playwright/director, writing a new play continues beyond the isolation of the writing room and into the theater during rehearsals. Tony Kushner describes "the rehearsal room" as "infinitely more inviting than the room in which I write" (Cole 130). While I had needed that isolation to make *Framing the Shot* ready for rehearsals, working the play with actors in the theater opened up new possibilities. Through exploration in rehearsal, I could alter the staging described in the text and improve scenes overall.

Other changes to the script resulted from efforts to increase the realism of the play. While these changes often involved only a line or two, their addition contributed to the production's believability. An example of this occurred in the final scene of the play in which Lance confronts Jacob about his posed photographs with Terry. He demands an explanation from Jacob about why he had "two rolls of Terrence Ledbetter with his shirt off acting like a cat." After a rehearsal of this scene my stage manager commented that from her experience in amateur photography, it would have been difficult for Jacob to have developed two rolls of photographs the night before. The photo development process is a meticulous one, and so finishing two rolls while intoxicated seemed to her implausible. Trusting her on this, I changed Lance's line from "two rolls" to "20 shots", thus making Jacob's photo development more believable by reducing it to a single roll.

In a farcical comedy like *Framing the Shot*, being "realistic" is not the ultimate aim. I knew that audiences would have to accept details like Lance believing the ketchup stains on Jacob to be blood as part of the comic nature of the play. What this instance with the stage manager taught me was that I wanted to anticipate audience questions of believability and address them. While most of an audience might not question Jacob developing two rolls of film while drunk, my stage manager had shown me that some people would. I did not want skepticism over such a small point to distract an audience member from the action of the scene. Hence, I would rather make a small change to one line than risk this kind of disruption. In contrast, a believability problem concerning a larger aspect of the plot could mean a much larger revision. Thankfully, the early readings and revisions of the script worked to prevent this from happening. However, if such a problem had occurred during rehearsals I would have been uncertain how to proceed. Ultimately, I would need to weigh

whether the issue demanded an immediate rewrite or would have to wait until after this first production. In the end, this would depend on the scope of the problem and how much time we needed to fix it before opening night. If I could avoid this problem by more careful consideration of my play's written settings prior to rehearsals, so much the better.

The third and most interesting category of scripting changes during rehearsals was unique to my dual role as director and playwright. These alterations were small additions and adjustments to make the dialogue better fit the characters, often in response to hearing the words spoken by actors. Arthur Miller compares his playwriting to composing music, describing how "things can sometimes occur to you when you hear the sound" of the actors speaking. Noticing these "new soundings of the notes" can lead the playwright to change the script (Cole 138). In the same way, hearing the actors voice my lines helped me refine the rhythms of the dialogue like a composer might with a musical composition.

A good example appears in the first scene when Terry begins to explain his excitement over his near-assassination by asking Jacob: "Before today, what was I to you?" In the script's original form, Jacob ventures the guess of "Um...my neighbor?" before Terry launches into a speech about his dismal state prior to the assassination attempt. As we rehearsed and I repeatedly heard Terry's question spoken aloud, I understood that the question was rhetorical, an introduction to his explanation of how almost being murdered had saved his life. Hence, Terry would not expect an answer from Jacob and would not wait for one. Realizing this, I cut Jacob's line down to the "Um..." and had Terry continue his lines before Jacob could venture the original guess. The result was an uninterrupted comic tirade from Terry explaining the sad state of his life prior to the assassination attempt. With this

rewrite, Jacob's brief and uncertain stammering complemented the overflow of sentiment from Terry rather than breaking its rhythm by shifting back to Jacob.

At times I made rhythmic line changes not from hearing the actors sound out my original words, but from their accidental additions or subtractions. For instance, in the drunken exchange in the third scene Terry responds to Jacob's speech about his ex-girlfriend by saying: "That's the saddest thing I ever heard." In our early work on this moment, the actor playing Terry³ unintentionally added the word "have" between "I" and "ever." While a small and seemingly insignificant addition, I saw that the actor's natural inclination was to add "have" in that place to heighten the emphasis on the word "ever." The natural rhythm of the actor's speech informed my decision to add the word "have" to the line, with the intention of better fitting the lines to the character's intention – in this case, the expression of shared grief. A contrary example of an actor's subtraction from the words of the script came during an early rehearsal of the second scene when the actor playing Lance⁴ dropped the word "adjust" from the line: "Ok...first thing is adjust the sights." Rather than being irritated at the word being left out, I liked it. The character action of the line was Lance trying to prove to Jacob that he knew how to shoot a rifle effectively, an intention made ironically funny since the ensuing lines reveal Lance's obvious lack of experience. With the word "adjust" replaced by a silent and failed search for the right word, Lance's comic ineptitude emerged earlier in the moment and helped make it more humorous.

With instances like these, I saw how hearing the lines spoken in rehearsal could be invaluable to a playwright wanting to fine tune his dialogue. As I watched actors repeatedly speak the lines, experimenting constantly with different tones and pacing, I acquired a clearer

³ Bo Odom.

⁴ Southey Blanton.

idea of how I wanted my characters to sound. In some cases, I realized how the actor's natural speaking rhythms could sound *better* than what I had originally imagined writing the lines. These insights encouraged me to alter words and rhythms accordingly. While these changes may just seem meticulous, they also represent a creative element of the playwright/director not to be found when the two roles are performed by separate people. A director working with another's play script will make efforts to understand the rhythms of the dialogue and how they illustrate the dramatic workings of the characters. Having crafted the script with these rhythms in mind, the playwright/director has not only an advantage in identifying these rhythms, but also the ability to revise the spoken words and alter the rhythmic sound of the dialogue. This is an extension of the writing process made possible by the playwright experiencing the play as a director and continually hearing actors give voice to the words. My direction of the premiere production of *Framing the Shot* allowed me to refine the script through continual sounding out in rehearsal, ensuring like a composer that all the notes of the dialogue were in the place I wanted them. As Tony Kushner affirms: "a good playwright" cares "about every single word that comes out of a character's mouth" (129). At the same time, as I continued to work with the actors I would later see how this intimacy with the rhythms of the script could lead the playwright/director to unknowingly limit the exploration of the play's subtext in rehearsals.

The playwright/director must also be able to distinguish the separate work of writing from directing to discern when a play's problems in rehearsal merit altering the words of the text. As Albee describes, writers who are too quick to change their scripts can "quite often destroy their own work or do serious damage to it" (Bryer 16). I learned that not every

problem encountered in rehearsal is best solved by changing the play script. As I worked with the actors, I often saw how all these problems need is director-guided exploration.

Working with Actors

When working with actors, the playwright/director faces the same challenge as a separate director. While encouraging actors to explore the potentialities of the text in defining their roles, a director must also guide and focus these explorations into a unified vision for the performance. What is different for a playwright/director is a personal understanding of the original thinking that informed the creation of the characters on the page. This knowledge can be an invaluable resource for an actor struggling to define uncertainties in his character. At the same time, this consolidation of director and playwright can also be a detriment to a performer's creativity when the author's presence limits the actor's free exploration of the text. In directing *Framing the Shot* I utilized my playwright's knowledge of the characters to guide my actors while also moving beyond this knowledge to discover with them the script's latent possibilities.

When I first cast the play, I had chosen actors experienced and skilled in the development of new writing for the stage. As Terrence McNally attested during the first productions of his plays, experienced performers must be relied upon to "create the play" effectively for the audience (Bryer 188). From the first reading of the play through the final rehearsals, I shared the work of creating this play's characters with my talented actors. One of these actors faced a unique characterization challenge in his portrayal of Lance, Jacob's boss from the world of organized crime. While the characters of Jacob and Terry had several moments describing how their past experiences had defined them, Lance had few distinct details of his past revealed. The only things the script revealed for certain were that Lance

had known Jacob for some time and had a definite appreciation for Jacob's prowess as an assassin. There were no details about how and why Lance had turned to a life of crime or what he hoped to accomplish. At times this missing information proved difficult for the actor as he worked to find Lance's motivations for his actions and dialogue. In response I gave advice that only a playwright could by telling the actor about my original thinking when I crafted Lance's character. I described how I envisioned Lance as somewhat younger than the other characters, probably in his early to mid-twenties. This youth gave Lance a rabid enthusiasm and eagerness to prove himself, but also an insecurity that sought out criminal role models, like Jacob the expert sniper. These suggestions proved helpful for the actor as he built his character in rehearsals; for instance, he discovered from this information the nature of Lance's anger towards Jacob in the fourth scene. Lance was not just upset that Jacob had developed a relationship with his target, but also that Jacob had betrayed Lance's worshipful admiration of him as the perfect killer. Hence, with the input of the playwright/director, the actor's work was facilitated.

At the same time I learned there is a limit to how helpful a playwright's explanations are to an actor in rehearsal. Also, a playwright/director may think that the emotional arc of a character is abundantly clear and have difficulty explaining it to an actor who does not see it. After a few rehearsals I became accustomed to relying on the playwright-based explanations described above to help my actors resolve their characterization difficulties. However, this solution proved problematic as we rehearsed the drunken scene between Jacob and Terry. During this scene Jacob unfolds the story of his failed romance with his ex-girlfriend Naomi. I envisioned this moment as Jacob revealing the emotional pain that he had silenced for five years by becoming an assassin; telling this story was difficult for him, but it represented how

Terry had begun to reawaken Jacob's humanity. This in turn led Jacob to abandon his life of crime at the play's conclusion.

All explanations did little to help the actor playing Jacob⁵ emotionally engage with this moment. While he appreciated my efforts to explain the origins and dramatic relevance of this story, he struggled to find a motivation for the telling. The actor questioned why Jacob unveils his past troubles to Terry in this moment when he had refused to do so earlier in the play. While I had thought the answer was present in the text, the actor's confusion made me suspect that the play script was not as clear as the cast's initial approval had suggested. I wondered whether the actor's regard for the writer in the second reading had compromised his giving an honest response to that version of the text. As I continued to try to explain the character's motivation, I realized I had unknowingly laid the grounds for a serious creative problem. My actors respected me doubly: as the director and also the author of this play. But this dual status led to me being *overly* respected: my ideas were often accepted without question, which limited the actor's freedom to explore in rehearsal. In addition, my authorial directing came to a screeching halt when the author could not find the right words to convey his thoughts. In a discussion about the actors' interpretations of the scene, I found myself verbally flailing for the right phrase that would motivate my actor to the reading I had imagined. This was not the kind of director I wanted to be – a hysteric playwright dictating line readings – and as we ended rehearsal for the night, I knew I had to lose “the dead weight of the playwright's authority” (Cole 123) and find my own answer to Bogart's directorial question: “How do we get out of our own way?” (86).

