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The first nine scenes of the 2015 winner of the Charles M. Getchell Award, given by SETC to recognize a worthy new play, are published. Scenes Ten through Seventeen are available for reading online at www.setc.org/helvetica.

Cover
“Inside the Club 2001” is one of 36 scene-by-scene, full-color renderings created for the world premiere of the new North American production of Saturday Night Fever. The show was part of the 2015 Finger Lakes Musical Theatre Festival at the Merry-Go-Round Playhouse in Auburn, NY. Scenic designer Stanley A. Meyer, one of SETC’s 2015 distinguished guest designers, worked with director/choreographer Brett Smock to create an evocative world for the musical. Slider panels and a moving header helped transform the set into various locations, such as a bedroom, dining room, coffee shop, playground, Verrazano Bridge, dance studio, subway and, of course, “Inside the Club 2001.” Assisting Meyer were associate scenic designer Jason Curtis and assistant scenic designers Jesús O. Luna and William Beilke. See the cover scene as it unfolded onstage above and on Page 8. (Rendering by Stanley A. Meyer; Photoshop work by Garland Gooden)
When you’re starting out as a playwright, the industry can seem mystifying. Here are some quick do’s and don’ts for those of you who are trying to navigate the wild waters of playwriting.

DON’T send your play to playwrights, artistic directors, literary managers or dramaturgs asking for feedback unless you’re related to them. Maybe not even then. We’re all very busy people, and we get dozens of people a month asking us for feedback on their plays. You’re asking us to do for free something we do for a living.

DO invite these people to come to informal readings. Feed them snacks. Serve them beer. And listen to them. You don’t need to follow every piece of advice, but don’t reject criticism out of hand. If all you want is praise, give the play to your mother.

DO consider hiring a dramaturg. Professional dramaturgs often specialize in helping playwrights develop new work. I understand (oh, so intimately) that most people don’t have a lot of extra money. Perhaps you know a dramaturg who would barter. I’d trade my dramaturgy skills for massage therapy in a hot second.

DON’T expect a personal response. Every theatre gets hundreds and hundreds of submissions. The workload is nuts, so most of us are barely keeping our heads above water. Don’t imagine that the reason you didn’t get a response is because the theatre is impolite, and don’t tell us we should stop accepting submissions if we’re not sending out personal notes to all 412 playwrights who submit each season. I assure you, we’re all doing our best.

DO respond courteously, if at all, to rejection. While most playwrights are awesome, often literary departments and ADs are confronted with angry playwrights who are upset their plays were rejected. I’ve personally been told I was an “idiot” who couldn’t recognize good writing. Rejection is hard, but I assure you it’s not personal. So take a deep breath, and then call me an idiot who can’t recognize good writing when you’re at the bar with your friends, not in an email to me.

Finally, remember that we’re here because we love playwrights and think you’re superstars. Hang in there. Keep at it. We need you.

Send your column of 400 or fewer words to deanna@setc.org.
How do you create theatre magic? Every inspirational moment onstage springs from a combination of imagination and hard work. This issue of Southern Theatre focuses on three fields that contribute to powerful theatrical moments: design, playwriting, and directing.

Each year, some of the country’s most distinguished designers spend long days at the SETC Convention, judging Design Competition entries, providing critiques, and offering their own inspirational stories and techniques. If you didn’t have the opportunity to hear them speak at the convention, be sure to read the story by Robert O’Leary beginning on Page 8, which summarizes the advice offered in seven key areas by the 2015 designers: Stanley Meyer, Kai Harada, Michael McDonald and Richard Pilbrow.

If you’ve ever struggled to provide an inexpensive but realistic candle or star effect on stage, you’ll want to peruse our regular “Outside the Box” column. Mike Post and Randy deCelle explain how you can use cheap Christmas lights and batteries to create memorable effects on stage.

We also celebrate playwrights and their work in this issue with the publication of the winning play in SETC’s annual Charles M. Getchell Award competition. Beginning on Page 25, you’ll find the first nine scenes of the 2015 winner, Helvetica, by Will Coleman. (Due to the length of the play, the remaining scenes are published online at www.setc.org/helvetica.) On Page 21, Kent Brown interviews Coleman about his work, both as a playwright and as the artistic director of a Chicago theatre focused on developing new works.

Writing a play is hard work, but just as challenging for many playwrights is the quest to get it produced. On Page 16, former literary manager Megan Monaghan Rivas takes playwrights behind the scenes in a theatre, outlining the key players in the decision-making process and the important questions they ask in evaluating plays for their seasons. In our “400 Words” column, Melissa Hillman shares additional do’s and don’ts for playwrights from her perspective as a theatre artistic director.

Professionals and students interested in directing plays will find helpful information in our book column, “Words, Words, Words,” which features a review by Scott Phillips of The Director Within: Storytellers of Stage and Screen by Rose Eichenbaum, with advice from 35 top directors of stage, film and the small screen.

I hope you enjoy SETC’s look behind the scenes at the areas of design, playwriting and directing. These important fields not only contribute to the success of a play but also help create magic onstage.
Who doesn’t like the effect created by candles on stage? The romantic twinkle of little points of light can make a scene come to life.

The effect of a candle can be achieved in many ways, from live flame to high-end flicker candles that typically cost around $30 each. Live flame is problematic for obvious reasons, and flicker candles are expensive. For a two-minute scene requiring 12 flicker candles, $360 of your budget would go up in flames. In today’s tight budget times, many theatres won’t spend that amount for a short-lived effect.

So how can you create the effect of candles affordably? Christmas lights. Specifically, we are talking about the tiny incandescent versions, called “B” lights, twinkle bulbs or mini-bulbs. These bulbs create an effect like a small flame at a price you can afford using just the change on your dresser. The average cost can be as little as 2 cents per light.

To create a basic series of candle lights on stage, you will need a string of Christmas lights (cheap is best) and a battery (more on that later). If you need to control the lights from a console, you can do that as well with a little more work (also explained later).

Putting the strings to work

To create a candle effect using Christmas lights, you must first understand how the light string works. On inexpensive sets, if an individual light goes out, either the entire string or part of the string goes out. That is because the lights are wired in series. What does that really mean? When wired in series, power is fed through each lamp to the next. The circuit needs a return path, so after the last lamp, a wire runs all the way back to the source. If a lamp breaks, there is no flow of electricity and no light.

Most strings of Christmas lights come in multiples of 50. If you look carefully at strings with 100 or 300 lamps, you will usually find that they actually are just groups of 50 lamp strings. These strings typically have three wires and, if you look closely, you will find a place where the wires meet, joining multiple strings of 50 lights.

Let’s say that, for your scene on stage, you need only a few lights. Here is how you can accomplish this using a string that contains many more lights.

Voltage: What type of battery?

Your first step is to determine the voltage needed for an individual lamp. In series, the total voltage is the sum of each lamp’s voltage. If you look at a string of 50, since America runs on 120 volts, each lamp needs 2.4 volts (120V ÷ 50 = 2.4V). Rounding that up for convenience, we will call it 3V. To test this, cut out three lamps from a string of lights, leaving them attached to each other. Touch the ends of the daisy chain to the contacts of a nine-volt battery. The lights should illuminate.

You can then test this idea further with a string of four lights. They will probably still light up, but not quite as brightly. Placing less than three on a nine-volt battery may prove hazardous, as the lamps will burn out fast. In actuality, while the lights are rated at 2.5V, very often the voltage applied doesn’t equal that. This is why doing the math is important.

So, if you need to illuminate three lights in your scene, a 9V battery provides an easy and cheap way to create a small battery-operated practical. A 6V lantern battery will drive two lights in series for a long time. A 12V emergency light brick battery will illuminate four twinkle lights for even longer.

Can you find a 3V battery and do just one light? Sure, they are available. But they don’t come in a standard form like a AA, AAA, C or D size battery that most people are used to seeing. They are odd-sized and not the same form as general purpose batteries. However, you can create a 3V battery...
by simply expanding on the idea of a series circuit above and applying it to batteries. Most canister-style batteries (AA, AAA, C and D) are rated at 1.5 volts. Putting two such batteries together in a series adds the voltages together. If you touch the bottom of one to the top of another (the order is important), you get 1.5V + 1.5V or 3V total and can power a single light. For ease of use, various styles of battery holders are available to stack batteries for different voltages or for more power.

**Amps: How long will the light last?**

The next step is to determine how long your battery power will last. Batteries are rated in “amp-hours,” meaning for one hour, they will deliver that many amps. To figure out the amperage of a Christmas tree light, you need to read the packaging, which will give a wattage rating or a current rating for the string. A typical rating on a string of 50 lights is 20 watts. Doing some more math (Watts = Volts x Amps), you can calculate that a single mini-light draws about 0.167 amps (167 milliamps). A AA battery has approximately 2,200 milliamp-hours, which means a single light powered by this battery should last 13 hours (2,200 ÷ 167). In general, the bigger the battery, the longer it will last. However, because different types of batteries (and lights) have different characteristics, the best bet is to hook your lights up and time them. If you need more amp-hours, you can connect groups of the 3V battery packs in parallel and increase your amp-hour rating.

