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Swimming In The Shallows: Drowning The Standard Conventions of Directing

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SWIMMING IN THE SHALLOWS: DROWNING THE STANDARD
CONVENTIONS OF DIRECTING

by

Debra A. Berger
Bachelor of Arts, Minot State University, 2006

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

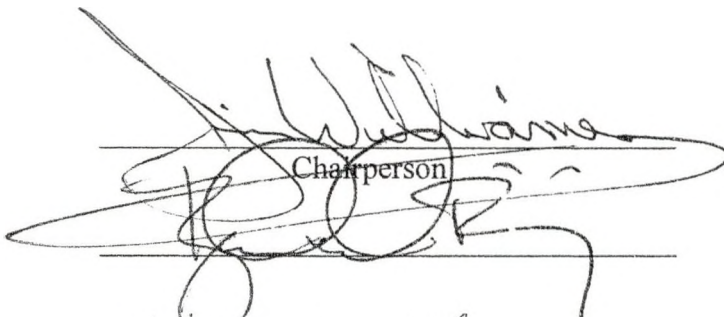
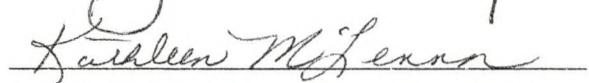
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Master of Arts

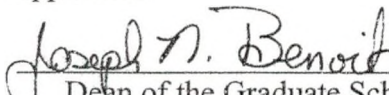
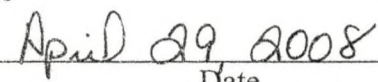
Grand Forks, North Dakota

May
2008

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Jim Williams, my teacher, advisor, and mentor, for his continuous support and dedication to my completion of this thesis. I would like to especially thank him, for encouraging me to contact Adam Bock. Without Dr. Williams' guidance and patience, this study could not have been accomplished.

This opportunity will also be taken to thank my committee members, Dr. Kathleen McLennan, Brad Reissig, and Tracey Lyons, for their counsel and assistance in the completion of this thesis.

I am especially indebted to the cast and crew of Swimming in the Shallows for lending their talents, expertise, and professionalism. Without them, this thesis would not have been possible. In conjunction, a special thank you to Sara Schaal for her technical direction and design abilities, which brought the project to fruition.

An extended thank you to Kevin Neuharth, Paula Lindekegual-Willis, and Conrad Davidson of Minot State University. Their constant support and thorough advice have guided my academic career and my knowledge and passion for theater and the arts.

I would like to thank Tyler Mills who first placed the script of Swimming in the Shallows in my hands and believed in my abilities and talents.

Finally, I would like to thank Adam Bock for taking the time to answer my many questions and support me in my final endeavor at the University of North Dakota.

To my dog Harold.
To my left breast.
To the love of my life, Misti.
To Jesus Christ.
To the janitor.
To my women's daily multivitamin.
To Jurassic Park

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the challenges I encountered while directing Adam Bock's play Swimming in the Shallows. Specifically, this thesis addresses staging issues that stem from the problematic conventions required by Bock's specific instructions regarding any mounting of the play. In particular, Bock suggests an abandonment of some traditional conventions in the fundamentals of directing, particularly the creation of three-dimensional picturization for the use of stage depth. In Bock's staging notes, he proposes that contrary to fundamental principles:

The action should be pressed flat. Like a screen. The actors' physical work should be vertical and horizontal rather than three-dimensionally horizontal. (6)

Bock's suggestion infers a reconsideration of traditional staging principles. This thesis examines the challenges and pitfalls of Bock's recommendations towards a realized production. Through an analysis of the text, research and execution of the production, this study assesses the possibilities of whether this particular production could successfully be accomplished through resisting traditional staging principles.

Chapter one of this study concentrates on text analysis in the process of answering why the elements of the play lend support to Bock's injunctions in his staging notes. Chapter two evaluates the finished product determined by the rationale of traditional stage directing texts.

CHAPTER I
TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

“I liked swimming in the shallows. I liked being near people in the water. I liked feeling the blood vibrating in their bodies. I liked the heat. I liked the thrash” (Bock, 68). Adam Bock’s play, Swimming in the Shallows explores humanity’s continual struggles of attachment, necessity and sacrifice through a comedic lens of fast-paced, yet touching, wit. Through the methodology of Cal Printer and Scott E. Walters in their text, Introduction to Play Analysis, chapter one of my thesis will examine Swimming in the Shallows in four capacities: Impressions, Gathering Information, Interpretation, and Synthesis.

Impressions

According to Printer and Walter, the initial impressions of reading and analyzing a script is just as important as the final synthesis. Through an evaluation of my first impressions, this section will comment on initial observations involving content, the history of the playwright and play, the play’s structure and potential embedded themes.

Swimming in the Shallows follows six Rhode Islanders who are attempting to discover whether their current attachments are of necessity or luxury. Barb discovers that she only wants to own eight things in her entire life. To do this she attempts to rid herself of all unnecessary possessions, and, in doing so, rids herself of her husband, Bob. Donna wants Carla Carla to marry her, but Carla Carla has reservations about commitment and demands that Donna quit smoking before they get married. Nick, the promiscuous gay

happens by falling in love with *The Shark*. Characteristic of many of Bock's plays, the synopsis entails an assortment of incalculable action through each character's moving, yet hilarious, struggles of understanding themselves and others.

History of Playwright and Play

Adam Bock, born in Canada, has published multiple plays, including *Five Flights*, *The Typographer's Dream*, and *Thugs*, which won him the 2006 Obie Award (Playscripts, Inc). Upon graduating from Brown University in 1989 with his master's degree, Bock moved to San Francisco where he continued to pursue playwriting. Currently, Bock is a resident of New York City where he continues to produce new works.

Swimming in the Shallows is the recipient of numerous awards including, the 2000 Bay Area Theater Critics Circle Award for Best Original Script, Best Production, and Best Ensemble, The Clauder Competition Award, an L. Arnold Weissberger Award Nomination, an L.A. Weekly Nomination, and a GLAAD Media Award Nomination. The play was first produced in Boston by the Coyote Theater in 1999. Shotgun Players, based in San Francisco, initially mounted the West Coast Premiere in 1999, and Second Stage originally produced the New York Premiere in 2005 (Playscripts, Inc.).

Form and Content

Through his form, structure and content, Bock exemplifies originality and freshness in American theatre. Bock claims that his keen sense of experimentation through form came from his training with playwright, Paula Vogel at Brown University:

. . . she sort of taught us to look at form as an entry point in the plays.

Like most people use story or character. And she said...you could use the

world, you could use device, you could use language. . . so she just made us look at sort of theater history and see how everybody has used different devices and you can use any of them and so, choosing how to tell the story, actually, has as big an impact as the story you're telling (Interview, 2008).

Bock's 'entry point' in Swimming in the Shallows is exemplified through his use of language, imagery and structure. Like many of Bock's plays, Swimming in the Shallows contains little punctuation, run-on sentences, fragments and word jumbles. His experimentation with style can challenge any actor or director. In American Theatre magazine, director Kent Nicholson comments on Bock's writing style:

He's not an easy read. The material is deceptive because it's so fast and fun and funny. But you get into the script and you realize it's meticulously constructed. (Cieply 96)

This misleading simplicity that Nicholson describes is continually demonstrated throughout Swimming in the Shallows. In a scene between Barb and Bob, Bock's style is evident:

BOB. You don't even listen.

BARB. I'm trying to be

BOB. You get an idea in your head and that's

Doesn't matter that someone else

BARB. Bob. I'm trying to be truthful.

BOB. Doesn't matter that I

Doesn't matter Anything else Anything that doesn't fit Pttf

And Barb's
Well I'm not
I'm just caught. Caught. Caught. (73)

According to Bock, his specific lack of punctuation has definite justification. He states:

. . . lack of punctuation is to get people to do a couple of things. One is to get them to make turns quicker. So instead of periods or commas that encourage people to pause...cause I think language...we can turn on a dime constantly. Also, just by making it look a little different...make people maybe think 'this doesn't look like a sentence. If it had a period it would look like a sentence I recognized.' . . . I keep trying to throw things in for actors to encourage actor to go: 'how many different ways can I do this. (Interview 2008)

This 'meticulous construction' of the text gives an actor more freedom to experiment with the rhythm of a text through tempo changes. Bock's quick-paced dialogue parallels the fast-paced world of today. He explains:

. . . I think people talk fast to be honest. I think we live pretty quickly. You know, and then I think actors like to go slow, so I write a little faster than normal because I don't like that long dramatic pause. I just don't think I have many of those in my life. (Interview 2008)

Bock jokingly adds, "I have A.D.D. I get bored."

Swimming in the Shallows encompasses Bock's experimentation with structure. The action in Swimming in the Shallows is broken up into twelve scenes with titles, which contain numerous sub-scenes within each. Joe Mader, in his review of the

Shotgun Players' 1999 production of Swimming in the Shallows, comments on the technicality of Bock's sub-scenes: "Characters address one person, interrupt with takes to the audience, and instantly address someone else, who may or may not be onstage" (SF Weekly). This complicated mechanism of characters beginning and ending scenes within scenes is a style commonly utilized in Bock's writing. Within these scenes and sub-scenes, Bock's writing strongly reveals his overarching themes in content.

In the spectrum of Bock's work, the themes of homosexuality and women are clearly evident. Bock, an openly gay playwright, expresses the importance of representing gay community through his writing:

. . . I always try to have gay people in my world.... Five Flights, Swimming, The Drunken City, Typographer all have lead characters who are gay...Thursday the same thing. (Interview 2008)

While Bock uses recurring themes of homosexuality, ironically, many of his plays are not *about* homosexuality. Bock asserts:

. . . I think people actually want to like gay people. I think they do, you know. They want to be allowed to, and be in a good place where they, you know...where it's not considered weird. Cause there's nothing gay about the play (Swimming in the Shallows)...in a weird way...even though there is...you know. (Interview 2008)

Through Bock's writing, the homosexual community is given a voice without alienating anyone in the process. Therefore, Swimming in the Shallows is not a play about homosexuality even though it contains homosexual characters.

Bock also tends to focus his writing on female characters. He states, “I like writing about women. I like writing about people who aren’t normally onstage to be honest” (Interview 2008). His emphasis on women is exemplified in Swimming in the Shallows, with the three female characters: Barb, Carla Carla, and Donna. Each female character encompasses unique qualities and traits, which reinforces Bock’s specific emphasis on establishing a solid voice for female characters.

Swimming in the Shallows represents Bock’s precise attention to detail through his poetic form, fast-paced structure and thoughtful content. His idealistic views on humanity, undoubtedly serves as a template for his works. Bock asserts:

. . . I think there is poetry in everybody’s lives. We just think that it’s only in certain lives...I just don’t think that is true.” (Interview 2008)

Gathering Information

According to Printer and Walter, in order to fully analyze a text, an in-depth observation of four primary elements is required: Time and Setting, Social Systems, Cultural Norms, and the Theatrical Contract (21). Through an exploration of these given circumstances, conclusions can be assessed to aid in revealing the numerous layers of the text.