The answer I found was setting aside my status as the playwright, with its comfortable understanding of the original ideas of the script, and beginning to explore the

⁵ Cory Kraftchick.

scene with my actors as a director in search of undiscovered possibilities. When we met to rehearse the same drunken scene between Jacob and Terry, I abandoned my usual practice of talking over ideas prior to working the scene and simply launched into it. That night we would leave the text behind and explore the scene a new way, using Viola Spolin's "Gibberish" game, which involved the actors going through the scene as usual but replacing the lines with a nonsense language of their own invention (114). Through this I wanted the actors to move past the spoken banter I had written and find a new energy in the scene through physical interpretation of the lines. This exercise worked fantastically well, especially given the characters' drunkenness; they moved and spoke with a new freedom and looseness. Once we arrived at the Naomi speech, I was thrilled to see how Jacob's newfound drunken enthusiasm funneled the monologue emotionally. The actor began the story with a reckless energy, asking in Gibberish "who wouldn't" want to be Jewish, then gradually cascading into a quieter sadness as the emotional release of the story hit home. As a playwright I had missed the full impact of the drunkenness as a motivation for telling this story, but the Gibberish game had freed my actor to explore and embrace that motivation as I let go of my fixation on explaining the words of the text.

This experience unveiled an important lesson for any playwright thinking of directing his own plays. While the writer can offer an actor some insight into the origins of a character, this cannot take preeminence over an actor's freedom to explore the text. I saw how my eagerness to present my own ideas about the original construction of the characters limited my actors' creativity and experimentation in rehearsal. Again, I realized that I had to set aside my playwright's sensibility and examine the workings of my play as a director trying to discover unknown potentialities. The playwright/director should approach the play

with a strong vision, but I had seen how this vision might not be the ultimate one. The need for exploration and discovery in McNally's "collaborative process" (Bryer 204) could not be ignored.

Stage Directions and Design Collaboration

When staging and designing the premiere production of a play, the playwright/director needs to fuse his original text with theatrical design elements that engage the senses. These demand an awareness of visual and auditory potentialities in the production, such as lighting and music. When working with designers and musicians in exploring these theatrical possibilities, the playwright/director should be receptive to their suggested additions to his original vision. The sense of discovery and collaboration that guided my work with the actors was also vital to how I interpreted my stage directions and cooperated with my lighting and set designers as well as my composer. The overall design of *Framing the Shot* was accomplished by the integration of our shared insights.

As I described earlier, the written staging of *Framing the Shot* sometimes changed radically in rehearsal when new ideas emerged. However, there are also moments in the play script when the stage directions are intentionally ambiguous. With these I wanted to encourage the actor's freedom to explore different choices when performing them. The best example of this is in the third scene when Jacob is drunkenly photographing a similarly intoxicated Terry. The stage directions read "Terry explores the space on the couch" and later "assumes a position," trusting the actor playing Terry to choose how best to perform such actions. I hoped through these to free the actor's imagination to try different ideas that best portray the character while also guiding him with towards what I had envisioned.

I soon saw that freeing the actor's imagination was not a problem. Our rehearsals for the drunken photo scene mostly consisted of my letting the actor playing Terry try whatever he wanted in the space, with the result often being hilarity. His improvised movements led him to ballroom dance with a hat rack, pose with a bottle of tequila, and play air guitar while standing on the couch. I was glad to relinquish control to a talented actor who knew how to explore physical humor in rehearsal. At one point, the actor's creativity in this scene reached a new level of welcome audacity. He informed me that he had come up with a new idea during a rehearsal break, and if I "didn't like it we might need to take you off this project." I was eager to see his idea – adding the background music of Enrique Iglesias' *Bailamos* – in action, and was relieved to find that I did love it and could stay on as director with the actor's blessing. While his comment was in jest, it did reveal a definite comfort in the actor's freedom to creatively explore any potentiality in staging his character in rehearsal.

Through this I realized my suggested stage directions in this moment were not really necessary to the script. An actor could use the drunken context of this scene with the lines Terry speaks (which are often quoted directly by the stage directions) and have sufficient information to play the scene well. In contrast, the specificity of directions like "stern face" or "on the couch" could limit an actor's creativity and hinder his free exploration; even open-ended directions like "assumes a position" could confuse an actor and lead to a futile search for exactly what position the scene demanded. Wanting to encourage the exploration of this moment without imposing blocking for future directors, I decided to cut these stage directions out of the text and take to heart Peter Brook's belief that "the best dramatists explain themselves the least" (*Empty Space* 13). Through this I learned to trust the importance of what Albee described as "implicit" stage directions "contained within the

essence and nature of a character.” A “good director” can be trusted to direct according to these implicit directions and should not be forced to present a “photo-image” of the author’s intent (Luere 50).

My collaborative work with the lighting designer⁶ was also instrumental in *Framing the Shot*. Prior to bringing her onto the project, I had not given much thought to how I would use lighting. It all took place in a single, indoor setting, and I had not envisioned how I wanted the lights to complement the action onstage. In contrast, one of her first suggestions was to use the red light of Jacob’s darkroom to begin the play. *Framing the Shot* starts with Jacob the professional killer trying to discern the meaning behind his missed shot at Terry. Besides the foreboding effect of lighting the stage in dark red, the darkroom light also communicated a sense of “processing things,” which is exactly what Jacob does throughout the play. Hence, the designer’s use of the darkroom light helped funnel the audience’s experience into that of the play’s protagonist, all without him speaking a word. This visual addition fit the play well, and I decided to write the darkroom light into the script’s setting description for future productions. While future directors and designers could decide how to interpret this lighting description, they would see its importance to the subtext of the play. This was only one example of how my lighting designer contributed her visual sense to the production by bringing out elements of my script that I had not considered. In this case, her choice informed not just my directorial ideas but also led to an addition in the play text.

In similar fashion, the scenic designer⁷ also expanded the visual world of the play beyond the written and spoken text. We worked together to create an aesthetic of Jacob’s apartment as a home bare of decoration, furnished neatly but cheaply. Behind these choices

⁶ Cecilia Durbin.

⁷ Rob Hamilton.

was the idea that given Jacob's occupation as an assassin, he would not want anything in his apartment to make him stand out from the ordinary. At the same time, Jacob's home suggested an occupant whose personal life was stark, orderly, and without sentiment. This fit Jacob's character well and set up Terry's loud and messy presence as an excellent comic foil to both setting and another character. In addition, the bare nature of Jacob's apartment called attention to what was actually there. Early on, the designer commented that it seemed unusual for Jacob not to at least have a stereo. I immediately took this to heart and began to imagine what sort of music Jacob would enjoy. This made for some entertaining moments onstage as the different characters discovered and interacted with Jacob's music collection, moments that would not have been possible without the designer's suggestion. Like the darkroom contribution of the lighting designer, the suggested addition of the stereo also made its way into the text of the script. Hence, the contributions of the scenic designer were also invaluable in developing *Framing the Shot* for this production and for the final play script.

The composer⁸ was also an invaluable addition to the production team, though his task was the most difficult. While lighting and set design are usually standard requirements in a play's production, *original* music is more unusual. *Framing the Shot* maintains a somewhat realistic aesthetic, and having recognizable background music in a scene could easily draw the audience's attention away from the play's action and onto the music. As Peter Brook described, "music in theatre [...] only exists in relation to the performing energies" and should not be the composer "trying to appeal to the spectator's ear in a separate language of his own" (*Open Door* 36-37). I expressed this opinion to the composer early on, emphasizing the importance of the background music complementing the action of the scene rather than calling attention to itself. This in mind, the composer attended rehearsals to

⁸ Enrique Varela.

observe the actors as he developed musical ideas to accompany characters and scenes. The resulting music complemented the play, heightening the humor and emotional energy. A good example was during Terry's speech about going to the police station. The composer accompanied this monologue with original jazz music – ironically evoking a *noir* sensibility to Terry's police story with high hat percussion and swelling brass. This ironic musical addition helped make the farcical nature of Terry's story funnier.

In another case, I saw how the music could help communicate the emotions of the characters. During Jacob's speech about his breakup with Naomi, the composer added some somber piano music to complement the sentiment of Jacob's lost relationship. Later in the play, the music returns as Jacob uncovers the photograph of Terry and him together. Through this recurrence of the sentimental piano music, an emotional connection is created for the audience between Jacob's feelings of loss over Naomi and his feelings for Terry. Thus, Terry's friendship, in spite of Jacob's attempt to kill him, takes the place of Jacob's lost love who rejected Jacob because of circumstances beyond his control. It is in this moment that Jacob finally decides he cannot kill Terry. The music augmented the audience's emotional connection to the characters during this scene.

I had seen how music composed and inspired by the actors' work in rehearsal could strengthen a performance. However, unlike the contributions of the lighting and set designers that I later added to the play text, I decided not to incorporate the composer's music permanently into the script. My primary reason was the composer created this music especially for this particular production of *Framing the Shot*. It was composed in our rehearsals in response to the work of these specific actors and the performance they created. The music was a discovery and choice we made together in our work for this performance. I

wanted to keep the script open for future readers to make their own discoveries about music in performing *Framing the Shot*, rather than imposing my choices. Essentially, this was a playwright/director realizing the distinction between production choices whose addition would clarify the play script and those which needed to be left open to ensure artistic freedom in future productions.

Throughout my collaboration with the artists, I realized the importance of shared vision in creating a theatrical experience for an audience. While I had a definite idea of how I wanted certain moments and scenes to play onstage, I had barely considered the specific makeup of the apartment set, and original music had not entered my imagination at all. In developing these aspects of the performance with my actors and designers, I understood the value of having different artists with different skills interpret my play script in their own ways. Clearly these ways were different from my own, but different did not mean opposed. Rather, a play that engages an audience demands the talents, imagination, and vision of multiple artists collaborating and not obeying the every whim of a theatrical autocrat in the form of a hysteric playwright/director. Thus, while a playwright/director may have a control over and intimacy with the script, in the end this person must still have the courage to engage the play text with a spirit of openness, discovery, and collaboration.

Conclusion

The tension between textual control and artistic freedom is key to my understanding of what is gained and lost by the playwright acting as director. I saw the primary advantage of a playwright/director as the ability to revise the script in response to rehearsal work. As issues and problems emerge in the script, the playwright/director can address them by altering lines and scenes in the text. I also learned how the playwright/director can fine-tune

the dialogue to present the musical sounds he heard when he wrote the play. In contrast, the main hindrance of a playwright directing his own work is the difficulty in relinquishing control. As author and director, it was not always easy to allow my actors to explore their characters in rehearsals. Nevertheless, I saw how this freedom to discover was essential to creating the performance. Rather than my individual vision, it was through collaboration that *Framing the Shot* became everything it could be.

As a playwright, learning these things taught me to better anticipate how directors, actors and designers will read my work. The ultimate lesson was understanding, as Artaud would describe, “what belongs” to the author and what to these roles (112). To the writer belong the words of the play. In crafting the text, the playwright has a unique position as the primary artist in a production: the others will begin with the script to create the theatrical experience. In directing *Framing the Shot*, I had to leave behind this playwright status and approach my play as a director. This separate thinking made the production possible. I was also grateful for the contributions of my actors and designers in this first production. By allowing my collaborators creative space to explore the play in their own ways, I saw how distinct creativities in this work were not supplemental, but rather essential to the performance. Any suggestion offered by the playwright regarding the sensory experience of the production is just that – a suggestion. The author must grasp the futility of hysteric playwrighting, recognize the limitations of his vision of the play and encourage the creativity of his collaborators. Only then can the play move beyond the words of the text and become a true theatrical experience.