**Controlling lights from a console**

For many shows, battery power works well to create your lighting effect. However, when that won’t work, there are ways to control your candelabra or other lighting effect from your lighting console. One option is to use one of the expensive wireless DMX devices. Another is to use a transformer that changes the 120V to the voltage you need so you can plug it into a dimmer. There are many different transformers, most typically described as “wall warts.” These are power supplies or chargers for various gadgets that are often tossed in a drawer when the gadget dies. You can find transformers at many different voltage ratings, with 12V being common. If you were creating a candelabra with 12 lights, you would wire the lights into three series groups of four lamps each (4 x 3V is 12V) and wire each group in parallel to the transformer. When using transformers, you can switch the light on and off but might not be able to dim the circuit. You should check the specs on your lighting system before attempting any dimming application.

**Final words of advice**

Bear in mind that the instructions above apply to incandescent lights. However, many of these same concepts will work for LEDs as well, except you may have to deal with the polarity of the device, and dimming requires special consideration.

Additionally, some strings of Christmas lights have special features and circuitry that will not work as outlined, but those tend to be the more expensive Christmas lights. If you purchase ordinary, cheap Christmas lights and do a little experimentation, you can find a very elegant solution for a candelabra, a star drop, fairy lights in the forest, or lightning bugs on a summer night.
Coloring and Playing Pretend

2015 Distinguished Designers Share Inspiration and Ideas

by Robert O’Leary
Stanley A. Meyer’s signature line – “making a career out of coloring and playing pretend” – pays homage to the artistry and imagination that fuel designers’ work. But how does a designer translate wide-open creativity into success in this competitive field?

Meyer and fellow distinguished guest designers Kai Harada, Michael McDonald and Richard Pilbrow shared their collective wisdom at the 2015 SETC Convention in Chattanooga as they adjudicated Design Competition entries, participated in design critiques and outlined philosophies in a keynote address. On the pages that follow, we offer edited snippets – paraphrases and actual quotations – of their inspirational advice.

**STANLEY A. MEYER on Scene Design**

*Attention to detail is key to your being needed as a designer.*

Stanley A. Meyer has been successful across a wide array of design stages. With more than 60 regional and international credits to his name, Meyer has created designs for theatre, television, rock music shows, circuses, theme parks and more. Notable works include Broadway’s *Beauty and the Beast*, the world premiere of Elton John’s and Tim Rice’s *Elaborate Lives*, the 2014 version of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus Legends, rock shows for Alice Cooper and The Steve Miller Band, Busch Gardens’ roller coaster sensation Verbolten, and Shamu’s show at Sea World in Orlando, San Diego and San Antonio. Meyer’s advice for succeeding in design includes:

1. **Take care of yourself and find a work-life balance.**
   
   “This job in the theatre is a marathon, and you have to prepare and prepare … to move to the next step. We have to take care of our bodies. We are athletes and artists. You have to be healthy in order to do the work.”
   
   “As you learn to balance this career with life, it is really important to find a partner in life that understands you are sometimes maniacal about this work, and they too are equally possessed by what they do. Find that place and balance in life and in the world, and find that someone who supports you in that.”
   
   “As designers, we have to find what is going to make us really happy and excited to do the work and keeps us fulfilled. That is really important.”

2. **Connections help you get work – and get through work.**
   
   Many people you have worked with in the past will show up again in your future. Maintain a positive work attitude wherever you are, and hang on to those special connections, those people with whom you collaborate well.
   
   Our work is nothing without good technical directors, company managers and stage managers. They are the people who make it happen. When you don’t have the ideal people in these positions, your work ends up as something less than it should be.
   
   “You are always going to find someone [in the production] that you connect with and admire. You will find yourself bonding with them, and it helps you get through the tough times.”

**MORE INFO:**

www.stanleyameyerdesign.com

Opposite page: One of Meyer’s most recent jobs was the scene design for Saturday Night Fever for Finger Lakes Musical Theatre Festival at the Merry-Go-Round Playhouse in Auburn, NY. (Photo by Stanley A. Meyer) The rendering of this scene is shown on the magazine cover. See Page 3 for more details.

Stanley Meyer judges Design Competition entries at the 2015 SETC Convention. (Photo by David Humber)
Have confidence.
Don’t be afraid of different and exciting design challenges. Take them all on with passion. Never think you can’t design a project.

Whether you’re asked to design an outdoor nighttime spectacular on water the size of a football field, an off-Broadway show or something at Disneyland, “it is just being creative and it is just a different scale. Just seize every opportunity that you can and love everything that you are designing.”

Communication is key to success.
You’ve got to be able to draw and communicate anywhere. “Hotel room, tech table, and paper napkin doodles … That’s how you are going to design a show at some point.”

A sketch or drawing is not a sacred thing, but rather is a communication tool and a means to an end in production.

Get through creative hurdles.
When you face stumbling blocks on a project, stimulate the creative brain. Go and look for new things.

“A lot of it is just going back to the research and going someplace new and seeing something, finding information. … [You may be] walking through New York City and all of a sudden [you] see an advertisement for something and you go, ‘Oh, okay that’s it,’ and you get a new idea. It is about re-stimulating the creative brain to keep going.”

Develop and storyboard your work.
Really figure how your work progresses throughout the production.

Less is more when well-thought. That kind of specific choice can be wholly evocative.

Sometimes you will question “why am I doing this?” but those times teach you how to deal with issues that arise and help you learn how to get through a project.

To avoid being typecast as a particular kind of designer, take on projects that show your ability to adapt your styles and abilities.

What makes a good assistant?
A strong work ethic, sense for detail and skills that complement the designer’s make for a good assistant.

“I can draw and paint … but I don’t do computer drafting, and we need 3-D CAD drawings. So [I] have to find people who can do it and like doing it.”

KAI HARADA on Sound Design

Kai Harada listens to an entry in the sound design competition at the 2015 SETC Convention. (Photo by David Humber)

Sound design is both challenging and rewarding.
A sound designer for musical theatre specifies the entire system from the microphones all the way...
through to the speakers. “On Broadway, all the theatres are completely empty, just four walls, so everything has to be defined.”

Embrace the live aspect of theatre. “Once something happens, whether a cast member flubs a line, a piece of scenery crashes into something else, or a mixer misses a line, it’s gone, it’s done, and you have to keep in the moment. I think there is something very invigorating about that.”

If sound is your passion, this career can be extremely rewarding, but it often takes you away from home and family. “There are a lot of sacrifices you make as a person to be able to do this, but at the end of the day if this is what you really want to do, you can be the luckiest person in the world because you get to do it.”

2 Musical theatre is evolving.
There are a lot of reasons sound design for musical theatre is especially needed now.

“The musical styles have changed. We’ve gone from shows like Kiss Me Kate or Oklahoma – which were designed pre-amplification, pre-reinforcement, where orchestrations would cut away so that you could hear the voices, and people were trained to project and hit the back wall – to the new style of rock musicals with actors who are trained to work for film.”

There are also changes in the venues, with many built as multipurpose spaces that “may be good for orchestral pieces but not so good for musical theatre.”

3 Collaboration is vital.
“The sound designer actually has to juggle what the director wants, what the composer wants, what the choreographer wants, what the orchestrator wants. … Part of the job of a sound designer is to be a politician and determine the best way to bring everyone’s wishes to fruition without compromising your own aesthetic.”

Make decisions such as speaker placement based on communication with the entire team. “It is all about collaboration because we don’t work in a vacuum. For example, one of the first things I ask a costume designer is what do we have headdress/headwear-wise where I can place a microphone for the best look and sound. The same with scenery, how can we hide the speakers? How can we work together to make the speakers where I need them to be acoustically, but [where they are] also visually pleasing?”

“Sound designers are still at the mercy of what the actors do onstage and what the orchestra does in the pit. We just have to take what we are given and work with it.”

Learn to work with each other. Learn how to talk to one another. Know the language and vocabulary required to talk to your director, your fellow designers and other teams.

4 Knowledge is key.
“Part of my initial process is reading the script and understanding the aesthetic. Is it a classical musical or is it a rock-and-roll musical? Those factors will influence what kind of speakers I use and what kind of system I will need.”

“I will then look at the theatre. What kind of theatre is it? Is it really dead sounding? Is it a really ‘echo-y’ barn? And what can I do about that?”

“Learn to trust your ears. All the measurement tools in the world won’t help if you don’t know what you are listening for.”

5 Do the basics.
Spend a lot of time doing your paperwork, and use it often to communicate to the other members of the design team. Make sure that all the required information is found in it somewhere.

Correct paperwork will also allow the multiple people working with you the opportunity to get things right the first time in both design and production. Back up, save and archive everything. You never know when someone is going to ask you to recreate a production.

“Label everything. If a connector doesn’t have a label on it, don’t plug it in.”

