The Mission of a Theatre Artist

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The Mission of a Theatre Artist
The Mission of a Theatre Artist

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

by

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University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana
Bachelor of Arts in English 2001

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University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of materials documenting my thesis performance as well as a statement of artistry, a copy of my current headshot, and resume and a link to my website.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to:

My tender comrades: Kholoud Sawaf, Stephanie Bignault, Jason Shipman, James Taylor Odom and Nathaniel Stahlke.

My professors at the University of Arkansas and my teachers in Chicago.

My family, who have always nurtured me as an artist and performer.

And the world that will go on turning when I am gone.
DEDICATION

This is dedicated to: the future students of the MFA Acting program in Theatre at the University of Arkansas.
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STATEMENT OF ARTISTRY

It is the responsibility of an artist to transform the hearts of her audience and to make them feel brave, new, hopeful, challenged, or even angry. In just a few short weeks, I will perform my final role at the University of Arkansas: The Old Woman in Eugene Ionesco’s The Chairs. As we begin rehearsals, I am inspired by the notion that it is the responsibility of the theatre artist, to a civilization that is and always has been sick, to transform hope into despair, loneliness and isolation into a sense of the whole, and to turn tears of sorrow into belly-roars of laughter.

My director, Kholoud Sawaf, a young woman from Syria who will receive an MFA in directing from the University in May, has been one of the biggest influences on my experience in graduate school. While working towards her Masters degree, she’s been living through the horrors of a civil war, which has unceremoniously ripped friends and family members from her on a daily basis. She’s watched as an ancient city, her hometown of Damascus, has been reduced to ruins. She’s been asked to live through and lead others through imaginary stories amid daily news relating real human suffering. And she is consistently asking herself the question: Why? And so, as I begin the journey of telling this story, I am reminded of a piece of text in The Chairs that spoke to her and in turn speaks to me: “We leave a trace because we are people and not cities.”

Actors are people who leave behind only traces. Our work will not hang in galleries for centuries beyond our death. It won’t be played in concert halls filled with people or stand in majestic glory at the harbor of some future city. Our work cannot be measured in bricks or
dollars but in units of the intangible: in units of love. It lives on only in the hearts and minds of the audience.

So I return to Kholoud’s question: Why? Why must we do this work? The answer I am currently living with is this: to nurse our sick world back to health; to grow trust, human connection and love, even in the face of war and destruction; to lift up hearts, perhaps even our own, as they are daily faced with sickness, poverty and loss. We that have the gift of words and the liberty to express them. We that have health and the luxury of shelter and peace, have a responsibility to tell transformative, enlightening and complicated stories. Working on The Chairs feels like a full affirmation of this mission.

The kind of theatre work I am most drawn to, influenced and inspired by thrives best in an ensemble. One of the greatest gifts of my experience in graduate school has been the opportunity to work within a true ensemble. For over ten years in Chicago I worked as a freelance actor, tripping from theatre company to theatre company like a kid in a school cafeteria trying out different lunch tables. Sometimes I’d get to work with an ensemble or a director more than once, and this consistency was the most fulfilling of work and often the best received by the audience. For the past three years, I have had the sublime opportunity to work and train with a cohort of actors, teachers, directors and designers who function as a true ensemble. The intimacy and trust between us begets an intensely creative and fruitful environment for original work.

Tender Comrades, a project that I recently completed with two of my acting colleagues, Stephanie Bignault and Jason Shipman, was my first sojourn into collaboratively creating an original piece of theatre. Six weeks prior to our performances at the end of February we had a blank page. I was amazed at our ability to transform the blank page into a strange, new, meta-theatrical story that illustrated some of the very questions we’ve been asking ourselves about the
creative process for the past three years. The speed at which we were able to produce this work was a direct result of our shared experiences as an ensemble. It would have been almost impossible to write, direct, act in and produce this work from scratch in such short of a time if we did not have the rich intimacy and shared vocabulary that is a direct result of years of training together. I will forever be searching for this kind of collaborative ensemble work as I continue back into the world as a theatre artist.

These final projects, *The Chairs* and *Tender Comrades*, are true culminations of the work I have done here for the past three years and they reflect the kind of work that I hope to do as I continue on as an actor, writer, and director—even if they only leave traces.
TENDER COMRADES

An MFA Thesis in Theatre

Designs by Jacob Hofer & Jacquelyn Cox
Music by LODGE....
Stage Managed by Bucha Hecke
Crude by Damien Dena, Celeste Richard
Devised by Stephanie, Laura & Jason

*Special thanks Kholoud Sawaf, Greg Hodges, Colin Bennett, and all those we failed to mention.

Program designed by Jason Shipman
TENDER COMRADES SCRIPT

Written and devised by Stephanie Bignault, Jason, Shipman and Laura Shatkus

The room is a bar, The Nines. It’s a Quonset hut that looks like a bomb shelter. The playing space consists of a door to the exterior, center, a piano at left, a typewriter on a small table at right, 3 chairs and a mannequin wearing a small apron. There is a suitcase on legs on its side at left and a door to a hallway at right. There is a Ghost Light, not on, rolled over to the right as well. Cranes hang from strings, articles about Michael Keaton, hanging pages of music. A decorated jail of sorts.

The audience mingles, drinks wine, snacks, chats. The actors are not present. CHRIS and DAMIAN escort audience members to their seats. At the start of play, The Ghost Light turns on.

LAURA enters the space. She swings the hanging lights, plays a few notes on the piano. She has the room to herself and it’s heaven.

LAURA
(To herself).
What a to-do to die today, at a minute or two to two;
a thing distinctly hard to say, but harder still to do.
What a to-do to die today, at a minute or two to two;
a thing distinctly hard to say, but harder still to do.
What a to-do to die today, at a minute or two to two;

She swigs whiskey.

a thing distinctly hard to say, but harder still to do.

A magical Magic 8 Ball rolls in from the audience. She examines it. She shakes it. She turns over the magical Magic 8 Ball and, miraculously, it has an answer.