APPENDIX 1:

Rehearsal Journal

Thursday, January 12, 2006

Tonight is our first real rehearsal. The last reading of the play on Tuesday night went fantastically – the cast and crew loved all the revisions to the script, had some funny and easily-added suggestions, and best of all, did not find any glaring holes in the action of the show. While I need to get on these smaller adjustments to the script this weekend when I have some more time, the script of the show is very ready for our rehearsals to begin tonight.

If only everything else was being more cooperative. I had to move the opening night of the show up a week because one of my actors just told me about an irreparable conflict on our initial opening day. Nothing fatal, but our rehearsals are going to be crunched a bit more than I had anticipated. Not to mention that I also need to find appropriate furniture, wall paint, and costumes for the show. I'm reminded all over again why I like writing so much more than directing: on the page, you can include as much detail as you want and trust that whoever's directing the play will take care of the specifics of design and staging; now, *I'm* the director and *I've* got to handle the details. As soon as I finish writing this, I move on to a plan for blocking the first scene, as well as some character-building exercises to help my actors get comfortable with their parts. I don't include the details of these because I haven't figured them out yet.

After all I wrote in my prospectus about having a powerful artistic vision for the play, I'm surprised that I'm still getting hung up on the details of directing. I suppose this implies that the aforementioned vision isn't as easily transferable as I had thought; I now need to sit down and examine my first scene with a director's eye to figure out how to embody the text I

wrote a month ago. Until I work this out in rehearsal, the play script is nothing more than a sharp and hilarious potentiality.

Sunday, January 15, 2006

Directing really is fun. After two days of rehearsal, the script has been revised, half the show is blocked, and everyone involved has had a great time. I really have to express gratitude for my crew and especially my cast – having a group of top-notch performers and assistants has made my job much easier. They have all consistently shared helpful ideas, made creative choices, and in general helped me laugh and enjoy this play in a whole new way. I'd give them all a pay bonus if most weren't working for free.

While I spent hours preparing for my first rehearsal by taking notes on the successive beats of the first scene and all the possible movement ideas I had for the actors onstage, once I was in rehearsal I consulted these notes about twice in the three hours we were there. The simple truth was that my actors either anticipated what I had wanted more or less exactly, or their movements onstage made *more* sense than what I had planned. The play really does happen onstage – I certainly had an original vision for how these characters would move and speak when I first wrote the script, but watching real live actors play these parts helps me realize how limited my own creativity can be. This is not to demean myself (I've written a pretty funny play here), but I love watching how my play script becomes more alive, vibrant, and funny when actors put their own spin on the lines and stage directions. The creativity of a play can't begin and end with the writer, no matter how great his original vision may be – he's got to give that vision to others and let it grow with their ideas and work.

In this vein, I've already changed some of my own lines based on what happened in rehearsal. One such case reminded me directly of my old professor John Clum's caveat about not trying to fix as a director what needed to be fixed as a playwright. In the first scene, Terry tries to use Jacob's landline phone to call the police, Jacob tells Terry to "use your own phone," and Terry responds that he's "out of minutes." While I thought it was clear that Terry was referring to the cell phone he uses in scene 2, more than one person was confused by this in the earlier readings. I had thought about Terry actually pulling out his mobile phone at this moment to make the line more clear, but knew this would make the joke really obvious and ruin the humor of the moment. As I pondered how to fix this in rehearsal, my stage manager asked if we could just change the line and have Jacob reference Terry's cell phone directly: "Use your cell phone" instead of "Go use your own phone." I quickly accepted and the problem was solved with a quick change of lines.

Besides making me more grateful for my stage manager, I realized how helpful it was to be able to simply make quick changes to the script without having to ask the playwright's permission (since I was the playwright). At the same time, this instance showed me the importance of being flexible as a writer, to take suggestions gracefully and not put up unnecessary resistance to needed revisions (though minor ones like this are certainly easier to swallow). My goal in this first production (besides answering my thesis questions) is creating the best possible production of my play – to that end, I'll gladly accept all the help I can get.

Thursday, January 19, 2006

Directing isn't as much fun as I thought. After a few more days in the theater with my actors, I'm beginning to realize some of the inherent difficulties in directing my own work. While rehearsals are still going well and the show is coming along, I've run into some serious directorial issues with my play. Specifically, I want to talk about the problem of having to interpret my own play as a director.

One of the first things I noticed in planning for rehearsal was that I needed to look at my play as a director would, making notes on changes in character and rhythm as seen in the script. I spent hours before rehearsal finding the shifts in a character's mood and actions, then imagining how I would lead my actors to understand this. While I wrote the dialogue with these character flows and changes in mind, I saw through my directorial preparation that a director has to perceive these shifts very specifically so he/she can explain them to the actors if need be. For instance, in writing the first scene I tried to have Jacob's irritation with Terry gradually escalate until he finally asks Terry to leave; Terry then tells Jacob about his near-assassination and Jacob's objective changes to feigning shock. Looking at the scene as a director, I realized that Jacob's irritation always becomes more intense and emotional whenever Terry tries to pry into Jacob's personal life. I hadn't realized it in the writing of the scene, but Jacob's playing the part of the concerned neighbor was at its most stretched when the conversation turned personal. This directorial analysis made it easy to direct the actor playing Jacob whenever he had questions about Jacob's reactions to Terry.

The challenge came in when I knew as a writer I was going for in a scene and then had to explain it to an actor who simply hadn't seen these things. When we worked on the third scene, in which Terry and Jacob enter drunk and Jacob tells Terry about his past relationship with Naomi, I had a definite idea of what Jacob's emotional arc was in the scene.

I saw him telling Terry a story he had wanted to tell for a long time, but simply hadn't allowed himself to go there emotionally. Hence, this scene was the beginning of Jacob coming to grips with his own humanity and culminating in his decision to spare Terry in the next scene. When the time came to work the third scene with my actors, I was surprised that the actor playing Jacob had a harder time understanding this than I had thought. Was the actor just slow to get it, or was the writing just not as clear as I had thought? I was doing a lot of explaining at this moment, referring to my thoughts when writing the scene and what I thought would help him as an actor. Was I being a good director, or just an insecure playwright wanting the reader to get the point I was so desperately going for?

I'm realizing more and more the limitations of this kind of explanation-based directing. While in some cases I may find just the right set of words to motivate the actor forward with the character, even then I'm forcing the performer to constantly look to the director for input rather than relying on his own understanding. I didn't come to the theater to be an autocrat who always got his way – I wanted to write plays that others would freely understand and interpret with their own, equally valid and often superior, creativity. Tonight I'm going to address this problem as best I can, and hopefully give my actors more freedom to experiment and make this production the best it possibly can be. I just need to get myself out of the way.

Sunday, January 22, 2006

Directors can't operate alone. It didn't take long for me to realize how much I needed the help of my crew on this project, and like I said earlier, their help has been invaluable thus far. Whether that meant helping me decide on blocking choices or hammering out a tech

schedule, I owe a lot to my top-notch crew of stage manager, designers and directing assistant. However, I'm beginning to realize that there are certain things that these people simply cannot do for me – certain things that the director has to deal with himself.

Yesterday we had our first stumble-through of the show. We ran the play from the beginning to the end with as little interruption from offstage as possible. After this concluded, my plan was to meet with my crew for 15 minutes and go over notes. After this communal sharing of ideas, I would deliver the notes to the cast personally. However, with all their input this conference lasted about an hour and gave me a lot more notes than I could efficiently give to my actors. It's not that their feedback was not helpful, but rather that there was too much of it; my experience as an actor taught me that only so many notes can be digested in one sitting. To top it off, many suggestions contrasted or disagreed – one person hated a particular staging choice, while others liked it. I tried to listen well and take it all in, but ended up feeling rather overwhelmed.

A talk with my directorial assistant this afternoon helped clear my head. These situation simply required leadership choices. When it came down to it, no one in this production expected it to be an entirely egalitarian commune – they had come on to work with me as their director, the one in charge, the one who would make decisions. This play is mine after all, and while they want it to be wonderfully produced just like me, they rightfully expect me to know better than all of them which ideas are ultimately helpful and which ones need to be politely dispensed with. The actors don't need to get three different sets of notes from whoever happens to be watching in rehearsal – they want to hear from me, their director, on what's working or not. This is not an excuse to disregard those helping me offstage, but rather to use their advice and deliver it myself. Theater might be a wonderfully

democratic practice, but even in democracy we elect leaders to make the best possible decisions for the whole group.

I suppose this is what I've always been most afraid of when it comes to directing. It's not so much that I hate dealing with details (though I know I don't like it), it's more that I hate being counted on to make the right decisions in all these numerous cases. What if I make a mistake? Will a bad piece of direction ruin my connection with the actors and jeopardize the whole production? Maybe, but to worry about this overmuch is giving way too much credit to my potential for self-destruction. No one involved with this production is a moron who doesn't know good from bad – they'll forgive my bad ideas and work with me to find the right ones. But they rely on me to lead. And that's the responsibility someone takes on when he or she decides to direct, especially when the director wants to direct his own play. After all, someone needs to ultimately decide what the best decision is – it might as well be the guy who came up with this idea to begin with.

Friday, January 27, 2006

There comes a point in rehearsal when you need to move beyond the words of the text and discover the nonverbal action of a scene. After some repeated rehearsal with the drunken third scene of the play, the wild, drunken energy I had imagined in the script was not playing well on the stage. My actors seemed a bit locked up – they did alright when the lines of the script suggested a ponderous, drunken tone, but the physicality and general deliberateness that made this scene so funny in my imagination was simply not there. The words I had written were not enough on their own. I needed to act like a director and coach my actors on

their creation of the characters so we could all discover together what would make this scene work.

Thankfully, I had spent the earlier part of the day working with some of Viola Spolin's improvisation techniques in one of my classes. These exercises were specially designed to help actors overcome these sorts of blocks that occurred in the rehearsal process. I decided to have my actors play Spolin's "Gibberish" game. In this exercise, actors play the scene speaking all their lines in a nonsense language of their own invention. The dramatic flow of the scene is identical – the actors keep the same blocking and actions throughout – but now they must focus on communicating their dialogue through physicality and tone rather than the words themselves. As the director, I would call out "Gibberish" or "English" at different points in the scene and the actors would switch back and forth; this ensured they were both on the same page as the action of the scene progressed. My hope for this activity was that the actors would embrace the physical energy running through the drunken scene and thereby increase the dramatic tension and comedy.

The exercise worked beautifully. When the actors were compelled to use gestures to help themselves communicate, they found a physical clumsiness that made the scene come alive in a way it hadn't before. By leaving the text behind and focusing on the actions between the characters, we all made some new (and funny) discoveries. Freeing the actors from the exacting demands of the script's dialogue allowed them to find the life of their characters in a new and exciting way.