Time and Setting

Bock places the time and setting of Swimming in the Shallows as, “The present. Twig Rhode Island” (6). Based on that information it can be assumed that ‘the present’ for the production is whatever year the play is being produced. Bock places the setting in the fictional city of Twig in the state of Rhode Island. Bock gives his reason for choosing the fictional city of Twig:

I thought it'd be a funny name for a town - with that New England modesty and beachy quality. I was thinking of Bristol RI or Little Compton RI when I wrote it. (Email interview 2008)

More specifically, the entirety of the play takes place in several locations within Twig: the hospital, Barb and Bob's house, Donna and Carla Carla's house, the aquarium, the yard sale, the beach, and the dream sequences. Actual locations of each scene are never stated in stage directions, they are established through the dialogue and situations of the characters. In an interview, Bock elaborates on the different locales Swimming in the Shallows encompasses:

. . . So how many different places could it be in? . . . So then the beach would look different from the boardwalk would look different from the lawn, which would look different from her empty room....(Interview 2008)

Bock's numerous locales create a vivid palate of imagery that facilitates the rapid-fire form and structure of Swimming in the Shallows.

Bock never declares the time of year that the play takes place. Based on evidence from the script, the season can be established as early spring/summer. Because of Barb's yard sale, Bob mowing the lawn, the adventure at the beach, and the outdoor wedding, it is assumed that the weather is fair. Furthermore, Bob goes hunting. Although it is not specified what he is hunting for, the turkey hunting season begins in Rhode Island on April 26 and runs through May 26. The turkey hunting season is the only spring/summer hunting allowed in the state of Rhode Island.

Social Systems

The social systems of the play can be established through an examination of the political, economic and religious systems. Politically speaking, a majority of the characters in the play are liberal minded. Each character accepts homosexuality and homosexual marriage. Additionally, Barb has opened her mind to a new religion, Buddhism. The character with the least tolerance is Bob. Based on a statement to Barb, it is revealed that he may be more close-minded:

BARB. He (Bob) said Lucky we don't live in Thailand. Lucky we live in
Twig Rhode Island USA. (13)

Through Bob's intentional use of 'USA,' it could be interpreted that he is not as accepting of Thailand Buddhist's traditions as openly as Barb and the other characters.

Economically speaking, Bob and Barb are upper middle class characters. They live in a nice house, own a riding lawn mower, have a pool, and Bob can spend money on expensive hunting gear. Also, Barb is able to afford her own apartment. Donna works at the local aquarium, whereas Carla Carla works as a nurse with Barb. When Barb is giving away her possessions and appliances, Carla Carla and Donna are eager to take them off of Barb's hands. On the contrary, Donna and Carla Carla are planning a big wedding, having the financial ability to hire a caterer, a disc jockey, and afford wedding rings. It may be assumed that both Donna and Carla Carla are middle class, although, based on the information given in the text, it is inconclusive. Nick, who according to Bock has "spotty employment history" (6), gets upset when he hears of Carla Carla and Donna receiving Barb's supposed give-aways. Based on Nick's conversations with Donna and The Shark, it is illustrated that Nick has the financial ability to afford a

therapist. In addition, Nick states that he “once sold paintings door to door” (66). Based on the information from the text, Nick’s financial state is also uncertain.

The religious themes in the play mostly surround Barb. Barb, who has recently adopted the religion of the Buddhist monks from Thailand, is determined to rid her life of unnecessary possessions. Since Buddhist monks only own eight things, Barb goes so far as to attempt to eliminate her belongings by having a yard sale, and when that fails, she takes her life belongings to the landfill. Another, possibly more minor theme of religion, is found in the character of Donna. In the scene entitled, “How to Agree on a Minister,” Donna attempts to persuade Carla Carla to agree on a leader for their wedding ceremony:

DONNA. She’s not really a minister. She’s more a crystal worker who specializes in partner / partner blessing ceremonies drawing from all kinds of ethnic traditions Judaism Tantric Balinese rainbow light therapy Buddhism.

CARLA CARLA. Barb’ll be pleased.

DONNA. Yeah I thought

Anyhow she used to be a Wiccan priestess. (58)

Later in the scene it is revealed that the Wiccan priestess is an ex-lover of Donna’s. Donna’s mentioning of specific religious practices depicts her acceptance and knowledge of diverse beliefs.

Cultural Norms

Cultural norms are also evident in Swimming in the Shallows. The cultural norms are evaluated through the examination of a given character’s perception of marriage, family, sex, ethnicity and language use. Swimming in the Shallows places a strong focus

on marriage and the ideals of marriage. Barb and Bob are ending their marriage, whereas, Donna and Carla Carla are just beginning a marriage, and Nick hasn't even begun. According to Bock, "The play is about the beginning, middle, and end of relationships" (New York Times interview E:3). Nick and The Shark are just beginning a relationship, Carla Carla and Donna are in the middle of a relationship, and Barb and Bob are near the end. These three stages allow the audience to see three different relationships at three different junctures.

The theme of family is also poignant. Bock states:

The story is also about how gay people create family. Barb is one of the people Nick and his friends pull into their family. She's also doing something in her life that she needs her friends to understand and Nick's made a switch from not being in love to being in love. They're both in the middle of change and growth. (New York Times interview E:3)

Each character creates family in their own way, whether that family is already existing or just beginning. The notion of family goes even deeper for Donna. Late in the play it is revealed that Donna's mother may or may not come to the wedding:

DONNA. She wants to invite my mother.

NICK. To the commitment ceremony?

DONNA. My mom won't come.

NICK. Maybe she will.

DONNA. She didn't come to our house-blessing ceremony. She won't come to this. (57)

This section of dialogue reveals the possible strained relationship between Donna and her mother. Although it is never stated why Donna's mother will not attend the ceremonies, perhaps it is because her mother does not accept Donna's homosexual lifestyle. In opposition, Carla Carla's family appears to be overtly supportive of Carla Carla and her lifestyle choices:

NICK. Is Carla Carla's dad coming?

DONNA. And her stepmother. And her mom. (57)

Based on this information from the text, there is evidence that Carla Carla's family is more supportive than Donna's family.

The significance of sex in Swimming in the Shallows is pertinent to the characters and their situations, specifically the character of Nick. Nick's promiscuity defines his character and his character beliefs. Nick assumes that if he has sex with men on the first date, the men will fall in love with him. Sex, generally, determines Nick's relationship status with other men. Therefore, when he attempts to convince The Shark to have sex with him, The Shark abstains because he wants the relationship to work out between them:

NICK. ...See I'm not supposed to go too fast. I mean I want to But everyone's saying Not too fast. Not too fast. I usually jump too fast.

THE SHARK. Me too. I think I shouldn't. But then I forget.

NICK. Me too. Let's forget it. I can forget it.

THE SHARK. Naw.

NICK. Yeah lets. My therapist says I'm fast. So what I sleep with people too fast. I want to. Let's sleep together now and next date lets wait.

THE SHARK. No.

NICK. I changed my mind. I want to. (70)

As stated previously, Nick indulges in the physical aspects of a relationship, yet is stunted in the emotional aspects.

Theatrical Contract

Swimming in the Shallows adopts a combination of both presentational and representational contracts with the audience. When assessing the theatrical contract of a play it is necessary to understand the difference between a presentational and representational contract. According to Pritner and Walter:

Presentational plays contract for characters to interact occasionally with the audience; representational plays contract for their characters to ignore the audience's presence. (35)

Carla Carla, Donna, Nick and Barb all address the audience directly. Whether it is through a monologue or an aside, each character speaks directly to the audience throughout the play. The Shark and Bob are the two characters who remain representational within the text. This intended oversight of The Shark and Bob could illustrate that The Shark and Bob serve as catalysts for telling the story of the four primary characters. With this information, both a representational and presentational contract is employed.

The play adopts are representational contract when the characters speak only to each other and not directly to the audience. This adoption allows the audience to become immersed in the action and, furthermore, allows the audience to forget that they are in a theater watching a play. When a character speaks directly to the audience, the fourth wall

is broken, reminding the audience of the fictional setting. Swimming the Shallows utilizes both contracts adding a mixture of drawing an audience into the production and keeping them at a distance.

Interpretation

An interpretation of a text is outlined through an evaluation and examination of the play's characters, their relationship with each other and the play's primary conflict.

Character Analysis

As a guide in understanding characters and their relationships, a character map can be employed. Below is a simplistic character map that demonstrates the basic relationships outlined in Swimming in the Shallows:

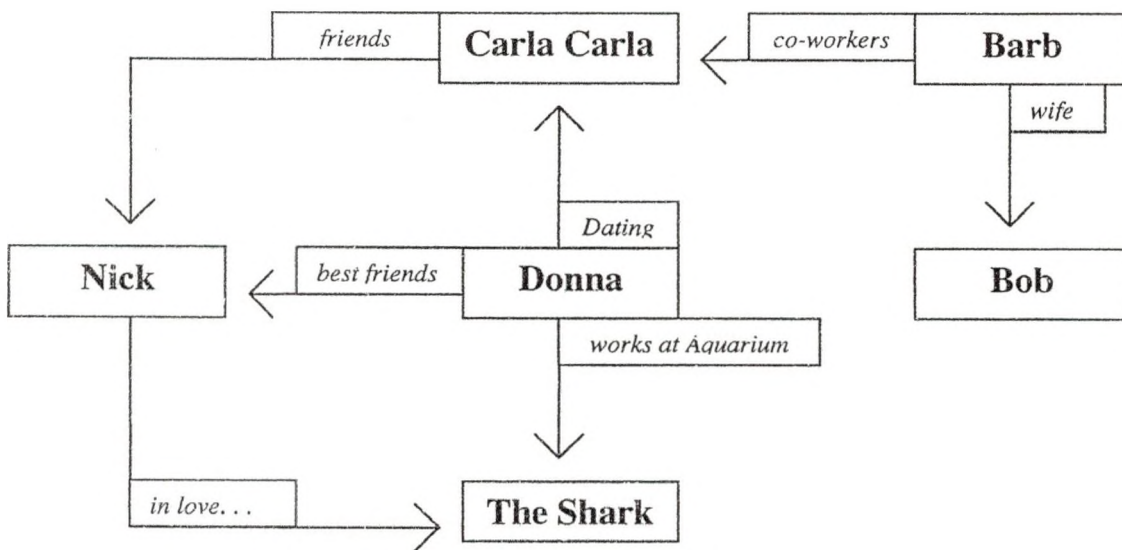


Figure 1. Character Map: Swimming in the Shallows

The play opens with Barb and Carla Carla at work during a break. Both are soaking their feet in tubs and attempting to relax. This opening scene reveals the friendship between these two characters. Barb, the slightly neurotic friend, discloses to

Carla Carla that she only wants to own eight things. Carla Carla attempts to be understanding, but knows Barb has a long history of neurotic behavior:

CARLA CARLA.

This the beginning of another craze?

BARB. No.

CARLA CARLA. Because if it is I want fair warning.

BARB. Bob said the same thing.