LAURA
“Keep your eyes on the stars and your feet on the ground.”—Theodore Roosevelt. Isn’t that a Pixies lyric? Will I ever get out of here? (Shakes, flips, reads.) “Be where your feet are.”—Anonymous. Why are you so obsessed with my feet? Will they ever get out of here? (Shakes, flips, reads) “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.”—Eleanor Roosevelt.

JASON, in character as KONSTANTIN from Anton Chekhov’s The Seagull, enters from the hallway area. LAURA hides the magical Magic 8 Ball in her clothing. She will eventually play the part of MASHA from The Seagull.

JASON as KONSTANTIN
(To LAURA as MASHA) “It’s time. We’ve got to call the audience! (She doesn’t respond). I said, we’ve got to call the audience.”

LAURA as MASHA
(Reluctantly. To no one.) “The play’s about to start.”

JASON as KONSTANTIN
(To an imaginary audience and LAURA as MASHA.). “So here’s our theatre. (He arranges the space as he sees fit.) An empty space. No phony scenery or anything like that. (re: The Door) Just the lake in the background and the horizon.”

JASON and LAURA look to the door. STEPHANIE has missed her exit.

JASON as KONSTANTIN
I said…”Just the lake in the background and the horizon.”

STEPHANIE as NINA
(Entering from hallway area. Wearing a ridiculous, childish tulle skirt and carrying a handful of cranes wrapped in fabric). “Am I late? I’m not late. Am I late? Surely, I’m not late. (She drops the cranes and papers everywhere). I’ve been shaking all day. I got here as fast as I could. HA! I’m so glad to see you. I have to leave in half an hour, we have to hurry.” (She hugs JASON as KONSTANTIN. They adlib about her costume. Her ridiculous skirt gets cut. She hands LAURA a copy of On The Road) Can you just read my lines? I’m not off book yet.

LAURA
Again?

STEPHANIE
Come on!

JASON as KONSTANTIN
“Get to places! (STEPHANIE throws the “script” at LAURA) It’s time to begin as a matter of fact. The moon is rising. (He turns on a light.) We’ve got to start the play.”

STEPHANIE as NINA warms up. LAURA as MASHA sits in the “audience.”

JASON as KONSTANTIN (…continued)
(He plays music on a CD player, something melodramatic and epic, Sigur Ros and cues the girls to begin all while enacting an absurd physical ritual). “Oh ancient mists. Oh shadows that hover and swirl tonight above this lake. Bring us sweet sleep so that our dreams may show us what we will be twice 10,000 years.” (Throughout, he gives silent direction like a stage mom.)

Nina drapes herself in fabric and begins an elaborate and ridiculous movement piece. She flaps her arms, throws cranes, etc. as the music builds and builds. It’s both ridiculous and beautiful.

1 Note: The following scene within a scene is adapted from Anton Chekhov’s The Seagull.
LAURA as MASHA sits unimpressed. She takes cues and side coaching from JASON as KONSTANTIN as she reads.

LAURA as MASHA as NINA
“And for just a moment I had reached the point of ecstasy that I always wanted to reach, I could hear an indescribable seething roar which wasn't in my ear but everywhere and had nothing to do with sounds. I realized that I had died and been reborn numberless times but just didn't remember especially because the transitions from life to death and back to life are so ghostly easy, like falling asleep and waking up again a million times, the utter casualness and deep ignorance of it. And when I realized this, I felt a sweet, swinging bliss, like a big shot of heroin in the mainline vein; like a gulp of wine late in the afternoon and it made me shudder; my feet tingled and I thought I was going to die the very next moment. But I didn't die...”

The music reaches a climax and STEPHANIE as NINA throws off the fabric she’s had draped over her head during the above. She steps forward off of her chair and poses ridiculously. JASON as KONSTANTIN claps. STEPHANIE as NINA bows. LAURA as MASHA claps.

JASON as KONSTANTIN
“Thank you everyone for coming. Thanks so much. (To Stephanie) Absolutely delightful and so pretty.”

STEPHANIE hugs JASON and they palaver about the show. They are all “themselves” again. Laura crosses to the light, turns it off. Then to the music, disconnects it.

Pause. JASON and STEPHANIE stare at LAURA.

LAURA
How many actors does it take to screw in a light bulb?

JASON
I don’t know. How many?

LAURA
I don’t know either. I can’t remember.

JASON
Whatever. Why don’t you have another drink?


LAURA plays. JASON shushes her, types loudly. LAURA plays louder. JASON throws a paper ball at LAURA. LAURA throws it back.

---

2 From On The Road by Jack Kerouac
STEPHANIE
(In an attempt to end the fight) One time…”a woman came up to me and said, ‘I’d like to poison your mind with wrong ideas that appeal to you, though I am not unkind.’ She looked at me, I looked at something written across her scalp and these are the words that it faintly said as I tried to call for help.”

JASON AND STEPHANIE
(Singing and dancing; they work on cheering LAURA up) “There’s only one thing that I know how to do well. And I’ve often been told that you only can do what you know how to do well and that’s be you. Be what you’re like. Be like yourself. And so I’m having a wonderful time but I’d rather be whistling in the dark. Whistling in the dark. Whistling. Whistling. Dark, dark, dark, dark. There’s only one thing that I know how to do well. And I’ve often been told that you only can do what you know how to do well and that’s be you. Be what you’re like. Be like yourself. And so I’m having a wonderful time but I’d rather be whistling in the dark. Whistling in the dark. Whistling. Dark, dark, dark, dark.”

LAURA
I just want to be alone for one. Second. Just one.

JASON
Of course. Poopy pants doesn’t wanna play.

LAURA
Poopy pants?

They go back to their activities. Eventually, JASON and STEPHANIE come up with a game: JASON types and STEPHANIE “interprets” what he’s writing, like a puppet. Or a robot.