I find it interesting that this victory in rehearsal came from the playwright-director letting go of his text and encouraging the actors to improvise and explore their characters outside the words. One problem I've begun to notice in rehearsal is that I often hear my own

dialogue differently than the actors choose to speak it. Many of my notes thus sound like: “Don’t pause in the middle of the sentence...say it more like this...make sure you don’t forget this word...it’s funnier this way.” While it’s natural that a playwright would have such opinions about his own writing, I’ve found that these kind of notes can be rather stifling to actors. Again, it forces them to rely on the playwright-director for their creative decisions, which should rightly be up to them to decide. As the rehearsal period nears its end, I’m wondering whether it’s better for me to let go of the minutia of how my lines sound in my head, or if I should continue to make my thoughts clear on this matter. Are my ideas really the most important here, or does everyone have equal say in the matter? Hopefully the answer will emerge in time.

APPENDIX 2:

Script of *FRAMING THE SHOT*

Scene 1: A small apartment north of the Loop, Chicago. Stage left there is the door leading out and a window next to it. A table with two chairs sits center stage, and an ugly but comfortable sofa sits stage right next to a small coffee table with a phone. A book shelf rests on the back wall between the table and the sofa. On it are a small stereo system, a black photo album and several long-distance lenses. Stage right is a door leading to the bathroom, and a door on the back wall leads to the rest of the apartment. At the top of the show, all the lights are out. Barbra Streisand's "People" plays out of the stereo.

The bathroom door opens, letting in the dark light of a photographer's darkroom. Jacob enters, carrying a camera. He shuts the bathroom door, then flips on the living room light. He walks slowly to the couch and sits. He looks at the camera for a moment, then places it on the coffee table. He reclines on the couch and stares at the ceiling. A knock on the door. He sits up, turns off the stereo with a remote. Before he can get off the couch, Terry opens the door and enters.

TERRY

Jake!

JACOB

Terry.

(pause)

TERRY

Howzitgoin?

JACOB

I'm fine. Do you... need something?

TERRY

No...no man. I need nothing. I am, at this moment, the exact opposite of needy. I am so needless right now.

(pause)

So...what are you up to?

JACOB

I'm... sitting on this couch.

TERRY

Cool.

(beat)

I just got off work.

JACOB
Did you.

TERRY
Yeah man, today was one crazy day. Like nothing ever before. Like...something happened today, and I know I'll, like, never see the world the same way again, you know?

JACOB
Yeah.
(pause)

TERRY
So Jake, how was your day?

JACOB
Not so great.

TERRY
Yeah? What happened?

JACOB
Nothing, nothing...I'd rather not talk about it.

TERRY
See, and I *want* you to talk about it, because you know why? I'm *interested*.

JACOB
Terry, did you have a reason to come over here? You need some more toilet paper or something?

TERRY
That's right...I owe you a roll.

JACOB
Two.

TERRY
Damn...two rolls? Did I really--?

JACOB
Yes, you borrowed a roll twice.

TERRY
You mean I borrowed two rolls.

JACOB

That's what I — Terry, I didn't mean you borrowed the same roll twice.

TERRY

Damn straight. That'd be disgusting.

JACOB

Look, do you need toilet paper or not?

TERRY

Jake, that's not why I'm here.

(beat)

But...you have some, you know, to spare?

(Jacob gets up and goes to the bathroom door. He flips off the main light.)

Hey, Jake, I can't see.

Jacob opens the door and enters the bathroom, letting in the red light.)

Whoa...this is kinda cool...

Jacob reenters with a 4-bag pack of toilet paper, shutting the door and turning the light on as before. He tosses the pack to Terry and flops back on the couch.)

JACOB

Shut the door when you leave.

TERRY

What's with the infrared bathroom?

JACOB

I use it as my darkroom.

TERRY

Uh huh. So what do you *do* in the dark – room?

JACOB

It's where I develop my pictures.

TERRY

Develop pictures, eh?

(He picks up Jacob's camera and begins pointing it around the room.)

So tell me Jake, where do you get these...pictures?

JACOB

I'm a photographer.

TERRY

For a living?

JACOB

Yeah.

TERRY

Nice.

(pause)

So, what do you take pictures of?

JACOB

People.

TERRY

What kind of people?

JACOB

Whoever catches my eye. Candid shots. No poses, life in action.

(Terry takes Jacob's picture.)

What are you doing?

TERRY

Life in action.

JACOB

(Taking camera away)

I don't like my picture taken.

TERRY

So you don't do self-portraits?

JACOB

How the hell am I going to do a self-portrait with a camera?

TERRY

Easy, just hold the camera out like this, point it at your face, *smile*, and then—

JACOB

Then I couldn't frame the shot correctly.

TERRY

Why not?

JACOB

Because I'd be *in* it. You have to see it from the outside for it to look right.

TERRY

Fine, fine. So...you ever take pictures of women?

JACOB
Sometimes.

TERRY
Are they ever like...you know...naked?

JACOB
Terry, I'm not a pornographer.

TERRY
That wasn't what I said.

JACOB
You asked if I took pictures of naked women.

TERRY
It's a valid question.

JACOB
Fine...I don't take pictures of naked women.
(beat)

TERRY
I think I'd better check this album just to be sure...
(*He picks up the photo album but Jacob snatches it away.*)

JACOB
Terry, what the hell do you want?

TERRY
Come on, Jake...I'm trying to show an interest in your work.

JACOB
And why is that?

TERRY
Because I want to know about you, Jake. I want to know the Jake behind the Jake, the man behind my skinny neighbor who lends me bathroom supplies. Jake, I am *interested in you*. I don't mean like I'm interested in you like I want to go out with you...I'm not a homo or anything. Not that there's anything wrong with being a homo...I don't want to offend you
...

JACOB
I'm not gay.

TERRY

Because Jake, I would totally support you in that lifestyle choice if that was your choice, man. I mean, who am I to judge, right? I mean, even if you told me you were attracted to me and stuff, and wanted to... get on my body or whatever, I wouldn't discriminate you for it.

I'd just tell you: Jake, I understand that you're burning with gay passion and all, but I just don't feel that way about you. Then I'd take you out for a beer or something, and you'd feel a lot better.

(beat)

You want to go get a beer?

JACOB

I told you I'm not gay.

TERRY

I heard you, Jake. Remember, I'm *interested*. But seriously, you up for a beer?

JACOB

I don't like beer.

TERRY

Not a beer guy huh? I've got a better idea. Stay here, Jake.

(He runs out the door, leaving it open.)

JACOB

Terry? What the hell--?

TERRY

(Reentering, holding a golden liquor bottle and a pair of glasses.)

CUERVO!

JACOB

Terry...

TERRY

I've been saving this for a special occasion.

JACOB

I don't think I—

TERRY

You'll love this stuff. It's es-PEE-zee-al.

JACOB

You really don't have to—

TERRY

(Places bottle and glasses on table and sits.)

Come on Jake. Sit. Drink.

JACOB

(Getting up and moving to table)

Alright – don't pour me too—

(Terry pours a generous amount into Jacob's glass and a matching amount for his own.)

TERRY

Come on, bottoms up.

(He drinks. Jacob hesitates, then lifts his glass.)

JACOB

L'Haim.

(He drinks, but doesn't enjoy it.)

TERRY

You're right, this needs some lime.

JACOB

No, I said L'Haim.

TERRY

Yeah, lime, like a green lemon.

JACOB

LA HAIM. It's a Hebrew phrase meaning "To Life!"

TERRY

Hebrew? You're Jewish!

JACOB

Yea—No. Well, almost.

TERRY

You're almost Jewish? Did they only half snip your penis or something?

JACOB

What?

TERRY

You know, accidents happen...

JACOB

My near-Jewishness has nothing to do with my penis!

(beat)
Well, I guess that isn't entirely true...

TERRY
Jake, I think it's time for you to be honest with me. I've been more than reasonable. No
buts. Drink some more Cuervo and tell me all about it. Remember –
(*Points to himself*)
Interested.
(*Pause. Jacob stares at Terry. Terry nods and grins. Jacob takes a swig of Cuervo, grimaces, then begins.*)

JACOB
About five years back I dated this girl. Conservative Jewish girl. Things started to get
serious—

TERRY
What was her name?
(beat)

JACOB
Naomi. Things were getting serious between us, but I couldn't marry her without converting.
I almost did.

TERRY
Almost did what? Marry her?

JACOB
Almost became Jewish. It didn't work, we broke it off, end of story. Now, if you'll excuse
me—

TERRY
Why didn't it work?

JACOB
Terry, I've had a long day, I got a headache, I'm really tired, and I have no desire to continue
this story. Now, before you go, is there anything you need from me?

TERRY
I *need* to know why it didn't work out—

JACOB
(*Jacob gets up, opens the door outside, looks at Terry.*)
Goodbye, Terry.
(*Terry sits there. Jacob flops back on the couch and closes his eyes.*)
Shut the door when you leave.
(pause)

TERRY

There is one more thing.

JACOB

Ok, shoot, what is it?

TERRY

You never asked me about my day.

JACOB

Alright, Terry, how was your day today?

TERRY

Good. Somebody tried to kill me.

JACOB

What?

TERRY

Somebody tried to kill me. I was putting up a new pane of glass for the old shoe store down the street. This pane was nice...streak-resistant, multi-polymer...quality stuff. Anyway, I was carrying this pane to the store when a bullet flew by my ear and put a hole in the pane. Then I dropped the glass. It broke.

JACOB

Who tried to shoot you?

TERRY

I don't know! That's the crazy part. I looked around, but didn't see anybody with a gun or anything. Everyone else kept walking around.

JACOB

Didn't they hear the gunshot?

TERRY

I didn't hear the gunshot. Must have used a silencer. Just heard the bullet fly by and saw the hole in the glass. Before I dropped it. The bullet went straight through the mortar in the brick wall. I saw the hole, but couldn't get it out. Too bad, would have made a nice souvenir.

JACOB

Souvenir?

TERRY

This is a day to remember, Jake. The best day of my life.

JACOB

Terry, today someone tried to kill you.

TERRY

Exactly.

(pause)

JACOB

I'm not sure I follow you.

TERRY

Listen to me Jake. Before today, what was I to you?

JACOB

Um...

TERRY

Just that guy who lived down the hall by himself. Just came out to work with high-quality panes of glass and borrow toilet paper. Just another nobody taking up space, just another nobody trying to get by without bothering anybody. Well...today, all that changed.

(beat)

JACOB

How?

TERRY

I thought nobody cared whether I lived or died. But today, I found out I was wrong. Somebody *does* care. Enough that they tried to kill me.

JACOB

And you're happy about this?

TERRY

That someone cares whether I live or die? *Yes...*

JACOB

Have you called the police?

TERRY

No, why?

JACOB

Terry, some anonymous gunman tried to put a bullet in your head.

TERRY

And changed my life.

JACOB

Well, yes...but has it occurred to you that this shooter might try again? And succeed? That could put a *little* damper on your newfound zest for life.

TERRY

More like a *huge* damper.

(beat)

What's a damper, anyway?

JACOB

You should go call the police.

TERRY

You're right.

(He stands and goes to Jacob's phone, picks up receiver.)

JACOB

What are you doing?

TERRY

Calling police.

JACOB

Use your cell phone.

TERRY

I'm low on minutes. Can I just use yours?

(Jacob gets up, takes receiver and replaces it.)

JACOB

No.

TERRY

Why not?

(Phone rings)

JACOB

I'm expecting a call.