6 Learn when to stop.
At a certain point, you have made as many adjustments to the design of a production as possible.

“What I love about this business is that you can get so close to perfection, but it will never ever be that way [at a single performance]. The great thing about doing Wicked around the world is that I have in my head the best Wicked ever – the original with Idina Menzel and the German Glinda and the Japanese ensemble – and I have it in my head as the best version of that show that will ever be. It doesn’t exist in reality, but I can try and get every other Wicked that I do to sound like that in my head.”

7 What makes a good assistant?
Good assistants should be strong technically, but also must know how to read people.

“All of the sound stuff, the paperwork – I can teach that, no problem. It is about finding the personality that meshes with you, and that is really difficult.”

‘There are a lot of sacrifices you make as a person to be able to do this, but at the end of the day if this is what you really want to do, you can be the luckiest person in the world because you get to do it.’
No matter how talented you are, you also need to be clever.

Michael McDonald, a regional, Broadway and off-Broadway costume designer, earned Tony and Drama Desk Award nominations for his work on the 2009 revival of Hair on Broadway. His off-Broadway and regional work includes Tartuffe at the Tribeca Playhouse, Among the Night Visitors at Lincoln Center, and Take Me Out at the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis. He is the assistant costume master for the Public Theatre. He had much to share about the world in which he plays:

1 Be conscious of the demands placed on the other people you are working with.

“I’ve been a costume designer, I’ve been an assistant costume designer, I’ve been a craftsperson, and I’ve run the costume shop at the Public Theatre. So I am sensitive to a lot of the areas where costume design reaches.”

“Caring what the actor has to go through is incredibly important, and it also helps you. It doesn’t do you any good when someone leaves their fitting, and they don’t love their costume, and you are forcing something onto them. You need to make them feel comfortable and make them feel good in it.”

2 Show how research ties to the design.

Get all of the information together – research, renderings, swatches – and let them work in conjunction. “You need to show your director, ‘This is what I am going to do with your play. This is how I’m going to make it look good. This is how I am going to support the text.’”

3 Sketches and renderings are road maps.

“It’s so easy to get caught up in creating a beautiful work of art on your rendering,” but make sure that the rendering is truly giving workable information for the construction of the costume piece.

“You have to let your sketches and your research be a road map for you” and not always the end decision on the costume.

4 Venture into the world for inspiration.

If you don’t go out of the studio and look for items, you are missing something wonderful. There is nothing like going to a vintage clothing store and seeing the real deal, feeling how the clothing is made and even how it smells. It is wonderful for inspiration. You will often even find something that isn’t at all what you were looking for, but it speaks to you. “In clothing, you can’t fake it; you have to try it. You have to get out there and feel and touch real clothing.”

5 The Internet doesn’t have all answers.

Young designers shouldn’t abandon the old-school ways of looking to books and magazines and going out into the world to discover. Find old books and catalogs and build a reference file for yourself of things that aren’t readily available on the Internet.

6 Make good communication a priority in presenting your design.

“Try to make your presentation as clear and straightforward as possible. Get rid of unnecessary stuff that you don’t need. Make every character clear and every scene clear, and you will get better jobs.”

“You have to take whatever your design concept is and illustrate it, or at least communicate it. How is that going to translate into your clothing?”

7 What makes a good assistant?

“Be as helpful as you possibly can.” Strive to understand the designer’s needs. “Take your designer’s temperature and see what is important to them.”
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Richard Pilbrow, the 2012 co-recipient with scene designer Tony Walton of SETC’s Distinguished Career Award, returned to the convention this year to critique design entries and offer advice from his many perspectives. He is a much-acclaimed lighting designer, a producer, an artist, one of the world’s leading theatre designers and consultants, and an author who has been called the “Prodigious Pilbrow” in reflection of his lifetime of achievement in the theatre world. His recent books include A Theatre Project, published in 2011, and Stage Lighting Design: the Art, the Craft, the Life, released in 2008. Nominated for two Tony Awards, he won the Drama Desk Award for Lighting Design for Showboat in 1995. He offered these tips:

1. **Understand the essentials of lighting.**
   In compiling a good piece of lighting work, you must get back to basics – the understanding that when you design with light, you also design with shadow, texture and color. Also you must never dismiss the essential idea that “light enables us to see.”

2. **Light shapes dimensionality.**
   “Light has to come from the back and sides of the actor to create three-dimensional living, breathable space.” This 3-D concept should lead to a strong selection of hanging positions for channeling multiple paths of light into a single area.

3. **Judging of lighting design must address multiple characteristics.**
   The judgment of a lighting design “must be an evaluation of how expressively and purposefully light has been used to illuminate the stage appropriately, how the performers are three-dimensionally revealed, the composition of the lighting within the overall visual intent of the scenic picture, and finally the degree to which the stage is charged with the correctly evocative atmosphere.”

4. **Successful design requires confidence, persistence and technical knowledge.**
   “Retain your innocence and believe that most anything can be done. You must pitch in and do what it takes.”
   “I always program from my submasters.” Submasters become the collected thoughts in light of the lighting designer.

5. **Your concept emanates from the show.**
   “It all comes from the script of the show and what ‘is’ the show – and, of course, your colleagues, the director, the scene designer. It is an amalgam of all those things. I can’t draw very well so I look for old paintings or photographs or something to illustrate it, but everything comes from the material. It is not your idea – it must come from the source material. You are just trying to bring it to life.”
   “Light is this most wonderful stuff. It allows us to see, and it affects our feelings in a very fundamental, basic way. You are just trying to take the essence of the story and clad it in light, which creates the air that the actors are breathing.”

6. **Theatre is a collaborative process.**
   “Theatre is about human beings coming together. Aren’t we lucky people [to be involved in a collaborative field like theatre]? Being part of that collaborative process is a constant thrill.”

7. **What makes a good assistant?**
   “I need an assistant that is fun to have dinner with ... good conversationalist and wise in artistic and technical choice.”

**MORE INFO:**
www.richardpilbrow.com

Above: Richard Pilbrow judges entries in the lighting design competition at the 2015 SETC Convention. (Photo by David Humber)

Above, left: Pilbrow’s lighting design for A Tale of Two Cities in 2009 won him a Drama Desk Award nomination.

Robert O’Leary is head of scenic and lighting design for Florida School of the Arts in Palatka, FL, and the past chair of SETC’s Design/Technology Committee.
Who’s Catching What You Are Pitching?

A Former Literary Manager Shares Inside Advice for Playwrights on Getting Produced

by Megan Monaghan Rivas

You’ve dropped the envelope in the mail, or pressed “Send” on your email. You diligently researched the guidelines your target theatre specifies for works sent by a playwright operating without agent representation. And now your carefully crafted synopsis and 10-page dialogue sample is on its way to the theatre you hope will produce it. Or the 10 theatres. Or the 50 theatres.

Ideally, you have just started a conversation with that theatre. You’ve made the opening move, and you eagerly await the theatre’s response and the next step in that conversation.

Your conversation partner – the other person in this dialogue – is likely to wear the title literary manager. Or dramaturg, or director of new play development, or artistic associate, or associate artistic
director, or even artistic director. Most professionals in this line of work come from theatre backgrounds as directors, dramaturgs, performers and playwrights. They are highly educated and deeply informed about the wide body of work in dramatic literature. They may have advanced degrees and many years of professional experience. They may even be founders of the theatre company to which you’ve sent your work.

No matter what title shows up on his or her business card, this person will be engaged in the search for excellent, even extraordinary plays for his or her theatre to produce. He or she will be hoping your submission leads to such a discovery. In a speech at the O’Neill National Playwrights Conference, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paula Vogel refers to that person as the playwright’s Dear Reader, just like the intimate, one-on-one relationship between a novelist and his or her reader.

Here is a look at five questions that may be front and center in the mind of your Dear Reader in the theatre:

**Q How does this play fulfill the mission of our theatre?**

Most theatres post their mission statements on their websites. A canny playwright will find that mission statement and review it before sending material to that theatre. A couple of examples: Mixed Blood Theatre in Minneapolis, MN, “promotes cultural pluralism and individual equality through artistic excellence, using theatre to address artificial barriers that keep people from succeeding in American society.” Salt Lake Acting Company in Salt Lake City, UT, has a mission “to engage and enrich community through brave contemporary theatre.” Synchronicity Theatre in Atlanta, GA, “supports women artists, forges long-term and effective community partnerships, and develops new work.”

Consider the mission Mixed Blood lays out. The submissions reader there will be looking for ways that your play fulfills it. Does your story focus on one of those artificial barriers? Does your cast of characters demonstrate cultural pluralism in some way? Is your play set in the U.S., addressing American society?

If you look at Synchronicity’s mission, you might anticipate that the reader at this theatre would have different goals in mind. Does your play create opportunities for women artists? Is your play new – that is to say, it hasn’t had previous professional productions? There is some gray area in the answer to that last question, especially concerning university productions. Don’t be discouraged. Most professional theatres do not consider a university production to be the “world premiere,” so if your play has had a college or university production it is not likely to be ruled out strictly on those grounds.