STEPHANIE
(To LAURA. Like a marionette with a New York accent.) Get yer head outta the clouds, kid. Get hip to the scene. Get your mitts off the marbles before I stuff that mud-pipe down your mush.

LAURA
Why are you talking like that?

STEPHANIE
Whadtya talkin’ about, toots? I’m not makin’ this baloney up! Somethin’s got me, see? The sucker with the schnozzle poured a slug, but, before he could scram out, two shamuses showed him the shiv and said they could send him over. STEPHANIE begins chasing LAURA around the room. And tell your moll to hand over the mazuma!

JASON
(Typing.) Mazuma, mazuma, mazuma!

3 From “Whistling in the Dark” by They Might Be Giants’ album *Flood.*
LAURA throws a shot of whiskey on STEPHANIE.

LAURA
(During the following, JASON sneaks out). You need to build an ability to just be yourself and not be doing something. That's what these games are taking away, is the ability to just sit here. That's being a person. Because underneath everything in your life there is that thing, that empty—forever empty. That knowledge that it's all for nothing and that you're alone. It's down there. And sometimes when things clear away, you're not doing anything, and you start going, 'oh no, here it comes. That I'm alone.' It just starts to visit on you. Just this sadness. Life is tremendously sad, just by being in it... Sadness is poetic. You're lucky to live sad moments. Because when you let yourself feel sad, your body has antibodies, it has happiness that comes rushing in to meet the sadness. And I am grateful to feel sad because it is met with true, profound happiness. 4 Stop. Be. Exist. Be where your feet are!

STEPHANIE
Are you alright?

LAURA
Yes. I'm great.

STEPHANIE
You're so spiky.

LAURA
I don’t even know that means!

STEPHANIE
(Beginning a piece of poetry they’ve been writing together, she works to get LAURA on board. They’ve worked on choreography that LAURA reluctantly enacts with STEPHANIE)
Solitude and loneliness are brothers but should never be mistaken for the same person.
With Solitude, there is an expedition…

LAURA
(Correcting her) Active mission.

STEPHANIE
That’s right. An active mission.
An excavation to unearth the gems within your soul’s soil,
a foraging through jungles of previously unexplored thoughts,
or even a gentle, easy drop of a fishing line,
a winding trail of questions stringing to that juicy bait that snags the coveted meal.
Or, sometimes Solitude invites you to waft upon a breeze of memories,
floating easily through your mind’s reconstructions as a dream,

4 Adapted from a speech by Louis C.K. on The Conan O’Brien Show
inhoaling forgotten scents and tasting the spices of past loves.

LAURA
(Playing along.)
Now: often within remembrance’s pastime, a door creaks ajar,
and Loneliness steals its sly little body into the room.
He spreads his arms wide and gapes open his knee-deep jaw,
scratchily sucking in all the colors of your mind’s world.
You blink in this familiar, yet shockingly desolate space.
Solitude sits down, suddenly tired.

LAURA makes STEPHANIE sit down. A new moment of writing:

The world has become as gaping as Loneliness’s mouth,
as grey as a marshland in winter.
Then Loneliness meets your eyes and a fixation occurs.
It’s narrow and expansive all at once.
“This is what it means to be alone.”

STEPHANIE
If you can, grab hold of Solitude and whisk yourselves into another room.
Why stay with what empties you out?

LAURA
But sometimes, a sadness in those mesmerizing eyes will stop you short.
He is kindred in your sadness.
You both have a need for visiting.
And so you stay.

STEPHANIE
And you mourn.

LAURA
And eventually his jaw will ache and his mouth will dry out and he will seek another host.

STEPHANIE
Then perhaps you and Solitude will return to your escapades with fervor.

LAURA
However, the likeliest of ventures,
you will clasp Solitude close to your breast,
share a kiss,
and mutually fall into the heartiest of slumbers.

An alliance has been mended.
LAURA
I like it.

STEPHANIE
Yeah. Me too. It was different. I think it’s really working.

LAURA
I need to tell you something… I found—

JASON storms in with typed copies of “Michael Keaton.”

JASON
Guys! I wanna revisit Michael Keaton, I wanna revisit Michael Keaton. Here. Take a copy. Take a copy. Look at the changes at the end there. (They read). Don’t forget to get in sync with us after “my frame of reference.” Here. I’m gonna go and then you follow.

They each take a chair, as they have rehearsed, Jason places The Ghost Light center. The girls study Jason as he begins. LAURA looks to STEPHANIE and mouths “I’ll tell you later.” Eventually they are speaking and moving in a “round.” The lights shift towards the end as they stand on chairs.

JASON, LAURA AND STEPHANIE as MICHAEL KEATON
Westerns were always my favorite things when I was little. And it always bothered me when cowboys were too clean in movies, or when they wore their guns like they had an outfit on. It always worked better when a guy looked sweaty and smelly, I hadda believe, I hadda believe that.

Now. Wait. Okay. It has to be true. Really true. Real. I had a nose for it as a kid. I still try to. Over the years, I think, people—actors, writers, whatever—lose their frame of reference. Their frame of reference is based on somebody else who did this or did that. Performances. So it just becomes a reflection of what already works. Like a warm-up. And that’s an invitation to be inauthentic. Everything becomes, you know, the work of somebody who did that before. Then somebody becomes a version of a version of a version./ (The overlap begins here) My frame of reference—and maybe I’m just lucky I grew up the way I did, when I did—it’s taken from some guy on the street, or some guy I grew up with. I always wanted to be the version. You know, the thing.

And there weren’t that many kids around. We'd play war, soldiers, fight in the woods, cowboys and Indians. So when we did these fights, they had to be true for me. I'd say, 'We have to have a little contact. We have to hit each other—I won't hurt you, you won't hurt me, but we gotta make contact, you know?' So I'd hit him. In the face. Bam. I swear.
But anyway, when he wanted to go, I'd say, 'No, no, no'—and here's how weird I was—I'd say, 'We have to do the previews of what we're doing tomorrow.' The trailer. My hand to God.\textsuperscript{5}

*The Ghost Light starts blinking in Morse Code.*

STEPhANIE

The light!

