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The Birth of a Playwright through the Evolution of the One-act Play Stripped, Bear; the film Stripped, Bear; and the Full-Length Play American Bear

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The Birth of a Playwright through the Evolution of the One-act Play *Stripped, Bear*; the film Stripped, Bear; and the Full-Length Play American Bear

The Birth of a Playwright through the Evolution of the One-act Play *Stripped, Bear*;
the film Stripped, Bear; and the Full-Length Play American Bear

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Drama

by

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Emporia State University
Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theatre, 2006

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University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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ABSTRACT

The Birth of a Playwright through the Evolution of the One-act Play *Stripped, Bear*; the film Stripped, Bear; and the Full-Length Play American Bear follows the inception, birth, and evolution of a ten-minute, one-act, film, and full-length play: three major iterations of the same source material. Through this exploration, the reader will not only see how the work was changed through outside forces such as form and function but internal struggles within a young playwright as he struggles to find a final form for his first major work while attempting to establish himself as a playwright both within the field and in his own mind. .

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to acknowledge the entire faculty of the University of Arkansas Department of Drama as well as the support staff within. Their influence is forever stamped, not only in this document, but in the work I continue to create. My journey with them has been both invaluable and incalculable.

I would be remiss if I did not individually thank Clinnesha D. Sibley, my partner in exploration through the three years in the program and Dr. Rodger Gross, my mentor through art and academia during my time at the University of Arkansas.

DEDICATION

To Elizabeth and Derek:

Your faith in me has meant the world.

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I. Introduction

I am going to tell the epic story of my birth and evolution as a playwright through the story of the birth and evolution of my first major work: a one-act play: *Stripped, Bear*; a film by the same name, and the full-length play American Bear: a play about home. The bear was birthed in 2006 in Fayetteville, Arkansas at the eponymous University as a randomly assigned ten-minute play, was picked back up in the spring of 2007 to be developed into a one-act for the Boar's Head Players' production that summer, was adapted into a film shot by Barrow Gang Productions in the spring of 2008. The piece then took a long rest before being resurrected as American Bear: a play about home for the Lawrence Arts Center's 2010 New Play Festival, and made its professional and critically reviewed premiere with Theatre En Bloc's 2011 production of American Bear in Austin, Texas. The point of this work will be to document the epic adventure which led the play from its inception as a ten-minute cast-off, through the many iterations, to what I feel is the final and most realized form. I hope that this document will be of value to future writers and directors who attempt similar projects in a world where crossing media platforms is not only becoming the norm, but a requirement for writers in all fields.

I hope to give as thorough a description as is feasible of the forces which brought each of the many changes. After an overview of the history of the play, I will take us through the entire six-year process in detail, through each iteration of the play, addressing the reasoning behind new approaches, large scale changes and the minute with a critique after each major iteration evaluating the process, the production, the script, the production's impact on the script, and myself as a writer.

Some of this reportage depends on memorial reconstruction and part on journals kept intermittently throughout the process. Because the material from the journals usually captures

more fully the persuasive impact of the commentary, the relaxed, spontaneous language of the “heat of battle” has been retained.

II. A Brief History of an Epic Adventure

American Bear was born as a ten-minute play in my graduate playwriting class. After a hiatus due to work on other projects and no initial idea of what to do with the piece, I began adapting it into a one-act play for what would be my second production as a playwright but my first as a person dedicated to the craft of playwriting. The short play went through two development processes: an initial and informal development with my mentor, Dr. Roger Gross, and a more formal process headed by Professor Michael Landman as part of a summer play development class that included graduate acting and undergraduate theatre students with the express purpose of developing the play for the Boars' Head Players' first annual New Play Showcase. It was directed by Rex Austin Barrow who was also a part of the tail-end of the formal workshop. On closing night of the production, I was approached by Barrow, with the idea of turning the script into a feature-length screenplay that could be produced by him and his wife, Laura Barrow.

Over the fall of 2007, I began to adapt the script into a screenplay. During spring break of 2008, the script was shot on location in El Dorado, Arkansas in eight days on a budget of less than 5,000 dollars. The film had a premiere in El Dorado, Arkansas in the summer of 2008 and after several failed attempts to enter the film into regional and national festivals, a Fayetteville premiere in the summer of 2009. Stripped, Bear is now available on Amazon.com for DVD purchase and on-demand viewing. Then, a great deal of nothing happened with the script. I was focused on productions of my other plays: Seller Door and Absolutely New Adventures in Love and the Space / Time Continuum.

After the workshop and production of Seller Door, I moved to Lawrence, Kansas where I sat, unemployed for most of the rest of 2009 and into 2010 before I decided to remount the

project as a full-length play. I directed and produced the project, and once things got underway, it was picked up by Ric Averill at the Lawrence Arts Center to be part of their New Play Festival in August of 2010. American Bear premiered at the festival and was picked up for production by She & Her Productions of Kansas City, Missouri in June of 2011 but was plagued by a loss of venue and a lack of commitment from the both the original and new actor cast as Eddie, so the KC premiere was turned into a reading of both American Bear and Seller Door.

After that production and a not extremely well-seen production of Seller Door by the Sustainable Theatre Project in Austin, Texas in July of 2011, Derek Kolluri, the actor who played Eddie in the one-act and the film, as well as the leading character in STP's Seller Door, set to work on the new full-length, this time playing Jules to his own brother Devin's Eddie. With his live-in girlfriend, co-producer, and lighting designer Jennifer Lavery as Lonnie, the play premiered in Austin to mixed but encouraging reviews and earned local B. Iden Payne Award nominations for sound and lighting design. With that, I had finally achieved one of my long-standing goals as a playwright, to be critically reviewed.

I feel I have now accomplished two of the three things that make a person a true playwright. I don't count the writing of the script. That makes someone a writer but not a playwright. To be a playwright, in my opinion, involves the actual collaboration required of theatre-making. First, there must be a production that people come to see. Then, the play exists. Somebody has to care enough about it to write a review. Then, the playwright exists. And, eventually, someone will decide to publish one of my plays, and that, in my mind, will make me a professional playwright. Though unpublished, I am a produced and critically reviewed playwright. This experience covers my journey from what I consider to be my birth as a playwright in training to what I feel is my establishment as an arguably legitimate playwright.

III. The Birth of the Bear

In 2006, my first semester as an MFA playwriting candidate, Clinnesha Dillon, the other entering playwright candidate, and I were enrolled in a value-added class for first-year students. Clinnesha and I were writing six ten-minute plays as an introduction to both the form and the expectations of graduate playwriting study. After a couple of assignments rewriting short plays from our repertoire, we started creating new ten-minute scripts from various prompts provided by Roger. The first prompt was for us to pick a number between one and 36 with no idea as to what the choice would mean. In the spirit of the thing, I chose 13. This, as I soon found out, was to correspond with one of Georges Polti's 36 dramatic situations, which I had heard of in passing less than a year before but had never attempted to read. My number corresponded specifically with dramatic situation number 13: Enmity of Kinship. To be honest, I was not entirely sure what this meant. I knew the word "enmity" and I knew "kinship," and I had an idea of what they meant together, but I didn't have any idea of what I might make of it.

So, I sat there, staring at the blank, open page in Final Draft, the scriptwriting software I have used since my first attempts at serious playwriting while at Humboldt State University, in Arcata, CA. I was at HSU so I could collect enough credits to finish my undergraduate BFA in Theatre from Emporia State University in Emporia, KS, and it was because of this direct exposure to the craft of playwriting which was not afforded me in my generalist theatre program at ESU, that I came to Arkansas as a playwright and not an actor or director. I have only written one other play without the software, (which I started in 1996 on paper and finished in 2003 in MS Word), so I feel it's worth a mention. I spend a lot of time staring at that blank page in Final Draft, and this evening, in early September of 2006, was no exception. So, to break things up a bit, and in hopes of spurring some kind of action, I decided to delve into the definitions of

kinship and enmity. They pretty much meant exactly what I thought they did, so I decided to read the 13th entry from Polti's list, which I found online through the most cursory glance of a search.

Polti calls for two major elements, "...a Malevolent Kinsman," and, "a Hated or Reciprocally Hating Kinsman," before going on to state that Enmity of Kinsmen is, "Antithesis, which consisted for Hugo the generative principle of art, -- dramatic art in particular,-- and which naturally results from the idea of conflict, which is the basis of drama, offers one of the most symmetrical of schemes in these contrasting emotions... Such conflicts necessarily give rise to stormy action." To be honest, I couldn't comprehend the language of his entry at the time. It seems simple enough in hindsight: two people who should love each other do the opposite, and that's drama... but I have now been through three years of post-graduate training and four more years of scholarly thought because of that training.

Polti goes on to describe and prescribe three specific laws for this situation, which I will now paraphrase. First: the closer the bonds, the more savage and dangerous the result. Second: The hatred is a better characterization of the situation when it is mutual. Apparently, to have the hatred only exist in one side of the kinship creates a tyrant and a victim, according to Polti, which results in situations he has listed as, "5, 7, 8, 30," and, "etc." The third rule I will quote directly because I find it is so well put, "The great difficulty will be to find and to represent convincingly an element of discord powerful enough to cause the breaking of the strongest human ties." I had no trouble comprehending that last statement at the time, and it stuck with me. Polti finishes the entry by listing possible iterations of his situation such as, "Hatred of Brothers, Hatred of Father and Son, Grandfather and Grandson," and even, "Infanticide." I couldn't

process most of this, but I did keep coming back to the question, “What makes one hate someone who should be loved?”

I had been reading a lot of Sam Shepard over the summer, and I think I was also keyed into a mindset of personal family exploration by moving from California much closer to my own family who live three hours south of the University in Glenn Rose, Arkansas. And, I kept coming back to my brother, perhaps because the word, “brother,” appears so often in Polti’s entry, and perhaps because my brother and I had just finished with an ordeal that had brought us closer to enmity than we had ever been. I had stopped speaking to my brother immediately after moving to Fayetteville, because I felt he had disrespected both me and our mutual friend, Derek Kolluri, who was also now in Fayetteville in the same department, though working on an MFA in acting. The whole situation was ironed out and we were talking again before classes started, but the essence of the saga still lingered with me as I stared at the screen. I had always talked to this brother, even when I didn’t get around to talking with my other siblings, but I had chosen to cut him off for reasons which felt more than justified at the time.

So, there I was, staring at the screen, re-living the argument of the summer while replaying Polti’s third law on a sub-conscious loop: “The great difficulty will be to find and to represent convincingly an element of discord powerful enough to cause the breaking of the strongest human ties.” I knew at the time that our little spat was low on the spectrum of family crises and motivation for enmity, so I immediately thought of ways to up the stakes. The last play I had worked on at Humboldt was Brecht’s Mother Courage and her Children, and it had been brought to my attention by the director, John Heckel, that this was a play about money, not war, and that the war was a way to up the stakes and make the money more important. What I had going between my brother and me that was worth exploring was the budding undercurrent of

my disappointment in his choices. But, to write a play about a brother who disappoints is not really much of a play. That's really just a slice of life. So, I started to think about building a play where this undercurrent is brought to life through a catalyst. And, I decided that the catalyst should be a poker game. So, I set to work.

IV. **The First Script: Wright-ing and Writing**

I created a couple of brothers. I called them *Jimmy* and *Jules*. My grandfather's name is Jules, and I've always thought it was a pretty badass name. Jules is also the name of Samuel L. Jackson's character in Pulp Fiction. You know his wallet. It's the one that says, "BAD MOTHER FUCKER," on it. Jimmy also starts with a "J" like Jules and ends in a "y" like Larry. Originally, Jimmy is listed as an, "intellectual hipster," and Jules as a, "well clothed vagabond." In a superficial effort to move myself out of the script and allow these characters to have their own lives I made Jimmy the younger brother and Jules the older brother. This also gave Jules more responsibility to not only succeed for himself, but to be an example to the younger Jimmy.

The play opens up as Jules returns from a poker game in which Jimmy had staked him the 10 dollar buy-in, only to be rebuffed when he asked Jules to repay him from his 200 dollar winnings. This happened to me at my bachelor party, though my brother was not the culprit. Anyhow, as Jules enters, he sees that his things are strewn about, outside the house, and Jimmy is on the couch doing his level-best to ignore Jules by staring at the television. This goes on for about two pages: Jimmy ignoring Jules and Jules attempting to goad Jimmy into talking. Then, at the top of the third page, Jimmy breaks out "the bear:" something he calls a, "family tradition," whereby family members don't speak for several years at a time due to feuds that are never discussed. Jimmy is unaware that any of this ever happened in the family, because he was too young at the time, but Jules warns him against going down the same path, before mentioning for the first time that they have both, "lost a lady this week," to which Jimmy replies, "She gone then?" Jules affirms. Now there is a third, unnamed character, who at the top of page four is reveled to have returned to Memphis the night before. When I started writing the play, I had no idea this was going to happen. I started with the poker-debt, began typing, and somehow, I

accidentally upped the stakes again, which is a good thing because a poker debt is not a strong enough catalyst for enmity of kinship.

Halfway through the third page, Jules says, “She left me, too,” intimating that the ladies that both brothers have lost this week are, in fact, one and the same. Mind you, this dialogue comes out as a tactic Jules uses to get Jimmy to talk to him again, warning him that, “This one’s on you. I tried,” at the bottom of page four. This finally sets Jimmy off at the top of five as he retorts, “Yeah, you ‘tried.’ That’s all you ever do. Just go. Please.” Jules moves to a new tactic, now offering the money to Jimmy, asking, “Will ten bucks buy me a brother?” This almost gets Jimmy involved again, but he finds his way back to the television and tells Jules to keep the money. Jules doesn’t understand. If it’s not about the money, then what is it about? So, Jimmy does his best to clue Jules in: “Do you really think I decorated our, my lawn with your shit, because you didn’t pay me back for poker?” Now, we’ve reached the heart of it. It’s not about poker. Jimmy has known this the whole time, but Jules seemed oblivious, because, frankly, so was I. I thought I was writing a play about a poker debt and this whole other narrative snuck in on me. And, in case his asking Jules to leave didn’t do enough to imply that this is Jimmy’s house, that last line confirms it. Jules is still lost. “You said you were cool with this Ashley shit, man,” he says to Jimmy. Now we know for sure that they are in a love triangle, and somehow Jules violated Jimmy’s trust by participating in it. We also know that Jimmy had tried to forgive Jules for the transgression, but the poker incident had sent them back to square-one.

The next four pages are Jimmy lecturing Jules about his life choices, and in these pages, it is revealed that this undercurrent of disappointment, spurred by the infidelity, is really the culprit and not a silly poker debt as Jules continues to play the brother card, in hopes that he and Jimmy can work this out. The last two pages are Jimmy telling Jules he has to go. As the play

ends on page 12, Jules and Jimmy hug, Jimmy reasserts that Jules must leave, adding, “for now,” and he does. The play closes as Jimmy heads back to the couch and television, putting on a ball-cap that Jules has left behind. So, there we have it: Enmity of Kinship. Two brothers coming as close to hate as I felt comfortable with at the time.

If there was to be a close second to Shepard in the influence department, I would have to list David Mamet. After finishing the Shepard plays on the drive from California to Arkansas, I had revisited his acting tome, True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor, a book that is as contradictory and inflammatory as all good theory has been and will continue to be. Prior to this, I had also read several of his plays, seen a couple, sound designed one, seen several of his films, and read his essay collection, Writing in Restaurants, so he was definitely on my mind, and, I feel this influence is evident in the dialogue of the first version of the play.

The title page for this 12-page version lists it as a second draft, and I have no remaining copy of the first, but knowing my own habits at the time, the second draft is, at most, a lightly edited version of the first. The second draft is dated September 18, 2006, and that is what I believe I brought into the main class with the other students.

V. Critique of Initial Draft

About a week before this, Clinnesha and I read the 10 page first draft for Roger in our one-hour class. The feedback from Roger and Clinnesha was positive. They liked the tone and the language. I felt encouraged. Roger released me from the constraints of the ten-minute form and told me to write it the length it needed to be. I believe that's how I ended up with the 12-page version that I also later brought into the main playwriting class with Kevin Cohea, Ashley Edwards, and Chris Martin. The feedback from the elder crew was not as generous. I remember Ashley feeling like it was a little harsh and Kevin feeling like it was a, "talking heads play." I think somebody liked the title, which at the time was "Stripped Bear" without the comma. Roger must have sensed my discouragement, and he pulled me aside after class to tell me he thought there was, "really something to this play," and that I shouldn't give up on it. But, due to other work and no real idea what else to do with it, that is exactly what I did for several months.

Looking back on this draft with fresh eyes, I agree with initial feedback that the dialogue is interesting and helps to pull the reader into the world of the play. It flows, though the longer speeches are heavy handed, and Kevin's, "talking head," description is apropos. Having two catalysts for the fight instead of one is confusing. But, one of them, the better of the two, was accidental and served the play well in future drafts. Bob Ross calls that a, "Happy Accident." I am and will probably always be a little embarrassed by what this play says about my attitude at the time. I clearly felt like I was better than my brother, whatever that means, and these 12 pages are my ham-fisted attempt to justify my holier-than-thou attitude toward him. Being newly surrounded by the empowerment of academia, which had chosen me while turning others away, wasn't doing much to keep my ego from inflating, either.

At some point, this play needed to become about Jules and Jimmy. And, even though I did my best to insert superficial changes and complications, this is still quite literally a conversation with my brother where I get to play both parts. Keeping myself so “in the play” did keep me in touch with the raw, emotional core that one cannot put into words when trying to create, but it also held these characters, who should have been free to follow their own paths, within my known world, and that was a disservice to them. It is also worth noting that this play does not technically fit into Polti’s description of the 13th Dramatic Situation. I had made one into the victim. The hatred was not mutual on a conscious level. But, I don’t see this as a failure, as, in my opinion, a prompt is there to serve a writer, so whatever comes of it is just fine, so long as it nets good work. Also, in later drafts and iterations of the script, I did make changes to address both my attitude at the time and the one-sided nature of the dispute.

VI. Hibernation 1

The “Bear” hibernated until April of the next year. I spent over 10 years writing on deadlines for newspapers, so I almost always need a deadline for motivation. This play didn’t have one. My solo-play about Bobby Fischer did. So did my many assignments for the television workshop that December with Linda Bloodworth-Thomason. We created a series, wrote a pilot, flew to Los Angeles, and pitched the thing at several studios, though nothing ever came of it. After returning from Los Angeles, I auditioned for the University’s production of All in the Timing. As a playwright in the program, this turned out to be a marginally bad move for me, as it was a replacement show for what was supposed to be a showcase for the senior playwrights in the program, Chris Martin and Ashley Edwards. I believe this choice affected our relationship for the remainder of their time in the program. At some point after I had finished, All in the Timing, it was brought up that Chris and Ashley were to have plays produced in the coming summer for what would be the university’s first annual New Play Showcase. This replaced the production they had lost during the spring of 2007. But, this was not where the news ended: Clinnesha and I were also getting slots in the showcase for one-acts. I don’t believe either of us had such a thing, so we both went with what we were working on in that semester’s playwriting class which focused on adaptation.

I chose to adapt Edward Everett Hale’s short story *The Man without a Country* as it seemed logical to me at the time that a short story should yield a short play. I gave no consideration to the fact that I had chosen an epic short story which spanned some 60 years of a man’s life. This did become apparent, however, once I turned in an initial outline with some dialogue to Roger and Austin, who was slated to direct my play. I was asked what else I might have, and I was simply not sure. For the time being, it was decided that I would still try to mine a

one-act out of “The Man Without a Country.” Clinnesha, on the other hand, was adapting Man of LaMancha into a modern tale of a sex-slave at a truck-stop, and though some of the senior students weren’t big fans, Roger and I felt this play had legs to it. Right around this time, in March, my grandfather died, and I left for Ohio to attend the funeral. I brought Clinnesha’s play with me to read.

VII. Waking into a new play

While at the funeral, I was immersed, after a decade-long absence, into my mother's side of the family. Everybody thought I was my brother, as they had actually seen him a time or two in the last ten years. This was also my first time being old enough to consciously take in all of the family goings-on that occur at funerals. In a lot of ways, I couldn't believe what I saw. Then I remembered the *Bear*, and I realized it wasn't just some convenient device or invention I had come up with but a description of my own family. It seemed like there were years growing up when we didn't go anywhere for Christmas because one member of the family wasn't speaking to another. At the time, it just seemed normal. Two sisters had a fight. It got settled, and we started visiting again. But, after seeing and hearing everyone at the funeral, my own family members arguing over money, guns, property, whether his second wife, the only wife of his I remember and called "grandma" should have been in any of the pictures: all petty stuff that one might think would go by the wayside at a funeral for a father, but was, in fact, all the more magnified because of it. At some point that day, Roger sent me a text telling me that "The Man Without a Country" was a non-starter for this term. He wanted to know what else I had in the can. I told him I had nothing, which is odd, as I was currently in the real-life version of a play I had written only a few months prior. Luckily, Roger made that connection for me. He suggested that I pull, "that bear play," back out for another look, and he had some ideas on how I might expand it into a one-act.

VIII. Bringing Back Bear

Upon my return from the funeral, it was clear that Roger was ready to help me find a path toward a play. He had pulled out an early draft from his files and noted several ideas for possible complication. The first and most important suggestion was that I should add the girl, currently named Ashley, into the play. So, I set to work trying to expand the play, and I took almost none of his advice. What I got was an 18 page, even more talking heads-y script that was six pages longer but not much different from where I had started. The new pages were more specific about the undercurrent of disappointment, with lines like, “When was the last time you paid rent? Huh? What kind of car do you drive? Who owns that car? Who paid to fix it after you wrecked it?” It’s essentially a continuation of that conversation in my head between my brother and me where I get to play both parts. It is also more apparent in that draft that Jimmy is almost as frustrated with Jules’s oblivious nature as he is with his perceived transgressions. This also mirrored my attitude at the time.