**Q How excellent is this play?**

“Excellent” is a subjective term, but absolutely non-negotiable for the theatre. Your Dear Reader is looking for the most exciting, multidimensional, inventive, thoughtful, original play he or she has read this year. Most professional theatres that accept unsolicited submissions receive hundreds of them every year. Your Dear Reader is hoping yours will be the one that stands out. It’s worth noting that most theatres accept a submission only once for any given play, so it’s up to you to make sure your play is fully ready for that evaluation before you send it. Every once in a blue moon, a Dear Reader will invite a playwright to send the next draft of a play that made a good first impression, but you should not count on that.

**Q How would this play interact with others planned for next season?**

Your Dear Reader considers each submission on its individual merits, but must also think about the bigger conversation his or her theatre has with its audience over a full season of plays. Imagine your play tells a powerful coming-of-age story whose protagonist is a rural teenager. If the theatre has already committed to producing another coming-of-age story in its upcoming season or another play with a teenaged protagonist, that might rule your play out. If the theatre has already slated two solo shows for next season and your piece is a one-woman play, your Dear Reader might recognize that the theatre’s audience is going to get
restless and wish for plays with multiple characters interacting. Your Dear Reader is thinking in terms of “season,” not just in terms of “this play.”

Q Does this play duplicate too closely another play we produced recently? Or a play we have commissioned? Or a play another theatre close to us produced recently?

Early in my career I served as literary manager for a theatre company that happened to produce one play about women in prison in one season, and a different play about women in prison the next season. (We were Orange Is the New Black before OITNB was cool.) Naturally, over the next year or so, many playwrights looked at our programming and thought “Wow, a theatre that might produce my women-in-prison play!” We were deluged with submissions of women-in-prison plays – and we couldn’t produce any of them. Our audience was sated with women-in-prison stories. We had to give them something else. In most areas, theatres also strive not to duplicate plays that other companies have done very recently. This is a wise strategy in that audiences are unlikely to buy tickets for two different productions of the same play. Box office revenues are important to any professional theatre, though for most professional theatres, ticket sales constitute only a fraction of the theatre’s total budget.

Q What resources would this play need and do we have them?

Even the biggest, best-funded theatre companies have limits. Many theatres think about season planning in terms of “actor-weeks.” How many actors can the theatre afford to hire for how many weeks, for the entire season?

A word problem: Imagine that a theatre has money for 240 actor-weeks for the season. The typical rehearsal process is four weeks, and a typical run is another four weeks. That means each actor cast in a production costs eight actor-weeks. How many actors can that theatre hire in that season? (The answer is 30 actors.) That means that all the plays that theatre produces that season, taken together, can only require a total of 30 actors. Continue imagining that this theatre is already planning to produce a play with four actors, a musical with 18 actors, and a play with three actors. Can it produce your comedy that requires a cast of 10? (The answer is no: $4 + 18 + 3 = 25$. Your 10-person cast would mean a season total of 35 actors, five over the budget’s limit.)

Money and actor-weeks are not the only resources a theatre has to consider. Some plays – notably Pulitzer Prize winner August: Osage County by Tracy Letts – require sets that show multiple stories of a building. Does the theatre have the space to put a multi-story set on stage? Theatres can be tremendously inventive about overcoming space limits with creative design, but those limits still exist. Perhaps your play requires special casting. For example, a play that requires child actors could be prohibitively expensive for a theatre whose union agreements require child performers to be double-cast (as in Matilde or Billy Elliot: The Musical, which have several child performers who alternate in the title roles) and to be supported with on-site tutoring during the rehearsal period and the run of the show.

So now you know the questions. Here’s the process your play typically follows on the way to being rejected – or accepted.

Each of the questions above must be answered during a reading and evaluation process which, in most professional theatres, involves multiple people considering the
Megan Monaghan Rivas is an associate professor of dramaturgy at the School of Drama at Carnegie Mellon University. Recipient of the Elliott Hayes Prize in Dramaturgy, she served as literary manager of South Coast Repertory Theatre, the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta, and Frontera @ Hyde Park Theatre in Austin, TX, and oversaw the artistic programming at the Lark Play Development Center in NYC and The Playwrights’ Center in Minneapolis. She is a member of the Southern Theatre Editorial Board.

Your submission arrives and is logged into the theatre’s tracking system. The theatre will want to keep track of when the submission came in, from whom, who read it, what decision was made, and when that decision was communicated to the writer. Sadly, some theatres skip that final step, to the unending frustration of playwrights. But for purposes of this conversation, we will believe that it happens.

Your Dear Reader sits down with your submission, reads it carefully, and writes a brief statement about it describing the play, the resources that would be required to produce it, and the play’s strengths and weaknesses. Dear Reader concludes by recommending whether this play should advance into further consideration for potential production. Imagine that this recommendation is “yes.” If the decision is “no” at any stage of the process, the theatre should communicate that to the writer by letter or email. As noted above, an unfortunate number of theatres fail to communicate with writers whose work is being declined.

If your original submission was a synopsis and a 10-page dialogue sample, the theatre will contact you to request a full script to read, and the whole process starts again: reading, writing about the play, and making a recommendation. Again, imagine that the recommendation was “yes.”

This is where the rubber meets the road. At this stage, you might not hear anything from the theatre for two reasons: 1. The staff has everything needed to make that decision. 2. Given most artistic directors’ overwhelming workloads, the literary staff cannot necessarily predict exactly when they will get to read the play.

Once a decision finally has been made—and it’s a “yes”—you will receive a phone call from the artistic director letting you know that the theatre would like to produce your play. That phone call comes about thanks to your hard work, but also thanks to the hard work of your Dear Reader(s) who have carried your play through the submission process, presented it to the decision-makers in the company, and advocated for it to be produced.

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Will Coleman: ‘I’m Interested in Why We Tell The Stories We Tell’

Will Coleman, winner of the 2015 Charles M. Getchell New Play Award for the play Helvetica, is a Chicago-based artist who divides his time between writing plays and serving as artistic director of The Wheelhouse Theatre (www.thewheelhousetheatre.org), a Chicago-based theatre company dedicated to developing original works. He began writing plays while earning a BA in Directing from Emory and Henry College, a small liberal arts college located in the Virginia highlands. After graduation, he moved to New York City and, in 2008, secured an internship at the New York Theatre Workshop, where he was able to pursue his interest in becoming an artistic director. He also continued writing and, in 2009, his short play Spooky Action at a Distance premiered at TheaterJ in St. Louis. In 2011, Zombie Boyfriend! – a musical Coleman co-wrote with Chandler Davis – premiered at Studio Roanoke. Coleman, who moved to Chicago in 2013, is currently completing his MFA in Playwriting through a low-residency program at Hollins University in Roanoke, VA. Helvetica was produced at Mill Mountain Theatre in Roanoke, VA, in January 2015 and is scheduled for production next season at Auburn University. Kent R. Brown interviewed Coleman in person and via email in late spring 2015 after a rehearsed reading of Helvetica at the 2015 SETC Convention.

KENT BROWN: You seem equally comfortable as a playwright and a director. What happened to acting?
WILL COLEMAN: I started out wanting to be an actor. That’s why I picked a small liberal arts college.
BROWN: To get more individualized training?
COLEMAN: I thought so, yes, but I turned out to be too intellectual as an actor. I’m stage-worthy but I’m too self-aware. At Emory and Henry, they had a Student Showcase Program where any student could apply for a showcase and pitch a production to the faculty. The budgets weren’t much. I know we had some money because we bought some costumes, but the productions were largely self-produced. Basically, we just had access to the facilities – a black box and a proscenium space – and some props and paint.
BROWN: What did you direct?
COLEMAN: The Shape of Things by Neil Labute, Songs for a New World by Jason Robert Brown, Martin McDonagh’s The Pillowman, a quartet of short plays by Doug Wright entitled Unwrap Your Candy, and a few others. The shows ran for just one performance, too, which was quite a challenge.
BROWN: You are a composer and lyricist. How did that all begin?
COLEMAN: I taught myself how to play the guitar in high school, and really got into musical theatre in college, and adapted my music to that style. So I tend to write rock-popper kind of music. My writing partner Chandler Davis plays piano and has a much stronger musical theatre background than I, so when we write together, we play to each other’s strengths.
BROWN: How did your internship experience with the New York Theatre Workshop inform your work as a playwright? As a future artistic director?
COLEMAN: I was there for about eight months, and in New York for about two years. I organized and house-managed countless readings, sat in on the artistic meetings, worked with the casting and literary departments, sat in on rehearsals, and saw tons of plays, on, off and off-off Broadway – some fantastic, some terrible. And I got to talk about the plays with some of the best and brightest theatre people in the country, like Charles Mee and Doug Hughes. I learned how a literary office works and read submissions for the literary director. After my internship, I stage-managed a few shows. It was an exciting experience.
BROWN: Which playwrights have impressed you?
COLEMAN: Doug Wright, Sarah Ruhl, Tom Stoppard, Tennessee Williams and Stephen Sondheim, who I consider a playwright, are favorites of mine. My go-to favorite playwright is Caryl Churchill, whose plays are full of theatricality.
BROWN: How do they all connect for you?
COLEMAN: The thing that links all of those playwrights is their intellectual curiosity, I think. They write plays about people trying to understand something, and I think I tend to gravitate toward characters like that.
BROWN: What prompts you to begin writing a play?
COLEMAN: Sometimes it’s coming across an interesting idea in a book, a podcast, or in the case of The Brooklyn Bridge, YouTube videos. My play The End of the Universe was inspired by a photograph of a friend of
Below are synopses of some of Will Coleman’s other plays:

**Zombie Boyfriend!** (book, music, lyrics co-written with Chandler Davis)
After a tragic accident, a naive college girl makes a deal with the devil to bring her boyfriend back from the dead. She gets more than she bargained for, however, when he comes back as a zombie.