JASON

Michael Keaton didn’t say that.

LAURA

What light?

JASON

Come on guys, let’s pick it back up.

STEPhANIE

The light! It’s…flashing.

JASON

*(Looking at the scripts).* I didn’t add any of this.

LAURA

Oh my god.

STEPhANIE

It’s Morse Code!

JASON

It’s not. It’s not real. It can’t be.

STEPhANIE

What if something’s still out there?

LAURA

What if?

STEPhANIE

What if.

\textsuperscript{5} Adapted from “A Normal Day in the Unusual Life of Michael Keaton,” *Esquire Magazine* by Tom Chiarella
STEPHANIE and JASON move around the light. It blinks again. They pull the chairs away and circle some more.

LAURA
I found something.

STEPHANIE
What do you mean?

LAURA
I found something. Or…it found me.

STEPHANIE
What?

LAURA
A Magic 8 Ball. A *magical* Magic 8 Ball.

STEPHANIE
Here?

LAURA
It just…rolled in front of me.

JASON
No it didn’t that’s a lie.

LAURA
It’s not a lie.

JASON
That door hasn’t opened in 3 years, there’s no way a *magical* Magic 8 Ball has been down here all that time and you’ve only now just come across it, or rather it came across you. That’s absurd.

LAURA
No, this is absurd. You’re absurd.

STEPHANIE
*(Trying to get the group back together)*
“There’s only one thing that I know how to do well. And I’ve often been told –

LAURA and JASON
Shut up!

JASON
You’re making this up!

LAURA
I am not. Just because your worldview doesn’t extend beyond the cardboard box you sleep on doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist.

JASON
My world is bigger than yours. I can get off my cardboard box.

LAURA
I can see past your cardboard box, my world is bigger than yours.

JASON
I can see through your wall, my world’s bigger than yours.

LAURA
I can leave!

JASON
No you can’t!

STEPHANIE
The light!

LAURA
You can only make me feel inferior if I let you.

JASON
Nobody’s trying to make you feel inferior, but you can’t just say you can leave. None of us can leave. It’s too dangerous.

LAURA
That’s the first time in 3 years I’ve heard you say that out loud.

JASON
What are you talking about, I say that all the time.

LAURA
(Overlapping) You’re so full of shit.

STEPHANIE
(Overlapping) Which one of you knows Morse Code?

JASON
You are. You’re obviously still drunk. And making things up.
LAURA
(Reveals the Magic 8 Ball.)
Proof.

JASON
That’s not proof. Gimme three truths.

LAURA
I know this is real because it has 3 dimensions, I can touch it. With my fingers. And…it smells like a bar. Smell it. (She holds the Magic 8 Ball under Jason’s nose).

LAURA
Touch it! How is that not proof? Here. Touch it. Ask it a question.

JASON
No. No…Fine. Fine. Are you…real? (Shakes, flips, reads). “Worrying is as effective as trying to solve an algebra equation by chewing bubble gum.”— Mary Schmich. Isn’t that Baz Luhrman?

LAURA
Ask it another one!

JASON
How’d you get here? (Shakes, flips, reads) “It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live.” Albus Dumbledore. This thing has a sense of humor?

LAURA takes the magical Magic 8 Ball from JASON. STEPHANIE touches the light. They are both transfixed, like moths to flames.

STEPHANIE
Which one of you knows Morse Code?

JASON grabs The Ghost Light.

LAURA (overlapping with JASON)
I do. I know Morse Code.

JASON
I do. Gimme that.

JASON moves The Ghost Light back to the piano and begins to translate the blinks onto paper.

STEPHANIE and LAURA aside.

STEPHANIE
Fudgy Brownie.
LAURA
What.

STEPHANIE
Fudgy Brownie. Ice cream.

LAURA
Ok. Ok. I see your Fudgy Brownie and raise you butter chicken from that Indian place on 4th street.

STEPHANIE

LAURA
AHHHHH! I miss baths!

LAURA (singing quietly at first and then louder. Eventually STEPANIE joins in.)
La cucaracha, la cucaracha, (The cockroach, the cockroach,)
Da da da da da da da (can't walk anymore)
porque da da da, porque da da da da da (because it's lacking, because it doesn't have)
marihuana pa' fumar. (marijuana to smoke)

STEPHANIE AND LAURA
La cucaracha, la cucaracha, (The cockroach, the cockroach,)
yo no puede caminar (can't walk anymore)
porque le falta, porque no tiene (because it's lacking, because it doesn't have)
marihuana pa' fumar. (marijuana to smoke)

STEPHANIE and LAURA look at JASON. They attack him with tickles, wet willies, still singing.

JASON

STEPHANIE
What?

JASON

STEPHANIE (reads)
Dw i ddim wedi dy weld ti ers sbel…

6 Translates as: “Long time, no see” in Welsh.
LAURA
That can’t be right. Let me try. Give me the pencil.

JASON
You don’t know Morse Code.

LAURA
You don’t know my life.

LAURA goes to The Ghost Light, translates.

STEPHANIE
It’s an anagram or something. I’ll work on it.

JASON
It’s bullshit.

STEPHANIE
It means something. It has to.

JASON
It’s a thing, not what you intend the thing to mean.

STEPHANIE
Look. BEDDED-IDLED-WEIRDLY-SWIMS-WIT. Bedded idled weirdly swims wit!

STEPHANIE takes the paper to the ground.

JASON
Ok.

STEPHANIE
No. Ok. It’s a code.

JASON
It’s not a code. It’s just the result of deteriorating wires. It means. Nothing. What if it all –

JASON grabs the paper from STEPHANIE, crumples it into a ball, throws it at the audience.

LAURA
Hey! Hey.

STEPHANIE
What.

LAURA
I got the same thing. It’s just on repeat. It means nothing.

JASON
See, nothing.