Again, as I continue to look back on these drafts, I am struck by my own ego. I’m essentially making a case in these plays that Jules’s parents coddled him when they should have made him stand on his own two feet, which is all too analogous to my own life. I had gone out into the world to make my way with very little support from my parents, and I have accumulated over 100,000 dollars in student loan debt to prove it. I felt that once it had been established that my choice to go to college instead of joining the military was not half-bad, my parents paid for my brother to do the same, and he did not finish. All the perceived slights to me and Derek were projections of this jealousy mixed with disappointment. I had to jump class the hard way, and I will happily pay for it the rest of my life. But, for whatever reason, at the time, I was projecting this frustration onto my younger brother.

For the first two years of college, I felt a constant pressure that, as the sole military-eligible family member, I had turned my back on the only opportunity they could comprehend, and to be honest with you, as I sit here typing this: an underemployed, seven-year MFA candidate; within the family, the jury might still out on whether I made the right choice. I was and still remain resolute that I made the best choice for myself. I wanted him to be like me. But he's not. And that's awesome. And, it is now apparent that I was putting the same pressure on his life choices that my parents had placed on me. I don't bring this up so that I can air dirty laundry. I offer it as explanation for why the driving forces behind this play seem to be so petty. It's because they were.

I could tell that Roger was not into the new "draft." He was encouraging, and he kindly repeated his main note from earlier, "We need to see the girl." This time, I had no better options, and in an attempt to humor him or prove him wrong, I set to writing the new first scene. I gave it very little thought before-hand. I just knew that we needed the girl. So, I started with what the original script gave me. At some point, after Jimmy had left, but before he had come back home, Ashley had left for Memphis. Jules was there. The first scene of the play is that scene.

The April 23rd draft opens with an answering machine message from Eddie, who has replaced Jimmy in the play. I changed the name, because in Final Draft, when you type the first letter of a name, it will auto-complete the name for you unless you have two names that start with the same letter. I had no patience for having to type the first two letters of every name, so I changed it to Eddie. I also have a cousin named Eddie, and I felt like Eddie sounded more like a nice-guy name than Jimmy, which does have a bit of sinister potential in it. I also changed the girl's name from Ashley to Lonnie. It just fit better. Lonnie sounds more like a Memphis name than Ashley, and there was an Ashley in our class, so that felt weird.

The message from Eddie plays as Jules and Lonnie listen. Lonnie is packing. Jules was sleeping but is now awake and sits on the couch. Eddie says that he's been driving and he's going to be back by tonight, waits for someone to pick up, but nobody does, so he ends the call. After the call, Lonnie continues packing as Jules tries to convince her to stay. In the second page, we also learn that Jules is the older brother, but the house has been left to Eddie. This also implies for the first time that the parents are dead, an obvious connection to the funeral I attended the month before. Lonnie also takes on a bit of the older stuff from Jimmy, in that the Mazda now belongs to her, though she technically sold it to Jules but is keeping it because he hasn't paid her for it. She also asks him if he loves her just like Jimmy did in the last draft before calling him, "...a leech, an asshole, an idiot, an adulterer, etcetera, etcetera." They kiss, and she leaves as Jules yells to her that she's a whore. Then, she comes back. They kiss again before Lonnie slaps him in the face and leaves again. Jules goes back to the couch and sits.

The second scene is the first and only scene of the previous draft minus the lines I took from Eddie and gave to Lonnie. And, though I assumed there was going to be a bit more, I felt like this was a play at the time. It wasn't, but it was a decent start for one. I was still having conversations where I played all the parts, only now, I'd gotten a girl into the mix. She's not very different from the brothers. If I were to cover up the names, and I didn't know the work so well, I couldn't tell them apart. I could get away with that on the brothers. They're supposed to sound alike, and their motivations led to a difference in pace and tone. But, with Lonnie, it was a problem that would extend well into the life of this project. In this draft, looking back, I do start to escape the Mamet tribute and fall into my own kind of language, but it is too much of a good thing. I was lost in myself, and there is little difference between the characters; another clue that I was simply having conversations with myself. At some point, characters need their own brains.

Roger was happy with the new opener. We had played around with phone calls throughout the year, and I had always gotten good feedback from him, so the answering machine went over well. It builds mystery. It has a nice rhythm to it. And, now that I had gotten over the hump of the new character, I felt open to rapid expansion. Roger suggested that I add-in some moments with less tension while sketching a graph illustrating the current state of tension in my play, which was pretty much a straight line up. This was an issue with, “The Man without a Country.” All of those scenes were high tension, and to add lower tension would have meant a much longer play. This play, however, was only 24 pages, and it could stand a bit of dialogue clipping, leaving about 20 pages of useable material, meaning that I could easily add another 30 pages. For the first time, I started to outline a plot. Roger had me tell him what I thought the story was, and we cherry-picked plot-points.

The first scene we decided to add was an opener that starts the plot at the logical beginning of the most important part of the story: when Eddie and Lonnie arrive. We both saw this as an opportunity for a low-tension, welcome-home scene. The answering machine scene, with Lonnie yelling at Jules and leaving, a high-tension scene, would be next. Then, Roger suggested that I have both Jules and Lonnie return, either in separate scenes, or together. He suggested that maybe Lonnie comes back and Jules comes back while she’s still there. Then, he suggested that I have the two brothers duke it out. I was not into this. I was trying to write a play that danced around all those moments. For me, at the time, the big scene was Eddie telling Jules what a shit he was and kicking him out of the house. And, the fact that it was non-violent but abrasive was important to me. I wanted a Julianne Sugarbaker moment, not Mixed Martial Arts. I also felt the idea was bit too True West. I was mindful that I was aping Shepard a bit and wanted

to steer clear of too many of his trappings. Roger told me to give it some thought. And I set to work on a new draft with at least two new scenes.

IX. A Play! (Technically)

On May 4, I finished a 48 page draft with five scenes that felt like, and actually was, a play. The new opener has Jules asleep on the couch as Eddie knocks on the door. The television has disappeared for reasons I cannot recall, and so has any reference to an, “intellectual hipster,” or a, “well-clothed vagabond.” I had been back in Arkansas for nine months, and I was settled into the south: where I wanted this play to take place. I made the living-room look like my grandmother’s house, implying that it was not Eddie or Jules’ house, but the parents’, and I let it rip with no goals in the scene other than letting these three meet and adding in some exposition about details that had come out when I recited / made the story up on the spot for Roger.

I left Lonnie out in the car so we could meet the brothers and the house first. They stand, awkward, unsure, and staring at one-another, leaving only uncomfortable small-talk. Eddie is married. Jules knows this but he didn’t know about the wedding. Then, she shows up at the door after finishing her song on the radio. Jules and Lonnie finally meet. He asks how long they’re planning to stay, and they imply that they might be sticking around. Jules tells them that they can stay as long as they like, which prompts Eddie to ask if Jules has read the copy of the will he sent him. Jules has not. This is when we find out that Eddie, the younger brother, has been given the house. And, we find out about the house right along with Jules, who had no clue.

This moment, which was not planned, does it’s best to set the play on a course for something closer to Polti’s 13th situation. Now, Jules has a motive. He feels like a victim, which means that Eddie can’t be the only one. Lonnie has left the room, and the scene finishes as Jules and Eddie talk about anything but the elephant in the room, even their parents’ death, (they were killed in a car accident), and where he found Lonnie, (at a strip club outside Memphis). I did not plan this, either. It just happened. I asked myself, “Where did she work?” And I answered, “A

strip club outside Memphis.” She is described as a, “washed-up, never was beauty queen,” but that’s not really how I imagined her. I thought of her as someone much softer who is driven to be hard by the end of this play. Despite seeing the other three actresses that have played her, I still have the original picture of her in my mind. And, “washed-up” isn’t the right way to describe it.

The second scene is still the answering machine and Lonnie leaving after yelling at Jules and kissing and slapping him a couple times. I didn’t really mess with that scene, mechanically, as I was excited to add the new ones. I did go back through and cut some of the bigger dialogue chunks into something more like a tennis match. The third scene is still the high-tension scene between Jules and Eddie, but at the time, I felt like the scene couldn’t go anywhere else. It is still the same scene it was in the two previous drafts, though I did go back through the dialogue, in an attempt to trim the fat, which did trim a few pages before adding one or two back as I also broke up some more monologues, (diatribes), into dialogue. Eddie also gives Jules some cash before he leaves this time, and though the television is no longer a fixture in the play, Eddie does still pick up the hat and put it on. The fourth scene has Eddie back on the couch as Lonnie shows up. As I entered this scene, I had no idea what was going to happen. I just had Eddie on the couch and Lonnie, “soaked to the bone,” at the door after running out of gas in the car, because Jules didn’t put any gas in it.

I knew I needed a low-tension scene after the two previous high-tension scenes, so I went back into the play with this mind-set. And what we get are two gun-shy former lovers, still, “husband and wife.” One is hoping to stay as the other turns her away, and both of them know they aren’t meant for one-another. Lonnie tries to come back in subtle ways at first. She asks if she can come in, to dry off. Eddie gets her a towel and offers to call her a cab. Then she tells him they don’t have to stay together and asks if she can still stay in the house, not wanting to return

to Memphis to be a stripper. Eddie doesn't bite, so she asks him if he still loves her. He does, but he just, "can't stand to look," at her anymore. He calls the cab and gives her the rest of his money. They both apologize to each other, and she leaves as Eddie returns to the couch. There is no yelling. It is bitter with a hint of sweet, and I had written her out of the scene, so I had to start a new one with either Jules and Lonnie, or Eddie and Jules.

I chose to end it with Eddie and Jules, and I chose to give Roger's advice a shot. I knew the last scene ended on a low-note, and I knew we couldn't go that route again for two reasons: it would mirror both the previous scene in the play and the previous scene with the brothers, and it would give a slump to the end of the play. I had Jules come back in to get his hat. It seemed simple enough, and then I let them go, knowing that at some point they were probably going to fight but still not convinced I was going to have them do it.

Jules is broken, and he wants his hat. Eddie, for the first time, plays the part of the bully that Jules has subconsciously created, taunting him with the hat, asking if it's his favorite when he knows damn well it is. At this point, the boy who got bullied in elementary through middle school couldn't let that go, and I sent Jules in. He tackles Eddie, grabs his hat, almost swings, but stops short, and begins to make his way out of the house. Eddie isn't going to let this go, however, and he tackles Jules from behind, grabs the hat, and tosses it away, like a teenager might do, then swings on his older brother, catching him in the jaw. Jules head-butts Eddie: a hyper-aggressive move to remind him who the big brother is, and sends Eddie to the floor. Now the fight takes a break. As the men mark distance, Jules grabs his hat and tells Eddie, "You took the house. She took the car. I got no place to live. I got no people left. All I got is this stupid hat." Then, it is revealed that it was their father's hat, and he had given it to Jules. Jules asks if he can go, and Eddie says, "Sure, Yeah. Go." But, as Jules tries to leave, Eddie starts throwing anything

in arms-reach at him before moving on to their mom's collectible figurines. Jules says, "Hey, that's mom's! Cut that shit out." Eddie does not, and Jules tackles him, again. Then he asks Eddie, "You just wanna fight?" To which Eddie replies, "Yes! It's all I've been waiting for. Come on brother! Swing! Hit me in the fucking face, Jules! Hit me!" Jules refuses, saying, "We're brothers, man!" Eddie replies, "Not anymore! Now we're bears! I am an ape fucking bear! Swing at me!" Jules refuses, again, so Eddie charges like a bull, and Jules dodges several times. Eddie gets up; starts taunting Jules again, "Swing! You fucking pussy! You fucking faggot! Hit me!" before charging and missing another several times and collapsing on the floor. Jules tells Eddie he's not going to fight him, he's sorry, and he has to go. Eddie lumbers up and moves to the couch. Jules tells him to get some sleep. Eddie says, "I been sleeping for six days." Jules replies, "I been sleeping for six years, man. Quit while you still can, brother." Eddie asks Jules if he wants to stay. Of course he does. Eddie says it's their home as Jules starts picking up and the play ends.

I felt like a God after that. I felt like a playwright. Roger was right about the fight. It finally gave these brothers a chance to air it all out. And, 48 pages is a play. I was mindful of that. Roger also felt this draft had good shape. He was happy with the tension but saw the dangers in having the Jules and Lonnie scene right next to the first Jules and Eddie scene. However, we both agreed that I was in good enough shape to enter the workshop. He also suggested that I give each scene a title in the style of Elia Kazan. I had always done this when directing, but it had never occurred to me to do such a thing as a writer. As I went through and polished the 48 pages down to 44 for what would be my draft entering the formal summer workshop, I did give each scene a title, but I did not include them in the script. What I didn't do at the time, however, was go back through each scene and make it adhere to its title.

I did one more pass at the script on May 30th, cutting four pages of extraneous dialogue while leaving the action untouched, and I added a comma in the title, which now read, “Stripped, Bear,” because Roger felt it looked too much like, “Striped Bear.” The comma draws your attention to the spelling of the words, and it separates the ideas.

X. Critique of the Pre-Workshop Script

Looking at the script in hind-sight, I love the language to a fault. It still loves itself too much. I am clearly aware that dialogue is my strong suit, and I hitch all horses to that wagon. I was clearly being steered by Roger to make a dramatic play, despite my best unconscious efforts to write a thematic play. The two contrasting efforts coalesce for an interesting thing. It is a play. It is not great. It has gaps. It goes too high in the middle before dipping and finishing strong. The two weakest scenes are the second and third, and the three strongest are the new ones. I think I was warming up here, as a playwright. Until this point, all of my writing had been purpose driven, fulfilling a deadline before being forgotten about as I got into the next project. I was forced to stay in this one, and though I wasn't doing much to improve the original scenes, (the first is still the weakest,) the strength of the new scenes does a great deal to compensate. I was wrong about how good I felt it was at the time, but I was right to feel I had a play on my hands.

There is a clear beginning, middle, and end. We enter fairly early in the story, only having missed the wedding and the death of the parents. Then, we jump time to where things have already begun to crumble. This does create a large action-gap in the play that makes the first scene feel a bit out of touch. The last four scenes feel right in a sequential sense, but, again, they are plagued with the first two being too similar, and the scene before last is in danger of feeling like a false ending.

Had I been left on my own I would not have been able to make a play in this amount of time. I was still learning the basics of the craft. I had some strong poetic and somewhat dramatic instincts, and I understood the world of theatre that plays have to exist in, but I was also just learning how to consciously construct plot, and that made me dangerous. Without Roger's guidance, I would have been lost, though I was so unaware as a playwright at the time, I would

have never known it. At almost each stage in the process up to now, and even going forward, I was often happy with the work or sure it was dead, until someone pushed me to search for more, to make it better, and in this stage of the process, it was Roger Gross doing that pushing. I moved into the workshop confident and more open to feedback.

XI. Doing more Digging

We read the initial script Roger had nurtured me into creating on the first day of the workshop along with Clinnesha's draft of her play. Afterward, Clinnesha and I met with Professor Michael Landman, the head of the Directing Program and leader of our portion of the workshop. He had asked us each to write a statement about how the play got to where it is and what our goals were for it in the workshop. The first part is the history of the process up to then, and we've covered that, but the last part will give you an idea about my mindset going in to the formal summer workshop, so I have included it below.

Statement for Michael Landman: 6-10-07

...I think that the goal for me has remained the same, that I now have more time to show the story: develop the characters and allow the audience to be a part of the action versus hearing about it.

I guess my goal is to test the bonds of family. Is it infallible? Can you ever be unworthy of the bond? What is the difference with the ones we choose to love? What do we gain if we alienate ourselves from family? What have we lost? Can we ever really go back home?

Michael agreed that I had some decent goals in mind. He agreed that the characters could continue to be fleshed out, especially Lonnie, and he added that he also felt there were gaps in the script that he would like to see filled. He asked why I had chosen to skip over so many ripe moments like the engagement of Eddie and Lonnie, the moment Jules and Lonnie start to cheat, and the moment Eddie catches them cheating, I answered that I was trying to construct a play out of all the moments most plays skip. I wanted to see the aftermath of the moments, not the moments themselves. I also hate seeing people in bed on stage. It rarely works. He seemed OK

with this and asked that I write two scenes for him that wouldn't go in the script as a way to flesh out the characters. He asked me to put Lonnie in front of a therapist and let her monologue a bit, so we can get a better idea of who she is, outside of the situation. He asked me to write the scene where Lonnie and Jules hook-up, just so we'd have a better idea of how it happened. I took this to mean that he expected them both the next day, because I was well-trained by my mentor at that point. So, I brought them both in the next day.

The first, "Lonnie-logue," as I called it, opens with a large paragraph where Lonnie explains why she can trust the psychiatrist before moving on to describe a typical day at the strip-club.

"Hi...It's good to see you again... No, really. I mean it. I missed you. You know. It's like, at first, seriously, I hated you. Well, not you. No, no, I did. I hated you. I hated having to come here. There's nothing wrong with me. Everybody got problems... No, that's not what I was trying to say. It's just, well... I think about this time, now. I like talkin' to you, cause you listen. You know? You really listen. A lot of people don't do that. You probably get ten people a day here, whinin' away about their dead mommies and daddies, probably more than that, but you look like you care. You really do. I know that inside you're thinkin' about what may be wrong with me, or maybe you're thinkin' about how you gotta get to the cleaners on the way to lunch and back, and you're wonderin' how you're ever gonna get into the gym when you just can't find the time... I know I'm probably wrong, but I know you're thinkin' about stuff. What I got to say can't be all that interesting that your mind don't wander... I know. You're a professional. So am I, but the mind wanders. It does. If you don't tell me that you think about other

things from time to time, daydream while folks like me yackety-yack on and on all god damned day, then I don't think I can trust you...

BEAT

There's a smile. I thought so. I figure if I can rub my bare ass on 37 strange cocks in one night without thinking; about nothin' but where I'm goin' to get my nails done, the whole time, pretending that I'm having the greatest sex of my life, when I'm not even remotely close to having sex... and we never do... anyhow, you oughta be able to listen to a whole gaggle of idiots like me and still keep your sanity, keep yourself."

Then, there is a beat where it is implied that the doctor asks Lonnie about her mother. Through her description it is clear that her mother is now dead and was the major influence on her. It is implied that the father was absent.

Oh, sure, every day. Don't you think about your mom every day? I know I do. I always did. Reckon I always will. You know? Not that I blame her or anything. It's all love. I miss her most of all. She did the best she could with me. Best she knew how. You never stop lovin' your mamma. She's all I ever really had. All I ever knew. I just miss her. You know? I touch hundreds of men every day, but I don't think I really get anything out of it. One hug from my mom would... wow. I miss hugs. Don't you? I can't think of the last time someone hugged me... I need a new job.

Talk of how much she misses her mom turns to talk of how much she misses hugs, and she sees the irony in the fact that she spends all day in contact with men but misses the briefest

but much more substantial contact of a simple hug from her mom. The doctor seems to call her out on this, as she replies...

I know. I always mean it, too. Just cause I always say it doesn't mean I never mean it... I don't know. I always thought being a nurse might be cool, but it costs way too much to go to school. Too much time. I don't have two years to become a nurse. You know? I'm still young, and I know I don't wanna do this forever, but I don't know what the hell I'm gonna do after this either... I'm young. I'll figure something out.

I had no plans for this monologue, I just started writing as Lonnie, and I was as curious as anyone else what might come of it. She cannot see the long-view. Michael liked this one, but he wanted more. He felt like we were just getting started, like a door had opened, but we never went in. So, he asked me to write another one.

The second scene I wrote for the day was the scene between Lonnie and Jules when they kiss for the first time. It borrows a bit from the previous assignment, as I did them both on the same night. I really just put myself back in undergrad where every moment seemed to have the potential for sex. So, knowing it was going to happen, I started the scene with the first action that popped into my head that didn't involve sex, found ways to make them vulnerable, and when I felt I had earned it, I pulled the trigger.

I remember Michael and the class liking the idea of this scene and how it got to where it needed to go, but there was a sense that it was just a hair too quick. We needed at least one more beat. For the next day, it was suggested that I bring in the other monologue scene he asked for earlier in the day and the scene I didn't want in the play but agreed to write as an "exercise:" where Lonnie and Eddie get engaged.

In my first year at ESU, I spent a lot of late nights hanging out with my roommate, as he worked the grave-yard shift at a Texaco on the outskirts of town. And, when the strip club closed, most of the girls came through to buy cigarettes, so I was exposed to this part of them, after hours, and they were surprisingly cheerful. They rarely came off as overtly intellectual, but they also rarely seemed willfully ignorant. And, it was the tone of these nights, the playfulness, which I tried to bring into the scene.

I also pulled upon my own engagement. It was not planned. Elizabeth had moved from Emporia to Lawrence for the summer of 2002 and was moving to San Diego in about a month. I had come up to Lawrence to see her, as we were planning to break-up but still sneaking off to see one-another. And, there we were, sitting on a balcony of a friend she worked with, alone, and she asked me what we were going to do when she left. I replied, "You wanna get married?" It was rather out of the blue and is seen as unromantic by some, but for me, I was just going with my heart. It was the first time the thought had seriously crossed my mind, and I honored it. I have friends long-divorced who had very dramatic and beautifully planned engagements. Mine was pure truth in-the-moment, and it has worked out well for me, but I knew the outcome would be different for Eddie and Lonnie. I recognized that this would serve as both a sweet moment between them as well as a harbinger of bad things to come.