**Squid Hunt!** (book, lyrics, music)
Itch Hawthorne lost his parents two years ago to one of the monthly squid attacks on his island home. Finally deciding he’s had enough, he teams up with a drunken sea captain, an ex-pirate, and a cowardly cook to bring The Great and Terrible Squid to justice. But, he’s about to learn that villains aren’t always what they seem.

**The End of the Universe**
Lauren’s big sister vanished out the window. Is she the latest in a series of disappearing children? Or did she simply run away? Can Lauren put the clues together before her family, and the town, tear themselves apart?

**Rust City**
In the ruined city of Detroit, a woman has built a bastion for survival in a place that wants to swallow them whole. Can she and her family return a once-great metropolis from the grave? Or will petty games and jealousies consume them all?

**The Brooklyn Bridge and Other Marvels**
A dreamer who can’t grow up meets a woman who literally made herself. Can he become the man she deserves, or is a Transgendered Romantic Comedy just too much to ask for?
to hear. At the beginning of the play, My-
ron tells us that the largest events in our
life are not always the most meaningful.
The action of Helvetica telling the story of
The Ballerina speaks more about her than it
does about the actual ballerina. It is more
illuminating of her character than the more
successful books.

**BROWN:** You prescribe so little in the way
of a physical environment. Are you hop-
ing an imaginative director will make the
“right” decision?

**COLEMAN:** Well, hoping for an imaginative
director is true of any playwright, for any
play. But I don’t think there are “right”
decisions. That’s kind of the point of a
play, isn’t it? If there’s one “right” way to
do it, it should be in the stage directions,
and if everything has to be done in a very
specific way, and you’re not comfortable
with a director, a designer, actors, etc.,
making choices, then you should probably
just write a novel. When I was younger,
working as a director, I only wanted to
direct my play myself. But that’s not really
feasible, is it? So I worked more in the
theatre, and realized that, hey, this is a
collaborative process. For example, were I
directing Helvetica, I would have the screen
door onstage throughout the play. And we
would see her fix it. Make it stop creaking.
But if I’m not willing to open up my work
for other interpretations, then I’m not really
participating in the art.

**BROWN:** You’ve recently produced your
first reading as a new play development
company – The Wheelhouse Theatre.

**COLEMAN:** Yes. Readings are so vital
for developing plays, but it’s sometimes
difficult to get people to attend the readings.
So we tried to think of a way to make it an
event. Brunch is very popular in Chicago,
especially with younger professionals, so
we thought that merging the two might
be a good way to get some new theatre
lovers. We contacted the folks at the Blokes
& Birds Public House and we came up with
“Pancakes and Playwrights.”

**BROWN:** How did it go?

**COLEMAN:** It came off nicely. There were
probably about 30 people there, which was
a great turnout for the size of the space.
We did *Gone City* by Chad Runyon and
Lucinda’s Bed by Mia McCullough.

**BROWN:** What is Wheelhouse Theatre
looking for in new material?

**COLEMAN:** We’re looking for plays writ-
ten for the stage, not plays wanting to
be movies. Movies are fine, but there are
things we can do onstage that you can’t
do in movies.

**BROWN:** Such as?

**COLEMAN:** A story told in film is usually
a much broader story, in terms of scope
and geography. Filmic attention span is
shorter, so scenes are much shorter and
scattershot, jumping all over the narrative.
There’s nothing inherently wrong with
this, and there are some excellent plays
that are very filmic. But, for me, theatre
can ask an audience to imagine something
that they don’t see. A theatre audience will
believe that characters are in two places at
once, or that a stuffed bear is narrating a
serious story, in a way that film audiences
can’t.

**BROWN:** Any restrictions on the content
or style of the play?

**COLEMAN:** Our mission is to find plays
that ignite and cultivate the ideas of artists
of our generation: something a bit chal-
lenging, or a bit dark, or something that
we don’t see every day. We’re very open
to lots of genres and styles. In production,
we’re not going to be able to produce a
play requiring 30 actors and an onstage
elevator, but if we love the play, we’ll figure
out how to do a reading of it, and help the
playwright.

**BROWN:** Your New York Theatre Work-
shop experience is paying off.

**COLEMAN:** I certainly hope so. We’d love
to be the NYTW of Chicago one day.
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CAST OF CHARACTERS:

PAST HELVETICA: Child. A young adult actress playing a precocious child. Very bright and energetic.

PRESENT HELVETICA: Adult. Anywhere from 25 to 45. Agitated, full of ennui.

FUTURE HELVETICA: Senior. 60s to 70s, but fit, still a spark of youth.

MYRON: A stuffed bear. He’s played by an adult. No bear costumes, please.

MOTHER: 20s to 40s. She’s tired. Troubled.

FATHER: 20s to 40s. Masculine. Works with his hands.

HUSBAND: 20s to 40s. He’s successful, and looks it.

PATIENT: 20s to 50s. Female. Optimist.

DOCTOR: Any age. Either sex. Professional, with kind eyes.

ILLUSTRATOR: Female, around the same age as Present Helvetica. She’s fun. Enjoys life.

ANIMAL SHELTER EMPLOYEE: 20s to 30s.

NOTES ON STAGING:

I think it is important to have a screen door as part of the set, possibly visible throughout the entire play.

Many parts should be played by the same actors. Ideally, a cast of 6-8 actors.

SETTING:

The United States.

FOR PRODUCTION:

Email Will Coleman at: willjcoleman@gmail.com
Will Coleman © 2015

SCENE ONE

Lights up on MYRON, a stuffed bear. He’s played by a middle-aged man, somebody’s beloved uncle. He’s alone on an empty stage. He smiles and waves at the audience.

MYRON: This is a story about my best friend.

PAST HELVETICA enters. She’s a young adult actress playing a precocious eight-year-old. She stands, frozen in time.

MYRON: This is Helvetica Burke. She is eight years old. This is the day her mother died.

Sound effect: Sharp, short.

PRESENT HELVETICA enters. She’s somewhere between thirty and forty. She freezes.

MYRON: Here she is today. The day her husband leaves her for a religious cult.

Sound effect: Longer, pained. Not a punchline.

FUTURE HELVETICA enters. Sixties to seventies, but fit, still a spark of youth. She freezes.

MYRON: And this is the day she will die.

Sound effect: An unknown sound.
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them at home any longer. Her grief had drowned the joy she had once found in the company of living things. So, as a compromise to herself, when Helvetica was one year old, she gave her a stuffed bear, a beautiful, handmade piece, with onyx eyes and soft, downy fur. Because his singular expression didn’t remind her of any of her favorite protagonists, she decided on Myron. We were friends at first sight.

**SCENE TWO**

Past Helvetica is alone onstage. Dancing, or playing on pieces of furniture. Myron enters, and watches her for a time before speaking.

**MYRON:** Like all children with no siblings, Helvetica relied on her imagination more than most. She fought dragons and rescued handsome princes from evil wizards, she crash landed her spaceship on a hostile, alien planet, she even solved the mystery of Who Killed Barbie? Hint: It was Skipper. But her favorite game of all was Travel. More than anything, Helvetica loved to construct a sailboat out of household furniture, and sail around the living room, her trusty First Mate, yours truly, at her side. Helvetica begins building the sailboat out of furniture.

**PAST HELVETICA:** Put your back into it, Myron! **MYRON:** Aye, Captain! **PAST HELVETICA:** We have to get this cargo loaded before Cap’n Kloves figures out it’s missing! **MYRON:** Ah, the Dread Pirate Cap’n Kloves! Scourge of the Seven Seas, hated from Tripoli to Singapore! **PAST HELVETICA:** He hasn’t seen the last of Captain Helvetica! We may have to sneak away this time, but one day— **MYRON:** We shall return to Black Island and have our revenge! **PAST HELVETICA:** For now we will be satisfied by the liberation of these treasures. **MYRON:** And you’re sure none of these could go... missing? **PAST HELVETICA:** Myron, I’ve told you! These treasures belong to the people of Hong City. **MYRON:** But there’s so much here. Surely they won’t miss a little gold. Don’t we deserve to be rewarded? **PAST HELVETICA:** All the reward I need is seeing the delight in the people’s eyes when I return what’s been stolen. **MYRON:** Sigh. And the look on Cap’n Kloves’ face when he realizes we stole it out from under him. **PAST HELVETICA:** That too. **MYRON:** Still we could use a new coat of paint, maybe a cannon or something. **PAST HELVETICA:** Posh. The Condor is a fine ship. Fastest clipper in the Philippines. Myron looks through a spyglass. **MYRON:** Avast! The pirate’s gang approaches!