STEPHANIE
What if this is a message? And there’s something happening. Out there. Right now.

JASON, somehow, destroys The Ghost Light.

LAURA
(Overlapping) What the fuck is wrong with you?

STEPHANIE
(Overlapping) My mother may be out there.

JASON
Little child, believing in bright and beautiful fairy tales.

STEPHANIE
Fairy tales? I believe in fairy tales? Yeah, okay. Why don’t we talk about this life that we have here? This bright and beautiful life. Violent obsessions sometimes take over a person, right? For example, you may think day and night of nothing but the moon. I have such a moon. Day and night I am held in the grip of one besetting thought, I must play, I must play, I must play! As soon as we finish a game, or one of your scripts, then something compels me to experience another, and then a third, and then a fourth--I must entertain ceaselessly. It's like I’m on a treadmill. I hurry along from one story to the next, and can't help myself. Do you see anything bright and beautiful in that? But all this time, I cannot forget for an instant that an unfinished story is awaiting me. (She touches the door, or references it in some way.) Yet, here we are! And I hear my mortality calling, and so I go back to this and begin to play, play, play some more. I can’t escape myself, and I feel like I’m consuming my life in this same, same version of a version of a version till I start thinking that all this praise and admiration must be a deception, that I’m fooling myself because they probably think I’m going insane. Playing is a pleasure to me, but no sooner does a performance close than it becomes odious; this is not who I was meant to be. I made a mistake in being here at all! To my dying day shall I hear you people say: "Delightful and pretty; delightful and pretty," and nothing more. So yes, forgive me if I am indulging yet another fairy tale notion, but maybe just maybe this really does mean something.  

Beat. She picks up the pieces frantically, looks for a solution and starts working on it. She cries. A panic attack begins. She sits down on the floor to calm herself.

STEPHANIE (sings quietly)
If I had a boat
I'd go out on the ocean

7 Adapted from Anton Chekhov’s, The Seagull.
And if I had a pony
I'd ride him on my boat/
And we could all together
Go out on the ocean
Me upon my pony on my boat

If I were Roy Rogers
I'd sure enough be single
I couldn't bring myself to marrying old Dale
It'd just be me and trigger
We'd go riding through them movies
Then we'd buy a boat and on the sea we'd sail

And if I had a boat
I'd go out on the ocean
And if I had a pony
I'd ride him on my boat
And we could all together
Go out on the ocean
Set me upon my pony on my boat
The mystery masked man was smart
He got himself a Tonto
'Cause Tonto did the dirty work for free
But Tonto he was smarter
And one day said kemo sabe
Kiss my ass I bought a boat
I'm going out to sea

And if I had a boat
I'd go out on the ocean
And if I had a pony
I'd ride him on my boat
And we could all together
Go out on the ocean
Me upon my pony on my boat

And if I were like lightning
I wouldn't need no sneakers
I'd come and go wherever I would please
And I'd scare 'em by the shade tree
And I'd scare 'em by the light pole
But I would not scare my pony on my boat out on the sea

And if I had a boat
I'd go out on the ocean
And if I had a pony
I'd ride him on my boat
And we could all together
Go out on the ocean
Me upon my pony on my boat 8

LAURA
/What is she doing?

JASON
I don’t know.

JASON and LAURA stare.

LAURA
I think she’s having a panic attack again.

JASON
Ok.

LAURA
Ok?

JASON
Ok. I don’t know what to do.

LAURA
Why don’t you go get some water?

JASON
Ok. Ok.

STEPHANIE continues singing quietly.

LAURA stares at STEPHANIE. JASON returns with water. Tries to give it to STEPHANIE. She ignores him, gathering up the pieces of The Ghost Light. She exits, sings offstage.

LAURA
Why did you do that?

JASON
I’m trying to protect us. It’s false hope.

LAURA

8 “If I Had A Boat”—Song/Lyrics by Lyle Lovett
It’s not false hope. Something is happening. I can feel it. Here. Feel it. *(She holds the Magic 8 Ball out to him).*

*During the following, LAURA bandages JASON’s bleeding hand.*

JASON

I don’t want to go back. In here, I…we have everything we need. Whenever we start a new venture, there is some sort of short-term euphoria. Like I have 3 cracked ribs and I’m being asked if it hurts…I smile and can say that this is an ‘interesting’ way to live with what you got. I know I’m a strange person, and that a lot of conventional paths require more smarts, focus and common sense, that I am unable to summon. This life is a hustle, a prolonged improv. I love it, I’m addicted. To this world we’ve created. This is this world we’ve been given. This way of living has made me far more resourceful and bold than I ever thought I was capable of before…all this.

*STEPHANIE re-enters with the broken pieces of The Ghost Light.*

JASON *(cont…)*

*(He takes the Magical Magic 8 Ball from her)* You are my family. The only people I have, and the only people I will know for the rest of my life. I’m 31 I’m not going to meet anyone new. But what the fuck am I talking about. Look. After all these years, this is perhaps the best part of my existence. I can’t retire from it.9

LAURA

*(Retrieving her Magical Magic 8 Ball. To Stephanie)*. Are you ok?

STEPHANIE

*(Still teary-eyed)* I’m not thinking clearly. I can’t figure it out.

LAURA

*(Comforting)* Come on. We’ll ask the Ball.

*LAURA and STEPHANIE exit.*

JASON is alone. Beat. *He pushes items in front of the door. He takes a piece of wood to hammer the wood over the window. He begins to exit to get more nails. STEPHANIE re-enters. A standoff between JASON and STEPHANIE. It’s uncomfortable. Jason exits.*

*Off stage voices:*

LAURA

What are you doing?

JASON

---

I’m looking for the nails.

LAURA
What. Why? Do you need nails?

JASON
I just do.

LAURA
What do you mean you just do? What are you doing?

JASON
Nothing.

LAURA
Nothing?

JASON
Yeah. Nothing. I’m doing nothing. Isn’t that what you want us all to do?

LAURA
What? No…You’re taking your box? Where are you going?