It was pretty unanimous in the workshop that the engagement scene was a hit. Again, the scenes continue to get better in respect to when they were created. I was still inventing the world I was supposed to be writing in, though by now, most of that world had been fleshed out. Michael mentioned that this would be a great scene in the play, along with the scene between Lonnie and Jules, but he also reiterated that it wasn't why he asked me to write them.

The second “Lonnie Logue,” opens immediately with a much more defensive Lonnie, “I don’t know. You’re the fuckin’ expert. Supposed to be. Shit. You tell me. No, seriously, I know I ain’t payin’ you or nothin’ but I don’t see the point sometimes. I don’t get you...suppose that’s not the point... you’re nice, right. You seem nice, but that’s how you do this isn’t it? You just smile.” This is Lonnie’s response to the doctor broaching the subject of her father. We learn that a rare phone call to him on her 18th birthday is rather anti-climactic, “After about ten minutes, he said, ‘Well, I guess I’ll let you go,’ and that was the last I heard of him. Wonder if he know about Momma? Figure he could have at least talked to me for a bit. About anything. Hell, I don’t care.”

The touchstone for this scene is taken from the last phone call I ever placed to my biological father. My brother had been talking to him on and off while he was in Florida, and I found myself stage managing a touring troupe of Chinese acrobats in the area, so I decided to give him a call. We talked for ten minutes, and then he said, “Well, I guess I’ll let you go.” And, that was it. I never called him back.

The class liked the piece, but they were always generally easy to please. Michael wanted more, again. He liked the history, but he wanted more of her mind, her point of view. I still don’t know how I would have done this any differently. I opened the door for her, and I felt like I got a lot out of it, but it was obvious that I didn’t quite get what he was after. It was certainly an insight I didn’t have prior to the exercise. Despite the fact that he didn’t get what he was looking for, or perhaps because of it, Michael didn’t ask for another Lonnie-logue. What he did ask for, the next day, was a scene with the family before the folks died: the last time Eddie was home. I obliged.

What I came up with was something I called, “Stuffed, Turkey,” in a nod to the title of the play. The scene opens up with Virgil and Vicki, Jules’s and Eddie’s parents, as they prepare for Thanksgiving dinner. Vicki needs help, but Virgil is, “On the shitter,” and suggests that she get Jules to help. Vicki says he’s still in bed, and they argue about whether it is right or wrong. Through their conversation we also find out that Eddie is coming home for the holiday but hasn’t yet arrived. Jules gets up, gets dressed, and helps Vicki with the bird. Jules comes back with a beer, which turns out to be the last one from the house, so Virgil sends him to get more out of the garage, and Eddie shows up. At first, he is hesitant to join the other two on the couch, watching the Cowboys game, but he eventually acquiesces to the pressure. As Virgil leaves the boys alone to talk, it is revealed that Eddie has dropped out of college and wants to start driving trucks, which he refers to as the, “family business.” He and Jules sit awkwardly until Jules asks Eddie if he wants to smoke a joint. He says, “Hell yes,” and Jules heads off to prepare as Vicki enters, kissing Eddie on the head. She sees that Jules has brought the beer inside but has left it in the living room, and she takes it to the fridge while yelling at Virgil to, “Get out there and say hello to your son.” He does, and what follows is awkward small-talk, until Virgil excuses himself to return to the bathroom. Jules returns, and he and Eddie leave to smoke the joint, leaving the living-room empty when Vicki returns. She yells out for the boys and Virgil. Only Virgil answers back, letting her know that he’s, “Back on the shitter!” When Vicki asks, “Where the boys at?” Virgil replies, “Hell, I don’t know,” and the scene is over.

This is one of my favorite scenes and it never made the play. Having two new characters to deal with was the last thing I wanted for my play but was fun to play with in the moment. The class, including Michael, all loved the material, but we also all agreed that bringing the parents in at this stage probably wasn’t going to work. We finished the day reading the script. After we

finished there was talk about how some elements of the scenes I had written for exploration might have a place in the play. I did agree that I was still looking for a way to lower the tension between the Lonnie-Eddie and Lonnie-Jules scenes that were both high tension and yelling, so I went home with an open mind, ready to take a look at how I might be able to use this new material to plug the gaps, and I had a bit of time, as we were going to spend several days focusing on Clinnesha's play.

XII. Shuffle up and Deal a New Play

I wanted to find an order that gave me the best balance of tension, because that is the element I was most aware of at the time. I made a post-it note for each scene, using the titles that Roger had asked me to create and giving titles to the new scenes as well. What I had was the original five scenes I had titled, “Coming Home, Lonnie’s Packing Up, Bear, Last Temptation of Lonnie,” and, “Go, Fight, Stay,” in the order of the current draft. Then I created titles for the other two scenes: “The Kiss,” and, “Wanna get Married?” I also made cards for the two Lonnie Logues thinking it might be fun to break into a monologue during the piece. I laid the notes out on my coffee table and stared at them for a while. I had never done anything like this before. I usually just wrote.

If I simply lined the cards up in the order that they happened, I would open with the engagement, Then, Eddie would arrive and we would find out about the will. Then, Lonnie and Jules would kiss while Eddie was out on the road. The next scene would be Lonnie yelling at Jules as she packed before the kissing and the slapping, then Eddie would be on the couch as Jules returned home, yelled at him, and kicked him out. Lonnie could come back, out of gas, and want to stay, but Eddie says, “No,” and she leaves. The play would still end with the fight. It was clear at a glance that this wasn’t going to work in terms of tension. “Wanna Get Married, Coming Home,” and, “The Kiss,” are all low-tension. The next two, “Lonnie’s Packing Up,” and “Bear,” are high-tension, while the last two did alternate, with “Last Temptation of Lonnie,” and, “Go, Fight, Stay,” ending the play nicely. And, I still had those damn Lonnie Logues. I called Derek Kolluri, who was not enrolled in the summer class but had still decided to swing by from time to time. He had read the play more than the students in the class by now, and he knew as

much about it as I did. So, there we both sat: staring at the cards on the table, moving them around, and looking for a balance of tension.

I mentioned to Derek that the first problem was that the play opened with three low-tension scenes, and he suggested that we start moving those around. I pulled the two new scenes out, leaving, in order: “Coming Home, Lonnie’s Packing Up, Bear, Last Temptation of Lonnie,” and “Go, Fight, Stay.” It was at this point, that I stopped paying attention to the plot points and focused solely on the tension. I kept, “Coming Home,” in front, followed by, “Lonnie’s Packing Up, Wanna get Married?, The Kiss, Bear, Last Temptation of Lonnie,” and, “Go, Fight, Stay,” stayed at the end. Derek then reached across the table and silently moved, “Coming Home,” from the beginning to the end of the play. This threw me, at first. It didn’t seem right that we were putting the first event last. But, Derek mentioned that the engagement was also out of order. He was right. Only having one scene out of order made it stand out too much. I was worried that I would lose the impact of the fight at the end, but it occurred to me that, “Coming Home,” would be a nice Coda for the play. We’d get to see them happy, and we’d see how this whole mess had started, but we wouldn’t see it until after it was too late to do anything about it. Then, just as I was about to say I liked what we had, Derek swapped, “The Kiss,” with, “Bear.”

Now, it all fit. The tension started high with, “Lonnie’s Packing Up,” dipped into clumsy, sweet romance for, “Wanna Get Married,” before jumping back into action with, “Bear,” then a low-tension scene with a surprise at the end: “The Kiss,” before the somber, “Last Temptation of Lonnie,” which, even though it is a lower-tension scene, has a moderate tension on it’s own, especially through juxtaposition with the prior scene. But, it didn’t have so much tension that it couldn’t happen before, “Go, Fight, Stay.” In fact, having the medium-tension but somber, “Temptation,” come before, “Go, Fight, Stay,” actually forced a sense of rising action as we

ramped into the end of the play. And, then we had the Coda, “Coming Home,” which served to release all the tension, almost like a curtain call within the play. Only this curtain call also shows how the triangle came together. Derek liked it. I liked it. And, I hoped the class would as well. As I mentioned, Derek had been stopping by the workshop, but Austin had mentioned that he was going to come in as well, and I was excited by that.

XIII. A New Structure

On June 17th, I brought in a 58 page draft of the play that followed the plot Derek and I had come up with a few days earlier. This draft is the first time I started putting the scene titles into the script. At first it was for easy reference, but it is now something I always do. It opens with, “Lonnie’s Packing Up,” in much the same condition as it had been, though more edited each time, sometimes growing longer as I let the dialogue in my mind go on, growing smaller as I would go back through with the scalpel.

I added some new stage directions to the opening of, “Wanna Get Married.” It was still set in a truck stop, but, this was now, “The last great smoking section, in a truck-stop, galaxies away, just outside of Memphis.” And, in order to bring notice to the fact that we were now jumping back in time, to set the scene apart, I called for Lonnie and Eddie to, “...begin the scene in separate areas, not actually at the truck stop, but facing the audience, relating to each other. Though it might seem a bit cold at first, they warm up.” Austin had missed this part of the stage directions and was concerned that we were now adding another set. I said, “Gotta’ read the stage directions.” He said, “Oh,” and I thought that was the end of it. Lesson learned. But Michael chimed in that stage directions are merely a suggestion. I told him that, “Stage directions are part of a script, and I know that sometimes directors might tell actors to ignore them, but that’s only to get an actor to explore. Eventually, the actor needs to come back to the text, and the stage directions are part of the text.” He argued that I was doing the director’s job, and not the playwright’s. As we so often have, and almost always cordially, we agreed to disagree. He brought in an article the next day that only seemed to support my position. It was about a forum of directors and playwrights arguing about how literally one should adhere to a script. The article went on to state that the law was, in fact, on the side of the playwright, so I was and still remain

unclear about how this article was supposed to make me understand his point. Directors need to read stage directions. A direct-address is not blocking. And, furthermore, sometimes, even blocking should be in the stage directions. If I have to put everything in the dialogue, I might as well be writing for the radio. Hell, even radio scripts have stage directions for the foley artists.

“Bear,” is again, very similar to its previous versions, but I used elements from the Lonnie-Logues to add more beats to, “The Kiss.” Now, not only was Lonnie opening up about her parents, but she was getting Jules to open up about his: something we never see between Eddie and Lonnie. “Last Temptation of Lonnie; Go, Fight, Stay,” and “Coming Home,” also remain very much the same as the earlier drafts, except that in, “Coming Home,” I added in some of the exposition from, “Stuffed, Turkey,” about the career paths of Eddie and Jules.

The workshop participants were both pleased and surprised at the new form of the play. The initial response was that I had found my play, and I agreed. I still do. If the last draft was technically a play, then this was definitely a play. It would be hard to steer me in any other direction at that point. I had not intended to use a broken narrative structure, but after Derek and I had popped the tab on it, there was no turning back. This was going to be the play. It was now only a matter of what else I wanted to do within it to, “tighten and heighten,” as I sometimes say to myself.

XIV. The Workshop Rests

After this point, very little work was done structurally with the script. I made several more passes, cutting and adding, adding and cutting, polishing, and pacing. Michael moved away from structure and exploration and began to press me on the objectives of the characters in each scene. I had never looked at a play in this way as a writer. As an actor, I was familiar with the concept. At the time, however, I couldn't bridge the gap. I was spent. The lesson was well-kept, however, and I do now use character objectives as a litmus test for my scripts on a regular basis, though I am not beholden to them. Objectives are a tool for an actor to produce a character. They can key a playwright in to a scene where a character might be wading or treading water instead of being active, but sometimes, to tell a story, I have to allow that to happen. Then, down the road, the actor can tell herself whatever she needs in order to get the job done, though I recognize that the more I can offer them the better the work. I also made an effort to add in some of the substance abuse referenced in, "Stuffed, Turkey," that Austin and Michael both felt had a place in the play. In a lot of ways, beer became the new television, though Lonnie is still watching it in, "The Kiss."

That's where we left things for the workshop. Michael mentioned that, at some point, a playwright needs to start protecting his script and that we were probably at this point. If he was trying to create efficacy, he did an excellent job. I went home, shot Austin an email asking for any requests as I worked on the production draft over the next three weeks, and he never answered. So, I took this as a cue to sit and do very little.

This is not the healthiest attitude, but I loathe the act of sitting down to write. I love the results, and once I'm lost in the world, I'm fine, but I'd almost rather go to the dentist than sit down to write. I've gotten better about it, as I have gotten used to not living in a deadline-driven

culture, but my most urgent work still comes from spec-scripts and commissions: when I know someone is waiting for the work. I knew Austin was waiting, but I also knew that he was happy with the play as it stood. He told me so before the workshop had ended, but I thought that he might change his mind, so I gave him the offer. I had expected to have to do re-writes up until tech rehearsals, but the 63 page draft I turned in to Austin and the production team on July 6, 2007 was the “final version” of the script. Nothing was changed either during rehearsals or in production.

XV. Casting the One-act

I was asked to attend the casting sessions by Austin, and I did recruit a few folks to come out. I urged Derek to come out, and he was cast in the role of Eddie. Cole Saugey, a junior in the undergraduate program, whom I had worked with in, “All in The Timing,” was cast as Jules. The role of Lonnie went to Kat Endsley, a senior who had played many roles in the department and was on what Kevin Cohea would often call the “A,” squad of undergrad actors. I was not initially a huge fan of Cole or Kat, though I think part of that was my wishing we had all graduate students.

I had assumed, coming into the program, that my plays would be cast predominantly with graduate students. I understood that I wouldn’t always get the cream of the crop and I knew that I was still low on the pecking-order when it came to casting, but I was still harboring some unrealistic expectations. I trusted Austin, however, as I had already worked with him as a writer and pitchman for the television workshop in Los Angeles, the production of, All in the Timing, that he directed me in, as well as a scene from, King Lear, that he cast me in when I first got to Fayetteville. I took his stage-combat class while we were work-shopping the play, and I was also slated to be his assistant director in the upcoming fall production of, Our Town. He had been great about respecting my work, and I certainly respected his. We discussed casting before he posted his list, and though I had my reservations, I felt no reason to protest. Let the contractors contract. Let builders build. Austin is both of those in this analogy. I was the architect, and my job was mostly complete, save for the role of consultant that I happily moved into.

XVI. Rehearsals

I attended two rehearsals: one working and one run-through. The working rehearsal I came into was the scene, “Wanna Get married?” Austin was pushing Kat to get Derek’s attention at the beginning of the scene and had freed her to push the envelope. This was a bit of a shock to me at first, as I had never thought about what Lonnie might have been trying to do in the scene beyond staring at Eddie as he ate. Austin recognized that Lonnie needs attention in the beginning of the scene. And he was making her demand it. I never looked at the scene the same way again. During this particular exercise, however, Kat started to quack like a duck, and Austin immediately stopped her, telling her, “There’s no duck quacking in the script. You can’t do that.” No director has ever been so good before or since at making me feel comfortable. He was protecting and doing his best to honor the script. By this point, I had taken out the stage direction that told the actors to face forward, figuring that, “...a truck-stop, galaxies away, just outside of Memphis,” was evocative enough for a director. I still believed I had the right to call for an actor to directly address an audience while staying in the scene, but I also felt that the direct-address was probably too much for the play.

About a week later, I attended a run-through, and I bawled my eyes out, as I was basically re-living every painful moment of my life that I had mined and given to the play. It was also rather moving to see, for the first time, a director and actors doing what I had intended for them to do... and it worked!

I was a bit concerned that the stage manager was clearly on her My Space account during both of these rehearsals, and I wondered who was keeping line-notes. They weren’t going too far off, but there were definitely some spots. I sent Austin an email, and he said he would address it. I asked cast members if they ever received any line notes, and, to my knowledge, none of them

ever did. So, I mentioned to Derek the spots I thought he and others were missing, and I asked him to spread the gospel. I never pressed beyond that. They were pretty close. They clearly respected the script, and I liked what I saw in rehearsal. If I had it to do over again, I would have re-addressed the matter with Austin instead of going directly to the cast, but, at the time, going to Derek was the easier route.

I did meet with Cole for lunch the day after the run-through, as he had asked Austin if he could meet with me and talk. I found this out, because I checked with Austin before I met with Cole, wanting to make sure that I wasn't stepping on any toes. He didn't want to talk about the script so much as he wanted to talk about our families. And, ordinarily, this would have been great. It kept us away from anything that might conflict with Austin's directing, and it might help a young guy who doesn't yet understand the grey area that can be the limits of family. Things to him were still very black and white. What made it weird was that this had been most of the talk through the workshop as well. And, I think this all traces back to my early comments about those arguments with myself in my own head. This version of the play never made it outside of me. We were always talking about me, my brother, my parents, or someone else's brother, mother, father, son, etc. And, as great as I'm sure this was on a psychological and cathartic level for everyone, it was doing a disservice to the play. At some point, we have to let the source material, the map, go, and we have to focus on the territory. With this process, that rarely happened. However, this same wallowing allowed the specifics to become universal, so it certainly isn't fair to say it was harming the production.

XVII. Performances

I attended all of the performances but one or two, even having to step in with a scene change one night when someone forgot to pre-set a basket for one of Austin's excellently conceived transitions. These transitions were something that had never occurred to me. I just had these moments: vignettes and I never thought about how the play might move from one to the other. Austin set things in a way that actors could shift the props, costumes and scenic blocks as if they were a part of the action. For the transition into, "The Kiss," Eddie, who has just kicked Jules out in, "Bear," goes off-stage, grabs a laundry basket and throws all the clothes on the floor in a huff. His anger sets the scene for Lonnie to come in and calmly start to fold the laundry with her headphones on: a seamless transition of character, scenery, and tone. After, "The Kiss," Austin had Eddie storm in before Jules and Lonnie can exit for the next scene which Eddie begins asleep on the couch. Once Eddie enters, Lonnie and Jules get up and go off. He's not really catching them in the act, but we get a taste of it because of the way the transition is set. As Lonnie and Jules head off, Eddie picks the laundry basket up and scatters the clothes again, but this time, the clothes represent all of Jules's stuff that the script says is strewn about the lawn. And, then Eddie lies down on the couch, spent from setting the scene. Genius! I stole these transitions and used them when I started the new play years later.

The feedback from the play was overwhelmingly positive. I can remember reading one or two negative comments on the cards that I've long-since tossed. One patron wasn't into the genre or the language of the play. And the other didn't appreciate seeing Kat's ass-crack for half of the show. Several people older than me really seemed to like the meditation on family. The younger viewers seemed to be pulled to the dialogue and the characters. People who had barely spoken a word to me my entire first year at the University were now inviting me to join them in upcoming

projects. Chris Martin, (who also had a play on the bill that night,) and I sat for one audience Q&A before meeting afterward and deciding we never wanted to sit for the Q&A's again. It wasn't that we didn't like what we heard, or that we were afraid of being egged, it just seems like these things are often more about an audience member wanting to appear smart or feel like a critic than it is an exploration of the work.

XVIII. Critique of the One-Act Process and Play

Looking back, I don't know that a playwright could ask for a better experience. There were relatively few disagreements during production. In fact, I was never asked to make any changes, so there was very little to disagree about. The feedback I got and the direction I received from the mentors was useful, not only on this play and in this production, but on future projects as well.

The focus on Dramatic Action and the constant search for purpose were drilled into me by both Michael and Roger during the process, and that is a skill that has now moved into my subconscious. Before the workshop, Roger's choice to pull my attention toward tension and juxtaposition made me conscious of structure in a way I never had before. Roger made me think like a director. He made me name the scenes as a reminder that each scene must be worthy of a name. Michael made me think like an actor. He wanted to know the arcs. He wanted to know why I wasn't giving them their juiciest scenes. And, that was also a point of view, like the directing, that I had experience with as a director and actor but never put to use as a writer. For me, I had always thought of playwriting from a storyteller's or producer's point of view. These new angles of attack have helped me sharpen my craft in the time since. Both were excellent facilitators who allowed me and sometimes forced me to explore my vision in a much deeper way. Both worked with me in a manner that was never heavy handed but always fully involved.

The workshop itself was a healthy mix of opinion and constructive commentary by actors who brought a fresh sense of urgency to every read. The process made me conscious of the idea that as my scripts grew longer, I would still have to retain the same attention to detail, because they would be searching for those details: those clues into the characters. Their daily search for meaning in my script, and that trust in me that there would be something to find, drove me to do

all I could to provide it to them. Acting is technically an interpretative art, but it requires so much creativity and trust that I feel a need to honor it in my work as best I can. I quickly learned that excited actors do the best work, and I have never forgotten it.

Looking back at the script with new eyes, I don't know that one could have expected any more from a virgin. If this script was turned in to me today by a beginning playwright, I would say it had some real potential. I would say that I like the language, but that the language likes itself too much. Lonnie needs to be further developed as she seems to be more of a plant for the battle between the brothers than she is actually a part of the play. It smacks of one person's point of view, though I know as the writer, I did make strides to represent more. I think that good plays ask questions, and this play did, but this play also gave out some answers along the way, and I wish it had not. I wish there was less yelling and more simmering or stewing. This play spends a lot of time at a 9 or 11, and it could stand a few more 3-6 moments. It does still cut straight to me in a way that my work since rarely has, but I cannot tell if that is because I have hit a universal nerve or if I am feeling it because it constantly pinches at my own.

At the time, of course, I thought I was a genius. I thought I had created something great and was ready to do even more. If they liked this small-scale deal, they were going to love the massive epic that would be, The Man Without a Country next year. I felt empowered, validated, and almost invincible.