CARLA CARLA. Because if this is the same as the needlework and the acupuncture and the running through the woods with the compass with the needle spinning and all of it being connected cause of the needles and how everywhere you look there are needles filled with meaning in barometers and porcupine needle art and the Seattle Space Needle I don't know if I can take it again or even if I want to. (Bock 15)

Through this exchange of dialogue, Barb and Carla Carla's duration of friendship is revealed. It becomes apparent that Barb and Carla Carla have been friends for a lengthy period of time based on the number of different 'crazes' that Barb has pursued.

Throughout the text, Barb and Carla Carla's friendship is remains strong. Even though Carla Carla cannot fully understand Barb's current obsession, she continues to support Barb throughout the play.

Barb's support system fails with her husband Bob. Bob, the caring, but not quite understanding husband fails to acclimate himself to Barbs needs; therefore, their relationship is strained. Even though Bob attempts to do as Barb asks, he cannot completely change who he is. In many ways, Bob is seen as a sympathetic character.

Bob attempts to play his 'role' in society by doing the typical 'patriarchal' demands of the male species: mowing the lawn, hunting and fixing things around the house.

Nonetheless, Bob often fails. He is unable to find the keys to the lawn mower, and during a hunting excursion Bob fails to kill anything and makes the decision to bring home a dead rabbit that he 'supposedly' killed with his car. Bob's masculinity falls short. Towards the end of the play, Bob makes a rash decision to rid his home of all belongings by throwing them into the pool. Thinking that this will win back Barb, it does just the opposite:

BARB. I'm just trying Bob.

And if that means

if it takes time then it just takes time

and you have to wait.

BOB. Much longer Barb?

BARB. Or if you don't want to

BOB. Much longer Barb?

BARB. I get to decide Bob.

BOB. Cause I'm tired of waiting. I'm doing what you want. Getting rid of everything. But I'm tired of waiting.

...

BARB. I think we should take a real break from each other for a while.

(73-74)

Barb and Bob's relationship is unable to thrive. Because of Barb's ever-changing ideals of recreating herself to find comfort to Bob's already comfortable lifestyle, the marriage

has become failed. Where Barb and Bob's marriage is ending, Carla Carla and Donna's has not even begun.

Carla Carla and Donna's relationship is also strained, but with an entirely different obstacle. Donna desires to marry Carla Carla, but, in order to do so, Carla Carla insists that Donna quits smoking. In the scene entitled "How to Quit Smoking," Donna confides in Nick about her addiction to cigarettes:

DONNA. Is it because I smoke?

NICK. I don't know.

DONNA. Did she mention smoking?

NICK. I don't think so.

DONNA. It's so stupid. She won't marry me because I smoke.

NICK. Maybe it's not the smoking.

DONNA. It's not like I smoke a lot.

NICK. Oh yeah Donna.

DONNA. I don't.

NICK. You do. (24)

Throughout the play Donna attempts to quit smoking using various methods: hypnosis, taping a picture of Carla Carla to a pack of cigarettes, and group therapy. In the end, Donna goes from smoking nearly two packs a day, to one cigarette a day. Even though she could not completely sacrifice her bad habit before getting married, Carla Carla decides to accept her hand in marriage regardless. Carla Carla realizes that their relationship together is stronger than any easily excused bad habit, and comes to the

conclusion that, perhaps the bad habits are not the primary issues holding Carla Carla back from marriage.

Carla Carla is the dominant half of the relationship. Her high-maintenance personality places controlling demands on Donna. Coupled with Donna's laid back, sarcastic attitude, both characters seem to balance each other's personalities to create a working, but questionably healthy, relationship. As the wedding date approaches, Carla Carla and Donna create minute problems to sabotage the wedding due to their fears of commitment. In the end, Carla Carla and Donna get married with the help of their supportive friends, Barb and Nick. Because of their advice and guidance Carla Carla and Donna's relationship is able to be reconciled.

Donna and Nick's friendship closely mirrors Barb and Carla Carla's. Demonstrated through the text, Nick and Donna are close friends who have known each other for, at least, two years:

NICK. Uh huh. My therapist said that maybe maybe I sleep with people before I am totally emotionally prepared. Physically I'm ready fast and so I sleep with them fast but then I wake up and I'm freaked cause who the hell is this guy? see I'm slower emotionally. And so then I push them away and then get sad cause I'm all alone again.

DONNA. Huh.

NICK. Unless I just want to have sex which is ok my therapist says. But. If I want to develop something then I have to develop it. Which is slow.

Weird huh.

DONNA. You therapist said that?

NICK. Think he maybe might be right?

DONNA. I TOLD YOU THAT TWO YEARS AGO. (56, 57)

Donna and Nick rely on each other as support systems. With Donna's challenge to quit smoking and Nick's endeavor to stop sleeping with guys on the first date, their friendship is built on blunt honesty, which reinforces the strength of their relationship. Ironically, Donna is the more dominant personality when compared to Nick. Donna has controlling tactics to place demands on Nick, such as, utilizing Nick as a way of sneaking cigarettes. Eventually, Nick stops sneaking Donna cigarettes, but only because the risk of Carla catching him is too great. Nick would rather stand up to Donna than to Carla, positioning the hierarchy of the character relationships. Nick's passivity around strong-willed characters is demonstrated even further when he finally meets his match, The Shark.

Nick and The Shark's relationship is an especially interesting dynamic in the play primarily because it depicts a fresh, newly beginning relationship. The Shark and Nick illustrate the vulnerability of a starting relationship. Of course, even being near a shark could make any situation vulnerable and risky. The Shark is briefly introduced to the audience while he is swimming in the aquarium where he works. It is not until later in the play that The Shark is revealed as more than just a fish:

NICK. You like the aquarium?

THE SHARK. It's ok It's a job. It's kind of boring. People stare a lot.

NICK. Well

THE SHARK. Yeah I guess that's. Before that I used to sell Avon. Skin So Soft. Door to door up on Federal Hill.

...

NICK. What'd you do before Avon?

THE SHARK. Before that

Used to be I was. Out there.

NICK. Here?

THE SHARK. I used to come here.

NICK. To Twig Beach?

THE SHARK. I liked this beach.

NICK. I wonder if I ever saw you.

THE SHARK. I'd swim and I'd see the beach and the people on the beach
pink people and brown people and white. And I'd stare at them. Scoot in.

NICK. You'd swim in?

THE SHARK. I liked swimming in the shallows. I liked being near
people in the water. I liked feeling the blood vibrating in their bodies. I
liked the heat. I liked the thrash. And I remember thinking.

(Makes biting gesture.)

Course I didn't

Would of ruined a good day at the beach for someone. Kind of.

That scare you? (67-68)

Selling Avon door-to-door allows The Shark to make him seem more humanistic and sincere. Yet, when The Shark reveals his 'swimming in the shallow' escapades, he suddenly becomes more dangerous. Like Nick, The Shark is lonely. He surrounds

himself with the temptations of killing people, whereas, Nick surrounds himself with the temptations of promiscuity, and it is because of their loneliness that they find each other.

The Shark serves as a metaphor for diving into the dangerous unknown. When asked about the metaphor behind the character of The Shark, Bock declares:

Well for me it was. . . it was the Other. You know. . . so and the Other as possibly scary. And why I liked it, was that it was a person that might be dangerous to go out with. So that could be anyone. That could be a guy with HIV if you were negative. That could be a guy from another race. Could be someone who is poorer than you. . . or richer. . . I just wanted it to be Other enough. And also dangerous, but that you might be afraid. So then again could be someone that you might fall in love with...and that could be dangerous. (Interview 2008)

Bock employs The Shark as a device to illustrate the vulnerability of dating anyone that could possibly be uncertain or risky. Nick, knowing that it is dangerous to date a shark, cannot resist the temptation of allowing himself to fall in love.

Conflict Analysis

Conflict analysis, according to Pritner and Walter, requires seven steps in determining the breakdown of the action. By determining, in the following sequence the resolution, climax, major dramatic question, protagonist, inciting incident, moment of engagement, and the opposing force, a play can be examined in a more comprehensive manner (Pritner and Walter 66).

The resolution of the play occurs in the last two pages when Carla Carla and Donna are wed, Nick and The Shark are in love, and Barb is still striving toward simplifying her life:

BARB. Your shark looks nice.

NICK. Um.

BARB. Looks like he might be in love.

NICK. Not yet. It's a little early for

He called. And he showed up. So far so good.

BARB. He's a good dancer.

NICK. I feel sick at work. I go to work and I put my head on my desk and just leave it there.

BARB. That's normal.

NICK. It is?

BARB. I had that with Bob.

NICK. You did?

BARB. I was lovesick.

NICK. Oh that's what it is.

(Pause.)

BARB. No.

(Pause.)

I don't think I'm going to be able to only own eight things. I have things of my grandmother's I'm having

NICK. I bet that's not the point huh. Only having eight things.

BARB. No. (76, 77)

In these final moments of the play, the conflict is resolved and all loose ends are tied up. However, Bock's ending implies that these characters' journeys are not over. Barb will still continue to pursue what it is she is looking for. Donna and Carla Carla will still have to work to maintain their relationship. Nick and The Shark have a long excursion ahead with the beginnings of their new relationship, and Bob will find his path again. Bock ends the play on an optimistic note, leaving the audience hopeful not only for the characters, but for themselves. Bock's creation of relatable characters and content is capable of appealing to anyone who seeks an understanding of basic human interaction.

The climax occurs shortly before the resolution when Barb and Bob are discussing the state of their marriage:

BARB. That wasn't okay you did that Bob.

BOB. What?

BARB. I found

(Pause.)

BOB. You I was going to pull the poolcover over it.

BARB. Um.

BOB. I'm

(Pause.)

BARB. I know you are.

BOB. You've got to come home Barb.

BARB. No Bob. (72)

The climax surrounds Barb and Bob, therefore the protagonist is Barb. Barb is the central character driving the conflict. It is Barb who is attempting to achieve her objective of shedding her possessions. This objective sparks the other characters' need to change and re-evaluate their life choices and experiences. Barb is the driving force of the action, and in turn, poses the major dramatic question: Will Barb continue to change her life in the direction she chooses or will she continue to be unhappy in her old habits? This question is answered in the resolution. Barb, along with the other characters, does not know where the future lies, but their actions reflect a pursuit to happiness.

After determining the resolution, climax, protagonist and major dramatic question, the inciting incident can be identified. The inciting incident occurs in the first scene of the play when Barb is talking to Carla Carla about ridding herself of all unnecessary possessions. It is not until Barb has a yard sale, hauls her belonging to the landfill, and leases a new apartment that she achieves her objective of detaching the heaviness of her current lifestyle. Barb's acquisition of the new apartment serves as the play's moment of engagement. The opposing force to Barb is her husband, Bob. Bob attempts to be supportive, but fails and resorts to throwing all of their belongings in the pool. Another opposing force is Barb's inner voice. Barb has to stay strong and resist going back to her old self. She is changed, and going back would only make her unhappy. Barb has to fight both her unsupportive husband and her inner temptations.