TERRY

So what should *I* do?

JACOB

I don't know...use a pay phone, go to the police station. I've got to take this.

TERRY

Ok, go ahead.

(He does not move. Phone rings again as Jacob stares at Terry.)

I guess I'll see you. Lunch tomorrow?

JACOB

Goodbye, Terry.

TERRY

I'll call you.

(He goes. Jacob reaches for phone. Terry reenters, grabs toilet paper and exits. Jacob picks up receiver.)

JACOB

Hello? Yes, Lance, it's me. No, there's been a slight problem.

(beat)

I missed.

(Blackout. End Scene 1.)

Scene 2: Jacob's apartment. The next day. Jacob sits on the couch. Lance sits at the table, on which rests a black sniper rifle. Lance holds a small can of energy drink (preferably sugarless) from which he drinks periodically.

JACOB

Do you think death is that which ultimately gives meaning to life? That when faced with his own annihilation, the individual can suddenly grasp the frailty of his own existence and truly understand his life's significance?

(Lance takes a swig of energy drink.)

Well I do. And if anyone understands life and death, it's the guy with the gun, right? I mean, a little squeeze of the trigger and I make it so some guy will never see life the same way again. Sure, his life will also be *over*, but isn't death with clarity preferable to life lived in obscurity?

(Lance puts down the energy drink. He stares at the rifle.)

But what happens when death *almost* occurs? When you get as close as possible to the final *period* at the end of someone's life, and it turns out to be a colon. Two dots instead of one.

Something is about to follow.

(Lance has picked up the gun and practices aiming it around the room.)

I never missed before. Why now? Was it just an accident, or is he meant to live?

LANCE

If I was a sniper, my code name would be Big Bad MuhThuh.

JACOB

(Still in his own world)

Why?

LANCE

'Cause I'm bad ass.

JACOB

No, Lance, why did I miss?

LANCE

Hells if I know. You never missed before.

JACOB

I know.

(pause)

LANCE

Hey, remember that shot from the top of the Cultural Center to the front row of the Millennium Park amphitheatre?

JACOB

Yeah.
(pause)
Uh, good shot.

LANCE
It was a fucking *bad ass* shot. Simon Saccelli's head popped off like he was gonna give us a
Pez.

JACOB
A slight exaggeration, but—

LANCE
Exaggeration? You're the best shooter I've ever seen. The other guys with rifles on our
payroll are a bunch of high-and-tight former Leatherheads. Hoo-Rah. Spent all that time
crawlin' in the bushes dressed up in frickin' leaves and vines with camo paint smeared all
over their faces and all that shit. Take those bastards out of the jungle and put them in a
Chicago high rise, every shot's a toss up. You...you're in a league of your own. Set apart.
Fuckin' honors with *distinction*. If shooters were countries, you'd be Russia and they'd
be...fucking *France*.
(beat)
Russia's bigger than France.

JACOB
What's your point?

LANCE
My point is, those Jarheads can't even compare to you. I don't know where the hell you
learned to shoot like that, CIA, KGB or whatever—

JACOB
Southern Illinois.

LANCE
What?

JACOB
Buckport, Illinois, five years ago. First time I shot a rifle.

LANCE
You learned how to snipe in Buckport, Illinois?

JACOB
Didn't learn. It just kind of came to me.

LANCE
How the hell did long-distance assassination “just kind of come to you?”

JACOB

My uncles took me shooting with them one day, and I was just good at it.

LANCE

What'd you shoot? Skeet? Squirrels?

JACOB

Diet Coke 2 Liters. They'd drain it halfway, toss it up, take a shot. They weren't very good...missed most of the time. I just watched for a while, then one of them shoved a rifle in my hands, said, "Now Jakey, it's time to quit watching and start shootin'." I'd never held a gun before...I was a photography major at Northwestern, for God's sake. My uncle Karl showed me how to pull back the bolt while Uncle Pete was chugging the 2-liter. "Y'ready?" he asked me. I shrugged. He tossed it up, I fired, put a hole straight through it. "Hell, Jakey actually hit it," Karl said. They readied another bottle, and I nailed that one too. They were impressed. Told me to keep shooting until I missed.

LANCE

Did you?

JACOB

They gave up after I juggled the 13th bottle. Hit that one three times, midair.

LANCE

God...and that was the first time you ever shot?

JACOB

Well, it's a lot like photography, you frame —

LANCE

That is a fuckin' amazing story, Jacob. And it proves my point. You are a *born* shooter. The best. It's just who you are. So what if you missed once? It's not a big deal.

JACOB

I don't miss.

LANCE

I didn't think so either, but these things happen.

JACOB

Not with me.

LANCE

Look Jacob, you're the best. I said that, and I'm not the kind of guy who disagrees with himself. But, you're not perfect. You missed, it happened, it's sad but it's not the end of the world. You can still do the right thing and kill the guy.

(beat)
By the way, do you think you could kill him... today?

JACOB
Why today?

LANCE
Tomorrow would be *ok*, but we're kind of on a time crunch, so we'd just as well get it out of the way if you know what I'm saying.

JACOB
What's going on?

LANCE
You don't need to worry about it.

JACOB
Why this guy?

LANCE
Jacob look, it's important for you to keep your professional distance at your job. Some things you need to know, others aren't really of interest. Take this rifle for instance. Flashy sights, integrated silencer...this is a kick-ass weapon. You can't just buy one of these at Wally World. And yet *you* never asked me where I got it.

JACOB
So where'd you get it?

LANCE
A few degrees of separation from a Swiss arms manufacturer.

JACOB
What, like you know a guy who knows a guy?

LANCE
More like I know a guy who robbed a guy who shot a guy. But you get the idea. Some things you've got no interest in, and you're better off not knowing. This is the same deal, just a business transaction. You provide us with a valued service – pest disposal – and I pay you. So why this guy? The only answer you need is *money*.
(*Jacob has drifted to the window.*)

JACOB
I just want to know, what makes this guy so special, that—

LANCE
Jacob, what did the fish say when he ran into the wall?

JACOB
What?

LANCE
What did the fish say when he ran into the wall?
(*Jacob shrugs. Lance puts his hand on his head like he hit a wall.*)
“Damn.”

JACOB
I don’t think I get it.

LANCE
The point is, when someone gets hit in the head by a wall – or a bullet – it doesn’t matter
who they are. They still got hit.

JACOB
That really doesn’t answer my—

LANCE
Look, can you kill him today or not?

JACOB
I could kill him right now.

LANCE
What?

JACOB
See for yourself.
(*Lance comes to the window.*)
He’s in front of the shoe store. Just like yesterday.

LANCE
Sweet Mother.
(*Hands Jacob the rifle.*)
Shoot him in the head and I’ll take you to lunch.

JACOB
Why him?

LANCE
We went over this. You don’t need to know.

JACOB
What if I missed for a reason?

LANCE

You made a mistake, it happens. Can you shoot him please?

JACOB

It's just...I've never missed before, and I just don't know—

LANCE

Give me that rifle.

(He takes it from Jacob, who doesn't resist.)

You'll get over missing. It happens. That's why bullets come in boxes.

(He looks at the gun, then out the window.)

You know, I always wanted to try this.

(beat)

Are you going to help me or not?

JACOB

Lance, have you ever shot a rifle before?

LANCE

(A little too fast)

Yeah.

(beat)

Ok...first thing is ... the sights?

JACOB

They're still fixed from yesterday.

LANCE

Right, right. What next?

JACOB

Frame the shot.

LANCE

What?

JACOB

Shooting a rifle's just like shooting a picture. Find him in the scope.

LANCE

Got it. Now what?

JACOB

Look at him.

LANCE

I am. When do I shoot him?

JACOB

You can't rush it. This shot will capture everything of who he is, define his existence, end his life story. All with a move of your finger.

LANCE

So just pull the trigger?

JACOB

Squeeze.

LANCE

Squeeze?

JACOB

Savor the shot. Squeeze it gently. Bullet won't get there faster if you yank it.

LANCE

Thanks.

(beat)

Now it's time to die, fat man...

JACOB

You really...don't need to say anything.

LANCE

Gonna put your fuckin' lights OUT!

JACOB

Maybe you should just calm—

LANCE

OH, oh...take out your little cell phone. Call your momma. Say goodbye, *biocht*.

(*Jacob's phone rings. Lance jumps. Jacob stares at the phone.*)

Shit!

JACOB

Sorry about that.

LANCE

I was about to put him *to sleep*.

JACOB

Just relax. I'll let the voice mail pick it up.

(Final ring, then silence)

LANCE
Now...where was I?

JACOB
Um...Biocht?

LANCE
Right. Say goodbye, bi—
(Phone rings again)
Dammit! I can't fuckin' concentrate if your phone keeps—
(Jacob unplugs the phone.)
Thank you.

JACOB
Sure. So, are you ready? All distractions taken care of?

LANCE
Hells yes.
(Lance aims again.)
Say goodbye—

JACOB
Ah, Lance?

LANCE
Yes?

JACOB
Maybe you should try a different tagline. Or none at all?

LANCE
How about, Ta ta, Mofo?

JACOB
...Sure...
(Lance aims again.)

LANCE
Ta ta, mo—
(Lance's cell phone rings)
GOD!!!

*(He stomps away from the window, throws the rifle on the couch, and yanks out his phone.
Once he sees who is calling, he calms down.)*

Mr. Riley, how nice to hear from you. How are— ...what? Josh Mitchell? He's dead, I shot him, like you told me. ...Well, yes, you didn't *tell* me to shoot him eight times, but he's a big guy...I wanted to be thorough. I just—yes...yes...I apologize...yes it was a waste of bullets, I'm very sorry. What? I...wasn't aware of that... Well of course I didn't ...yes...yes...*what?*...NO, no, God, I...yes, I'll take care of it right away. Goodbye sir.
(*Puts away phone*)

I need to be going, but Mr. Riley wanted to let you know your price has doubled.

JACOB
What?

LANCE
The price on Terrence Ledbetter's head has doubled.

JACOB
Why?

LANCE
Riley said so, and so I tell you. Take care of him. I'm out.
(*Lance goes. Jacob stares at the door, then the gun, then the window. He picks up the gun, looks at it, then goes to the window and looks out. Terry is not there. He plugs the phone back in, dials his voice mail, listens. When he hears the message, he bolts to the couch, frantically rewraps the gun, then slides it underneath as soon as there is a knock on the door. As he gets up, Terry enters, leaving the door open.*)

TERRY
You're still alive!

JACOB
Yes...
(*Terry approaches Jacob and gives him a bear hug.*)

TERRY
Thank God...thank God thank God.
(*He begins to pat Jacob down.*)

JACOB
What are you doing?

TERRY
Checking for broken bones.
(*Jacob tears himself away from Terry.*)

JACOB
What the hell is wrong with you?

TERRY

What's wrong with me? You're the one who didn't answer your phone.

JACOB

I was indisposed.

TERRY

Look Jake, I don't care what you were trying to *dispose* of, two calls in a row means
emergency.

(beat)

So you are ok?

JACOB

Yes... what's the emergency?

(Terry goes to the window, looks out.)

TERRY

Are you sure we're alone?