XIX. After the Show: Hibernation 2

There was a push from the interim chair, Patricia Martin, who was a vocal fan of the play, to enter the play in contests. Unfortunately, at 63 pages, it was not eligible for submission under most one-act competition criteria. It was also too short to be a full-length play. There was talk of making it shorter or longer, but I just didn't have it in me at the time, so, I never found a contest to enter the play into. I moved into bonding with my son, Quentin Kenrich Mitchell, who was born about two weeks after the play premiered. I was also slated to assist in Austin's production of, Our Town, which started auditioning about a week after that.

On the closing night of the festival, after the show and strike, I was at a bar next door to the theatre with the cast, and Austin approached me about the possibility of shooting the script as a film. Derek had mentioned this to me during the run, but I had shrugged it off. Cole's performance had changed my mind about his ability to play the role, but Kat's had not. I told Austin that I was interested in doing it if he could cast the role with another actress. And, at the time, he agreed. We talked about a few other actresses who had not come out to the earlier auditions, and we both agreed on a suitable replacement. Then, we moved into work on, Our Town, and there wasn't much discussion until the holiday break, when Austin gave me a call.

By the time Austin called, I had almost forgotten about the film. I had certainly assumed it wasn't going to happen. But, Austin had gotten a few thousand dollars from an old high-school chum and the film was a go. Apparently, his family has a huge chunk of land down in El Dorado, Arkansas, so we could shoot a good deal of it at their lake houses. And, since we were now on a fast track, hoping to shoot over spring break of 2008, he wanted to know how fast I could get a script together. And, by the way, Kat was still going to play the role of Lonnie. "Our other choice isn't going to work out," he said. I had already felt awkward enough about asking for her to be

replaced, and if the director wasn't going to do it, nobody was, so I decided to go with it, because nobody else was asking me to write a screenplay for a film they were determined to shoot within the next four months.

During our call, he also had several notes about the script. Some ideas and images were floating around in his head, and he wanted to share them before I got started. His first image was a, "front door." A strip-joint. "Eddie comes out, goes to truck. Cell-phone, radio." It's the answering machine scene, but he sees us being in both places at once, cutting between Eddie outside the strip club and Lonnie with Jules listening in as he leaves the message. His next note was that I should add a waitress at the diner, "someone who knows Eddie." Then we talked about the possibility of Lonnie knowing her, since the diner was in Memphis. She might know Eddie as a regular, but she knows Lonnie like her own daughter. The waitress is Lonnie's past, and we decided that we would see this through a conversation she has with Eddie.

Eddie was to be the conduit for the initial jumps. He "takes us in and out of the past." Austin wondered where Jules goes after he leaves the house before coming back for the, "Bear," scene. He also asked, "When does Lonnie break down?" I am not sure if he meant within the story or the screenplay. But, a note underneath, "Split Bear," seems to imply that we were talking about splitting up the, "Bear," scene with shots of Lonnie's car breaking down, as both events are happening simultaneously in real-time. Next, Austin asked if I could add in a buddy, the guy that Jules goes to see after he leaves the house in, "Bear," before coming back to the house for the hat and the fight. The character already had a name. Jules says he went over to, "Jesse's." Now, I just needed to put him in a scene. We decided that Jesse would find Jules on the road after he leaves the house, pick him up, and bring him back to his house the next morning. There would be a, "parting shot," as Jesse drove off before we got back into the familiar territory of the

fight. He also asked me to set as much of it as possible in the day. The note says, “Brighter is better.” This would obviously make shooting both easier and cheaper.

Through these notes, one can see that the construction of a screenplay is very different from a stage-play. A screenplay not only allows for more characters and locations, it demands them. On screen, when people walk outside, we usually follow them. On stage, we wait for them to come back. On stage, Jules can say he was at Jesse’s and that’s OK. On screen, we want to know who this dude is. On stage, the answering machine is a wonderful device that starts the play with non-verbal imagery while a voice we haven’t met talks in the background. On the screen, we want to see the man making the call and the people listening. We want to see the answering machine close-up. We want to walk around in this room, this world, from within, instead of watching it from a distance.

XX. Building a Screenplay from a Stage-Play

The one-act play has seven scenes. The first draft of the screenplay, which I turned in on January 21, 2008, has 50. The one-act had two locations: a truck-stop and a house. The screenplay has a truck stop, (now named, Lulu's Truck-stop, after the waitress we added,) the family house, the parking lot of the truck-stop, the exterior of the house, the Mazda, Eddie's truck, the side of the road, the liquor store, the parking lot of the liquor store, a strip-club outside Memphis, the parking lot of the strip-club, the road a few miles away from the family house, Jesse's car, and the side of the road with Lonnie's Mazda. The one-act play has three characters. The first draft of the screenplay had six characters with lines and could use several extras.

The first draft of the screenplay opens at the parking lot of Lulu's Truckstop as Eddie takes a swig of beer and dials a pay phone. Cut to the family house, where Jules is asleep on the couch and the phone is ringing. The machine picks up. "Beep!" Cut back to the parking lot as Eddie starts to talk, then back to the house as Lonnie is now listening and Jules is waking up. Jules asks Lonnie if she's going to answer before jumping back to the parking lot as Eddie rambles into the phone, hangs up, and walks back to his truck. Then, we go back to the house so Jules and Lonnie can have their fight. In this draft, the scene is the same as the play from this point until Lonnie exits and Jules yells after her. We follow her out and then back into the house as she tells Jules to tell Eddie she is sorry. Then Jules sits and we head outside to watch Lonnie drive off in the Mazda before jumping back to the parking lot of the truck-stop as Eddie throws his beer to the ground and gets in his truck. Then, we're back to Lonnie, who is driving down the road, fiddling with the radio, before finally cutting back to Jules on the couch where his, "Cheers," marks the end of what was the first scene. Every time someone goes in or out, if the

camera follows, it's a new scene. At the end of what was scene one, the screenplay is now at scene 12.

The second scene of the play is the engagement scene. That is what follows in the script, after a transition shot with Eddie fumbling through some CDs in his truck while driving. Those CDs are Lonnie's, and his memory of her takes us back in time to their engagement. It is the same truck stop from the phone call, but this is obviously an earlier, happier time. Lulu delivers Eddie's food to him as Lonnie plays with the jukebox. Seizing the opportunity to talk to Eddie without Lonnie present, she drops a little history that is exposition for the audience, but also a subtle warning to Eddie that there are still people who care about this girl, even if her parents are no longer around. Then, as Lonnie goes off to get Eddie's coffee, we jump back to real-time. Lonnie's car has just run out of gas. After the three scenes it takes for Lonnie to get a cigarette out of the glove-box and light it, the screenplay goes back to the diner, and the dialogue from that scene in the play finally begins, with Lonnie staring at Eddie while he eats. Lulu comes back out to bring Eddie the coffee, and check on Lonnie. As Lulu goes to get Lonnie a Sprite, the actual talk about the eating from the play takes place. Lulu brings the Sprite back during this, but she doesn't interrupt the conversation, and this plays out for several pages without breaking into a new scene. What was the third scene in the play was now the second, and it was made up of two separate scenes with eight separate shots in the screenplay.

Then, as a transition, the screenplay goes back to where we left Jules on the couch. This time, he follows a memory, the liquor store that Jesse owns. I described Jesse as a, "scraggly dude who looks older but not as smart as Jules, weighing in at a buck and a quarter," because I knew that someone was going to have to play the guy, and I thought, "Why not me?" I never

mentioned that this was why I did it. I just hoped someone might make the connection that I also weigh about a buck and a quarter and ask me to play it.

Jesse and Jules talk about getting together to smoke some weed, (because this is much easier to pull off in a movie than it is on stage,) and then Lonnie pulls in to pick Jules up. Jesse asks if she wants to hang, too, but Jules runs interference, and they leave. This was all new stuff, establishing Jesse for later and leading us into what was “The Kiss” in the play. But, before the camera can make it there, it jumps to Eddie, who is waiting for a load only to find out he doesn’t have one. I added another new character named Gerald to wait at the loading dock with Eddie and give him the news. Gerald invites Eddie to the casino for their impromptu night off, but Eddie decides to head home early.

Now, the screenplay jumps back to the play. Only, instead of being at the house, Jules is asking Lonnie to sell him the car while they are still in it, driving back to the house from the liquor store. Before they can reach a deal, there is a jump back to Eddie, as he rifles through the CDs, mirroring the earlier scene which is actually later in the story. This time, he picks one that is obviously not his and listens to it. Then, we’re back to the old scene from the play, inside the house as Lonnie and Jules talk about laundry and the strip club. Only, this time, as Lonnie talks about meeting Eddie for the first time in the club, we get to see it happen. As she describes Chuck, the owner, we also get to see him. Then, as Jules asks, “You ever done anything else?” we have a psychological reason to jump back into the scene at the house. Lonnie talks about other jobs she’s thought of doing, her mom, and her dad before hugging Jules. Then, it’s back to bargaining, and as they reach a deal, they kiss, just like the play. Jump to Eddie pulling into town. Jump back to Lonnie and Jules getting it on. There is some hesitation, but Lonnie pleads for Jules. Jump back to Eddie who is now pulling in and getting out of the truck with roses in

hand. He enters. Now, two scenes become one. They have been caught. Michael got his moment, just not on the stage. Eddie takes off.

The next scene is after Eddie's return from his six-day "Zen journey," that he warned Lonnie and Jules about over the phone at the beginning of the screenplay. The house is vacant. He goes in. It's a mess. He picks up a beer, starts to drink it. As he falls asleep, time jumps two hours, and we follow Jules as he approaches the door and walks in. What follows is the, "Bear," scene from the play. The entire scene, in this draft, takes place inside the house.

There is a transition scene with Lonnie attempting to hitchhike on the side of the road before jumping to another transition, in real-time, to Jesse and Jules inside Jesse's car. Jules has the mound of stuff on his lap. Jesse tells him it's going to be alright and offers to spark up a joint. Then, the screenplay moves into what was, "Last Temptation of Lonnie," in the one-act. The scene remains intact from there until its end, as Lonnie walks out the door and Eddie opens a beer. Then, Jesse pulls in with Jules and drops him off at the house.

Jules enters the house, and the, "Go, Fight, Stay," scene from the one-act plays out completely inside the house. Jules cleans up a bit and leaves before the screenplay cuts to Lonnie filling the car up with gas, getting in, and driving off into the sunrise. Next, Jules gets into a car with Jesse and rides off into the same sunrise. Back at the house, Eddie is asleep on the couch as the curtains fill with light. The screenplay ends just like the one-act, with the, "Coming Home," scene, which is set completely inside the house, just as it was in the play.

The feedback from Austin and Laura was positive. Chuck Mere` had come on board by now as the cinematographer, and he had also read and liked the screenplay. Austin's major notes were that we could bring them outside of the house more. This would keep things from feeling too static and would make the film easier to shoot. The, "Bear," and, "Go, Fight, Stay," scenes

needed this the most, but we also agreed that the second half of, “Lonnie’s Packing Up,” could take place in the driveway before she speeds off in the Mazda. Also, there wasn’t going to be a Mazda. He wanted an American car. I understood this, and though I disagreed with the choice, I changed the car to a Dodge. He also suggested that I add a scene where Eddie comes into the strip-club and punches Chuck. I convinced him this was a bad idea, as Eddie must save the violence for the final fight, which we agreed would be set almost entirely in the front yard of the house so that he could shoot the scene without trashing his family’s lake-house. Then, almost in passing, he asked if I might be interested in playing the part of Jesse. Damn right, I was.

I turned the production draft in about a month later on February 29, 2008, which was about a month before we were set to shoot, on-location, in Austin and Laura’s hometown of El Dorado, Arkansas.

XXI. Shooting and Showing the Film

About a month later, over an eight-day span while we were all on spring break, the film was shot. I did no work on the script during production. My main job was to play the part of Jesse in the film, and I took still production photos of the fight while Austin and Chuck Mere shot it. Over the following summer, while writing his thesis on, Our Town, Austin edited the film on his computer. I was busy with my workshop and production of, The Man without a Country, but I did see an early cut of the film before it premiered in El Dorado on August 15.

The response to the film was more about the hometown favorites making good than it was about the content. Neither Austin nor I was completely happy with the current state of the thing, and he went back to the editing bay to get it ready for festivals. They cancelled all other screenings once they found out that some festivals won't allow a film that's had a premiere to enter, and I didn't hear much as Austin and Laura moved to Georgia, and I got to work on what was my original thesis.

About nine months later, Austin and Laura got back with me about setting up a premiere in Fayetteville. They had grown tired of being rejected by festivals, and they wanted to have a Fayetteville premiere to help launch possible sales of the DVD that was now on Amazon. By this point, Derek had moved to Austin, Texas. Cole was now in Los Angeles, and Kat was in Kansas City. So, I was the only contact left. I did a radio interview and attended the screening. About 20 showed up, and they seemed to like it. And, with that, my journey with Stripped, Bear seemed to be over.

XXII. Critique of the Screenplay and Film

Looking back on the screenplay and the finished film, the largest note that jumps out at me is that they are both too short. It's too much for a short film and not quite enough for a feature. It needs more or less, much like the one-act play did. There is substantially more screaming in the film than there was in the play, and I thought the play had too much. I think I might have put less than ten actual, "fucks" into the script, and yet, the actors seem to say it more than that in some two minute chunks of the film. And, who could blame them? They'd been empowered. They felt like they were harnessing all of these raw emotions and then releasing them into the camera. Unfortunately I can see that thought process in the actors as I watch the film. They are over-emoting, and, yes, a good deal of that is my fault.

When I say it's my fault, what I really mean is that I had no idea what I was doing. I hadn't studied screenplays at all. I had never even read one, and while making this, it never even occurred to me that perhaps, I should. So, I was just transposing a play into a film. I didn't create a screenplay. I mean, I did, technically, but that wasn't my mindset. By instinct, I did write the thing with a camera mind, but I wouldn't focus on film or television for another year in the program. I attended a screenwriting seminar in LA two years later. All of this, plus the experience of writing the TV scripts and the screenplays for class, surely would have made for a better screenplay. But, everybody who wants to try a hand at this game has to write a first script, and they all have to have a first film. This is mine, and it ain't half-bad.

I have gotten some positive feedback on the film, but most of the time, when someone hits me up on Facebook to tell me they've found my film and are going to watch it tonight, I tell them, "Let me know what you think," and I never hear back. If you didn't see the play, and you don't know the people, it's a bit of a drag. For an eight-day shoot and a 4,000 dollar budget, it's a

pretty damn decent film. I'm not especially proud of it. I do not screen it, ever, but I am also not embarrassed to be attached to it. It is a valiant effort by all involved.

If I could do it over again, I would have gone in with a more visual eye, knowing less is more with dialogue, and that the screenplay has to read like a novel, a script, and a poem at the same time.

XXIII. After the Film: Hibernation 3

A few months later, I requested that this project be my thesis. I felt like the crossing of media and the success of the project warranted this, moreso than my experience producing, The Man Without a Country, which I still do my best to forget. I learned much from the process but felt that my thesis would be overly negative if I had to wade back through what was a horrendous process for me, the actors, the director, and even the mentors. This experience of taking a ten-minute play, turning it into a one-act, and then a film, has been one of my most cherished. And, so I resolved to start writing about it for my thesis. Of course, that doesn't mean I actually did any of the writing.

What I actually did was a good deal of nothing. I let it sit, as I moved on to, Seller Door, for the next summer and a collection of my short plays to be produced in the spring. I had applied for and was granted permission to come back for an extra semester so that I could finish my thesis in-house, but a week later, after my wife came home fuming about her boss. I suggested we move within the month. So, we moved to Lawrence, Kansas in September of 2009 with plans to move out to California by the summer of the next year.

XXIV. Getting Back on the Bear

Fast-forward to March of 2010. I had some fits and starts on the thesis, but it was going nowhere. It was obvious we wouldn't be moving any time soon, as I was still unemployed and my wife had just found a job. I wanted to get back into my thesis, but I also needed a way to get my name out there. I needed to do something artistic soon, or I feared I might dry up. I was still trying to get work, any work, but I had been out of the labor game too long with all my artsy-fartsy training to be of use in the service industry, especially in a small-ish college town. (Imagine Fayetteville before Wal-Mart or Fayetteville 20 years from now, after they finish moving north.) I was stuck. I was an artist, whether I liked it or not. So, I decided to start mounting a production of "Stripped, Bear." I was originally going to stage, Seller Door, but I had promised that play to Derek and our new company, The Sustainable Theatre Project, down in Austin. He suggested that I get back to the bear instead.

At first, I was interested in doing the one-act as it stood. I printed off some copies and sent them out to the guys I hoped would play the brothers and started looking for a Lonnie. I intended to produce, direct, and design the thing to save money, but also as a way to show off my skills to a community who had no idea who the heck I was. Since I had gone through the trouble of printing the things up, I gave the script a read as well. I was not a fan.

I had written several more plays since work on, "Stripped, Bear," had ended, and I could see all the problems. It was decent writing, but it wasn't as good as it could be. It wasn't as good as it could be if I had started writing it the day before, because I was now a better playwright. I knew I was going to have to re-write this thing if I was really going to do it right. And, I figured this would be an excellent opportunity to jump-start my thesis back into action. This was, of course over three years ago. Anyhow, on April 23, 2010, I started a journal.

XXV. Journal of the Full-Length Process

Friday, April 23, 2010

I'm going to put up another production of *Stripped, Bear*, and I'm going to do it here in Lawrence, Kansas. After sitting down several times, going through four different outlines, and writing four different introductions to my thesis, I've decided that I just don't care about it. The only thing that will make me care is if I commit to staging it by the end of the summer, keep a journal of the process, and bring up elements of the other two processes as I go. Aside from keeping me from putting my thesis off any longer, this also gives me a reason to keep a journal, something that I really never do and certainly didn't do during the initial process of bringing, *Stripped, Bear*, to the stage and screen back in 2007 and 2008. Also, it looks like the Austin, TX production of, Seller Door, isn't going up until October or November at this point, and that would mean a year without a show. I'm not interested in letting that happen. I know it might seem arbitrary, but I feel it's important.

As of today, I have sent inquiries to Jason Smith and Chris Roady: two actors who live in Kansas City that I went to undergrad with at Emporia State University. After leaving ESU, Jason went on to get an MFA in acting from the University of Arkansas, where I joined him for his final year to begin my MFA in playwriting, and Chris snagged an MFA in acting from Wayne State about a year before I started. Both have been absent from the stage for almost two years, and I'd like to be a part of getting them back up and out there.

Jason called me almost immediately, and he sounds very into it. Another old friend from ESU, Evan Enderle is also back in KC, and he might be a good candidate, should Chris decide not to commit. I have not assigned roles, as I am waiting to see who commits. The part of Lonnie has been conditionally offered to another old friend from ESU and current girlfriend of Chris,

Lizzi. I like her, and I've seen her do excellent work. At present, I am the director, but I'm willing to offer that up, should it become a bargaining chip for production or should my wife show an interest.

Aside from choosing Jason and Chris because they are appropriate for the parts and because I have a decade of history with each of them, I chose these two gentlemen because they both went to high school here in Lawrence, KS. Ric Averill, the Director of Theatre for the Lawrence Arts Center is both familiar with and fond of both of them. And, although I'm looking at going through another company in town, I think he can help me make that happen. Of course, should he be interested in putting it up at the LAC, I would also be. It's a better and more visible venue. Also, everything he touches gets press for days.

Thursday, April 29, 2010

I pressed ahead with Ric, and he is interested in the thing!

Chris and Jason used to be roommates. That's worth mentioning. My brother also lived with them for a year. Chris had asked me to move into this sweet pad that a bunch of seniors were moving out of at the end of our freshman year. I had just found a roommate the night before: a woman I met seven days earlier, moved in with a month later, and married after five years or so. Jason also directed my first play, *Between Hell and California*. This was back in 2003 as part of a deal with IF theatre company, of which I was Executive Producer at the time, where the Artistic Producer directed a short play, *The Last*, by Jason, and he directed one by me, which I also acted in. Trivia...

Monday, May 3, 2010

I sent an email out to Chris last night. It basically said, “So, whatta you think?” I have not received an answer. I sent one out to Jason to let him know I’m going to move ahead with him for sure.

So, that’s where we’re at. Waiting. I hate waiting, but I need to learn to get better at it; especially if I’m going to produce this. Don’t want to kill the sale. Right? I’m pretty sure I have pushed actors away by being too enthused about a project by running too hard of a sell on it. He’s got the script. I’ll call him on Friday, and I’ll work on the script until then.

I’ve gotten the first scene formatted. I have to use PDF’s that people have graciously sent back to me after I lost all my files a few months ago.

Tuesday, May 04, 2010

Still importing and formatting. It’s fun to watch the page count go from 10 to 33, down to 7, and then back up to ten again as I reformat. I try to read the text as I go through, but I end up zoning a lot of it out. It’s tedious work. Delete, delete, delete; down. Delete, delete, delete; down. Etc.

The first scene took a couple of hours. The second one took a lot less. I’m going to have to do this with any of the plays I plan on revisiting. Fuck.

I posted a status update on Facebook yesterday that read, “Larry Mitchell will begin re-writing *Stripped, Bear* today.” I got a few responses by this morning.

Adam Douglas

Any hints as to what is in store?

Rex Austin Barrow

Why may I ask?

Larry Mitchell

Gonna put it back up by the end of the summer; write about the process, so I feel some motivation to actually finish my thesis. (And, Roger & co. will get that journal they love so much.)

Also, one would hope I'd learned a thing or two since then.