Synthesis

Based on my textual analysis of Adam Bock's Swimming in the Shallows, this synthesis will inform my directing process, my collaboration with the designers and the application of text analysis to the second chapter of this thesis.

I read the script multiple times to conceive my directing approach. I approached Swimming in the Shallows organically. In other words, I did not force any conclusions, answers, or ideas. I wanted the text to shape my decisions as a director, rather than my decisions shaping the text. This would allow me to stay true to the playwright's intentions throughout the process. As a director, I needed to make certain that each element of the production embraced the style I wanted to exemplify to the audience.

As such, I met with each designer individually to collaborate and finalize a conclusion regarding the scenic, costume, and lighting designs. I chose to design my own projections and my sound for three primary reasons. First, I have experience in accomplishing both. Secondly, my directing style requires a focused visual palate that is a crucial component to Swimming in the Shallows. In addition, music is a critical element, which I take very seriously when placing between scenes and sub-scenes. Because of the challenging aspects, and my in-depth familiarity with the script, I deemed it crucial that I compose these elements. After collaborating with the designers we all decided to facilitate the overall vision of the play.

The text analysis is a critical tool when conceiving a production approach to Swimming in the Shallows. Without a comprehensive understanding of the text and the playwright's intentions, Swimming in the Shallows would have been difficult to negotiate. After evaluating impressions, gathering information, and interpreting the characters and conflict, synthesis of all these elements assist in the development of a production approach. Swimming in the Shallows playfully investigates three couples and their quest for something more from life. Each character faces dilemmas that challenge their strength, purpose, and being, and through these problems they continue to live as

best they know how: by supporting each other regardless of their struggles. Even though the plausibility of a man and a shark maintaining a romantic relationship is basically impossible, nonetheless, it your everyday love story about everyday characters that everyday people can relate to. In an interview in the Boston Globe, Bock states:

They remind us that the world is made-up and we can make it up, too. A lot of plays say, 'This is the way the world is, get used to it.' I want to show the possibilities for anybody who isn't on the winning team, that they can imagine a new world. We can remake it. (Marx D7)

CHAPTER 2

DIRECTING METHODOLOGY

In his staging notes of Swimming in the Shallows, Adam Bock writes:

The action should be pressed flat. Like a screen. The actors' physical work should be vertical and horizontal rather than three-dimensionally horizontal. (6)

Bock suggests a reconsideration of traditional staging principles found in fundamental directing theory. Through an examination of the challenges of Bock's recommendations, this chapter will explore the relationship between the playwright and director, dissect the traditional staging principles regarding blocking and composition, assess the challenges of this directing methodology, and evaluate the realized conclusions.

Playwright and Director

When directing any play, the playwright and the director have an unparalleled connection. Obviously, without the playwright, a director would not have a play and without the director a playwright's play may not have a voice in production. Therefore, a director must be considerate of a playwright's intentions. In directing Swimming in the Shallows, I deemed it of utmost importance to approach the script through my interpretive lens, yet still remain attentive to Adam Bock's intentions, particularly his staging comments in the preface of the script.

In Mis-directing the Play, Terry McCabe discusses the importance of the relationship between the director and the playwright:

Your job as a director is to present the play as a unity, to bring the various elements of the production into one clear focus that expresses your best judgment of the playwright's intentions. (60)

McCabe argues that the playwright's intentions concerning the mounting of a play are pivotal in conveying the overall meaning of the text. Therefore, if the director adds any staging choices that do not coincide with the playwright's intentions, the play no longer expresses what the playwright set out to achieve. To reiterate, McCabe writes:

The problem is this: staging choices convey meanings. Staging choices that are at odds with those of the playwright but are inserted into the overall context of the play will confuse the careful viewer. (58)

Making strong staging choices that support the play's action and intention is crucial to the accomplishment of a production. In preparation for directing Swimming in the Shallows, I aligned my directing intentions with Bock's recommendations for staging the production. However, adhering to his recommendations required an examination and rethinking of traditional staging and composition techniques. It is impossible to investigate an assessment of the process without a comprehensive understanding of traditional staging principles.

Directing Terminology

This chapter will frequently use the terms: blocking, staging, and composition. Blocking and staging are defined as the "positioning and movement of the actors" (Bloom 140). According to Jon Jory in his book Tips: Ideas for Directors, blocking is a meaningful necessity:

Blocking is often behavioral, as in going to the kitchen for a cup of coffee. It is psychological in the human and emotional needs that drive it. It is aesthetic, giving pleasure through composition of bodies in space. It is architectural in the relationship of the actors to the set and the building.

(78)

Jory's four essential foundations of blocking: behavioral, psychological, aesthetic and architectural, reveal and determine the text's inner life. Through an examination of Swimming in the Shallows each foundation contributes to the play coming to life. A play's blocking is revealed through the text. It is determined by character patterns, objectives, and relationships. Furthermore, Jory comments, "it is the play's visual score and counterpoint" (78). The blocking of a play reinforces the play's content and theme. It serves as a guide to the action; a map to direct the audience through the deep waters of the playwright's intentions.

Composition refers to the "visual imagery created by the combination of staging and design" (Bloom 141). This collaboration of actors and technical elements creates an aesthetic balance of the play's insights and intentions. According to Jory:

Elements of composition include: the body and line of actors in relationship to space, set, theater architecture, furniture, and each other. The director's trained eye works with spacing and juxtaposition of vertical and horizontal, the different planes and areas, high and low, straight line, triangle, and curve. . . . Composition uses repetition, stillness, movement, and surprise.

All elements of the production's content, including, the color of a costume, the actor's body shape, the curve on an arm of a chair, the spatial relationship between a coffee pot and a mug, contribute to the play's composition.

Blocking, staging, and composition are all necessarily explored in the process of directing Swimming in the Shallows. Each application was approached unconventionally to facilitate adhering to Bock's staging suggestions.

Blocking and Staging

An exploration of blocking and staging was evaluated and assessed through three principles: horizontal and vertical stage depth, diagonals in staging, and organic blocking.

Stage Depth

In Thinking Like a Director, Michael Bloom addresses the importance of studying staging principles:

By studying the principles of composition through visual art, a painter can build acuity, but a director, like a sculptor, can truly master compositional skills only by continually working in three dimensions. (145)

Any experienced director is aware of the beneficial outcomes in utilizing stage depth. Without the employment of stage depth, a production could suffer due to a monotonous composition involving a lack of dynamics, leading to what is referred to as "flat" blocking.

Furthermore, Bloom states, "To create depth in the staging, place set pieces on at least three horizontal planes: foreground, middle ground, and background" (89). In directing Swimming in the Shallows, I sought to eliminate the appearance of stage depth. To eliminate the three-dimensional outcome of staging, I worked with the scenic designer

to create a space that would be shallow, offering only two primary positions: a foreground and a background, eliminating the middle plane. Appendix A in this thesis offers an illustration. This elimination of a middle plane met with Bock's suggestion of abandoning the depth of the playing space. With only two primary planes in which to stage, I was challenged to find more vertical staging potentials in the blocking.

Bock comments on his staging suggestion, in part by stating, “. . . I thought it would be fun to see what would happen if people went up and down instead of front and back” (Interview 2008). In my production of Swimming in the Shallows, the exploration of vertical space, in the absence of stage depth, helped locate a new dynamic in the composition, as seen in Appendix B. Another utilization of vertical space was depicted in the mirrored reflection of the shark during the aquarium scenes. The reflection of The Shark swimming created an inventive, unexpected illusion of imaginative space. An example is demonstrated in Appendix C.

Diagonals in Staging

The use of diagonals in staging is often advocated in contemporary directing theory because it utilizes stage depth, and illustrates character power dynamics in composition. Jory asserts, “For some reason when the two actors are on an angle the stage looks dynamic and when they are flat it seems boring” (110). In staging Swimming in the Shallows, I avoided utilizing diagonals through the actors' movements in order to adhere to Bock's staging suggestions. For example, if an actor entered from upstage right and crossed to downstage center, the actor would take two crosses: a cross downstage and then a perpendicular cross to center stage. Even though the actor's cross avoided the use of diagonals, the character still created visual interest due to the unconventional way

of crossing to center stage. Therefore, abandoning diagonals in staging created just as much visual interest than if I had employed diagonals throughout, and also gave the illusion of stage depth.

Organic Staging

The staging of Swimming in the Shallows was executed with some preplanned ideas, but, primarily, was configured organically throughout the rehearsal process. This organic approach invited experimentation with the space and the blocking, which also agreed with Bock's staging notes: "I like physical experimentation" (6). As a result of physical experimentation in rehearsal, the collaboration that occurred between the cast and myself became rewarding due to the tight ensemble that developed. In an interview with Bock, he explains:

. . . I love actors. . . I also think that what my job is, actually. . . to make a sort of a shell for an actor to step inside of and then tell it truthfully. . . but I know I have to leave enough room for the artists to do their jobs. . . And it's like trying to learn that I'm not the director, I'm not the actor. I have to do it as I'm writing it. I have to direct in my head a little bit. But I also try to leave big chunks. You know. The shark in the aquarium. Now you can do that anyway you want. (Interview 2008)

Bock's plays invite collaboration between the actors and staging. Without diverse insights and opinions from everyone involved, a production can suffer from a stunted lack of development, creating a one-sided perspective. This process of blocking organically allowed the actors and myself to make discoveries within the text as they came naturally without trying to prepackage or manufacture them. Therefore, allowing

the actors to collaborate and experiment with the staging created a unique, and more unified production.

Composition

When directing Swimming in the Shallows, I investigated composition principles outlined in contemporary directing texts. Through an assessment of fundamental composition standards, I experimented with creating a composition that correlated to Bock's staging recommendations. Based on composition fundamentals, I considered two primary sites of investigation: actor placement and composing diagonals.

Actor Placement

In William Ball's A Sense of Directing, he describes the specifics of creating composition through directing:

Composition is the aspect of blocking that is mechanical.

Downstage-center is the strongest position on the stage.

Upstage-left is the weakest position.

Facing full front is strong, full back is weak.

Crosses from up-center to down center are powerful.

Crosses from stage right to stage left follow the "reading"

line in Western culture.

An individual standing separated from a group has focus.

Symmetry connotes formality or ritual.

And on and on; there are many axioms about position that a director should know in order to create the most powerful stage composition. (110)

In creating my composition for Swimming in the Shallows, I abandoned many of these traditional formalities. Specifically, I abandoned, “facing...full back is weak.” On the contrary, I believe that facing full back can be a powerful technique to composing diverse arrangements in a space because limiting the actor’s body to only a frontal and a profile view diminishes the versatility of the composition created. Through the application of having an actor full back to an audience, another dynamic is employed; creating a different way of seeing action portrayed on stage. Appendix D illustrates two instances when full back to the audience was implemented successfully.