JACOB

Yes...

TERRY

I think you better shut the door.

(Jacob shuts door, then stands waits for Terry to speak. Pause.)

Take a seat, you look tense. You want something to drink?

JACOB

For God's sake Terry, what's the emergency?

TERRY

Jake, you ever get the feeling somebody's out to get you?

JACOB

Well, someone did try to kill you yesterday...

TERRY

That's what worries me. I mean, what if she comes after me again?

JACOB

She?

TERRY

Well yeah, it could be a woman... I don't wanna stereotype people...

JACOB

It's probably not a woman.

TERRY

Yeah, I guess so.

(beat)

That would be kinda hot though—

JACOB

Terry...

TERRY

You know, some chick with a rifle, checking me out through the scope...looking and *liking*...

JACOB

Have you gone to the police?

TERRY

Yeah, that's actually what I came to talk to you about.

JACOB

What?

TERRY

I found out some interesting things at the police station this morning.

JACOB

What kind of things?

TERRY

Maybe I'd better start at the beginning.

(Pause. He looks at Jacob.)

JACOB

Ok.

TERRY

At approximately 9:53 AM, I leave my apartment. On foot. I arrive at the Damen Street police station, on Damen Street, at 10:18 AM. I enter the station, wipe my feet. I go to the officer at the desk for crime reports. He looks up. *Blinks* at me. "I'd like to sit down," I say. He blinks again, says, "Ok." I get a chair, take a seat. "Do you have a crime to report?" he asks. "Yes," I respond. A pause.

(Beat as Terry pauses)

"Well, what is it?" he says. Now it was my turn to pause.

(Terry pauses again.)

"Assassination," I reply. He blinks *again*... I can tell something's not quite right here. He asks me who. I tell him I don't know who *did it*, why did he think I came to the police

station. “No, who’s the victim?” he says. “Terry Ledbetter,” I reply. He starts to talk...boy does he talk. Starts feeding me monkey crap about how he can’t put “assassination” on the crime report because the proper term is murder...he’s going on and on, and I can’t take it any more. I slam my fist on the desk—

(Terry slams his fist on Jacob’s table.)

And say, “For the love of God, officer, a man’s life is at stake!” “Who?” he asks. “Terry Ledbetter,” I say. “Isn’t he supposed to be dead?” he says. “No!” I reply, “Terry Ledbetter lives. He stands before you now.” (I was sitting, but I thought “stands” sounded better.) He gets this *real* weird look on his face, then pauses again. Blinks at me. I blink back. And then...
(pause)

JACOB

What happened?

TERRY

They threw me out of the station. Told me if I came back, they’d charge me with filing a false report.

JACOB

Really.

TERRY

And that’s not the end of it. I decided to retrace my steps to the scene of the crime, maybe find some clues. When I got to the front of the store, the broken glass had been swept up *and* the bullet was gone.

JACOB

Didn’t the bullet go in a hole in the wall?

TERRY

Yeah, but that’s the thing. *I couldn’t find the hole* either.

JACOB

There are a lot of holes in that wall...

TERRY

No Jake, I’m afraid there’s something much more sinister at work here.

JACOB

I’m not sure I understand.

TERRY

No Jake, I think you do.

JACOB

What do you mean?

TERRY

Sometimes those you trust can betray you Jake.

JACOB

What are you saying?
(pause)

TERRY

The police are in on it.

JACOB

...I don't think—

TERRY

Can't you see it Jake? The way the cop kept blinking at me, like he was surprised to see me? Alive? *And* the way he said Terry Ledbetter "was supposed to be dead?" What about the *evidence* being removed from the scene of the crime? Jake, the cops are trying to cover this thing up. And the mysterious gunperson? Still at large.

JACOB

Wow...

TERRY

But Jake, I'm not the kind of guy who *quits* when the funk hits the fan. I'm a *survivor*. They might try to rub me out, but I'm not going quietly.

(He stands, then knocks over a chair.)

If I'm going down, I'm gonna make some *noise*, rattle some cages!

(Jacob stands and fixes the chair as Terry runs to the window.)

JACOB

Ah, Terry...

(Terry throws the window open.)

TERRY

YOU HEAR THAT, YOU BASTARDS? I CHOOSE LIFE!

(He shuts the window.)

Wherever that anonymous gunperson is, I hope he – or she – heard that.

JACOB

We can only hope.

(pause)

Ah, Terry?

TERRY

Yeah?

JACOB

Do you know why someone might want to kill you?

TERRY

We probably shouldn't talk about it any more.

JACOB

Why not?

TERRY

Quite frankly Jake, I think the less you know, the safer you'll be.

JACOB

Really Terry, I don't think—

TERRY

Jake, I'm a hunted man. I don't know whether I'll live to see tomorrow. I don't want you to end up in the same place because you know too much.

JACOB

Do you owe somebody money, or—

TERRY

We should drop this conversation now. Trust me Jake, it's for the best.

JACOB

Did you insult someone?

(No response.)

Sell drugs?

(No response.)

Ever kill anybody?

(No response. Pause as Jacob tries to think of something.)

Do you like the White Sox?

TERRY

What kind of person do you think I am? If Terry Ledbetter's anything, he's a Cubbies fan.

JACOB

Sorry.

TERRY

I mean, Jake, do you not know me at all?

JACOB

I guess not.
(*Pause. Jacob has an idea.*)
But I'd like to. What are you doing the rest of today?

TERRY
Trying not to get killed.

JACOB
We're going to the Cubs game. My treat.

TERRY
You serious?

JACOB
We need some quality time. I want to know the Terry behind the Terry.

TERRY
There's a lot to know. You might be surprised.

JACOB
Hey.
(*Points to himself.*)
Interested.
(*Blackout. End Scene 2.*)

Scene 3: Later that night. Terry and Jake loudly enter the apartment, each carrying a brown-bagged bottle. They have both been drinking and enjoying it, but Terry's the drunker of the two.

TERRY

Look Jake...some people would be *proud* to live next to a guy who served his country.

JACOB

You call *that* serving your country?

TERRY

I was a marine. Semper Fi – *Always*...Fi. I served...with honor.

JACOB

You were *honorably* discharged...

TERRY

Exactly...look...look at me... I *bled*...shed my own blood...so people like you could taste the freedom waves of grain.

JACOB

You were medically discharged for having grade F flat feet.

TERRY

Exactly. I'm a veteran.

JACOB

You were in the marines for 2 weeks!

TERRY

And thank God I got out...it was killing me. You might be surprised to hear this, but I didn't fit in too good with the Marine Corpse.

JACOB

You mean corps?

TERRY

They *were* mean to the core. Always screamin' at me, shaving my hair off, telling me to shut my mouth and *march*...my very individuality was very at stake.

JACOB

So what'd you do next?

TERRY

Got out, starting working the glass business. Nothing says “I’m my own man” like setting a multi-polymer dura-flex pane on a department store window. It’s kinda my way of giving back.

JACOB

Right...Is that ... *all* you’ve done since then?

TERRY

Yeah...

(beat)

Hey...what do you mean is that *all* I’ve done?

JACOB

I didn’t mean anything.

TERRY

No, I think you mean somethin’ Jake. And I’m not sure I like it.

JACOB

Why are you being so defensive?

TERRY

I’m not being defensive.

JACOB

Just by saying, “I’m not being defensive,” you are, in fact, being defensive.

(*Pause. Terry runs the math.*)

TERRY

Jake, I’m being defensive. Which makes you...

(pause)

JACOB

Right?

TERRY

No...*offensive*.

JACOB

Oh, sorry.

TERRY

Hey, what’s a little offensive between friends? Cheers?

JACOB

Cheers...

(They move to clink bottles, but Terry pulls his away.)
What are you doing?

TERRY
Eye contact, then clink.

JACOB
What?

TERRY
You gotta make eye contact when you toast.

JACOB
What if you don't?

TERRY
Bad sex for seven years.

JACOB
God...

TERRY
Eye contact has saved *me*. No bad sex for this guy. Or any sex...here's to eye contact!

JACOB
To eye contact!
(They clink bottles, careful to look, then drink.)

TERRY
Cuervo?
(Jacob points to kitchen. Terry exits, speaks offstage.)
So Jake... why you wanna know so much about me?

JACOB
What do you mean?

TERRY
Well don't take this the wrong way, but you seem more... interested than usual. Like you're asking me all these...questions about me, my work, my family and stuff...
(Jacob begins to move to the couch and the hidden rifle.)

JACOB
Maybe I just—

TERRY

And I'm starting to piece together the... pieces, and I *realized* that this has all happened since
I got shot at the other day.
(*Jacob kneels and takes hold of rifle as Terry reenters. Jacob lets go and turns to Terry.*)
So, I *think* I know what's really going on.

JACOB

Ah...what do you think's going on?

TERRY

You're writing a book about my life.

JACOB

...How did you know?

TERRY

Well, let's just say that Terry Ledbetter is not easily fooled. And since yesterday, my life has been totally different. I realized, wow, I'm a pretty interesting character. *Then* I thought, hey, somebody should write a book about me. "But who?" I thought. Then, I had my answer.

JACOB

Me?

TERRY

Right! So what have we not covered yet?

JACOB

Um...

TERRY

My childhood. I was born...at a very young age. Then...some stuff happened...
(beat)

Maybe I should skip to when I actually remember things... you need to write this down?

JACOB

Uh...no, um...mental notes.

TERRY

Well, well...color me *impressed*. What'd I do to deserve a writer like you?

JACOB

I'm really not sure.

TERRY

Well, we need to drink to that! What's that Jewish toast you said before?

JACOB
L'Haim?

TERRY
Lime!
(He raises the bottle, and Jacob raises his. Eye contact, then clink, drink.)
But enough about me, Jake. Whatever happened to you and that girl?

JACOB
What?

TERRY
You know, the Jewish princess you were dating. What happened?

JACOB
I told you, things didn't work out.

TERRY
I know things didn't work out...details, man, details.

JACOB
It's really not worth the telling.

TERRY
Look Jake, if you're going to spend all this time writing *my* life story, the least I can do is
hear about your failed attempt at Jewish romance. Hey—
(He points to himself)
Interested.

JACOB
You don't need to...this really isn't important.

TERRY
Hey, your life *is* important, Jake. Tell it.
(pause)
Come on, her name was Naomi, you were in love, but you had to become Jewish—

JACOB
I wanted to.

TERRY
Yeah?

JACOB

Who wouldn't? I mean...being Jewish... the holidays, the history, the culture ...it's belonging to something bigger than yourself, having a place in history. It's more than just eating matzo and drinking Manischewitz a few times a year.

TERRY
I never knew.

JACOB
It was who she was, and she wanted me to be a part of it too. Me, a Scotch-Irish goy photographer born in Buckport, Illinois. Family of country boys...can't trace them back more than four generations. I loved her...becoming part of a culture that shaped several millennia of history was an added bonus.
(beat)

TERRY
So what happened?