**PAST HELVETICA:** Retreat! **MYRON:** If only we had a cannon! **PAST HELVETICA:** Speed is as fine a weapon as any! **MYRON:** They draw closer! **PAST HELVETICA:** Then shove off, ya dog! Let the winds guide us home! **MYRON:** Aye, Captain! They sail away.

**SCENE THREE**

Sound effect: The Sound of the Present

Present Helvetica is sitting at a table at a restaurant, perusing a menu. Myron enters.

**MYRON:** By the time she was in her late twenties, Helvetica had accumulated a variety of ex-boyfriends, and one, she was somewhat proud to note, on again, off again female lover. She didn’t like to affix labels to herself or be “part of a cause,” but looking back on it years later, she thought of the relationship fondly. But on this night, four years after graduating college – that relationship was over, and she found herself on a blind date. A set-up courtesy of friends from work.

**HUSBAND enters, looking around, and spots Helvetica. He’s masculine, successful, and looks it. A touch insecure, though. Probably some bullshit with his parents.**

**MYRON:** He didn’t look like she expected. He was handsome, but in a unique way. **HUSBAND:** He didn’t look like she expected. He

**PAST HELVETICA:** That’s me! So you’re him. **HUSBAND:** I am indeed him. **PAST HELVETICA:** Hi. He sits down. **HUSBAND:** It’s nice to meet you. **PRESENT HELVETICA:** Nice to meet you. The boys have told me a lot about you. **HUSBAND:** Really? They seemed awfully tight-lipped about you. **PAST HELVETICA:** I cultivate an air of mystery. **HUSBAND:** That can be very appealing. **PAST HELVETICA:** I’ve found that to be true. **HUSBAND:** Does that make me a detective? **PRESENT HELVETICA:** It makes me Agatha Christie and you some guy on a train with a book. **HUSBAND:** The easy, flirtatious banter was second nature to Helvetica. While she found His Girls Friday charmingly outdated from a feminist perspective, there was no denying the dialogue. Her sparring partner, having not had the pleasure of experiencing Ms. Russel’s superb delivery, felt like he was missing something.

**HUSBAND:** So did you uh – find the place okay, I mean, with the weather and all it’s – **PRESENT HELVETICA:** Oh, no I live close to here, I come here all the time. **HUSBAND:** Oh yeah? My office is just down the street.

**PAST HELVETICA:** We could have passed each other a thousand times. **HUSBAND:** Never even noticed. **PRESENT HELVETICA:** So they said you’re in finance. **HUSBAND:** Yep. **PRESENT HELVETICA:** What does that mean? **HUSBAND:** You don’t really wanna know, do you? **PRESENT HELVETICA:** Oh god, I really don’t. **HUSBAND:** What do you do? **PRESENT HELVETICA:** I come up with stories. **HUSBAND:** Stories? **PRESENT HELVETICA:** Short answer: I’m a writer. **HUSBAND:** Long answer? **PRESENT HELVETICA:** You don’t want to hear about it. **HUSBAND:** I really do. **MYRON:** What Helvetica thought was: **PRESENT HELVETICA:** Well... I think it would probably have been better to never be born at all. The world is nothing but suffering followed by death, and the only alleviation humanity has come up with is stories. Fantasies to make us believe that there’s something worthwhile to this bankrupt existence.

**MYRON:** What she actually said was: **PRESENT HELVETICA:** I try to make the world a little happier. **HUSBAND:** You want a drink? **PRESENT HELVETICA:** Yes. Lights shift. **MYRON:** It was a below average date, in her estimation. Her usual, cynical honesty had put him off, as it did to many others. They ate, they drank, but conversation seemed forced, she was asking him questions, searching for mutual interests. They both liked “comedies” and “music” and “spending time with friends.” Generic, non-threatening answers to engender the least possible amount of disagreement or controversy. But then something happened.

**HUSBAND:** This isn’t working, is it? **PRESENT HELVETICA:** I don’t think so, no. **HUSBAND:** Okay, then how about this? The chances of us seeing each other again right now are pretty low, right? **PRESENT HELVETICA:** Low. **HUSBAND:** Like single digits. **PRESENT HELVETICA:** Agreed. **HUSBAND:** So why don’t we ditch the bullshit for a minute, huh? You have opinions? **PRESENT HELVETICA:** Doesn’t everyone? **HUSBAND:** Unpopular ones? **PRESENT HELVETICA:** Almost exclusively. **HUSBAND:** Alright, then. We trade unpopular opinions. Cut straight through the fat and really get into what we’re like. What makes us individuals. **PRESENT HELVETICA:** Sounds fun. **MYRON:** It sounded like a lot more than just fun. It was straight out of a movie screen. Woody Allen asking Diane Keaton to start their first date.

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with a kiss. Sentiment and Cynicism fought it out for a quick three rounds inside Helvetica’s brain. Sentiment won on points.

HUSBAND: Okay. I’ll go first. I love the Microsoft Office Paper clip guy. Helvetica laughs. A real, honest laugh that melts the tension from her shoulders, and when she looks up at her future husband, she sees him in a new light.

HUSBAND: Your turn.

PRESENT HELVETICA: I really like airports.

HUSBAND: Really.

PRESENT HELVETICA: I’ve always found them relaxing. They’re so clean and organized. Plus I love the schedule. I’ve got two hours to kill, all alone, I can totally read a good chunk of my book before I board.

HUSBAND: What kind of books do you like?

PRESENT HELVETICA: No, no, we can talk about that later! Be more offensive!

HUSBAND: Umm… I don’t like Bob Dylan!

PRESENT HELVETICA: What?

HUSBAND: He can’t sing!

PRESENT HELVETICA: He doesn’t have to sing!

HUSBAND: Then he shouldn’t! This is extremely good natured, they’re both laughing.

PRESENT HELVETICA: I don’t believe in God.

HUSBAND: I’m Jewish, but I’m Anti-Zionist.

PRESENT HELVETICA: I’m not really interested in the news. I just don’t care.

HUSBAND: It’s hard to care sometimes. I like Ben Affleck.

PRESENT HELVETICA: I like country music.

HUSBAND: I like Death Metal.

PRESENT HELVETICA: I didn’t vote last time.

HUSBAND: I haven’t voted in years.

PRESENT HELVETICA: What’s the point?

HUSBAND: I can’t fucking stand to look at myself in the mirror.

The laughter stops.

PRESENT HELVETICA: Who can?

HUSBAND: I think I used to be able to, but something…

PRESENT HELVETICA: I think everyone feels that way sometimes.

HUSBAND: No, really. Sometimes, I just think that there’s… there’s no point to anything, you know? I mean, what am I doing this for? Why am I making this money? To pay for nicer things, and then even nicer things, and what? So I can have a child, and hope that one day that child will have even nicer things? Is that what we’re doing? Progressively sliding up the economic scale? For what? To raise privileged monsters who hate us and then die of a drug overdose at twenty-four?

PRESENT HELVETICA: I don’t know. He reaches out his hand.

MYRON: And Helvetica made a decision.

SCENE FOUR
Sound Effect: The Sound of the Future

Future Helvetica and another PATIENT, much younger, are waiting in a doctor’s waiting room. An Oncologist’s office. Future Helvetica is holding a book in her hands, but she’s not reading. Her eyes wander: The Patient is staring at her.

PATIENT: Hi.

FUTURE HELVETICA: Hello.

PATIENT: I’m sorry.

FUTURE HELVETICA: What’s wrong?

PATIENT: It’s nothing, I just –

FUTURE HELVETICA: Yes?

PATIENT: I don’t mean to bother you.

FUTURE HELVETICA: Oh?

PATIENT: You’re Helvetica Burke, aren’t you?

FUTURE HELVETICA: Um, yes, yes I am.

PATIENT: I’m such a big fan of your books.

FUTURE HELVETICA: Thank you. That’s nice to hear.

PATIENT: My mother read Darkly Dream to me when I was a kid, and I –

FUTURE HELVETICA: How nice.

PATIENT: I’m sorry, this isn’t the right…

FUTURE HELVETICA: Oh no, I… It’s always nice to talk with fans.

PATIENT: I’m sorry, I just – Are you here?

FUTURE HELVETICA: I’m not sure yet.

PATIENT: Oh, I uh, I have breast cancer.

FUTURE HELVETICA: Oh. I’m sorry.

PATIENT: They cut my tits off.

FUTURE HELVETICA: Shit.

PATIENT: Yeah. And then I think I’m fine for a year and…

FUTURE HELVETICA: Oh.

PATIENT: My scan comes back and they want to do another biopsy. Just To Be Sure, they said. To Be Safe.