Another formality I abandoned was “Crosses from stage right to stage left follow the “reading” line in Western culture.” In addition, Terry John Converse states:

... we are naturally inclined to look from left to right in reading that we carry this inclination to all phases of observation. In looking at a painting the first glance is in the left direction; and in the theatre, as the curtain rises at the beginning of the act, the audience can be seen to look to their left first in taking in the immediate impression of the stage setting. (35)

Logically speaking, this is true. However, I employed using crosses from numerous directions to facilitate a more varied pattern of movements through composition.

Furthermore, Converse states:

Stage directors can apply this thinking to their work by thinking of movement stage left to stage right as overcoming stronger resistance; it pushes against the current instead of drifting with it. (36)

‘This pushing against the current,’ refrains from allowing the audience to get too comfortable with the staging pattern. Having an actor go against the reading line, keeps the audience’s attention on the diverse, unpredictable, moving patterns.

A composition principle I could not always neglect was “symmetry connotes formality and ritual.” I found, at times, that Swimming in the Shallows needed symmetry because some scenes were ritualistic, almost like a Greek chorus. In certain instances throughout the script, the characters would narrate the action to the audience. Because of this choral representation, I needed the balance and the symmetry to display that to the audience. My application of symmetry, which I employed in Swimming in the Shallows, can be seen in Appendix E.

Diagonals in Composition

Michael Bloom states:

Composition has several axioms. Diagonals are generally more dynamic than straight lines because they infuse both movement and composition with greater energy. This is why scenes with three characters are more effectively staged in triangles than in straight lines. (147)

My production of Swimming in the Shallows predominantly discarded the use of diagonals throughout the compositions. Because Bock suggested that the “action should be pressed flat” (6), I explored the use of straight lines, and rarely placed characters on different planes. Appendix F displays the employment of experimenting with a composition that investigates characters sharing the same plane.

Nonetheless, I did not manage to completely abandon this traditional principle. I found it to be almost impossible to continuously require the characters on stage to share

the same horizontal plane. I often found utilizing diagonals within the composition necessary in order to create dynamics. If the entirety of the play depicted characters housing the same plane, the composition would become repetitive. It was through this traditional directing principle where I considered the benefits and hazards of maintaining a balance between the playwright's recommendations and my personal preference. Appendix G of this thesis exhibits my necessary use of diagonals and planes through composition.

Challenges of Directing Method

In the process of directing Swimming in the Shallows, I encountered three primary challenges while attempting to adhere to Bock's suggested implantations of stage depth and physical action: complications with planes, abandoning diagonals, and creating limited depth.

As stated previously, I found it impossible to completely neglect utilizing planes in order to press the action flat. Through this directing process, I have acquired an appreciation for the use of planes in composition and staging. I found that by using both shallowness and depth I created a diverse, dynamic, and unified production.

Abandoning diagonals became impossible when entrances and exits had to be accomplished quickly to move the action at a steady pace. With two crosses instead of one for entrances and exits, I realized that it brought the face-paced action to a staggering halt. Even though I rarely used diagonals in my staging, I still found it absolutely impractical to remove them altogether.

Initially, my intention was to create a limited depth to facilitate Bock's suggestion of pressed action. Throughout the process I believed that I was achieving that. It was not

until the final week of rehearsals, before I knew what I had actually done. To explain, this thesis was to investigate whether Bock's specifics in his staging notes could be implemented and demonstrated through a realized production. During the final week of rehearsals, once the mirror was in place and the projections were operated, I noticed that I had created a space of hidden depth. This sudden realization conflicted with my initial intent. Even though I tried to maintain a shallowness in the space—I had failed. I created layers upon layers of depth involving the projections, which revealed a movable screen, which revealed a mirror, which revealed the Shark. Without even knowing it, I had created depth in the space. At first, I was upset at the thought of failing at my directing intention, but then I realized the complete parallel between the space and the content of the play. Prior to the production the stage looks ordinary and shallow, but as the play progresses even more layers are revealed to create a depth. Just as the space became full of depth so did the occupants of that space: the characters. As the characters are revealing their many layers of depth, the composition of space is 'wading' cautiously next to them, until the end, when both space and character unite to reveal the depth and complexity of humankind.

Realized Conclusions

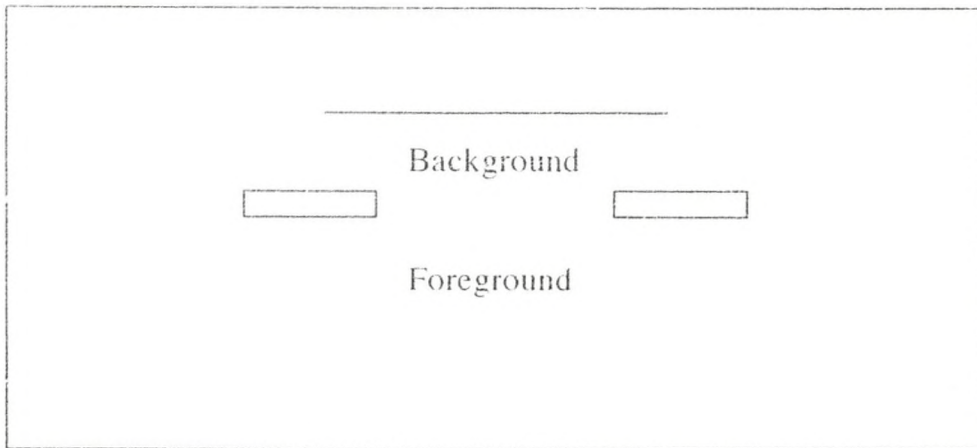
I chose to direct Swimming in the Shallows because of its complexities in comparison to fundamental directing theory, approach, and content. I was certain the text and expectations of Bock would challenge my directing capacity. Because of my familiarity with traditional staging principles, I was able to reevaluate the importance and rationale for employing such principles. Even though I was not completely able to abandon standard directing principles, exploring each principle allowed me to determine

why such principles are necessary in directing theory. Bock's recommendations for creating limited stage depth opened my mind to new directing possibilities, which gave me a greater freedom in utilizing directing 'rules' and breaking them.

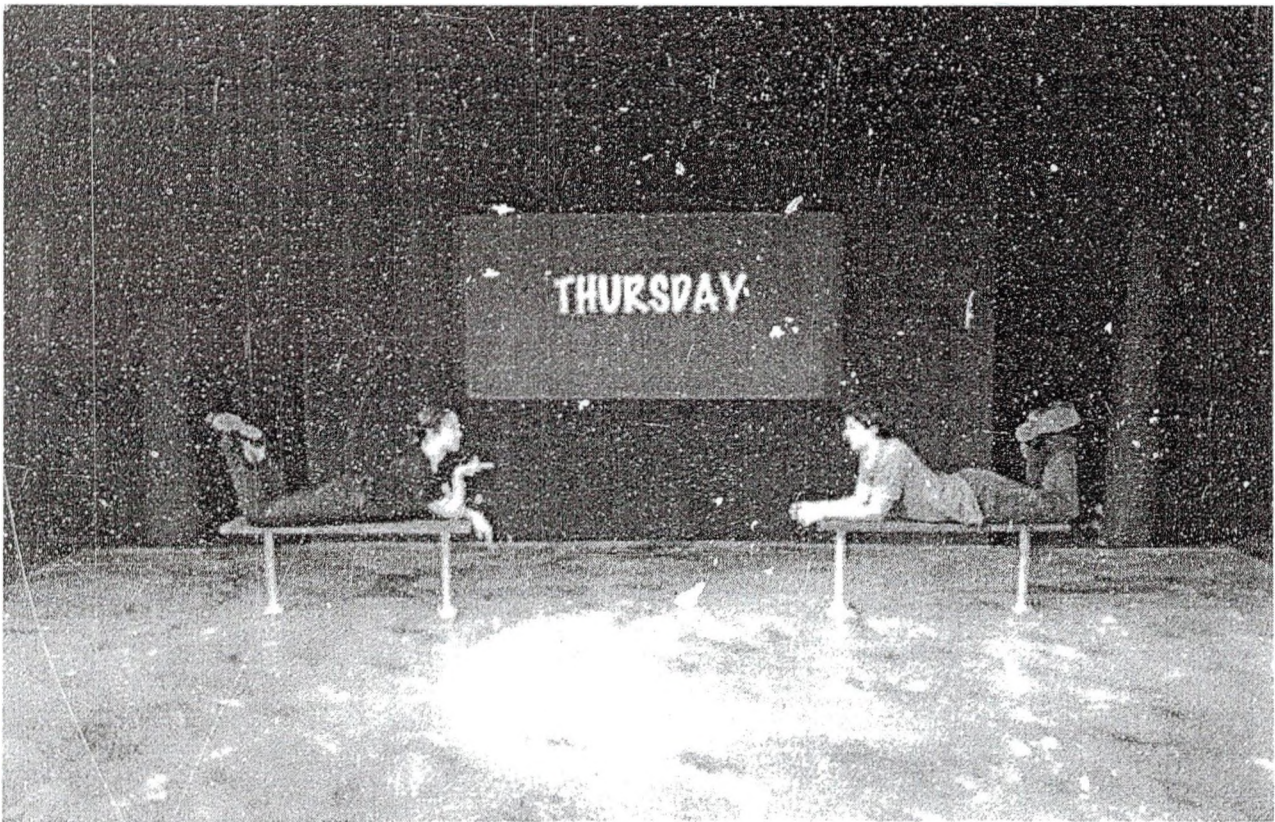
Swimming in the Shallows changed my perceptions of directing theory and opened numerous doors. Realizing that abandoning traditional staging principles only constricted my choice of staging and composition in creating a unified production, gave me the opportunity to explore new realms of experimentation through spatial relationships, involving horizontal and vertical depth. Through this process, it is revealed that limiting and constraining directing theories and approaches only diminishes the diverse and dynamic outcomes of a finalized production. With this knowledge, I can employ my gained perceptions to my future work in directing for the theater.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
DEPTH ILLUSTRATION