I haven't gotten too deep. Lost all my files last January, so I'm pasting from a PDF that I turned into an RTF, and then I have to re-format. Going at it one scene at a time.

Feel like I owe Lonnie a hard second look. And, I'll probably play with the order to make sure the old way was the best way. Who knows? May even add a scene or two, so it feels more like a full-length.

I'm in talks with two actors, and one has committed that I'd really like to share with you, but I can't until the rest is ironed out.

Also, why the hell not?

And, that's where we're at right now. I'll be in Malvern next week, so I'm hoping to spend at least one full day working on Stripped, Bear. My mom offered to keep him for another week after so I could work here in Lawrence, but I don't think that's going to fly here at home.

This stuff may seem personal, but it's all part of trying to figure out when, where, and how I'm going to get work done. With Elizabeth working full time, and me not so much, I'm making the best of my time with my son. It's the best job I've ever had. And, I haven't been very secretive about how much I enjoy it. It is busy, as I try to find time to do what is essentially a full-time job while I try to find part-time gigs when I can, write my thesis when I can, and

remain an active, involved, and warmed-up artist. Who knew an unemployed hack-playwright could be so busy? Though, to be honest, it doesn't feel like a whole lot is happening.

Thursday, May 06, 2010

Notes from me to me on 2007 Production Draft

Scene One: Lonnie's Packing Up

- Clean up the stage directions
- “LONNIE, a washed up, never was beauty queen,”
 - Man, that's rough... That's the start of why this play and especially this character need work. Lonnie deserves better than this.
- “obviously contrasting temperaments.” ... Maybe the DIALOGUE should say that instead of the stage directions.
- Need to work on the transition after, “Good. Good.”
- Maybe move “Shoulda' left you in Memphis” up?
- “Judging by that message, I'd guess I was right.”
 - This should be more subtle. It should hurt more.
 - It's cooler if she just knows she has to move on. She can change her mind.
- “*Absolutely not. This is my home. I was raised here. I got rights to it. No, I don't see that happenin' at all.*”
 - Less
- “*It's not yours. You just live here. You're a cockroach. It's Eddie's house. And, Eddie wants us... Have some, Jesus, have some respect, Jules. It's his house. You owe him that. Don't you think?*”

- Less! And, too choppy. Make the synapse fire and light another. This is a shock.
- She wants to get him out. For Eddie.
- Repeat last two notes (LESS is MORE!) on anything that goes over a line. Less talk, more rock.
- *“Haven't yet. Funeral was three months ago, signed the papers the next day. This house is more mine than it is yours.”*
 - Expo, Expo, Expo!
- Eddie is the voice on the machine. When did this happen? Can we see it, later in the play? (earlier in time)?
- “No. Jules. Nothing. Guilt. Boredom, I guess. No, I wasn't bored, I just...”
 - I beg to differ. I think she's bored. That doesn't mean she knows it, but...
- Lonnie should be the smart one, here. She gets it. She should stop fighting her own objective... with the exception of the kiss. For Jules, it's about the house.... Although he seems willing to leave with Lonnie for a second... Is that real? Maybe it's not about the house either...
- Does Jules want the impossible? Is his objective for things to be OK, or back to the way they used to be, or that this whole thing had never happened? If so, does that work?
- So, yeah. Clean up the expo, objectives, and Lonnie's choices. Otherwise, I think a decent start.
- Leave more questions at the end of this scene.

Friday, May 7, 2010

Everybody seems interested in the project at this point. I received an email from Chris that I feel is worth sharing.

Chris Roady

To Larry Mitchell Fri, May 7, 2010 at 12:23 PM

Larry

I had some initial thoughts and suggestions after reading the play that I wanted you to see. Obviously, take these for what they are worth (GOLD!!!!!!) But seriously, this is your baby, and I don't want to step on it. Because stepping on babies is cruel.....and unusual.

Overall, I think the play needs a clearer sense of time. How much time truly passes between Lonnie and Eddie moving in and Lonnie and Jules cheating? It's unclear. Perhaps one thing that may help is to see Lonnie and Jules together without Eddie more. Maybe just one more scene might do it. (Also, I love your idea of seeing Eddie leave the message later in the play)

Lonnie's Character - I think a more interesting choice for her is to really not like Jules at all. She is repulsed by him, but something inside her, driven by loneliness makes her act out. I think this is a better choice than them actually being attracted to each other. It could also add some more dramatic action, which I think is needed throughout. The first kiss could almost be a violent scene. It won't make Lonnie more likeable, but it will make her more interesting.

-Last scene - I think it is going to be difficult for an audience to understand that this scene is supposed to be a "shared dream or memory." It may work better to have that scene simply be a flashback of the first time these three have come together. I believe it will also make the play more endearing to end with a scene in which the three of them are happy together, not at each other's

throats. Also, I'm not sure I like the last sequence of lines. It comes off as a punch-line of a cheap joke.

Let me know what you think of these.

-Chris

What great notes! Here are my responses.

Overall-

Great note. I'm only on the second scene right now, of the initial notes, and a great deal of the ideas popping into my head had to do with this. It can be much clearer. The stage directions shouldn't have to say, "six months earlier, etc." And, I do think seeing Lonnie with Jules again could really help serve, not only the clarity of time, but also the next note about Lonnie.

Lonnie's Character-

I agree! And, in my mind, more interesting is more likeable. I think, "Interesting" is a much better goal to have. Good call. Much more active this way. I'm pretty sure this was actually an initial intent of mine or at least someone in the workshop process that was lost along the way. Thanks.

Last Scene-

I agree. I think the stage directions are misleading. The scene usually feels happier, and I think it's the audience that feels the discomfort due to the dramatic irony. I mean, it's an awkward scene for the characters, with conflicting and shifting objectives, not to mention the task upon the actor to make the switch from the previous scene, but it should also be happier.

Last Sequence of Lines-

Hmm... I can see that. It might play better once we get a little more depth to Lonnie.

I did hear from Lizzi tonight, and it's on! I asked her how much work she'd done, and she said that she hadn't done anything in the last four years. It occurred to me that Jason and Chris hadn't worked in almost two, so we were all going to be a bit rusty. Hell, I haven't directed a full-length play in almost ten years. Chris was in that as well. And, Jason designed the poster. More Trivia...

Off to Malvern this week. Hopefully, I'll return with a history of at least the first phase and perhaps notes or maybe even a new draft? I'm going down for six days, and I'm supposed to get two full days of work. Wish me luck.

Monday, May 17, 2010

So, I got almost nothing done in Malvern. I didn't get any of the history done that I was hoping to have finished by now, and I certainly didn't get a new draft. The best I could do was to finish transferring the copy from the PDF to Final Draft.

I did, however, come up with the idea that I might want to re-title the play, as it occurred to me that Lonnie doesn't really need to be a stripper. As I was thinking about what she might do if she wasn't a stripper, it also occurred to me that she and Eddie hang out and meet up at a local truck stop. So, why the hell can't she just work there? It's not like that's a super-duper job to go back to, and since there were never any scenes in the strip club, it also eliminates the need for me to find ways to "discuss" life at the strip club. Now, we can see where Lonnie works, and it makes the whole package more elegant, cleaner, and easier to work with.

Thursday, May 20, 2010

I had lunch with Ric Averill today to get details on a favor I will be doing for him on Friday. He came with dates! He'd like to take *Stripped, Bear*, along with another one or two plays and produce them as a new play festival, making them part of the LAC season. This would almost guarantee asses in seats. It wouldn't be until the fall, however. It gives the project more time, but it's still a close enough date to get firm commitments from everyone involved. And, it's at a time when it might be possible for Fayetteville folk to come up and see the show, which might be fun.

Tuesday May 25, 2010

It looks like we have some proposed dates for, "Stripped, Bear." September 17th & 18th with rehearsals on the 15th and 16th. Looks like the New Play Festival is a go. I'm waiting for Danny, the TD, to call back. Sounds like I should have a busy fall. September does, however allow me to use June as a month to workshop the show, with July and August to rehearse. So, bad for thesis, but good for show, I guess.

Saturday May 29, 2010

So, I'm definitely re-naming the play, and I thought I'd try to make it a bit more interactive, so I've started this note on Facebook today.

Larry Mitchell: Help name my Play!

Tuesday, May 25, 2010 at 4:06pm

So, while I was down in Malvern, one of the only things I actually got around to doing related to Stripped, Bear is that I think Lonnie will no longer be a stripper. I think it opens her up and allows me to do more with her, the story, and the dramatic action. And, right now, I'm thinking that she will simply be a

waitress at the truck-stop outside of Memphis where she and Eddie decide to get married. It really does simplify things.

But, it also means that Stripped, Bear ceases to work as a title. I had a co-producer that I'm working with ask if it was called "Striped Bear," and those of you who've been around the project since the workshops know that he wasn't the first. In fact, you might remember that we briefly changed the name to "Bare" during the workshop until we realized that the press-kit had already been run. So, we stuck with the original, and it also stayed that way for the film, though there was still confusion in the interim on whether it was Stripped, Bare or Stripped, Bear.

Well, it's time to put an end to all of this. With dates for the new production possibly less than four months away, it's now or never.

I want to rename the show. Aside from fixing all of the above, it will both honor and allow the film to stand alone as its own entity as the play begins to depart from it.

I'd love some help. So, feel free to start shooting ideas at me. The Bear metaphor still exists, so it could still be a play on the word in some form, but it doesn't have to be. If I choose the name you suggest, I can offer no money, and I can't guarantee official credit, though I'd like to get your name in the program or something, and I hope to have a display outside the theatre with material from all of the processes, so you would definitely be recognized as part of that. I will also do a status update telling the entire world that I picked your title, so that should make you feel good for a solid day.

Feel free to share this with other folks who may or may not know what the heck all this is about.

Thanks in advance.

-Larry

Here are some of the responses:

Adam Douglas

I'd suggest "Brother Bear" but Disney might sue.

Larry Mitchell

"Might?"...

Derek Kolluri

Without reading the changes... The Bear, Brothers Bear (or Brothers' Bear)...

And now for my funny suggestions:

Redneck Romance, GRRRRR! A Play, Big Paws: A Drama

Cassiday Proctor

Bearing down?

Larry Mitchell

GRRR! Paws... GRRR!

Derek Kolluri

Bear in a Ball-cap, Bear Cap, F-Bomb: A Play About Cussing

I'm done.

Cassiday Proctor

Bearly legal!

Derek Kolluri

Let me know about a poster design.

Michael Alan Smith

Truth or Bear

John Henningsen

Three Bears

Michael Alan Smith

Terms Of Enbearment, lol. Sorry, couldn't resist :)

Tim Bruns

Loosing a Bear. I think I'd have to read it again to be more helpful.

Jon Pic

Bear Down.

Ursa Minor.

Bear Naked.

Larry Mitchell

Roady suggests Thicker than Water via text message

Derek Kolluri

Bros B4 Hos

Chuck Meré

Broken, I am the Bear, Jules and the Bear, Rain, Drought, The Bear, Trust,

Brothers Bear, We're Brothers, Far Road, Load, Will, Mistake, Eighteen Wheels,

The Hat, My House, Get Through, It's Been Done, Blood, Dead to Me, Bareness,

Ruin, Waste... Well, I should probably stop now. Let me know if you gravitate toward one and we can start brainstorming further down that road.

Kevin Horner

The "Bear" Essentials, Does a bear shit in the woods?, Hold the mayo, DeCaff... that's all I got... I would like to read the script sometime.

Kelli Conklin

Bear Betrayal or Bear South (which would be a play on words in several respects)

Dave Johnson

Bare Baiting

Laura Barrow

The House of the Broken Bears; Looming Anger; I Love You, but I Can't Stand to Look at You; Baiting Bear

Yuko Takeda

Clawed Deep, Clawed Bare, Bear Claw

I'm obviously obsessed with the word claw. It's because I remember feeling, when I saw the show, that the lashing out of love and anger left deep scars both in the audience and the characters. It was like, a seemingly harmless creature suddenly attacks with its claws that had been hidden.

Patricia Relph

Bear A Hard Opinion

Jordan Haynes

I've always thought it should either be called "Bearek Clawlluri" or "Truckin' and Fuckin'"

Rex Austin Barrow

Hibernation - playing on the sleeping to waking and waking to sleeping theme of the two characters reversing (Jules waking and Eddie sleeping)

One in the Middle; Brother, Love; Out of Hibernation...

more later, Max wants to play Batman.

Clinnesha D. Sibley

Hmmm... Oh Larry, you know I'm no good with titles. There's something about the simplicity in "Brothers" as a title--even though there's a movie out now called Brothers. Have you seen that film yet? Where's the production going to be? I'd really like to see it.

Derek Kolluri

I like Jordan's first choice.

Dave Wright

BareBack.

Derek Kolluri

Bear Claw: It used to be a Donut, Now, It's a Play!

Larry Mitchell

I'm working on dates for Lawrence, KS, then will mull the possibility of a night or two in KC once the first dates are set.

Roger Gross

Have you considered "Stripping the Bear?"

Cori Kelland Weber

Ursus Americanus, Grizzly Living, Bear In Mind...

I should probably read the play... :)

Michael J Riha

Have you received even one serious response? Maybe Facebook isn't the primo

spot to ask for a serious name for a play that has the word "stripped" in it!!!

Especially from a bunch of psudeo-comedians. Best of luck though. . . he he

Derek Kolluri

I thought there were a lot of serious titles thrown out there.

Michael J Riha

Stripping the Bear? Really? Bear Claw?, Bareback? Even "Out of Hibernation"

sounds like a parody title. I don't know Derek - I still think trying to weed out a

serious title here is risky business. Hey, how about that for a title? "Risky

Bearsness."

Derek Kolluri

Brothers Bear, Ursa Major or Minor, Thicker than Water, Ursa Americanus...

just a few I liked. Of course there are some silly suggestions, but hey it's

brainstorming.

Larry Mitchell

There are a few that have really started to grow on me. I don't want to single them

out right now, because I don't want to stifle the brainstorming. One of them, I

really didn't like at first and wasn't sure if it was a joke, but it has really grown on me.

I like a lot of them, actually, and I'll most likely start trying to narrow them down in the next couple of days. Everybody likes to be listened to. And, when the play actually does go up, those who participated will be more likely to remember the project or associate it with something positive. And, so, if through what has been little work on my part, even one hint of a germ for a good idea should sprout, it's a triple-bonus.

Wednesday, June 2, 2010

I took the title suggestions and sat down yesterday morning to try and figure out which ones I liked. To be honest, nothing is striking me at this point. A few were kind of working for me temporarily, but upon further review and discussion, I think the title's going to have to wait. Here's a post I sent out about it and the discussion that followed.

Larry Mitchell

Thanks for all the great title suggestions! I've narrowed them down to 4:

"Hibernation"; "Bloodwater"; "Far Road"; and "Blood, Water, Bear". Thoughts?

Kelli Conklin

Hibernation and Far Road make me more curious/intrigued than the other two...I

think....

Kelli Bland

Blood, water, bear is my favorite!

Bobby McLaughlin

I can't say because I don't know the story. But, just to put in my two cents, every time I hear blood in a title, I immediately think Vampires. If there aren't any vampires, I would go with the other two. Then again, I could be an idiot. lol

Larry Mitchell

The beauty of a good title, (and poster, for that mater,) is that you shouldn't need the story. It should simply make you want to see it, or at least want to see more. It's nice to have a title that also reflects the theme, mood, or genre of the play as well.

It's actually better that you don't know the story. I have the same fear about using "blood" in the title. Two of my other favorites used Latin in them, and I nixed them because I thought they felt too intellectual... I loved them, but I thought they had a false sense of genre for this piece.

Thanks for the comments.

Cathy Lee Mitchell

What are you naming?

Larry Mitchell

A play I wrote my first year of school, 'Stripped, Bear,' that I'm going to re-write for my thesis and want to re-title, both to reflect changes I've made in the script, and to honor the film we shot the next year that has the same name as the old script.

Kelli Conklin

Yeah, the word "blood" evokes something I can't quite pinpoint. Murder, vampires, thrillers, etc.

Cathy Lee Mitchell

Ahhh....sorry without reading it, hard to say! Good luck picking the right one!

Bobby McLaughlin

Glad I could provide some blind perspective then.

So, then I tried to go with something less vampire-y...

Larry Mitchell

"Far Road" or "Blood, Water, Bear"...?

Hope Hudson

Blood, Water, Bear!

Elizabeth Mitchell

I don't LOVE either...far road doesn't spark my desire to know more in fact if I saw it on a poster I might not read any further, and blood, water, bear doesn't have the zing of the original.

Derek Kolluri

I'm with Eliz.

Cathy Lee Mitchell

I like the original name very much....gives me more of an insight as to what it might be about! Put a BIG #2 after the original title!!! Joking.

Adam Douglas

What's your log line?

Larry Mitchell

Well, perhaps I'll go back to the drawing board. I, too must say, I don't like either of them better than, "Stripped, Bear," though I am set on changing it...

And, the log line is a tough one. Perhaps it is a sign that I need to pick a lead character.

A prodigal son returns home after the accidental death of his parents, with the deed to the house and a new wife. Both are a surprise to his estranged older brother who never made it past the front porch.

Adam Douglas

"Past the Front Porch", for some reason, really clicks with me.

Rachel Chelly Thompson

far bear road

Tim Bruns

I also dig Past the Front Porch.

Bobby McLaughlin

Maybe an adaptation.... Far Road Never Traveled, or Far Road I Could Not Bear.

I have to admit that the logline query threw me. It truly is a sign of some serious questions that need asking. Whose show is this? Is it possible that Lonnie is the major character? If it's one of the brothers, then which one is it? I used to think this was Eddie's show. But my attitude about what kind of story I'm trying to tell and what kind of questions I want to ask have changed over time.

I feel like when I started this, I might have been asking the question, “what are the limits of family?,” but I also feel like I might have been trying to prove some kind of a point to myself about my life choices versus my own brother’s at the time. And, now, I don’t think it was very fair. There’s a line in both the original play and the film that I feel is particularly unfair to him, despite the fact that neither he nor anyone else may be aware of it.

Talking about source material or inspiration for a story is something I’m not very interested in doing with those who are or may become involved with the production anymore. I think it confuses them.

Anyhow, I went back to Facebook with a couple more title suggestions. And, as I type this, I will tell you that I am no longer into them. They elicit too much of a science-fiction, intellectual vibe that a southern-drama saturated in realism cannot match.

Larry Mitchell

"Ursus Americanus"? "Ursa Major"? "Ursa Minor"? "Ursa Major, Ursa Minor"?

Derek Kolluri

What about "Ursa Americana"? Or "Great Bear"? Or "Little Bear"?

Larry Mitchell

Little Bear is my favorite childhood story character and now, also one of Quentin's favorite cartoons.

Larry Mitchell

What if the title had something to do with Lonnie?

Adam Douglas

In what context?

Derek Kolluri

What is it called when Bears fight over a mate?

So, yeah, looks like I'm going to hold off on the title.

Friday, June 4, 2010

I'm in Fayetteville for the wedding of an old friend of mine from ESU who also graduated from the U of A, where he met his bride to be. I met up with Roger to discuss the thesis project, and I hope, our lives in general.

We talked about the new project, and somehow, during the discussion, I decided that the reason I changed the chronology of, "Stripped, Bear," was to force a Dramatic Action. I cheated. It was a revelation of sorts. I also came to the decision during this conversation and the drive back to the hotel afterwards, that the new title should wait until I finish or at least dig into the rewrites this month. I have a strong feeling, made stronger through our conversation, that Lonnie will have a much larger role to play. I feel like she is the catalyst. The brothers can have a shared "lead" role, but I feel like the main arc will be hers. In essence, I'd like the brothers to share the Willie Loman role, and I'd like Lonnie to be Biff Loman. It's Lonnie's journey, but the play could be seen as being "about" the brothers, who, although they do have a bit of a role reversal, don't change a whole lot over the course of the play. Anyhow, the title can wait.

Tuesday, June 8, 2010

I met with Ric Averill today to talk about the shows in the fall, as well as my new Creative Dramatics gig. It looks like everything is a go, and the play is definitely a part of the festival. I was a little worried when I read that email that said the play was, "being considered," versus already chosen. According to him today, my play is definitely in, and we're awaiting word about a play written by two sisters that I think is some sort of a musical. He also wants to

try and book some kind of performance art. Sounds like it will be a very eclectic weekend. Love it.

I also got the go-ahead to wait until the end of June on a title. I'm working on finding some day-care or Montessori school for the boy on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so that I can write all day on Tuesday and a half-day on Thursdays before I teach class, so I hope to get into re-writes very soon. I need to either set up times for readings with the cast, or find a group I can workshop with here in town. I can do the re-writes without readers, but it won't go as well. Maybe I can work something out where I have several different trios reading. Maybe I'll just finish a draft and take the first three readers who say, "yes" that night. Hmm...

Also, the title, "Past The Front Porch" is still haunting me. I like it, but I also still fear that it is too generic. Ultimately, I need to let the title find me. That's what I've learned from all of this. I just hope it finds me by the end of the month.

Wednesday, June 09, 2010

Notes on 2007 Production Draft

Scene 2: Wanna Get Married?

- More of a game, more of a misunderstanding, two worlds, one with steak, one without.
- Change talk of the strip club to talk of the diner.
- Not taking her clothes off at the club, but we can come up with something similar that has to do with the uniform/apron/food smells.
- Need to bring location into the discussion about eating. She works here now, and it's a restaurant. Why doesn't she eat the food here? Or does she?
- How's she never seen a man eat like this working at a truck stop? Does Eddie do something unique? Or is it his sheer hunger?