FUTURE HELVETICA: I’m…

PATIENT: And today I – I find out if it’s in my liver.

FUTURE HELVETICA: Is there someone –

PATIENT: My mom’s across the country. She wants me to move home.

FUTURE HELVETICA: I – I started getting these headaches so. They cut open my head and cut it out, they just want to make sure it’s uh…

PATIENT: Little things are persistent, aren’t they?

FUTURE HELVETICA: Tenacious.

PATIENT: Good one.

FUTURE HELVETICA: Shaved my head. For the surgery, you know? So I feel like a fraud, people think I’ve had chemo, but… I got off easy on the cancer lottery. So far.

PATIENT: I’m sure it’s fine. They catch it early?

FUTURE HELVETICA: Yeah.

PATIENT: They do that shit all the time.

FUTURE HELVETICA: You too. C’mon, lots of people come back from what you’d call a surgery.

PATIENT: Silence for a moment.

FUTURE HELVETICA: Too early. C’real, lots of people come back from what you’d call a surgery.

FUTURE HELVETICA: Silence for a moment.

FUTURE HELVETICA: You too. C’mon, lots of people come back from what you’d call a surgery.

FUTURE HELVETICA: No, it’s okay. It’s good to talk.

PATIENT: Yeah. I just. I really liked your books. Even the Ballerina one.

Helvetica laughs.

FUTURE HELVETICA: Yeah, I took a lot of flak for that one.

PATIENT: There’s nothing wrong with telling kids the truth.

FUTURE HELVETICA: Thanks.

PATIENT: You scared?

FUTURE HELVETICA: Sure.

PATIENT: I’m scared.

FUTURE HELVETICA: That’s okay.

PATIENT: Can you uh – you think you could a –

FUTURE HELVETICA: Moves to sit closer to the Patient.

After a moment, she reaches out slowly, and takes the Patient’s hand.

FUTURE HELVETICA: When I was a little girl my mother told me something. She said that the hands were the window to the soul. Everyone says it’s the eyes, I know, but… someone’s hands really tell you what they’re like. Our hands are how we interact with the world, and with others. Rough or smooth, hard or gentle, our hands, and the way we touch are the closest we can be to someone, and are our most valuable possession. So when we hold hands, it’s a cooperation. Each hand must carry some of the weight of the other. We’re carrying each other.

Before anything else can be said, the DOCTOR enters.

DOCTOR: Good afternoon, Ms. Burke.

FUTURE HELVETICA: Doctor.

DOCTOR: If you’ll follow me, please. The Patient lets go of Helvetica’s hand and smiles. Helvetica follows the Doctor to another part of the stage. The Doctor’s desk is a piece of the sailboat from earlier.

DOCTOR: Thanks for coming in.

FUTURE HELVETICA: Is it like last time?

DOCTOR: The MRI showed a small mass in your cerebellum.

FUTURE HELVETICA: Oh.

DOCTOR: We’ve been able to grade the tumor, Ms. Burke, and as far as these things go, you understand, things are looking good –

FUTURE HELVETICA: Good.

DOCTOR: It’s really very minor. What we call a Grade I Astrocytoma.

FUTURE HELVETICA: Another one.

DOCTOR: Right.

FUTURE HELVETICA: But it’s not cancer.

DOCTOR: It’s not cancer, no.

FUTURE HELVETICA: So what do we do?

DOCTOR: Well, as I said, it’s not cancer, but the fact that it’s there at all can present some difficulties. I would schedule a surgery immediately.

FUTURE HELVETICA: Again.

DOCTOR: It’s actually a fairly simple procedure. Easier than last time. Much smaller incision. They do it every day.

FUTURE HELVETICA: Okay.

DOCTOR: Let’s take a look at the schedule, shall we? How about the 19th?

FUTURE HELVETICA: So soon.

DOCTOR: We need to get to it as quickly as
PAST HELVETICA: Ugh.
FATHER: And then we’re gonna eat it.
PAST HELVETICA: Can’t you do it?
FATHER: I’m building our relationship, Helvetica. One day, you’ll look back on this day and smile. We’re making lasting memories.
PAST HELVETICA: You think I’ll forget how bored I was?
FATHER: I hope I’ll forget how rude you were.
PAST HELVETICA: Can I at least get a book?
FATHER: Nope. She sighs dramatically.
PAST HELVETICA: Can you tell me a story, then?
FATHER: Now that might be something I can do.
PAST HELVETICA: Cool.
FATHER: You have to keep an eye on your line, though.
PAST HELVETICA: Deal, deal. Story.
MYRON: Tell a story about a courageous bear, long-domesticated, suddenly on his own in the wild.
FATHER: Here’s a story about a fish.
PAST HELVETICA: It’s like he’s not listening to me.
FATHER: Once upon a time there was a little girl who didn’t appreciate the nice things her father did for her.
PAST HELVETICA: Daada!
FATHER: Alright, alright. Once upon a time there was a fisherman.
PAST HELVETICA: Fisherwoman.
FATHER: Excuse me, a fisherwoman. And the fisherwoman had to provide for her family, but it was a very poor season, and they were very hungry. So one morning she was out at the stream, and she cast her line, and after a great long time—
PAST HELVETICA: As long as this?
FATHER: The fisherwoman was very patient, and she knew how to enjoy nature, and she thought deep thoughts and figured out many things while she was waiting for that line to move. But eventually it moved, and she hauled up into the air, a very small fish. A disappointing haul to be sure. And the fish said, “Please, noble fisherwoman, please! I am such a small fish, I can’t provide for your family! But if you wait for a season, I will eat and grow larger, and then catch me again, sell me for a large profit!” And the fisherwoman narrowed her eyes.
“I would be very simple indeed if I were to give up certain gains for uncertain profit.”
PAST HELVETICA: ...Is that it?
FATHER: That’s it.
PAST HELVETICA: That’s stupid.
MYRON: I bet I could catch a fish.
FATHER: How is it stupid?
PAST HELVETICA: It just is.
FATHER: It’s about how what you have is better than some uncertain thing you may have in the future.
PAST HELVETICA: I get it, dad, I’m just saying. Okay, okay. My turn.
FATHER: Go ahead.
PAST HELVETICA: The fisherwoman narrowed her eyes. “A talking fish,” she shouted, and struck
of what I was going for.

**ILLUSTRATOR:** But the kids don’t get it.

**PRESENT HELVETICA:** Not right now, at least.

**ILLUSTRATOR:** I know! Like, these kids are gonna grow up loving this story, and then come back to it when they have kids of their own, and get this totally different level to the story later, you know?

**PRESENT HELVETICA:** You really think so?

**ILLUSTRATOR:** Oh, definitely.

**PRESENT HELVETICA:** Hey, are you off work?

**ILLUSTRATOR:** Oh yeah, I just stuck around for the reading.

**PRESENT HELVETICA:** My husband just had to run off to – You wanna grab something to eat?

**ILLUSTRATOR:** Uh, sure! Yeah, that’d be fun.

**PRESENT HELVETICA:** You can stop telling me how great I am, I promise.

**ILLUSTRATOR:** Deal.

**MYRON:** Helvetica and the Book Store Employee became great friends, eventually she became her second-best friend, and the illustrator of all the rest of her books. They were close, and discussed much in their lives, but the secret that she never revealed was that Helvetica didn’t really think her story was all that wishful at all. Because she never had that spark snuffed out of her at school, or by her parents, or anyone else. She and her faithful, courageous, handsome stuffed bear were constant companions, well into adulthood. Until one day, after everything fell apart, he was placed in the attic. I was placed in the attic. Helvetica’s work suffered after that. Her public appearances became less frequent, her output stopped altogether.

**SCENE SEVEN**

**Sound effect:** Sound of the Future

**Animal Shelter:** Future Helvetica is looking at dogs, which can be portrayed in a number of ways, probably just mimic. Real dogs wouldn’t really be worth it.

**FUTURE HELVETICA:** Well, hello there! Hey fuzzyface. Are you ready to get out of here? I’ll bet you are. I can’t imagine having to stay cooped up in here.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER joins her**

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** Neither can I.

**FUTURE HELVETICA:** It must be so hard to work here.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** Sometimes. Sometimes it’s worth it, though.

**FUTURE HELVETICA:** This one’s a sweetheart.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** Oh, absolutely. Found him living in a dumpster behind a restaurant.

**FUTURE HELVETICA:** Probably eating well, at least.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** Poisoned, actually.

**FUTURE HELVETICA:** …oh.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** Happens a lot. Dogs aren’t really made to eat people food.

**FUTURE HELVETICA:** Well, neither are humans.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** Haha. Yeah, I guess not.

**FUTURE HELVETICA:** Seems okay now, though.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** Do you have kids?

**FUTURE HELVETICA:** Nope. Just me.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** I think he’d be a great choice. Huskies aren’t great with kids, but are usually very loyal. They just have to know you’re the boss.

**FUTURE HELVETICA:** Shouldn’t be too hard.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** What kind of dogs have you had in the past?