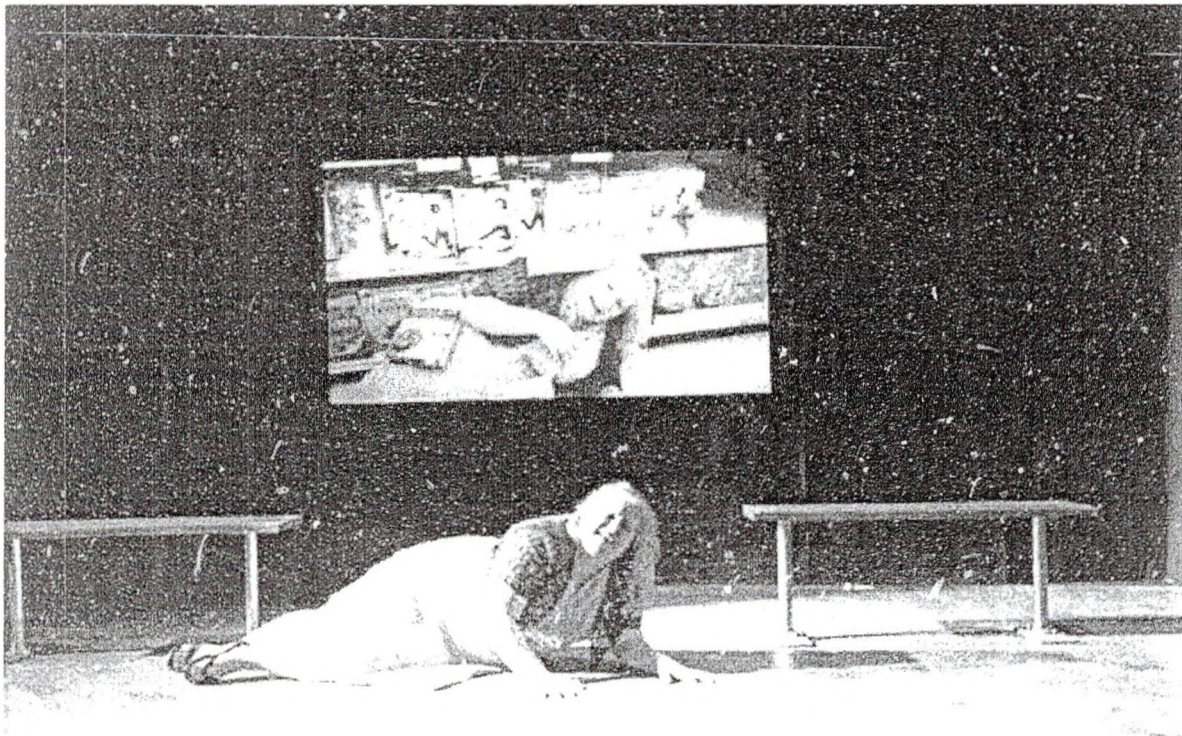
APPENDIX B
STAGING: EXPLORING THE VERTICAL



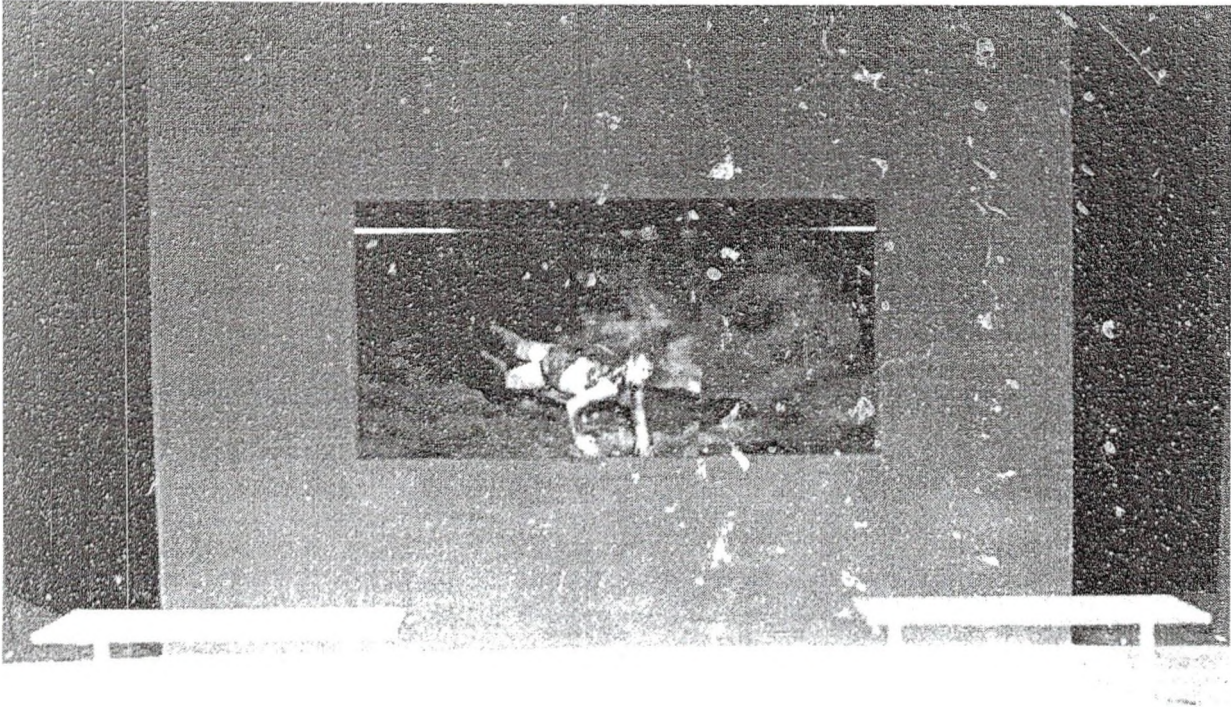
APPENDIX B
STAGING: EXPLORING THE VERTICAL



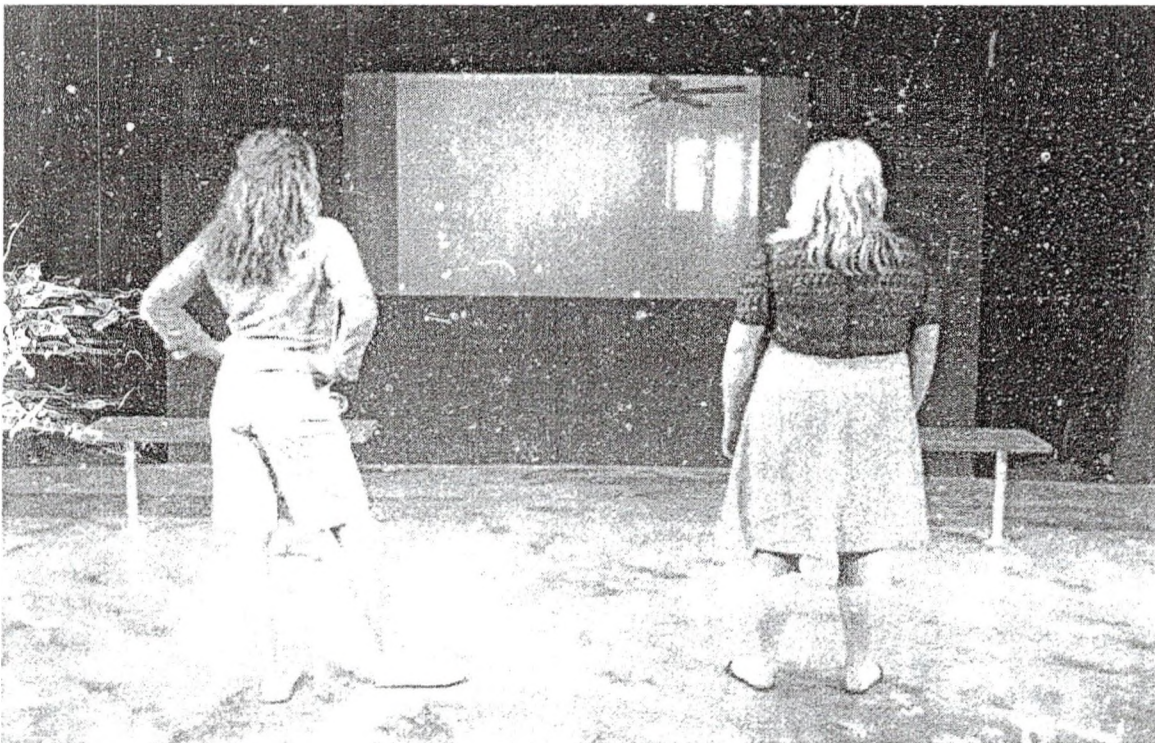
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STAGING: EXPLORING THE VERTICAL