- Is Lonnie getting off of her shift in this scene and choosing to stay?
- Is Eddie in South Carolina still? Seems like clunky exposition.
- What if Eddie doesn't have a home? What if he lives on the truck?
- Is home still Missouri? Maybe western Kansas? Maybe a real state, but a fake city? Ursa, KS?
- If Eddie doesn't have a home, it's more interesting, less expo, and it leads into discussion about his moving in with her. Then, in "Coming Home," or perhaps another scene, we can find out when they decided to leave, or when Lonnie and/or Eddie stopped rent on the place in Memphis. Letting go of the old place could be a nice moment for the new draft.
- We fall into conversations that end up being questions, and we are forced to answer. Then, we choose to call one-another's bluff, or perhaps the act of mutual bluffing does that for us.
- Or, do they decide early on to have no home together?

Scene 3: The Bear

- Shouldn't have to explain time. It should be apparent from the scenes. Did the audience know in 2007? Were they confused? Is there any way to actually know the answer to this, now?
- Is the trust really about having a job? This seems like it's more about something personal for me at the time than it is about this play. Why did they really choose Eddie?
- When Jules says, "oughta be. I'm the oldest." Why doesn't Eddie counter that? Does he choose not to?
- Cleaner rhythm

- “The Bear” is a conspicuous monologue. There’s no getting around that. So, it must be earned.
- Can’t just keep throwing “pause” around like that. They mean nothing when there are so many. What happens during the pause?
- Right now, we jump from beat to beat to beat. I want to think I’m heading into a beat about one thing before something snatches me over to another by surprise.
- Why does Jules agree to leave?

Scene 4: The Kiss

- Lonnie needs a bigger complaint that, “trying to keep busy.” What does she want? Sympathy? Is it a challenge? Does it fall on deaf ears?
- Where’s the game early on?
- Jules doesn’t ask. “You wanna sell me that car?” That’s far too direct. Where’s the game?
- The game is: Jules wants a car, and Lonnie wants companionship. Or maybe she wants to play at having companionship.
- The “stalker” talk can have to do with the diner now, instead of the strip club.
- “Wanna get married” should have more of a history to it.
- What do we find out in this scene that we didn’t find out in or is contrary to what we saw in “Wanna get married?” What does she tell Jules that she didn’t tell Eddie?
- Is Daddy what comes up with Jules that she doesn’t want to discuss with Eddie?

Scene 5: The last Temptation

- Does she know not to enter, or does Eddie do or say something that keeps her on the porch before she asks to come in? Asking should be the final straw. Lonnie doesn’t want

to ask, because she knows the answer. Or better yet, if she has to ask, she knows the answer.

- Enough with the pauses. ACTION!
- All of this is too direct. Lonnie needs to try to lead the convo in a certain direction. She's looking for forgiveness, security, or whatever she can grab. He sees this coming from a mile away, and she knows it.
- We need to earn these "open-heart" moments, and there need to be fewer of them.
- He feels a need to be honest about what he wants, but he won't let what he wants interfere with what he'll allow.
- Is there any hope for these two? I don't think so, but I don't know that it affects the story either way. What's important is the question.

Scene 6: How to Kill a Bear

- F-bombs gotta go
- When Eddie asks Jules where he stayed last night, he shows genuine concern for Jules's well-being. How can Eddie's interest in Jules's well-being be placed and framed for greater impact?
- Jules wins the first fight. Is this unexpected? He is the oldest. Maybe it felt unexpected due to casting choices in Arkansas as opposed to the writing.
- I think the first fight should represent the way things used to be. The second fight is the way things are. Emotion, uncontrollable, unreliable, and unpredictable as it may be, always trumps apathy.
- Jules used his power to get the hat. Eddie reacts. He's the new King Bear.
- The new king scares the old king off. The old king instantly knows his place.

Scene 7: Coming Home

- What if this is the first scene? ... (Like it's supposed to be)
- If it is the first scene, there's too much expo. What can make this active?
- What if Jules finds out about the wife in the scene?
- What if Jules doesn't even know that they're coming?
- Then, the expo goes down a little easier, as Jules has a lot of catching up to do.
- What if Jules hasn't done anything since the parents died? Is the house a mess? Have any of the funeral arrangements been made?
- If Jules doesn't know anything about the will, and Eddie has to tell him, this moment becomes more active. This choice also instantly places Jules and Lonnie at-odds with one another.
- If nothing is known, nothing is inevitable. Everything must be figured out in this moment, in this scene. And, even if it isn't first anymore, it's definitely still active.
- If Jules doesn't know they're coming, why didn't Eddie call? Did Eddie try to call?
- Are room arrangements more or less awkward if Jules doesn't know they're coming?
- If Jules doesn't have a clue what's going on, Eddie has a reason to tell him what's going to happen.

Friday, June 18, 2010

I re-wrote two scenes today. And, I started chronologically, with what used to be the second scene of the play, "Wanna Get Married." For now, I tried to write it as if it will actually be the first scene of the play. I'd like to try my hand at going chronologically, but I do worry that with the affair not happening until further on down the road, that we may be waiting to long for

the inciting incident, although, in this version, the inciting incident could be the choice to get married. Hmm... I also changed the name of this scene to, "Star Crossed Bluffers."

What was once the final scene of the play, "Coming Home," is now the second, and I had made the choice going in that I would make Jules ignorant about both the will and the marriage. This really changed the scene significantly, and I think it added a lot of action. I hope that the new version of this scene has more of a sense of who these guys are as brothers, and I hope it sets the stage for the real-world life that the "Star Crossed Bluffers" from the previous scene are now thrust into.

I'm excited to see how the play works itself out chronologically. I'm trying my best to remember that, "The map is not the territory," as Mamet puts it. And I'm trying my best to work with the territory I find myself in.

Monday June 21, 2010

Here's a very useful chat that Derek and I had via the inter-webs:

Derek

Hey.

Me

Hey, I'm responding to your response. Thanks man.

took Quentin through the flint hills today

Derek

Sweet. He dig it?

Me

yeah.

Derek

Nice.

Me

Do you mean no one knows who gets the house until the marriage scene?

Derek

Well - no - but that's an idea I suppose. I meant what if neither Jules or Eddie knows who is getting what until Eddie shows up with Lonnie - makes it awkward - gives Lonnie an opportunity to feel bad.

Me

You mean, he opens the envelope and they read it right then?

Derek

Yeah.

Me

Oh shit. I can't believe I didn't think of that.

Derek

Like - Eddie got the official letter sent to his folks house and Jules didn't open it, because he's a lazy dude and very distraught

Me

It's elegant. Like changing Lonnie into a waitress. It solves problems and it's more active.

Derek

Stripped Bear became more complex in my head after the questions you asked...

It's the complexity I tried playing Eddie with - but I think now you have opportunities to flesh out the script itself.

Me

I was really starting to doubt whether S,B could work as a consecutive script, but your ideas might really help it work. I think I'm still stuck inside of it, and you're more outside of it, plus, you have the knowledge of an insider.

Derek

Yeah - and I don't have that reminder that I have to get it done... that pressure always makes me a little nervous, which is why I always seek advice from you.

Me

Nice point. I never thought about the pressure of a deadline. I've just always had them.

Derek

Yeah - it always makes for a myopic view of the project, and I think the more complex you make it - the more artistically sound and complete it becomes.

Me

Yeah, it's all about compressing a lot of the action that's being talked about and making it happen on stage. I also need to stop flat-lining all the dialogue.

Derek

Yeah - it's a good tone but not for every character. Eddie is likely the flattest. In my head, anyway.

Me

Yeah, I was thinking about that on the drive. I thought about making Lonnie a little flatter, but I think she needs to be closer to Jules.

Derek

Do you get what I mean when I say that E and L getting married at the house can add tension? That if E wants to handle the business of the death/house before getting married that there is an added pressure to handle the house stuff - all this puts pressure on every character. E just wants to get married, J doesn't want to be alone and L exists in this pressure cooker... Then she feels alone, because Eddie takes off and all of a sudden she feels lost and alone like Jules. This makes sense?

Me

Whoa... Maybe the wedding never happens. Maybe Eddie stays gone during the wedding day. Maybe that's "Lonnie's Packing Up". I get it now, and I'm probably gonna steal it.

Tuesday, June 22, 2010

It looks like we're going to really take this thing in a new direction after all. So much is flying around. I'm getting some great feedback from Austin and Derek that's really helping me figure out what this new direction means. There's a general feeling that what worked for the last play isn't working for the new one. Perhaps I need to start from scratch. But, I'm worried that I don't have the voices of these people anymore. However, trying to use the old voice with the new purpose is really flattening everybody out.

Thursday, June 24, 2010

I sat down with printouts of the first scene and a pair of scissors today with the intention of cutting the scenes up by beats and re-arranging them. As I went in to do this, it occurred to me that the beats were jumbled, hard to nail down, and a little cyclical. Cutting them up into beats was impossible. So, I did try my best to mark the different beats, and in some cases, this was possible. Then, on the back of the pages, I plotted out what should be the new progression of beats. Then, maybe as I go to write the new scenes, things will be a bit cleaner.

Saturday, June 26, 2010

It appears I didn't take things in such a new direction after all. The consensus on the last draft was that I was trying to salvage too much of the old script. I was looking at the map and not the territory. With Lonnie being more fleshed out, it's going to require that Eddie and Jules be more fleshed out. If we make Lonnie more real and more interesting, it means that EVERYTHING else changes. One little tweak is an impossibility. That's what I've discovered. Everything affects not just something but everything else.

Instead of trying to tweak within the script, as I normally do, I finally took the advice of Frank Gehry and actually started from scratch. I opened a new file and started with the blank page. I rewrote the first two scenes, and I only looked at the old draft to see how I had described the house in what used to be the first scene but will now be the fifth. It felt good. Since I had already gone through the old draft attempting to find the beats, (and discovering that it was very difficult), I had a very clear plan, so I could kind of just let the people flow out. I let the dialogue take me places, as if I was writing the play for the first time. I allowed Lonnie to be her new self instead of trying to morph the old one into a new person. In the process, Eddie has become more flawed and Jules is much more likeable.

I also feel like the new beats are cleaner with better transitions. I feel better about the first scene than the second, but there's a lot more going on in the second scene now, so it's tougher to pull off. But, even that is a marked improvement on the last version. I think this really might shape up to be Lonnie's play after all. I think I'm accomplishing what the goal has been from the start of the process: to make Lonnie more interesting and to inject some more dramatic action. I think I just had no idea what that would mean when I got down to actually accomplishing those tasks, that it would be such a substantial change. After the fact, however, it seems quite obvious.

Sunday, June 27, 2010

I met with the cast and had a read-through of the first two scenes today, hoping that I might be able to cast the roles of Eddie and Jules between Chris and Jason and to get some input from the actors before they all go off for Independence Day. I was initially going to have them read the two new scenes, (and a third I had hoped to write by now), and then just read the old versions of the other scenes, but after reading back through the other scenes, it was more than apparent that these were very different people, now, and that reading the old versions of the latter scenes was only going to be confusing.

As it was, dealing with the new characters was tough enough for them. And, I understand. It's natural to miss the old version. I also understand that this new play might never feel as good to the actors as the one they agreed to act in. I tried to be as patient as I could with them when they were giving me notes based on the play they thought they would get versus the one that was in front of them. By, "the play they thought they would get," I am not referring to the 2007 production draft. All of the actors agreed with me that the play needed a stronger Dramatic Action and that Lonnie needed work. They understood what the goal was. Like me they were unaware of what that would produce.

After we talked a while and did the second read, I think that all three started to buy into this new group of people and their story. It will be different, but it's not like it will be unrecognizable. And, hopefully, it will be better.

I felt like one of the cast members was trying to grab a bit too much of the power, so I tried to put that in check by moving the rehearsal to another actor's house. It was a power-play on my part and probably somewhat passive aggressive, but I still think it was the right move. If I'm going to move into the role of director next month, it needs to be clear who is steering the ship. I don't say that as a megalomaniac who loves power. I used to seek out positions of power, but now I have grown wise to all that such an endeavor entails. I want power only when I need it, anymore, and I am happy to let someone, anyone else fill in the void upstairs so that I can stay busy doing things that matter to me. I can be a leader, and when I feel called to, when the time is right, I like to lead. This is one of those times. And, as a follower who appreciates a strong leader, as well as a father who knows his son requires nothing less, I need to make it clear that I might be flexible, but I am not malleable.

I still have no idea what I'm going to do about casting. That was the major point in meeting today. To be honest, I think I'm actually worse off than I was before we did the two reads today. At least before the readings I had an inclination. In fact, I wrote the new drafts yesterday specifically with Jason in mind for Eddie and Chris in mind for Jules. I still felt the same way. In fact, I felt like it was pretty clear that Roady, with his laid-back nature, was the clear choice for Jules. Elizabeth was with me today, and on the ride home, she also felt that the choice was clear. Though her choice was different than mine... And she's not alone. Derek was not at the reads but was part of the original workshop and acted in both processes of the original play / screenplay and knows all of the actors from undergrad, and he also felt very sure about

who should play Eddie. They both felt that Chris was the better choice. Now, Elizabeth hadn't been reading much of the new stuff, so these reads were new to her, and Derek is the only other person who knows this play as well as I do, and they both went the same way. This has forced me into a quagmire of doubt that I must quickly get out of.

To be fair, I thought Chris gave better reads of both characters, so, I'm leaning toward trusting my wife and best friend's judgment. But, something is keeping me from actually going through with it. I've still got a little bit of time, so I'm not going to force this. I had hoped to know by the time I got home tonight. That has obviously not happened. Perhaps I should sleep on it.

Monday, June 28, 2010

I got up this morning, and casting was all I could think about. I talked to Derek for a while about it. He thought I should have them re-read and then try to direct each of them. I don't know that I'll have the time to exercise that option, as Chris is unavailable until July 10. But, I decided that I can certainly wait at least another day, if not a few more. So, I went to writing the third scene.

I had a few notes from when I broke the script down to scenes and re-arranged it back into consecutive order, and I had talked to the cast about my intentions for it. Essentially, my plan was that Eddie would be trying to change the answering machine, because, unable to find a local hay route, he was going to have to head back out on the road driving his old route from St. Louis to Memphis. Jules would see Eddie doing this. Somehow, Lonnie would come in and Eddie would tell her that he was going to have to go. And, somehow, it would come up that he thinks she should stay there and that he thinks she shouldn't find a job, but simply wait at the house for him. Next to that, I had written, "What about Jules?" I needed an action for him. I

figured I would come up with it as I wrote, so I got to it. No worries about being stuck in the old draft, as this was going to be a brand new scene.

I got about a page into it. I had Eddie flirt with a couple different greetings, and then Jules walking in. Then, it occurred to me that both Lonnie and Jules needed to come into the room from somewhere or something else. I couldn't write any more. I needed to plan. Then, almost as soon as I had decided that, it occurred to me that Jules should change the answering message, that just because Eddie is on the greeting in the old play doesn't mean he is in the new one.

Then, I started to look at the other scenes and remember everything that needed to happen. It occurred to me that Lonnie's car was nowhere in this draft. I had noticed this during our read-through yesterday, and I decided to add it back in as part of a beat from the old script that didn't make it into the new draft but probably should have, where Lonnie lists her possessions and obligations in life, specifically in Memphis. What if Lonnie was just getting back from Memphis where she settled her lease up and picked up her car? So, that was my new action.

Eddie would start the scene out by trying to change the greeting, Jules would overhear him, then they could talk, perhaps about what to do with the money, (maybe I could squeeze in the hotel management stuff from the old draft, and Eddie could say that he wants to use the money to pay off the mortgage.) Then, Lonnie could make it back from Memphis, Jules could leave the room, and Eddie could tell her about having to go back on the road and that he wants her to stay in KS. She could be cool with this, thinking she might be able to get a job, to which Eddie can tell her, "no" in some form. Then, as Eddie and Lonnie leave to do something, Jules can change the machine. I liked how we get this seemingly unresolved introduction, interrupted

by Lonnie's arrival, supposedly shifting the tension from Eddie and Jules to Eddie and Lonnie, and then having Jules return to show that it may have been redirected for Eddie but that it wasn't for him. I'd say that somewhat mimics the action of the show at this point. And, I still feel like it needs more. I don't like the way people just appear and disappear...

So, I went back to the scene breakdown to check out the second half. Was writing the rest of the play going to be this tough? Is my plan too general? In a word, yes. I still have snazzy Kazan-esque titles for all of them and a one sentence action for them, but they aren't specific. However, it also dawned on me that that was OK. I could deal with them individually and consecutively, allowing each to affect the other. What did hit me that was useful is that with the current structure, this might not be Lonnie's play after all.

The last two scenes are between Eddie and Lonnie, then Eddie and Jules. Then, Eddie stays in the house. Could there be another scene added to the end of the play? Who would be in it? What the hell would happen? At any rate, it appears that this is going to be Eddie's story after all, and I think that's pretty close to the original intent 3 years ago, before I convinced myself that it was about them both. Unless something drastic happens while I'm actually in the territory, the map is telling me that this is Eddie's play.

If it is, then that means I should cast Chris. I thought he read both parts the best, if I'm being honest, and I think I've been hung up on age. They both look the same age. Chris, I think, will be Eddie. Now I have a picture to put in my head when I write the rest of the play.

Tuesday, June 29, 2010

An eventful day...

I still think Chris is the right choice. I talked to Derek this morning about how I felt that the action of the play is Eddie's, and he agrees that if it is, indeed, Eddie's story that Chris should

play the role. If I could have them read again, I would. But, I don't want to wait until the 10th. I'd like to write the second half of the show with an idea of who will be playing what. I don't know why. I pretended that I had cast the show when I wrote those two scenes on Saturday, and now I'm leaning the other way. So, I'm still holding off.

As I was talking to Derek and explaining my idea for the outline of the third scene, he suggested that perhaps Jules just hears the new message then changes it after the scene. It's a little cleaner that way. We don't have to deal with the unpredictable nature of having an actor using an answering machine on stage. If you do it for real, you've got to rely on the answering machine. If you use a sound cue, you have to rely on the equipment, the software, the recording itself, and it almost never sounds right or finds the right timing in practice. Then, it occurred to me that perhaps Eddie goes with Lonnie to Memphis, and then follows her back. Perhaps they can bring this argument in with them. Then, it gets interrupted by seeing Jules. He asks what's up, and he gets the short story.

But, that doesn't work so well, as it's not very active for Lonnie and Eddie. What if the message that wakes Jules up on the couch is from Eddie's boss? What if that message tells Eddie that they couldn't find him another route, that if he wants to stay on with the company, he will have to stay on his old route? That way, Jules has a reason to bring up the answering machine. Actually, he'll have two: both the message and Eddie's greeting. And, perhaps it's been that way for at least a week. So, essentially, Jules still hasn't found a new job, Eddie can't get a local one, and Lonnie isn't allowed to. Then, Jules changes the machine. Perhaps Eddie and Lonnie can start to argue and choose to move it into the other room. That could open the floor for Jules to change the greeting.

Then, it occurred to me that we were supposed to be planning a funeral and a wedding. Perhaps the wedding is still an issue, but perhaps the funeral arrangements are finished. Does the set look any different, now? Is it cleaner? Does Jules still sleep on the couch even though he has the bigger room? When do Eddie and Lonnie move into the master bedroom? Can Lonnie and Jules talk about that in scene 4 before they kiss? Could that scene be a good chance for both to air grievances against Eddie? Then, does that transition into something that makes the two vulnerable to each other before moving into the haggling about the car as a distraction that doesn't work, but leads them into a kiss? Who initiates the kiss? What happens after? I think that there might be some answers in the film script. Austin had me write some dialogue for that portion of the scene that wasn't in the play. Perhaps he wanted a better moment there as I do now.

Wednesday, June 30, 2010

What if the part where Jules hears the machine is a transition scene? What if Jules hears the message, then goes back to sleep? Then, Eddie and Lonnie can enter in the next scene with Jules still on the couch. Perhaps he heard the message and didn't tell anyone. Better yet, since there's the possibility of needing the set to look a bit different, why not write in a ballet of sorts, where Jules can continue sleeping, and Eddie and Lonnie can "redecorate" the house. Probably better not call it a "ballet." That's just going to confuse people. But I think there might be something to this. Austin solved some transition problems during production of *Stripped, Bear* by doing a similar thing with certain actors between scenes that sort of suggested what might be going on between them.

Maybe I write that fruit bowl in from the original production, and that's the only real visible thing that remains. Michael Landman provided the fruit bowl in the original production

after we decided we probably didn't want to throw Hummel figurines. This will be a good way to sneak him in. Maybe they bring the TV in at that point. I remember a television being more of a part of the original script.

Wednesday July 7, 2010

So, I'm starting to feel a little wrapped up and spent about the story. I wrote the two sub scenes last Wednesday before teaching class on Thursday and taking off for the, "Mitchell Compound," on Friday, and all weekend, I kept thinking back on how they just don't work. I also began to seriously doubt that Eddie could be a trucker. But, then, I realized that I was thinking of Jason as Eddie. With Chris as Eddie, especially if he has the longer hair, it might be possible. I think I've solidified my casting choice. I should alert the troops and get the rest of the play drafted by Monday. That's a tall order. And, I still don't know what to do about the transition into the end of the first act.

Right now, after scene two, Jules sleeps on the couch while a sort of "ballet" goes on where Eddie and Lonnie redecorate the joint, leaving only the fruit bowl which isn't a part of the original script but was a part of the original production. Then, they leave for Memphis and Saint Louis. Maybe I can drop a line in the 2nd scene about Eddie already talking to Gerald about getting a gig in KS.