JACOB
Did I tell you her dad was a rabbi? She was his only daughter. When I met her family, I found out that he wanted her to marry another rabbi and that he'd never heard *anything* about her almost-Jewish boyfriend. Well...let's just say almost didn't count, in this case. He didn't want his daughter marrying a goy, regardless of whatever I said I believed. He told Naomi she had to choose between me and staying in the family. I...hope she's happy.
(beat)

You want to believe you can be anything you want to be. But when it comes down to it, you're still stuck with who you are. I just wasn't Jewish, never would be. I went back to Southern Illinois and never saw her again. That was five years ago.
(pause)
Terry?

TERRY
(*weeping*) That's the saddest thing I ever heard.

JACOB
Oh God, Terry, don't cry...

TERRY
No Jake...this is your life. And it's really sad!

JACOB
I guess so...

TERRY
I mean, to go through all that for a girl, and then...*Southern Illinois!* God...

JACOB

It had to happen, Terry. When I was down in Buckport, I found out who I really was.

TERRY

Yeah?

JACOB

Yeah! I found my purpose, who I was meant to be.

TERRY

You chose life.

JACOB

What?

TERRY

You're a survivor, Jake, just like me.

JACOB

Ah, yeah, sort of.

TERRY

Sort of? Jake, don't let regrets over that Jewish daddy's girl ruin your life. It's your life, dammit!

JACOB

It is my life.

TERRY

That's right. Choose *life*, Jake.

JACOB

I...I do.

TERRY

Say it then: "I choose life!" Ready?

JACOB

I choose life.

TERRY

Say it like you got a pair!

JACOB

I CHOOSE LIFE!

TERRY

Let's drink *to life* then!

JACOB
To life!

TERRY
LIME!

(They look, clink and drink, with some difficulty as they are both very drunk by this point.)

Now I gotta go pee.

(He goes to the bathroom door and exits. Jacob thinks, goes to the phone, and dials.)

JACOB
Hey yeah, it's me. I just wanted to let you know, I've been thinking, and I decided something. I CHOOSE LIFE!
(He slams the receiver home as Terry reenters with a photograph of himself in hand.)

TERRY
What is *this*?

JACOB
Where'd you find that?

TERRY
Your bathroom, under the red lights. Is this the photo for the cover of our book?

JACOB
...How'd you know?

TERRY
Because I'm *sharp*. When was this taken?

JACOB
Yesterday.

TERRY
The day I was shot at.

JACOB
Yeah, do you like it?

TERRY
This is the *worst* picture of me I've ever seen. Look at my face...it doesn't capture the...the...

JACOB
Subtleties?

TERRY

The *edge*, that we're going for.

JACOB

I...don't know what that means.

TERRY

Terry Ledbetter is raw, and masculine, not ... not...*this*. Get your camera. We're retaking this.

JACOB

What, now?

TERRY

Yes now.

JACOB

Um, you know I don't do posed shots...I like life in action.

TERRY

Give me a minute to prepare and I'll show you all the action you can handle.
(*Jacob gets camera while Terry ruffles his hair and tries to make himself look edgy.*)
It's a good thing I didn't shave this week.

JACOB

Ah...good thing.

TERRY

Ok, how about this?
(*Jacob takes his picture.*)
Hey, I wasn't ready!

JACOB

You made the face.

TERRY

I wasn't ready. Ok, now.
(*Jacob takes the picture. A pause.*)
Well?

JACOB

Well what?

TERRY

We need multiple images to work with Jake. They've got to get a sense of my versatility.

JACOB
Ah...ok.

TERRY
How about something more...

JACOB
Happy?

TERRY
Sensual.
(Jacob takes picture.)
Try it sitting down.
(Jacob takes picture.)
Ok...Let me explore the space a little.
(Jacob wants to laugh, but takes picture.)
Now for something more...exotic.
(Jacob keeps composure, takes photo.)
I think it's time for the shirt to come off.
(Terry takes off his shirt and assumes a position.)
I call this one, *the panther*.

JACOB
Ah...Terry...

TERRY
(makes panther sound, then speaks in "panther" voice.)
Just take it.
(Jacob takes photo.)
Think you can develop these... tonight?

JACOB
(Gives up composure and laughs hard.)
Just try and stop me.

Blackout. End Scene 3.

Scene 4: The next day, afternoon. Lance sits alone on at the table, drinking another energy drink. Elton John's "Tiny Dancer" plays out of the stereo. Lance skips the song with a remote, and Abba's "Dancing Queen" begins to play. Lance quickly skips this song, and Queen's "Bicycle Race" plays. Lance shuts off the radio. Jacob enters, carrying a to-go bag and coffee from a bagel store. He freezes when he sees Lance.

JACOB

How did you get in here?

LANCE

Your door wasn't locked in any *serious* way.

JACOB

I guess that's as good as an invitation, huh?

LANCE

What's a little breaking and entering between friends?

JACOB

Are we friends, Lance?

LANCE

Better. We're business associates.

JACOB

Lance, do you need anything? I'm hungry, I've got a nasty headache, and—

LANCE

No no, don't mind me. Just pretend I'm not here.

(Jacob stares at Lance. Lance stares back, sips energy drink. Jacob eventually gives up, and goes to couch to eat. Lance continues to stare as Jacob unwraps his bagel. He is about to bite into it when Lance speaks.)

So you choose life, huh?

JACOB

What do you mean?

LANCE

Got a little phone call last night. *Late* last night. Some guy called me up at 2 AM and screamed, "I choose life!" into my ear. Then he hung up.

JACOB

Who would do something like that?

LANCE

Somebody with the same number as that phone over there. Care to explain?

JACOB

Ah, look, Lance...I had had a little bit to drink, and I was acting a little crazy. To be honest with you, I don't even remember making that phone call.

LANCE

So...just a little drinking and dialing, huh?

JACOB

Yeah, yeah, nothing to be worried about.

LANCE

That's all that happened last night?

JACOB

Yeah, drink, call, hangover, bagel, simple as that.

(Lance swigs the rest of the energy drink, pulls out a stack of photographs and throws it on the table. He picks one out and shows it to Jacob. It is of Terry with his shirt off.)

That *isn't* what it looks like!

LANCE

I'm glad to hear that, because what it looks like is... frickin' *disturbing*.

JACOB

I can explain.

LANCE

Look Jacob, what you do in your spare time is not my business. If you want to take semi-nude photos of overweight men contorted in various positions, I have no problem with that. I mean, I've had no problem with you being gay the last two years—

JACOB

I'm not gay.

LANCE

Like I said, if you want to putt from the rough in your private life, that's not my business. *What is* my business, however, is paying you – very well, I might add – to shoot people. Why? Because you're fucking amazing at it. That's all I ask of you. Have I ever asked anything more?

JACOB

No.

LANCE

So how do you think I feel when I find out you've been having erotic photo hour with the guy you're supposed to have shot two days ago?

JACOB
Maudlin?
(beat)

LANCE
...No... Jacob, *disappointed*. You're the best of the best. You can't let your sexual fetishes get in the way of finishing the job. It's just not professional.

JACOB
I'm *not* attracted to him.
(*Lance looks at him.*)
Or *any* men, that's not my thing...I dated a Jewish girl for a long time... I have a picture somewhere...
(*He looks through his wallet but can't find it. Lance takes the photo album from Jacob's shelf.*)

LANCE
Is she one of the ones in here?
(*Jacob freezes when he sees Lance with the album. Lance stares at him.*)

JACOB
No...no she's not.

LANCE
Why don't we take a look?
(*Opens the album and reads photo captions.*)
David Fowlie, roof of the Historical Society to North Avenue. Paul McCracken, top of the Art Institute to the El platform. Now here's a nice one...Erika Walton...she was pretty, wasn't she?

JACOB
From my Volvo to the shore of Lake Michigan. Just as the sun was setting. Beautiful shot.

LANCE
(*Closes album*)
What do you do, snap a photo before you pull the trigger?

JACOB
Well, it works a lot better than waiting until *after* I pull the trigger.

LANCE
Don't get smart with me. Why the hell do you have these?
(pause)

JACOB

Do you remember what we talked about yesterday? How death is that which gives meaning to life?

LANCE
Yeah.

JACOB
Millions of people live in this city. But to most of us, they're just numbers in the population, masses of bodies in transit. A photograph changes that. If I frame the shot correctly, I capture the essence of an individual life in action and preserve it forever.

LANCE
And then you shoot them.

JACOB
In that moment I give ultimate meaning to their lives. It's an art.

LANCE
One man's art is another man's *evidence*, Jacob. Evidence of your connection with more than 50 murders in the last five years. That ever cross your mind? You know what, I don't want to hear about that. I'm a lot more interested in why you've got 20 pictures of Terrence Ledbetter with his shirt off, acting like a cat.

JACOB
No, look, I just took those because he thought I was writing a book about him.
(*Lance doesn't buy it.*)
No, seriously, I— He's my neighbor...He thinks we're best friends, we're *not*...I find out you want me to kill him. I was *happy* – I hated him... first target I ever knew personally. I took the usual picture of him before I took the shot. I *missed*... He came to tell me, found the picture, I had to tell him *something*, so...
(beat)
Are you going to kill me?

LANCE
I'm not going to kill you, Jacob. You're the best sniper we have.

JACOB
Oh...good.

LANCE
I mean, if you hit your hand on the wall by accident, you don't cut it off, right?

JACOB
Ah...right.

LANCE

You're a special guy...people like you don't come along every day. So here's the deal. One, no more photographs – I'll get rid of these, and you're just going to have to start giving meaning to life *without* film in the camera, ok? Two... when are you going to see him again?

JACOB

He's coming over soon...to work on the book.

LANCE

You still have that pistol hidden in the bathroom?

(*Jacob nods*)

Get it, wait till he gets in the door, give him two in the chest, one in the head, and I'll pay you *three times* the original fee. It's win-win.

JACOB

I don't need any money.

LANCE

Then what do you want?

JACOB

I want to know why he's supposed to die.

LANCE

You're really hung up on that, aren't you? Fine. Terrence Ledbetter needs to die because his name is Terrence Ledbetter.

JACOB

Can you give me a less *circular* explanation?

LANCE

Terrence Ledbetter runs a union of trash collectors in Old Town.

JACOB

No, he works with glass, here in—

LANCE

They're *not* the same guy, just the same name. Terrence the union boss has a meeting tomorrow morning to organize an Old Town garbage strike. Mr. Riley doesn't want trash to pile up outside his penthouse apartments, so he doesn't want the strike to happen. Terrence the union boss has been resilient to intimidation, so we needed to show him how easily we could get to him.

JACOB

So...?

LANCE

So you kill Terrence Ledbetter the fat glass worker. The next day, Terrence Ledbetter the union boss gets a call to check out the Tribune's front page – or the obituaries, depending on where it ended up – and he sees that someone *with the same name as him* got a rifle round in the head. He sees that we mean business, he calls off the strike, everybody's happy.

JACOB

Except Terry the glass worker.

LANCE

He's dead. Therefore you're happy.

JACOB

Seems like a sorry reason to kill a guy.

LANCE

All the more reason for you to shoot him and give some meaning to his life. It's probably the most exciting experience he'll ever have. It's also the last experience, but what do you do?

JACOB

Are there any other Terrence Ledbetters we could kill?

LANCE

Don't worry, Jacob. There are other fat men out there to model for you.