JASON
My world. Bigger than yours.

*JASON re-enters. LAURA follows. They discover that STEPHANIE is undoing the deadbolt.*

LAURA
Hey! HEY!

JASON
Woah woah woah woah woah. Take your hand off the doorknob.

*They encircle her.*

STEPHANIE
You guys don’t have to do anything. I’m just…I’m going.

JASON
What are you gonna do out there.

STEPHANIE
I’m gonna buy a boat. I’m gonna find the others.

JASON
What others. This isn’t Lost.

LAURA
Wait. Don’t. Ask the ball. (LAURA shoves the ball at STEPHANIE. STEPHANIE won’t take the ball so LAURA asks/shakes/flips on her behalf. Should she leave by herself? (Shakes, flips, shows the answer to STEPHANIE) Well? Read it.

STEPHANIE

JASON
Who the hell is Robert Gallagher?

STEPHANIE
Let’s just see it, for whatever it is now.

JASON
(Overlapping) No. No way.

LAURA
(Overlapping) Be where your feet are!

STEPHANIE opens the door. Light. And sound. The door yanks her back. All three battle the door. The door stays open, shaking, dancing with the three actors during an elaborate movement piece to sound. Their bodies are not their own.

Finally, the door shuts, the light and sound stops and they fall. Their bodies are their own again. A long moment. They stare at the door. All at once they have the same thought: move the chairs down center facing up center/the door. As if they are on guard. Does STEPHANIE grab her Seagull fabric and hide them all under it? Like children hiding from the monsters?

JASON
Guys. Are we stuck in an existential French film or something?

LAURA
(She raises the magical Magic 8 Ball.) The forecast is hazy.

JASON
Yeah. I’m a real boy. I ain’t no spirit damned in purgatory.

STEPHANIE
Me neither.

LAURA
Me neither. (Pronounced /nye-thur/, like the old song)
STEPHANIE
Either.

LAURA *(singing)*
Either.

STEPHANIE *(singing)*
Neither.

LAURA *(singing)*
Neither.

JASON *(singing)*
Let’s call the whole thing off.

*A paper ball sails in from the audience. They scatter and chairs get pulled back to corners.*

LAURA
What the fuck is that.

STEPHANIE
It’s a paper ball.

JASON
Where did it come from?

STEPHANIE
I don’t know.

*They face the audience looking for the answer.*

JASON *(Under his breath)*. I’m a real boy.

*They all look back at the ball. Jason reaches for it.*

STEPHANIE
Don’t touch it.

JASON
It’s just a piece of paper, man.

*He throws it at STEPHANIE she throws it back.*

*He opens the paper: The sound of wind. He closes the paper: sound out.*
JASON
The paper is making noise.

STEPHANIE
Do it again.

_He hands the paper to her. She opens it: the sound of crickets._

LAURA
Let me try!

_LAURA opens it: children laughing. She closes it._

Together, they all open the paper ball. The sound of T.S. Elliott reading “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock;” just first few lines of the poem “Let us go then…you and I…patient etherized upon the table.” They close it. They open it again: They hear Ludacris: “Move bitch, get out the way.” Together, they open the ball again: sound of the 5 grad actors and KHOLOUD talking, planning, laughing. They close the ball.

STEPHANIE
“It’s time.”

LAURA
“We’ve got to call the audience.”

JASON
“The play’s about to start.”

_They open the ball a final time and lay it on the floor: The song “Tender Comrades” sung by Billy Bragg. They collaboratively construct a beautiful piece of sculpture which will be left in space behind them. It contains all of their possessions: the typewriter, the flask, The Magical Magic 8 Ball, the remaining pieces of The Ghost Light, the mannequin wearing the ridiculous tulle skirt. When the sculpture is completed:_

_The door opens and each of them exits into light, going their separate ways. At the door, LAURA turns back, looks at the audience one final time then exits._

_The door closes. Lights go down._

Beat.

_The Ghost Light comes back on._

END OF PLAY
TENDER COMRADES: FROM PAGE TO STAGE

Long before my colleagues and I began the six-week journey that lead to the final script for *Tender Comrades*, we had been ruminating on an original piece of devised theatre centered on a very specific location: my one-hundred-year-old two-bedroom house in the center of Fayetteville. We spent almost two years, on and off, in informal meetings (which originally included our other two graduate actor classmates James Odom and Nate Stahlke and fellow graduate director Kholoud Sawaf), during which we were exploring the theme of Americana in the South as well as researching the house and neighborhood in which it resides. Needless to say, the play took a very different turn, but those early meetings paved the way for a shared dialogue between my collaborators, Stephanie Bignault and Jason Shipman, and me that would not have been possible had we not had that history of discourse. In fact, not a single piece of text or storytelling from those original collaborative meetings actually made it into our final script except for the title of the play and the Billy Bragg song from which the title gets its name. However, that period of ensemble building in tandem with our shared vocabulary made our abbreviated six-week devising and rehearsal period entirely possible.

When we began our artistic process in mid-January of 2015, we were drawn to one particular text, Anton Chekhov’s *The Seagull*, and an exercise we’d worked on together in our Modern Drama class with Amy Herzberg, during which we had studied Chekhov extensively. For class, Amy asked us to prepare a Chekhovian monologue and familiarize ourselves with the play from which it was taken. In class, we were all asked to sit silently in one room together, isolated from other actors but unable to leave the playing space. Amy asked us to imagine ourselves from the point of view of our character in relationship to other actors in the room based
on a few simple defining relationship questions: Who in the room do we love? Who in the room do we hate? Who in the room is an ally or friend? In this silence, we were allowed to glance at our nemesis, make eyes at our loves, work at menial activities like knitting or whittling, and start little games with other characters. Eventually, when the pressure could no longer be contained, we were asked to find someone to speak to and erupt into our monologues just as characters in Chekhov plays are wont to do. It was from this zygote of an acting class exercise that the beginning moments and early scenes and ideas for Tender Comrades were born. As we began to develop the script, we found that we were continually drawn to texts that focused on some of the themes and struggles that we were personally experiencing during our last semester of school. Themes and ideas related to questions about what it means to be an artist, how to succeed and thrive “outside” (in the “real world”) vs. “inside” (in academia) and how to meet the challenge of collaboration itself eventually found their way into the script. We found that a Chekhovian framework for these themes was a nice fit and the idea of meta-theatricality became a device through which to explore our mash-up of texts.