Then, the 4th scene is another short one where Jules wakes up to hear Cotton, Gerald's Boss, (Eddie's Boss's Boss,) say that he can't give him the gig in Kansas, because Cotton still needs him in St Louis.

The sun rises, and Eddie and Lonnie will return to mark the beginning of the 5th scene, what was going to be the answering machine but will now be the scene where Eddie and Lonnie re-return. They wake Jules as they enter, arguing about whether she can continue to go with him

on the trips. He wants her to stay home. If she stays home, she wants to work. Eddie sees no reason for her to work. There's plenty to do around here, at home. Before, the truck was their home, but now, this is. His mother died on the road. He doesn't want her to share the same fate. She storms off to the bedroom.

That can give Jules a chance to tell him he has a message. Perhaps, Jules remains still under the covers as Eddie and Lonnie fight, not sitting up until she leaves. Then, Eddie can listen to part of the message, before cutting it off, because he's already dealt with the matter, and we've already heard the message.

Then, Jules can bring up the change in the answering machine message. Is he still wearing the same clothes from before they left? They can also talk about plans for the money, mortgage, etc, and then Jules can leave to shower or something. Does he notice that they moved to the parents' bedroom for the first time, too?

Maybe Lonnie didn't storm to the bedroom but to the kitchen. Maybe she returns having seen that there is no food after Jules leaves the room to shower, or maybe her returning to the room is the reason for Jules to exit. Maybe they can decide to go back out for food. Then maybe they argue about whether or not to invite Jules. Eddie doesn't want to but Lonnie does. She feels like they ought to as family. Eddie wants to be able to talk. Lonnie says they've been talking for days and yells through the door to ask Jules if he wants to go with them. He says no. She says, "You don't wanna eat?" Jules says he's going to fix something here. Lonnie says there isn't anything. He ate it all. Then Jules can say he'll figure something out, and they can leave.

The next scene can be Jules coming out of the shower in a towel and changing the machine.

Then, the 6th scene will be the kiss scene. Let's do it.

Notes to me collected from various cards, sorted by scene

Star Crossed Bluffers

Sometimes, subtext is enough (“reserve the right”)

What if Lonnie calls and quits onstage?

Lonnie is a TCB'er

Coming Home Again

Eddie already talked to Gerald about a possible gig in KS.

Lonnie looks to Jules? (don't know what that note means)

How you been man?

Shitty.

Sorry to hear that. Me, too.

What happened?

Jack-knife, etc

No, I mean, do you have the ashes yet, or whatever?

All that stuff's addressed to you.

A New Look

A New Voice

You Don't Want to Eat?

Eddie and Lonnie return from Memphis and St Louis

Eddie and Jules chat about the money

Jules wants to buy a hotel.

Eddie wants to pay off the house.

Has Eddie been sending money back to the family?

Why would anyone want to stay in a hotel in the middle of nowhere?

I think it's kind of pretty out here.

That don't mean anybody wants to stay here"

Machine has been changed for a while, and they've been in the parents' room, but Jules hasn't noticed until now.

I mean, do you want to say something too (on the machine)

Nah, you go ahead.

They leave to eat. There's nothing there.

X over scene in diner?

Jules changes the machine after saying very little.

Jules hasn't found a job.

Eddie hasn't found a local job.

Lonnie wants to find a job, and isn't allowed?

What about the funeral?

Any changes to the set? (now scene 3)

Wedding? (maybe in scene 7?)

Changing

Have Jules change the machine in a towel after they leave.

The Socks. The car. The Kiss.

INTERMISSION?

Lonnie's Packing Up.

Does Eddie quit his job?

Work at the Mill?

Is this supposed to be their wedding day?

Does Eddie read his vows over the machine?

L&J discuss who told?

What if it was Lonnie?

What if it was Jules?

The Bear

The Last temptation

Is it Eddie who tries to keep them together this time?

Or does he keep offering to drive her, but she insists on a cab?

Does Lonnie Ask for Money?

How to Kill a Bear (Or build a new one)

Does this become Eddie's play with the current ending?

Nobody wins in a drama

Everyone loses.

But everyone gets the chance

To learn, to grow, to try

To be better next time

Monday July 12, 2010

Stop talking about it. Stop thinking about it. Stop doubting and just do it, already.

Actively and passively think about it all day every day if you want to, but at some point, you're just going to have to do the damn thing. And, the audience won't be able to read anything you might have read. They don't care about your research. They just want to hear the words and see them. Just write the words.

Here I've sat, over the last two weeks, agonizing over how I was going to segue from, "Coming Home, Again," into, "The Kiss." I knew something wasn't working about the whole timeline of the answering machine message. I wasn't too hot on the fragmented feel I was creating with so many scenes. I knew it wasn't going to look right on the page, and I didn't want to sit down to write the damn thing until I had a clear picture, but that epiphany never came. So, finally, yesterday, I just sat down and wrote.

I had already written the ballet and the message from Cotton, Eddie's boss. So, I started the next scene according to plan. It opened with Lonnie and Eddie returning from Memphis / St. Louis. And, as best I could, I injected exposition about how Eddie didn't get the job in Memphis, (which was really all a repeat of the previous scene, but I pressed on,) then had Jules and Eddie chat about the hotel idea before Eddie and Lonnie took off for dinner. Then, after they've left, Jules comes out from the shower and changes the greeting on the machine.

Then, out of habit, I just rolled into the next scene, The Kiss. And, as I was writing the stage directions I stopped myself. I said, "Self, here we are in scene seven, which was supposed to be scene four. Now, we've ballooned into a seven scene first act, and you know we don't like the way 3-6 are playing out." Then, Self said to me, "Larry, chill out, man. You need to write this scene. Post it all when you get done, and you'll figure out the rest later. But, for now, just keep writing." So, I did. And, I was right. Scenes 3-6 aren't going to work. The timeline is too confusing. But, Rita Scribner accidentally read scene 7: The Kiss, before she read 3-6. She loved 7. Thought it was a great continuation of the story, but after finding out she'd missed the cluster that is 3-6 and going back to read them, she was confused. Austin stopped by and felt similarly.

So, I asked them how they would feel if 3-6 weren't there. What would we have missed? Because, I knew that we could lose all of the activity in those scenes and lose nothing. What we

would miss is the time spent getting to know the characters and allowing their arc to span. It really doesn't matter what they do. It just matters that they do it together. And, despite the fact that 3-6 don't work so well, I was able to make 7 work, because I know these characters. I trusted the work I've done thus far in getting to know them, and I just wrote the damn scene.

Less talk, more rock. There is a time for thinking, but I need to spend a lot more of that time actually doing. So do my characters. That's the lesson learned from the mistakes made in 3-6. Do it ON STAGE. The reason things aren't working on stage, (page,) is because too much is happening off of it. Whatever it is that these three people do between 3 and 6, they just need to keep being themselves. They won't let me down. It is I who must simply give them something better to do. I need to take scenes 3-6 and use the age old note, "Do it in one." I need to bring the action back onto the stage and make it a part of the activity. I need to take the activity and the action that is scattered in those four scenes and I need to condense it into a maximum of three scenes. I have a feeling that two would be better, but I'm leaving an option out there for a third, should I decide that the "ballet" idea works. I know that four is too many, but I also know that three can work if properly earned. And, I'm not sure how I know this. It just feels like two scenes will give me enough of a break to build the tension I need, but that three or four might deflate it.

Sunday July 25, 2010

So, here I am, damn near two weeks later, and I have obviously failed to take my own advice. It's horrible that it's gotten to this point, and I'm letting my own self-doubt in the new form stand in the way of action. The show has a date. People are going to come. So, there should probably be a play. And, there should probably be a script for it.

Notes from Conversation with Derek on Monday, July 11, deciphered today, July 25.

- PUT MORE ON STAGE!

- Define “Home”
- Are they in the room when the machine plays?
 - (early scene, change things)
- Job thing is a no-go, too confusing
- Is Eddie about to leave town?
- Lonnie supposed to go?
- What if the call is a realtor?
- What if Lonnie called?
- What if the conversation about the greeting between Eddie & Jules is OVER the greeting and the beginning of the message, but they stop at a certain point?
- L- “Let’s just go talk to the guy?”
- What can happen to them in the 2nd act while building dramatic irony?
- 2nd Act Jules brings his stuff out?
 - His own ballet?
- 1st scene of 2nd act is wedding or them coming back from wedding?
- L&E come back (from Honeymoon?) all over each other.
- Jules gets a job?
- Eddie caught in the middle of an unknown conversation.
- Jules wants to tell Eddie about the affair.
- The word “affair” doesn’t quite cut it. Perhaps one of them could mention this.
- Jules and Lonnie get physical trying to keep Jules from telling Eddie about the affair?
- (Maybe an accidental hit?) (Or a PURPOSEFUL one from LONNIE?)
- “contract/pact” between Eddie & Lonnie that he fails to fulfill?

And, I got to deal with a bee-sting while in the middle of typing this. Fun times...

Let's write.

Tuesday, July 27, 2010

I got a lot written on Sunday. I did rewrites of the scenes after scene 2 that come before "The Kiss." Then, I wrote the first two scenes of the 2nd act. Now, I'm up to the point of, "Lonnie's Packing Up," "The Bear," "The Last Temptation of Lonnie," and "How to Kill a Bear," all original scenes from "Stripped, Bear" that will largely continue to have the same basic action beats. As I did with the original scenes I used in Act I, I went through these four with a mind for what the action beats were and what they could be in this new incarnation, and I came up with a plan. Essentially, "Lonnie's Packing Up," is a "should I stay or should I go," scene. I fear it might compete with and steal thunder from the new, "Missed" scene, as they have similar actions, but I think the energy and tension will obviously be different. Then, "The Bear," is about opening up the can, getting the issues out there. "Temptation," becomes a scene about closure and acceptance. And, "Kill," is all about naked aggression, a high tension ending scene. It's a seven-page fight.

Notes from old scenes:

"Lonnie's Packing Up," is about CHOICE, STANDING YOUR GROUND VS WALKING

AWAY

"The Bear," is about OPENING THE WOUND

"Temptation," is about CLOSURE, ACCEPTANCE

"Kill," is about INEVITABLE AGGRESSION

MISSED

Keys back in Missed?

Money for car in missed?

LONNIE'S PACKING UP

Timing with answering machine

Does answering machine wake Lonnie?

Does she think about picking up?

Does Jules Come out?

“Are you gonna pick up?”

“No”

Then, Jules tries to start a conversation with Lonnie, but Lonnie is packing.

Objectives: Lonnie - GO! (with Jules) / Jules - STAY! (with Lonnie)

This should end poorly. No closure.

THE BEAR

Start with Jules

Eddie comes in w/o Jules hearing, starts throwing stuff on the front lawn

Then Jules wakes up

Jules wants to talk / Eddie wants Jules to leave

BEAR

Jules- move on / Eddie – wallow

Eddie kicks Jules out.

(comedy w/ Jules full hands?)

Get close to a fight?

THE LAST TEMPTATION OF LONNIE

Keys! Gas!

Ed- come in / Lon- No

Ed – rain / Lon – OK

Lon – Gas can / Ed – ride / Lon – cab

“sugar pimp?”

Eddie tries to give Lonnie \$?

HOW TO KILL A BEAR

Jules – Hat / Ed- No

Jules tackles Eddie, takes hat, and tries to go

Eddie throws stuff

Pillows

Fruit

Jules tackles Eddie

Eddie wants to fight / Jules NO

Eddie Bull Bear

Ed collapse

Jules leaves

Wednesday, July 28, 2010

We had a read-thru last night of scenes 1-9 with an outline of scenes 10-12. We were joined by Matt Mazouroski, an old friend who attended Emporia State in 2001 to finish his last year of undergrad before heading off to get his M.A. and Doctorate from Northwestern. While at Emporia, he also directed Chris Roady and me in Sam Shepard’s, Buried Child. I played Dodge to Roady’s Vince. Matt now teaches at some private college in Pennsylvania, but he happened to

make his way back to Kansas City last week, so we invited him to the read. Trivia... It was great to see him. And, it was great to have fresh eyes on the script.

The read wasn't entirely smooth due to several reasons I will now list. First, the actors had never seen the script before. Subtext is about 80% of what I write, especially in this script, so a cold read, which is never a great time, gets even worse when subtext is needed. Second, those early scenes need some ratcheting. They need to be a lot tighter, especially if the play is going to be this long. (God, I really don't want this play to be 100 pages. I know one should let a play be what it wants to be, but what if a play wants to be kind of shitty and kind of long? Shouldn't I intervene?) Third, and this is the one this is tough to say out loud, this play bores me. It needs more poetry. It's too mechanical. Every time I get caught up in building a "well made play," I usually forget to be entertaining. I'm going to finish these last three scenes, and possibly add an extra scene where we get to see Jules tell Eddie. Then, I'm going to open the play up to the possibility of shuffling. I may or may not involve the cast in this process.

Time isn't running out. The play would be OK as is. It was OK before. But I know that it can be something more, and if I'm willing to cut the hell out of it, I think I can even get some really good performances out of my cast. But, there needs to be less text. Logistically, I don't think we can put up 100 good pages in three weeks, which is pretty much what we'll have to work with, if we don't get started until next week. I think 75 pages is do-able with hustle. But it must be preceded by the hustle from me. I hope the ship hasn't sailed.

Monday, August 1, 2010

I sat down for a while, and I tried to figure out how I might break the scenes up, and I was having a hard time. I had the scenes printed out in little squares, and I cut them up, so I could re-arrange them at will, and usually, this really frees me up. With my previous plays, this

was the moment in the process when everything finally made more sense. This was not how it felt this time.

Part of the reason, “Stripped, Bear,” worked in a fragmented structure was that the story and characters were so harsh, so bare. These new ones are more rounded out, and so is the story. So, I thought maybe I could try to slice it up with this, “Confession,” scene as the crux, and that got rid of a few scenes in the first act, but I kept coming back to the idea that the original scenes in chronological order from, “Lonnie’s Packing Up,” through. “How to Kill a Bear,” combine for an excellent third act. In order to have a classically structured third act one must build two more acts to hold it up.

I decided to go ahead and bang-out the rest of the scenes. At the very least, I would need something to read tomorrow. Maybe I could let the cast help me re-arrange. Maybe they’ll know something I don’t. Maybe my head is stuck in the sand.

I had “Bear, Temptation,” and, “Kill” to go. I wrote them sparingly, trying to stay under six or seven pages, and I planned to go back to do the “confession,” scene, but that never happened. I decided that if we were going to cut things that this scene would be the first to go. I know now that I just had no idea what the hell would happen in that scene. Well, I guess I know what would happen. Jules would somehow tell or Eddie would somehow find out about the affair... or the tryst, or whatever it is. But, I had and still have no idea how that materializes. So, perhaps, after a pow-wow, and hopefully, a little help from the cast, maybe I either won’t need it or will have a better idea of how to realize it.

I must admit that I actually feel pretty good about how those last four scenes turned out. “The Bear,” seems to lack any purpose other than as a staging mechanism, but “Lonnie’s Packing Up,” has some drive to it, and, “Last Temptation of Lonnie,” has a real sweetness to it. I

tried not to let things end too comfortably. I wanted to make this scene hurt a little while giving Lonnie some closure. I think it does that, or at least, it's moving in that direction. "How to Kill a Bear," felt like a true ending to me. So much so, that I had almost forgotten until now that the play and the film didn't end that way. I think I had to keep reminding myself when I tried to do the scene shuffle earlier today, too. In fact, I don't think I ever had a clear idea of what the old structure was. I need to find the old index cards from the one-act. I should review the scene breakdown for the film, as well.

Wednesday, August 4, 2010

Last night's read was reassuring. Things aren't going to change much. The cast wants to do the 13 scene version that is; American Bear, (That's the final title!) and I think that that actually requires less work on my part. As we read the entire second act last night, (except for the unwritten "confession," scene,) I thought that the feel worked. And, when I brought up the idea of going back to the old style and knocking out a few dozen pages, the entire cast was surprisingly against it. I guess they had grown to like this new version of the script a lot more than they seemed to a couple of readings ago.

I think the cast liked being able to see the end, knowing that those scenes were very much the same in action as the old version, and, to be honest, they were the ones worth saving, mostly intact, from, "Stripped, Bear." They are willing to commit the time and effort needed to get a 90 page play up. I feel empowered to finish, but also that I am running behind. This is a good place to be creatively, as a playwright, but a poor one logistically, for a playwright, especially one who also wants to direct the show that he is also producing. However, we came up with a clear plan of how to clean the story up, and I have a workable idea of how I can get that done by Monday

while keeping the count near the 87 current pages. I think I can trim enough fat to balance anything I'll add to the "confession" scene.

The biggest note I got from the cast was that the metaphor of, "The Bear," is clunky and unclear at best. It pretty much only exists in one scene. That's just poor plotting, and it's easy to fix. In fact, developing the idea of, "The Bear," in scenes 2, 6, and 8, make lines like, "Ape Fucking King Bear," necessary. Last night, it didn't quite feel earned. And, if the exposition of the "Bear," can be taken care of in scenes 2, possibly four, and especially six, when Jules and Lonnie, who are able to talk more freely than Eddie and Lonnie, can use it as a vehicle to become closer. Then it's not so much exposition as a tension mechanism. We can explore early on how the "Bear has affected the family over time, how Eddie is unaware of most of it, then move into how the "Bear is affecting or could affect Jules and Eddie now and into the future.

Right now, scene 8, "Missed," seems forced. Jules can't mention that he wants to tell Eddie about the tryst. Something has to happen in this scene when combined with the pressure of the next scene that makes Jules explode into his confession. Jules must be alienated. So, Scene 8 is now about Jules being tossed into the fire as a wake-up-call by Lonnie who needs Jules to believe that what happened between them was just a mistake. She must go over-the-line in some way that hurts and alienates Jules. Then, in the next scene, the idea of staying home versus leaving home and how each brother has contributed over the years should become the focus. This loaded conversation leads to a rather defensive Jules revealing things that Eddie never knew about, things that allow the "Bear" metaphor to expand. (Did their mom have a heart attack that Eddie never knew about? Mine did, while I lived in California.) This tension over who made the right choices will further alienate Jules, and the idea that Eddie and Lonnie got married without him could flare up. Jules could say something like, "Why do you even love her? If you loved her

you'd stop leaving her." Eddie could then say, "You gotta get out and go," and Jules could ask Eddie what he has to show for all his time away.

Perhaps Eddie has been sending money back to the folks over the last few years, and perhaps that could become another point of contention. Essentially, Jules will push Eddie about his idea of contribution, suggesting that, "being there," means something. Jules doesn't get the response he expected, (Eddie should be doing something related to change or escape from the house,) and Jules responds by confessing in an attempt to shock or hurt Eddie.

Jules is losing everything, his parents, his brother, his home, and a potential, (in his mind,) love interest. He wasn't able to deal with the first loss, and the others have sapped him. Now he needs to lash out. And, Eddie should deserve a bit of that rage. Jules really does bring the bear. But Eddie will become the bear. The Ape Fucking King Bear.

Then, in, "Lonnie's packing Up," Lonnie can have a bit more rage herself. This can help Jules and Eddie build up the tension needed for the final scene. Perhaps Lonnie hasn't spoken to Jules since he told Eddie. And, this scene is the first time that happens.

Before the reading last night, and in the form the script is currently in, I thought that the stakes weren't high enough. But, with the changes we laid out in the reading last night, I think this can be a much more active and high-stakes venture. It was mentioned that Lonnie could easily be a stripper again, and that this might be a way to help raise the stakes. I think that would be cheating.

Thursday August 5, 2010

I got about 75 pages of notes from Derek this morning. Actually, I got a script pieced together in a word document from the shards scattered on Facebook that he had highlighted and notated with several useful suggestions. The biggest thing he did, and one of the most helpful,

was to go in and start swinging a blade at the dialogue. It's too verbose. I think I'd made that note before, but I must have either forgotten it or not heeded it well enough. He cut out a lot of pronouns. That actually helped quite a bit, and he pointed out a lot of lines that didn't feel right for a specific character. He also suggested several ways to change dialogue into action, mostly silent that will help build tension and make the play much more watchable. Basically, he went through the first several scenes of the play and held me accountable for, "showing versus telling." It's about the idea of putting it on stage instead of in the people's mouths. He and I keep coming back to that. And, I think it's a great thing.

So, I took his draft and transposed the notes onto my draft from the reading. And, I got busy. I worked on the first scene, and without adding pages, was able to add another action beat or two while dropping exposition about Eddie being a trucker and adding in the promise to Lonnie that Kansas won't be forever. This is the promise that will help pull them apart.

END OF JOURNAL

XXVI. A Full-Length

I was knee-deep in rehearsals after that, and we followed the plan I had outlined above. When a scene was needed for rehearsal after the journal ended, I spent the morning going through it and creating the production version. Scenes one through five were all brought in on the ninth of August. Scenes seven and nine came in on the 11th. Scenes six, eight, and ten showed up on the 12th. Scene 12 popped up on the 22nd. And, scenes 11 and 13 rolled out on the 25th. After that, there might have been a light change here and there, but it was time to put the director's hat on, and that means accepting the script you have and making something of it, not second-guessing the text.

Statistically, Lonnie really did become more of the play. Her lines comprise 30% of the total. Eddie and Jules make up 39% and 33% respectively. So, I guess, technically, it's Eddie's play. I would agree. He becomes the bear. He hibernates at the end. Jules and Lonnie have more hope, and if this falls more in line with a tragedy, then, Eddie coming out as the biggest loser in the game based on a choice he makes in the first scene, should be the central focus, even if it is a pretty heavy time-share.