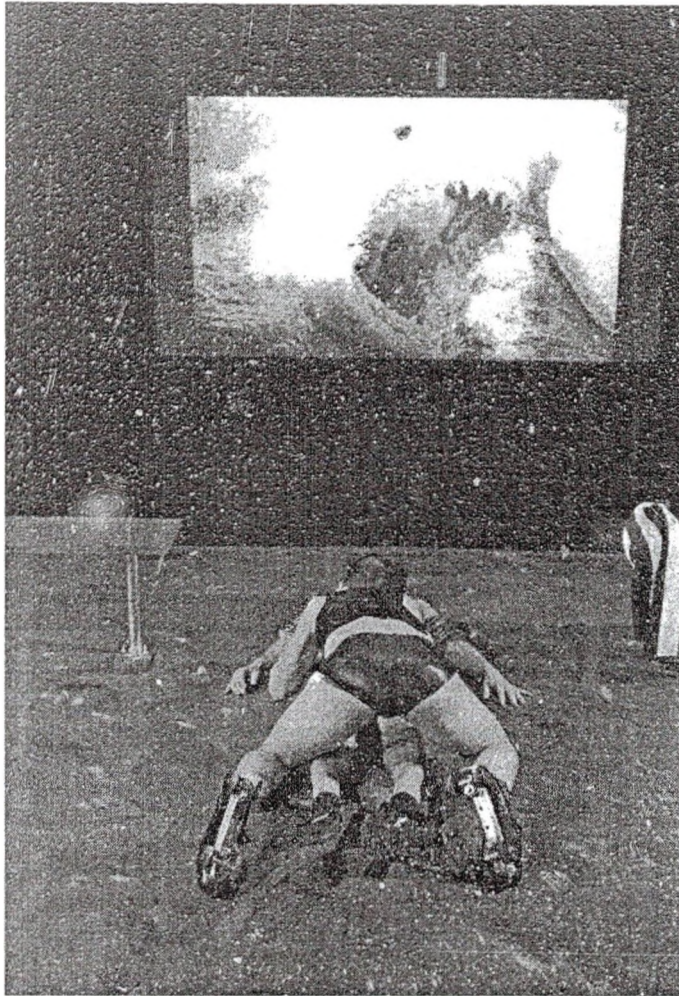
APPENDIX C
STAGING: THE SHARK AS VERTICAL SPACE



APPENDIX D
COMPOSITION: BACK TO AUDIENCE



APPENDIX D
COMPOSITION: BACK TO AUDIENCE



APPENDIX E
COMPOSITION: SYMMETRY



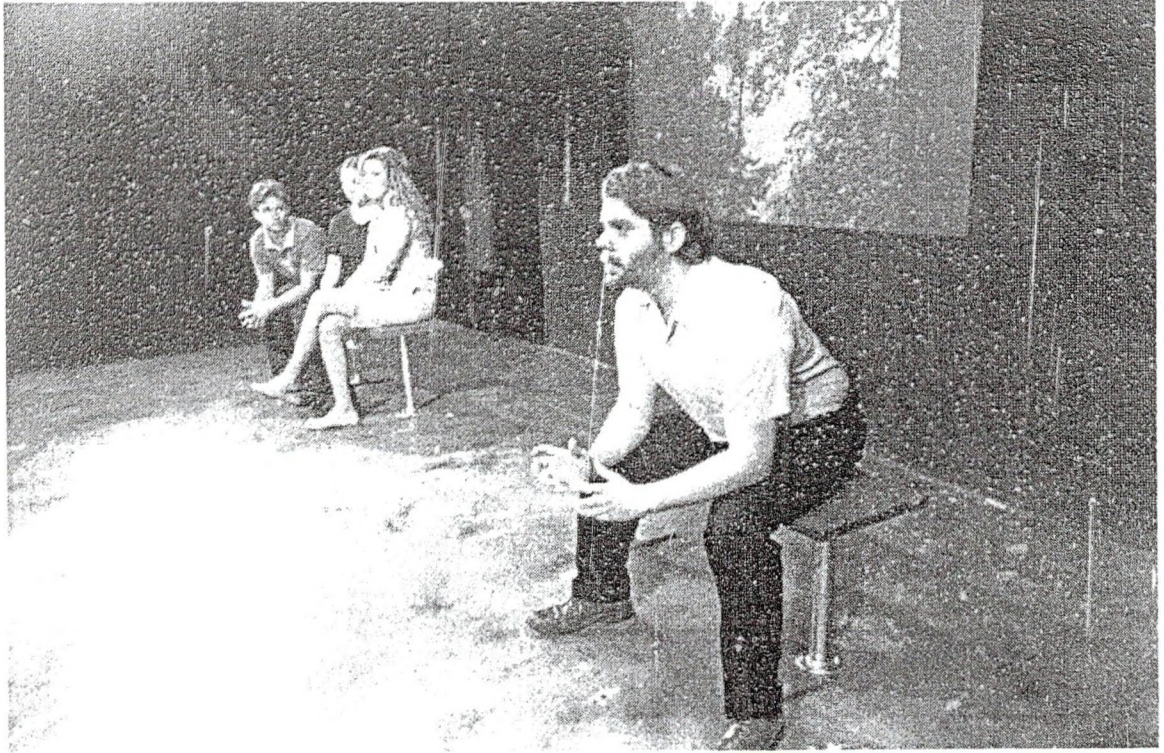
APPENDIX F
COMPOSITION: SAME PLANE/NO DIAGONALS



APPENDIX F
COMPOSITION: SAME PLANE/NO DIAGONALS



APPENDIX F
COMPOSITION: SAME PLANE, NO DIAGONALS



APPENDIX G
COMPOSITION, DIFFERENT PLANES/DIAGONALS



APPENDIX G
COMPOSITION: DIFFERENT PLANES/DIAGONALS



APPENDIX H
TRANSCRIPT OF PHONE INTERVIEW WITH ADAM BOCK
APRIL 2, 2008

ADAM. Hello. This is Adam.

DEBRA. Hey Adam this is Debra Berger calling.

ADAM. Oh Hey. How you doing? I just got home...so lucky.

DEBRA. Perfect.

ADAM. I totally forgot you were going to call.

DEBRA. Oh no.

ADAM. So lucky.

DEBRA. Do you have time to talk right now?

ADAM. I do. Yeah.

DEBRA. Perfect. Awesome. I guess I'll just tell you what I am doing. I directed your Swimming in the Shallows—

ADAM. How'd it go?

DEBRA. It went really, really well. I was really surprised actually. The response from people who saw it seemed to love it—

ADAM. How'd you do the shark?

DEBRA. Um...he was on roller blades...roller skates....

ADAM. Oh really?

DEBRA. Yeah, he was on roller skates. He had a fin. A speedo. And he was sexy...good looking...hah.

ADAM. Good.

DEBRA. It was awesome.

ADAM. Excellent.

DEBRA. First of all do you mind if I record this conversation?

ADAM. No. Not at all. Go ahead

DEBRA. Alright. Perfect. So I have to write a thesis about my experience with the show and a text analysis and all that jazz too. So right now I am just kind of finalizing my thesis and I was like I should try to contact him. I did not expect to be able to contact you directly. So this is like--

ADAM. No it's good. I think you're my first thesis.

DEBRA. This is awesome. So I just have a couple of questions I guess for you. What playwrights have inspired you, past or present would you say.

ADAM. Um...

DEBRA. I'm sure you get asked this all the time.

ADAM. Yeah. No. It's good. People that I really like. Shakespeare. Chekhov, then Churchill, Mamet...those would probably be the big ones.

DEBRA. Ok.

ADAM. Euripides.

DEBRA. Yeah?

ADAM. Yeah, I love Euripides. Strindberg I like very much. But I also went through...I liked uh...Lanford Wilson before I wrote, sort of as I was starting to write that is who I copied first.

DEBRA. Really? Lanford Wilson. Ok.

ADAM. Yeah I just liked his... sort of liked.... Outsiders and also his language I thought was beautiful. Sort of at the beginning liked lyrical language, you know...and then I was like it's too poetic for me. So, I have a little of that but not that much stuff.

DEBRA. Ok. You're plays especially Swimming in the Shallows and Five Flights... you experiment a lot with form. Is that ...why that choice, I guess?

ADAM. Well I came from going to school at Brown—

DEBRA. Yeah.

ADAM. With Paula.

DEBRA. Sure.

ADAM. And she sort of taught us to look at form as an entry point in the plays. Like most people use story or character. And she said well you know those are two of the entry points...you could use the world, you could use device, you could use language...you can... you know. So, she just made us look at sort of theater history and see that everybody has used different devices and you can use any of them and so, choosing how you tell the story actually has as big an impact as the story you're telling. Sort of what I talk about in Typographer's Dream.

DEBRA. Sure.

ADAM. About how you tell the story is as important as the story.

DEBRA. Great um...specifically... you would say that your lack of punctuation all of that kind of ties in with the form? Would you say? Or...

ADAM. Yeah. What I try to do in that is to encourage people to...umm...lack of punctuation is to get people to do a couple of things. One is to get them to make turns quicker. So instead of periods or commas that encourage people to pause...cause I think language...we can turn on a dime constantly...go in different directions so that's part of it. Also, just by making it look a little different... make people maybe think "this doesn't look like a sentence...if it had a period it would look like a sentence I recognized. So what's going on?" I keep trying to throw things in for actors to encourage actors to go..."huh? How many different ways can I do this?"

DEBRA. Yeah. And that's something that I loved about directing this show was that all the work isn't complete for you almost—

ADAM. Right.

DEBRA. You give the director and the actors...you still have to work...was that part of...did you do that to help facilitate more collaboration within the text itself?

ADAM. Yeah, well I love actors.

DEBRA. Yeah?

ADAM. And I also think that what my job is actually to make a sort of a shell for an actor to step inside of and then tell it truthfully.

DEBRA. Ok.

ADAM. So if I do too much then it makes them try to be who I want them to be rather than who they want to be.

DEBRA. Oh...that's great.

ADAM. And...it's sort of like intuitive on my part, but I know I have to leave enough room for the other artists to do their jobs. You know there's this story I tell when I'm in tech. I'll say something...and I'll be like ah...look at me I was just trying to be a lighting designer again...

DEBRA. (laughter)

ADAM. I have all these opinions...or there, I was trying to direct again.

DEBRA. Yeah.

ADAM. And it's like trying to learn that I'm not the director, I'm not the actor. I have to do it as I'm writing it. I have to direct in my head a little bit. But I also try to leave big chunks. You know. The shark in the aquarium. Now you can do that any way you want.

DEBRA. Right.

ADAM. You know and people keep doing it differently. In the play Five Flights I have suddenly birds come down and cover her...so they just do it differently.

DEBRA. Yeah. May I ask. What has been your favorite production you've seen of Swimming in the Shallows. Is there anything you've seen that stuck out? Perhaps you didn't think about that...or?

ADAM. Well in New York they did the shark really well.

DEBRA. What did they do?

ADAM. What they did was...you can see it was on the cover of American Theater 2005. What they did was open the back wall so there was a slot.

DEBRA. With the mirror right?

ADAM. Yeah and he slide on the floor

DEBRA. We attempted to do that. And we used it when he was swimming...we had some sight line problems so.

ADAM. Right. It's hard.

DEBRA. It's tough. It's expensive too.

ADAM. I know right.

DEBRA. Try and get a giant mirror.

ADAM. I think we used Mylar. I think we did something like that. But it was sooo amazing. It looked like he was flying on the wall. No one knew how it worked. It was beautiful. How'd yours turn out? Did you like how it looked?

DEBRA. Yeah. It looked awesome. People were like how'd you do that? I was like "It's a big mirror."

ADAM. So you had him on skates?

DEBRA. He was on roller skates when he wasn't swimming in the aquarium. He was on roller skates. It went okay. The only probably we really had were sight lines. If people either sat too far stage right or stage left...they kind of lost part of it, so that was an issue.

ADAM. Yeah.

DEBRA. So we did it in this really small black box theater.

ADAM. Good for you though. And you did it in North Dakota! I'm so proud of you!

DEBRA. I know. I wasn't the first one. Did you know that?

ADAM. Someone else has done it in North Dakota?

DEBRA. Yeah somebody else did it in Fargo I guess I heard.

ADAM. Awesome!

DEBRA. I'm actually good friends with the guy who did it in Fargo.

ADAM. Really. That's very good.

DEBRA. A friend of mine had given me Swimming in the Shallows, and I read the first scene between Barb and Carla Carla and I was like...this is it.

ADAM. (Laughter) I had a friend who's name was Heidi Carla and she said oh yeah. My sister Carla. And I was...you're sister's name is Carla Carla. And it turns out it was a family name and her sister had changed her last name to Carla Chinquenta. It was just a weird thing...but I thought that's the funniest name Carla Caria.

DEBRA. Yeah, A lot of people asked me that too. Like "Who's named Carla Carla?"...I'm like I don't know. Some woman is.

ADAM. Doesn't matter...it's theater.

DEBRA. Yep. Carla Carla. I love it.

ADAM. Did you have good girls?

DEBRA. Yeah. We did. We had a great cast really. They pulled it together it was good. And they loved it. Every second of it...so

ADAM. Awesome.

DEBRA. Yeah. It was very good to do especially in this community. So. Surprisingly, something that really surprised me was...I had expected the younger generations to appeal to more to it, but actually the older generations just ate it up. They loved it.

ADAM. Yeah. Well it's a friendly play. It makes people...I think people actually want to like gay people. I think they do. You know and they what to be allowed to, and be in a good place where there you know...where it's not considered weird...or...cause there's nothing gay about the play in a weird way...even though there is...you know.

DEBRA. Yeah. totally. It's not defined by that.

ADAM. Two girls trying to get married ya know.

DEBRA. We had, let's see...some of the younger kids...what I found interesting about his play too...oh it's funny, funny, funny...but when it comes down to the beach scene between Nick and the Shark and when they actually do kiss, all of a sudden it becomes real... becomes more serious...and less will and grace. And it hits the audience in the face and become more real and intimate.

ADAM. Yeah. Were they accepting of it?

DEBRA. For the most part. We didn't have anyone walk out.

ADAM. AWESOME!

DEBRA. Which is great. But in North Dakota you never quite know. There's a huge gay community here in Grand Forks so surprisingly enough.

ADAM. So they must have been psyched.

DEBRA. Yeah. They held for us a big reception. The 10% Society. It was great.

ADAM. Oh cool. Oh. Good for you.