Our initial rehearsals consisted of sharing our writing, which included original scenes and poetry, ideas and images for scenes as well as looking at found text, imagery, music, and videos. However, we worked very hard to always get on our feet at each rehearsal. We often began with warm-ups and idea-generating exercises that we’d learned about in our first semester of graduate school in our Devised Theatre class with Les Wade, a class which was arguably the true origin of our interest in devising our thesis project. Later, as the demands of our production schedule began to close in, we began to cull down the script and find a through-line of story-telling and narrative. However, the play didn’t really begin to “cook” until we found the performance space.
In many ways though *The Nines Lounge* actually found us one night when we were enjoying a glass of wine after rehearsal. It’s a local watering hole which I like to describe as a hookah-bar-that-got-stuck-in-a-fall-out shelter, and once we knew for certain we were going to produce the show there, it ended up informing a great deal of the story and themes of the script. It wasn’t until after the show closed that I learned that Greg Hodges, the incredibly generous owner of the bar, had spent three months designing the aesthetic for the small room. We had not only found a space but a built-in scenic designer in Greg. The room contained an array of stage-worthy items such as type-writers, a mannequin, a piano, several small suitcases that had been converted into low tables, many bookshelves filled with books Greg had hand-picked for both their content and their covers, maps, mirrors, candles, colorful pillows to sit on, swanky-looking couches and exposed light bulbs dangling from the ceiling. Such a vibrant and eclectic-looking room could not help but inform the script. The space suggested to us not only a sense of isolation and claustrophobia but also a feeling of whimsy. It felt like a room that may well have been decorated by artists who’d been trapped together for three years.

During the rehearsal process, we had several show-and-tell nights in which we presented possible material to colleagues and friends. Their initial responses and questions to the material were pivotal to the shaping and editing of the script. When they had a question, we sought to answer it in the following rehearsals. When they delighted in a moment, we worked very hard not to cut it. And when they had suggestions or problem-solving ideas, we worked them into our plans. So great was their input and involvement that this group of test audience members eventually became part of the production crew. Early test audience member Chris Hecke eventually became our production’s stage manager. Damian Dena, who also attended early show-and-tell nights, was later cast as The Door and The Doorman in the production and served
as a crew member as well. Celeste Richard our light board operator and assistant scenic designer and prop manager gave us feedback on early drafts of the scripts as did Kholoud Sawaf, our classmate who had been part of the devising process from the beginning and who functioned as a directorial eye. Jacquelyn Cox and Jacob Hoffer, both graduate lighting designers, co-designed the lights for the show, and it was Jacquelyn who, during an early tech watch of the show, encouraged us to use the ghost light in the room. This contribution eventually created one of the most arresting moments of the play as we three actors, standing on chairs, hovered around the ghost light, throwing shadows onto the flickering metallic walls. Every night of tech and the show this team of people helped us to transform the bar into a theater complete with lights, sound and an audience seating area, and when rehearsals and shows were over they were the ones who transformed the set back into The Nines. The show would not have been possible without their assistance and involvement.

To drum up interest in our little production, we created individually designed number nine playing cards (to correlate with the name of the location and perhaps to loosely connect to the show’s themes of game-playing and chance) and hand delivered these “tickets” to each person who made a reservation through our ticketing platform, Eventbrite. Though the playing card idea was stolen directly from Punchdrunk’s production of Sleep No More, the hand-delivered ticket idea was our own.

The weekend of the show called for snow and though we knew it would affect audience turnout we couldn’t have asked for a more beautiful natural backdrop to be revealed when The Door finally opened to reveal the snow-covered street framed by a line of trees. We never could have predicted that we’d find a set designer in Mother Nature or that an actual living dog would run into the room and back out of the room on cue during a grand moment of lights, sound and
movement one night. These joys of live theatre were only a small part of what made the show successful. Despite the snowy weather, audience turn-out was quite good. Our final show was over “sold” so we had a packed and rowdy house. One audience member told me that the show resembled an acid trip while another told me that it was a clear picture of what it was like for us to be in grad school. The general consensus from the audience seemed to be one of delight, even if all of their questions weren’t answered. Many people commented on the innovative use of space as well as the dramatic reveals involved with the door to the outside, though several people had questions about the first ten minutes or so of the play. In the end, we were at ease with unanswered questions, though given more time we might have dug further to unearth a bit more clarity, particularly in the first half of the play.

After spending three years of training together and several years devising and collaborating on projects, Stephanie and Jason and I were able to quickly and efficiently write and stage a script, design costumes, choreograph a movement piece, decorate a set, sell and distribute tickets, and consult on lighting and sound design elements all to be included in a play that six weeks prior was only a blank page. I could not have dreamed up a better team of comrades, tender to begin with and even more precious to me as the show came to a close, with which to create my penultimate theatre project in graduate school and I was incredibly pleased with the show and the overwhelmingly positive response from our audience.
WEBSITE LINK

http://shatkus.mixform.com/
Laura Shatkus

- 4607

Height: 5’4”

Regional and University Theatre

The Chairs
Tender Comrades
The Daughter Party
Kin
Just Like Us (staged reading)
The Case of The Missing Melody
The New Now
Prison Stories
Spring Awakening
Art Out Loud: Gertrude Stein
Don Chipotle (staged reading)
The Clean House
Company
Secret Theatre
33 Variations
Art Night Out: Moshe Safdie
Picasso at the Lapin Agile (staged reading)
Period of Adjustment
The Fall Of The House