XXVII. Rehearsals For the Full-Length

Rehearsals were extremely smooth. Everybody showed up ready to work, and the script was starting to reveal itself once we learned to trust what we had to work with. This play was much funnier than the one-act and the screenplay. The cast saw the potential humor in the play. What could make some of the more conspicuous lines such as, “Ape Fucking King Bear,” work was the simultaneous humor and sadness of recognition that started to ooze from the text. And, once we knew to look for it, the humor was everywhere.

Yes, the play should have an overwhelming feeling of impending doom. It is technically a tragedy, but it’s also a story with a bit of hope at the ending. These people do change. They do learn, and some of that is too little too late, which puts us firmly into tragedy, and they go through personal hell to make these changes for a touch of the epic, before taking at least a nugget or two that can make them better people at the end. The play is technically a comedy. It’s a really sad comedy that’s not quite funny enough to be a dark comedy, but it’s far from hopeless. These are first-world problems. These people have roofs, clothes, and food. There must be laughter, or the audience will start to hate these whiny kids who drink too much beer.

XXVIII. Critique of the Full length Production and Script

The performances were very well received if not well attended. I relied on the Lawrence Arts Center caring enough about its own bottom-line to secure attendance. The first night had fewer than ten people, the second was about 25, and the closing night had something close to 45. So, as comedies often go, the responses went up with the attendance, because the laughter did, too. An audience has to know it has permission to laugh, especially when the comedy has so much darkness. If we didn't get them in the first scene, with those two silly kids fumbling and bluffing their way into matrimony, we didn't have them at, "Ape Fucking King Bear."

Several of my old chums came out. Roger and his wife Dr. Pat came to closing night, and they both enjoyed the new version. Dr. Pat thought that Lonnie could still use a better shake. I agreed. And, Roger, who had never been a huge fan of broken timelines, liked this consecutive version much more. The old stage manager, Megan Mayo, was interning in Kansas City at the Coterie, so she came out with Elliot James, another Arkansas graduate. She liked the old version better. A large group of ESU alums also made the trek. So, the Facebook posts might not have technically found me a title, but it probably kept us from having empty seats.

The production was about all I could ask for from a group of actors who received no money. It was more. That was a 20,000 dollar show I put up for less than 2,000 out of pocket. This isn't to say the thing didn't have its problems. As I say, I agreed with Dr. Pat that there was still something intangible about my treatment of Lonnie that felt judgmental and not quite right. I think she was flawed from the start, and I think, while not impossible, a lot of times, if it isn't fleshed-out at the start, it might never be.

There were also several comments from those in attendance that the play seemed to have three false endings. It's not that people didn't like the last three scenes, or that the play was too

long. But, when you think something is over, and then it's not, that is what you're most inclined to think about, not the show. I was actually keyed into this during the final dress by Ric Averill, and we tried our best to alleviate this problem by building in a transitional sound cue and staging that keeps the play, "alive," enough to keep the audience from thinking the play is over, and that worked for the most part. I think a director like Austin would have seen that coming. If we had more runs with audiences, we would have noticed it sooner. I think that scene 11, "The Bear," is the real culprit. Though, a case might be made that scene 10, "Lonnie's Packing Up," (You know that's a reference to, Annie, right?), starts the trend. There is finality to that scene, but it comes so close to the confession, that it makes the play feel unresolved. So, it must have been a staging issue, which isn't to say that I can't pre-empt that with something within the text. I should certainly seek to.

I learned a good deal about the business through this process, but I also learned a ton as a playwright. I learned that, sometimes, if you want to get your play up, you also have to be the spark. I learned that I can't expect to get a different script if I just edit what I've already written. I cannot be afraid to start from scratch. I'll always have the old drafts if I need them. And, I learned that, even if you bring more years of experience, skill, and thought back into a play, and even if all of that certainly makes a play better, it still might not save it. American Bear is a good play, maybe almost really good, but it's not great. I get that.

Even though it is a better-crafted piece of work, in its place and time, it doesn't have the same punch or immediacy that, "Stripped, Bear," seemed to have in its place and time. I recognize that a good deal of this feeling might have had more to do with the expectations, juxtaposition, and the mood of the moment in Fayetteville than it had to do with my skill, but I felt it then, and I still do, when I look back, that this just didn't hit that nerve.

I also learned how to shape my own process outside of a graduate school. Yes, I was and still remain disappointed in the infrastructure and culture of the department as a company whole, but internally, within my circle of six in the playwriting room with Roger, I was always well supported. I always had an interested eye. Someone was always pushing me to do more, to expand, and to write, write, write. I always had at least one other person to read with. Outside of those confines, I now have to either fill in the gaps myself, being my own critical eye or search out those who can do it for me.

It was during the rebirth of this play that Derek started to fill in the parts of that role that I could not. Yes, I need to learn how to self-motivate, but it's nice to have an outside force that I respect who adamantly believes in me as a writer, always wants to read my work, understands what I need as a playwright, consistently expecting more and better of me. He has a history with me that goes back over a decade, and he's been through most of the same training I have, so we have trust and a similar vocabulary while having somewhat different skill-sets.

XXIX. A Production of One Script Becomes a Reading for Two

She & Her Productions of Kansas City was set to produce the play next in May of 2011, but Derek and Theatre En Bloc in Austin Texas had also already committed to the play, for the fall of 2011. However, they, (or rather we, as I was still a founding company member and non-residing Resident Playwright,) were currently still the Sustainable Theatre Project, and we were producing, Seller Door, in July. So, I was doing re-writes of that play while attempting to direct and apparently also produce, American Bear, for She & Her, who were going through a transition of both leadership and space as we began rehearsals.

Things spiraled quickly out of control. First, Chris Roady, the actor slotted to reprise the role of Eddie emailed me to ask if I might be able to move the dates, as he had just accepted a role in, Tommy, at the KC Rep that would perform at the same time. I felt betrayed and reacted with my heart instead of my head, and I told him I would replace him. In hindsight, I might have tried to accommodate an actor who had done such excellent work for no money at all. Instead, I replaced him with an actor that had the youth I was looking for out of an Eddie opposite a rather youthful looking Jason. And, he turned out to be rather unreliable, so we found ourselves constantly rescheduling rehearsals, until one day, I realized that we didn't have enough left. We had also moved through three different spaces by that point. So, after attempting to cancel the whole thing, then renegotiating with the producers, we decided to have, "A Night of Mitchell Plays."

"A Night of Mitchell Plays," would be staged readings of two of my plays, American Bear, and, Seller Door. I called in favors and had a rotating cast to fill in the roles for, Seller Door, while Jason, Lizzi, and the new Eddie: Corbin, would read, American Bear. It ran four nights over two weekends, and almost nobody attended. This was supposed to be me polishing

the production as a playwright, to get it ready to send to Austin, but instead, it was me getting a look at the re-writes I had done for, Seller Door, while watching a half-ass version of a play I hadn't found any time to improve which was supposed to be the whole point of the project.

XXX. To Austin!

I was rather uninvolved in the November 2011 Austin production. I was in Austin for a month to write a spec script for a crazy old man with too much money, so I did swing by a couple of rehearsals. Derek played the role of Jules this time. His brother Devin came into town to play Eddie, and Jenny Lavery, Derek's new love interest as well as partner in production with the new company, Theatre En Bloc, which I was still resident playwright for but no longer an active member of, played the role of Lonnie. The stage manager, Blake Addyson, whom I would later go on to write a shadow puppet opera with, was given credit for directing along with Derek, Devin, and Jenny. In fact, so was I. It played to small houses with an overall positive response from those who attended. And, we got a mix of critical reviews.

Since I was so uninvolved in the production, I asked both Derek and Jenny to describe it and answer a few questions. Here are their responses:

Jenny Lavery: Lonnie, Lighting Designer, Executive Producer for Theatre En Bloc

My experience developing Bear was great! In comparison to other development processes that I've been through, it was smooth and easy. As we worked through the script in rehearsal, we'd make notes of things that weren't working and basically flag the things that we really needed to work. Our method was a trial and error approach at 'making what the playwright wrote work onstage'. If, after many tries, we still felt the moment wasn't playing fully, we'd bring it to you. Also, if while working we had an idea for a moment, we would note it and bring it to you as a potential change. In every interaction, I felt like you, the playwright, approached the note without ego and without clenched fists. I genuinely remember feeling like you were just looking for ways to make the script

better & would take suggestions to mull over and potentially implement.

Flexibility and humbleness are rare qualities to find in a playwright.

We toiled over the montage. Man-that was a beast to figure out. It became clear during rehearsals that the first act couldn't hold 2 separate montages. It weighted the act down. And introduced a convention that is novel....but if it doesn't come back in the second act in some way... we don't get the payoff. We worked those montages with music, without. With TV noise and without. With small words and with no words. With gesture movements and with mundane pedestrian movements--trying to find what worked. We knew that it needed to be a dance--a modern dance full of pedestrian movements that add up to something greater. So, we continued to add events/take them out...add other bits here and there to make the passage of days make sense but without adding too much time. In rehearsal, we would sometimes run the montage with so many bits that it would take 15 - 20 minutes. YIKES! After about 7-9 minutes, we found that our SM and other designers, etc in the room would be bored. No amount of tech could float us beyond that mark--since the movement was so pedestrian. (Necessarily pedestrian)

The montage was the most frustrating in terms of development, but the most fun in terms of staging and acting it. We gave ourselves every opportunity to play & fill it out. I like physical theatre a lot--so telling a piece of the story through this silent scene was a fun challenge!

Staging:

We did collaboratively. We minded the beat changes. We minded levels. Derek and I took turns, when we weren't in the scenes to direct & hone in on moments. We tried to keep every moment honest.

Acting:

This is an actor's dream. The script's success depends on the actors. It is what one would call 'an actor's script'. I LOVED Lonnie. From the moment I read the script about a year before auditions, etc, I repeated asked Derek-when are auditions? I need to play this role! Lonnie is in a very real predicament. A situation that we (those of us who have a little road behind us) can all relate to. I immediately connected to the dialogue. Technically speaking, the lines are short phrases & everything is in the subtext. Lonnie is strong, yet longs to be swept off her feet--rescued. She desperately wants to make a home, feel wanted and loved, and feel like she belongs. When the reality doesn't match her dreams...or what Eddie has promised her....she becomes lonely. She becomes lost. And in a very human way-finds connection. Communion.

We worked a lot on the last scene of Act I, because the script at first painted Lonnie in a way where her struggle wasn't apparent. I remember that we worked hard to make that scene into something that could actually happen & a mistake that Lonnie could make: We see her just talking to Jules and giving each other a hard time...and for once letting her guard down to have a beer with him. Then, unexpectedly, they share a very real emotional moment & it scares them. Without thinking, suddenly they're kissing. Without premeditation.

The final scene between Lonnie and Eddie is SO real. It took Deven and me some time to find it because the scene is raw. We've all been in that situation where all you want to do (in a perfect world) is run to the other person, jump into their arms & make everything ok again. But we stop ourselves. We're afraid, angry, hurt, ashamed, vengeful, tired, embarrassed & the words don't come--or at least not the 'right' words. So it vacillates between moments of near connection & a series of missed connections. Attempts at taking a step toward each other but neither knowing if even the most perfect present can amend the past. I loved this scene. It's so ripe. It gave me so much to play with.

Lighting:

This show was SO fun to light. I really started with the concepts of the OUTSIDE vs. INSIDE worlds of the house. How the house had a life of its own. It was something sacred that contained specific items from the parents. I wanted the type of light to be distinctly different from the outside forces: the porch light, the sunlight streaming in through the big window, the TV light & then the diner. Inside the house, it was a warm glow and really warm practical lamps. The TV and porch light were harsh and flickering white lights & the sun through the window was the way that we established time of day. The diner lights were harsh, directional lights that were hung directly over the bar and then flown out of the space. We used about 12 traditional stage lights as a wash for the house & a little diner front light. But the rest of the lights were practicals or clip lights. The TV I rigged with a clip light and strobe light that were mounted into the gutted TV. The window unit was 8 clip lights, the diner light were spray painted and taped clip

lights that we rigged on a pulley system to be manually flown out via the booth. Transitions from scene to scene was the window lights taking us from one time of day to the other. Lighting transitions inside the montage were lights up (day look) for action and just TV lights (night look) for passage of time. I had much more complex lights implemented for the montage but it weighted the montage down. So we abstracted it a bit to keep the momentum flowing better. (B Iden Payne Nomination for Lighting Design)

What were your (our) initial thoughts about what needed to be changed?

**Lonnie needed a clearer arc. We focused mainly on the montage and scene 6.*

**Montage(s)*

**I remember there was a lot of talk about the time period.*

How did the performances feel?

We cancelled the first because the tech wasn't ready. This is a deceiving show. It looks technically simple, but it wasn't for us. It was gorgeous and technically sound, but it is more complicated than one originally thinks.

How were they received?

Audiences (though small) LOVED the show. Grown men wept. The audiences were really affected. We had many people come back 2 and three times. Some audiences yelled out at the stage "Oh no she didn't!" "Oh shit--look out!" etc. which was fun! One middle aged man called his brother who he hadn't talked to in 20 years because of the show. Other men literally cried afterwards. People were really moved and wrote us notes and comments for weeks afterward telling us the conversations that the show started for them.

How was attendance?

Terrible. It was our fault. I had never produced here & Derek's forte is not marketing/advertising/PR.....plus we were overwhelmed with the show.

What would you change about the script now or what problems do you think remain in the script that you think I should look at?

Hmm--to be honest, I haven't read it recently enough to be able to say fairly. I love what it became during our process. It is a show that I would do for years if someone let me. It is fulfilling as an actor. It was a show that I was very sad to put away.

Why do you keep doing my work? What draws you to it?

I love your dialogue. The short crispness rings true to me. You have a knack for not over-writing and letting the actors have work to do too.

I think this is your strongest work and I would love to see you continue to hone your realistic theatre voice. If we did Bear again & put the right marketing and PR around it--it would be a SMASH! You have a wonderful way of finding the humor amidst the drama. This realistic piece reeks of the classic great American playwrights. You could be that modern American voice. Again, I would love to see you continue in this vain.

What do you like the least about my work?

Similarly to my comment above, I think that you could write with more of a producer's eye. Meaning: Write for a specific audience. Of course, it will appeal to larger audiences because I trust that you'll unearth those human universals. But if the script is too broad & 'for everyone', it quickly becomes for no one. Or if it's too heady--then it becomes a producer's nightmare because it is so much

riskier. I say this because I think that you could write anything! I also think that you could and should be published. I think you will be published (and soon) if you continue to tell realistic stories wrought with honesty and the human condition. Just my two cents.

Derek Kolluri: Jules, Artistic Producer for Theatre En Bloc

So here are my offerings concerning 'American Bear' etc.

ONE: What initially drew me to the script was the precise mixture of universal theme and clear personal voice. Initially, I was aware of a shift between "main" character... initially it was Eddie's story, then it became Jules' somewhere in the film adaptation, and then in the work with Landman and the work we did on Lonnie, I felt it became her story. In the end, after the question of "main" had bounced around, I felt that what happened was unique. Unique in that the play was very balanced and every character was a "main." That balance is rare to find. That balance also made the potential effect on the audience exponentially stronger. It was clear as a reading audience that I was left feeling empathy evenly through out and for all characters. I found myself supporting the characters and also blaming them. And in that it felt genuine and honest... it revealed more truth about the subject (family) than a story that might have positioned one person as a traditional "main" or "lead". That balance made the story feel universal because the ability to identify with everyone of the characters, their great qualities and tremendous short comings, made me think about what was at stake instead of leaving me with a sense of how I should feel. In other words I couldn't wrap everything up and think "this is how I should feel about this..." rather the work

made me question what family means and what my responsibility is a member of a family.

TWO Through rehearsal I knew we needed to create the balance the writing exhibited. So my question were mostly about how to honor those notions I had as a reader. How do you keep Eddie from becoming a victim or Jules from being the heel or Lonnie from being an evil vixen...? I think a more amateur group of theatre makers would prolly not find those subtleties. Another question I had throughout was "Does it matter that Lonnie cheating on Eddie with Jules is so obvious? Does it matter that we see it coming from a thousand miles away?" In a sense, and not with any dramatic framing put on the question, I think it isn't so important. In real life we live in these situations, completely oblivious to the inevitable outcomes - and then when an objective outsider reflects the situation to us we say "Of course that was going to happen!" I like that notion of the script - it's real. That said, it requires the other elements of the show, the acting and directing in particular to be DAMN tight. Which is another aspect that drew me in... again, lesser actors could make this show really BAD. I like that the playwright in this case is asking something of me as an actor or director, not just giving me an actor proof script. Too often we hear, "thank god the script was great because the acting was awful..." or vice versa. In this case I think good performances are required to understand how good the script is.

Another question I had throughout was how to handle the montages. I knew instinctively two montages (especially that close together) would not work.

But I like to remain open to the idea of solving what a playwright has given me before regressing to asking the playwright to "fix" it. This point falls best in a question I will answer later, but the solution for the montages was born out of one specific reason I trust you as a playwright - you trust that sometimes things have to be discovered in a room. And that is how we figured it out. We continually asked ourselves "what is Larry after with the montages?" and "what solution can we create for the montages?" Then we just staged and restaged and restaged until we hit it. Ultimately, it came down to something poetic and cinematic. No words, no lyrics, just very clear physical story-telling that exposes a little bit about each character, while telescoping time and giving a clear arc to the relationships at play. Many people found the montage to be hypnotic and engaging, very clear and beautiful. Some even asked how we "did it?" I assume that means how did we effectively put a montage on stage... I think that means they liked it. Nah, I know they did... people were in awe. Truly.

THREE: In performance. Well, that was tough; we didn't get great audiences, which is mostly our fault. We didn't know how to market it. I feel like performances revealed that Lonnie is not as balanced as I think we all intended her to be, you and us. Truly it was difficult for me to think about the play as a piece of dramatic literature too much in performance because I needed to slough off the previous 5 or 6, whatever, years I had been a part of the development. I needed to just act. So, I took off the development/director/collaborator hat and just worked to continue honing craft as an actor. The worry I have is that the script isn't actor proof. If this was handed to even above average actors (granted

without a background with the piece like I have - a la J. Smith etc.) it has traps. My question is how do you rectify that without losing the subtlety and dynamic?

The reception was amazing, despite the small houses on some nights. We ran four weeks... 16 shows... and probably hosted 275 people total out of a potential 1,000 or 1,200. Those that saw the play and viewed it as a piece of drama to be intellectually digested were disappointed as per our Adam Roberts Chronicle review. But those who saw the show and just experienced it were truly moved. One of my favorite kinds of moments in the theatre is when an audience member begins to interact with the piece. Audible gasps, "Oh, shit!"s and the like stand out more to me than laughter or cries. It means people are paying attention, and what's more - getting caught up. This happened on several occasions. One man who saw the show is a national champion slam poet who said as he listened to the play, he began to hear the poem and he was impressed because it had three voices that worked so well together - yet were still individual. That same poet I would later find out was the man who "hmmmmmed..." and "AH NO!" ed his way through the show - and was so emotional at the end all he could say when he was introduced to us was - "ooooh maaann" shyly, under his breath as he struggled to break eye contact. No, I'm not making this up.

Yet more impressive I would say is the middle aged man who came with his wife. The two stood pensively in the lobby. The woman knew Jenny from work, so the two waited for us to come out. She looked worried; him, shaken. He had clearly been emotional. Eventually, he told us (and I know some of this came out in the lobby and some between Jenny and her co-worker in the following days)

that he hadn't spoken to his brother in years. They had a falling out. And the play moved him to call his brother. He had an emotional and active response... his wife was more emotional seeing the change it brought about in him.

We grabbed two nominations for design.

FOUR: The biggest issue in the script is balancing Lonnie. AND how do you pitch a small script that everyone will inevitably frame as realism with a one-off opening scene that is set so dramatically different than the remainder of the play, especially smaller, low budget theatres?

FIVE: The reason I do your work is because I think you're as good a writer as any I've read. I've read and directed Pulitzer nom pieces... I think you're that good. Correction - that good when you are personal. American Bear is really the tip of the iceberg for you. It is honest, emotional and completely vulnerable - to be honest, as much as I like Seller Door, Tin Man stuff I've read, Man w/o a Country etc... I think they are not as personal or vulnerable as American Bear. I continue to work with you because I want to do whatever I can to help you realize that potential. MAKE IT PERSONAL!!! MAKE IT VULNERABLE... in Seller Door you hid behind metaphor... which made it easy for you and probably me - but it was lost on others. You have to develop your voice, your vulnerability. You can't hide your opinions and compassion and desire and anger and love behind metaphor - I think the next thing you write should be realism and personal. In Seller Door - you tried to make something universal by stripping the personal out of it... in American Bear you wrote something personal and it was universal because of it.

They swear that neither saw what the other wrote. At least one can be confident that they should be running a company together. They certainly have a singular vision balanced out by differing points of view. The play was also reviewed by three critics that I know of. One was extremely positive, one rather negative, and one was somewhere in the middle. Only the positive one made me cry. And, I don't find that odd. I wish it could have gotten more lift with more people, but it did run for four weeks, so when we say it had small houses, we mean smaller than we would have liked or even than we could afford, but large enough to run for a month. I say I'm done with the script, but I know these things are never done. I don't disagree with anything Derek, Jenny, or the conflicting reviewers say, but I don't currently have the will to try to rectify those opinions with the work and find another production. I want to write new things. Derek and Jenny and just about every one else wants me to write new things. Yet, I can't and probably won't ever escape the hunger to make it perfect. It's just that, for now, I have other priorities.