DEBRA. Yeah it was good. Um. Couple of questions left. We are talking about the homosexual undertones but um...Did you mean to include certain homosexual stereotypes within the play? With the construction boots and the dream sequences...that

is just in the dream sequences though...were you trying to avoid stereotypes? Did that come into your mind at all?

ADAM. Well those... I...those...I put in because I thought the combination would be interesting. You know the masculine and feminine wedding dresses, you know and the mixture of all of that. So I think that's where that came from. Other than that, I tried not to...I tried to write past stereotypes in a way...I tried to write past the idea that Nick has come out. It was sort of he sleeps around...he slept around too much. Rather than...you know like any guy...and I am going to stop doing that or not? You know...and how I am going to deal with loneliness. That's what I think I was thinking more.

DEBRA. Okay good. Let's see what else. How's Drunken City going?

ADAM. Good.

DEBRA. Yeah.

ADAM. It's kind of a companion piece to Swimming actually... in a weird way.

DEBRA. I missed it by a week.

ADAM. Oh no.

DEBRA. I was like "Aw, man."

ADAM. Next time call me and I'll get you into a rehearsal.

DEBRA. That would have been perfect. Yeah, I wish I could of seen it but...who knows maybe I'll be up there in a month or so. So in terms of the metaphor of the shark what does that mean to you? I've heard a lot of different people's interpretations, and I, of course, have my own, but what does that mean to you?

ADAM. Well for me it was...it was The Other. You know...so and The Other as possibly scary. And why I liked it was that it was a person that might be dangerous to go out with. So that could be anyone. That could be a guy with HIV if you were negative. That could be a guy from another race. Could be someone who is poorer than you...or richer. Could be...I just wanted it to be Other enough. And also dangerous, but that you might be afraid...so then again could be someone that you might fall in love with... and that could be dangerous. So that's what I was thinking. And it's also in the old tradition of the Greek plays where, you know, people and animals fall in love with each other. So there's that that because long tradition like as Zeus coming down as a swan or a bull or, as you know, and then I always loved Elizabeth Egloff's play The Swan. I think there a little of that in there too.

DEBRA. Okay...interesting. So you mentioned Five Flights with the birds coming down...you write a lot of imagery in your writing. When you are writing do you

visualize the play being staged? Do you visualize it in your head or is it just your complete imagination and anything is possible?

ADAM. No. What I try to do is...I think of an event when I'm writing. What's the next event? And that event has to have a visual quality as well as a sound quality. Like I usually write from my ear mostly. But then I know that all true there has to be...in swimming...it should be in a bunch of different places...so how many different places could it be in? And um...so then the beach would look different from the boardwalk would look different the lawn...which would look different from her empty room, you know. So that's where all pictures come from. From... as I know I have to have...I have to know what those places are when I'm writing. Part of the thing where I think so many things happen in Swimming...was the decision I made at the beginning of the play formally, was I was going to try to use as many different shapes to tell the story...so one would be a monologue and then there would be a dream sequences...and then there might be a dance and then might be a dialogue or a scene with three people a scene with four people a scene with three people and one who doesn't talk...a scene where Bob just comes on. So thing after thing like that. That's what I formally try to do.

DEBRA. Is it difficult for you to hand your script over to a director? Or ...do you enjoy that?

ADAM. No. I work...until I've seen it done once really well, I'll keep working with directors to make sure that the script could be done really well once. I'll be kind of controlling...little bit...I'll sit next to my director and I'm like do you think we can try this...try this...try this...I leave them room, but I also like to have a hand in it. But then Swimming's been done now 25 times, 30 times so it's like have other people do it and see what they can do, you know.

DEBRA. Awesome. What year exactly did you graduate from Brown?

ADAM. '89.

DEBRA. '89 Okay. You did your grad work there? Or undergrad?

ADAM. I did my grad work there.

DEBRA. Where did you do your undergrad?

ADAM. Boden, Maine

DEBRA. I couldn't find that anywhere. In the opening of Swimming the stage direction...or stage notes...you say want the action to be pressed flat. Is that shallowness a metaphor that ties into the play...or is there anything specific?

ADAM. Well when I was doing that play, I thought it would be fun to see what would happen if people went up and down instead of front to back. And people haven't done it

much. But I wanted to see what would happen with a bit of physical experimentation that that would force. I thought you put limits on people and then suddenly they have to come up with different ideas...you know that means something to one person and something else to someone else. I try to make strong choices and demands on people and then know that you guys will come up with something better than I thought of. Usually.

DEBRA. Kind of reminds me of Artaud... a bit...his freeness.

ADAM. (laughter) I read a lot of Artaud when I was a kid...so it's still there.

DEBRA. I love it.

ADAM. Yeah.

DEBRA. Are you writing anything right now? Currently?

ADAM. Yeah. I've got a couple of things right now. A play called The Flowers. I just came up with a new idea for a play called The Noise in the Hall...in the Hallway... The Noise in the Hallway. And I'm writing a movie for Scott Ruden and I am going to do a musical.

DEBRA. You're going to do a musical?

ADAM. Um Hm.

DEBRA. Yeah!

ADAM. I know right? Scary but fun!

DEBRA. When do you expect those to be finalized or are they still works in progress?

ADAM. Well The Flowers I'm doing another workshop next month. It's all...it's probably 2/3 written...and just brand new starting all the other three.

DEBRA. Okay. Cool. Um...Are you still...those pieces that you are working on now do they contain gay representation?

ADAM. Um. Hm. Usually. I usually do...almost sort of like...I always try to have gay people in my world. At least. The Shaker Chair was just like one of the conspirators...Five Flights, Swimming, The Drunken City, Typographer all have lead characters who are gay...Thursday, same thing. The Receptionist didn't have any. Which is very unusual for me. For a sort of play that wasn't overt. But you know gay people are a part of my world so I always kind of have them in there.

DEBRA. Right. And what about women. You say you write a lot about women too.

ADAM. Yeah. I like writing about women...I like writing about people who aren't normally onstage to be honest. So...

DEBRA. Do find it easier to write for a woman character than a male character?

ADAM. I guess I find it quite easy to write women. I find it easy to write gay men. And I like writing straight men, but they're onstage all the time so I just don't feel like I have to. Like it's just...I don't look in that direction all the time to write. I write about the people that...you know it was kind of fun to write the receptionist because it was a 55 year-old woman who's a receptionist who isn't normally the center of a play. Usually it would be a doctor or a politician...or someone who's successful, you know...quite high status. So I like writing the fringes and I like writing the edges a little bit more.

DEBRA. Cool. Okay. You also experiment, I think, a lot with tempo...everything seems very faced almost...that's intentional I'm assuming. Can you talk a little about that?

ADAM. I'm a little A.D.D. I get bored.

DEBRA. I do too.

ADAM. So, I like things to go...I think people talk fast, to be honest. I think we live pretty quickly. You know, and then I think actor's like to go slow, so I write a little faster than normal cause I don't like that long dramatic pause, I just think I have many of those in my life.

DEBRA. Yeah. I don't think many do.

ADAM. Yeah. But people love doing them.

DEBRA. Do you ever write yourself into characters?

ADAM. Oh, all of them are me.

DEBRA. All of them are you?

ADAM. Yeah.

DEBRA. Awesome. I read a statement by Jason Zinoman in the New York Times and I just wanted to get your opinion on it he said. "the real crisis in American theater is not that their aren't any new writers...it's that they frequently fade away heading into the big or small screen."

ADAM. Right.

DEBRA. “And without the support of commercial theater that trend will probably continue.” How do you feel about the current state of theater?

ADAM. Wow.

DEBRA. I know it’s a huge question.

ADAM. I don’t worry about it to be honest.

DEBRA. Yeah?

ADAM. I sort of...what I’m trying to do...is I’m trying to write plays. I love me, I love the actor’s in America, I think they’re great. Financially, it’s hard for them only to do theater. But a lot of them go and do movies so that they can do theater. And I think theater’s always going to be around. And I think there’s a lot of it around. You know, it’s not always well paid, but there’s a lot of theater going on at universities and every town has a bunch of little theater...so I think it’s actually doing okay. We’ve always had a hard time. I think what’s tough about America is we think that unless something’s making money it’s not doing well, you know.

DEBRA. Sure that make sense.

ADAM. And I think, actually, it’s hard to make a lot of money in theater...because that’s not the point. The point is to get people together. And look at something, you know. So, it is tough because a lot of young writers have to make livings and so they go and go to TV and I’m not sure TV writing is so helpful for theater writing. Because you have to do what they tell you. And I think something that is so great with theater is that there is independence in it. You’re supposed to be an iconoclast. Actually the people who write like other people aren’t rewarded. They are sort of seen as not original and not interesting, whereas on TV if you can write with someone else you’re rewarded. You know...you can sit on a writing squad...you can start writing for ER...or you can write for soap opera cause you know how you’re supposed to sound. Whereas in theater we are looking for someone who sounds unusual, you know...original voice that’s...so I think that’s where that get a little tough. Cause with those people, they start thinking “oh, I’m supposed to write what other people want me to write, you know” And, good TV actually people don’t do that, but most TV I think people kind of do.

DEBRA. Do you have a favorite TV show?

ADAM. Oh I love TV! And there’s lots that I like. I loved Rome. I loved daytime...lot’s of stuff on HBO. But I love regular TV too...what’s that?

DEBRA. I loved Carnivale on HBO.

ADAM. Did you? I never watched it.

DEBRA. I watched Rome too.

ADAM. I loved Rome. I thought Rome was great. I also love The Comeback...Did you watch that?

DEBRA. No I haven't.

ADAM. Lisa Kudrow...so funny. I love Battlestar Galactica.

DEBRA. Oh my God.

ADAM. Yeah, I watch all kinds of different stuff. I like pop...I like high art and I like low art and I like to try to mix them together...that's why I like writing about people who might seem normal but then every now and then are poetic.

DEBRA. Sure.

ADAM. Cause I think there is poetry in everybody's lives. We just think that's it's only in certain lives...I just don't think that is true.

DEBRA. That's awesome. Okay. Um.

ADAM. I'm a bit of an idealist.

DEBRA. Yeah.

ADAM. Right.

DEBRA. I don't think there are enough of those around. I think I am nearing the end of my questions.

ADAM. Are you all set?

DEBRA. Oh, when can the public get a copy of The Drunken City?

ADAM. We just sold the right...do you want me to email it to you?

DEBRA. That would be awesome!

ADAM. Okay, why don't I send you a copy. I'll email it to you. Email address?

DEBRA. debra.berger@und.edu

ADAM. Good. I'll send it to you.

DEBRA. Great. This was awesome. Oh. Do you have a favorite play?

ADAM. Do I have a favorite play?

DEBRA. If you had to pick one?

ADAM. If I had to pick one. Let me tell you three. Midsummer Night's Dream, Uncle Vanya and Far Away.

DEBRA. Okay. Wow. Interesting. Well thank you so much for your time.

ADAM. You're welcome. I hope it goes well.

DEBRA. I think it will. Thank you so much for your time this was an awesome experience.

ADAM. Right on. Thank you for doing the play.

DEBRA. Take Care.

ADAM. All right.

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