(Lance stands, gets ready to leave.)

By the way, if he's not dead when I get back, I will fucking kill you. Understood?

(Jacob nods.)

Good, I'm gonna go get a smoothie.

(Lance leaves. Jacob sits for a moment, then goes to the bathroom. He returns with a pistol, which he places between the cushions on the couch. That done, he goes to his camera and replaces the lens cap as Terry enters, carrying a flat brown bag.)

TERRY

Heya Jake.

JACOB

Hey.

TERRY

I've been thinking, and I *think* that your book could use more focus on my childhood. You know, the early years, before I became the man I am today but describing the events that *made* me the man I am today?

JACOB

Right.

TERRY

So I had this cat when I was seven. His name was Mr. Sparky. One day I got off the school bus in front of my house and saw that Mr. Sparky was on the front porch, yowling and screeching. He'd been hit by a truck. We rushed him to the vet and saved his life, but at great cost. He would never walk again. At least on his back paws anyway. Now an ordinary cat would have just given up by this point, but Mr. Sparky was no ordinary cat. He chose life, just like me. He learned how to get around with just his front paws. And he developed *massive* shoulder muscles as a result. You should have seen the *traps* on this cat. He could drag himself around with the speed of a...well, he was fast.

JACOB

That's nice, Terry—

TERRY

But things weren't always easy for Mr. Sparky. An unfortunate consequence of his injury was the loss of peeing control. But we all adapted together – that's what family does, especially when somebody's bladder gets full. Twice a day, at 4pm and eight, it was my job to squeeze the cat. It was on my list of chores. You see, Mr. Sparky's bladder was underneath his back legs, so I'd scoop him up by the front paws, and then—

JACOB

I really don't think I need to hear this.

TERRY

Details are important, Jake. It's the little things that make us who we are.

JACOB

How did squeezing the cat make you who you are?

TERRY

I wasn't sure, then I realized earlier today that squeezing that cat taught me an important lesson about perseverance and friendship.

JACOB

And that lesson was?

TERRY

Just because something *seems* useless, like a paralyzed cat, it's not a lost cause. It just needs the right person to come along, appreciate it, and give it a squeeze.

JACOB

That is...*profound*, Terry.

TERRY

Yeah, I thought so too. Speaking of bladder emptying, I'm going to the bathroom.

(Terry exits to bathroom. Jacob removes the hidden gun as Terry speaks offstage.)
Oh, and I got you a present. It's in the brown bag.
(Jacob goes to the bag and takes out a framed photograph of himself and Terry, both drunk and smiling. Jacob stares at it as Terry enters.)

JACOB

Where did you get this?

TERRY

You not remember?

(Jacob shakes head)

Yeah, that's the picture we took of us after our little photo shoot last night. We both held the camera so it wouldn't shake too much.

JACOB

Shot... got framed pretty well...who pushed the shutter button?

TERRY

You.

(Jacob puts the picture down and looks away.)

Jake? What's wrong?

(beat)

Oh Jake, don't cry...

JACOB

I'm a bad person, Terry.

TERRY

You're a great person. You're my best friend. I thought about getting that engraved on the frame, but I only had fourteen bucks. Sorry.

JACOB

Terry, you need to leave.

TERRY

Look, I *said* I was sorry Jake—

JACOB

No, no Terry, the picture is fine. But you're not going to be if you don't get out of here now.

TERRY

What's going on?

JACOB

Someone's coming here in a few minutes. He's threatened my life. If you're still here, he'll kill you too.

TERRY
Oh my – God.

JACOB
It's been great, Terry, it really has. But you've got to get out of here now.

TERRY
Jake, I'm not leaving you.

JACOB
There's nothing you can do, Terry. Just run.

TERRY
I got you into this mess, Jake, and I'm not going to leave you in it.

JACOB
What?

TERRY
Can't you see it Jake? He's trying to kill *you* to get to *me*!
(beat)

JACOB
I'm pretty sure that's not it...

TERRY
Well, if that bastard thinks he can threaten my friends and get away with it, he's got another thing coming. Have you got a gun?

JACOB
Ah yeah...I keep it in the cushions on the couch.
(*Terry pulls out the gun.*)
Terry, this guy is a professional killer. I don't think—

TERRY
He already missed me once, didn't he? Let's hope second time's the charm.

JACOB
So what are you going to do? Just shoot him when he comes in?

TERRY
You have a better plan?

JACOB
I did suggest running away.

TERRY

Come on Jake, if you want to stop a killer, you have to *think* like a killer. WAIT, that's it!

JACOB

What's it?

TERRY

I'll kill you.

(He points the gun at Jacob)

JACOB

What are you talking about?

TERRY

It's so crazy it just might work.

JACOB

Would you point the gun somewhere else?

TERRY

Sorry. Ok...he's coming here to find you and kill you. But what if you're already dead?
(beat)

JACOB

Then he won't kill me.

TERRY

Exactly.

JACOB

But I'll still be dead.

TERRY

Only temporarily.

JACOB

I'm not sure I follow you.

TERRY

Where's your ketchup?

JACOB

What?

TERRY

You'll lie on the floor like you've been shot with dark red blotches all over your shirt. He'll come in, see you on the floor, see me sitting at the table with the gun, do the math, and leave.

JACOB

Wait, wouldn't he just shoot you too, since you're the actual target?

TERRY

No, because I'll be in disguise.

(He runs out the door, then returns with a hat and scarf.)

I'll put these on, and he'll assume I'm some other killer and then he'll just leave.

JACOB

Terry, I really don't think—

TERRY

There's no time! Lay down by the couch and look dead. I'll get the ketchup.

(Terry exits. Jacob tries out different dead positions by the couch. Terry returns with ketchup and eating a cereal bar.)

JACOB

What's that for?

TERRY

I got hungry. Now hold still.

(He squirts the ketchup all over Jacob.)

Act dead. I need to put on my disguise.

(Jacob looks dead. Terry puts on disguise and sits at table. Silence. Terry fidgets.)

Hey, could I go make a sandwich?

(Knock on the door.)

Never mind. Dead!

(Lance enters and freezes as he surveys the scene. Lance pulls out his gun just as Terry points his pistol at him.)

LANCE

Who the hell are you?

TERRY

You can call me Mr. Sparky. And yourself?

LANCE

You can call me Big Bad Muhthuh.

(beat)

You killed Jacob Connors.

TERRY

Shit yeah I killed him. What you gonna do about it?

LANCE
Well nothing. I mean, he's dead...

TERRY
That's what I thought.

LANCE
Fuckin' dead. That guy was one of the best. A real badass.

TERRY
His bad ass ain't the best ass no more.

LANCE
How'd you do it?

TERRY
Do fuckin' what?

LANCE
Kill him?

TERRY
I shot the *shit* out of him, is what I damn did... damn.

LANCE
Hey, hey, calm down...

TERRY
Why don't you *calm down*...
(beat)
Bitch?

LANCE
Just take it easy, ok...

TERRY
Hey, hey HEY...shut up. You wanna talk to me, you keep your bitch mouth shut, aight?
(beat)

LANCE
How the fuck can I talk to you and keep my mouth shut?

TERRY
Look asscrack, if you got something to say, just say it.

LANCE
How'd you like a job?

TERRY
What?

LANCE
You just killed Jacob Connors. The best of the best. That makes you the new best.

TERRY
Hells yes. The *bestest*.

LANCE
Right...well, anyhow...what do you say?

TERRY
Is Jacob Connors that easy to replace?

LANCE
He was good at what he did, but I never liked the guy. Too smart for his own good. Plus, I'm pretty sure he was a homo.

TERRY
Really? You're sure?

LANCE
Have you heard the guy's music collection? If he wasn't gay, he was certainly missing out on a great opportunity.

TERRY
You shouldn't stereotype people. Bitch.

LANCE
If you call me bitch again...

TERRY
You'll do what, bitch?

LANCE
I'll fuckin' kill you. Do you want the job or not?

TERRY
Bitch I don't want your bitch-ass job, bitch. Now get out.
(*Lance advances on Terry.*)
Don't come any closer or I'll shoot.
(*Lance comes closer. Terry pulls trigger. Click.*)

LANCE

Looks like you forgot to load your gun, bitch. Drop it. On the ground.

(Terry drops gun and gets down on knees.)

Now...who are you?

(He pulls the mask off, recognizes Terry. Lance laughs.)

Oh my God...You killed Jacob Connors?

TERRY

Uh...yes.

LANCE

What a waste. I'm going to enjoy this.

(He points gun at Terry's head and prepares to shoot.)

Ta ta, Mo—

(Jacob grabs rifle from under couch and points it at Lance.)

JACOB

Drop it.

TERRY

Yeah bitch, drop it.

LANCE

Jacob, what the hell are you doing?

TERRY

He's pointing a gun at your face.

LANCE

I know that. I want to know why.

JACOB

Lance, some things you just don't need to know. Terry, get his gun.

(beat)

Now point it at him.

TERRY

Good call, Jake.

LANCE

Terry, don't listen to him.

TERRY

GET ON THE GROUND!

(He forces Lance to the floor.)

JACOB

Ah, actually Terry, I kinda just wanted him to leave.

TERRY

Oh, sorry.

(He yanks Lance up to his knees.)

LANCE

You really wanna listen to this guy, Terry?

TERRY

He's my best friend, bitch.

LANCE

Best friend? He's the one who tried to kill you.

TERRY

Jake wouldn't do that.

LANCE

Why the hell do you think he has that rifle? He tried to shoot you two days ago in front of the shoe store. If he hadn't missed, you'd be dead right now.

(Beat. Terry keeps gaze on Lance.)

TERRY

Jake, is that true? Did you shoot at me and miss?

(beat)

JACOB

Yes.

TERRY

Thanks.

LANCE

What?

JACOB

Keep the gun trained on him Terry. I'm going to get the camera.

(Terry obeys. Jacob puts rifle down, gets camera. He points it at Lance and Terry.)

LANCE

What are you doing?

JACOB

Just framing the shot. Smile. Not you, Terry.
(Jacob takes picture, puts camera away and picks up rifle. He points it back at Lance.)
Stand up. Close your eyes, Lance.
(Lance obeys.)
Choose life.
(He fires the rifle. The shot barely misses Lance's head. Lance squeals. Jacob fires again, barely missing, then misses once more. Lance opens his eyes.)

LANCE
What the hell is wrong with you? My grandmother wouldn't miss from this range!
(Jacob is annoyed. He shoots Lance in the foot.)
AH SHIT!

JACOB
Congratulations Lance. You just had a life-changing experience. Now get out of here and quit bleeding on my floor.
(Lance limps out the door. Terry closes it behind him and they both lower their guns.)
He hired me to kill you.

TERRY
A professional contract on my life...and you're the best of the best?

JACOB
Yeah, so they say. Look, Terry, I know sorry doesn't quite cut it—

TERRY
What's to apologize about? You meant to miss, right?
(beat)

JACOB
Yeah, I did.

TERRY
So why'd they want to kill me, anyway?

JACOB
Because... you're Terry Ledbetter.

TERRY
So why'd you miss?

JACOB
Same reason.

(Blackout. End of play.)

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