Old Woman
Laura/Deviser
Tamsen Donner
Linda
Helen Thorpe
Sarah C. Caeza
The Coadrillereis/Picasso

Ensemble
Adult Woman
Alice B. Toklas
Ensemble
Lane
Joanne
Deviser/Performer
Dr. Gertrude Ladenburger
Deviser/Performer
Germaine
U/S Isabel Dorothea
Eliza Poe/Wilson

University Theatre
University Theatre
University Theatre
TheatreSquared
Trike Theatre
Artist’s Lab Theatre
XWA Prison Story Project
University Theatre
ArkansasStaged
TheatreSquared
University Theatre
University Theatre
Artist’s Lab Theatre
ArkansasStaged
TheatreSquared

Chicago Theatre

Mariposa Nocturna
Accidental Rapture
Sketchbook: Reverb
Berwyn Avenue
El Grito Del Bronx
The Last Days of Judas Iscariot
Macbeth
Major Barbara
Lucid
Talk Radio
Beggars in The House of Plenty
RIPPED: Women and Families Edition
Otherwise Engaged
Changes of Heart
The Santaland Diaries
Laundry and Bourbon
Bad Habits
Rumors
Oleanna
Sunday in the Park with George

Abuela/Ensemble Puppets
Amy
Deviser/Performer
Guy Martini
U/S Elizabeth
Mary Magdalene/St. Glenna/Loretta
Lady Macbeth
Lady Britomart/Mrs. Baines
Becky
Ensemble
Sister Mary Kate
Women: Erotmites
Davina Saunders
Silvia
Elf
Amy Lee Fullernoy
Becky Hedges
Claire Ganz
Carol
Celeste #2

16th Street Theatre
16th Street Theatre
Collaboration
VoNTouch Puppets
The Goodman/Teatro Vista/Collaboration
The Gift Theatre/Victory Gardens
Muse of Fire Theatre Company
Rogue Theatre
Diamante Productions
The Gift Theatre
Mary-Archie Theatre
American Blues Theatre
Red Twist Theatre
Janus Theatre
Janus Theatre
Janus Theatre
Janus Theatre
Janus Theatre
Janus Theatre

Film

Valley Inn
Gordon Family Tree
Identity Thief (Short)
Illuminated (Short)
Red (Short)
Prison Ladies (Short)

Mrs. Baker
Nancy
Principal
Principal
Principal
Principal

Kindred Films, Inc.
Purpose Pictures
Fig Media, Inc. Chicago
Columbia College Chicago
Columbia College Chicago
Columbia College Chicago

Other

Founder and ensemble member—Five Months Pregnant (long-form improv)
Founder and ensemble member—ArkansasStaged (site specific contemporary and experimental staged readings)

Training

MFA Theatre
Shakespeare Folio Technique Workshops
Meisner
Theatre Audition Workshop

Acting
Private Studio
The Actor’s Center/Private Studio

University of Arkansas
Jeffrey Carlsson/Susan Hart
Eileen Voebach
Erica Daniels/Adam Beecrore

Special Skills

Dialects: British (R.P.) French, German, Irish, Southern American, Scottish. Skills: singing (mezzo), ballet/tap/jazz (beginner), hiking, puppetry, archery, bicycling, canoeing, kayaking, knitting, French
WORKS CITED


APPENDIX A.1

Email Correspondence with Janna Giacoppo

3/10/2015

Permission to use Headshot!

Info <info@jannagiacoppo.com>
To: Laura Shatkus

Hi there!! Congrats on the MFA program and of course you can use the pic!!
Hope all is well and that you are enjoying being far far away from this terrible winter!

> On Mar 9, 2015, at 4:04 PM, Laura Shatkus
> > Hi Janna,
> > I hope you are doing well and that business is still booming.
> > I am writing because I am finishing up an MFA in acting at the University of Arkansas and am required to include a headshot in my official documentation. I would love to have your permission to use the attached photo that you took of me in 2008. I just need a written ok from you to make it official.
> > Thanks so much for your beautiful headshots!
> > Laura Shatkus
> > <Shatkus_Laura_Headshot.jpg>
APPENDIX A.2
Email Correspondence with Stephanie Bignault and Jason Shipman

Permission to site you as co-authors of Tender Comrades

Stephanie Bignault
To: Laura Shatkus
Cc: Jason Shipman

Mon, Mar 9, 2015 at 3:49 PM

Absolutely,
Thanks!

Love,
Stephanie Bignault
Comrade (other girl)

On Monday, March 9, 2015, Laura Shatkus
Hi you two,

I need written permission from you to site you both as authors of "Tender Comrades." Please reply to this thread, which will be included with my Thesis documentation.

Thanks,
Comrade Shatkus

Permission to site you as co-authors of Tender Comrades

Jason Shipman
To: Laura Shatkus
Cc: "Bignault, Stephanie"

Mon, Mar 9, 2015 at 5:11 PM

Comrade Shatkus,

You have my permission to site me as co-author for "Tender Comrades."

Tender Shipman

Sent from my iPhone

On Mar 9, 2015, at 3:09 PM, Laura Shatkus

> Hi you two,
>
> I need written permission from you to site you both as authors of "Tender Comrades." Please reply to this thread, which will be included with my Thesis documentation.
>
> Thanks,
>
> Comrade Shatkus
APPENDIX A.3

Email Correspondence with Jason Shipman

Permission to use Tender Comrades program

Jason Shipman
To: Laura Shatkus

You have my permission to use the tender program. Boom Shaka Shatkus

Sent from my iPhone

On Mar 10, 2015, at 4:58 PM, Laura Shatkus

--- Forwarded message ---
From: Laura Shatkus
Date: Mon, Mar 9, 2015 at 3:01 PM
Subject: Permission to use Tender Comrades program
To: Jason Shipman

Hi Jason,

I need your written permission to use the "Tender Comrades" program as part of my thesis. May I have it, please?

Thanks,

Comrade Shatkus