**FUTURE HELVETICA:** None, actually. Not that I remember anyway. But my mother had dogs and... I’ve been thinking about her lately.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** Oh, really?

**FUTURE HELVETICA:** Well, there might be some other ones that might be a little easier for beginners...

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** I think I like him. He looks, well, not like a Myron... like a Joharis.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** You a Darkly Drear fan?

**FUTURE HELVETICA:** You could say that.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** Oh my god. You’re...

**Future Helvetica smiles.**

**FUTURE HELVETICA:** I’m surprised you recognized me.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** I’m reading it to my son. He loves you.

**FUTURE HELVETICA:** Oh, children don’t know books by their authors, just the stories. He loves Darkly. He’s probably not even aware I exist yet.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** Maybe not.

**FUTURE HELVETICA:** Sometimes I wish it were still that simple.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** Everybody has a job, right?

**FUTURE HELVETICA:** What?

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** Well, I mean, we all think that certain people, wow, those actors, they’ve got it made. They get paid for playing around in front of a camera. But if you know any of those people, it’s a lot of work, right? And the press, and they have to be away from their families. And you think, wouldn’t it be nice to be a famous author, and just make up stories all day?

**FUTURE HELVETICA:** And there ends up being so much more than that.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** Yeah, you have to go on tour, and promotions and –

**FUTURE HELVETICA:** Always be thinking of something new.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** And if it’s not the same as Darkly Drear –

**FUTURE HELVETICA:** You get crucified.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** Yeah.

**FUTURE HELVETICA:** Or isn’t it wonderful to be able to work with animals all day, and take care of them and find them good homes?

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** Yeah.

**FUTURE HELVETICA:** But there’s more to it than that, isn’t there?

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** Yeah.

**FUTURE HELVETICA:** What do I need to sign?

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER:** Come with me.

**SCENE EIGHT**

**Sound effect:** Sound of the Present

Present Helvetica and her Husband are at home.

**MYRON:** People always asked Helvetica why she never had kids.

**HUSBAND:** So he left. Not like I can blame him.

**PRESENT HELVETICA:** You don’t think she had a right?

**HUSBAND:** A right to what? It was his kid too.

**PRESENT HELVETICA:** No, I agree. But ultimately it was her decision.

**HUSBAND:** Yeah but without telling him?

**PRESENT HELVETICA:** It’s complicated.

**HUSBAND:** I don’t think its all that complicated.

**PRESENT HELVETICA:** What if it wasn’t his?

**HUSBAND:** Well then, all the more reason –

**PRESENT HELVETICA:** What would we do?

**HUSBAND:** Oh, I get a say?

**PRESENT HELVETICA:** Let’s imagine, for a moment, that you do.

**HUSBAND:** I don’t know.

**PRESENT HELVETICA:** We have money.

**HUSBAND:** But we have lives.

**PRESENT HELVETICA:** Some would say that a baby is the most important thing you can do with your life.

**HUSBAND:** What do you think?

**PRESENT HELVETICA:** Well, we always said we wanted kids someday.

**HUSBAND:** Someday is now?

**PRESENT HELVETICA:** I’m not saying that.

**HUSBAND:** You’re very carefully not saying anything at all.

**PRESENT HELVETICA:** It would be hard for me to write if I had to take care of a baby.

**HUSBAND:** I don’t imagine you’d get much done for a couple of years.

**PRESENT HELVETICA:** Unless you quit your job.

**HUSBAND:** He laughs.

**PRESENT HELVETICA:** Is that funny?

**HUSBAND:** Um, no.

**PRESENT HELVETICA:** It just didn’t occur to you?

**HUSBAND:** No.

**PRESENT HELVETICA:** Why should I quit my job?

**HUSBAND:** Because.

**PRESENT HELVETICA:** Careful. Cause I’m the woman? Cause I work at home?

**HUSBAND:** Cause you work at –

**PRESENT HELVETICA:** I get paid pretty well for what I do at home.

**HUSBAND:** I know that, just...
PRESENT HELVETICA: More than you.
HUSBAND: Oh christ, Helvetica.
PRESENT HELVETICA: Oh, sorry. You like to forget that, right?
HUSBAND: So you’re deciding?
PRESENT HELVETICA: I haven’t decided anything.
HUSBAND: I’m sorry I laughed.
PRESENT HELVETICA: No, it’s fine. It’s good to know how you really feel. It’s not like you’re feeding the hungry or anything.
HUSBAND: I like to think--
PRESENT HELVETICA: But you’re wrong. You work for a bank. A collection of banks, an abomination of banks, I don’t know the collective noun for banks.

(Scene Nine)
SCENE NINE
Lights shift. Myron and Present Helvetica are telling a story.

MYRON: It was a day like any other. The day she put me into the attic. It wasn’t so bad at first. It was sudden, but somehow I saw it coming for a while. She had never put her back on the dresser, where she had spent so many years, locked away inside her box, but she pulled and she strained, and she managed a grand jetée in the attic dance. They let the dance talk for itself, and then they were on their own, making it up as they went, clockwork steps, and then the new grand jetée, and for the first time, instead of dancing with his wife, he was dancing in a great ballroom, but somehow, she could. The peasants would clap their hands and gasp and lay down their coins for the advisor, who began to demand more and more from the little ballerina. She didn’t mind. All she ever wanted to do was dance, but strangely, after a number of years, just as the first strands of grey began to appear in the advisor’s beard, she began to grow tired. The advisor had become very rich, but her schedule never wavered. She’d dance and dance, until her movements slowed, and the advisor would call an end to the day’s entertainment, taking her home to rest. And while he begged her and pleaded to keep working, keep dancing, for just a few more days, a few more hours, a few more minutes, I need this, please, I need you to dance for me! Dance! Just a bit longer, and then we’ll rest, I promise, then you’ll only dance for me. And like a fool, like a little wooden-headed girl, she believed him. And she danced. And she stopped seeing him in her dreams, for now he only dreamed of himself.

And then one day came, as these days always will. She missed a step once, jerking forward in her track like skipping forward in time, and the advisor gave a shout, and snapped the music box closed. He rushed into town, trying to find the old Toymaker’s shop, finding it empty and dark, with a sign in the window that said “foreclosed.” He was afraid of opening the music box himself, terrified of doing something irreparable. The Queen’s great machinist took a look at the gears and the sprockets, and apologized. “It looks like she was loved,” said the machinist, and the advisor just nodded. He took the Ballerina back to his room and watched her dance again and again, her steps faltering more and more, until the music and her body stopped short, stuck in place forever. The little Ballerina couldn’t move, as much as she tried. The advisor put her back on the dresser, where she had spent so many years, locked away inside her box, but this time he didn’t close the lid. She could still see him, every day, going about his business, waking and sleeping, but all the joy was gone. Without the dance, she became another piece of furniture, and sometimes he didn’t even remember that they had shared anything at all. But the Ballerina did. And when she dreamed, she was still dancing.

Read Scenes Ten through Seventeen of Helvetica on the SETC website at www.setc.org/helvetica
The Director Within: Storytellers of Stage and Screen
by Rose Eichenbaum
2014, Wesleyan University Press
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Price: $30 (hardback); $23.99 (e-book)

For every concrete lesson the student of directing can learn from a class, there are many more unquantifiable aspects of the craft that can only be absorbed through time, experience and practice. Rose Eichenbaum’s The Director Within: Storytellers of Stage and Screen offers a glimpse into those intangibles of directing through a series of interviews with 35 luminaries of dramatic storytelling. Here we have such veterans of the stage as Hal Prince (Phantom of the Opera), Julie Taymor (The Lion King), and Emily Mann (Greensboro Requiem); film directors including Peter Bogdanovich (The Last Picture Show), Paul Mazursky (Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice), and Mira Nair (Mississippi Masala); and television directors ranging from Jay Sandrich (I Love Lucy and The Mary Tyler Moore Show) to Tim Van Patten (Game of Thrones, Deadwood, The Wire).

Eichenbaum distills each interview into short, readable narratives, picking the creative brains of her subjects with insightful questions. The result is a mix of memoir, best practices and critical commentary. Bogdanovich laments the computer-generated tricks and shallow escapism of contemporary mainstream moviemaking, while reflecting on the influence of Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawkes and D.W. Griffith on his own work. Nair speaks of providing a “safe” creative environment for her actors. Sandrich, a veteran of TV’s early days, recounts learning on the job in an industry still defining itself.

Eichenbaum’s subjects approach directing from a variety of perspectives and formative experiences. Taymor’s main interest in college was mythology and religion. Her interest in Indonesian puppet theatre and her conception of the director-as-shaman are key to understanding her work in both nonprofit and commercial theatre. Susan Stroman (The Scottsboro Boys and The Producers) began her career as a choreographer and often begins her rehearsals with an exploration of character movement. Playwright Emily Mann, whose work includes a revival of A Streetcar Named Desire cast with actors of color, speaks of her close friendship with Tennessee Williams and her desire to reinterpret his work while remaining faithful to his vision.
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